

## Report COZ 17: October 20.10.2020: Charles Heller and Alexander Knapp

### The Death of Nusach and Chazzanut: the Loss of a World Music Art Form

	<p><b>COZ 17: Tuesday 20 October</b></p> <p><b>Charles Heller</b> Choir director for over 50 years with <b>Alexander Knapp</b> Research Associate x University of London SOAS</p> <p><b>The Death of Nusach and Chazzanut – the Loss of a World Music Art Form</b></p> <p>Ashkenazi nusach has evolved over 2000 years as an intricate system of modes and motifs, enabling the congregation, led by a skilled chazzan, to unite in time and space. This tradition is about to disappear forever.</p>	
<p>Charles Heller, working with the world's leading cantors, author of two books on synagogue music</p>		<p>Alex Knapp retired Joe Loss Lecturer in Jewish Music, University of London SOAS</p>

Most of this session can be heard on the IFJMS Facebook page

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#### The Death of Nusach and Chazzanut: the Loss of a World Music Art Form

**Alexander Knapp:** Geraldine introduced Alexander Knapp as the Jewish music scholar par excellence with knowledge in many aspects of Jewish music. He studied music at Cambridge and also with Professor Johanna Spector at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. He became the full-time lecturer in Jewish music at City University in London in 1991 which then transferred to SOAS, University of London in 1999. He has lectured widely including in China where his lectures have been published in Chinese. (see Alex and Charles brief full biography below at the very end.)

#### Alex Knapp opened the session saying:

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

It's a great pleasure to be taking part in this CoZ session, which forms the first of a two-part series. Today's topic is "The Death of Nusach and Chazzanut: the Loss of a World Music Art Form" which Charles Heller will lead - and I feel privileged to have been invited to take on the role of interviewer and chairman. Then, next week, Cantors Jalda Rebling and Jack Kessler will offer *their* perspective, entitled "How to keep the Good Old Nusach Alive, and have it serve the Needs of Modern Jewish Liturgy". Maybe this debate will turn out to be less of a "Nusach War" than a "Nusach Rapprochement"! Let's see how things evolve...

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I must confess to you that I'm not a *chazen*. Furthermore, although I was brought up Jewish, I was *not* brought up with *chazonus*. My musical environment comprised the world of Western Classical music on the one hand, and the compositions of Lewandowski and Mombach, Salaman and Verrinder, and other nineteenth-century masters of synagogue music, on the other. Now, I believe that one of the best ways that a non-vocalist can develop a deep experience and understanding of *chazonus*, is to *accompany chazonim*, and to study cantorial modality as a prelude to composing arrangements of traditional liturgical chants.

For me, this all began in 1968-69, when I was a research fellow at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. My purpose was to gather material for my PhD on Ernest Bloch. In addition to studying with the legendary Professor Johanna Spector in the Department of Ethnomusicology, I also audited lectures by Cantor Max Wohlberg – a true *thesaurus* in his own right – in the Cantors' Institute, where I made enduring friendships with many educators and fellow students. For me, this was a landmark year, and a life-changing experience, for which I've always been – and always will be - deeply grateful...

So from the late 1960s until the late-2000s, I was active in accompanying *chazonim* in weddings and concerts, and on recordings. From the ethnomusicological point of view, I was admittedly an "outsider" - and yet at the same time an "insider". And I felt – and continue to feel – not only a huge affinity for *chazonus*, but also a great love for this unique and inimitable genre.

### **Alex Knapp began by posing several Questions and Comments:**

Are *nusach* and *chazonus* – as presently constituted – viable in today's world? Here are some of the questions I've been asking myself, in the context of today's controversial topic (in no particular order):

1. Is "**listening**" always "**passive**", and "**participating**" always "**active**"? I personally do not think so – indeed, I have often witnessed the opposite to be true.
2. Can the tension between so-called "**authentic tradition**" and "**acculturation**" be resolved? And if so, how? After all, everything that lives, changes...
3. What about "**tradition**" (as "the authority of the past") versus the "**cult of the individual**"? What is the role of "self-image", and how do we feel about it? Is the *chazen* the originator of his/her inspiration, or rather the medium through which it is channelled? In this context, why do so many cantorial compositions - much in demand in concerts and on recordings - conclude *fortissimo*, *prestissimo*, *in altissimo* - not always in accordance with the meaning of the text?
4. What about the "**oral**" tradition and its emphasis on improvisation, vis-à-vis the "**written**" tradition?
5. How can the distinctive musical elements of the **West and the Middle-East**, respectively, be reconciled - and fused into the content and performance practice and voice production of Eastern European *chazonus*? Some *chazonim* sing microtonally – or are they "out-of-tune"? Who decides - and according to which criteria?
6. Education poses special problems: Should the **apprentice system** of past centuries be replaced by the **seminary training** of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries? And in any case, should the congregation itself be educated? If so, can that lead to disputes concerning "élitism" in synagogue music? Conversely, is "knowledge" really a prerequisite for a profound response to music? (I have played *chazonus* during lectures to Chinese audiences in Beijing, who had never heard it before, and who exclaimed that "this music is so emotional: it comes straight from the heart.")
7. The undeniable **intensity of many cantorial performances** turns some congregants on - and others off. Is there a "golden middle way"? Indeed, should there be?
8. What about the crucial difference between the "neutrality" of **Western tonality** (except for listeners with "perfect pitch") and the **specificity of Jewish modality**, with its distinctive motifs, melodies, intervals, representing moods, services, seasons, Festivals? This relates to the whole world of *Affektenlehre* (Theory of Affects) and hermeneutics. "Happy" major? "Sad" minor? Not always, even in the West - and certainly not universally.
9. There are fascinating paradoxes, too - for example, regarding the hugely popular *Ahavoh Rabboh* mode (*Freigish*), which is thought to have entered the Ashkenazi canon only about one millennium

- ago, after apparently having been **prohibited in Temple music** because of its close relationship to the profane music and tuning of the Ancient Greek pipe, the *aulos*.
10. Perennial debates about **female voices - and the organ!** How have these influenced traditionally male, instrumentally unaccompanied Jewish liturgical music?
  11. The synagogue: is it primarily a **house of worship?** Or a “**meeting place**” (as in the original Ancient Greek meaning of the word)?
  12. In strict *Islam*, a clear distinction is made between **chanting** (which is sacred) **and singing** (which is secular); and whereas the former is essential to religious worship, the latter is anathema. What do we feel about that in the *Jewish* sphere? It may have some bearing on our reactions to the introduction of operatic tunes and non-Jewish folksongs into liturgical music. There’s a Liberal Jewish community in London who, on Seder nights, sing *Echad mi yodea* to the tune of the English folksong *Green grow the rushes, O!* We may smile - but is that so very different, in principle and practice, from some of the instructions found in the superscriptions at the head of some of the Psalms?
  13. What’s the impact of modern – and even *avant-garde* – developments in *chazonus*, such as “**twelve-tone serialism**”? - which I hope Jack Kessler will discuss fully next week!

So, in view of these, and many, many other issues, **do we feel that nusach and chazonus are dying – or even dead?** Or are *nusach* and *chazonus* not dying – nor dead? Do we have a preference?

### Charles Heller continued

Alex then introduced his dialogue partner, **Charles Heller**, who had chosen and set up the session: Charles is a retired synagogue choir director with 50 years’ experience working with the world’s leading cantors. He is the author of *What To Listen For in Jewish Music* ([www.ecanthuspress.com](http://www.ecanthuspress.com)) and *Shul Going: 2500 Years of Impressions and Reflections on Visits to the Synagogue* (Wipf and Stock, 2019). ([Biography below and also on Humanities Commons under his name](#))

### Attacks on traditional nusach

Charles opened his presentation by reviewing the various attacks on traditional *nusach* and *chazzanut* that have appeared in the Jewish press over the years and drew attention to the reasons why administrators such as rabbis and school principals tend to be hostile to the arts (the arts are a challenge to their assertion of power and they release potentially uncontrollable emotions).

### The word nusach

Charles reviewed various uses of the word *nusach* ranging from “any popular tune” such as Nurit Hirsch’s *Oseh Shalom* to the preferred definition by Eric Werner: The traditional application of melodies to the liturgy— the unifying idea in every service which promotes style and dignity. The use of *nusach* unites the community in time and space. Different times have different *nusach*. Dr Charles Burney described *nusach* as “a kind of ancient canto fermo”.

*Nusach* is based on leitmotifs, a concept developed by Wagner.

Charles gave the example of the *Kol Nidre* theme which is sung weeks before *Yom Kippur* to announce *Rosh Hodesh Ellul* and which arouses the congregation to prepare for the penitential season. There is no universal *nusach* but there is a **universal concept** of *nusach*.

He emphasized that discussion of traditional liturgy is problematic since Reform congregations have largely abandoned it – but are slowly reclaiming it today.

### Cantor Danto singing *Sham’ah Vetismah Tsiyon*

Charles demonstrated the use of *nusach* in the Friday Night *Hashem Malach* mode and how it can be expanded artistically by a skilled *chazzan*. He played the YouTube video of Cantor Danto singing *Sham’ah Vetismah Tsiyon* by Heilman. Regrettably the sound quality on Zoom is very poor and you are encouraged to find the actual YouTube video to hear this stunning performance.

### Discussion

**Alex** directed the discussion to the nature of the *chazzan* and possible future developments and changes in the way *nusach* and liturgy is presented.

**Charles reviewed the concept of *chazzan* as *shaliach tsibbur***, helping us to focus our thoughts. He then reviewed the process of evolution and selection in the development of *nusach*. He accepted that *nusach* and its maligned “old tunes” inevitably changes. Taste, the one thing we cannot teach, is involved here. It is important that whatever tunes are used should be familiar to the congregation, which is not the case even with Carlebach tunes (which were not originally intended to replace *nusach*).

**Alex mentioned the question of taste** and the disputes it arouses. How do we distinguish a tune that is in bad taste from a tune that is “wrong”? And who can decide what is bad taste?

Alex also opened a discussion on words —the **text of the prayers— versus music**: which is more important? Which affects us more?

He also raised the issue of **participation versus listening** to *chazzanut*. Is participation always successful? Maybe the singing along congregation is not really engaged. Is listening really passive or is it active and engaging? Alex also reviewed the ancient dichotomy between the Greek emphasis on **aesthetics** and the Jewish emphasis on **morality**, and common ground where they can overlap.

Several more issues were raised during the discussion:

**Cantor Beny Maissner referred to the *yeridat hadorot*, the decline of culture** in our day. He outlined how over the 40 plus years of his tenure at Holy Blossom Temple he had trained his congregation to appreciate traditional *nusach*. He also mentioned his admiration for the humble anonymous *Baal tefilah* who may well be a more effective prayer leader than many a trained *chazzan*.

**Dr Rachel Adelstein raised the issue of White West Ashkenazi** privilege. In a strong rebuttal, Dr Judith R. Cohen asserted that she did not identify as White West Ashkenazi and requested Dr Adelstein to be careful what she said.

**Prof. Boaz Tarsi reviewed the nature of *chazzanut*** and the differences between it and the performance of a *Baal tefilah*.

**Daniel Katz emphasized that the role of synagogue music** was not to provide hits but to create an atmosphere for participation and *kavanah* in a service.

Another important topic for further discussion is the fact that the congregation may simply not understand what the liturgy is saying. **Marsha Dubrow suggested that the clergy actually explain to the congregation the meaning of the liturgy**. She gave an example of how Debbie Friedman herself was at first unfamiliar with the significance of the liturgy she was composing music for.

The session ended after two hours.

*Report by Alexander Knapp and Charles Heller*

Part of this session may be seen here:

<https://www.facebook.com/138818510938797/videos/795038457938803>

**Charles Heller Brief Biography** [charlesheller@rogers.com](mailto:charlesheller@rogers.com)

Charles Heller and Alex Knapp go back 55 years to the time when he went up to Trinity Hall, Cambridge University, in 1965, to read Natural Sciences - and I to Selwyn College in 1963 to read music. Charles took an active part in university musical life, singing in the Cambridge University Musical Society chorus, and playing piano and viola. (In fact, we both participated in a Trinity Hall performance of Bach’s *St John Passion*, in which he sang and I played the viola!)

He furthered his music studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, and has a BEd in Music Education from the University of Toronto. Charles has had over 50 years’ experience as

synagogue music director, composer, arranger and pianist, and has established an international career and reputation at the highest level. He began his career in synagogue music as a boy soprano aged eight in the old Stoke Newington Synagogue. He was Choir Director at the New Synagogue, Egerton Road, London, working with *Hazzan* Rabbi Geoffrey Shisler, then at the Finchley Synagogue with *Hazzan* Naftali Herstik, then at Beth Emeth Synagogue, Toronto, with Cantors Louis Danto and Aaron Bensoussan. He served as full-time cantor at Beth Jacob Synagogue, Kitchener, Ontario, and also conducted services for many years at Beth Emeth Synagogue and the Kiever Shul, Toronto.

He has also performed in concerts and on recordings with Cantors David Bagley and Marvin Hamlich, and Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, and made brief appearances with *Hazzanim* Dovid Kussevitsky, Misha Alexandrovich, and Yanky Lemmer.

Charles has published two excellent books: *What to Listen for in Jewish Music* (2006); and *Shul Going: 2500 Years of Impressions and Reflections on Visits to the Synagogue* (2019). He's on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Synagogue Music*, published by the Cantors Assembly.

### **Alex Knapp: Brief Biography** [knappalexander1@gmail.com](mailto:knappalexander1@gmail.com)

Alex is a freelance musicologist, ethnomusicologist, composer and pianist. He graduated from Selwyn College, Cambridge, with MA, MusB, and PhD degrees in music, and has also been awarded ARCM, LRAM and HonARAM diplomas.

He was awarded a one-year Research Fellowship to study Jewish music with Professor Johanna Spector at the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, in 1968, where he also audited classes in *Hazzanut* with Cantor Max Wohlberg and other faculty members. In 1974, he was appointed a Winston Churchill Travelling Fellow in the category of "Religious Art" for Jewish music research in North America; and from the late 1960s to the present day, he has published and/or lectured in the UK, USA, many parts of Western and Eastern Europe, Israel, Western Russia, Eastern Siberia, and China, on a wide range of Jewish music genres: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, *Mizrachi*; liturgical, paraliturgical, folk, popular, classical; interrelationships with Christian and Islamic cultures; and also on the life and work of Ernest Bloch. In 1998, his anthology of essays on Jewish music -translated into Chinese - was published by the Music Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Arts in Beijing, under the title *Youtai Yinyue Lunwenji*. Among numerous other articles, he has contributed entries to *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (Second Edition)*. A volume entitled *Ernest Bloch Studies*, that he co-edited for Cambridge University Press and to which he contributed several chapters and sections, was published in 2016.

Alex has been appointed to academic and administrative positions at Wolfson College, Cambridge; and at Goldsmiths' College, Royal College of Music, and City University, London. From 1999 until taking early retirement in October 2006, he held the Joe Loss Lectureship in Jewish Music at University of London SOAS. Having organized and directed conferences on Jewish music at City University (1994, 1997) and SOAS (2000), he organized the First International Ernest Bloch Conference in Cambridge in 2007, and lectured at the First Beijing International Ernest Bloch Conference in 2010.

Alex's set of *Four Sephardi Songs* (arranged for voice and piano) was published by Transcontinental in New York in 1992; and his *Elegy for String Orchestra* was published in Jerusalem in 1997. As well as performing as pianist in the UK, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania, Russia and the USA, he has been involved as consultant and accompanist to cantors and choirs for several commercial recordings. He has written about one hundred arrangements of Jewish music, sacred and secular.