Judy Cohen, Montreal.

"Sing to me in Yiddish", sung by Claire Klein Osipov with piano arrangements and accompaniments by Wendy Bross Stuart, both now living in Vancouver, is a collection of 14 anonymous and composed songs in Yiddish. The musical quality of the record is unwaveringly high, with Claire's exceptionally beautiful soprano voice complemented by Wendy's sensitive and supportive arrangements. The selection of songs is a fairly representative one, ranging from well-known dance tunes such as "Di Mezinkie Oisgegebn" to the late 19th century immigrant songs (Mayn Ru'e Platz") and the despairing creations of World War II ("Undzer Shtetl Brent"). Claire's interpretations, while intensely personal, draw on traditional styles; and her diction is so clear that someone unfamiliar with Yiddish could almost take down the words phonetically.

My only reservation about this record is related to the problem of "art" and "folk" music. Yiddish folksong is a strange phenomenon. It traces its existence back to the Middle Ages, but not as a musical continuum. The 19th century saw a new departure, with the old klezmorim ("musicians") still performing in Eastern Europe, but not in western or central Europe (1). Towards the end of the century, poems by American Jewish writers were being adopted as folksongs by American and European Jewish communities; and in our own century many "art" songs became "folk" songs almost as soon as they were composed. For this reason, it is particularly difficult to separate "art" from "folk" singing styles in Yiddish folksong. With this in mind, when I suggest that Claire's and Wendy's beautiful record is clearly an "art music" record, the statement has rather different implications than it would in the context of, for example, Ontario lumberjack songs.

Even so, as a record sent to a folk music society to be reviewed, I find it a bit too removed from folk music. For all their indisputable sensitivity, the interpretations and arrangements (to my ears at least) are somewhat too contrived, the diction almost too clear, the tempo and key changes often superfluous to the songs. (2) It should be remembered that even the songs composed in the late 19th century and between the wars were often sung by their composers to the people; Rosenfeld (songs 4 and 7), for example, was himself a sweatshop labourer and sang to his fellow workers (3). What I would like to see, then, is a follow-up to this first lovely album with a word-sheet enclosed, and in a style more accessible to folksingers who are interested in the active preservation of Yiddish folksong as a living tradition.

Copies of the record are available from Claire Klein Osipov, 375 West 42 Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.

2. It's interesting to note that the dance tune "When the Rabbi sings" (#3a) is an anti-Chassidic text. (Ibid., 390).
3. Ibid., 352-3.
If you're interested: Best book for learning to sing Yiddish songs is Ruth Rubin's "Jewish Folksongs in Yiddish and English" (Oak). For further listening, try Ruth Rubin's own records (Folkways) or Theo Bikel's. Supraphon's "Music from the Ghetto" is more of an "art" record, with intensely moving renditions. Watch for traditional music played by Dave Tarras, and a klezmer revival by Zev Feldman and Andy Statman, both to be released soon in New York.

Judy Cohen is a member of C.F.M.S. living in Montreal. Her chief interests in folk music centre around Spanish, Eastern European and Middle Eastern music. In Canada her interests gravitate to Quebec and Acadian unaccompanied vocal folk songs. She plays vielle, rebec, guitar, psaltery, recorders, krumhorns, clarinet, various percussion instruments, dulcimer, and of course, she sings. Judy also works with a medieval music group known as Sang Cuer and says "... we try to make 12th and 13th century music more alive by using a lot of refrain songs and inviting audience participations."

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