"Evolution of Jewish Music": Discourse Communities and Narrative Construction in the Performance of Music History

Gordon Dale

Abstract: This paper examines the performance of Jewish musical history through an analysis of two 2017 music videos, both titled "Evolution of Jewish Music." Drawing on theories of historiography and collective memory, it argues that such medleys do not simply represent the past but actively shape it, reflecting the present-day values, ideologies, and cultural boundaries of their creators. Through close comparison, the study demonstrates that each video curates a distinct musical lineage aligned with its performers' "discourse community," that is, the subculture within Orthodox Judaism that shapes the artists' presentation of the past. These videos reveal how musical canons function as "usable pasts" that reinforce communal identity, signal belonging, and negotiate tensions between continuity and change. The article challenges linear notions of musical "evolution," demonstrating instead that Jewish musical history is multidirectional, selective, and shaped by both memory and the performers' social context.

In April 2013, Pentatonix, a popular American a cappella ensemble, posted a video on YouTube titled "Evolution of Music." In the four-and-a-half-minute video, the five vocalists perform a rapid-fire series of thirty-six pieces in chronological order, beginning in the eleventh century and reaching the 2010s. With a plain black background behind the singers, the video is sparse in its presentation but exciting in its execution, as the musicians demonstrate great skill and creativity. At the time of this writing, the video had been watched well over one hundred million times, and had inspired many spinoffs. In this paper, I analyze two of these spinoff videos, both titled "Evolution of Jewish Music."

The two videos studied here are by Benny Friedman and Meir Kay (released July 9, 2017), and the Y-Studs (released September 19, 2017). Rabbi Benny Friedman (b. 1985), a popular singer from the Chabad-Lubavitch community, is a star of hasidic entertainment. Like much of hasidic popular music, his songs are dedicated to topics such as the importance of the Torah, praise of God, and love of one's fellow Jews. Friedman is the son of Rabbi Manis Friedman, a respected speaker and author in Chabad circles, and the nephew of the hasidic music star Avraham Fried. Meir Kay is the stage name used by Rabbi Meir Kalmanson (b. 1990) in his social media videos. Kalmanson, who was also raised in Chabad-Lubavitch, is a viral video star even beyond the Jewish community, with posts that promote positive thinking, happiness, and helping others, often without explicitly Jewish iconography. The second of the two videos to be released features Y-Studs (a play on "Yeshiva Students"), an a cappella group that

originated at Yeshiva University. The singers, like the institution with which they are affiliated, are more closely aligned with Modern Orthodoxy, a movement that blends adherence to Jewish law with a high degree of engagement with the popular culture of the majority population.

By analyzing these videos, I hope to reflect on the presentation of the Jewish musical past. I argue that presentations of the musical past must be understood as existing within "discourse communities" that describe the past based on present-day values and sensitivities, obscuring the non-linear and remarkably diverse course that music has historically taken in the lives of Jews.

To be clear, this analysis is not meant to criticize these videos or their creators. On the contrary, the hard work and immense skill that went into these performances makes them excellent subjects of analysis. Additionally, I recognize that the videos are intended to be light entertainment, and a close analysis may seem to be an overreading of the material. Nevertheless, following Henry Giroux (2011), I approach media as a form of "public pedagogy" that "produces images, ideas, and ideologies that, consciously or unconsciously, help to shape public attitudes and individual behaviors in complex ways" (Jones and Some 2024); thus I find it important to glean all we can from such media. As will become clear, I understand these videos as discourses on the history of Jewish music and take their publication as an opportunity to study what they might teach us about the crafting of emic musicological narratives. This paper builds on ethnomusicologist Mark Kligman's analysis of the song "We've Got the Music" by Abie Rotenberg. In a May 2017 presentation to the New York Working Group on Jewish Orthodoxies, Kligman argued that Orthodox Jewish narratives of music are demonstrative of the ways these traditionalists understand their own history. Building on this premise, it is valuable to look closely at the pieces chosen as representative of this evolution, and to reflect on the story that is told in the selected sequence of songs.

Jewish History and Communal Memory

This analysis of the two "Evolution" videos is driven by a pedagogical concern that has emerged from my work teaching cantorial students. For the past twelve years I have taught a two-semester course titled "History of Jewish Music: The Cantor in Context," in which I guide students through a study of Jewish music history that centers on understanding the development of the contemporary liberal American Jewish community and the cantorate that it supports. In the opening session of the course, I introduce the idea that the study of history is, to quote Sam Wineburg (1999), an "unnatural act," requiring us to question fundamental assumptions about how we experience the world and to see the creation of historical narratives as creative acts

rather than empirical statements of simple cause and effect. Students have generally been favorably inclined toward adopting this positioning vis-à-vis the study of history; it is one that supports the interest that many have in finding the marginalized but impactful individuals who do not appear in the stories we tell about the past.

However, another wrinkle in the study of the Jewish musical past has been difficult to articulate and communicate effectively. It is one that Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi famously touched on when he stated, "We have learned that meaning in history, memory of the past, and the writing of history are by no means to be equated" (Yerushalmi 1982, 14). Yerushalmi goes on to discuss the divide between the study of Jewish history and the dominance of cultural memory and ritual in the Jewish approach to the past:

> Many Jews today are in search of a past, but they patently do not want the past that is offered by the historian. The extraordinary current interest in Hassidism totally ignores both its theoretical bases and the often sordid history of the movement. The Holocaust has already engendered more historical research than any single event in Jewish history, but I have no doubt whatever that its image is being shaped, not at the historian's anvil, but in the novelist's crucible. Much has changed since the sixteenth century; one thing, curiously, remains. Now, as then, it would appear that even where Jews do not reject history out of hand, they are not prepared to confront it directly, but seem to await a new, metahistorical myth, for which the novel provided at least a temporary modern surrogate. (Yerushalmi 1982, 98)

Yerushalmi's diagnosis is bleak, and I take issue with his wholesale claim that Jews have no interest in the work of historians. On the contrary, my experiences as an ethnographer, as an organizer of public scholarship programs, and as an active member of the American Jewish community have often left me impressed with the widespread interest in Jewish history as studied by rigorous scholars. Nevertheless, Yerushalmi's work is compelling in his suggestion that communal memory overtakes history and shapes the ways that Jews think about their own past.

Aleida Assmann notes that the term "communal memory" is a gloss for an array of ways of interacting with the past. She critiques understandings of narrative construction that dismiss presentations of the past on the grounds that they are subjectively built. She writes:

> Memory constructs that inform commemorative practices and traditions are therefore not necessarily false because they are constructed—of course they are! The questions to be asked should not only focus on empirical evidence and the

> substance of the narrative or tradition alone but ought to take the wider context into account: Why and how do memory constructs work? Why do they succeed to mobilize? Why do they find or fail to raise mass support and resonance? As they are necessarily selective, the question is: By which norms and bias are they chosen? What is included and what is excluded from the constructions of collective memory? And what are the political consequences of such choices in the present and for future?" (Assmann 2008, 67)

What, then, do we make of contemporary presentations of the Jewish musical past? For the cantorial students whom I teach, the question is poignant. As Judah Cohen has explored, cantors are often framed as "vessels of tradition," an identity and role that steers them toward narratives of Jewish musical history that reinforce ideas of Jewish continuity and peoplehood. This stands in tension with contemporary scholarship, which views such tropes with suspicion and often focuses on moments of rupture, social schisms, and internal difference. Writing about American cantorial training in the first half of the twentieth century, Cohen states, "It might be best to see the cantor as a flexible symbol of historical continuity, assembled to make sense of a fragmented past in order to maintain music's place in the emerging Judaism of a modern age" (Cohen 2017, 49). Recognizing that this remains the case, I strive to help students develop the skill of thinking historically and reflecting critically on the presentation of the Jewish musical past. The exercise is not merely abstract; as cantors are asked to ritualize the Jewish past—for example, through Holocaust commemoration, Yom Ha'atzmaut celebrations, or Yizkor services—they are tasked with creating historical narratives and a usable past through music. Thus, the ability to reflect on the construction of Jewish music history is a useful tool when navigating a web of ideological, political, and familial interests that often compete with one another.

Consciously historiographic presentations of Jewish music, then, offer particularly useful opportunities for examining narrative construction. Bringing Yerushalmi's observations regarding the divide between historiography and communal memory to the musical realm, I offer this comparison of two presentations of Jewish musical "evolution." Through this comparison, I demonstrate not only that such presentations tell us as much about the present as about the past, but also that communal memory is disseminated through what I call "discourse communities" and filtered through specific interests and cultural norms. These presentations of the Jewish musical past are far from uninterested in history. They deeply engage with history, while telling the story of Jewish music in divergent ways that reflect contemporary religious practices and discourses of inclusion. In this process, these songs are rearticulated in the light

of the present day, shaping how a new generation understands their own past. As such, the songs presented here live both within and transcendent of time, as the past circles back on itself by resounding and being reframed in the historical narrative.

"Evolution of Jewish Music," by Benny Friedman and Meir Kay

Friedman and Kay's video begins with "My Yiddishe Momme," by Jack Yellen and Lew Pollack, which was most famously sung by Sophie Tucker (recorded in 1925), though here it is Yossele Rosenblatt's version that is represented. As in his appearance in *The Jazz Singer*, Rosenblatt can be read as a stand-in for the eastern European synagogue music that predated him. While this representation of Jewish music begins in twentieth-century America, Rosenblatt—depicted here by Friedman dressed in cantorial synagogue garb—grounds the history in a synagogue music style that hearkens back to Europe. The video continues with Ben Zion Shenker's "Eishes Chayil" (composed approximately 1954), likely the most popular melody of that American-born hasidic composer. Like Rosenblatt, Shenker is often represented as a hallmark of authenticity (Dale 2017), again grounding this early part of the "evolution" in figures aligned with strict religiosity and European musical practices. From here, the video moves in a somewhat different direction, highlighting the music of the folk singers Shlomo Carlebach and Moshe Yess, who were most prominent in the American Folk Revival of the 1960s.

The video then jumps to the 1980s with hasidic singer Mordechai Ben David's pop song "Just One Shabbos" (released in 1982) and continues in this pop genre with songs from Abie Rotenberg's "Journeys" project and the Lubavitcher pop star Avraham Fried. We next hear "Who Spilled the Milk" from the Marvelous Midos Machine, a 1984 album of morality songs for children by Abie Rotenberg and Moshe Yess. Hippie rockers Piamenta are next heard, performing "Asher Bara," a song with text from the Jewish wedding liturgy here set as a contrafactum of Men at Work's 1981 hit "Down Under." This is followed by another contrafactum, the humorous 1987 song "Achashverosh," by Shlock Rock which is set to the tune of "Rock Me Amadeus" by Falco. After "Sim Shalom," sung by Dedi Graucher, an Orthodox pop star (the performance depicted here seems to imitate the 2004 disc featuring the Miami Boys Choir and Dedi), a new tone is taken with the rap group Black Hattitude, whose piece "R.E.L.I.G.I.O.N." (1995) includes musical material taken from hits by the Seattle grunge rockers Alice in Chains and Nirvana (see Cohen 2009), who were extremely popular in the mid-1990s.

The video turns then to "Modeh Ani Lefanecha" (1983) by Regesh, a hasidic ensemble

featuring the singers Abish Brodt and Shmuel Brazil, before turning to the introductory music to the first of the popular "A Time for Music" concerts, the annual fundraisers for the Hebrew Academy for Special Children (HASC) that began in 1987. "Lo Yisa Goy," a well-known song of the Brooklyn-based Miami Boys Choir (first released in 1992), is sung next, with Friedman imitating the choreographed dance moves typical of boys' choirs. The video then shows Kay roller skating to the 1991 release "Modim," by Yehuda!, then a sixteen-year-old Canadian yeshiva student descended from several generations of composers in the Vizhnitz hasidic court. The "evolution" continues with the 1995 release "Dor Metzuyan," a dance-reggae track by the Orthodox Israeli ensemble Oif Simches. Accompanying the song, Friedman and Kay imitate the dance moves and clothing of Oif Simches at the Ohel Concert 5758, a fundraiser that was held in 1998 and released as a video and audio CD.

Kay and Friedman's performance then shifts to the 2001 hit song "Rachem" by Yaakov Shwekey, a singer of Syrian Jewish descent who is now one of the most popular musicians in the entire Orthodox community. We then see a costume change as the duo transforms into the Israeli folk rockers the Moshav Band, an ensemble whose members grew up together in Moshav Mevo Modi'im, a village in central Israel that was founded by Shlomo Carlebach and continues to be shaped by his teachings, music, and lifestyle. Their 1999 song "Come Back" expresses a longing to return to Israel, with a Celtic-inspired mandolin melody that returns throughout the song.

The song then turns to "Y'hey," a 2001 piece by The Chevra, a four-member "boy band" that performed in a style clearly inspired by popular groups such as the Backstreet Boys and NSYNC. Next, we see the performers acting out the scene portrayed in "Flippin' Out," a 2002 song by the Modern Orthodox rock band Blue Fringe. The song humorously depicts the phenomenon of "flipping out," a rightward shift in religious observance among Modern Orthodox eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds during a year of study in Israel between high school and college. The medley transitions to hasidic superstar Lipa Schmeltzer's "Gelt," a 2003 song criticizing society's obsession with money, while cleverly playing with Jewish stereotypes (for a thorough analysis of the song, see Frühauf 2018, 126–128). The next song featured is "Kol HaMispalel," a 2003 song by the Yeshiva Boys Choir, the first track on the youth ensemble's popular first record (see Dale 2017, 201). The video transitions to a performance of Matisyahu's reggae retelling of the Biblical story of the exodus from Egypt in his song "Chop 'em Down," originally released in 2004. The video shows Kay in Chabad garb, with long beard and wire-frame glasses, closely resembling Matiysahu's appearance at that time. (Matisyahu

left the Chabad community in 2007 and, after experimenting with other expressions of hasidism, shaved his beard in 2011 and publicly left Orthodoxy.)

We next see Friedman and Kay reenacting the music video for "Ya'alili," a 2011 song by the Chabad duo 8th Day that cleverly juxtaposes Sephardic and Ashkenazi cultures as the group dances through a kosher supermarket in Brooklyn. The "evolution" continues with "Candelight," a viral video from the Maccabeats, an a cappella group that began as a student group at Yeshiva University; the Chanukah-themed music video was filmed in advance of the holiday in 2010. The song, a contrafact of Taio Cruz's hit song "Dynamite," went viral, and the music video has so far been viewed more than fourteen million times. Friedman and Kay are then seen performing Benny Friedman's own hit song "Ivri Anochi (I'm a Jew and I'm Proud)." The song and music video, featuring Meir Kay, were originally released in 2016; seeing the two performers play themselves while the original video plays on the green screen behind them is a humorous twist. Finally, the concluding song, Meilech Kohn's "VeUhavtu" (2016), enters with a curious vocal timbre. All along, the singers have imitated the voices of the original singers, but here Friedman's performance is revealed to be too good to be true, and Kohn himself enters the frame, singing and dancing while placing his arm around Friedman, who lip-syncs with the lyrics.

"Evolution of Jewish Music," by the Y-Studs

The Y-Studs' "Evolution" video is simpler in its visual presentation—the thirteen singers are simply dressed in matching gray button-down shirts, black pants, and brown belts and gesticulate in front of a black backdrop—but the musical arrangement is more complex than that of Kay and Friedman. The Y-Studs' arrangement is entirely vocal, with multi-part harmonies, including beatbox for many of the pieces sung in the medley. Clever transitions between pieces help to smooth the diverse collection of songs into a cohesive unit, and the singers collectively cover a wide tessitura. The performance begins with a liturgical melody commonly sung for the "Barekhu" prayer of the Rosh Hashanah evening service. The video identifies the melody as being from the ninth century, though it is difficult to know exactly when it was written, and because "there is no exact correspondence between text and melody" (Kligman 2015, 92), performances of such melodies vary. The video then transitions to "Cuando el Rey Nimrod," which it states was written in the 1600s. In actuality, the lyrics and melody for this Ladino song that the Y-Studs perform here likely date to the late nineteenth century, although variant texts date as early as c. 1790 (Seroussi 2008, 542). The Y-Studs slip seamlessly into "Maoz Tzur," listed here as being from the 1700s. In fact, the piece is much

older; a very similar melody is recorded in Martin Luther's 1523 hymnal to the text "Nun Freut Euch, Liben Christen G'mein." Abraham Zvi Idelsohn writes that the "Maoz Tzur" is likely a combination of "Nun Freut Euch" and the melody of the battle song "Benzenaur," both of which date to the early 1500s (Idelsohn 1929, 171). The video then indicates a jump to the 1800s as the singers begin "Oyfn Pripetshik" by Mark Warshawsky, which does indeed just make the cut, having been first published in 1899 (Loeffler 2010, 164). The video continues to indicate the 1800s as the Y-Studs begin singing Hatikvah, the Israeli national anthem; the lyrics were originally written in 1877 or 1878 (Seroussi 2015, 3), and approximately a decade later they were set to the melody of the Moldavian-Romanian song *Carul cu Boi* (Cart with Oxen), which became the prototype for the song's current form (ibid., 6).

The video now enters the twentieth century, and begins to identify songs by their decade rather than their century. Entering the 1910s, the musicians sing Israel Goldfarb's "Shalom Aleikhem," written and published in 1918. The video indicates a move to the 1920s, with "Havah Nagilah," Idelsohn's 1918 setting of original words to a niggun from the Sadigurer hasidic dynasty. The video proceeds to the 1930s, with "Bay Mir Bist Du Sheyn," originally written in Yiddish by Sholom Secunda and Jacob Jacobs in 1932, but later adapted with the English lyrics heard here for the Andrews Sisters' 1938 release. Moving to the 1940s, the ensemble sings "Ani Ma'amin," composed by the hasidic musician Azriel Dovid Fastag on his way to a concentration camp;[1] the song was sent to the Modzitzer Rebbe, Shaul Yedidya Taub, in New York at the tail end of World War II (Dale 2025, 55-57).

The video jumps to the 1960s and transitions from black and white to a color presentation. Ran Eliran's "Sharm El-Sheikh," composed during the Six-Day War of 1967, is sung next, and transitions to "Od Avinu Chai," composed by Shlomo Carlebach in 1965 at the request of an individual involved with the Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry (Ophir 2014, 265–267). The Y-Studs then move on to "Oseh Shalom," as set by the Israeli composer Nurit Hirsh for the first Hasidic Song Festival in 1969, an event in which non-hasidic musicians composed Jewish religious music in a style resembling hasidic music. Remaining in the 1960s, the ensemble next sings Naomi Shemer's "Yerushalayim shel Zahav," which debuted at the 1967 Voice of Israel Song Festival; the song was later amended to commemorate the Six-Day War, which broke out just three weeks after the song's premiere (Shahar 2021). The 1960s portion concludes with "If

[1] There is a bit of ambiguity regarding Fastag's destination. Ben Zion Shenker, who first read notation that had been sent to Fastag's rabbi, Shaul Yedidya Taub, stated that Fastag was sent to Treblinka, though my correspondence with the Treblinka archives has not produced any record of Fastag's arrival there. Records indicate that he was likely sent to Auschwitz.

I Were a Rich Man," written by Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock for the 1964 musical *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Seamlessly moving into the 1970s, the Y-Studs begin the new decade with "Hafachta Mispedi" by the Diaspora Yeshiva Band, released in 1976. Baruch Chait's "Kol HaOlam Kulo" follows, written in 1973 during the Yom Kippur War (Tucker 2010). We then jump to a fast, upbeat rendition of Uzi Chitman's 1976 setting of "Adon Olam," and continue to "Baruch HaGever," originally released by the Orthodox boys choir Amudei Sheish in 1979. The video then proceeds into the 1980s, beginning with Israeli composer and singer Tzvika Pik's setting of the traditional prayer "Shehekheyanu." Though the Y-Studs' video writes that it has moved into the 1980s, Pik's setting was actually released for the 1973 Hasidic Song Festival in Israel. The next song was indeed released in the 1980s—Shlock Rock's 1987 song "Minyan Man," an English-language ballad that tells of a Jewish man who travels through a town and is asked to stay for the Sabbath so that the residents will have enough men for a prayer quorum.

The video then moves to the 1990s, beginning with Mordechai Ben David's 1992 hit song "Moshiach," a disco-pop setting of Maimonides' declaration of faith in the coming of the messiah. Next, we hear "Birchot Havdalah," a setting of the liturgy that ends the Sabbath on Saturday night, composed by Debbie Friedman, the iconic singer who popularized American folk music in the Reform movement. This is followed by "The Chanukah Song," a humorous song by the comedian and actor Adam Sandler that was originally performed on *Saturday Night Live* in 1994. We then hear "Salaam," a Hebrew and Arabic song for peace by the Israeli band Sheva, released in 1997. The Y-Studs move quickly through the next piece, Abie Rotenberg's "Acheinu," released in 1990. The song's message of brotherhood made it a hit during the Gulf War, which coincided with its release. Next, the musicians move to "Shir La'ahava" (commonly known as "Yachad"), the 1999 hit song by the Israeli band Gaya, closing out the decade.

The video indicates a shift to the 2000s, and we hear hasidic singer Mordechai Ben David's popular 2001 song "Maaminim." The musicians take on a new tone as they sing "Hafinali," the 2002 song by the Israeli rapper Subliminal. The Y-Studs next begin the 2003 Israeli hit "Balbeli Oto" by Kobi Peretz, an Israeli Mizrachi singer of Moroccan descent. They then transition to "Shabeḥi Yerushalayim," which the Y-Studs attribute in the YouTube notes to Glykeria, a Greek singer, whose 1993 Hebrew performance of Psalm 147:12 made her a star in Israel. Glykeria, who is not Jewish, also went on to release the song in 1999 on a recording with the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra. In actuality, the song was composed by Avihu Medina

and has been sung by many Israeli singers, though Glykeria's performance is likely the most famous. Next is the Yeshiva Boys Choir's 2005 song "V'ohavta"—the Talmudic Rabbi Akiva's expression of the importance of the principle to love one's neighbor as oneself. We then hear the 2002 Israeli hit "Bo'ee" by the Idan Raichel Project, an ensemble that explores the fusion of diverse musical practices, particularly those of Jews from all around the world. This leads into "One Day," the 2008 release by Matisyahu describing a Messianic vision of world peace. The Y-Studs transition to "Vehi She'amda," a setting of a text from the Passover seder liturgy released by the American-Israeli haredi musician Yonatan Razel and later popularized by Yaakov Shwekey in 2009.

The video indicates its move into the 2010s as the Y-Studs quickly sing the hook of "Yesh Tikvah," released by Benny Friedman in 2012, as well as "Ya'alili" (the 2011 song by 8th Day that is also found in the Friedman/Kay video). The Y-Studs sing with great energy as they approach the present day, singing "Et Rekod," released by Yaakov Shwekey in 2014, and briefly including a line from "Mahapekha Shel Simcha" by the Israeli pop singers Omer Adam and Lior Narkis, released in 2015. The video closes with "Hashem Melech," originally released in 2013 by the Orthodox Israeli singer Gad Elbaz, and re-released as "Hashem Melech 2.0" in 2016 with Nissim Black, a Hasidic rapper. The song is based on "C'est la Vie," a 2012 hit song by the Algerian singer Khaled.

Song Choices: Cultural Mores and Gender

Friedman and Kay's compilation is composed of twenty-nine pieces, all the work of Orthodox male musicians. The list of musicians is striking, in that nearly all the composers are from the right-wing of the Orthodox sector, and a great many are, like the two performers, hasidic. "Jewish music" here is seen through a very specific lens that recognizes, to some extent, those in other Orthodox subcultures, but does not include the music of other Jewish communities. The video's definition of "Jewish music" is more constrained, as it exclusively portrays male musicians as the creators of expressive culture. In Lubavitcher culture, as in other Orthodox circles, women do create music but it would be unlikely to be included in such a public venue as this video. Women's musical roles are not only to be found in private, domestic settings—which Shelemay (2009) refers to as the "hidden transcript" in her research on Syrian Jewish women in Brooklyn; rather, there are active female musicians. However, the prohibition of men listening to female singers means that the two male entertainers are expected to be unknowledgeable about these singers, and it would be problematic for them to publicly demonstrate any familiarity with their music. Additionally, the Jewish music represented here

is nearly entirely American and Ashkenazi, with few exceptions. Broadly speaking, the narrative constructed here suggests a move from eastern European cantorial music to popular music that is reflective of the sounds of the concurrent surrounding American pop culture.

By contrast, the Y-Studs have selected far more Israeli songs, as well as several European pieces. The Y-Studs begin their chronology much earlier than the Friedman/Kay video, though there is a clear pattern in which there are large jumps through earlier centuries, and more pieces included in tighter spans of time as we approach the present day. As young Modern Orthodox Americans, they are far more familiar with contemporary repertoire, yet it is noteworthy that they know the music of both Israel and America. As one might expect, the selections here are largely from Orthodox musicians, though this is not a firm rule. The video includes numerous Israeli musicians who identify with the "secular" community in Israel, a non-Jewish musician (Glykeria), and Debbie Friedman, who is closely aligned with the Reform movement. It is significant that the Y-Studs include songs written and performed by women, as will be discussed below.

The musicians behind the two videos have much in common due to their shared practice of Orthodox Judaism, but the song choices presented here demonstrate the diversity of those who affiliate with this religious stream. The "evolution" described in these videos is reflective of the worldview with which each group was raised, as shaped by political contexts, social mores, and philosophies of social integration. Whereas Lubavitch-rooted Meir Kay and Benny Friedman (as well as the hasidic arranger and pianist Avrumy Berko, a contemporary American hasidic musician who was involved with the creation of the video) have been primarily exposed to the music of hasidic America throughout their lives, the fervent Zionism of Modern Orthodoxy in America, as well as greater support for engagement with American life beyond the Orthodox community, makes the Y-Studs familiar with different repertoires. Modern Orthodox institutions such as schools and summer camps use Israeli music to teach values, particularly religious commitment and dedication to the State of Israel (which are deeply intertwined for many Modern Orthodox individuals).

The song list offered by Friedman and Kay is suggestive of the hasidic tendency to consume cultural productions created by those in the haredi community almost exclusively, or at least to present oneself as if this were the case. In the Orthodox community, any public presentation of oneself must signal adherence to fundamental practices and values. For hasidim, even the relatively open Lubavitch sect, gender is among the most important considerations in the performance of communal citizenship. Therefore, it is unsurprising that

Kay and Friedman have not included women in their "evolution" video; to do so would cross a line in the community that would be unacceptable, even if they are, in fact, familiar with music created and performed by female Jewish musicians.

The Y-Studs, however, include selections by several women,[2] though the number is far outweighed by that of male musicians. Within Modern Orthodox communities, approaches to the law of *kol isha* (hearing a woman singing) vary more widely than in some other Orthodox settings (Spolter 2013). Some institutions, particularly those for children, rely on lenient interpretations of the law that permit men to listen to women sing in many contexts (Mandel 2012). In their personal lives, many Modern Orthodox men listen to women sing, both in person and on recordings (Summit 2016, 155). Practices are diverse among individuals and communities, and the Y-Studs' inclusion of songs sung by women reflects this spectrum of interpretation and the social acceptability of such choices within their milieu.

Orthodoxy as an Analytic Category, Orthodoxy as a Discourse Community

The contrasting presentations of Jewish music history in the two videos point to the complexity of the term "Orthodox" and the importance of its careful usage in the social sciences and humanities. Literally translating to "right belief," the term "Orthodox" was originally used disparagingly by adherents to the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment movement to describe a person "either Christian or Jewish, opposed to the Enlightenment" (Blutinger 2007, 312). With the development of the Reform movement in Judaism, the term came to be applied to those who opposed the worship innovations of the Reformers, essentially turning Jewish Orthodoxy into a social category (ibid.). In the United States, the development of Orthodox Judaism had a specifically musical aspect: the term was applied to Jews who opposed the use of the organ in synagogue services (Sarna 2003, 202). Oppositional terms, though, are often poor descriptors of the phenomena and the people they seek to encompass and are generally ill-equipped to handle the diversity in doxa and praxis of those found under the term's umbrella. In viewing these videos through an analytical lens that seeks to understand presentations of "Orthodoxy," questions emerge: Where is doxa to be found in these videos? Where do the beliefs and practices of the two groups of musicians intersect and diverge? In the performance of Orthodoxy, which gestures can be read as religious in nature?

Clearly, the Orthodoxy presented by the Modern Orthodox Y-Studs differs from that of

[2] I note here that "Shabeḥi Yerushalayim" was written by a male composer, but the Y-Studs' attribution of the piece to Glykeria demonstrates that they have her performance in mind.

Kay and Friedman. As described above, the Y-Studs' frequent use of Israeli popular songs is a reflection of the high priority placed on Zionism in Modern Orthodoxy. For the Modern Orthodox, even cultural productions that have no obvious theological content are frequently considered part of a religious narrative, stemming from a deep-seated belief that the creation of the modern State of Israel in 1948 was an eschatologically significant event. As a result, Israeli culture and the Hebrew language are deeply intertwined with religious thought among the Modern Orthodox. Of course, it is not only Israeli productions that can be subsumed into a religious narrative; the Y-Studs also include pieces such as "Bay Mir Bist Du Sheyn," and "If I Were a Rich Man," which are emblematic of Judaism for many, but are more connected to the stage than the synagogue.. The inclusion of these pieces demonstrates the engagement that Modern Orthodox Jews have with the majority culture and non-Orthodox Jews, a connection rooted in a religious philosophy that finds this engagement to be theologically unproblematic, and for some, preferable to any alternative.

For the Lubavitchers Friedman and Kay, doxa is present in the references to the Messiah ("Just One Shabbos") and loving God (VeUhavtu,"), as well as the many references to liturgy ("Eishes Chayil," "Asher Bara," "Sim Shalom," and others). While the "Evolution" video is consistent with Chabad-Lubavitch beliefs, it is also important to note that the video situates the performers and listeners within a particular musical-discursive community. Through the inclusion of popular pieces from Orthodox musicians and ensembles, the Orthodoxy here is about participating in a particular community just as much as, and perhaps more than, it is about "right belief."

Doxa, of course, is challenging to measure. However, certain lines in praxis—and not necessarily even halakhic praxis—must not be crossed if one is to remain a part of this community. Semiotic symbols are extremely significant in the determination of in-group and out-group status, and Orthodox Jews are highly adept at understanding the nuances of outward behavior such as speech, dress, and mannerisms. It is for precisely this reason that Matisyahu's public display of his beardless face and lack of head-covering was so dramatic to Orthodox audiences; it was these acts, not any sort of renunciation of Orthodox theology, that made clear that he was no longer part of the Orthodox Jewish community.

The symbols—both sonic and visual—that are found in the videos tell us little about the performers' beliefs; however, they do situate the performers in social milieus that understand their own history in very particular ways. This affiliation with a discourse community and its cultural productions is a key component of contemporary Orthodoxy. The discourse

communities of the Y-Studs and Kay/Friedman overlap, telling us about the politics of representation, the boundaries of communal mores, gender dynamics, approaches to non-Orthodox Judaism, and more. For those who not only share these beliefs and attitudes, but also have facility within the discourse—in this case a musical discourse—that structures the community in important ways, these "Evolution" videos are enjoyable ways of understanding the community's history and reinforcing each viewer's place within it. The songs included in the video thus function as a "usable past" (Brooks 1918) within each discourse community.

Musical Evolution

Both videos, drawing on the popularity of the Pentatonix video, purport to document the "evolution" of Jewish music, though I suggest that the term should be understood in this context as something closer to "a conflation of history and memory" (Assmann 2008, 64). Indeed, the videos demonstrate the complexity of thinking about musical change in a linear fashion, particularly in a transnational community. Nevertheless, framed as "evolution" stories, these videos offer an opportunity to probe the appropriate way to conceptualize musical change. "Evolution" implies an organic process of change leading to an improved, "evolved" musical culture, rejecting the old as antiquated and less fit to survive. "Evolution" implies linearity and uniformity, shedding the past while marching toward a more whole and civilized future.

Although change is certainly a constant in Jewish history, it would be foolish to ignore the lines of continuity that run through even those communities of Jews that are most open to innovation. "Creative retrieval" has been a key element of musical-liturgical practices in liberal Jewish worship, as elements of Orthodox prayer practice are adopted and adapted for contemporary sensibilities and sensitivities (Morris 2013). The process of change in Jewish history is anything but linear; it is characterized by the future's ever-shifting relationship with the past. Even the ever-referenced pendulum that swings between "tradition" and "innovation" is a flawed metaphor: neither the meaning of a text nor what one might do with it swings between stagnant poles.

The consideration of the evolution of Jewish music rests, of course, on the premise that "Jewish music" itself exists as a free-standing entity with a clear history. Although Jews have made musical sounds for millennia, the scholarly conversation about "Jewish music" inquires as to when this term came to be a recognized genre (see Bohlman 2008 and Cohen 2019 for treatments of the topic). That is to say, the question of Jewish music is as much a question of discourse as it is one of musical production. Judah Cohen writes: "Part of the dilemma with Jewish music research lies in both scholarly and lay efforts to approach music as a product of

linear and definable 'tradition,' thereby heightening its symbolic capital" (Cohen 2019, 5). Discourses on the "evolution" of Jewish music further this rhetoric but obscure the complexity of political, social, and psychological forces that enable the presupposition of an entity known as "Jewish music" that has its own canon and history.

The musics examined in these "Evolution" videos are diverse, and upon examination it is challenging to see them as continuously building upon each other. In the Y-Studs video, the pieces included span a huge geographic and temporal range, and if one were to map the composers' inspirations for each individual piece, it is unlikely that all the pieces that precede it in the video would be included. Furthermore, it is problematic to understand the original performers of these piece as all operating within the same musical canon. While "Bay Mir Bist Du Sheyn" and "Ani Ma'amin" were both written by Jews who spoke Yiddish, their juxtaposition in the historical narrative constitutes a retroactive act of identity construction. The sequence continues with several iconic pieces of Israeli nationalism, constructing a narrative in which the Holocaust gives way to the birth of the Jewish state. While appropriate to Modern Orthodox and Religious Zionist ideology, this juxtaposition creates historical inaccuracies: "Ani Ma'amin" was likely not in the repertoire of the Jews of the nascent State of Israel.[3] Furthermore, the video skips over the 1950s entirely, a period with a rich repertoire that shaped Israel's identity during an important period of nation-building (Regev and Seroussi 2004). The jump from the Holocaust to the 1967 Six-Day War results in a redemptive narrative that contrasts the near-decimation of European Jewry with Israeli Jewish strength.

The songs presented in the Kay/Friedman video were created and performed in a relatively small timespan, and primarily in the United States, but their presentation as a historical narrative should nonetheless be read as a construction of memory. For example, Matisyahu's musical inspirations for "Chop 'em Down" are not to be found in the musicians who precede him in this video, but rather can be more closely attributed to the reggae music of Bob Marley. While it is true that Matisyahu was an Orthodox Jewish musician, others might have chosen to omit him completely from a history of Jewish music because his performance practices were unique in the Orthodox community at that time—and controversial, due to his use of reggae and rap styles that were generally not part of haredi musical practices and the mixed-gender audiences for which he performed. This underscores the assertion that the songs presented here

[3] Shlomo Carlebach, the composer of "Od Avinu Chai," likely knew "Ani Ma'amin," as he was familiar with the Modzitz hasidic dynasty, the leader of which, Rabbi Shaul Yedidya Taub, helped to publicize the song. Nonetheless, it is somewhat tenuous, and certainly ideologically driven, to suggest that the pieces can be placed in a historical evolution.

tell us more about the discourse communities of the performers than about a natural evolution of a sui generis category known as Jewish music.

Rather than viewing such changes as an evolution, it might instead be preferable to note the pieces, styles, and instruments that enter the discourse at different times. Various pieces stand for significant events in the community's history: For the Y-Studs, "Ani Ma'amin" represents the Holocaust, "Cuando el Rey" is a nod to older Sephardi music, and "Hatikvah" represents the fulfillment of Zionist ambitions; for Friedman and Kay, Yossele Rosenblatt stands for "tradition" and an artistic milestone in the synagogue soundscape, the HASC introduction is important because it became an institution in haredi life, Black Hattitude represented a somewhat deviant engagement with rap and grunge music that entered a particular part of the community in the 1990s. These musics represent shifts over time but within a retroactively constructed narrative of Jewish music.

The life of music is, we see, multidirectional rather than linear. Musicians are simultaneously acting upon and reacting to political events, broader cultural shifts, and a host of dynamic internal sensibilities. Although discourses of music history may suggest a natural progression that takes place independent of the deliberate decisions that musicians make, historical thinking requires the agency of the musician to be considered as well. Furthermore, the construction of a linear narrative is the result of competing values being worked out in a way that, as an act of contemporary identity construction, suggests a thread of cultural continuity across divergent musical practices. Certain pieces of music enter the historical record due to their popularity among either a broad audience or the writers of the history, but popularity, too, must be problematized, as it is attributable to factors such as social interactions, technologies, and finances. Moreover, popularity among certain audiences grants historical currency, while the pieces that appeal to or are marketed to others do not matter. Pieces of music that are on "women only" records (Roda 2024), for example, will not make it into these historical records, and thus do not seem to be a part of the "evolution," despite the great meaning they might have for individual listeners.

Finally, these pieces demonstrate the ways in which music circles back on itself. As the constituent songs are resounded in these new contexts, they are recast in a new light. We see the pieces presented within the context of constructed timelines that attribute meanings and particular significance to them. When songs are reperformed in these new contexts, they experience a form of rebirth as the pieces are introduced to new audiences who see them through the lens of the present day, rather than their original articulation. In this way,

presentations of the musical past give new life to songs of the past.

Conclusion

The "Evolution of Jewish Music" videos examined in this paper present a valuable opportunity to examine the manner in which the politics of representation in historiography produces narratives informed by specific worldviews. Discourse communities dialectically develop understandings of history and sociopolitical beliefs, each informing and reinforcing the other. This understanding tasks the viewer with the job of untangling the complex web of ideologies, representations, and events to understand the histories of each component of the larger whole. It is for this reason that the present study includes a brief explanation of each piece in the video montages, though a more thorough study would expound upon each piece in far greater depth than space allows in this format. Close studies of canons and their constituent pieces can shed light on the ideological thrust of the corpus, and how these components came to be bundled initially. Moreover, it is appropriate to consider historiographic omissions within these canons, as they may change our perception of the past and enhance our understanding of a collective's identity politics and social priorities.

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