# BETWEEN UTOPIA AND DESTRUCTION:
# THE MAKING OF "JAZZ RHAPSODY ON SOVIET JEWISH THEMES"

## NOAM LEMISH
*University of Toronto*

———————————

"Jazz Rhapsody on Soviet Jewish Themes" is an original composition for jazz quartet (soprano saxophone, piano, bass, drums) based on two very different songs by Soviet Jewish composers. The first is "Lullaby," composed by Isaac Dunayevsky for Gregori Aleksandrov's 1936 film *Circus*, and the second is "Der verter un di shtern" ("Merit and Stars"), a Yiddish song by an unknown author from an unpublished collection dating back to 1942.[1] In composing "Jazz Rhapsody," I leaned heavily on these sources. But in my rendering, their themes undergo a series of transformations—appearing and re-appearing in a variety of ways, while new material inspired by these themes is presented in connecting sections or in a superimposed, integrated and layered fashion.

The result is a piece that is both steeped in and true to the source material. Yet it is unquestionably a new work, with its own unfolding narrative and unique language. The critical dimension of this project, as I originally conceived it, involves an interaction (and internalization) of musical styles gleaned from Soviet Jewish culture. In writing this piece, I blended the Soviet Jewish sources with my own musical world—encompassing jazz, classical and Israeli sounds—thus creating a highly non-traditional and personal piece. I reflect on this process through the five excerpts that follow.

Both "Lullaby" and "Der verter" spoke to me musically, sparked my imagination and inspired me to generate musical content that satisfied my artistic expectations. Ironically, the songs are not an obvious pair. The two pieces were written only a few years apart but their messages could not be more disparate. They offer extreme thematic contrasts: one speaks about hope and the utopian ideal, the other loss, destruction and revenge. "Lullaby" presents a Soviet Union in which ethnic and racial divisions are transcended by social egalitarianism; in *Circus*, representatives from the Soviet Union's ethnic groups each sing a verse. (Still, a dark cloud hangs over the cheery socialist message: one of the actors who performed "Lullaby" in *Circus* was Solomon Mikhoels, the great Soviet Jewish actor murdered by the state twelve years after the

---

[1] I first heard of "Der verter" from Anna Shternshis, an associate professor of Yiddish Studies at the University of Toronto, in winter 2015. Shternshis discovered the song while working in the Manuscript Department of the Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine, document call number B2509. Shternshis is leading an ongoing project to bring to life previously lost Soviet Yiddish music called "Defending the Motherland: Lost Yiddish Songs from WWII in the Soviet Union."

film's release. [2] ) The unknown Jewish composer of "Der verter," a vengeful piece about slaughtering Germans, likely perished in the Holocaust. The song, which is reminiscent of klezmer, Balkan and Roma dance music, was never published, perhaps after failing to win approval from Soviet censors.[3]

Both pieces evoke worlds that have been lost: in "Lullaby," an imagined utopia that never existed; in "Der verter," a legacy of culture, art and music that was destroyed during the Holocaust. With "Jazz Rhapsody," I endeavor to recover these lost worlds. These songs, along with their emotional soundscapes, have come back to life inside of me and hopefully in the listeners of my music.

## Listen to "Jazz Rhapsody on Soviet Jewish Themes"

Recorded April 14, 2015 at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Music
Noam Lemish … piano
Anthony Argatoff … soprano saxophone
Nick Arseneau … acoustic bass
Andrew Miller … drums
Jeff Deegan … recording engineer

## Listen to "Der verter un di shtern"

Record April 14, 2015 at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Music
Noam Lemish … piano

## Listen to "Lullaby"

---

[2] Birgit Beumers, *A History of Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 108.
[3] Anna Shternshis, in discussion with the author, March 2015.

# EXAMPLE ONE

"Jazz Rhapsody" begins (m. 1–12) by presenting a solemn rendition of the portion of "Lullaby" sung by Solomon Mikhoels. The melody of "Lullaby" is the top voice in the piano part above. The melody itself appears mostly unchanged, with slight variation and embellishment compared to the original. The mood, however, is drastically different.

In *Circus*, "Lullaby" is filled with hope, warmth and acceptance. The version I created—stark, hesitating, deliberate, and dissonant—reflects pain, mourning and grief. My chorale-style, four-part texture contracts and expands in terms of density, yet maintains a reserved manner. The hope and utopia foreseen by Dunayevsky and Mikhoels has been turned, nearly eighty years later, into grief for hope lost and nostalgia for a future that never existed.

Indeed, the opening twelve measures present more questions than answers. I cannot say that I thought of all these dimensions when writing this first section of the piece, only that I was unconsciously drawn to these realms. What was conscious was a desire to imbue the song with a much greater degree of dissonance, referencing the irony embedded in the gap between the

song's utopian vision and depiction of Soviet society, and the reality of life in the Soviet Union at that exact time and in the years that followed.

# EXAMPLE TWO

As mentioned previously, I pursued this project with the idea of creating a new work that leaned heavily on my sources while simultaneously integrating my own musical background to create a hybrid piece. This process of integration is constant throughout the work, as the thematic source material never appears "faithfully." Furthermore, as part of the process of creating a coherent and convincing new work, it was necessary to create completely new themes and ideas (still influenced by and relating to the sources but not directly quoting or referencing either theme). This process appears for the first time in measures 13–32 with what I can only describe as a blend of sound worlds that is fairly representative of my own language as a jazz composer.

# EXAMPLE THREE

## LISTEN



The beautiful melody of "Der verter" appears for the first time in the saxophone part starting at measure 35. Its nature is transformed, and its appearance slightly disguised, by a two compositional techniques. First, rather than appearing as fast eighth notes (as in the original version) it is played much slower. Instead of adhering to the precise formal and metric structure of the song in its original version, the rhythmic placement shifts so that while it approximates the general rhythmic ratio in the original, it is transformed to fit the piano pattern underneath. The piano part creates a repetitive rhythmic pattern—an *ostinato* in musical terms. The goal is to

create a whirlwind of sound—a full, thick texture. This two-measure pattern is rhythmically complex, yet harmonically stable.

Second, in addition to manipulating the melody I also use a layering technique called textural superimposition. While the two textures (as represented by saxophone and piano) fit together well, they each evoke different metric and phrasing realities. The piano part works in two-measure phrases, but the saxophone part has phrases of varying length that sometimes blend and sometimes clash with the piano's consistent phrasing. Although the saxophone part works in the 4/4 meter of the piano, its phrasing feels as though it belongs to a different metric world. The intended effect creates the sense that two different musical realities, or layers, are operating simultaneously. These layers can be listened together or separately. But ultimately, resolving this ambiguity is up to the listener.

One can interpret the slow-moving "Der verter" melody as again portraying a deep sense of loss. In the context of two separate musical universes layered one on top of the other, the listener can imagine "Der verter" and its "suspended reality" as an invocation of memory, a musical memory of a time and a world that was destroyed and is now lost.

# EXAMPLE FOUR

LISTEN

Here we see another iteration of thematic material originating in "Lullaby," this time in the form of a jazz waltz. Compared to its first solemn appearance at the beginning of "Jazz Rhapsody," this version of "Lullaby" is substantially more upbeat. Again, it takes the original version of the song and transports it to a very different musical realm. This is accomplished by way of harmonic and rhythmic manipulations. Furthermore, in rehearsal mark F, we see a melodic variation on the theme even more directly imbued with jazz sensibilities, eventually leading to an improvised piano solo in a jazz-waltz style.

My invocation of African American jazz tradition reflects my own training and musical tastes, but also serves as subtle commentary on the ambivalent relationship Soviet composers had with African American music. Along with Leonid Utesov and Alexander Tsfasman, Isaac Dunayevsky was one of the leading proponents of jazz in the Soviet Union.[4] Throughout *Circus*, as well as in other films, Dunayevsky references the distinctly African American world of jazz. In *Circus*, this is most clear when a black character sings a section of "Lullaby."

Despite a brief period of approval by the Soviet regime from 1932 to 1936, proponents and practitioners of jazz suffered through lengthy periods of repression. Jazz was seen as a bourgeois art form, a corruptive and corrosive manifestation of decadence and capitalism. While *Circus* suggests that the Soviet Union was free of racism and a bastion of ethnic equality, public debates among intellectuals, and the prevalent opinions of well–known classical composers, including Dmitri Shostakovich, reveal that the Soviets were unwilling to accept jazz because of its African American origins.[5]

---

[4] See Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917–1991* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1994). For a discussion of Tsfasman and Utesov, see 130–156.

[5] Ibid. It should be noted that jazz faced similar charges around the world. In capitalist countries, objections to the form derived from racially charged fears centreing around the "corrupting dangers" of its "sexual and primal" nature. In the 1910s and 1920s, the emergence of jazz challenged Victorian social mores. See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Still, jazz held immense appeal to leading musicians and composers, such as Dunayevsky. By invoking jazz references in "Jazz Rhapsody," I reaffirm this connection and emphasize its unambivalent importance in the life and music of Dunayevsky and his contemporaries.

# EXAMPLE FIVE

LISTEN



The saxophone returns (see rehearsal mark G) after the piano solo with a more direct quote of "Der verter." This second rendition of the melody closely resembles the original version of the song but it is transformed in two distinct ways. First, the melody's rhythm is dramatically altered to incorporate a swing feel, thus fitting idiomatically with the jazz waltz. Second, instead of the simple chord progression that the melody implies, I have reharmonized the tune with material that blends Western classical music and jazz sensibilities. This section pours into an improvised saxophone solo that again evokes the harmony of "Der Verter."

The entire jazz waltz section of the piece provides the greatest integration of the two themes. Within this contemporary jazz framework, the melodic and harmonic features of both

"Lullaby" and "Der verter" intersect and blend to such an extent that the listener cannot distinguish them fully. The two songs have become one, and their fusion has yielded an entirely new piece.

After the conclusion of the saxophone solo we have a return to and repeat of previous material, creating a bookend effect. We return to the material of measure 25, following a path through several of the sections discussed earlier. To close the piece, we return to where we started: the slow, painfully dissonant and mournful expression of Mikhoels's part from "Lullaby" in Example One. Thus, in the overall structure of "Jazz Rhapsody" we hear the two themes come together to form something new and energetic. The layers of loss and grief, however, remain.