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From St. Petersburg to Vienna

The New Jewish School in Music (1908–1938)
as Part of the Jewish Cultural Renaissance

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The illustration on the cover shows a drawing by Saul Raskin (1898–1966) depicting the musicians of the Jewish chamber music ensemble „Zimro“.

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Preface to the revised and supplemented English edition (2023)¹

Nearly twenty years have passed since the release of the first German-language version of this monograph in 2004. Since then, interest in the „New Jewish School”, the association of composers whose history was comprehensively reconstructed in this book for the first time, has grown appreciably. Testament to this are the numerous performances around the world that include works of the New Jewish School. As a pianist, I have contributed to the growing dissemination of this music as well, through both concerts and recordings. My path as a musicologist, which began in the 1990s with archival research on the New Jewish School, eventually brought me to the University of Music Franz Liszt in Weimar, where I have occupied the chair in the History of Jewish Music at the Department of Musicology Weimar-Jena since 2013.

The primary impetus behind the English-language publication of this book was the numerous inquiries from musicians and music researchers from various countries who were unable to read the original German edition. To this day, no comparable work has been published in English. Indeed, while the number of musicians who are interested in the composers of the New Jewish School has steadily grown, there are still relatively few musicological works on the topic.

That this book is now being published in English is thank above all to Wolfgang Bottenberg (1930–2018), a Canadian composer and professor at Concordia University in Montreal, originally from Frankfurt am Main. I met him in 2009 after a concert in Montreal in which I performed compositions of the New Jewish School. Wolfgang Bottenberg was impressed by the musical quality of these works and expressed interest in my research on the subject. He offered to translate the monograph, which a few years earlier had been printed as my doctoral thesis. His translation, completed in 2010, forms the basis of this publication. Chapter V of the book had previously been translated, by Verena Bopp and Elliott Kahn, and was published in the New York journal *Musica Judaica*.² For various reasons, however, it took several years to finalize the revised and expanded English edition.

For this publication, the entire text was thoroughly reviewed, and in parts corrected and considerably supplemented, taking into account the literature that has been published in the interim and the numerous new relevant internet sources.

Two extensive appendices – detailed biographies of the composers of the New Jewish School and an overview of their publishers with the lists of all publications – are for the most part newly added. The book also includes comprehensive visual material, most of which has not previously been published.

¹ Translated by Michael Lesley.

² Jascha Nemtsov, The History of the Jewish Music Publishing Houses Jibneh and Juwal, in: *Musica Judaica*, Vol. XIX, New York 2007.

A central focus of this monograph is the international dimension of the activities of the New Jewish School, as suggested by the title *From St. Petersburg to Vienna*. This is also the reason for the choice of the cover picture. The picture by the Russian-American Jewish illustrator Saul Raskin (1878–1966) shows the musicians of the Jewish Chamber Music Ensemble *Zimro*. The ensemble, formed in early 1918 by the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music with the aim of disseminating its repertoire, traveled halfway around the world in 1918–1919, eventually arriving in the United States. The countless concerts of *Zimro*, which had made the music of the New Jewish School known in distant countries such as China, Japan and Indonesia, symbolize the worldwide spread of this music. It is regrettable that this composers' association is still often referred to as the *St. Petersburg group*, especially in the English-speaking world, as in the valuable internet project by the American Society for Jewish Music of digitizing the repertoire of the New Jewish School, which they named „The St. Petersburg Score Collection“.³ In fact, this group includes several composers who never were in St. Petersburg, or in Russia at all. While the association originally emerged out of the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music, its activities soon extended far beyond the then Russian capital. Only a few years after the foundation of the St. Petersburg Society in 1908, its ideas and repertoire had spread internationally. After the 1917 Revolution and the subsequent Russian Civil War, accompanied by an unprecedented economic and political collapse, several prominent members of the St. Petersburg Society emigrated, initially to Western Europe, and later to the United States and Palestine. Further institutions of the New Jewish School were founded in a number of countries, and maintained close contact and intensive exchange with one another. During the final phase of the New Jewish School in the 1930s, after its activities had almost entirely ceased in the Soviet Union, the cellist and composer Joachim Stutschewsky (1891–1982) emerged as its central figure. Although Stutschewsky, like almost all other composers of the school, originated from Eastern Europe (he was born in present-day Ukraine), he had studied in Leipzig and subsequently lived in Central Europe. In Vienna he co-founded the Society for the Promotion of Jewish Music (1928–1938), which became the leading institution of the New Jewish School, until it was dissolved after the annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany. The definitive end of the New Jewish School was thus brought about not only by Stalinist repression but by German National Socialism and the Holocaust as well.

The history of the New Jewish School in music can only be understood against the backdrop of a broader intellectual development in Jewish life at the turn of the 20th century. This development, which encompassed all spheres of Jewish culture, is known as the „Jewish Renaissance“. Coined by Martin Buber in 1901, the term denoted the complex renewal of Judaism that began at the end of the 19th century, ushered in by a new national self-awareness. As religion increasingly lost its significance for emancipated and secularized Jews, the national idea took on a progressively identity-forming role. „Religion alone proved to be a fragile foundation for the self-definition of a strongly secularized Jewish population“, writes historian Michael Brenner in his essay „How Jewish were Germany's Jews? The Renaissance of Jewish Culture During the Weimar Republic“. According to Brenner, those

3 <http://www.jewishmusic-asjm.org/database-the-st-petersburg-score-collection.html>.

Jews who no longer identified with religion, yet did not want to assimilate entirely, were confronted with the challenge of redefining Jewish existence in a modern secular society: „How could a new form of Judaism be created, and with what content should it be filled?“⁴ Such secularization occurred not only among emancipated and acculturated German Jews but also in Eastern Europe where, though traditional Jewish ways of life persisted in many places, there emerged in the cities a largely modern, enlightened, and educated Jewish milieu.

The answers to the question of how Jewish life and Jewish identity were to be reimagined were either directly connected to Zionist thought or significantly influenced by it. While Zionism is commonly associated with the names of Theodor Herzl or Max Nordau, who aimed for a political renaissance – the re-establishment of a Jewish state – it was no less shaped by the so-called Cultural Zionism and its representatives such as Ahad Ha'am, Martin Buber, Leo Winz, and many others who viewed the intellectual and cultural rebirth of the Jewish people as the main task of the Zionist movement. This national movement, which at the end of the 19th century represented only a minority of Jews, eventually proved to be the most effective survival strategy for the Jewish people and perhaps the sole genuine alternative to assimilation or annihilation. Beginning already in the 1930s, and growing significantly after the Shoah and the founding of the state of Israel, the national ideology became the most important feature connecting Jews of nearly all stripes: religious and secular, liberal and conservative, „Eastern“ and „Western“ Jews. The idea of the national renaissance, with Zionism as its most prominent and consistent expression, thus played a central role in 20th-century Jewish life. Alongside a few other prerequisites, this idea of the Jewish national renaissance was the crucial factor in the emergence and development of modern Jewish art and culture.

Inspired by this idea, associations of Jewish artists and intellectuals emerged at the beginning of the 20th century in both Eastern and Western Europe and promoted the development of a new Jewish culture. This occurred as much in the musical realm as in any other. Alongside the Society for Jewish Folk Music in St. Petersburg, the defining institution of the New Jewish School, the publisher and cultural Zionist activist Leo Winz (1876–1952) founded a circle of Jewish musicians in Berlin around his journal *Ost und West* whose activities were very similar to the St. Petersburg Society, focusing on the collection, processing, publication, and performance of traditional Jewish music. The history of the group around *Ost und West*, as well as other musical developments in the context of Cultural Zionism, but not directly influenced by the New Jewish School, are treated in my German-language monograph *Der Zionismus in der Musik: Jüdische Musik und nationale Idee* (Zionism in Music: Jewish Music and the National Idea).⁵

4 Michael Brenner, *Wie jüdisch waren Deutschlands Juden? Die Renaissance jüdischer Kultur während der Weimarer Republik* (How Jewish were Germany's Jews? The Renaissance of Jewish Culture During the Weimar Republic), Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Bonn 2000, S. 13–14.

5 Jascha Nemtsov, *Der Zionismus in der Musik: Jüdische Musik und nationale Idee* (Zionism in Music: Jewish Music and the National Idea), Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2009.

While the activities of the Berlin group around Leo Winz never went beyond adaptations of folk songs, a completely new kind of Jewish music emerged in St. Petersburg. These musicians brought about a productive and innovative synthesis of traditional folk elements with European forms and compositional techniques, which became the foundation for Jewish art music. A similar development had previously spurred the emergence of other national schools in music. National movements had become particularly dominant in the music cultures of oppressed peoples who fought for their political independence and/or cultural distinctiveness, and who were thus also inspired by the idea of a national-cultural Renaissance. Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák in the Czech lands, Jean Sibelius in Finland, or Edvard Grieg in Norway, all created music that was to achieve a (national-)state significance – even when states like Czechoslovakia, Finland, or Norway did not yet exist. In the same vein, Glinka and the „Mighty Handful“ in Russia contributed to Russian imperial culture by asserting the dominance of the Russian folkloristic tradition against Italian and French influences.

Even though these national schools had become known at the beginning of the 20th century, a comparable development in Jewish music was by no means given. It was not the result of a finished abstract „doctrine“, but rather the outcome of intense artistic struggle and an open, critical, and lively exchange among the young musicians of the St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music.

Before this could occur, the Society first had to pass through a „chaotic phase“ (in the words of Mikhail Gnesin), when it was unclear what should be considered Jewish music to begin with, and by what means a modern, secular, Jewish art music could be created. The Society then began its creative activity with modest folk song arrangements, though these satisfied neither their high aesthetic demands nor had any scholarly-ethnological significance.

Yet very quickly the most talented composers of the Society were developed a distinctly Jewish-national style and created works of considerable artistic value. This development progressed so rapidly – and for some of its members so unexpectedly – that it seemed almost miraculous. While the maturation process for other national schools often took many decades, the Jewish school reached its initial peaks in just a few years, with compositions such as Mikhail Gnesin's opera *The Youth of Abraham*, Alexander Krein's cantata *Kaddish* and his piano sonata, Joseph Achron's first Violin Concerto, and Alexander Wepruk's symphonic *Dances and Songs of the Ghetto*, alongside a few works of other composers.

By 1913, after the fifth anniversary of the Society for Jewish Folk Music, Russian music newspapers spoke of a new interesting phenomenon in Russian musical life. The term „New Jewish School“ was coined a few months later by an influential art historian and professor of aesthetics at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Livery Sacchetti. In April 1914 the Russian-Jewish newspaper *Novyi voskhod* reported on his lecture „On the Musical Art of the Jews“ at the annual meeting of the Society for Jewish Folk Music:

„Rarely has a Jewish society been welcomed so many members to its meeting as the annual meeting of the Society for Jewish Folk Music on April 13th. [...] The massive turnout once again illustrates the tremendous growth in interest in the Society's

activities. [...] Professor Sacchetti's participation in the meeting was itself noteworthy, as he had previously not acknowledged the existence of a distinct Jewish music. Sacchetti began his lecture by saying that he had attended a concert featuring Jewish music only once in his life, and that was at the last major concert of the Society in St. Petersburg. This concert not only convinced him of the independent existence of Jewish music but also of the existence of an entire new Jewish school of composers, one which is both unique and artistically valuable.⁶

The designation „New Jewish School” was taken up in lectures in the 1920s by the most important theorist of Jewish art music of the period, Mikhail Gnesin. The violinist and composer Joseph Achron considered himself part of the „New School of Hebrew Music” as well.⁷ Other terms were also used at the time, such as Joachim Stutschewsky's references to the „Young Jewish School” in articles from his time in Vienna. While it was important for Stutschewsky to emphasize the Zionist aspect of this school with the words „Young Jewish”, the Russian music critic Leonid Sabaneev limited himself to the neutral description „The Jewish National School in Music” in an essay of the same title, which was translated into both German and English, introducing the term to the West.⁸

When one of the former activists of this movement, the music critic Gershon (Hermann) Svet, was asked in the 1960s by the New York „Union of Russian Jews” to write a contribution about Jewish music and Jewish musicians for the „Book on Russian Jewry 1917–1967”, he again used the term „New Jewish School”, which was clearly still in use at that time. He mentions „several talented composers [...] who created a number of interesting musical works in the style of the so-called New Jewish School in music.”⁹

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the Harrassowitz Verlag in Wiesbaden for their excellent work and for their willingness, twenty years after the publication of the original edition of the monograph, to put out this revised English version.

I would like to thank Ohad Stolarz for the translation of both extensive appendices to this monograph.

Last, but not least, I remember with gratitude my colleague, the musicologist Beate Schröder-Nauenburg (1946–2007), who passed away far too soon, with whom I shared many years of collaboration and friendship, and who provided assistance in many ways on the original German version.

Berlin, August, 2023

Jascha Nemtsov

⁶ Newspaper *Novyi voshod*, St. Petersburg, April 17, 1914, no. 14/15, pp. 32–34.

⁷ Joseph Achron, Autobiography, in: Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) in New York, Solomon Rosowsky Collection 5/22.

⁸ The original Russian version of the essay was commissioned and published in Moscow in 1924 by the Society for Jewish Music. The German translation of the brochure: Leonid Sabaneev, *Die nationale jüdische Schule in der Musik*, Universal Edition, Wien–Leipzig 1927. Die English translation: Leonid Sabaneev, The Jewish national school in music, in: *The Musical Quarterly*, 1929, XV (3), pp. 448–468.

⁹ Jacob Frumkin et al. (eds.), *Kniga o russkom evreistve 1917–1967* (Book on Russian Jewry 1917–1967), Union of Russian Jews, New York 1968, pp. 263–264.