

WAKS – Yiddish voices

With Inge Mandos, Klemens Kaatz and Hans Christian Jaenicke

Yiddish songs from the archives of wax cylinders by Sophia Magid and Moishe Beregowski

Voices and songs from a lost world

“We hear voices, many decades old, from somewhere in Eastern Europe. We hear peoples voices and their songs touch us deeply.

We combine their voices with our voices and newly arrange their songs. We revive those voices to create a bridge between yesterday and today.”

To convert human voices from a funnel and membrane to a wax cylinder via sound waves is a 19th century invention. Material so produced allows an almost intimate closeness to people who lived and sang about 90 years ago. Their echo transfers to us today.

The material that inspired the ensemble WAKS comes from a collection of Yiddish songs taken from field recordings collected in the Soviet Union between 1928 and 1941 by the Soviet ethnomusicologists Sophia Magid and Moishe Beregowski. The songs were recorded on wax cylinders which miraculously survived the war, and in 2008 were transcribed and revised by the Potsdamer music scientists Elvira Grözinger and Suza Hudak.

Glimpsing the personalities behind the voices are very moving and keep your attention. These are people who interpreted and performed Yiddish songs in a very personal and individual manner. They speak to us through 80 years of turbulent history. The kind of transmission used is a very risky and fragile enterprise: after several times of playing back the recordings, they can stop functioning at any time.

One has to hear the original recordings over and over again to feel the individual voices, the authenticity and personal expression that the vocalists project. Upon close attention one can hear a broad spectrum of personal interpretation: simplicity, confidence, energy, deeply felt spirituality, empathy, and exuberance just to name a few. What they all have in common is a love for melody and musical expression as well as a pride in the Yiddish song repertoire, handed down through the generations. Moreover, the songs give a lively account of the plight of the Yiddish population during the Stalin regime.

Inge Mandos had a strong desire to combine her own voice with those original voices and find a new interpretation that would connect yesterday and today. She wanted to lend her voice to the singers who were recorded between 1928 and 1941 and whose fate is unknown, thereby bringing these people and their songs back to life. With this she made sure that Manja, Fanja and Yeshaya (just to name a few) and their contemporaries are still heard today.

On those original recordings gaps appeared: not only the ones that were caused by damage to the wax cylinders due to wear and tear, but also cultural gaps, caused by the extermination policies of the Stalin era and the Nazi regime.

In practice this project demanded on the one hand a respectful sensitivity to the historical song, and on the other hand, further development of the interpretation of the given material. The

WAKS-Ensemble used musical emphasis, contrast, targeted insertion, accompaniment, mixing and categorizing the exceptional as some of their creative medium. The vocalists and musicians were often confronted by difficult tasks and decisions to be made due to the bad sound quality, scratching noises, the breaking off of stanzas or the individual eccentricities of the original vocalists. Sometimes only a few lines or the original historic material could be selected and used. Nevertheless, the original voices, even though of limited sound quality, had to be appreciated and highlighted. The task was to create a CD for listening pleasure despite the shortcomings of the original sound recording.

The original pieces were arranged with current vocals, violins, piano and accordion and adapted with the help of modern recording devices and mixing technique. The original vocalists and vocalist Inge Mandos sing either in two part harmony or alternately. She repeats several of the original stanzas and completes the no longer audible or broken off parts of songs. Some original voices are adapted without accompaniment and stand alone. The accompanying instruments take up the traditions of the songs, but also employ modern arrangements and free interpretation.

Hans Christian Jaenicke on violin, Klemens Kaatz on piano, accordion and India Harmonium together with vocalist Inge Mandos and the original singers create a complete ensemble.

This project resulted in a permanent CD which will be launched on October 15, 2015.