

# A MUSICAL TREASURE TROVE

MALCOLM MILLER took part in a conference of musical discovery

**F**rom liturgical music to folk and Yiddish song, from Italian Renaissance to Schoenberg and contemporary Israeli music, from Mahler's use of klezmer to the soundscapes of the Western Wall. This year's music at the 16th World Jewish Studies Congress at the Hebrew University at Mount Scopus highlighted the refreshing diversity of cutting-edge Jewish music research in the 21st century.

The event celebrated the inauguration of the Jubilee Season of the Jewish Music Research Centre, founded in 1964. This brainchild of Professor Israel Adler (1925-2009) is a uniquely visionary organisation that has introduced ground-breaking publications and recordings to a wide public. It is currently under the charismatic direction of Professor Edwin Seroussi, an expert on Sephardi heritage and popular and traditional Israeli music.

Ashkenazi music might seem a well-ploughed field, yet new insights were afforded by scholars prepared to analyse in depth the content of cantillation and chant. Papers explored the development of motifs across disparate prayer chants (*musach*), the Israelisation of liturgical melodies from the diaspora and new fusions of cantorial music with jazz and other contemporary styles.

Much of the research emanates from archives that have received little attention – including the substantial Birnbaum Collection of the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati; the archives of the National Library of Israel and archives from the former USSR. They revealed the impact on 19th-century synagogue music in Europe of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), which came at the cusp of modernity, as seen through the lens of cantor-composers. These included Israel Lovy (1773-1832), a major influence on 'modern' synagogue music, and Salomon Jadassohn (1831-1902). We also heard about new discoveries of the tradition of organ music in Warsaw's Polish and German synagogues.

The second day highlighted Israeli art music, with the key event a tribute to



Tanya Magram, singer, and Rotem Luz, pianist

Yehezkel Braun, one of Israel's most senior and popular composers. This marked the imminent publication of the first ever study of Braun (who is now 91) by Jehoash Hirshberg and the composer's daughter, Rotem Luz. A lecture by Hirshberg entitled "I write what I hear" highlighted how Braun avoids the usual pigeonholes of 'styles' in Israel, expressing instead his own pluralistic soundworld.

A highlight of the concert that followed was the world premiere of Braun's *Wind Quintet*, composed in 2012, when he was 90! It is full of bristling rhythmic impetus, interaction and playfulness, as well as a more lyrical movement with solos for each wind instrument. Highlights from a new CD of piano and wind music followed, performed by Rotem Luz, pianist, the singer Tanya Magram and wind players of the IPO.

There are still sensitive areas of musicological debate including composers' attitudes to Zionism and Judaism in the interwar years and the impact of the Holocaust on Jewish artists. These discussions continue to stimulate new thought and to highlight neglected musicians. Papers by leading academics included a new take on Schoenberg's attitudes to Jewish persecution and German nationalism and his use of allegory in depictions of the Golden Calf in his opera *Moses und Aron*. Equally challenging were studies of Steve Reich and in particular the Israeli-ism of his masterpiece *Tehillim*.

From that period, too, the discovery of a relatively neglected émigré composer was a special treat: Karin Wagner gave a paper on Hugo Kauder (1888-1972), a Jewish-Viennese musician who fled Nazi Europe and settled in New York, and played us some of his piano music.

Academic discussion of music frequently remains abstract yet the inclusion of daily lunchtime lecture-recitals lent a tangible quality to the papers presented. One of the seldom heard composers represented was Mikhail (Moses) Milner (1886-1953) – a composer of the St Petersburg School of Jewish Folk Music, so influential in the development of modern Israeli music.

Another was Israeli composer-cellist Joachim Stutchevsky, here performed eloquently by cellist Rachel Galay and Karin Wagner, who also played music by émigrés Hugo Kauder, Korngold and Seizl.

Salomone di Rossi is by now well known as the first composer of Hebrew art music; yet, as research by Israel Adler and others has shown, there was a thriving music scene in Renaissance and early Baroque Italy. Don Harran recently rediscovered another unknown figure, Allegro Porto, a composer of madrigals who signed himself 'Hebreo' and travelled the courts of Europe from Trieste to Venice and Mantua. From fragmentary evidence Harran wove a spellbinding tale that promises to add a valuable piece to the jigsaw of Jewish cultural history and may help unearth some enriching lost music.

The performance of music that lies in archives and collections has been the focus of an extended project by the Centre for Dutch Jewry at the Hebrew University. It has so far produced two CDs of Sephardi music, one from Amsterdam, New York and London; the other from the Dutch Colony of Curaçao (reviewed in *JR* July 2011).

A CD in the making was previewed at a stupendous concert featuring Sephardi and Ashkenazi cantorial music given by Israeli cantors Daniel Halfon and Daniel Colthof. It included works from an unpublished collection in Groningen, in sparkling new arrangements by Raymond Goldstein. The compositions by J I Vleeschhouwer (1839-1913), chief cantor in Groningen, were superbly sung by Colthof, who has a stunning projection. Also performed were settings by Amsterdam cantor-composers Schlesinger (who was fortunate to emigrate to Manchester in the 1930s) and Abraham Katz (1881-1930).

This conference, with its myriad concerts, opened up the many new directions being pursued in a field which now thrives in both the academic arena and in public performance. This augurs well for the development of Jewish music research and creativity. In their Jubilee year the JMRC have much to be proud of.



# bringing back the bird who

## flew away

JAY PROSSER  
reviews Los  
Desterrados'  
new CD



At the launch of their fourth CD, *Dos Amantes* (Two Lovers), at Carriageworks, Leeds, as part of the Leeds Jewish Festival in June this year, Los Desterrados (The Exiles) performed a song about a beautiful girl who escaped her lover's embrace and is compared, in the words of this sweet Ladino ballad, to "the bird that flew away".

Following the song, lead female vocalist and our compere for the evening, Hayley Blitz, wove from its words another level of metaphor. She compared the Sephardi music which this London-based band have made their speciality also to the bird that flew away.

### They do not try to capture and pin down an original but delight in making it modern

The diaspora of Sephardi Jews has disseminated their music all over the world, becoming adopted into other musical traditions and in turn adapting them. Los Desterrados bring Sephardi musical history to life, investing the new in the ancient. They do not try to capture and pin down an original but delight in making it modern. In their talented hands and voices, as exemplified on this latest CD, the great 'migration' of Sephardi music seems richer than ever.

Even more than their previous CDs, *Dos Amantes* is marked by an enticing range: geographical, historical and also songs for different occasions and performing different functions. Songs of medieval (Ladino, or Jewish Spanish) Spain sit alongside Judeo-Arabic timeless

community celebrations. Among the latter, a song for a recently wedded couple and a song for a recent bar mitzvah are punctuated by the *khilili*, Middle Eastern ululation of Arabic Jews and heard throughout the Middle East. Such sounds evoke the dancing, clapping, crowd-stomping mood of a joyous people leaving a synagogue after

one of these life-affirming events. Other songs are underwritten by Turkish swaying rhythms, or even modern Latin Jazz. The secular and the religious, seduction and spiritual, dance happily and closely together.

An array of musical instruments represents and encompasses that diaspora. Spanish guitars and *palmas* (flamenco clapping); western violin, viola but also Middle Eastern oud and stringed *qanun* (flat, harp-like, stringed instrument); *darbuka* and softer percussion and more outlined rhythms of Latin American sounds, in the passion of 'Estreyas' ('Stars') or the sad tango of 'Yo La Keria' ('More Than My Life').

Los Desterrados have spoken about how different instrumental sections for the songs were rendered in different parts of the house in which they recorded the latest CD, and how producer Drew Salida then mixed the discrete material. Like feathers on a bird – like the Sephardi Jews themselves spread throughout the world – the instruments, voices and sounds of different provenances remain recognisably distinct; but they do their work better together.

The songs on the new CD move from liturgy to tragedy and back again – as the band said at the concert, in the 'characteristically Sephardi way' (prayer to passion). 'Ayi En El Midbar' ('There in the Desert'), a revelatory song of praise to Moshe Rabenu as he brings the Tablets of Law down from the mountain, segues into sweet soft sad songs of love and loss, such as 'Ija Mia' ('My Daughter') and 'Secretos' ('Secrets').

Key to this tonal or mood range, lead female Hayley Blitz is able to render equally well poignant mourning and sexy rudeness. The latter is compellingly caught in 'Enkalador' ('Whitewasher'), an invitation by a lady to a decorator to take his make-over of her house a little further:

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"Whitewasher, will you whitewash me. . . forwards and backwards... my, how thick the brush is!"). The words are helped along with a hypnotic percussive beat, which seems to begin in your gut.

Of the lead male vocalists, Drew Salida adds resonant youthful tenor, and Daniel Jonas a throatier, earthy shout. The band's collective sound is very much a product of multifaceted and talented musicians. The language they sing in is mostly Ladino, but also some Turkish, and a Hebrew that is definitely Middle Eastern, close to Arabic in its guttural emphases.

At a time when splits are opening up again within the Middle East, between East and West, between different religions and cultures, and even within single religious and community groups, music has a special power to unify. As Daniel Barenboim has written, "In music, everything must be constantly and permanently interconnected; the act of making music is a process of the integration of all its inherent elements. . . Learning from music makes people more likely to apprehend the similarities between all people rather than the differences between them."

At their concert in Leeds, projected behind the band were lovely, collectible postcards of the old cosmopolitan worlds that are now (due to these conflicts) sadly emptied of their Sephardi Jews: Salonika, Istanbul, for instance. In conversation after the concert, the band confirmed that their recovery of Sephardi songs does entail research. They have to find out about their songs and the provenance. At the same time, theirs is deliberately not an ethno-musicological approach, and, thank goodness, there is nothing purist about this CD. Given the cultural admixture, the fusion with modern jazz, Latin and so on, this is not 'purely' Sephardi Jewish music.

Indeed one of the achievements of the band is to show that Sephardi music is not culturally or ethnically pure. While there are several groups and singers currently on the international scene making Sephardi music their speciality, no one can do both party and mourning quite like Los Desterrados.

Los Desterrados, *Dos Amantes*  
(Enkalador Records 2013)