Evoking a Corner of Jewish Life: Moses Milner's "In Kheyder" for Voice and Piano

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Evoking a Corner of Jewish Life: Moses Milner's “In Kheyder” for Voice and Piano

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Towards the end of the nineteenth century, musical nationalism began to inspire young Russian-Jewish composers to write “Jewish art music” by combining elements of their folklore with the complex compositional techniques that they learned as students at the Russian conservatories. Among the most celebrated compositions of this Jewish musical movement is a Yiddish art song called “In Kheyder” (“In School”), composed circa 1902-4 by a young piano student at the Kiev Conservatory named Moses Milner (1886-1953). While many commentators have praised “In Kheyder” for its stylistic resemblance to Jewish folk music, Milner’s art song also has significant connections to both Jewish folk and Western art traditions in its Mussorgskian evocation of a typical scene from Jewish life.

Milner’s art song bears several interesting similarities to a Jewish folk genre of children’s songs that satirically depict the schoolteachers as naïve, overbearing, and prone to misfortune. Musically, these folk songs tend to imitate the rhythms and contours of spoken language in recitative-like passages and a sing-song style of chant called “study mode” with which the *kheyder* teachers traditionally instructed their students. Milner likewise imitates both spoken language and the traditional “study

mode" in his art song and pens a satirical Yiddish text that portrays the teacher as both overbearing and naïve in his inability to teach a young pupil how to pronounce the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

While deeply rooted in Jewish folk traditions, "In Kheyder" also contains elements of Mussorgskian musical realism. Like Mussorgsky, Milner reenacts a small, and at first seemingly insignificant, folk scene through careful imitation of the natural rhythms and inflections of his vernacular language, tone-painting of physical and emotional programmatic events, and untraditional harmonies and formal structures that are uniquely crafted around the dramatic structure of the folk scene. This paper seeks to understand Milner's satirical art song within this dual framework of Jewish folk and Western art traditions by exploring its historical context, folkloric allusions, musical structure, and tone painting.

Who was Moses Milner?

Moses Milner¹ was born in 1886² in a small Ukrainian village called Rokitno, located near the well-known commercial centre of Kiev. At that time, Rokitno was part of the Jewish "Pale of Settlement," a tiny region of the Russian Empire where almost all

¹ For detailed biographical information, see Brian Farrel Miller, *Mikhail (Moshe) Milner: The Composer in Russia as Bridge Between Tradition and Innovation* (M.S.M. diss. Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, 1996) and Zalman Zylbercweig, "Milner, Moyshe" in *Leksikon fun Yidishn Teater* (New York: Elivisha, 1931). Alternate forms of Milner's first name found in research materials include: Moshe, Mikhail, and Michael. Alternate surnames: Mil'ner and Melnikoff.

² Albert Weisser writes that "the year of [Milner's] birth...is not certain. Mendel Elkin says 1882, Zalman Zilberblatt says 1886." Weisser agrees with Elkin and prints Milner's birth year as 1882, further supporting this claim with a footnote: "this date [1882] is corroborated by the Moscow Opera tenor now living in New York, Vital Koretzky, who was a close friend of Milner's in his Kiev days." However, the majority of the academic literature holds 1886. See Albert Weisser, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, Inc., 1954), 93-94.

of Russia's Jews were legally required to live.³ Only a small minority of Jews were granted residential permits outside of this region.⁴

Milner's family typified life in the Pale: they were very poor, very religious, and they loved music. His father was an amateur violinist and his mother dreamed of her eldest son becoming a famous cantor, "just like her brother in America."⁵ Little Moshe had a beautiful alto voice and was, according to certain rumors, "stolen"⁶ (or, as he claims in his autobiographical sketches, "fought over"⁷) by various music directors to sing with their synagogue choirs throughout the "Pale of Settlement." Milner must have acquired a deep familiarity with Jewish sacred music at this time, but it is interesting to note that he also sang Mozart's *Requiem* under the direction of Abram Dzimitrovsky in Kiev, and

³ Weisser, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music*, 17.

⁴ "It was in the year 1791 that...Empress Catherine II of Russia issued a far-reaching *ukase* (decree) which restricted the permanent settlement of the Jews within her kingdom to a certain area...Within these boundaries they were permitted only to settle in cities and towns; the rural districts being forbidden to them by the Provisionary Regulations of May 3, 1882. As for the rest of the country, settlement was only open to certain privileged classes...So that by the end of the nineteenth century the Pale, comprising four per cent of the entire Russian territory, had crowded within its borders ninety-four per cent of the Jewish population." Weisser, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music*, 17. Benjamin Nathans adds that "by 1835, [Czar] Nicholas [II] had officially established the Pale of Permanent Jewish Settlement, thereby formalizing the restrictions on Jewish residence first enacted by his grandmother Catherine. Although Jewish soldiers often served in the Empire's interior, in areas otherwise off limits to Jews, upon completion of military service they were required to return immediately to the Pale." Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter With Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 29.

⁵ Translated from Milner's autobiographical sketches, currently held in the Milner archive of the Russian Institute for the History of the Arts. Several excerpts are quoted in Brian Farrel Miller, "Mikhail (Moshe) Milner," page numbers unavailable.

⁶ Weisser, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music*, 94.

⁷ Miller, *Mikhail (Moshe) Milner*.

he knew by memory all of the choral parts to the *Rex Tremendae* and *Lachrymosa* movements.⁸

Milner was eight years old when his parents died. Later, after his voice broke, he took up a two-month apprenticeship with an engraver but soon decided to begin piano lessons. With the help of Professor Vladimir Pukhalsky, who later taught Vladimir Horowitz, Milner enrolled as a piano student at the Kiev Conservatory around 1902. It was at this time, during his studies at the Kiev Conservatory, that the teenaged Milner composed what would later become his most famous work:⁹ a satirical Yiddish art song about a young boy who goes to school to learn the first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet and, despite the efforts of his obviously passionate teacher, fails miserably.¹⁰ Milner himself wrote the satiric libretto, perhaps while reminiscing about his own childhood experiences in *kheyder*:

When I was ten years old...I began to study the *Talmud*¹¹ in *kheyder*. The rabbi made us study very hard, and with great effort, he tried to drum into my head the first three chapters

⁸ Miller, *Mikhail (Moshe) Milner*.

⁹ No date of composition is listed on the score, which was first published in 1914. Weisser cites "a close friend of Milner's in his Kiev days," the singer Vital Koretzky, who claimed that "it was in this period...that Milner wrote his very characteristic songs, 'In Cheder' and 'Unter di Grininke Bamelach.'" Weisser, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music*, 94.

¹⁰ See Appendix I for the original Yiddish text and my own English translation. "In Kheyder" was published by the Society for Jewish Folk Music in St. Petersburg in 1914 and reprinted by the Juwal Publishing-House for Jewish Music in Berlin in 1923. In recent years, it has also been republished by TARA Publications in a collection entitled *The St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music: The Legacy from Russia, for voice and piano* (1998). The score excerpts included in this article are cited from the original publication.

¹¹ Milner refers to the anthology of Jewish legal teachings and debates, compiled circa 220 C.E. in Palestine and later in Babylonia, which holds scriptural status in Orthodox Judaism. Later in this quote, Milner mentions the particular volume that he learned in *kheyder*, "Gitn," which deals with the laws of divorce.

of *Gitn*, where I learned all the most minute details of how to get divorced from your wife.¹²

Milner's boredom is understandable, and surely not uncommon, for what could seem more irrelevant to a recently orphaned ten-year-old than having to memorize, word-for-word, three full chapters of legal debates over the technical processes of divorcing a wife that he has not yet married? Milner's satirical art song conveys a similar sentiment of boredom and cynicism as the hopeless teacher yells at his student over and over, "That's it! The first letter is 'Ah!' The second letter is 'Bah!' Come on now, louder! Stronger! Men must learn!"¹³

Satirical Depictions of *Kheyder* in Children's Folksongs

This element of playful satire connects Milner's art song with a wider genre of popular Jewish folk music, which was sung (and often times written) by young school children. In one such folksong, called "Abraham the Teacher," a young narrator calls to his friends in a mock-serious, recitative style: "Who was it who went to take a ritual bath before the holiest day of the year, but took so much time bathing himself that he missed the entire holiday?" The chorus of children gleefully responds: "It was Abraham the Teacher! Abraham the Teacher!"¹⁴ In another such folksong, "a little teacher" becomes a pedagogical farce when he boasts about his three best pupils:

¹² From Milner's autobiography, cited in Miller, *Mikhail (Moshe) Milner*.

¹³ Paraphrased from mm. 30-33, 35-39, 42-43, 48, 50-52, 55-56, 63-64, 67-69, 77-86, and 103-107.

¹⁴ "Avremele Melamed" ("Avremele the Teacher") is published in Aharon Vinkovetzky, *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mount Scopus Publications by the Magnes Press, 1985), 18-22.

"Do you know what my pupils can do?" he beams with delight. "Well, I'll tell you! The first one learned his ABC's. The second one is mean to his mother. And the third one is engaged to be married. And do you know whom he's marrying? The shoemaker's daughter, that's who. And do you know what he's getting for a dowry? Fifty rubles were promised, but only forty were intended. Thirty were counted, twenty were given, and of all that, only ten actually existed."¹⁵

During his time at the Kiev Conservatory, Milner was particularly enamored by this genre of children's songs.¹⁶ His own "kheyder" song also characterizes the teacher as a hapless old charlatan who is unable to teach a young pupil the first four letters of the alphabet. After five unsuccessful attempts at pronouncing the letters, the frightened student falls victim to a pedagogical frenzy as his teacher yells at him to pronounce the letters "more joyfully," calls him a rascal,¹⁷ commands him to study the Bible, quotes a popular Yiddish proverb, "Toyre iz di beste s'khoyre" ("Torah is the best merchandise"),¹⁸ and finally

¹⁵ "A Kleyne Melamed!" ("A Little Teacher"). Score and text in Aharon Vinkovetzky, *Anthology of Yiddish Folksongs*, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mount Scopus Publications by the Magnes Press, 1985), 7-10.

¹⁶ Weissner, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music*, 94.

¹⁷ The uncommon Yiddish word "genarnik" translates literally as "one who was like a fool" but may be interpreted as "fool," "rascal," or "charlatan."

¹⁸ See mm. 87-88. This proverb appears in numerous folk songs. For example, the Yiddish song "Di Toyre iz di beste S'khoyre" ("The Torah is the Best Merchandise") with words by Solomon Small and music by Perlemuter and Wohl (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1912). Likewise, the popular Yiddish lullaby "Unter Sorele's Vigele" ("Under Sorele's Cradle"), which says: "What is the best merchandise? [My child's] groom will be a Torah scholar." In a discussion of nineteenth-century Yiddish folk songs and lullabies within the context of the trope of Torah study in Jewish culture, Ruth Rubin quotes a contemporary Jewish author: "riches, bodily advantages, and talents of every kind have indeed a certain worth...but...no merit is superior to that of a good Talmudist. He has the first claim upon all offices and positions of honor in

implores him to stop fooling around and just be a darling little child, only to turn around and call him a rascal again! At last, the teacher finally gives up and permits his student to leave, but he immediately calls him back, explaining that God himself wants the little boy to learn and that his family would be proud to hear of his biblical studies. The song concludes with the teacher repeating the word “Toyreh” (“Torah”), forcing his student to recite the word several times (mm. 113-end).¹⁹

Despite this comical depiction, the image of a passionate teacher who cannot pass his love for learning on to his pupil also introduces an element of tragedy.²⁰ Before the student has even entered the classroom at the very beginning of the song, the teacher is already calling to him to come inside and look at “the little letters – the beloved letters, the golden letters!”²¹ Five times, after each and every one of the student’s failures the teacher

the community...The most honorable place is assigned to him.” See Ruth Rubin, *Voices of a People: The Story of Yiddish Folksong, Second Edition* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963), 31.

¹⁹ Repetition is a common method used in traditional Jewish pedagogy. The single vocal line at the end of Milner’s song contains an implied dialogue between teacher and student (although performed by only one singer) based on repetition; here, as throughout the song, the student’s responses to his teacher’s instructions are consistently suggested by the note lying a tritone away from the starting pitch of the teacher’s instruction. At the end of the song, the teacher sings the word “*Toyreh*” on pitches A and F#; in response, the student repeats the same word three times on D#, a tritone below A.

²⁰ One might argue that the teacher is not passionate at all, but rather just as bored and frustrated as the pupil himself. This view would be corroborated by contemporary Yiddish writings on the inadequate training and qualifications of elementary educators, who were often picked from the bottom rungs of society. For example, Jacob Kopenko recalled in 1931: “my first kheyder teacher...[was] Shloymke Nyesvizher. I only studied once with Shloymke. He told my father that it was time for me to begin learning Torah, and if he couldn’t send me I would be given to Nakhe the Thief...Nakhe was the meanest of the mean and used to beat children at the slightest provocation.” From an excerpt translated for an exhibit at the National Yiddish Book Center, Amherst, Massachusetts, Summer 2009.

²¹ See mm. 5-8.

proclaims, "That's right, little boy! One must learn, little boy!"²² Pedagogy here draws comically and tragically on cultural allusion, philosophical principles, and touching personal entreaties.

"In Kheyder" shares not only literary attitudes but also several interesting musical connections with Jewish folklore and even evokes the specific sounds of a typical classroom environment. Many of these satirical children's songs mock the teachers not only in a witty text but also through musical imitations of the pedagogues' voices, establishing a sort of musical effigy for farcical purposes. For example, the lyrics are often set in recitative style, following the natural rhythms and inflections of the teacher's spoken Yiddish. The opening melodies of Milner's song feature this same speech-like recitative as the teacher greets his student and invites him inside to learn; the line is restricted in melodic range, punctuated by rests where the teacher would naturally breathe, and follows the natural rhythms and inflections of the spoken language. For instance, in measures 22-27, the teacher finally convinces his hesitant student to sit down and listen in a recitative-like phrase:

The image shows a musical score for a voice and piano piece. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 22-25) features a vocal line with a recitative-like melody and a piano accompaniment. The second system (measures 26-27) continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in Yiddish and are written below the vocal line. The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *pp* (pianissimo), and a *rit.* (ritardando) marking. The piano part features a simple, rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes.

["That's right. Sit down and listen to each letter carefully. Sit down. That's it. Listen to this."]

"IN KHEYDER" [mm. 22-27]

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²² See mm. 42-44, 55-56, 67-69, 77, and 81-86.

Milner likewise uses a sing-song style of chant, called “study mode,” with which the *kheyder* teachers traditionally instructed their students. This “study mode” consists, in its most basic form, of singing a section of text on two or three notes of a minor triad, emphasizing the minor third interval as a way of helping the students to remember the lesson.²³ Milner uses this mode throughout his composition, for example when the teacher encourages his pupil to learn, on the repetition of the word “*Toyreh*” (*Torah*) at the end of the piece, and (most notably) whenever the teacher pronounces the letters of the alphabet, as in measures 35-37:²⁴

pa.sach a - lef a pa.sach bejs ba pa.sach gi.mel ga
פ - ס - א כ ג

mf *cresc. di forte*

“IN KHEYDER” [mm. 35-37]

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One of the most significant instances of folk-derived elements in Milner’s composition is his brief use of the Ukrainian Dorian mode – a minor mode with raised scale degrees four and

²³ The “study mode” should not be understood as a musical mode or scale but rather as a pedagogical method, one that has various motifs associated with it in addition to the minor third interval and triad.

²⁴ Miller suggests that the piano accompaniment in this passage is also constructed from the “study mode.” Miller, *Mikhail (Moshe) Milner*. It is also possible that Milner evokes a particular physical motion, a rocking back and forth called “shukkeling,” which Jews traditionally use when studying or praying. This rocking motif becomes increasingly active, with a wider range, triplet rhythms, and even oddly-shaped contours, as the student becomes increasingly frightened and forcefully involved throughout his alphabet lesson.

six²⁵— in measures 81-86, as the teacher begs of his pupil, "That's right, little boy! One must learn *Torah!*" This is the first time that the teacher mentions the Bible by name, and Milner emphasizes the modal switch in the vocal line with a rising arpeggio that begins almost all folk songs in this mode; the passage even concludes with one of the mode's idiomatic melodic half-cadences.²⁶ This special mode is rarely used in Jewish music except in the most tragic songs. For example, one such song describes an abandoned housewife who simply curls up and dies after realizing that her one true love "doesn't have any use for her anymore."²⁷ A powerful example from Jewish art music is the well-known "Hebrew Melody,"²⁸ by Milner's colleague Joseph Achron (1886-1943), where the music switches to the Ukrainian Dorian mode for the climactic text: "And the flooding tears, the ancient groan,/welling upward reach to Heaven's throne,/where the Lord of the earth and sky/harks to that exceeding bitter cry" (mm. 49-57). Here too, the dorian mode is associated with tragedy. However, perhaps for this very reason, it is also

²⁵ A. Z. Idelsohn defines it as "the Dorian Scale with the fourth augmented." A.Z. Idelsohn, "Musical Characteristics of East-European Jewish Folk-Song," *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (October 1932): 634-645, 635. The Dorian scale is a minor scale with the sixth augmented; therefore, the Ukrainian Dorian is a minor scale with the fourth and sixth augmented. I prefer this explanation (as an altered minor, not as an altered Dorian) in this context, because I think it better clarifies the shift to and from the minor mode in Milner's song.

²⁶ A description and table of Altered Dorian motifs is found in Moshe Beregovsky, *Jewish Instrumental Folk Music: The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski*, ed. and trans. Marc Slobin, Robert A. Rothstein, Michael Alpert (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 16-19.

²⁷ Moshe Beregovsky, "The Altered Dorian Scale in Jewish Folk Music (On the Question of the Semantic Characteristics of Scales)," in *Old Jewish Folk Music: The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski*, 549-567, ed. and trans. Marc Slobin (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

²⁸ Joseph Achron's well-known "Hebrew Melody for violin and piano (1911)" (St. Petersburg: St. Petersburg Society for Jewish Folk Music, 1914) was later revised and rescored by the composer for high voice and piano with an added text by his wife, the singer and poet Marie Raphof (New York: Carl Fischer, Inc., 1928).

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occasionally used for satire – and this is likely the context in which Milner’s teacher laments, in that most tragic of modes, the sorry fact that his student cannot even read the first four letters of the alphabet, let alone the Torah!

meno mosso

ge.nar.nik ot a . soj in . ge . le darf — men ler — nen
גערניק אַ סױ אינגעלע דארף מען לערענען
לערענען

toj . re toj . re is dibeste schoj . re
הײדעל הײדעל איז די בעסטע שױדעל
הײדעל הײדעל איז די בעסטע שױדעל

[You’re a *genarnik*! That’s right, little boy. Men must study the Torah! Torah is the best merchandise.]

“IN KHEYDER” [mm. 80-89]

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The Influence of Modest Mussorgsky

“In Kheyder” also shares many similarities not only with Jewish folk music, but also with the realist art songs of Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881). In fact, Milner’s compositional style is often compared to Mussorgsky’s and several musicologists even venture to nickname Milner “The Jewish Mussorgsky.”²⁹ In contrast to elongated Schubertian melodies, Mussorgsky’s vocal lines – like those in “In Kheyder” – are often short and

²⁹ Klára Móricz comments on the use of this nickname in *Jewish Identities: Nationalism, Racism, and Utopianism in Twentieth-Century Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 46.

punctuated, imitating the natural rhythms, inflections, and phrase structures of the spoken vernacular. Mussorgsky's libretti for solo voice, like Milner's, often take the form of monologues or implied dialogues between several characters, giving the listener unambiguous insight into the characters' inner thoughts and emotions. Just as many of Mussorgsky's realist songs divide into a series of dramatically-related scenes, so too is the formal structure of Milner's "In Kheyder" derived from the dramatic structure inherent in the text itself. Finally, many of Mussorgsky's songs, like Milner's, centre on typical folk scenes rather than exploring the morality and values espoused by early Romantic composers of *Lieder*. For example, Mussorgsky's song "The Seminarian" (1866) delves into the secret thoughts of a young student who is too busy fantasizing about the priest's beautiful daughter to focus on his Latin homework. Mussorgsky's song cycle *The Nursery* (1870) depicts, among other scenes, a little boy who runs crying to his nanny because he found a disgusting cockroach in his sandbox as well as a woman who angrily punishes a child after the cat knocks over her sewing box. This emphasis on simple folk life bears a strong resemblance not only to Milner's "In Kheyder" but also to many of his other songs, including the *Vokal-Syuite oyf Peretz's Tsen Kinderlieder* ("Vocal Suite on Peretz's Ten Children's Songs," ca. 1919) and "Der Furman" ("The Drayman," date unknown).

Thus, both Mussorgsky and Milner adopt a unique, refreshing type of musical realism, one that recreates the physical, structural, aural, and emotional events of a folk scene through the medium of art song. Moreover, many of Mussorgsky's realist songs – and Milner's "In Kheyder" – trace a character's emotional transformations, often exposing these shifts over the course of just a few measures. Furthermore, characters sometimes express strongly conflicting emotions simultaneously, as we see in the very beginning of Milner's song; the score

implies that this is not the first time that the student has disappointed his teacher, who greets him with an emotional mixture of optimism and impatience.

Milner begins his song with the teacher's enthusiastic salutation as he welcomes the student to come inside and learn with him in a passage marked *andante cantabile* and *amarevole* [sic]. "*Amarevole*" might be a typographical error, as Jascha Nemtsov suggests; Milner may have intended to inscribe the Italian "*amorevole*" ("lovingly").³⁰ Such an indication could certainly describe a *keheyder* teacher's attitude towards his students. On the other hand, "*amarevole*" could be a hybrid word with the Italian word "*amaro*" ("bitter"). If the latter is intended, then it is surely an element of satire, because the music itself seems to suggest that the teacher is actually very happy to see the student and not in any particular hurry. Musically, the teacher appears to take his time with his greeting, as indicated by the natural, flowing rhythms; the fermata at the end of the first measure of the vocal line (measure 5); the half-bar rest at the beginning of bar 7, where the teacher pauses to contemplate the beauty and sacredness of the "beloved, golden letters;" the long half-notes at the end of the following two measures; the *ritardando* cadence; and the sparse piano accompaniment, which avoids adding any harmonic, rhythmic, or contrapuntal hindrances to the teacher's "loving" (*amorevole*) invitation.

However, the text here seems to contradict the teacher's musical patience: "Gicher gicher, kum aher!" ("Quickly, quickly,

³⁰ Personal correspondence (e-mail, 15 February 2009). Spelling errors are common in scores published by the Society for Jewish Folk Music. Furthermore, as Nemtsov points out, Milner was not a highly educated man, and therefore it is unlikely that he himself generated the hybrid word "*amarevole*" in order to indicate an unusual expression marking. On the other hand, several of Milner's close colleagues were very well educated in foreign languages, including Lazare Saminsky, Joseph Achron, and Solomon Rosowsky, and it is possible that they edited Milner's score before its initial publication in 1914, approximately ten years after it was first composed.

come here!") Milner even hints at a macaronic double-entendre in the Yiddish words "kum aher" ("come here"). As the singer elides the two words, he suggests the Hebrew "maher" ("quickly").³¹ If the music itself seems to suggest the teacher's patient "*amore*" (love) then the text is full of impatient "*amaro*" (bitterness).

Andante cantabile.

Amarevole

Kum a-her, in-ge-le ne-hen-ter zu mir un thu a-kuk in di klej-ne ei-ssi-lach.
קום א-הער, אין-גע-לע-נע-הענ-טער צו מיר און דו א-קוק אין די קלע-נע-עיס-לעך.

taj-e-re ej-sse-lach gil-der-ne ej-sse-lach
טא-י-רע-ע-אי-תיו-לעך גיל-דער-נע-אי-תיו-לעך

³¹ A Kabbalistic interpretation of the Torah claims that by shifting the grammatical spaces between the words, a new text emerges from the same ordering of letters, offering a different reading of the same Biblical narrative. According to this tradition, there are four possible grammatical permutations that create four different readings of the text. Milner might have been familiar with this tradition, leading him to incorporate such linguistic puns into his libretto. In fact, this would not be the only instance in this particular song of a linguistic pun. In measure 25, the teacher asks his student to "her oys mit kopf." "Her oys" is a conjugated form of "oyshern," which means "to listen." But "her" by itself means "hear" and "oys" by itself (spelled differently, but pronounced the same way) means "alphabetical letter." Thus, the teacher is saying, at the same time, both "Listen" and "Hear the letter."

[Come here, little boy, closer to me. Look at the little letters – the beloved letters, golden letters! Quickly, quickly, come here.]

“IN KHEYDER” [mm. 1-12]

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Unlike his teacher, the pupil does not seem to have any patience or excitement, prompting the teacher to repeat his entire greeting in bars 15-20 (yet another indication of his patience and love for his pupil). In this second statement, however, the teacher becomes slightly anxious, and the piano part becomes suddenly thicker and more active, with wide rolled chords and double pickup ornaments and syncopations in measure 18. The fermatas, rests, and half-notes are no longer to be found, and each line of text simply flows into the next without any punctuating pauses. The teacher’s patience has been tested and transformed, as we see from the sudden rush of sixteenth notes in the piano part and the instructor’s encouraging entreaties sung in a higher register (“Don’t be afraid! Don’t worry!”). The student’s growing fear and the teacher’s increasing energy and frustration are common themes developed throughout the entire song.

Evoking a Corner of Jewish Life:

Moses Milner's "In Kheyder" for Voice and Piano

p

Kum a her, in ge, lo ne, henter zu mir un
 קום איר צו מיט, הענטען, יע, גע, לויס, זיך, מיט איר

rit.

p

thu a kuk in di klej, ne ej, sse, lach taj, e re ej, sse, lach, gil, der, ne ej, sse, lach
 לעך, איר אן די קליינע עיגלעך, טאג, ערע עיגלעך, גילדערע עיגלעך
 און קוק אין די קליינע עיגלעך, וואס זענען געלעךט, און קוק אין די קליינע עיגלעך, וואס זענען געלעךט

pp

gi, cher, gi, cher kum a her hob kajn mojre nit, schreck sich nit.
 קומ איר צו מיט, קומ איר צו מיט, קומ איר צו מיט, קומ איר צו מיט
 און קוק אין די קליינע עיגלעך, וואס זענען געלעךט, און קוק אין די קליינע עיגלעך, וואס זענען געלעךט

[Come here, little boy, closer to me. Look at the little letters – the beloved letters, golden letters! Quickly, quickly, come here. Don't be afraid! Don't worry!]

“IN KHEYDER” [mm. 13-21]

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Milner's "In Kheyder:" Jewish or Classical?

Milner's combination of the Western art tradition with Jewish folk idioms makes it difficult to classify this song as belonging uniquely to only one tradition. The elements of Jewish folk music permeate both the text and music in Milner's use of satire, recitative, "study mode," Ukrainian Dorian mode, proverbs, and cultural references. However, these same stylistic characteristics, together with an emphasis on the emotional, physical, and aural events of the folk scene, strongly resemble Mussorgskian realism. Milner frequently draws upon typical Western performance

indications, musical effects, artistic concern for rhythmic, harmonic, and structural complexity, and even a delectable *tierce de Picardie* as the teacher instructs his relieved student: “Close your prayer-book. You’re free” (measures 95-96). Milner’s syncretic integration of both musical traditions in “In Kheyder” quickly gained fame and recognition as one of the cornerstones of a progressive, new genre of Jewish art music.³² Part of the appeal of Milner’s generic innovation is this inclusive vision, which draws upon classical and folk, Western and Jewish, nationalist and universalist themes.

³² Weisser writes that “the song [“In Kheyder”] has become so popular among the Jewish masses (a rarity among Art songs) that it has taken on a variety of extra-musical connotations.” Weisser, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music*, 97. Milner’s colleague Joel Engel, one of the central figures of this movement, “applied an old Jewish figure of speech (‘one page of the Talmud is worth all your Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky’) to Milner’s song by claiming that even one page of Milner’s ‘In Kheyder’ proved the existence of Jewish art music.” Móricz, *Jewish Identities*, 46.

Appendix I: Milner's "In Kheyder"³³

*Kum aber ingele nebenter zu mir
Un thu a kuk in di klejne eissilach
Tajere ejsselach, gilderne ejsselach
Gicher, gicher, kum aber.*

Come here, little boy, closer to me,
And take a look at the little letters –
The beloved letters, golden letters!
Quickly, quickly, come here.

*Kum aber ingele nebenter zu mir
Un thu a kuk in di klejne eissilach
Tajere ejsselach, gilderne ejsselach
Gicher, gicher, kum aber.*

Come here, little boy, closer to me,
And take a look at the little letters –
The beloved letters, golden letters!
Quickly, quickly, come here.

*Hob kajn mojre nit
Schrek sich nit*

Don't be afraid!
Don't worry!

*Ot asoj
Sez sich awek un her ojs mit kopf
Sez sich
Ot asoj
Her sich zu*

That's it.
Have a seat and listen to each letter carefully.
Sit down!
That's right.
Listen to:

*Komez alef o
Komez bejs bo
Komez gimel go
Komez daled do*

*Komez alef: "Oh"
Komez beyz: "Boh"
Komez gimel: "Goh"
Komez daled: "Doh!"*

*Pasach alef a
Pasach bejs ba
Pasach gimel ga
Pasach gimel ga [sic]*

*Pasakh alef: "Ah"
Pasakh beyz: "Bah"
Pasakh gimel: "Gah"
Pasakh gimel: "Gah!" [sic]*

*Ot asoj ingele
Ot asoj darf men lernen ingele
Oj wej tajer ingele
Thu a kuk in ssider un sog noch a mol*

That's it, little boy.
That's right, one must learn, little boy!
Oh no, darling child!
Take a look in the prayer book
and say them again:

*Komez alef o
Komez bejs bo*

*Komez alef: "Oh"
Komez beyz: "Boh"*

³³ Original Yiddish text by the composer. Transliteration from the first published edition. The English translation is my own. Note: the score published by the Society for Jewish Folk Music includes the libretto in both the Yiddish and Latin alphabets and the two versions frequently diverge. For the purposes of this article, I have translated the text as it would be performed using the latter writing system.

Nota Bene

Hecher
Starker

Louder!
Stronger!

O
Bo

“Oh...”
“Boh...”

Ot asoj darf men lernen ingele

That’s right, one must learn, little boy!

A
Ba
Ga
Da

“Ah...”
“Bah...”
“Gah...”
“Dah...”

Hecher
Starker

Louder!
Stronger!

Ot asoj darf men lernen ingele

That’s right, one must learn, little boy!

A
Be
Bo
Ga

“Ah...”
“Beh...”
“Boh...”
“Gah...”

Ot asoj
Frejlicher
Lebediger
Genarnik

That’s it!
More joyfully!
Livelier!
You rascal!

Ot asoj ingele
Darf men lernen tojre

That’s it, little boy,
One must learn *Torah*!

Tojre is di beste schojre

Torah is the best merchandise.

Wolst gewen a tajer ingele
Solst nit sajn a genarnik
Aj bist du a genarnik ingele

Would you be a darling little boy?
You shouldn’t be a rascal.
Oj, you’re a rascal, little boy!

Genug schojn
Farmach dem ssider
Bist fraj

Enough already.
Close the prayer book.
You’re free.

Gedenk majn kind
A id darf lernen tojre

Remember, my child,
A Jew must learn *Torah*;

Evoking a Corner of Jewish Life:
Moses Milner's "In Kheyder" for Voice and Piano

*Asoj sogt uns der beliger bojre
As men wet dich fregen
Wos bost du getun in kheyder
Solst du sogen bost gelerent tojre*

*Gedenk tojre
Noch a mol tojre
Tojre tojre tojre*

The Holy Creator told us so.
So when everyone asks you
What you did in school,
You should tell them you learned *Torah*.

Remember: *Torah*.
Repeat it: *Torah*.
Torah...Torah...Torah...

Appendix II: Recollections of *Kheyder*

"One morning, when I had turned three, my father wrapped me up in a prayer shawl, ...took me into his arms and carried me off to *Rebe* Meyer, the teacher in the *chejder*...[who] immediately started to teach me the Torah, pointing...to the ABC's and chanting: See now, little fellow, the first letter is an *aleph*...the second, which looks like a little hut with three walls, is a *bey*s...After that, is the *giml*...Repeat now: *daled*, little fellow, *daled*! ...When we reached the tenth letter, *yud*, he told me to close my eyes. When I opened them...raisins and almonds were strewn over the ABC's. 'The angel from Heaven has thrown these down to you for studying the Torah,' *Rebe* Meyer said. 'Eat.'"³⁴

Israel Joshua Singer (1893-1944)

~

"A *kheyder* is a traditional school where one studies the Torah with Rashil's commentary], the Talmud, and everything that a boy must know to be a religious Jew. The *kheyder* was in the rabbi's house. The rabbi was very poor and his house was very small. We all studied around a small table. I went to *kheyder* until my *bar mitzvah* [at age 13]."³⁵

Uriel Weinreich (1926-1967)

~

³⁴ Cited in Rubin, *Voices of a People*, 52.

³⁵ My translation. Uriel Weinreich, "The Grandfather's Story," in *College Yiddish* (New York: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 1971), 119.

Oyfn pripetsbik (“On the Stove”)

On the stove burns a little fire,
And the room is warm.
And the rabbi is teaching little children
The alphabet.

Refrain

Tell me, little children,
Remember, dear ones,
What you’re learning here.
Tell me again,
And, really, one more time:
Kometz aleph: “Oh”

Learn, little children, with great desire,
What I am saying to you.
Whoever among you learns Hebrew quickly
Will receive a flag.

Learn, little children, don’t be afraid.
Every beginning is difficult.
Happy is the one who learns Torah;
What more could a person need?

When you grow older, little children,
You will really understand
How many tears lie in the letters
And how much suffering.

When you carry the Diaspora, little children,
As you will surely do,
You will gain strength from the letters,
When you look deeply into them.³⁶

- Mark Warshawsky (1840-1907)

³⁶ My translation. Cited by Yuri Vedenyapin (Lecture, National Yiddish Book Center, Amherst, Massachusetts, July 2009).

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