

THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE "INSTITUTE OF JEWISH MUSIC"
IN JERUSALEM

BY A. Z. IDELSOHN AND S. Z. RIVLIN IN 1910*

Bathja Bayer, *Jerusalem*

From the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, efforts were made, in various countries and in various ways, to institutionalize the "fostering and study of Jewish music." Roughly parallel, in time and place, were certain initiatives affecting the cantorial profession: organizations, journals, and endeavours to set up institutions for the training of cantors. Each of these domains, the fostering-and-study and the cantorial, merits a full-scale enquiry.

The earliest venture of the fostering-and-study kind was the *Society for Jewish Folk Music*, founded in St. Petersburg in 1908, and disbanded in 1918 by order of the government, shortly after the Revolution. Elsewhere in this volume of *Yuval*, Philip Bohlman deals with one of the later attempts: the *World Centre for Jewish Music in Palestine*, which was founded in Jerusalem in 1936 and came to an end in 1939 with the outbreak of the Second World War. The document presented here bears witness to what is probably the second-oldest initiative of this kind, dated only two years after the founding of the St. Petersburg Society.

Idelsohn arrived in Palestine in 1907, and immediately settled in Jerusalem. Three years later he published the *Announcement*, in which we find him proclaiming the founding of a *Maḳôn šīrat yisra'el* (literally, Institute of Israel's Song) and calling for worldwide support. As stated in the *Announcement*, the institute had already been inaugurated in the Passover week of the year 5670 (see § [11]); this falls within the second half of April 1910. From the contents one may infer that the *Announcement* was printed for distribution immediately after this "opening date."

The text is signed by Idelsohn and Shlomo Zalman Rivlin, titled respectively "founder and director" and "secretary." Below their names there appears a declaration of adherence, supposed to be signed by representatives of four Jewish ethnic groups. However, the names of the groups and of the signatories have not been filled in.

* Some matters in the commentary are discussed at greater or lesser length in the Hebrew version. References to sources published in Hebrew have been omitted in the English version. Much help was given in this enquiry by our colleague Dr. Eliyahu Schleifer (who as a boy sang in Shlomo Zalman Rivlin's choir in the 1940s).

The item may be defined as a kind of broadsheet. It measures 47 x 30 cm. and is printed in three columns. The copy used here is in the Jakob Michael Collection of Jewish Music (JNUL Music Dept., no. JMB 867). In our transcription and translation the paragraphs have been numbered for easier reference.

The "Institute" can hardly be held to have achieved a real existence. Until the end of Idelsohn's stay in Palestine, i.e. until the summer of 1921, he pursued his ethnomusicological work precisely as he had done before 1910 – entirely by himself. An "institutionalization" of sorts can be found only as regards his association, again wholly as an individual, with the Berlin and Vienna phonogram archives. The collections of material described in §[18]a to c – recordings and notations, instruments and research library – were undoubtedly simply his own; and the "Treasury of Costumes," as described in §[18]d, must be understood as nothing more than a research file on his shelf. All these were indeed a nucleus, around which something larger might have been made to grow, if all had gone well. As we shall see, the three ethnic choirs that had been set up (§[19]) functioned only briefly before the members melted back into their respective synagogal environments.

A relic of Idelsohn's endeavours is the booklet *Tôrât han-negînah* (Theory of Music), published under the imprint of the *Maḳôn* in 1910 (see no.7 in E. Schleifer's bibliography in this volume). Another relic is a lithographed "sheet three" of musical paradigms (scales, intervals, etc.), in the Jakob Michael Collection (JMA 3385).

More information should certainly be gathered on what was actually done in 1910. But there is no need to look far afield in order to know what happened afterwards, and to be certain that it happened very soon. Idelsohn himself is our witness that the "Institute" came to naught. To quote from his autobiographical essay of 1935 (re-published in our Hebrew section here): "In the year [5]670 I founded a *Maḳôn le-šîrat yisra'el*... but this attempt of mine did not succeed. Also[?] the zealots of Jerusalem blocked my way, and were wont to persecute the yeshivah students and to threaten them with the ban, and some of them they managed to deprive of the Halukkah."¹ An echo of this is also found in Idelsohn's short story *Le-ḥayyim ḥadašîm* (see item 13 in the bibliography, and Schleifer's commentary there).

The project also failed for want of a proper financial basis. One directly relevant document can be found in the Idelsohn Archives: a letter of refusal from the Central Committee of the *Hoveve Zion* organization, located at that time in

1 Halukkah: the dole, from funds collected among Jewish communities abroad, which was their main or only support.

Odessa. It is signed by Menahem Ussishkin, and dated 10th November 1910.² No evidence can be found that the appeal for individual membership, or rather patronage contributions (§[21]), succeeded in any way.³

Most of the writings about Idelsohn, including most of the biographical articles in encyclopedias, state that he “founded an institute... in Jerusalem” and leave it at that. It should be noted that a proper enquiry *ad fontes* about Idelsohn’s Jerusalem period has not yet been carried out. Our own searches, too, have not been exhaustive. But they do seem to confirm that Idelsohn’s statement can be taken at face value. To say that “he *attempted* to set up an institute...” probably comes closest to what actually happened.

Even with these reservations, the *Announcement* is a document of importance in several respects. It contributes, above all, to our understanding of the ideological basis of Idelsohn’s work throughout his life, and it obviously also contributes to our knowledge of his Jerusalem period. Jerusalem in the last years of Ottoman rule, with its small but highly diverse population, including the tradition-bound Jewish communities and the nascent New Yishuv (the Zionist community, evolving from the 1880’s onwards), is itself nowadays more and more frequently a subject for research. This *Announcement*, as we have shown, belongs among the source-materials for the history of attempts to institutionalize the fostering and study of Jewish music.

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The style of the *Announcement* raises some questions. It is high-flown, indeed bombastic, yet frequently awkward. Our translation tries to reproduce both these characteristics. Idelsohn’s Hebrew style and idiom changed in the course of time: before World War I his language tended strongly to that of the nineteenth century Haskalah movement; afterwards it became fully modern. Much the same is found among his contemporaries; for it was this generation that directly experienced the “Renaissance of the Hebrew language” promoted by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Even so, the writing here does not fully consort with what else we have from Idelsohn’s hand at that period. The discrepancy seems more pronounced in the first part of the text (§1 to §10) and in the two concluding paragraphs (§22 and §23), i.e. the non-programmatic sections.

One might consider the influence of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, to whom Idelsohn was much attached. The high claims put forward here are not a little reminiscent

2 JNUL, Mus.7 (132).

3 It should be remembered that the entire Jewish population of Palestine at this time numbered less than eighty-five thousand. The latter is the approximate count for 1914; in 1900 it was about fifty thousand. Approximately one-third of the Jews of Jerusalem were dependent on the Halukkah.

of the style of Ben-Yehuda, who was often rightly accused of proclaiming molehills as mountains. Possibly there is also an influence of Hayyim Nahman Bialik's style. In at least one place, §[8], there seem to appear some fairly direct echoes of his famous hortatory poem *Lam-mitnaddevîm ba-'am*. All this is found combined with repeated appeals to the sense of Jewish history; in §[3] and §[6] harsh words are also said against the "assimilationists" (not clearly specified). The slant here is towards an easily identifiable readership: the orthodox and ultra-orthodox, especially in Jerusalem itself. Idelsohn had to obtain their collaboration, or at least their agreement, and at the very least to forestall their active obstruction.

Our attempts to explain the peculiar style of the *Announcement* still leave a residue of doubts. These doubts draw attention to the other signatory, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Rivlin (1884-1962), "The Father of Jerusalem's Cantors." The title *šîrat yisra'el* turns out to be linked with several of his own ventures. Information on these is somewhat conflicting and still needs to be followed up.

Rivlin writes that he himself founded a *Maḳôn û-maḳhelat šîrat yisra'el* (Institute and choir) already in the year [5]662, i.e. 1901/2. His son Shmuel Rivlin writes that "the choir was founded in [5]661... and the institute in [5]665, by Sh.Z. Rivlin and Professor A.Z. Idelsohn." Since Idelsohn only arrived in Jerusalem in the year 5667 (1907), this looks like a conflation of at least two events. In an obituary notice written by Eleazar Hurwitz in 1962, the details are again different. Hurwitz was a faithful pupil of Shlomo Zalman Rivlin's cantorial classes, and helped him with the publication of his writings, especially during Rivlin's later years when his sight was failing. Hurwitz writes: "he founded the choir...in 1899 [i.e. at the age of 15], and the *Maḳôn šîrat yisra'el* in 1901, which was a school for music theory, voice training, choral conducting, biblical cantillation, and rabbinical homiletics." Tidhar's biographical encyclopedia states that Rivlin's *Maḳôn* was founded in 1901 "together with Professor Idelsohn" – again a conflation.

Contemporary reports must obviously be searched. And thus we find A. M. Luncz publishing the following notice, dated the 5th of Sivan 5670 (12 June, 1910): "*Maḳôn šîrat yisra'el*. The famous composer and cantor Mr. Abraham Zvi (Idelsohn) has founded an institute of *šîrah* [singing?] for everyone of pleasant voice among the various communities: Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Aleppines, Babylonians and Yemenites. The purpose of the institute will be: to gather the folk melodies of the people of Israel into one *ôzar* (treasury), and to teach the sons of Israel music in general and Hebrew music in particular, and furthermore to develop cantors knowledgeable in the music of Israel and its song. From each community he has set up a choir which will sing and develop its music and its song. Already there have gathered within this institute about seventy pupils, who study under the governance of the founder and the instruction of qualified

musicians from each particular community. By means of this institute Mr. Abraham Zvi (Idelsohn) intends to revive and to renew the original music of Israel [*šīrat yisra'el*].”

To judge by the style, the notice looks as if it was written by Idelsohn himself. The date, 12 June 1910, is close to the “opening date” given in the broadsheet-announcement, i.e. the second half of April 1910. One notes that Rivlin is not mentioned. A thorough search of the Hebrew newspapers of the time will surely bring more information. What is already known is that Rivlin carried on his own teaching activities under the name *Maḳôn šīrat yisra'el*, until his death in 1962.⁴

To return to the broadsheet-announcement. A comparison with Rivlin’s writings makes it fairly probable that the first part (§[1]-[10]) and the conclusion [22]-[23]) came wholly or at least largely from his pen. Rivlin’s and Idelsohn’s visions were certainly not the same. But for a brief time, around 1910, they found a common ground for collaboration. The rest remains to be investigated.

4 Here another and recently published error can be corrected. Art. “Jerusalem” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), vol. 9, states on p. 610: “The first secular choral society Shirat Yisrael was founded in 1901 by S. Z. Rivlin, and was remodelled in 1910 by Abraham Zvi Idelsohn to maintain the musical traditions of the various Jewish communities. In 1917 Idelsohn founded the larger Habamah Haivrith [Hebrew Stage] Choir to perform Hebrew songs at concerts and official functions.” Rivlin never concerned himself with anything resembling a “secular choral society”. The Hebrew Stage Choir was formed at the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts on the initiative of the school’s founder Boris Schatz. Bezalel was opened in 1906. Schatz’s choir does seem to have been formed around 1910, but Idelsohn worked with it only occasionally. The story of Idelsohn’s choirs, and of the other choirs in Jerusalem, has still to be investigated.

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