

# Michael Fabianovitch Gnesin

program text by Prof. A.G. Yusfin

Michael Fabianovich Gnesin - one of the great composers of the first half of the twentieth century - contributed considerably to the Jewish as well as the Russian musical culture. He lived most of his life in the extremely harsh conditions of the totalitarian state, but managed to preserve his creativity and independence and create fine works in many genres of the musical art.

M. F. Gnesin was born in the southern Russian town of Rostov-on-Don on February 2, 1883. He was the son of the state rabbi – a senior representative of the Jewish community who was highly esteemed for his outstanding personality and social activities and contributed greatly towards improving the position of the Jews in Rostov.

Gnesin's mother came from a musical family. Her father was a famous folk singer and composer, the author of many tunes that still feature in Jewish folk music today. Two of Gnesin's aunts, his mother's sisters, became famous singers. Gnesin's mother was also an excellent singer. All her children inherited her musical talent: her three daughters became professional musicians and creators of one of the best musical establishments in Russia – the Gnesin Music-Pedagogical Institute (nowadays the Gnesin Academy of Music).

Gnesin's love of Jewish songs was implanted in his earliest childhood by his mother's father Schajke Pfaifer (Ishayagu Fletzinger) – badchen (folk singer and composer) from Vilna. Later Gnesin used some of his tunes in his works. The synagogal tunes were introduced to him by Eliezer Gerovich, the cantor of the Rostov synagogue, a talented author of liturgical music.

In 1901 Gnesin entered the Petersburg conservatory in the class of N. Rimsky-Korsakov. His other teachers were A. Glazunov and A. Ljadov. Gnesin always felt fortunate to have been able to mold himself under the guidance of the great Russian composer.

It is interesting to note that the whole pleiade of young Jewish composers emerged in the class of Rimsky-Korsakov – Solomon Rosowsky (1878-1962), Lazare Saminsky (1882-1959), Alexander Zhitomirsky (1881-1937) and Pesah Lvov (1880-1913). Later they all took part in founding the first Jewish national school of composing music.

Immediately after graduating from the conservatory, Gnesin moved to Rostov, where he taught at various music schools. After the revolution he founded a conservatory in Rostov and became its director.

Together with the other young Jewish musicians, he was one of the founders of the "Society of Jewish Folk Music". He was commissioned by this Society to take his first trip to Palestine in 1914. There he learned a great deal about the status of music education and studied Jewish folk music. In 1922 Gnesin visited Palestine for the second time. His year in the Promised Land enabled him to deeply enter the world of Jewish music, as was reflected in all his future creativity and in his scientific and pedagogical activities. After the termination of the St. Petersburg "Society of Jewish Folk Music", Gnesin and J. Engel, D. Shor and A. Krein made an effort to re-establish it in Moscow in 1923. Organizing the future musical academy in Palestine was one of the aims of the Society. Many years later, after all of them had passed away, this type of academy was founded in Israel. As for the Moscow Society, after some years it was closed as well...

In 1923 he was appointed professor of composition at the Gnesin School, in 1936-1941 he was a professor at the Leningrad Conservatory, and in 1944-1951 he held a chair of composition at the Gnesin Institute. Since the foundation of the Composers Union of the USSR in 1948 he was a board member. In 1927 he was given the title of "Honored Worker of the Arts of RSFSR". He became Doctor of Art without defending a thesis (1943), and received the State Premium in 1946. Gnesin died on May 5, 1957.

M. F. Gnesin was an outstanding representative of both Jewish and global musical culture, a musician with broad and diverse activities, a highly talented, original composer, one of the creators of the school of Jewish art music, a scholar in the science of music and the author of a number of profound scientific ideas, a brilliant pedagogue who taught several generations of composers from various national cultures. Lastly, he was a great public figure in the musical world and an active

builder of internal culture, whose high moral authority in many ways established the destiny of Russian Art...

Gnesin was the author of more than 50 romances and songs, a number of chamber works, orchestral compositions, and the opera-poem "Youth of Abraham".

The special role of the musical thought, the idea, was typical of his musical works. His music always bore an air of bright and expressive emotionality. The composer was convinced that "Music is a field of emotionalized thinking" (V. F. Gnesin. "Initial course of practical composition". Moscow, 1962, p. 16). He organically combined gravity and depth of intentions with acute and strong expressiveness and tense emotionality in his music, embodying vital human feelings.

Jewish folk and synagogal music, deeply assimilated by him in his early childhood, became the genuine basis of his musical language, and formed not only his artistic style, but also his musical way of thinking. It is no coincidence that, as Gnesin noted himself: "elements of Jewish music captured my musical feelings and imagination to such an extent that even when I did not have the mission of looking for a Jewish style, those elements appeared in my works" (M. F. Gnesin. "The Articles, Memories, Materials". Moscow, 1961, p. 206).

However, in the first decade of his creative life Gnesin rarely addressed Jewish themes. Once I asked him about this singularity, and he answered:

-For some reason many people think folk music is very simple and seems to lend itself to be worked upon. But it only seems so. Actually, the professional approach to it is extremely complicated. On the one hand there is a great danger of slipping into banality, of writing "cheapish" music (as M. Gnesin liked to say, A.Y.) that only discredits ingenious folk tunes. And on the other hand, as we know, there is diversity in the stylistic forms of Jewish synagogal and folk music because the Jews lived in a diaspora among many peoples for centuries and have naturally incorporated some elements of those cultures. This is why it is very difficult to write *Jewish* music, as opposed to Russian, German or Polish music with a mild "Jewish flavour" – plenty of that kind of music was and is written. So I did not hasten to become a Jewish composer. I understood that it would come to me all the same. Only after the first trip to Palestine in 1914 did I suddenly feel I was becoming ripe for the allusion to the Jewish intonation. And I destroyed all the numerous past attempts in this field as soon as I really caught the internal sense of the Jewish melody or, more precisely, individually-unique Jewish substance in a melody. His first Jewish work was a free interpretation of a tune composed by his grandfather, "A Nigun fun Sjaike Pfaifer". After that he wrote a lengthy series of compositions in the Jewish style...

The ideological pressure on culture in our country intensified in the middle of the 1920s. Any reference to synagogal music was interpreted as Zionism, which was forbidden at the time. That is why M. Gnesin was compelled to address the music of other peoples (sextet "Adygeya", pieces for violin, and piano on the basis of Chuvash, Mordovian, Circassian, Kazakh and Mari folk songs and dances). But in these compositions the ethnicity of the writer clearly showed through and they can be rightfully attributed to the Jewish national school (just as say the "Spanish Capriccio" by N. Rimsky-Korsakov belongs to the Russian national school).

From the very start Gnesin's music drew great interest from many outstanding performers such as N. Zabela-Vrubel, I. Alchevsky, P. Casals, G. Szigeti, A. Zilotti and M. Yudina.

Unfortunately, the subsequent destiny of his compositions was extremely diverse. They were only very rarely performed. And here the obvious question arises: how could it happen that the works of one of the greatest internal composers of the first half of the twentieth century did not attract the public attention of his contemporaries? It seemed to have all the necessary qualities to attract performers: melodic saturation, bright visualization, artistic courage, a deep ethnic basis and genuine originality. The answer to this question is very simple – the very Jewish essence of his music became the main obstacle to its widespread circulation. As far as I know there were no special legal *written* orders "from above" in this case. There was only a secret *oral* instruction to limit the number of compositions on Jewish subjects for performance, and there are many testimonies to that: ("There was a blacklist of musicians and musical pieces they were advised not to perform" ("Ogonyek", №33, August 1990, p. 16). This was enough, and the rest was done by the "functionaries of the arts". It is understandable that performers started to avoid compositions and composers that could cause a problem in obtaining permission to include them in concert programs.

Furthermore, most of his published works were limited editions (much of his work still is manuscript) and were out of the reach of performers. And Gnesin himself did nothing to improve the situation and have his works published or distributed, though his own high authority would have easily enabled him to do so. Like any composer, he certainly wanted his compositions performed and wanted to have his own audience. But he couldn't "push" his music or fight for concerts, since at the time this would entail humiliating and ingratiating yourself before "the powers that be". As a sad result, most of Gnesin's compositions remained unknown up to the end of the twentieth century to listeners and musicians alike.

Certainly, some of his works were known to inquisitive Jewish composers, and played a role in the emergence of the Jewish school of composing in Russia, America and Israel. But there was no audience access to them in concert halls.

That is why it is now possible to rightfully say Gnesin's music is a discovery of the twenty-first century. I'd like to wish Gnesin's music a happy life. And hope its beauty, freshness, brightness, its ethical purity and philosophical depth will open themselves to the new listener at last.

*Abraham Yusfin,  
St. Petersburg, August 2002*

### **Brief summaries of performed works**

*A Nigun fun Sjaike Pfaifer* (1914) – his first published work in the Jewish style. It is a free arrangement of a tune by his grandfather for violin and piano. In the concert it will be performed in the version for violoncello and piano.

*"A Song of the knight-errant"* (in remembrance of minstrel Süßkind from Trimberg for violoncello and piano, op. 34 (1921). The composition is dedicated to a unique personality of the Middle Ages – the Jewish minstrel of the thirteenth century. It is based on an organic combination of medieval Provençal and Jewish melodic intonations.

*The Jewish songs* for voice and piano, op. 37 (1923-1926).

N1. *There is no hand more tender* is an arrangement of an Arabian tune recorded by Gnesin in Palestine in 1921. The Jewish text is by Zalman Shneur.

N2. *Song of Mariamna* (fragment from the tragedy by Hebbel "Herod and Mariamna") - vocalize, whose melodic structure is based on archaic intonations of the most ancient Jewish tunes.

N3. *From the Song of Songs* (Chapter 8, stanza 8-10 "We have a little sister"). It's a playful song and includes some melodic elements of Jewish dances.

N4 *The Song about Redheaded Mottele* ("Father and grandfather were working"). The lyrics are from "The story of redheaded Mottele" by J.Utkin. The song is about a poor tailor from a small Jewish town, who had the gift of being able to laugh at his own poverty. In it the sound world of Jewish province and the special manner of drawling the words are authentically reconstructed. This song is number one in vocal cycle Op. 44

N5. *The enemy is at the gates* by Osher Shwarzman. The composition flagellates the instigators of the pogroms. Its melodious language is based on the combination of a synagogal recitative and a Jewish song.

In this vocal cycle Gnesin develops the traditions of Musorgsky creating realistic musical pictures, embodying scenes from ancient and modern history of the Jewish people.

*"Óra"* (*Galilean workers dance*). Variations for four-hand piano, op. 35 (1922-1923). This composition is based on a traditional Jewish dancing tune recorded by the composer during his stay in Palestine.

*Sonata for violin and piano* in G-Major Op.43 (1928) is dedicated to his wife - Galina Mavrikiyevna Vankovich. It is an inspired lyrical poem in a very light mood. In the sonata Gnesin's artistic style is fully embodied. His deep feeling of the spirit of Hebrew music organically combined with modern musical dynamics is actualized in this work without any conventional quoting of well-known tunes and in his own musical language.

*Three Melodies*. For clarinet, violin, violoncello and piano, op. 60. (1942). They are based on music to the plays "On the eve", "Russian people" and "A soldier came awalking from the front " in the Mari drama theatre performance in Ioshkar-Ola, where Gnesin was evacuated during the war.

N1. *Song of Gerèn* is based on a Turkmen tune.

N2. *Ukrainian Dancing*.

N3 *Lyrical Intermezzo* freely interprets a Russian national song.

Music to "*The story about redheaded Mottele*" by J. Utkin, for voice and piano. op. 44 (1926), represents realistic pictures of life in a small Jewish town after the revolution came. The interference of conventional Jewish ways with new revolutionary customs generates cheerful, absurd and sad situations that the heroes of this cycle collide with. The music of this composition, following the poetic text – a refined interpretation of Jewish (Yiddish) speech in Russian with its typical irregularities – finely replicates its intonations, using the entire arsenal of music typical of small Jewish towns – lyrical niguns, celebratory tunes, and synagogal recitatives.

Thus the composer not only attains complete authenticity in the musical setting, he also achieves an extraordinary artistic wholeness almost unparalleled in Jewish music. In many years only Shostakovich came close to attaining such heights in his vocal cycle "From Jewish Folk Poetry".

"*The Jewish Orchestra at the Ball of the City Mayor*". Suite from the music to the play "Revisor" by Gogol in 6 parts (Grotesque). Op. 41, (1926).

N1. *Félicitation (Fantasie)* ((Salutation (Fantasy)),

N2. *Quadrille (Polka, Romance, Waltz, Gavotte, Petits pieds, Gallop)*.

This composition was written for a play performed at the Theatre Studio by the great producer V. Meyerhold. On the instructions of the producer, the Jewish orchestra played ball dances at a ball, as was not uncommon in the epoch of Gogol. As M. Gnesin wrote, "this composition called Grotesque falls into the category of musical humour: amusing, comical, heightened here to "laughter through tears" ... through professional music a peculiar phenomenon is imitated of common practice in folk music, namely the music of Jewish folk musicians. (M. Gnesin, *Articles, Memories, Materials*. Moscow, 1961, p.196-207). Using the form of conventional everyday dances of the mid-nineteenth century, the composer saturates their music with typical Jewish intonations to create the comical effect of paradoxical disharmony of form and musical content. The melodic material of this composition is mainly created by the composer, but he widely used melodic phrases from the songs of his grandfather (who lived, by the way in the era when Gogol wrote his play).

"*Trio*" for piano, violin and violoncello "*To the memory of our perished children*", op. 63 (1943).

The composition was inspired by the death of the composer's son Faby during the war in 1942. This explains the tragic nature of the music and musical materials used in it. A leitmotif of this composition is the Jewish song "Amol iz geven a judele" (There Lived a Little Jewish Fellow) about the death of a son. The second subject of the trio is a tune composed by M. Gnesin's son at the age of eight in 1915. The musical drama of the trio is created from their intensive interplay and dramatic development.



JEWISH MUSIC PROJECTS . POB 55524 . NL-1007 NA Amsterdam . T/F: +31 (20) 6623675 . E: info@joodsemuziekprojecten.nl