

## Juliana Yaffé

### THE YIDDISH FOLKSONG PROJECT

*A worldwide campaign of education on (and dissemination of)  
a rich, yet endangered piece of musical culture*

#### I.

Through the centuries, Jewish folk songs in the Yiddish language have been passed on from parent (or grandparent) to child, or through the Jewish congregational community, or in occasional performance within the small circle of traditional Jews, from generation to generation. However, as those people for whom Yiddish was the 'mame-loshn' (mother tongue) pass away, the memory of the Yiddish folk song gradually fades as well, *and so fades an important part of the chronicle of a people*. Sadly, many of these songs are no longer heard at all.

#### II.

Most anthologies of Yiddish song are rendered in 'lead sheet' form. That is, they are not arranged for performance; they are simply an elementary notation of the melody (with chord symbols above) and underlying text. These renderings of the songs are useful for archival/research purposes, but any use of them for performance purposes requires the hand of a musician who would be able to flesh them out into a viable accompaniment for the desired musician(s) — if they are to be done in any context beyond informal singing with, say, guitar or piano (i.e., a chordal instrument). As such, the songs are subject to the unpredictability of the one whose hand is responsible for the arranging. There have been a few isolated published examples of Yiddish songs with accompaniments for piano, but these have been cursory arrangements, and the volumes include no supplementary teaching aids.

#### III.

It is for the above reasons that the dissemination of this cultural heritage has been extremely limited. It has, unfortunately, remained caught within the small circles of Jewish families, congregations, social events, and archives. These songs have had almost no exposure to the world outside those small circles, because they have not been disseminated through the channels by which all other significant song repertoire gets its global exposure: the thousands of song recitals performed by trained student — and professional — singers each year around the world.

#### IV.

One might respond, "But these are folk songs, not 'art songs,' and folk songs ARE sung by performers." Indeed, within a small circle of people interested in a particular folksong tradition, folk songs are occasionally done. I would however, call the attention of the 'Doubting Thomas' to the fact that without the 'classical' arrangements of folk songs of the British Isles by Benjamin Britten, the Czech folksong arrangements by Antonín Dvořák, the German folksong arrangements by Johannes Brahms, the American folksong arrangements by Aaron Copland, the songs of the British Isles by Benjamin Britten (and the list goes on and on), there would be a massive body of folksong literature that would be completely unknown to a large portion of the world population.

## V.

It is for this reason that it is our firm conviction — and the driving force behind the several years during which we have been brainstorming our Yiddish Folksong Project — that this rich piece of culture will endure, educate, and enlighten only through exposure to a much broader global community. That exposure can now come to pass as a result of our rediscovery of the finely crafted arrangements by Robert De Cormier.

## VI.

It is important to keep in mind that when talking about Robert De Cormier, we are talking about one of the most highly regarded American musicians of the second half of the 20th century. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone in American choral circles, or in the area of folksong literature, who does not know who De Cormier is. His contribution to the editing, arranging, and publishing of folksong literature is immeasurable. His arrangements of the Yiddish folksong repertoire in question stand proudly next to the arrangements by the master composers mentioned above; and we have been given exclusive rights to their performance and the publishing.

## VII.

Since launching the project, Juliana has been invited to perform these songs at such venerated New York City institutions as the 92nd Street Y, the Center for Jewish History (YIVO), the New-York Historical Society, the City University of New York, and the Mannes College of Music. Additionally, institutions in Chicago, San Antonio, and Plymouth (New Hampshire) have hosted the program, as has Coventry University in England. In each of these cases, both lay audiences and scholars have expressed their pleasure at having been introduced to such a rich body of poignant, humorous, and impassioned vocal literature, often using the word ‘revelation’ to describe their experience. In the 2014/15 season alone, Juliana will be touring the UK extensively with the program — through the generous support of the Endeavor Foundation — visiting universities, conservatoires, and festivals in Cambridge, Wolverhampton, London, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Rugby, Birmingham, and Nottingham.

## VIII.

Alongside the performance dimension of the project is another, and equally important one: the publication of the De Cormier arrangements. This will be the first significant anthology of classical arrangements of Yiddish-language folk songs available in multiple volumes for a) voice and piano as well as b) voice with instrumental ensemble.

The publication will distinguish itself also in the following ways: since it will be intended for trained performers (or performers in training), it will include not only De Cormier's outstanding arrangements (and some basic historical, cultural, and linguistic background text), but also certain materials to aid performers in mastering the songs for performance: a) a Yiddish pronunciation chart, b) each song text printed in IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet; used almost universally by singers and voice teachers to aid in the pronunciation of foreign languages), and c) an accompanying CD on which Juliana will sing the songs, with the goal of allowing singers and instructors to *hear* the language

pronounced, and on which the song accompaniments (without the voice) will be provided. These are all teaching aids that our volumes will offer. *To our knowledge, no other published volume of Yiddish folk songs has done so.*

IX.

Finally, when the anthology is released, thousands of formally trained singers, and their voice teachers, will have access to this new body of vocal literature from a pedagogically conceived publication. Additionally, interest in these volumes will be generated through Juliana's master classes and continued live performances of the songs (which always include engaging and informative explanations). The net result: a broader dissemination of this rich cultural heritage to the world community.

Thank you for your interest.  
Thank you for your support.

*Juliana Yaffé*  
*John Yaffé*