

Henekh Kon

By Neil W. Levin

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Unlike many refugee composers and other artists from the Third Reich (German-occupied lands as well as Germany or Austria), who, despite the trauma of transplantation, were fortunate in reestablishing themselves in America, Henoch Kon appears to have been unable to reconstruct the visible and fruitful career he enjoyed in prewar Poland.

Owing to the dearth of extant primary sources, as well as his relative obscurity in America, we are heavily (though not exclusively) reliant on the accounts and assessments offered and quoted by Issachar Fater, the most thorough chronicler of Jewish musical life in interwar Poland.

Born in Łódź, Poland, to a Hassidic-oriented family, Kon was sent at age twelve to Kutno (birthplace of the famous Yiddish writer and playwright Sholem Asch, 1880–1957), to be reared in the home of his grandfather, Rabbi Hayyim Moshe Lipsky, who supervised the boy's religious studies in the hope of his becoming a Torah scholar. But Kon succumbed to the lure of the muse. Perhaps more than might have been the case in relatively diverse Łódź, he was exposed in Kutno to the music of *klezmerim* and *badkhonim*. He was increasingly drawn to their folk-derived modes, melodies, and other materials, which sparked his desire to study music on a serious level in order to incorporate those traditions within cultivated forms. Eventually his parents acquiesced in his determination to pursue music as his principal focus. Abandoning the yeshiva world and the Hassidic life of his grandfather, he went to Berlin, where he studied for a few years at the Royal Academy of Music (Königliche Hochschule für Musik). But in 1912, yearning for a Yiddish cultural environment, he returned to Poland.

Upon his return, Kon was initiated into the Yiddish literary and artistic circles of Jewish Warsaw. He became a frequent visitor to the salons of the actress Thea Artsishevskaya [Miriam Izrales], whose former husband, the sculptor B. Kratka, introduced him to the famous Yiddish writer, poet, and playwright Isaac Leyb [Yitskhoh Leyb/Leybush] Peretz. Kon soon became a regular guest at Peretz's Sabbath-afternoon gatherings. He was especially attracted to Peretz's writings and was inspired to develop a means of expressing them in music.

Kon wrote music for Peretz's *Treyst mayn folk* (Console My People), *An edom* (An Edomite), *S'shlaykht tsu a shtot di shverd bay nakht*, and other works; and years later he composed a score for Peretz's play *Bay nakht afn alten mark* (At Night in the Old Market). Peretz is said to have been so impressed that he told Kon, "If you don't do it [create music for my work], no one will." Kon came to consider Peretz his mentor with regard to Yiddish literature, and he took Peretz's charge as a personal artistic responsibility. It was through Peretz's influence, according to Fater, that Kon became devoted to Yiddish theater in Poland.

Beginning in 1922, he joined with two contemporaries in the development and advocacy of Yiddish theater in Łódź. His partners were the painter Yitzhak Broynier, and Moshe Broderzon—the Yiddish poet, journalist, theater director, and playwright who headed the literary society, Yung-yidish, and is credited with discovering and promoting many talented candidates for the Yiddish stage. Fater tells us that the proletarian audiences in Łódź, weary of serious drama (including comedies) and eager for a lighter variety of humor and satire, were receptive to Broderzon's founding of Khad Gadyo, the first Yiddish marionette theater, in which Kon played an important musical role. He also contributed to other small repertory art theaters in Łódź that were founded by Broderzon, such as Ararat and Shorabo'r, and Azazel in Warsaw, cofounded with Thea Artsishevskaya. During that period, Kon composed songs and other musical numbers for about forty theatrical productions.

Among his incidental music for Yiddish plays were scores for a number of productions of the famous Yiddish theatrical troupe from Vilna (Vilnius), the Vilner Truppe: Sholem Asch's *Kiddush hashem* (Sanctification of God's Holy Name); Aaron Zeitlin's *Yidnshtot* (A Jewish Town); Moshe Lipshitz's *Hershele Ostropole*, a variant of Shalom Aleichem's *Tsvey hondert toyznt*; Y. Aniel's *Shvartze geto*; David Bergelson's *Di broytmil*; H. Leivick's [Leivick Halperin] *Der golem*; A. Tretiakov's *Shray khine* (Scream, China); and *Shaylok*, a Yiddish adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

Kon was even more intensely involved with the Yung Teater, which was directed by Dr. Mikhal Vaykherht and flourished until the German invasion of Poland in 1939. Kon conducted and wrote scores for its productions, which included Yakov Prager's *Simkhe Plakhte*; *Napoleon's Oytser* (Napoleon's Treasure), based on a play by Shalom Aleichem; *Dos lebn ruft*, an adaptation of a work by the American author Theodore Dreiser; *Krasin*, a play about the northern expedition of the Italian general Nobile; *Trupe Tanantsop*, billed as a "Goldfaden Spectacle," with reference to [Abraham Goldfaden](#) (1840–1908), who founded modern Yiddish musical theater in Romania and is considered the "father" of the genre; *Misisipi* [Mississippi], a piece by Leib Malakh about the experience of American blacks; and *Bostn* [Boston], a play about the emotionally and politically charged Sacco and Vanzetti episode, which involved the widely considered unfair and prejudicial murder trial of two Boston-area Italian immigrant workers and avowed anarchists—and their 1927 executions following denials of their appeals for retrial. Reactions to that production were bound to be explosive, according to Kon a heightened measure of local publicity, even if his contribution was confined to the musical score.

The guilt or innocence (or the degree of complicity, if any) of Ferdinando Nicola Sacco, a shoemaker, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fishmonger, in the 1920 robbery and murder of two pay clerks in South Braintree, Massachusetts, remains the subject of continued controversy. The question is not likely to be resolved, despite numerous attempts to revisit the evidence, including some that is said to have surfaced later. Sacco and Vanzetti were unrepentant and probably active followers of a deported anarchist leader who openly advocated violent revolution, including bombing and assassinations. But at the time—with respect to the particular crime with which they were charged, the mood of the trial, the reported behavior of the judge, and especially their death sentences—they were perceived as victims of the hysteria surrounding a climate of anarchist violence and of anti-immigrant and anti-Italian bias. Vocal but ultimately unsuccessful

lobbying for a retrial came not only from such responsible Socialist or left-leaning intellectuals and progressive thinkers as George Bernard Shaw, Upton Sinclair, Bertrand Russell, and H. G. Wells, but also from Felix Frankfurter, the future Supreme Court justice. Vociferous protests both before and following the executions reverberated internationally, with demonstrations and even riots as far away as England, France, and Germany. The fact that the Yung Teater anticipated an audience for the play—and that Kon was sufficiently interested to warrant his musical contributions—may be further indication of the geographical breadth of the outcry of perceived injustice. It is also probably a measure of the empathy harbored by certain elements among Yiddish-speaking working classes in Poland. There are reports of riots in Warsaw surrounding the opening of the production; the few in America and Israel who were even familiar with Kon's name by the end of the 20th century usually remembered it in connection with that incident.

An interesting anecdote that offers insight into Kon's *modus operandi* was recorded in the Warsaw *Haynt* in an article by the Yung Teater's director, Dr. Vaykhert, who was also an arts and literature critic for that periodical. Vaykhert describes the initial frustration over Kon's inaccessibility when it was first determined to produce the play *Misisipi* and a score had to be commissioned:

Kon was then out of the country, so I turned to other musicians—among them [the well-known folk bard Mark] Warshavsky. But as much as I tried to explain what I was seeking, no one was able to “get it.” So I wrote to Kon with a copy of the script and a description of what we had in mind for each musical number . . . no response for a long time. Then, ten days before the production, Kon showed up at the theater one morning with his completed music for the show under his arm. He sat down at the keyboard and played the music. We were stunned; we could not have had better!

In 1924 Kon wrote an opera on the biblical story of David and Bathsheba, *Dovid un bas sheva*, to a libretto by Broderzon.

From 1934 until he left Poland, Kon also wrote scores for a number of Yiddish films that were produced and shot there. The best known of these is *Der dibuk*, but others include *Mir kumen on* (We Are Arriving); his first film, *Al kheynt*; and *Freylikhe kabtsonim*.

Fater presents Kon, during his Warsaw and Łódź years, as a true theater composer—able to understand his role objectively as part of an organic whole and in the context of the nonmusical or extramusical parameters. In that spirit he tried to avoid writing songs or other musical numbers merely to fill gaps left by weaker moments in the action. Rather, his aim was to develop music that would contribute to a sustained, unified expression. “Kon reflects the tale so honestly,” wrote the poet, essayist, and critic Melech Ravitch [Zekharye Khone Bergnen (1893–1976)] years later, “and tells it in so interesting a way that, at times, it seems that he should be a writer as well.... Among writers he is the best musician; and among musicians he is the best writer.”

Nonetheless, some of the songs from Kon's larger theatrical scores are said to have become popular as “hits” in their own right in interwar Poland, and even to have been sung as quasi-folksongs in Jewish homes: songs such as *Loz mikh geyen du shl'mazl* (Let

Me Go, You Hapless One), *Oy vi sheyn* (Oh, How Pretty), *Yosl ber*, and others—especially those from his scores for *Kiddush hashem*; *Parnose* (material sustenance); and *Hershele Ostropoler*, about the legendary late-18th-century *badkhn* whose orally transmitted story has inspired many poems, plays, and even a novel.

Ravitch later summed up Kon's role in the Jewish cultural life of interwar Poland:

We attempted to build a permanent and solid Jewish cultural life in Poland between the wars—one that would be worldly as well as sacred to Jews. This was perhaps the first time that all elements and shades of Jewish life were combined to create a structure that would reflect a [composite] Jewish spiritual worldview. Our aim was to create a worldly synagogue, a theater, a press, literature.... And for the musical parameters, we turned to Henschel Kon.

Insofar as we know, Kon never composed for Hebrew liturgy or for the synagogue, nor was he involved directly in religious life. But Fater, who lived in Warsaw during the 1920s and 1930s and was an active participant in its Jewish cultural life as a musician and critic, observed that Kon's theater music revealed the transparent influence of traditional [eastern] Ashkenazi synagogue melos; and a "reverence for the Hassidic *nign* [melody]" is evident throughout. It takes no guesswork to trace that affinity to his youthful familiarity with Hassidic environments. For Kon, the *nign* seems to have transcended Hassidism and religious connotations, representing an extra-religious association—a more generic "singing of the folk." He looked consciously upon Hassidic melodies as a collective source on which to draw. He is reported to have visited Hassidic *shtiblekh* (small prayer houses or synagogues) and attended Hassidic weddings expressly for this purpose. And he traveled to the town of Otwock (Otvotsk) near Warsaw to hear the Modzhitzer Rebbe's (the spiritual leader of the Modzhitzer Hassidic dynasty) new *d'veikut* (lit., clinging [to God])—free-form Hassidic expressions of profound spiritual devotion, which, in general, are longer, more gradually and freely spun out, and less (if at all) metrically structured than *niggunim*. (See the [Introduction to Volume 6](#).)

After leaving Poland, Kon spent a short time in Paris, where he had some association with an émigré Yiddish art theater. He also wrote about Jewish music for *Yidn*, a general encyclopedia in the Yiddish language that was published in Paris in 1940. Shortly afterward he immigrated to the United States and settled in New York. Over the next three decades he wrote many more individual songs; music for a cantata with a script by Wolf Younin, *Gut yomtov yidn* (Happy Holiday, Jews), to celebrate the tricentennial of American Jewry in 1954; and his last theater score (1963), for a play based on Chaim Grade's 1955 *Der mames shabosim* (Mother's Sabbaths). He is known to have written, either in Europe or America, two ballets, choral settings, a few solo instrumental pieces, and some chamber music—none of which seems to have gotten beyond the manuscript stage. Not all of this music is even extant. According to the recollections of acquaintances from his American years, he lived in disorganized, disheveled, and even squalid surroundings for much of the time in New York and often did not save his manuscripts or copies once he had sold them privately.

A collection of Kon's songs for voice and piano was published in New York in 1947, comprising eminently worthy settings of sixteen poems by some of the most respected

serious Yiddish (and, in once case, Hebrew) poets: Peretz, Broderzon, ᲘHayyim NaᲘman Bialik, Jacob Glatstein, Moshe Leyb Halperin, Zisha Weinper, Aaron Zeitlin, H. M. Kudlovitch, Abraham Liesin, Itzik Manger, Mani Leib, Daniel Charney, and Benjamin Jacob Bialostotzky. But it is not clear which if any of these songs were composed in Europe and which were written after his immigration to America. Separately, he wrote a set of twenty children's songs, and another group of settings of poems by ten Yiddish poets who had been murdered by the Germans in Poland.

During his first few years in New York, Kon did achieve some degree of recognition in Jewish music circles. A concert devoted entirely to his compositions, for example, was presented in 1943 at the New School for Social Research. But that recognition soon faded, and in the postwar years his reputation rested mostly on his Holocaust-related songs. Only a few additional songs of lighter character, which gained some favor when they were performed by well-known recitalists, were published. In addition, his compilation *Songs of the Ghetto* was published in two volumes by the Congress for Jewish Culture (1960 and 1972), but these are his arrangements of songs that arose from, or were sung in, the German-built ghettos in occupied eastern Europe, rather than his own compositions.

Kon's published music represents only a fraction of his productivity. Over his lifetime he is believed to have written more than 150 songs. The vast majority of these—whether from his years in Poland (even including songs from his most successful theatrical scores) or from his American period—were never published, and a great many have not been located.

By all accounts, Kon never found a reliable means of adequate support in America, and it was an almost continual struggle to provide for himself. Relying on private charity and paltry sums from sales of individual songs in manuscript to singers whom he would implore to promote them, he appears to have lived in obscurity—much of the time in the flat of a female painter friend, although the nature of their relationship is unclear. It was not unusual for him to sell a pencil manuscript of a song to a recognized singer, secure her promise to include it on a radio broadcast so that he could receive a tiny additional remuneration, and then “borrow it back” and resell it—all out of desperation for subsistence. Many of these songs may thus still reside among private papers, their identity yet to be discovered.

Increasingly, Kon resorted to throwing together songs whose musical substance—as well as the quality of the lyrics—he knew to be inferior, but whose minuscule compensation he needed. A group of amateur female would-be poets, for example—dubbed by a critic for the Yiddish daily *Der Togas* “*di damen vos shraybn ramen*” (the ladies who write rhymes)—would occasionally ask him to set their pedestrian poetry to music. But he was paid only if they liked his setting or if the song was performed in public. Often he would have virtually to beg a professional singer to program the song as a personal favor, in order to assure the poetess of its value and thus receive remuneration.

From stories such as these, from other isolated bits of information, and from interviews with people who had some passing contact with Kon in New York, a sad picture emerges of an artist who never recovered from the disruption of his rewarding, high-profile

creative life in interwar Poland, nor from the upheaval of the Holocaust, in which many of his friends, colleagues, and family were slaughtered. His American persona appears as a shadow of his former self and of his position in Poland's cultural milieu. He is not known to have become involved with any American Yiddish cultural organizations or any American theatrical companies. Nor is there evidence that he made any attempts to revive his European activities in his new environment, for nowhere in related documents does his name appear. For more than three decades he remained a loner, almost to the point of reclusiveness.

How much of that was caused by a purely psychological disorder—perhaps an insurmountable depression that manifested itself only after 1940—how much of it was the result of artistic disappointment, or how much of his eccentricity predated his immigration is impossible to know. Little about Kon's personal life or personality—in Europe or America—has come to light. By the time of his death—one day following his admission to the Bialystock Home for the Aged in New York, after he had been found by a retired singer incapacitated and half starved in an infested flat—he had become virtually forgotten, even in Yiddish musical circles.

Proper full evaluation of Kon's talent and the qualitative merits of his music is necessarily incomplete and unfair without access to his prewar scores, which, if any are extant, have yet to be located and studied. We do not know how many he brought with him when he left Poland, nor how many might otherwise have vanished in the process of the German destruction of Polish Jewry. On the other hand, some of them might have reached Palestine in the hands of others and might now lie undiscovered and unexamined in archives or private collections in Israel. Some theater scores were left behind with their respective companies in Poland, especially if—as is often the case in the theater and commercial music world—they had been considered works for hire that belonged contractually to those companies. (It is not unusual to find that composers did not even keep copies under such arrangements, particularly in the pre-computer days; and we do not know the nature of Kon's legal agreements with the theaters, nor the copyright/ownership status of that music.) In any event, incidental theater music in general, like original orchestrations even for shows that attain major commercial success, are notorious for their disappearance following the runs of staged productions. His opera, however, resides in an American archive.

Given the encomiums of praise that his music generated in Łódź and Warsaw, it is entirely possible that even the best of the songs Kon wrote in America do not, even as well-constructed miniatures (as in the 1947 collection devoted to serious poetry), reflect the full measure of his gifts. Yet those songs must not be dismissed. Certainly they exhibit taste, charm, musical wit, and artistic manipulation in their evocations of the poets' moods and messages. The piano parts, while breaking no new ground in their conventional tonality, transcend purely accompanimental roles, even if without bold adventure. They function with sufficient interdependence for the most part as the desired partners in a duo ensemble, which, in principle, is the desiderata of the art song (*Kunstlieder*) genre. And they provide pianistic interest within the confines of their intended immediacy. That these songs are infused at the same time with a refined folk character—rather than attaining the high art expression or the post-Romantic/post-19th-century sensibilities in the Yiddish art songs of a composer such as [Lazar Weiner](#), who addressed many of the same poets—is at least in part a function of two entirely

divergent approaches, considerations of the relative qualitative gifts of the composers aside.

Kon's chosen path in Europe—the poets, playwrights, and other artists with whom he was associated, and the theatrical forces with which he aligned himself—suggests that he considered himself a composer for those educated and culturally attuned Yiddish-speaking audiences whom he perceived as “the folk.” And it was on their appreciation of simply but artistically adorned folk styles and traditional flavors that he had learned to rely. He probably did not view as his public the more classically oriented Jewish circles in Poland that were attracted, even if they were Yiddish speakers (in addition to Polish and/or German), to the Western musical canon. Even his opera, which, perhaps tellingly, was produced at the Kaminsky Theater and not at Warsaw's principal opera house, was aimed at that urbanized “folk” more than at Jewish operagoers, whose desired operatic fare did not differ from that of non-Jewish patrons. It would be a disservice, therefore, to judge Kon's music according to the standards of high art alone, or to dismiss it for its relative simplicity.

Nonetheless, despite his respectably inventive treatment of the poetry in his 1947 art songs, there is about his American oeuvre a pervasive weariness that can seem at odds with the reported glory of his European phase. Whether this represents a decline in his inspiration or energies, whether he might have been misled by the popularity as well as commercial success of artistically wanting Yiddish songwriting in America, or whether the assessments of his work in Poland might have been exaggerated are questions that cannot be answered without comparative examination of the complete range of his music.

Over the years, Kon also wrote many articles on Yiddish theater, music, and other topics for such Yiddish periodicals as *Yung-yidish*, *Nayes Folksblat*, *Literarisher bletter*, *Der Forverts*, and *Moment*. In the 1960s, despite his difficult circumstances in New York, Kon managed to visit Israel. He caused a minor stir at colloquiums there with his assertive defense of eastern European Jewish musical clichés and modes and his insistence on their perpetuation. For him, those elements were a necessary part of any fresh approach to a culturally inclusive Jewish national music. But many modern Israeli composers, critics, and others in the Israeli music establishment at that time considered his ideas reactionary, antiquated, and—worst of all—reliant on “the music of exile.”

At an intimate gathering in Tel Aviv of literary and musical intellectuals, the Israeli music critic Menashe Ravina took issue with Kon on this matter, insisting that Kon's preferred materials constituted a “foreign source,” inconsistent with the drive toward a modern Jewish musical language. Kon countered that he saw in those eastern European Jewish modalities not only a desired force for historical continuity but the combined mood of hope, faith, rebelliousness, and insubordination that had served the founders of the Jewish state well in their steadfastness against the opposition. Moreover, he maintained that *all* aspects of Jewish musical heritage should be represented: “Our obligation is to take on the whole of Jewish musical tradition,” he proclaimed, “as it came down through the generations, and to protect its holiness.”

Kon believed that the task of Jewish musicians should be to find a path to Jewish identity by drawing from traditionally Jewish sources of all kinds. He thought that was

especially important for the older generations, for whom it would provide a connection to newer sounds. And he envisioned a new Jewish national music that would combine the musics of various Jewish traditions and communities—Ashkenazi modes, for example, blended with or juxtaposed against Yemenite Jewish tunes.

When Fater met Kon in New York in 1968, Naomi Shemer's famous song *Y'rushalayim shel zahav* (Jerusalem of Gold)—which, although written before the 1967 Six Day War, had become the virtual anthem of the war and its reunification of Jerusalem—was ubiquitous among world Jewry. Unaware (as was everyone until Shemer's "deathbed confession" more than twenty year later) that a part of it had been borrowed subconsciously from a Basque lullaby, Kon proclaimed it "the beginning of a new era."
