

## Reviews / Comptes-rendus

**On Wings of Song, A New Yiddish Collection from the Book "Mir Trogen a Gezang, A Collection of Art, Folk and Theatre Songs".** Musical Director and arrangements: Zalmen Mlotek; Producer: Henry Sapoznik; orchestration: Peter Sokolow; liner notes: Chana Eleanor Mlotek. New York, The Workmen's Circle, 1992. Cassette #WC21. 45 E33rd St., New York, N.Y. 10016.

Yiddish song, as the second subtitle of this delightful cassette indicates, has "folk", "art" and "theatre" components. "Folk", "art", and "theatre", also "popular", are used throughout the cassette liner notes and the anthology from which the songs are taken, and, rather than trying to define (angels fear to tread) or avoid these terms, I will simply trust that their intended meaning is fairly clear from the context. (Perhaps this should be phrased as a warning: "The ethnomusicologically controversial term 'folk' will be used throughout this review without apology or definition, because it is useful.")

Twelve different singers and fourteen musicians present a generous selection of songs from the anthology *Mir Trogen a Gezang* (Chana Eleanor Mlotek). Several of the songs are by the beloved Yiddish writer Mordkhe Gebirtig, born in 1877 and killed by the Nazis in 1942. In fact, most of the songs on the cassette are by known composers, with only a couple of exceptions. In Yiddish song, known compositions, from those adapted from earlier folk versions to those composed for the Yiddish theatre or other occasions, have often become part of the traditional repertoire, and in turn have often become part of the folk process of change and adaptation.

The songs cover a multitude of themes: A mother sings to her baby boy of how he will grow up to become a wise scholar but meanwhile he's lying "in a puddle". A blacksmith dreams of freedom. One young girl tells her suitor he must learn the tango and Charleston or he's out of the running; another says, yes, join the Fire Brigade, all the girls will be jealous of me when you show up in your brass helmet. The Queen of Turkey sends Rabbi Tam a love letter; Avreml the Master Pickpocket reflects on his life; the bride's mother keeps tipping the klezmerim (musicians) to play yet another tune. A mother weighs her child down with so many layers of warm clothing that he "cannot lift his wings"; a romance is born by the warm kitchen stove; "the golden peacock will come to take us to the place we long for". The last song on the cassette, written just after the Holocaust, is a moving expression of the will to survive.

Each singer brings his or her artistry and affection for Yiddish (known to its native speakers as the "mame-loshen", the "mother-language") to the songs, and the arrangements are typical of Zalmen Mlotek's and Pete Sokolow's musical expertise and sensitivity. It would take too long to comment on each singer's style and the instrumentation of each song: each has its own appeal. What I miss, though, is a simpler style: not one of the songs is sung a capella, or even with just one instrument (not counting the piano). Of the three components in the subtitle, "folk" seems to have been neglected, partly in the choice of songs, and even more in the performance style. In the case of the art and theatre songs, which in fact form the majority of the selections, the style follows naturally, but in the few "folk" items I would have welcomed a less formal vocal style and/or setting.

A note on the cassette jacket: two holes are punched to accommodate the plastic case, unfortunately right through the list of musicians and part of the telephone number of the publisher. As there is actually a blank panel to the left of this one, the problem could easily have been avoided. Also, it would have been helpful to include the page references for the anthology. Each song has a brief summary in English, by Chana Eleanor Mlotek, who is also the author/compiler of *Mir Trogen a Gezang* (also Zalmen Mlotek's mother, also wife of Josef Mlotek, who sings selection B-6 simply and movingly).

To sum up, I recommend this cassette, with the caveat that it does not represent either the "folk" singing style or the various klezmer instrumental styles which have become familiar to listeners over the past decade or so. For these, the interested reader does have a wide variety of available recordings to choose from. (If enough interest is suggested, I can put together a basic list for another issue.)

The singers, in alphabetical order: Robert Abelson, Bruce Adler, Michael Alpert, Batsheva, Rosalie Becker, Phyllis Berk, Joanne Borts, Adrienne Cooper, Shura Lipovsky, Yosl Mlotek, Henry Sapoznik, Lorin Sklamberg.

*Judith Cohen*

Brendan Nolan. *Across the Great Divide*. "Ould Sagosha" Music, 5160 Mayfair, Montreal, QC H4V 2E9.

Between 1820 and 1968 4,711,113 Irish people emigrated to the United States. Many more left before 1820. Tradition tells us that the emigration of Irish to America began with the voyage of Saint Brendan in the 6th Century, while history, more conservatively, says the "great Scots-Irish emigration" began in 1718. The impact of millions of Irish immigrants on the history and culture of the United States -- and of many other far-flung regions of the world -- is inestimable. No less the impact on the culture and history of Ireland itself. Emigration pervades the Irish mind like the salt tang of the wind off the sea. Love and war and emigration are the three leaves of the shamrock of Irish literature and Irish song.

Emigration darkens the life of Ireland even yet. Indeed they say that more are leaving the country now than did at the height of the Famine years of the late 1840s, when over 200,000 a year were "sailing away from Derry Quay" or "going away to leave the misty mountains in the rain". Among the modern emigrants who left his "home in Dublin for to find and catch a dream" was folksinger and songwriter Brendan Nolan, now resident in Montreal, and habitué of the Old Dublin Pub in University Street, his "home away from home".

Nolan has been blessed with a rich Irish voice and an Irish way with words. For his latest album of songs, *Across the Great Divide*, he chose "the immigration theme", something that had been playing around in his head for many years. He could have had his choice from a limitless treasure of traditional Irish songs on the age-old theme of leaving home, but instead he chose to add more gems to that wealthy collection, and there they shine no less brightly than other age-polished jewels of the genre. He did pick a few of the traditional emigrant songs: the deservedly well-known "Paddy's Green Shamrock Shore", "one of the best of the immigrant songs"; "Welcome Paddy Home", an old song of wishful thinking in the emigrant's return; and the lesser-known "No Irish Need Apply", a lively song that Pete Seeger includes in his own apparently limitless repertoire but which Nolan sings just as well, with only his own bodhran beating lightly in accompaniment. In these three songs, all the themes of the emigrant tradition are found: the sailing away "to Americay"; the leaving behind of parents, lovers, "comrade boys", of beloved home town and "sacred ground"; the search for work, for a place to live; the hostility and discrimination: "No, you are a Paddy, and no Irish need apply". And then the longing to return:

If fortune it ever should favour me, or I to have money in store

I'll come back and I'll wed the wee lassie I left on Paddy's green shamrock shore.

These same emigrant/immigrant themes Nolan takes up in the songs in this collection, and, whether they are his own songs or those of other contemporary writers, in his singing and his musical arrangements he helps his listeners to feel the pain, the joy, the humour, the triumph, the sadness, the longing, as deeply as did the old songs of the tradition.

America was, of course, not the only destination of the Irish emigrant, for "we walk the streets of London", or "we're over here in Queensland and in parts of New South Wales", or "within sight of Grosse Île/ we anchored far off shore". The island of Grosse Île lies downstream from Quebec City in the Saint Lawrence. In 1832 the small deserted island became a quarantine station where 51,146 Irish and English immigrants were examined. In 1847 the Irish famine drove emigrants away by the hundred thousand, despite a typhus epidemic. They endured six to twelve weeks of inhuman conditions in 221 ships to reach Canada. Eight thousand were buried at sea.

Two weeks out at sea, we had lost ten or more as the fever took  
the strongest of men.

And the holds were battened for days on end to stifle the sickness below,

While the waters of the ocean swallowed our dead, far away from their home.

Nolan's long, slow, sad song, "Far Away From Their Home", with its haunting flute accompaniment by Dave Gossage, describes the terrible conditions on the emigrant ships. This is as much a Canadian folk song as Irish, including one poignant verse in French.

Another song, the one from which the album title comes, also has a distinctly Canadian flavour -- as well it should: it was written by Stephen Fearing. It's one of the happy, optimistic songs in the collection:

I crossed the Great Divide and now I'm crossing back again,  
 I'm going to where the sun tempts the gold into the grain  
 And the fields of waving wheat go on forever.

That's not Irish, though Fearing has wove[n] that into a song about a young man leaving Dublin to cross that other great divide, the one into which thousands of his dead predecessors were sunk. But not this young man. He made it. And he'd "never trade my life for any other".

That brings us to the contemporary emigrants: young, educated, talented but facing a future with no hope. Liam Reilly's song "The Flight of Earls", a reference to the 1607 flight of Irish chieftains to Spain in fear of persecution, tells of the plight of Ireland's youth today:

It's not murder, fear nor famine that makes us leave this time...

We've got brains and we've got vision, we've got education too,

But we just can't throw away these precious years.

But, as in the traditional song, there is always that hope, that longing, to return. "But if we see better days, those big airplanes go both ways, and we'll all be coming back to you again". The old friends will all be there; the girl left behind will still be waiting, forever young and beautiful; only the parents will show the signs of aging while the emigrant was gone.

*Across the Great Divide* deals not only with Irish emigrants and their longing to escape the grinding hopelessness of a famine-stricken or a jobless home. In this collection Nolan includes a song that he wrote about the Mexicans looking north across the Rio Grande, a barrier to future happiness much narrower and much less hazardous than the treacherous Atlantic. But the goal on the other side is just the same: "As I look from the banks of the Rio Grande, to another life in another land". That's Paddy standing on the shamrock shore looking west across the Atlantic, as Paddy has done for generations, and may go on doing for generations more.

There are musical riches in this well-chosen selection: the gentle, reflective "Curse of the Immigrant", with its self-doubt and loneliness; the forceful, strong ballad of the young, noble "Beresford", fleeing to Canada with the servant girl he loves; the lively dance-time song of "The Devil and the Bailiff" contrasting with the slow-air pace of "The Widow's Walk", with its clever broken-step rhythm of the dead march. Nolan sings with a clear, strong, easy-to-listen-to voice, with -- in most cases -- an appropriate musical accompaniment. Only the piano behind "The Flight of Earls" and the drums -- not the bodhran -- behind "Paddy's Green Shamrock Shore" are out of place. But that's a personal reaction; others probably won't mind, and indeed, so good are the songs, may not even notice.

This is an album to buy and enjoy.

*Ron Duffy*

Mary Eileen McClear. *O Canada*. Cassette available from Mary Eileen McClear, Box 365, Baden, Ont. N0B 1G0

For proof of the oft-quoted statement that truth is stranger than fiction, one need only listen to this most intriguing and delightful recording, in which we are introduced to Ontario-based storyteller Mary Eileen McClear. Many words can be used to describe the five tales on this cassette: strange, unusual, haunting, bizarre, often improbable. But all these tales have one overriding element in common: they are all true, and based on actual events in Canadian history, from the days of the earliest colonial settlement in New France to the equally colourful period of Canadian western expansion into the prairie provinces and British Columbia. McClear has done an excellent job in ferreting out and researching these intriguing stories from all over Canada, using diaries, newspaper accounts, historical journals and other sources, both national and regional, to show how the combination of history and fine storytelling can produce an exciting blend in the final analysis.

The reader is skillfully and magically carried from the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and Prince Edward Island to the Peace River country and the plains of Saskatchewan, in a series of events that the cleverest movie director might have difficulty in creating. Here, for instance, are the tales of Lillie Vining, the raft baby of the Peace River country, who almost, through circumstance and chance, married her half-brother; John Mullins, a Nova

Scotian trader who lost his ears because of his discovery of hidden pirate treasure; Marguerite de la Roche, who was marooned on a deserted island for several years, all for the sake of love; John Rowand, Hudson's Bay Company factor, whose bones took a remarkable journey before their final interment in Montreal; and Charles Coffin, noted Canadian actor, who died in Galveston, Texas, and whose body was not returned to his home in Prince Edward Island because of a hurricane that blew his coffin out to sea for eight years.

I can only wish that I had had a history instructor such as McClear when attending high school and college; in the clever and masterful hands of a first class storyteller, history becomes infinitely more interesting, and learning seems more worthwhile. This is a cassette well worth going after, and history buffs, Canadian and otherwise, and lovers of good and unusual tales will thoroughly enjoy how Mary Eilene McClear makes both storytelling and Canada's rich and colourful past come thoroughly alive.

*Robert Rodriguez*