Although we have no exact knowledge of the beginnings of Jewish music, we know that its history is an ancient one. The chanting of Biblical verse, on which much of the Synagogue service has long rested, is generally supposed to have been known in the era of Ezra the Scribe during the Fifth Century B.C.; the chanting of the Psalms of David at the Temple of Jerusalem has been reported as early as the Second Century B.C. by the Fathers of the Synagogue. If the exact origins of this music are unknown, its significance in the religious services of the Jewish people is undisputed, and although its outward form has been altered over a period of more than a thousand years by its contact with the music of other peoples, its emotional content is undeniably Hebraic. And it is in the powerful, sonorous voice of Moshe Kusevitsky, undoubtedly one of the great cantors of the modern era, that both the history and the beauty of this particular music come alive for us here.

The word “cantor,” in itself, denotes singing, and despite the fact that the development of this very special form is extremely obscure, it is generally surmised that the early scripture readers (the cantors) undoubtedly delivered their texts in a definite monotone. From time to time, individual intonations were added, and eventually, this became a unique musical form. It is a known fact that musical notation appears in many of the ancient Hebrew scriptures and prayers, these being markings which indicated to the cantor the exact point at which he should raise or lower his voice. For, according to cantorial tradition, he cannot merely recite his text—in its entirety it must be sung, a fact which has given rise to some of the most glorious voices in the vocal tradition. But strange as it may at first appear, a cantor’s training is not primarily in this direction—he is, first, last and always, a theologian.

It stands to reason that a music which has traversed so many hundreds of years could not make that arduous journey without submitting to countless changes. The folk music of Central Asia, of Russia, Germany and even Spain have left their mark, altering the music, to be sure, but in such a way that its basic content is unchanged. This content assumes many forms—extracts from the Bible which lean heavily on the Psalms, poetry which has been compiled over the ages, simple prayers whose musical setting develops an even greater aura of devotion and sanctity. All of this music has a definite place in the service of the Synagogue—some is an integral part of the everyday service; some others are more closely associated with the holy days of Pentecost, Yom Kippur or Rosh Hashonah. Esso Einai El Hehorim, for instance, is the one-hundred-and-twenty-first Psalm, a selection which is usually heard in the form of a scripture lesson; Ad Heino Asorunu is a prayer of traditional standing which forms a major part of the morning service; Rachmonon D’Oni Laaniyei Aneino is another prayer whose roots are to be found in a sacred poem. There are others, too, which follow the same general pattern—Korutz M’Chomer is a poetic utterance based on the commandment, “Thou shalt not covet”; and Ma Godlu Maasecho Adoshem, based on the ninety-second Psalm, is an important stage in the Sabbath service—being, in essence, a musical work devoted to the holiness of that day.

Moshe Kusevitsky is not only one of the truly great cantors of the present day, but one of the most proficient interpreters of sacred music as well. At one time cantor of the Warsaw Synagogue, Kusevitsky has been carried far in musical circles by the surging power of his voice and the magnificent style with which he surrounds all his undertakings. In addition to the moving and passionate music of the Synagogue which he declaims here with such sincerity and brilliance, he is also well-known for his work in folk music, concert and opera. But it is in the former, as we can hear in the present instance, that he has reached an exalted position, and it is thanks to him that this music, as living as any music can be, is made to take on the vitality and meaning which can only increase its already gigantic stature.

Bill Zeitung

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FESTIVAL GEMS

1. ESSO EINAI EL HEHORIM
   (Psalm 121) (Yardeini—Arr.: Bass)

2. KORUTZ M'CHOMER
   (Pentecostal Hymn) (Low—Orch.: Bass)

3. AD HEINO ASORUNU
   (Rosenblatt-Kusevitsky—Arr.: Bass)

4. RACHMONO D'ONEI LAANIYEI ANEINO
   (Slichot Prayer) (Low—Arr.: Bass)

5. MA GODLU MAASECHO ADOSHEM
   (Low—Orch.: Bass)
   Cantor Moshe Kusevitsky, Tenor
   with Orchestra
   Warner Bass, Cond.
FESTIVAL GEMS

1. L'DOR VODOR (From Generation to Generation)
2. UMIPNEI CHATOEINU (For Our Sins)
3. SHEIBONEH BEIS HAMIKDOSH (Rebuilding the Temple)
4. AKAVYO BEN MAHALALEL (Akavyo the Son of Mahalalel) (Cantor Israel Alter)

Cantor Moshe Kusevitsky with String Ensemble
Joseph M. Rumshinsky, Dir.