

A CANTORIAL LESSON: THE LINEAGE OF A LEARNING ENCOUNTER

ABSTRACT

Dyadic lessons were a prevalent form of instruction for cantors in the United States during the period of mass immigration up until the establishment of seminary-based schools of sacred music in the decade after the World War II. Dyadic lessons offered an opportunity for novice singers to learn skills related to the cantorial craft, especially the knowledgeable interpretation of cantorial scores. In this essay, I offer an ethnography of a lesson I took with elder Cantor Julius Blackman in San Francisco in 2016. The description of the lesson serves as a frame for a discussion of the history of cantorial pedagogy in America and the specific ideologies associated with cantorial performance that pedagogues impart in the frame of the lesson.

KEYWORDS: cantorial pedagogy, cantorial performance, dyadic lessons, Julius Blackman, musical performance

“*Sing* it. Don’t holler at them.” The old cantor repeated the closing melody of a prayer text for me once again. His voice followed the contours of a knotted ornamentation, singing very softly in a wavering falsetto, his slightly distended lower lip trembling with the effort. He held the final note for a long time, surprisingly long, accentuating the delicately communicative nature of his delivery, gradually easing the listener into the moment of release and silence. The contrast

between his voice and mine, young and healthy and loud, could not have been more marked. He seemed to find my robust vocal tone irksome and desired to contain it so that I could be subdued to a dynamic at which I would truly listen to what he was trying to communicate. In the context of the cantorial lesson, it is the health and vigor of youth that must bend to the will of the trembling and ancient.

This article offers an analysis of one cantorial lesson I took with Cantor Julius Blackman when he was 103 years old. Our lesson is an example of a form of pedagogy that arose in the United States in the early twentieth century as a response to the changing cultural conditions in which cantorial music was being made. Cantorial choirs had been a training ground for novice cantors in Eastern Europe, but were not a major part of synagogue life in America. In the first decades of the twentieth century in the urban immigrant environment where most Jews lived, the culture of cantorial apprenticeship disappeared. Cantorial pedagogues set up shop offering lessons as an alternative form of education. In the dyadic learning environment, the relationship between teacher and student substitutes for the professional settings that provided formative experiences for novice learners in Europe.

My lesson with Blackman serves as the jumping-off point for a discussion of themes in the transmission of cantorial knowledge. By attending to aspects of Blackman's teaching style that might at first glance appear idiosyncratic or counterproductive, I have been able to come to a more nuanced understanding of the functions and goals of cantorial education. In the cantorial lesson, interpersonal dynamics, including frustration and confusion, play an important role in helping guide the student into a working knowledge of the genre. Taking on the perspectives and stylistic nuances of the teacher becomes the student's point of entry to understanding musical practices. The teacher's voice is the key to unlocking the sonic experience hinted at in musical scores of old cantorial pieces. In the cantorial lesson I took, Blackman presented not only musical examples, but also anecdotes and ideas that guided me toward a sympathetic understanding of the ideologies and purposes of cantorial performance as Blackman sees them. The pedagogy of the cantorial lesson is an attempt to move the holistic approach of apprenticeship learning into the compressed space of a dyadic experience.

Modern cantorial music arose in nineteenth-century Europe as an aesthetic response to Jewish Emancipation and was brought to its apogee of popularity through recordings made by immigrant Jewish artists in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Cantors were virtuosic singers who performed a version of old synagogue music stylized and expanded into an art form influenced by European classical music. The genre of classic cantorial music functioned both as an art that was appreciated by devoted music fans and as a prayer experience. The two aspects of cantorial music, devotional and aesthetic, are not easily separated from one another. For Jewish congregational audiences in the late

nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, the experience of being moved by the sounds of a knowledgeable and skillful cantor was an integral part of the experience of prayer. The dyadic cantorial lesson is an endeavor to insert this cultural history into a social experience limited to teacher and student. The substance and format of the lesson I took with Cantor Blackman reveals historical details about the intellectual lineage of cantorial music, the interaction of text and performance, and the cultivation of a cantorial perspective in a novice performer.

Comparing my experience studying with Blackman to stories about other cantorial pedagogues and archival research from the history of the genre indicates that seemingly idiosyncratic aspects of Blackman's teaching are in fact normative, or at least relate to major trends in cantorial education. In my discussion of my lesson with Cantor Blackman, I have decided against a "deficit" view of the lesson that would imagine the existence of an "ideal" lesson with a somewhat younger pedagogue. Instead, I maintain that this lesson represents an integral whole that reflects both Cantor Blackman's individual aesthetic sensibility and the larger culture that he is a part of.

A close analysis of my lesson with Blackman offers insight into two themes in the history and practice of cultural transmission in American cantorial music. The first is the format of the dyadic lesson itself. At first glance, it might appear self-evident that lessons would be a standard form for oral transmission of musical knowledge. This does not seem to have been the case for cantors in Europe, who learned through professional participation in the music as members of choirs usually beginning in childhood. In the United States where there were fewer opportunities to apprentice as choir singers, the cantorial lesson became the primary form of education for cantors before the establishment of seminary-based training programs in the 1950s.

The second theme is the nuanced role musical scores play as a pedagogical tool and a means of transmission of cantorial knowledge. The presence of texts as an important source of cantorial repertoire suggests that cantorial music is a genre dependent on prescriptive notation. This is only partially true. Written musical texts are problematic because cantorial music is in important respects resistant to being notated. Signatory elements of the genre such as non-metered rhythm, improvisatory embellishment and the complex timbres of cantorial vocal production are not notated, or are only partially represented by the written form. One important goal of the cantorial lesson is to impart skills that will allow the novice cantor to interpret written music with an authoritatively cantorial sound, as defined by the aesthetic judgment of the pedagogue. The attention that is garnered by the virtuosic improvisatory elements in cantorial performance obscure the role of composed music in the genre and of notation as an important means of preservation. The "hidden" role of musical scores in supporting knowledgeable cantorial performance can also function from an even more oblique angle. Rather

than utilizing a musical score text, a seemingly “oral” lesson, with no text visually available during the lesson, can refer to textually derived source material that the pedagogue learned from. The pedagogue can present musical material to a student in a folklorized improvisatory form, with the original text partially or completely unacknowledged. Keeping a score hidden has the effect of further obscuring the relationship of musical expertise and textual source material. This was the case in my lesson with Blackman where the source text was acknowledged but not directly utilized during the lesson.

Cantor Blackman’s century of experience offers an authoritative significance to the testimony I gathered in our lesson. Blackman has lived through the major periods of transition in the American cantorate. From the Golden Age of populist “Star” cantors, to the rise of American-born cantors who sought training from European-born pedagogues in an unregulated market, to the establishment of seminary-based conservatories that produced “certified” cantors who belonged to strong unions, Cantor Blackman has participated in it all. Blackman’s musical interests show the flow of mid-twentieth-century cantorial aesthetics. His tastes and expertise embrace the Eastern European folk melodies he heard growing up, a deep knowledge of virtuoso solo cantorial performance styles from Europe, and a passionate interest in “high culture” music for the synagogue written in the United States by twentieth-century classical composers. Blackman’s conception of the musical skill set of a cantor is an assemblage that reflects these disparate elements. By delving deeply into the fine-grained details of my experience with an eyewitness to the history of the genre, I have been able to learn about the function of dyadic lessons and gain insight into some of the “invisible” work that is achieved in this kind of learning environment. Attending to less overt aspects of pedagogy, especially the way cantorial coaching helps the student translate textual sources into performance, invites a more nuanced discussion of the role of musical text in oral transmission.

It should be noted that the kind of idealized synagogue environment where congregants are deeply engaged in prayer experience through the aesthetic mediation of a master cantor is increasingly rare. The lesson Blackman gave me and his advice about how best to interpret prayer melodies is geared toward a religious practice that is largely absent from the contemporary American Jewish landscape. His style of teaching, intimate and focused on helping me adopt his own style and aesthetic standpoint, echoes the dyadic education that was available to aspiring cantors in the period when he was learning. Blackman’s pedagogy is a product of a period in American synagogue life when the reflected light of the “Star” cantors of the early 20th century continued to glow and professional cantors played a role in the congregation as knowledgeable virtuosos presenting a soloist repertoire of prayer music. Ostensibly, when Blackman was learning his trade the prayer leading style of virtuoso soloist performance was still widely understood and desired by Jewish congregations.

A CANTOR'S LIFE AND THE LIFE OF THE MUSIC

On December 10, 2016, I drove to San Francisco from the Stanford campus to meet with Cantor Blackman. At the time, Blackman's health, at 103, had been somewhat more tenuous than usual in the last few months after a fall. Fortunately, his injury was very minor, but the ensuing hospital stay was disorienting and stressful for both him and his daughter Beth Blackman, who takes care of him. He was soon able to return home. Despite having limited mobility, Cantor Blackman is blessed with an astonishing lucidity at his advanced age. After a month of e-mailing back and forth with his daughter, I was able to arrange a meeting. This was my third visit with Blackman. In my first visits I had interviewed him extensively about his life in Jewish music, establishing important context for understanding how he encountered cantorial music and learned to be a practitioner.

Julius Blackman's life is in many respects a paradigmatic American cantorial biography. His experiences are illustrative of shifts that took place in cantorial culture in the United States during the first half of the twentieth century. He was born in a Jewish immigrant neighborhood in Chicago, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants who sang *zemiros* (table hymns) and Yiddish songs in the home and attended an Orthodox synagogue where he heard the prayer leading of an Eastern European-born *bal tefilo* (prayer leader). As a boy, Julius had opportunity to sing in cantorial choirs accompanying famed cantors visiting Chicago on tour, including revered figures such as Pierre Pinchik and Yossele Rosenblatt. As a young man, in the early years of his marriage, he moved to California, along with thousands of other Jews seeking easier living and economic opportunity on the West coast. It was in California that he began his career as a cantor. After attaining a job as a cantor for the High Holidays, he spent an intensive period taking dyadic lessons with a Polish-born cantor named Roman Cycowski. Cycowski had come to Berlin to train as an opera singer and there became a recording star in interwar Germany as a founding member of the internationally popular vocal quartet the Comedian Harmonists.¹ After immigrating to the United States, Cycowski reinvented himself as a cantor, returning to the music he had sung as a young man. Cantor Blackman speaks reverentially of Cycowski to this day and cites him as the source of his cantorial expertise.

While these elements of Blackman's life story might favor a view of his career as a folk musician working in an oral music genre, it is notable that knowledge of Western art music and literacy in music notation played a role in every period in his music making career. In his years as a pulpit cantor, Blackman organized concerts of new synagogue music with a modernist classical bent. His career trajectory highlights the ways in which valorization of folk traditions and a bent toward elite forms of music coexisted in the period of the institutionalization of the cantorial profession in the United States.²

Julius was slightly older than the generation of cantors trained in seminary schools, but like his generationally younger peers he was concerned with elevating the status of the cantorate. Attaining respect was both a matter of forming a strong union to gain better salaries and of appealing to the status of high art music through avenues such as the commissioning of new synagogue music by classically trained composers. Julius was politically active; he was involved in labor organizing as a young man in Chicago and he sang in a socialist Yiddish choir. During the course of his career as a cantor, Julius was heavily involved in the struggle for institutional recognition and greater respect for the profession of the cantorate. He was involved in cantorial politics as the representative of the West Coast Regional Branch of the Cantors Assembly. In this capacity, he suggested at the 1954 annual convention that the Jewish Theological Seminary include courses on cantorial music as part of rabbinic training³ in an effort to raise the status of cantors to an equal level as their more established counterparts in the pulpit.

Julius eventually left full time employment as a cantor, but continued to lead services on the High Holidays into his senior citizen years. As an employee of the Hebrew Free Loan Association, where he worked for decades in his second career, his business card read “Cantor Julius Blackman.”

Many elements of this life narrative are typical of American-born cantors who got their start before the establishment of training seminaries in the years after World War II. Childhood enculturation in European Jewish religious folk music sung in the home, choir singing, followed by a period of intensive training with a cantorial pedagogue is a familiar refrain heard in the autobiography of Leibe Waldman,⁴ born in New York in 1907, and also closely resembles the career path of Cantor Jacob Konigsberg (my grandfather), born in Cleveland in 1921. The basic strokes of these life narratives foreground the aural basis for learning Jewish music and the nurturing of musical authority through access to a Jewish musical lineage peopled by renowned figures.

The cantorial biographies included in Elias Zaludkowski’s cantorial lexicon,⁵ and in the Jewish Ministers Cantors Association thirtieth-anniversary festschrift⁶ offer the impression of a “template” cantorial narrative from the pre-World War II era in Europe, in which family background and choir singing were basic elements. European-born cantors typically learned repertoire and stylistic norms over a period of many years of apprenticeship in choirs singing with a master cantor as a *meshorer* (chorister, pl. *meshorerim*).⁷ Working as a meshorer in a cantorial choir amounted to a form of legitimate peripheral participation⁸ in the trade. A meshorer was both a novice learner and a necessary participant whose labor helped a professional cantor to successfully ply his trade. The remuneration earned by a meshorer lent the legitimacy of paid labor to a young singer. The choir experience allowed a singer to learn over time and through repeated exposure to the musical vocabulary of a master cantor. Although not all meshorerim

became cantors,⁹ most cantors in the Eastern European milieu had experience as choir singers.

From this “standard” cantorial biography, it is difficult to gauge how widespread note reading was among Eastern European cantors. Being non-literate in Western notation is a frequent description used by American cantors to describe their small-town European-born elders.¹⁰ Of the “Golden Age” cantorial stars, most appear to have been musically literate in Western notation. David Roitman, one of the best-known European-born cantors in America, appears in his only film clips reading his own recitative composition from a small notebook he holds in his hand.¹¹ Roitman, like many of his contemporaries, was an urban-based artist who was also experienced as a singer of opera and other forms of Western art music. The trope of the rural cantor’s isolation from Western classical norms was clearly not a reality for many “star” cantors. The repertoire of the most revered cantors included Western art music and in some cases may have been partially reliant on notation for their cantorial singing as well.

In the first half century of mass migration of Eastern European Jews to the United States (c. 1880–1924) the need for cantors was fed by European-born performers. After the Johnson-Hayes act of 1924 slowed Jewish immigration to a trickle,¹² a crisis of cantorial continuity necessitated the development of new forms of cantorial education. In the early decades of the twentieth century, young singers born in the United States continued to have some of the kinds of cultural experiences that had prepared European cantors to enter the field. Blackman had sung in choirs, but these experiences were sporadic and did not impart a complete knowledge of the musical repertoire of the liturgical cycle and the improvisational skills required of a professional. The memoir of Cantor Leibeke Waldman¹³ depicts a similar scene to Blackman’s childhood: an upbringing in a kind of hybrid Eastern European/American urban environment where European Jewish musical practices continued to function in immigrant neighborhoods. Waldman was raised exposed to European synagogue practices and sang in choirs, but in order to attain mastery of the cantorial canon he needed the services of a pedagogue. In the absence of the opportunity to learn from apprenticeships, dyadic lessons with cantorial pedagogues became increasingly important as a means of musical transmission.

As noted by ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin, cantorial pedagogues such as Louis Lipitz set up shop in the 1920s and ’30s as instructors who would provide aspiring cantors with the repertoire needed to gain employment.¹⁴ According to Noah Schall, an influential cantorial pedagogue who has been teaching private students since the 1940s, private cantorial teachers could shape their instruction to the specific skills and needs of their students in ways that classroom teaching could not address.¹⁵

Sheet music transcriptions became increasingly important as a source of repertoire for young American-born cantors working in the Eastern European

cantorial style, separated geographically and culturally from the roots of the genre. Both Lipitz and Schall would write out by hand segments of the liturgy for their students as part of their instruction, creating a personalized anthology that the novice cantor could study and refer to. Jacob Konigsberg, who studied with both Lipitz and Schall, retained his hand written scores from Lipitz for the rest of his life.

CANTORIAL SCORES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF SONIC EXPERIENCE

As my afternoon with Blackman proceeded, he and I sat around his table in the combined living room-dining room that took up the better part of his apartment. The room was crammed full with many overflowing bookshelves and a collection of furniture procured in different eras of the 20th century. Blackman's library included books on cantorial music; prominently displayed was Abraham Baer's well-known cantorial anthology, numerous *sidurim* (prayer books) as well as classics of American literature. Assorted Judaica objects were placed around the room: a menorah, brass candlesticks. On the wall were hung framed black and white photographs of Cantor Blackman's relatives, some dating back to before their immigration to the United States.

At my urging, we transitioned from conversation to a lesson. After a fair amount of equivocating and half remembering, we settled into working with a piece that Blackman identified as Adolph Katchko's setting of *Hashkivenu*. This selection was one of Katchko's *Five Musical Settings of Hashkivenu*, published in 1947, a work that contains five distinct treatments of the same prayer text from *mariv*, the evening service.¹⁶ We spent most of the lesson working with a recitative setting from Katchko's published score.

It is worthwhile to spend a moment parsing the term "recitative," so prevalent in cantorial discourse and yet rarely or confusingly defined. In the cantor's specialized professional vocabulary, recitative has a different meaning than the common usage by European classical musicians. *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* offers a definition of "recitative" as a "style of setting that imitates and emphasizes the natural inflections, rhythms, and syntax of speech. Such a setting avoids extremes of pitch and intensity and repetitions of words, allowing the music to be primarily a vehicle for the words."¹⁷ The entry goes on to note the function of the recitative as a transitional passage between two adjacent pieces in an opera. In contrast, the cantorial recitative is a long-form non-metered solo voice fantasia that often features extensive repetition of text. One outstanding feature of the cantorial recitative is the use of densely ornamented melsimatic figuration that often spans over an octave. These vocal figures are referred to as coloratura, another borrowing from Western music nomenclature that has been altered to meet the needs

of cantorial style. Cantorial coloratura serves as a display of vocal virtuosity and improvisational skill in manipulating and expanding upon the traditional modalities of old prayer chant forms.

“Recitative” as a descriptor seems to have been adopted by Jewish singers because of the marked rubato and parlando vocal style in operatic recitative that is shared with cantorial singing, albeit in greatly differing form and substance. This non-metered, highly abstract vocal genre became a form of mass popular culture among Jews through recordings made by “star” cantors such as Yossele Rosenblatt and Gershon Sirota in the early decades of the twentieth century. The genre of the cantorial recitative is a hybrid form that brings together elements of pre-modern non-metered synagogue chant melodies with harmonic and melodic innovations derived from Western art music. Its non-metered rhythm and through-composed form make the cantorial recitative an ideal space for poetic flights of fancy, improvisation and evocative interpolations of older prayer melodies. It is a genre that is designed to be deeply emotive, as is reflected in characteristic vocal effects that imitate the sound of crying or wailing. In the words of cantorial scholar Gershon Ephros, “the scholar who writes the history of our people in the Diaspora, should find very valuable documentary evidence in the hazzanic recitative.”¹⁸

Adolph Katchko (1888–1958), the composer whose recitative we were working with in our lesson, was an important figure in the transitional period of Eastern European Jewish synagogue music in America.¹⁹ His training in Europe included both meshorer apprenticeship and conservatory training in Berlin, a similar biographical profile to Blackman’s teacher Roman Cycowski. Katchko immigrated to the United States in 1921, initiating a successful performance and recording career in New York. While his records have drifted into obscurity, Katchko’s scholarship of cantorial music remains influential. The anthology of synagogue chant for the entire cycle of the Jewish liturgical calendar that he produced is one of the primary pedagogical texts used at the Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music.²⁰ The piece Julius chose was from a Katchko publication that included four choral pieces with keyboard accompaniment, composed in a vein reminiscent of Salomon Sulzer, the legendary nineteenth-century Viennese cantorial reformer who pioneered the importation of European classical sounds into the synagogue.

The fifth setting of Hashkivenu included in this work was written for a single tenor voice, in the style of a “Golden Age” recitative. The score indicates that it is intended to be appropriate for a synagogue that follows the Orthodox ritual, without instrumental accompaniment. The notation for solo voice is written without bar lines, to imply the approximate nature of the rhythmic notation of the score. Notating without bar lines is normative in cantorial scores because the non-metered rhythm of the cantorial recitative demands compromise in Western rhythmic notation practices. This usage of Western notation in these texts affirms the identity of Jewish liturgical music as being a form of European music but

simultaneously undermines this association by accentuating difference through breaking the rules of graphic representation. Cantorial scores use the technology of notation, but at a slant, appropriating rhythm, pitch and articulation markings with a free hand to approximate a non-western art form with a unique sonic palette and aesthetic disposition.

Not having been familiar with Katchko's Hashkivenu before this lesson, I was unaware of its provenance in a published textual form and mistakenly assumed the piece was something Blackman had learned from a record, or perhaps from his teacher Cycowski. While we did not look at a written score during the lesson, Blackman's choice of material specifically invoked the legacy of cantor-composers who used written scores to transmit their compositions. There does not appear to be a recording of this particular recitative. Blackman most likely learnt it from the published score. The fact that we were not looking at a text obscured the fact that we were learning a composed piece and reinforced the impression that I was receiving folkloric knowledge in an oral tradition. Blackman was folklorizing Katchko's composition, creating the sense of himself as being the authoritative source of knowledge. Cultivating the image of direct transmission from a knowing source is important as an element of pedagogy. Blackman was "reclaiming" a composed recitative as a template on which to improvise and interpolate signatory cantorial sonic gestures. In this way he was modeling for me the kinds of musical behaviors and skills that are important aspects of cantorial performance.

Blackman sang for me a recitative that began with the same set of phrases as Katchko's Hashkivenu No. 5, varied only very subtly from its notated version, as I was able to verify later by comparing a recording of our lesson to the published score. After the opening phrases Blackman's rendition moved in different directions, perhaps referring to another textual source or perhaps opening completely into improvised material. The format of the lesson consisted of Blackman singing musical phrases that I would try to imitate as closely as possible. He would critique my imitation and then either ask me to try again or he himself would sing the phrase again. Sometimes musical ideas would give way to memories, and Blackman would embark on narrative episodes that would explicate emotional resonances of the text or social contexts related to the work of cantorial performance. He accentuated musical ideas with anecdotes from his life in the pulpit, bringing his thoughts about the experience of having been a cantor into the lesson as another resource he had at his disposal to teach about the music.

INTERPRETING THE SCORE

Learning how to decipher the sounds notated in a cantorial recitative score is an important goal of the cantorial lesson. Cantorial recitative scores are what

ethnomusicologist Benjamin Brinner refers to as a *foundation*, “a frame of reference that is reliable because it is ongoing or regular and therefore predictable and absolute enough to anchor oneself in the shifting relativity that typifies much music making.”²¹ Rather than a performer who plays a supportive role, as in the examples Brinner brings from Indian classical music, foundational support in the context of cantorial pedagogy is provided by previous generations of cantors, represented both by the score and the pedagogue’s memory of his own experiences. In the interactive network of the cantorial lesson, the text of a composed recitative brings the voices of dead masters of the genre into close proximity to the work of living practitioners. The guidance of the teacher helps the novice learner make the leap from being bound to singing the notes printed on the page to being able to make the text breathe with the performative norms of the tradition.

A “true” reading of the cantorial score, one that comports with the pedagogue’s goals for the student, will communicate feeling and knowledge of the meaning in the verbal prayer text through the use of proper embellishment and cantorial vocal production. In addition to teaching musical techniques, the cantorial pedagogue instructs students in a vocabulary of affective gestures and philosophical standpoints about the meaning of music in prayer that are invisible in the notation. In the course of my lesson, improvisatory gestures and complex timbral vocal shadings arose in the course of the varied examples that Blackman sang for me. Blackman communicated extra-musical ideas about the meaning of cantorial performance through anecdote and asides sprinkled into our study session. To the extent that the goal of the lesson was for me to learn to sing Katchko’s Hashkivenu, the lesson was not successful. Blackman was, however, highly effective in illustrating for me how he might go about inflecting a composed musical text for optimal emotive effect. His variations demonstrated how to bend a piece to suit the communicative needs of the social setting of a prayer service where the creative energy of a cantor would be the defining element in the sonic space, drawing interest and engagement from the congregants.

Cantorial pedagogue Noah Schall told me in an interview that he believes *khazones* (the Yiddish term for cantorial music) is a text-based art form, even though the written form is a highly imperfect and only partial representation of what the music should sound like. Schall says performance of *khazones* depends on “a *tam* (flavor) and *bal tefilodike* (prayer leader-like) intonation.” Schall’s use of the word “intonation” resonates with Russian musicologist Boris Asafiev’s theory of intonation as a product of enculturation.²² Asafiev, and later Russian musicologists such as Izaly Zemtovsky, propose that musical hearing is similar to a linguistic skill and that fluency in a musical idiom is produced over the course of a lifetime of exposure. In a similar vein, Schall suggests that the key elements for developing a cantorial sound come from exposure to hearing *bal tefilos* (prayer leaders) in childhood. According to Schall, the work of the cantorial pedagogue

involves drawing out passive sonic memory and harnessing it as knowledge that can be brought into performance.

Regardless of what material he is teaching, Schall insists on the use of musical texts as a didactic tool, even for students who cannot read music. It occurred to me that this might be partially symbolic, reflecting the importance of books as sacred objects in Jewish religious practice. Using written texts also accentuates the importance of lineages, illustrating the connection of the student to older artists and composers through the materiality of the score. The text connects the novice cantor to the history of the music and enshrines the memory of distinct musical personalities.

While Blackman did not have a printed score in front of him, his choice of material suggests that notated material was an important part of his repertoire. Indeed, in a personal correspondence ethnomusicologist Mark Kligman had suggested that Blackman's music might not be relevant to my study of "Golden Age" cantorial music styles because of Blackman's reliance on textual sources of a relatively recent provenance (this proved not to be the case). Teaching from a written source, not a cantorial piece learned on an aural basis, is in keeping with Blackman's own musical training, in which music reading played a significant role.

Katchko's status as an important composer resonates with Blackman's professional interest in modernist synagogue music. The elite associations with synagogue composers of Western classical-inspired music supported the labor rights project of raising the prestige of the cantorial profession. At the same time, the improvisatory approach Blackman took to Katchko's piece indicated that he heard this composed recitative as ripe for interpretation along the lines of synagogue prayer leading styles where a cantor would feel free to make significant variations in traditional melodies. In Blackman's musical world, cantorial creativity is associated both with improvisation on traditional themes and with composed music. These varying associations are not mutually exclusive, but rather reflect the multiplicity of artistic perspectives that were circulating during the years of Blackman's cantorial career.

Blackman's approach to teaching blurred the line between text-based learning of a stable text and oral imitation of a shifting and partially improvised musical sound. When Cantor Blackman would repeat a phrase for me to sing, the reiterated phrase would be different from the previous statement of the idea, sometimes drastically so. Trying to sing the phrases that Blackman wanted me to imitate was extremely challenging. The process tested my ability to hear, remember and repeat and my ability to synthesize diverse variations into a melodic line that I could sing somewhat satisfactorily. Blackman's vocal lines would shift in melodic contour, but were also varied in terms of the small, essential details of ornamentation. Some of his variations would include exquisitely microscopic and rapidly delivered groupings of notes that would expand the scalar group and include new

note choices that threw new light on the harmonic scope of the melody. Trying to imitate these shifting, variable elements was difficult, perhaps impossible for me. Although I could not “succeed” in my repetition, and even as I would flounder in my efforts, I felt my perception of interpretive possibilities expand under the sway of Blackman’s improvisations. Upon later reflection, I realized that this unstable quality of the curricular material relates to the goal of teaching the novice flexible interpretive skills in the singing of a cantorial composition.

Since I was aware that I was stymied in an attempt at a note-for-note repetition of Blackman’s phrases, I focused my energy on attending to the spoken critique he offered me rather than on achieving accuracy in hewing to exact pitch sequences. If he told me to accentuate a phrase and hold out the last note, I would attend to these spoken instructions rather than being preoccupied with the exact notes to be sung. Perhaps in response to my focus on his spoken commentary, Blackman began to give more attention to issues of interpretation. At the beginning of the lesson, his comments were primarily musical in nature, urging me to place pauses or shift dynamics in ways that would draw out textual meanings. As the lesson progressed, he began to offer more involved interpretive advice concerning the text and how to bring attention to meaning with vocal delivery. The theme of the lesson shifted away from teaching specific melodic patterns and moved toward an exploration of extra-musical meanings of the prayer texts and how these can be brought into the consciousness of the hearer through vocal stylistic interpretations. The idea emerged that cantorial music relies on more than voice and that the texts of the prayers are more than words, that cantorial performance is “not just singing. If you convey the content, you’ve got it made.” The phrases of the prayer text must be organized so that the cantor is “teaching ideas” to the congregation through the specific manner of his articulation of the text. “You are a more important teacher than the Rabbi,” Blackman stressed. This idea resonates with Blackman’s petition that he made back in the 1950s to have rabbis study cantorial music and his goals for the uplift of the profession in the United States.

Blackman became particularly focused on the words *Ki eyl melekh khanun v’rakhum ata* (because you are king, full of grace and merciful). He took particular pains that I should take a breath before continuing after the words *khanun v’rakhum* (full of grace and merciful). He teased me that I sounded like the voice in a television advertisement rapidly stating the adverse health effects of a medication. He wanted me to slow down and fully articulate the depth of these words and the powerful work they perform. Blackman held forth on the idea that the act of supplication on behalf of the community is the key purpose of the cantor. These words, “full of grace and merciful,” initiated an associative narrative that Blackman wove throughout the rest of the lesson. The words brought to his mind a story about an old friend, a cantor who had served at a synagogue for twenty years and was retiring. A new cantor was being installed with a major communal

celebration and the old cantor was not invited to officiate at the ritual. Blackman stressed that the community had been “lucky to have someone to bring out the *khanun v'rakbum*.” The community had been blessed to have a cantor who successfully pleaded on their behalf and was able to draw down the qualities of mercy from the seat of judgment. The people had not adequately recognized their blessing and did not reciprocate in kind when the cantor was old and no longer of use to them.

This anecdote was both a commentary on the text of the prayer we were learning and a reflection on the sociality of cantorial labor. Perhaps Blackman's story also offered a wistful backwards glance at the changed status of cantors in America whose labors have largely been rejected in the contemporary synagogue.

After working for a time on the subtleties of performing *Hashkivenu*, we ended our lesson by singing a metered melody on the phrase *ushmor tzeseynu* (and guard our coming and going), a short repeated melody that Blackman identified as of Chassidic origin and that was familiar to me from other liturgical texts it is used for. I asked him if he would sing the entire *Hashkivenu* piece for me one last time without interruption so that I could record him. He seemed to enjoy the opportunity to perform. Blackman seemed cheerful and pleased as I collected my papers and recording device and bid farewell to him and to his daughter. He requested that I come again to learn more with him.

LEARNING TO THINK LIKE AN AMERICAN CANTOR

In the cantorial lesson I took with Cantor Julius Blackman, I encountered a form of pedagogy that emerged in a period of social change in synagogue music. Dyadic lessons offered a means of training for American-born aspiring cantors who did not have access to older forms of transmission that occurred in the process of labor as choir members accompanying master cantors. In the lesson format, the cantorial pedagogue makes enormous demands on the learner, attempting to make the novice believably replicate the sounds and performance practices that the cantor has honed over the course of a lifetime. The teacher is attempting to expose the novice to bodies of musical repertoire from a variety of provenances and historical periods, drawing the student into dialogue with past masters of the genre.

The partialness of the notated texts that are an important curricular tool for learning how to perform repertoire is emblematic of the challenges posed in cantorial pedagogy. Like these “partial” texts, the lesson itself is an attempt to condense a social art form into a restricted dyadic context. One of the key goals of the lesson is to teach the novice a complex repertoire of timbral and improvisatory details that are basic components of the music. These sonic gestures announce the presence of a masterful cantorial voice and the communicative role of cantorial

prayer leading. The challenges in teaching the social skills of interpretation and improvisation were revealed in the aspects of my lesson with Blackman that were most “idiosyncratic.” The instability of the source material he presented and his reliance on spoken narrative to convey musical meaning were indicators that the lesson was not simply an exercise in learning repertoire. Rather, the lesson was organized around the goal of developing social knowledge about the layered role of cantor as mediator of a communal prayer experience.

The tension between textual stability and improvisatory shading that Blackman presented to me reflects the musical history of cantorial education in America. Cantorial pedagogues like Louis Lipitz and Noah Schall, whose studios were active starting in the 1920’s and 40’s respectively, were keenly aware of the importance of notated, stable texts in training novices who had not had extensive exposure to the cantorial repertoire. The importance of these texts is evidenced by the handwritten scores produced for students by early pedagogues and the proliferation of cantorial anthologies, such as that produced by Adolph Katchko. At the same time that these texts played an important preservation and pedagogical role, over-reliance on text created a danger of diminishing the non-notated aspects of the music that are deeply audible and definitive aspects of the genre. One of the key goals of the cantorial lesson is seeking to recover the cultural breach that resulted from the interruption of transmission of cantorial knowledge in situated experiences of learning through labor.

Although in our lesson we were working with a partially stable text derived from a print source, Blackman’s shifting improvisations on the phrases he remembered from Katchko’s *Hashkivenu* destabilized the sense of there being a “foundation” that I could readily get a grasp on. The pedagogical efficacy of learning through oral imitation of a rapidly changing source is apparent when one considers the fact that the student is being trained in an improvisatory art. Imitating the master cantor’s sound and musicality develops the student’s ability to hear and perform the subtle shifts in phrasing and melody that are indelible markers of proficiency in the genre. The curriculum of the cantorial lesson might frustrate the student while in process, but maps effectively onto the ultimately desired skill set of the cantor: the ability to access fluid ornamentation and improvisation in a manner that will facilitate emotional engagement in the context of the social experience of a prayer service.

While a student may long for a stable body of sound to imitate, a static text would in fact be destructive to the cultivation of the student’s ability to capture the full complexity of cantorial sound. As Lev Vygotsky notes, “the development of consciousness is the development of . . . a set of particular habits. Improvement of one function of consciousness or one aspect of its activity can affect the development of another only to the extent that there are elements common to both functions or activities.”²³ The tasks that Blackman made me perform and

the explanations he offered about the music align with the goal of training me to “think like an American cantor.” The ideologies about what skills a cantor needs to master are specific to the midcentury American synagogue milieu where cantors played a role as teacher to the congregation, imparting knowledge about those aspects of prayer music the cantor believed to be truly representative of Jewish prayer sound. In the shifting cultural landscape of the American synagogue, Blackman saw the role of the cantor as both preservationist of sounds associated with Eastern European Jewish prayer, and as a source of cultural uplift, upholding for the community a model of aesthetic engagement with “high culture,” refracted through a Jewish lens.

The musical text we studied in our lesson served as a frame for Blackman to convey his ideology about what an American cantor needs to know. Seeking to imitate the pedagogue increases the student’s nearness to the “reality” of being a skillful cantor by teaching the student to internalize the teacher’s genre-specific vocal practices and aesthetics. The pedagogue’s guidance cultivates both a cantorial sound and a cantorial attitude in the novice, leading the student toward the goal of expertise in sacred sound.²⁴

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NOTES

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1. Douglas E. Friedman, *The Comedian Harmonists: The Last Great Jewish Performers in Nazi Germany* (West Long Branch, NJ: HarmonySongs Publications, 2010)

2. See Charles Davidson, "A Quarter Century of Synagogue Music in America," *Journal of Synagogue Music* 2, no. 1 (February 1969): 3–10 for a representative discussion of elite music in cantorial professional discourse. Davidson extols Ernst Bloch as an ideal that synagogue musicians should aspire to.
3. Neil W. Levin, "Music at JTS," in *Tradition Renewed* (New York: The Seminary, 1997), 725.
4. Leibele Waldman, *A Song Divine: An Autobiography* (New York: The Saravan House, 1941)
5. Elias Zaludkowski, *Kultur treger fun der idisher liturgye* (Detroit, 1930).
6. Aaron Rosen, *Di Geshikhte Fun khazones: Aroysgegeben Tsum 30 Yohrigen Yubileum Fun Agudat Hazonim Di-Amerikah ve-Kanadah, Zuntog Dem 3ten Februar, 1924* (New York, 1924).
7. Accounts of choir boy culture in Europe are offered in numerous sources. See, for example, Samuel Vigoda, *Chosen Voices* (New York: S. Vigoda, 1981), or Michl Gelbart, *Fun Meshoyrerim Lebn* (New York: Farlag M. Sh. Sklarsky, 1942).
8. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
9. Some meshorerim also went into Yiddish theater, as is noted in Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 32–48.
10. For example, Max Wohlberg reports learning in his town in Hungary from a musically illiterate cantor in Charles Davidson, *From Szatmar to the New World: Max Wohlberg, American Cantor* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2001)
11. Pontius, Rich, et al. *Great Cantors of the Golden Age: Great Cantors in Cinema* (Waltham, MA: National Center for Jewish Film, Brandeis University, 2006).
12. For an exploration of the impact of this legislation on Jewish urban experience, see Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home in America: Second Generation New York Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 9ff.
13. Waldman, *A Song Divine*
14. Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 72.
15. Noah Schall, interview
16. I am indebted to Cantor Deborah Katchko-Gray, Adolph Katchko's granddaughter and an accomplished synagogue musician in her own right, who generously sent me a copy of her grandfather's publication from her own collection to use in my research.
17. Don Michael Randel, ed., *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 707.
18. Gershon Ephros, "The Hazzanic Recitative: A Unique Contribution to Our Musical Heritage," *Journal of Synagogue Music* 6 no. 3 (1972): 23.
19. Neil Levin, "Adolph Katchko," <https://www.milkenarchive.org/artists/view/adolph-katchko/>, accessed August 19, 2018.
20. Cohen, *The Making of a Reform Jewish Cantor*, 42
21. Benjamin Brinner. *Knowing Music, Making Music: Javanese Gamelan and the Theory of Musical Competence and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 174.

22. Discussed in Zev Feldman, *Klezmer: Music, History, and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33; and in Izaly Zemtovsky, "Ethnic Hearing in the Sociocultural Margins: Identifying *Homo Musicans Polyethnoaudiens*," in *Garment and Core*, ed. Eitan Avitsur (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2012)
23. Lev Vygostský, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. Michael Cole (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 83.
24. I am very sorry to say that Cantor Julius Blackman, the subject of this essay, passed away on April 22, 2019, at the age of 105 years. He is survived by his children Beth, Ellen, and Paul. I would like to especially acknowledge Beth Blackman, who served as her father's caretaker in his last years, and who kindly facilitated our meetings. Cantor Blackman was a genial and loving spirit who generously shared his knowledge about cantorial music with me. His presence will be sorely missed. Julius's death is a sobering reminder that many important figures in twentieth-century Jewish music are rapidly leaving us. There is still much important work to do in gathering and interpreting their stories and melodies. I dedicate this essay to his memory. *Baruch dayan emes*.

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