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## The Presence of Jewish Music in the Musical Life of Interwar Prague

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## The Presence of Jewish Music in the Musical Life of Interwar Prague

The subject matter of this article is the history of Jewish music's presence in the general culture of the interwar Prague. Both concepts—of the Jewish music and the general culture—require clarification. As for the latter issue, the author means the culture represented by the multinational audience of the leading concert halls and the readers of the high-volume Prague press, who for various reasons after 1918 became intensely interested in Jewish music, earlier cultivated mainly (though not only) within the diaspora. It cannot be assumed that the participants of the general music culture were exclusively members of non-Jewish audience; nevertheless, the meaning of the presence of Jewish music in this culture can be reduced to the mechanism of cultural exchange between Jewish and non-Jewish society, analogous to the one identified by Philip Bohlman, who described the career of Jewish music in the neighboring centers: Vienna and Budapest.<sup>1</sup> Bohlman focused on these currents and genres of music that represent Jewish *ethnos* as the aim of his work was to enter the title issue into the modern discourse. The topic of his book is the connection between the expansion of Jewish music and the migration of rural Jews from Eastern Europe to modern Western metropolises. For this reason, the East-West relationship appears as Bohlman's leading analytical issue,

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<sup>1</sup> See: P. V. Bohlman, *Jewish Music and Modernity*, New York 2008.

and it is illustrated by such phenomena as the birth of Jewish folk music, Jewish cabaret, operetta and film, and development of historical research on the Orient-associated Hebrew music.

In this paper, the area of source research was extended mainly to the professional concert movement, where the offer of widely understood Jewish music appeared in response to the demand of transnational audience, caused possibly by the fad, and then effectively used by the organizers of musical life. This “wide understanding”—established in the European culture already in the 19th century—was defined, in the context of Russian culture, by Jascha Nemtsov. He suggested that the practicing of Jewish music in the general concert movement meant performing this kind of music “in which there was simply something Jewish: it may have been the music of Jewish composers such as Mendelssohn, Halevy or Meyerbeer, the works of Jewish character by Russian composers (Musorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakiriev), various Jewish folk music, synagogue music, Jewish operetta, etc.”<sup>2</sup> This wide and flexible definition fairly serves for the purpose of this article, as the source material that interests its author concerns the very different phenomena: organizing concerts in synagogues, which were open for non-Jewish audience (there are evidences that already at the very beginning of the 20th century the Christian listeners were attending there), the cantors’ performances (which were initiated even before World War I) presenting synagogue music on “secular” stages, the appearances on the interwar stages of Jewish performers of folk and artistic songs, who were coming both from Eastern and Western Europe, and finally—the emergence of professionally organized environment of Jewish composers (the so-called “New Jewish School”), who aspired to take a place among other European national schools and whose works were promoted by professional publishing houses and concert agencies.<sup>3</sup>

The sources on which this article is based were collected during the study of three periodicals published in Prague: “Prager Tagblatt”,

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2 “Zu jüdische Musik zählte man einfach alles, was irgendwie jüdisch war: die Musik von Komponisten jüdischer Abstammung, wie Mendelssohn, Halevy oder Meyerbeer, Werke jüdischen Charakters wie Mussorgski, Rimski-Korsakow oder Balakiriew, jüdische Folklore verschiedenster Art, synagogale Musik, jüdische Operette, usw”. J. Nemtsov, *Die Neue Jüdische Schule in der Musik*, Wiesbaden 2004, p. 51.

3 It is mainly about the Viennese Universal Edition and its press organ “Musikblätter des Anbruch”, whose offer reached Prague as a satellite center in relation to Vienna.

“Prager Presse” (both are in German, both had a democratic program and were open to the matters of Jewish circle) and a leading Czech musical magazine “Listy Hudební Matice”, which represented the society of professional Czech musicians who were active in Prague. These different sources are rather complementing each other, nor duplicating the information, and what is more important, they give us quite a broad picture of the issue, but far from the exhaustion. *Ipsa facto*, the author treats this paper as a preliminary reconnaissance and focuses on the presentation of the sources itself. The comprehensive interpretation of their significance will only be possible after confronting the Prague’s findings with the materials concerning other centers: Vienna, Berlin or Budapest. There is no doubt that, as in the 19th century, the musical activity of Jewish circles in the interwar was international, and its basis was the circulation of people, works and ideas.

### **The “Open” Musical Activity of Synagogues**

In the musical life of Prague, the leaders were these synagogues under which auspices the singing societies existed. In the field of organizing concerts dedicated both to Jewish society and the audience “from the city”, the great role—since the end of the 19th century—played Vinohrady Synagogue, where the Czech-language Jews attended. In the years 1922–1939, the main cantor in this synagogue was Šaje Sud, while the conductor of the Jewish choir was Erich Wachtel—the graduate of the German conservatory in Prague who was considered as the leading proponent of Jewish music in the capital on the Vltava river. Each year, Vinohrady Synagogue organized open concerts to the cosmopolitan listeners. As we know from the preserved correspondence of Sud, on his ordinance during these concerts the performers were singing in languages understandable for the wide audience—in Czech and German (instead of Yiddish).<sup>4</sup>

The concerts open for non-Jewish audience were organized also by the Synagogue in Karlin (Karolinenthaler Synagoge), the Maisel Synagogue (Meisselssynagoge) and the Jerusalem Synagogue. The

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4 The letter is dated at 12th of November 1926. [online] <http://www.praha2.cz/Stopy-Zidu-v-Praze-2.html> [accessed: 13.03.2017].

festive Passover concerts from Jerusalem Synagogue were broadcasted by the Radio Prague in 1930s.

From 1929, the institution on the name Beth-Haam became a center of Jewish culture movement. Numerous concerts and lectures in the field of Jewish music took place there. In the spring of 1930, the symphonic orchestra and the choir were established in Beth-Haam. The activity of the orchestra turned out to be ephemeral, but the choir survived until 1938. From 1933, the ensemble was conducted by Erich Wachtel; both synagogue music, Jewish folk songs and secular pieces—mostly by Felix Mendelssohn, Salomon Rossi and other composers of Jewish origin—were in its repertoire.

In May 1934, Wachtel and his choir performed the first concert defined as “open” (“öffentliches Konzert”) in the prestigious hall of the Lucerna Palace, which is placed in the very center of Prague on the Wenceslas Square.<sup>5</sup> A set of musical pieces by Salomon Rossi, Mendelssohn and Palestinian folk songs arranged for the piano were presented. The courteous gesture—very distinctive for the multicultural atmosphere of Prague—was made during the evening: *Hallelujah* by František Škroup, the composer regarded as a father of Czech national music and the author of music to the Czech’s anthem *Kde domov můj*, was added to the concert program. By performing this song, the Jewish musicians paid tribute to Tomasz Masaryk, who was already elected again for the post of President of Czechoslovakia.

One year later, in the Hall of Lucerna the following open concert of Jewish music—thanks to the efforts of Erich Wachtel—took place. The audience heard a famous work entitled *Servizio sacro (Avodath Hakodesh)* by Ernest Bloch, as well as the *Cantata* Op. 103 by Darius Milhaud to the texts from The Book of Psalms.<sup>6</sup> The third open concert of Jewish liturgical music took place in Prague in February 1936.<sup>7</sup> As a main soloist appeared Max Kriener, a famous performer of Jewish songs. From the short review published in “Prager Presse” we learn that some “treasures of synagogue music” were performed during the evening. In December 1936, Erich Wachtel organized the performance of oratorio *Elias* by Mendelssohn in the most elegant concert location in Czech—Smetana Hall. The last open choral event, which took place

5 *Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 06.05.1934, p. 7.

6 O. B[aum], *Musikalische Uraufführungen*, “Prager Presse” 04.04.1935, p. 8.

7 *Kunstchronik*, “Prager Presse” 28.02.1936, p. 8.

under the supervision of Beth-Haam, was a concert of Jewish Singing Association “Juwal” in May 1938. It is known that a part of the program were “Palestinian choruses”.<sup>8</sup>

## The Reception of Works by New Jewish School in Music

In the interwar period, the musical works of composers who declared themselves as representatives of the so-called “New Jewish School” in music reached Prague. The group was created just after the first World War in Vienna, and was established mostly by the Jewish artists who had emigrated from Russia. They were aspiring to create a modern Jewish national school in music. The main ideologists of the movement were: a cellist Joachim Stutschewsky, and a pianist, pedagogue—working in Vienna, but born in Warsaw—Juliusz Wolfsohn. The last mentioned musician arrived in Prague for the first time in 1922, when he performed his own composition *Paraphrases On Old Jewish Folk Songs*.<sup>9</sup> The artist made also this musical piece a part of his following concert, which took place in December 1924.<sup>10</sup> Two years later, Wolfsohn presented in Prague his next work—*Hebrew Rhapsody*, which was stylistically influenced by Jewish folk songs.<sup>11</sup> Just before the concert, this musical piece had been published by the Viennese famous publishing house—Universal Edition, which was at that time interested in publishing works of modern composers of different nationalities, among others Slavs and Jews. Until 1931—thus until this eminent company was threatened with the bankruptcy because of the world economic crisis, and in the result it stopped publishing new pieces—it was fulfilling, by its media campaigns, the role of the main promoter of Jewish music in the mainstream of music culture. In the concert life of Prague, as in the music culture of other European countries, mainly those works by composers of New Jewish School were performed that had been published by Universal before. Thanks to the activity of this company, the next meeting of Prague audience with the modern professional Jewish music took place

8 *Konzerte*, “Prager Presse” 17.05.1938, p. 9.

9 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 03.03.1922, p. 5.

10 E. R[ychnowsky], *Konzerte. Klavierabend Juliusz Wolfsohn*, “Prager Tagblatt” 04.12.1924, p. 7.

11 V. P., *Konzerte*, “Prager Tagblatt” 26.03.1926, p. 6.

during the ISCM World New Music Days in 1924. The work by Ernest Bloch, *Psalm* for baritone and orchestra became a part of the program and was performed by the orchestra of Czech Philharmonic conducted by Vaclav Talich.<sup>12</sup> In the following years, the instrumental and vocal-instrumental pieces by Bloch—who was considered as a leading representative of Jewish school—were performed quite often. However, differently than in Vienna or Warsaw, where only his popular small chamber pieces were played, the audience in Prague heard cantatas and orchestral works. Already in 1925, Czech musicians gathered in the group “Spolek pro moderni hudbu” organized the performance of *Sonata for violin and piano* by Bloch.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, in 1929 his *Psalms* No. 114 and No. 137 for soprano and orchestra were conducted by Oskar Nedbal in the Czech Philharmonic.<sup>14</sup> The same musical pieces became a part of subscription concerts of Czech Philharmonic in the spring of season 1930/1931. At the same time, *Hebrew Songs* by Maurice Ravel and *Hebrew Rhapsody “Shelomo”* for cello and orchestra by Bloch were introduced as novelties to the concert programs of Radiojournal.<sup>15</sup> In September 1930, *String Quartet* by Bloch was performed very often on a series of concerts of Ceske Spolku pro Komorni Hudbu. This work, as well as other Bloch’s musical piece, *Piano Quintet*, was built into the repertoire of the Prague Quartet.<sup>16</sup>

The great opportunity for the Prague audience to explore works of the New Jewish School were also guest performances of soloists and chamber ensembles. In 1923, the concert of Rhenish Quartet took place; this ensemble came to Prague for the invitation of the synagogue choir from Vinohrady and for this reason added to its program a work based on the Hebrew melodies—*String Quartet “Hebraicon”* by Paul (Jean Paul) Ertel.<sup>17</sup>

Subsequent chapters of the Jewish music’s presence on the Prague concert stages are linked to the activity of Frank Pollak—the pianist and composer, graduate of the German conservatory in Prague. In 1930,

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12 See: International Society for Contemporary Music, [online] <http://www.iscm.org/activities/wmds/iscm-wmd-1924-prague-salzburg> [accessed: 10.03.2017].

13 *Z hudebního života československeho*, “Listy Hudební Matic” 1929, No. 2, p. 61.

14 *ib.*, *Z hudebního života československeho*, “Tempo. Listy Hudební Matic” 1929, No. 4, p. 150.

15 *Z hudebního života československeho*, “Tempo. Listy Hudební Matic” 1931, No. 6, p. 207.

16 *Ibid.*

17 E. R[ychnowsky], *Konzert des Rheinischen Streichquartetts*, “Prager Tagblatt” 30.10.1923, p. 8.

he participated in the “Evening of Jewish Art” organized in the Hall of Beth-Haam. The evening had a propaganda character, and musical performances were settings for the exhibition of Jewish visual arts.<sup>18</sup> December 18, 1934, the concert of young Jewish composers active in Prague (Konzert junger Prager jüdischen Komponisten) was held by Frank Pollak in the French Institute. There were presented works by Walter Süskind, M[ieczysław]. Kolinski, Berthold Kobias, Hermann Weiss and also Frank Pollak.<sup>19</sup> The following composers’ concerts organized by Pollak had no Jewish label—e.g. in 1936, the “Evening of young Prague composers”<sup>20</sup> and the “Chamber concert of Czech composers” took place.

In late 30s, the Jewish music was represented mostly by the musical pieces of Joseph Achron, Ernest Bloch and Joachim Stutschewsky, who were promoted by the Universal Edition Publishing House, at this time those works were already recorded and broadcasted by the radio stations in the whole of Europe. Unknown string pieces by Bloch and Achron were presented in Prague by Lea Lipszyc (Lubszyc/ Luboszyc—this famous artist was formerly a student of Emil Młynarski in Odessa) during her recital, which was held in March 1936;<sup>21</sup> at the end of October 1937 the American violinist, Jacques Margolies, performed the unknown piece of Bloch,<sup>22</sup> while in February 1938 the Swiss cellist Regina Schein (the wife of Joachim Stutschewsky) played works by Achron and her husband.<sup>23</sup> A few presentations of instrumental pieces by Jewish composers living in USSR, like Aleksandr Veprik or Samuel Feinberg, occurred as part of Soviet composers’ concerts which were organized quite frequently in Prague.

## **Jewish Synagogue, Folk and Artistic Songs in the Concert Halls of Prague**

Prague familiarized with the art of performing Jewish songs even before World War I—in the years 1910-1912, the concert singer from Berlin and favourite of the audience of the whole of Europe, Leo Gollanin,

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18 *Abend jüdischer Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 21.10.1930, p. 8.

19 W. S[eidl]., *Konzert jüdischen Komponisten*, “Prager Tagblatt” 20.12.1934, p. 6.

20 W. S[eidl]., *Abend junger Prager Komponisten*, “Prager Tagblatt” 27.03.1936, p. 8.

21 *Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 1.04.1936, p. 5; *Der Tag in Prag*, “Prager Presse” 30.03.1936, p. 8.

22 *Der Tag in Prag*, “Prager Presse” 27.10.1937, p. 7.

23 o.b. [O. Baum], *Bühne und Musik. Konzert Regina Schein*, “Prager Presse” 13.02.1938, p. 7.

performed here with great success. In 1920, Max Kriener—a singer from Leipzig—appeared in Prague for the first time. After the war, he specialized in Jewish vocal repertoire (in 1923, Jewish songs performed by him enriched the propaganda movie about the Jews, which was produced in Vienna and entitled *Opfer des Hasses*—“Victims of Hatred”, dir. Hans Marschal). In the program of Kriener’s concert, which was held in the leading Prague entertainment hall Uranie, the audience heard Eastern Jewish folk songs in Yiddish.<sup>24</sup> In 1921, another concert of Max Kriener took place; in the advertisement published in “Prager Tagblatt” it was noted that it had been the first concert of Jewish songs in Prague open to the wide audience.<sup>25</sup> At the end of this year, it was possible to hear the Jewish folk songs in Prague, performed by a baritone from the Kyiv Opera, Lew Jefimowicz Karenin,<sup>26</sup> while at the beginning of 1922—by Boris Matufis, who was associated with the St. Petersburg Conservatory.<sup>27</sup> We can mention that at the moment of Matufis’s concert, at the Mozarteum—where this evening was held—the first Prague exhibition of graphics by Jewish artist took place. In October 1923, Jakob Lehrmann, introduced in the press as a Russian main cantor and a concert singer, had his recital in the aforementioned concert hall.<sup>28</sup>

From the second half of the 1920s, the increasing number of concerts of Jewish folk songs as a part of the activity of Jewish artists from the Western Europe can be noticed. This phenomenon can be considered as a reflection of the increased interests in a folk song as the numerous performers of these concerts specialized in the so called “mixed programs”, combining Jewish songs with songs of different nations, especially Slavic (Polish, Russian). Other artists gathered only Jewish songs (both folk and artistic ones) in their programs. The distinct kind of performing were concerts of cantors who presented the religious repertoire, combining it sometimes with folk songs. In February 1926, the Bratislava cantor, composer, famous collector and researcher of Hebrew music Josef Kijewski appeared in Prague; he gave a lecture entitled “Old Hebrew musical pieces” (“Althebräische Musikwerke”) in the Hall Urania. As a part of the lecture, the performance of earlier

24 *Ostjüdischer Liederabend Max Kriener*, “Prager Tagblatt” 14.12.1920, p. 6.

25 “zum erstenmal auf diesem Gebiete vor die Öffentlichkeit treten”. *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 01.01.1921, p. 7.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 14.01.1922, p. 6; *ibid.* 21.01.1922, p. 6.

28 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 30.09.1923, p. 10.

discussed musical pieces took place. The soloists were two main cantors: Frankl from Vienna and Alter from Hannover.<sup>29</sup> In early June of the same year, Raval Stromfeld, who had been unknown to the local audience, arrived in Prague. He combined the presentation of Jewish folk songs with his rendition of 2 *Hebrew Songs* Op. 15 by Ferruccio Busoni; moreover, he gave a speech on the psychology of Jewish poetry.<sup>30</sup> In February 1928, the main cantor from Karlsbad, M. Perlman, came to Prague with a concert of Jewish songs. He performed religious (Chasidic) and folk songs. The concert took place in Mozarteum and gained—as the reviewer of “Prager Tagblatt” reported—warm reception from the audience.<sup>31</sup> In the winter season of 1929, three evenings of Jewish songs took place: Josef Ringel’s (the artist was introduced as a folk singer),<sup>32</sup> Alexius Drach’s (the main cantor of Jerusalem Synagogue),<sup>33</sup> and Max Feder’s (the main cantor from Marienbad).<sup>34</sup>

Jewish female singers also took advantage of the popularity of Jewish folk songs in Prague. In March 1929, Hilda Dulinskaya arrived in the capital of Czechoslovakia. She sang in the Stock Exchange House, where concerts were organized very often at that time.<sup>35</sup> After her, in March 1931, the Polish star of Vienna stages and movies, Dela Lipinskaya, arrived in Prague. Her first concert was held in the Hall of Beth-Haam and contained a set of theatre scenes, Jewish, Polish and Russian folk songs, as well as early German songs and French chansons.<sup>36</sup> The following performances of Dela Lipinskaya took place in March 1933, in April 1934, in January 1935 and in October 1937. Unfortunately, the programs of concerts from the years 1936-1937 were not noted in the press. From the review of Dela Lipinskaya’s performance, which was held in 1935, we find out that its program was politicized, as the artist presented—apart from early and folk songs—the poems of Kurt Tucholski, an iconic journalist of Berlin, who was manifesting his anti-Nazi attitude; however, in the opinion of the critic from “Prager Presse” “[Lipinskaya] is not making politics, she gains the satirical

29 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 18.02.1926, p. 6.

30 p., *Jüdischer Liederabend Raval Stromfeld*, “Prager Tagblatt” 04.06.1926, p. 6.

31 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 04.02.1928, p. 7.

32 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 12.02.1929, p. 7.

33 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 20.01.1929, p. 8.

34 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 06.04.1929, p. 8.

35 *Jüdisches Konzert Hilda Dulinskaja*, “Prager Tagblatt” 12.03.1929, p. 6.

36 *Ein Abend jüdischer Lieder und Figurinnen*, “Prager Tagblatt” 02.03.1931.

impact by mocking of this, what—in a common sense—is worthy of ridicule”.<sup>37</sup> In February 1933, the next female singer with a Slavic Name—Sarah Tomaschoff—debuted in Prague. It was none other than Frank Pollak who accompanied her during the show, the program of which contained the arrangements of religious songs. The following concert with the participation of Frank Pollak as a pianist, who was this time cooperating with the singer Irene Zoltay, took place in Beth-Haam in April 1933.<sup>38</sup> In February 1934, Israel Segal-Rosenbach, one of the best performers of Jewish songs (but also a musicologist) had his recital in the Mozarteum Hall. Not surprisingly, this event was initiated by Frank Pollak. The singer presented Hebrew, Palestinian, Arabic-Yemenite and folk (i.e. Central European in Yiddish) songs in the arrangement of S. Alman, Rosowski-Seira, M. Milner, J. Achron and W. Binder. The concert reached a little press note in “Listy Hudební Matice”<sup>39</sup> where we can find the information that its program was complemented by few piano pieces of Joachim Stutschewsky as well as the composition of Joel Engel, the title of which unfortunately did not come out. To complement our narration, we should also mention that the “jargon” songs were part of the recital of different nations’ folk songs, which was presented by Dutch artist Lisbet Sanders in November 1935.<sup>40</sup> In the late 30s, female singers performing Jewish songs as a part of programs consisting folk songs of different nations appeared several more times in Prague. In 1937, three evenings of this kind took place—two of them (in spring and in autumn) were concerts of Engel Lund, the artist from Iceland,<sup>41</sup> one—of Sarah Goldstein, described in the press as a Romanian singer. Goldstein gave the next performance in Prague in February 1938 in the City Library. It was—as “Prager Presse” mentioned—her last concert in Europe before she emigrated to America.<sup>42</sup>

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37 “Sie politisiert nicht, aber sie ruft durch Verulkung des dem gesunden Menschenverstand ulkig Erscheinenden nachhaltige satirische Wirkungen hervor”. *Kulturchronik*, “Prager Presse” 16.01.1935, p. 7.

38 *Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 23.03.1933, p. 7.

39 (fb), *Koncerty*, “Listy Hudební Matice” 1934, No. 7, p. 263.

40 jbk, *Koncerty*, “Tempo. List pro Hudební kulturu”, 1935, No. 4, p. 44.

41 O. B[aum], *Bühne und Musik*, “Prager Presse” 21.10.1937, p. 8.

42 *Sarah Goldstein*, “Prager Presse” 05.02.1938, p. 5.

## Jewish Musical Theater

It would be no exaggeration to say that in the interwar period the Jewish theater gained as great popularity as Jewish songs. The local and visiting troupes presenting this kind of art usually performed in hotels and cafés (mainly in Café Aschermann, which played the role of Jewish stage “willingly welcoming the guests”<sup>43</sup>); however, at the beginning of 1922, the series of performances of American-Jewish theater troupe—well known from its shows at Jewish stages in Prague-Karlín and in Vienna—was announced to take place in the biggest public entertainment hall of Prague—Urania. The group presented Jewish operettas, famous play *The Dybbuk*, songs and dances.<sup>44</sup> In February 1922, an amateur group Haor arrived in Prague; it was founded in 1879 by the well-known Jewish poet Abraham Goldfaden in the most Jewish—in the view of the reporter of “Prager Tagblatt”—corner of Europe, Jassy in Carpathian Ruthenia.<sup>45</sup> Before arriving in Prague, the artists visited Slovakia, where for the first time they were allowed to play their repertoire in Yiddish and Hebrew (what had been forbidden before 1918 in Hungary, a part of which Slovakia was at that time). The above-mentioned author described the troupe as amateurs, but having an experience in cooperation with the professional theatre (Max Reinhardt’s experimental theater of Berlin was named). What is important, he also assured his readers that the audience coming to the performances of the group were not only Jews. Haor had dramatic plays in its repertoire, composed by both Jewish and worldwide authors (e.g. Henrik Ibsen), evenings of songs, operettas and even operas.

In 1924, on the small stage of Neues Deutsches Theater (German theatre, which was hosting both dramatic and opera productions) a series of guest performances of the prominent Moscow group “Habimah” took place. They were founded in 1917 by Nachum Zemach and Menahem Gnessin, and functioned from 1918 under the auspices of none other than Konstanty Stanisławski. The Moscow guests presented speaking plays (*Höre, Israel, Der Gott, der Rache*), plays with music (*Der Golem*

43 “Gäste willkommen” — “guests welcomed willingly” — those words were part of the announcement of O. Donat’s lecture entitled “From the History of Prague Jews” (Aus der Geschichte der Prager Juden), which took place in Prague in 1934 (Vorträge, “Prager Tagblatt” 08.12.1934, p. 7).

44 *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 15.12.1921, p. 6.

45 Dr Stefanecky, *Haor. Judisches Theater auf Tournee*, “Prager Tagblatt” 20.01.1922, p. 7.

von Prag, defined as a “musical legend”) and the operetta *Sulamit* by Goldfaden. The invited non-Jewish audience was assured before the show that the repertoire would be presented in a “mitigated” stage jargon to let the listeners understand the lyrics.<sup>46</sup> The same thing was promised few months later, when the Artistic Jewish Stage (Jüdische Künstlerbühne) started performing theater scenes written by popular Jewish (Goldfaden, Hirschbein, Schalom Asch, Scholem Aleichem etc.) and European (among others Gogol) authors in café Aschermann: “The actors speak in easily understandable jargon”<sup>47</sup> (it was, of course, understandable to the German-speaking listeners). The following “Habimah”’s performance took place in autumn of 1925 in the Hotel Palace; this time, the hits were such plays like *Gott, Mensch und Teufel* and *Die weisse Sklavin* which was described as a “picture from the Jewish life” (“jüdisches Lebensbild”).<sup>48</sup>

The memorable event of Prague musical life was the Moscow group “Habimah”’s next series of performances in February 1928. This time, the group presented iconic plays, those that were admired and liked by the audience of the whole of Central Europe: *The Dybbuk*, *Der Golem* and *Der ewige Jude*; what needs to be added: with a very rich scenery and musical settings (as precise reconstruction of religious rituals, e.g. Jewish wedding).<sup>49</sup> The “Habimah” visited Czechoslovakia two more times: in August 1934 and in January 1938. During the second tournée—which was organized just after its success on the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937, when the troupe was awarded with the gold medal—the heart of the program was again *The Dybbuk*.<sup>50</sup>

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46 “Um Ihr Spiel einem weiteren Publikum verständlich zu machen, werden die Gäste einen gemilderten Bühnenjargon sprechen”. *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 18.09.1924, p. 7.

47 “Die Künstler sprechen [...] in einem leicht verständlichen Jargon”. *Bühne und Kunst*, “Prager Tagblatt” 22.04.1925, p. 7.

48 *Bühne und Kunst*. “Prager Tagblatt” 30.09.1925, p. 8.

49 M. B[rod]., *Die Moskauer “Habimah”*, “Prager Tagblatt” 25.02.1928, p. 7; *id.*, *Der Golem*, “Prager Tagblatt” 26.02.1928, p. 7.

50 *Habima-Gastspiel*, “Prager Presse” 26.01.1938, p. 8.

## Writing about Jewish Music

Most of the authors of books and press publications devoted to Jewish music (its presence and history) accessible in Prague of the interwar period were, in fact, created by local writers of Jewish origin. One of the most known and prominent of them was Max Brod—journalist, playwright and a composer-amateur, whose musical reviews, very often containing notes about Jewish spirituality, were published in “Prager Tagblatt” from 1924 to 1938. In 1923, by an effort made by the most important Prague bookselling company “Orbis”, the collection of pre-war works by Brod was released. In this set entitled *Sternenhimmel. Musik- und Theatererlebnisse*<sup>51</sup> (“Constellation. The Musical and Theatrical Experiences”), among others articles we can find the one dedicated to the father of dodecaphony and composer of *Gurrelieder*. Max Brod emphasizes there the issue of the dependence of Arnold Schönberg’s music from his “race”. The manner of author’s dealing with this matter is similar to his previous reflections on the Jewish element in music of Mahler, which were published before the war in the magazine “Der Jude” edited by Martin Buber, and then reprinted in “Musikblättler des Anbruch” in 1920. In the year 1923, the book of Paul Nettl (Jewish lawyer and musicologist, from 1927 an independent docent in the Institute of Musicology of the German University in Prague), entitled *Alte jüdische Spielleute und Musiker*<sup>52</sup> (Old Jewish Buskers and Musicians) was published. In its introductory part, we can find a recapitulation of typical views on the problem of “Jewish soul”, which were spreading out in Germany of that time. Nettl lights out the issue of leaving by Jews their cultural ghetto and the assimilation with the European culture. In further part of his dilatation, the author presents the history of music created for the synagogue by Jews from Italy and German-language countries; in this story, Nettl clearly highlights the leading role of Salomone Rossi and decides to devote much space of the book to show the output of this composer. The Prague citizens’ way of thinking about the Jewish music was distinctly influenced by the widely discussed—among others in the magazine “Tempo. Listy Hudební Matice”—article entitled *K problému židovské hudby* by Nettl, which was published in the magazine of Prague Jewish community “Die

51 M. Brod, *Sternenhimmel. Musik- und Theatererlebnisse*, Prague 1923.

52 P. Nettl, *Alte jüdische Spielleute und Musiker*, Prague 1923.

Wahrheit”, containing the historical overview of the forms of Jewish music’s participation in the musical culture of Slavic from the Middle Ages to the 20th century and including important comments about the presence of Jewish influences in Polish and Czech folk music.<sup>53</sup>

The certain role in promoting Jewish music and spreading the knowledge about it played the above mentioned Czech-language musical magazine “Listy Hudební Matice” (from 1928: “Tempo. Listy Hudební Matice”; from 1934: “Tempo. List pro Hudební Kulturu”), edited by Boleslav Vomacek and Stanislav Hanus, and from 1934 by Jaroslav Tomasek. However, it should be mentioned that the magazine, which was an actual voice of the society of Czech musicians (formally it belonged to the publishing house Hudební matice Umělecké besedy in Prague) focused rather on the activity of Czech musical institutions, not the events organized by the closed Jewish circles. Thus, it was possible to read in “Listy Hudební Matice” about the performances of works by composers who belonged to the New Jewish School in music, as well as to find announcements of newly published Jewish musical pieces. A benevolent attitude of the editorial staff to the “Jewish matter” can be confirmed by the publication from February 1926—an extensive article by Jaroslav Vogel, *Zidovstvi v moderni hudbe*.<sup>54</sup> The author not only considered the position of Jewish composers in European music and declared a desire to study the issue of Jewish influences on a new Czechoslovak music, but he also expressed the hope that the music of artists affiliated with a New Jewish School would soon put down the roots in Prague, and that the new Czechoslovak music should derive from its attitudes so as to face the challenge to create its own national school in the nearest future.

The issues concerning Jewish music showed up also in the daily German-language press, mostly in single articles on the history of music, e.g. the role of music in the Bible, or the impact of Jewish composers on the modern European music. What is more, Richard Wagner’s position on Jewish music was also discussed several times. After Hitler came to power, both German- and Czech-language magazines were trying to track and stigmatize the acts of oppression and discrimination against Jewish musicians in Europe. The rising of Jewish musical culture in Palestine also became a matter of concern.

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53 Lch [Lovenbach], *O cem se pise*, “Listy Hudební Matice” 1926, No. 5, p. 15.

54 J. Vogel, *Zidovstvi v moderni hudbe*, “Listy Hudební Matice” 1926, No. 5.

Finally, the lack of a language barrier resulted in the fact that not only local publishing houses, but also those from Vienna and Germany (e.g. Berlin, Munich), had an influence on the awareness of common readers from Prague in the field of “Jewish matter” in music; it applies to books, music publishing (including religious and school songbooks) and record releases—in the interwar period the foreign editions were in a constant use, which could be evidenced by the rich musical collection of the Library of Jewish Museum in Prague.

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As it has been already highlighted, the material presented in this paper is a result of the preliminary reconnaissance. In order to explore the problem of the participation of Jewish music in the general culture of the interwar Prague comprehensively, it would be necessary to examine also the contents of Czech-language daily newspapers, browse the archives of musical institutions and radio broadcasts. However, all facts collected so far by the author of this article complement our knowledge of the musical life in Prague, show us its diversity and richness as well as the variety of Jewish musical art, which has been presented with the aim to cross this formerly closed and tight borders of diaspora, guarded once by both Jewish and non-Jewish music creators, critics, concert organizers and listeners. The more petite facts of musical life we know, the closer we are to the answer to fundamental question about the most significant determinant of Jewish music’s dissemination beyond the diaspora. If this “hidden factor” was simply a market mechanism (e.g. the result of demands for the Jewish element, considered as an “exotic” by non-Jewish music lovers), or maybe we should consider this process as more profound—what Leonid Sabaneyev, Russian musicologist and composer, suggested already in the late 1920s<sup>55</sup>—as a step towards the acquisition of “Jewish self-awareness”? Is to be hoped that further study on Central European music culture of the interwar period will enable us to find an unequivocal answer.

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55 L. Sabaneyev, *The Jewish National School in Music*, “Musical Quarterly” 1929, vol. XV, No. 3, pp. 448-468.

## **Abstract**

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The interbellum was a period when the spontaneous popularity of Jewish music was born. Its expansion in the area of general culture coincided with the rise of a strong institutional and media backing for the musical activities (which means that this music had to have a market value), and on the other hand—with the revival of the national Jewish movement in its various ideological forms, all of which acknowledged a significant role for fostering their own culture. At that time, Prague was the third most important (after Vienna and Berlin) center of Jewish culture in Central Europe, and it strongly influenced the neighboring centers such as Bratislava, Budapest, or—the closest to the author of this abstract—Warsaw. In this paper, various aspects of the Jewish music's presence in the general musical life of the interwar Prague are being discussed, namely: the open musical activity of Jewish organizations and synagogues, Jewish instrumental and choral music, as well as Jewish songs (synagogal, folk and artistic) performed in the concert halls of Prague, the activity of the group of young Jewish composers (among others: Walter Süsskind, Mieczysław Kolinski, Berthold Kobias, Hermann Weiss and Frank Pollak) who formed the so-called “New Jewish School” in music, and finally, writing about Jewish music.

## **Keywords**

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Jewish music, Jewish song, New Jewish School, musical life in Prague, interwar period

## **Abstrakt**

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### **Obecność muzyki żydowskiej w powszechnej kulturze muzycznej międzywojennej Pragi**

Okres międzywojenny był czasem wielkiej popularności muzyki żydowskiej; jej ekspansja na grunt kultury ogólnoeuropejskiej łączyła się z rozwojem zaplecza instytucjonalnego dla działań kulturalnych, szczególnie zaś ruchu medialnego (co oznaczało, że muzyka zaczęła

mieć znacznie rynkowe), z drugiej zaś strony – z odradzaniem się żydowskiego ruchu narodowego, w jego różnorodnych ideologicznych odmianach, z których każda podkreślała ważną rolę wspierania i promowania kultury niematerialnej, stanowiącej jeden z filarów tożsamości żydowskiej. W okresie dwudziestolecia międzywojennego Praga pełniła funkcję trzeciego co do znaczenia (po Wiedniu i Berlinie) ośrodka żydowskiej kultury muzycznej w Środkowej Europie, wywierała znaczny wpływ na inne centra kulturowe, takie jak Bratysława, Budapeszt, czy też najbliższa autorowi niniejszego tekstu – Warszawa. W artykule zaprezentowane zostały kolejno różnorodne aspekty obecności muzyki żydowskiej w tzw. powszechnym życiu muzycznym międzywojennej Pragi, wśród których wymienić należy: działalność muzyczną żydowskich organizacji oraz synagog, prezentacje żydowskiej muzyki instrumentalnej, chóralnej i pieśni (synagogalnej, ludowej i artystycznej) w praskich salach koncertowych, aktywność grupy młodych kompozytorów żydowskich, czyli reprezentantów tzw. Nowej Szkoły Żydowskiej (m.in. Walter Süsskind, Mieczysław Kolinski, Berthold Kobias, Hermann Weiss i Frank Pollak) oraz refleksje na temat muzyki żydowskiej obecnej w publikacjach książkowych i na łamach prasy.

## Słowa kluczowe

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muzyka żydowska, pieśń żydowska, nowa szkoła żydowska, życie muzyczne w Pradze, okres międzywojenny

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