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The GREAT CANTORS – Volume II

Gershon Sirota (1874-1943) : A Biographical Sketch by Bob Ziering

Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet - Isaiah 58:1

"His voice was one of nature's wonders. It overwhelmed the listener with its range and volume. It was a voice of two or three voices joined into one. He was a warm and impressionable singer, with such an effervescent temperament that it seemed as if he wanted to inject and imbue everyone about him with his own burning fire."¹

Gershon Sirota : Chazzan

Sirota was born in Haissin², Podolia er guberniye (Polish Lithuania), in 1873 or 1874³. His father was the well-known cantor in that village and he realized his son's vocal gifts early. He started his schooling and training in the Nusach (traditional melodies) and soon had the young Gershon assisting as a chorister. It became evident that Gershon was no ordinary child, and between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, the reputation of Sirota's amazing voice travelled, and it was soon the talk of the Jewish community in Odessa, where he had journeyed with his father to visit his grandfather. Fortuitously, the elder Sirota was offered a post as cantor of a small congregation, and so the family moved to Odessa, and Gershon was able to devour the extensive chazzanuth resources of that city. It is questionable as to who was doing the devouring, as the religious hierarchy and musical elite were taking a serious interest in young Gershon.

The chorus master of the Shalashna Synagogue, Yakovkin, succeeded in acquiring Sirota as a member of his choir, and solos became frequent. It didn't take long before the young Sirota was brought to the attention of Baron Kolbuss, Professor and Director of the Odessa Conservatory of Music. Sirota was auditioned and offered a scholarship. Concurrently, after a successful two-year tenure at the Shalashna, where he had been raised to the post of assistant cantor, Sirota was offered the position of First Cantor at the Prikashtshikes congregation in a suburb of Odessa. He was now 18 years old, a full cantor and tradition prescribed that he should be married. And so he did, marrying the daughter of the chief trustee of the temple; the boss's daughter.

At the conservatory, Gershon's studies in voice, theory and harmony were broadened to include specifically secular and operatic compositions. His father was concerned that these influences were drawing him away from the

synagogue and his calling as a cantor. These concerns proved to be well-founded. In 1892 Baron Kolbuss and Naradeyev, Director of the City Theatre, persuaded Sirota, who was much taken with the work of Haydn, to appear in *The Creation*. The cast included the great basso Lev Sibiriakoff. The production was a tremendous success, so great, in fact, that Sirota was offered, and accepted, the opportunity to continue his studies at the Vienna Conservatory.

Introduced to Baron Anselm Rothschild, as a young cantor from Odessa with "the most beautiful voice of our time." After hearing him, Rothschild, enthralled, offered his patronage, and speculation followed as to whether Sirota was destined for the Wiener Hofoper or the post of Wiener Oberkantor. Sirota's flirtations with the cultural elite of Vienna and his enticement with the possibility of a major operatic career and/or a cantorial pre-eminence in Vienna, were derailed by a telegram. His father was fatally stricken, and he was summoned to return to Odessa immediately. Fate had intervened, and the promise and expectation of all that lay before him in Vienna ended.

So, the invaluable experience of formal musical studies and vocal training were not realized. Sirota returned to Odessa, but would not remain there long where he was just one among many cantors. In 1896, at twenty-one he was called upon to audition for the position of Oberkantor of the Wilna Synagogue⁴. As Cantor Vigoda noted: "In Odessa he was a promise. In Wilna he became the promise fulfilled." The great Synagogue was the ideal setting for him. A mammoth structure, where his mighty voice would ring out in its full splendour. The appointment, however, didn't come without some resistance and jealousy. Sirota was, after all, very young and Wilna was a most important cultural and religious center⁵, with a tradition and history of many great cantors. However, the talent, voice, ability and public favour couldn't be denied. The *Wilna Balebeiysel*⁶ had risen from his grave and had returned to his pulpit. Sirota would officiate in Wilna for the next 9 years, a very successful tenure, and he laid the major foundation for his meteoric career.

Sirota worked with a number of choir leaders in Wilna, but it was with the assumption of the post by Leo Leow that a stellar collaboration began. Leow⁷, a formidable musician, choir leader, coach, and advisor, was to contribute much to Sirota's success, in and out of the synagogue, locally, throughout Europe, and, eventually, internationally.

Leow persuaded Sirota that concerts of prayers, psalms and folk songs could be made available to a larger public outside the temple. This innovative idea, feared for its unorthodoxy, led to a concert in the Baratzkoy Concert Hall, the largest in Wilna. Its resounding success soon brought invitations for similar concerts in the neighbouring cities of Grodno, Bialystok and Minsk, to list only a few. These tradition-breaking concerts introduced Sirota to the gentile population, and he began to meet prominent city and state officials, as well as members of the nobility and the military; many of whom were frequent visitors to the Synagogue.

Sirota's visibility and reputation grew to such a degree that he was requested to do a benefit concert for the dowager Czarina Maria Fyodorovna, for the Institute for the Blind, a favourite charity of hers. The ghetto had produced a star of such quality and reputation that he was performing for the Czar's mother. He received a commendation and a personally dedicated inscribed gold watch from Her Majesty. It is documented that he also sang annually before Czar Nicholas. Great hope arose for the Jewish community. Russia was for centuries virulently anti-Semitic and such favour and attention brought hope for a diminution of the repression by the government. But to laud honours on one man and use his talent, did not mean that general enlightenment was to follow. The community could expect little change from the Russian government. Sirota may not have been able to affect change in the attitudes of the Russian government towards the Jews of Russia, but to his congregation in Wilna, he was their darling. Late in 1903 an event of poignant significance occurred in which Sirota was an inspiring participant. Accompanied by Leow, he sang at a reception for Theodor Hertzl⁸, given by the Jewish community of Wilna.

Although he had a contract for life, it was obvious that sooner or later he would want to move on, as he was continually being wooed by other congregations. There were bigger and better positions and these had to be considered. After nine years the possibilities became worthy of serious attention.

In 1905, Sirota just 31, was invited to audition for the Tlomatzka Synagogue in Warsaw. At the time the Tlomatzka was the largest temple and congregation in the world, and was seeking a cantor to match its status. Again, the call came easily, but the appointment wasn't without internal struggle. This Synagogue was entrenched in stodgy and time-worn traditions which held fast, and Sirota and his reputation were one of a cantor who had already broken with tradition. After all, he had sung for non-Jewish audiences outside of the temple. In his concertizing, he sang secular songs, and he had even recorded his voice on gramophone records, which would be heard outside the temple. All this seemed shocking for the day, and, to add to this, no less important, Sirota was a "Litvak (Lithuanian)", and they were considered a lesser breed. Ironically, Sirota was first auditioned by way of his gramophone records. Met with the combination of his presentation and the stellar quality of his golden tenor, the opposition presented no contest. With the assumption of his new post, Sirota initiated changes. His unique style of improvisation and bravura presentation required a collaboration and a new collaborator. In 1908, Sirota sought out Leo Leow, who had taken a position in Bucharest at the Reform Temple. Fortunately, Leow was no less anxious to team up once more with his former cantor. The collaboration was restored, this time in Warsaw.

It was during his time at the Tlomatzka that Sirota's career reached its zenith. Contemporaries were as much interested in discussing and analysing his unique gifts as we are in the reading of them today. What was it about

this cantor that thrilled congregations and concert audiences alike? A few of these articulate observers are quoted:

Cantor Vigoda said of him: "Sirota overwhelmed ... a voice of many voices, a true leonine voice, the quality and lustre of velvet, powerful yet mellow, full and soft, a high dramatic tenor with a ringing top, a baritone middle ... cello-like."

Isaacher Fater wrote, "I remember once when my father and I paid a visit to the home of Eisenstadt, the choir director. After some time, he beckoned us to accompany him to Sirota's synagogue. There, high above us, on the pulpit was Sirota, absorbed in vocalizing. Little by little, he warmed up to his practice. The voice was now the glorious instrument which we knew so well. For a moment it seemed as if the entire synagogue had been ensnared in a clap of thunder. Then, changing again, Sirota's tones evoked memories of artillery fire. The windows rattled in their casements. As suddenly as it had erupted, the storm subsided. In its place, came a stream of soft soul-searching pathos; delicate falsetto ... piano tones stringing out like pearls. Sirota's tones would remain suspended in mid-air seemingly determined to remain vibrating until by sheer willpower they would break through the clouds which separate man from his Creator."

Leo Leow⁹, his choir leader, characterized the voice as "without a beginning or end, encompassing three octaves with little effort in his prime ... with E and F above high C. The voice was limitless."

His assistant cantor in Warsaw, Pinchas Szerman, wrote of his High Holidays: "The prayers of Unsaneh Tokef, Berosh Hashono and Keshimcho he sang with such bravura that he deserved to be paid his whole yearly salary for them alone. During his recitation of the prayer Ata Nigleiso, when he came to the words Kolos Uvrokim (Thunder & Lightning), Leo Leow used to instinctively duck his head in a reflex to miss the barrage of sound he knew was coming. It seems apparent that Sirota thrilled his congregation with his vocal might, his tremendous staccato, and leaping high cadenzas. His stamina seemed to be inexhaustible and so engrossing that an audience could forget that they were hungry and fasting, consumed by the thunder and lightning from the pulpit."

The critic and musicologist Menachem Kipnis after much adulation of Sirota, as cantor, wrote: "I would rather hear him in the opera *Africana* than in the synagogue. I believe in this opera he would be able to stick the famous Italian, Caruso, into his belt. Hearing Sirota, I often ask myself, 'What is such a voice doing in a synagogue?'"

A popular criticism of some of his dissenters was that his operatic voice was so powerful that his appeals to heaven sounded more like demands rather than supplications.

Sirota did not write or compose. He interpreted. The compositions Retzei and Adoshem, Adoshem were most closely associated with Sirota, but were not his creations. Retzei was written for him by Yitschak Schlossberg, a choir-leader for Sirota and later musical director of the Yiddish Theatre of

Warsaw. The Adoshem, Adoshem was composed by Cantor Bernstein of the Choir Synagogue of Wilna. The fame and popularity of these compositions were due in large part to Sirota's interpretations of them, which were so admired and influential, but, not without criticism. Cantor Vigoda noted that he detected a restlessness and hurry in his delivery. "Sometimes, the tones sounded as though they were belted and pushed out in spasmodic bursts, with the tendency to convey agitation or anger. There was lacking a balance of sweetness and ease, calmness and repose."

Early in his career, Sirota's fantastic voice was his best, perhaps his sole asset. But, with time he displayed to audiences and congregations his ability to improvise and interpret the prayers with his own individual intelligence. One record cites an incident of exceptional interest. Sirota learned that the cantor, Pinye Minkowsky¹⁰, was attending a service on Shevuoth (Pentecost). Sirota, determined to show his mettle to Minkowsky, dismissed the chorus, and performed an unexpected, and perhaps unprecedented tour de force. He sang his solos and accompanied himself by following with the choral portions, a masterful improvisation which humbled Minkowsky and his other critics, and became the talk of Warsaw.

Only a short time after his initial sessions Sirota's recordings were being distributed world wide. They were an inspiration to communities throughout Europe and America, and even doing their part for the war effort. During the Russo-Japanese War, and much later, during the First World War, his records were distributed among Jewish servicemen and were a comfort and a morale builder. He concertized often with no compensation, with his daughter Helena¹¹, a soprano, to raise funds for the uprooted masses of Jewish refugees fleeing the Germans after the invasion of the Polish borders during World War I.

It was inevitable that Sirota would have to be heard in America. His recordings and his European fame had preceded him. Thousands who had known and heard him in Odessa, Wilna and Warsaw, had emigrated, and for those who had not heard him in person, his records were by this time widely distributed in the United States. The idea for the trip was planted and nurtured by Leo Leow. He was for Sirota friend, advisor, impresario and a farsighted business agent. Leow was a dynamic spirit, attracted to the unlimited possibilities in the "land of opportunity." He only had to convince a much more reticent Sirota.

Late in 1911, Leow obtained a leave of absence from the Board of Directors of the Tlomatzka. He had relatives in Bayonne, New Jersey, whom he hadn't seen for many years and a visit was timely. He wisely and deliberately didn't disclose the other reasons for a trip across the ocean. Obviously the leave wouldn't have been granted if he had. He was off to New York to see just how interested an audience there was, and if financial arrangements would be worthwhile. He made an appointment with the William Morris Agency and arrived with examples of Sirota's gramophone records for the audition. The agency was more than convinced. Leow's

arrangements far exceeded their expectations. He returned with a contract for twenty five concerts to be given by Sirota with Leow and his choir in the principle cities across the entire United States. Sirota's American adventure was underway. He arrived in New York in early February, 1912.

The premier concert took place in Carnegie Hall on February 14th. Sirota appeared in full black tails and silk top hat and received a 10 minute standing ovation. Leow was dressed to match, and the choir was wearing long black cantorial robes and four-cornered hats. The program included *Tov Lehado* (It is Good to Praise), *Rachmono Deoni* (The Merciful One Who Answers), *Kedusho* (Holiness), *Retzei* (Accept), *B'rosh Hashono* (On the New Year), and the aria *Celeste Aïda*. The concert was overwhelming, and the audience was wild with enthusiasm. A reviewer from the *Daily Forward* reported: "He came, sang and conquered." The headline of the *New York American Review* hailed: "Warsaw Cantor as Competitor of Caruso."

His second New York concert took place at the Hippodrome on February 18th, sharing the program with the soprano Lucille Rabinoff. Sirota's portion of the program included some additional cantorial pieces and a brilliant rendition of *Bianca al par*, from *Les Huguenots* of Meyerbeer. The house was sold out with over 500 extra seats on the stage, which was larger than that of Carnegie Hall. The Hippodrome could not accommodate the throngs of people who came without tickets. They could only crowd the street outside, all but threatening to storm the entrance to the theatre. Concerts followed with tours throughout the country, bringing him to Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Dayton, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis etc.

There were three concerts back in New York; one at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, a second at the Hippodrome, and finally, a second at Carnegie Hall, on March 13th 1912. Advertisements announced that Sirota would include the *Kol Nidre*, which initiates the Yom Kippur service (Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is the holiest day of the Jewish year). The Morris Agency was convinced that this highlight would draw Jews and non-Jews alike. This national tour was an overwhelming success. H.E. Krehbiel, of the *New York Tribune*, in a review dated February 23rd 1912 wrote, "When he sang the liturgical music of the Synagogue, he compelled amazement at the flexibility of a beautiful tenor voice, which is truly heroic in quality, as that of Slezak. The music of the Jewish liturgy, like all Oriental music, is very florid and this music pours out of the throat of the great Chazzan as fluently as it might out of the throat of Tetrzzini. It is amazing, and one can understand that he has achieved as great a renown in his field as Caruso in his."

The reviewer of *The Boston Herald* wrote of his concert in that city, "A strange, exotic tang fell upon the few gentile ears that heard him. They were listening to the chants and hymns of the Synagogue with their ancient modes, strange intervals, and clear liturgical suggestion. And there, in the midst of them, came intricate ornaments of song, ringing high notes or eloquent recitative that instantly and inevitably recalled the opera house. Mr. Sirota's

voice is unmistakably an operatic voice in its range and resonance, with the power of its open tones and the capacity for long sustained declamation. The mingling of impressions was not unlike that which used to spring from the florid Masses that the Roman church once cultivated and now eschews."

Victor Nilsson, of *The Minneapolis Journal*, wrote, "Sirota has been called the Caruso of Russia, and not altogether without justice, for he has a true tenor voice of great compass and power, with that dark, passionate colouring of the genuinely lyric timbre that is characteristic of Caruso. He also has a great agility in dramatic phrasing and coloratura work, so unusual a combination in a male singer, although not blended to the degree in which they are blended in Caruso. But he sings with the power and frenzy of a singer with the seal of the most high on his brow."

Sirota was often compared vocally with Caruso and Tamagno; most often to Caruso his contemporary. Indeed, among the notables who came to hear the "Jewish Caruso" in New York, was Enrico Caruso, evidently interested in hearing the tenor whose voice could unsettle his mantle. Fortunately, they were not competitors. Performing in different disciplines, they could easily be admirers rather than challengers.

But there were pejorative comments as well. They referred to his choice of musical selections, his delivery and flaws in his vocal artistry; too much forte, lack of colour variation, nuance and finesse. Some dealt with other matters. The American press, other than the specifically Jewish newspapers and magazines, was certainly unfamiliar with the music of the liturgy and referred to it as "picturesque," "exotic," of "oriental wildness" and "untraditional." The bearded cantor singing in a high hat raised eyebrows, and a tinge of prejudice. There were reviewers who commented on the "overabundance" of Jews in the audience. In *The Boston Transcript* the reviewer described, "They (Jews) filled the three galleries and sprinkled the floor of the Boston theatre in the epitome of the many sorts and conditions of their race that have settled here."

The major criticism, which was taken seriously, was that Sirota, whose first duty was as a cantor in a synagogue, had not arranged to sing in a temple as an officiating chazzan. Within a matter of months, Sirota visited New York again for another round of American appearances. This time his first engagement was to officiate at a Sabbath service with a choir under the direction of Jacob Margolis at Kessler's Theater on January 24th 1913. Curiously, still not in a synagogue, but Sirota had now conducted his first Sabbath service in America.

The concerts which followed were primarily liturgical in design and were equally as successful as in 1912. A farewell concert on May 24th 1913 featured excerpts from *The Jewish Trilogy* by Hemmerick.

Sirota's success and fame did little for his congregation at the Tlomatzka Synagogue in Warsaw. They had an Oberkantor, but mostly in absentia. Disappointment and displeasure created a dilemma for the cantor and his congregation. However, the First World War kept Sirota at home and

curtailed his intention to return to the United States, certainly not before 1916, as was promised. For the period of the war the Tlomatzka had its cantor in situ.

After the end of the First World War Poland, for the ninth time in its history, became a sovereign state, independent of Russia. With the upsurge of nationalism, came a wave of anti-Semitism once again. It was unremitting and although the Jewish community sustained itself, it did so only with the greatest cost of life, continuous discrimination and plunder.

Leo Leow, who had up to this time been with Sirota as musical and choir director, was ready to leave Poland for good. He decided his future was with Jewish music in America and he decided to emigrate. He took with him a willing new cantorial star, the young Oberkantor of Wilna, Mordechai Hershman.

It should be noted that Sirota was the first prominent chazzan to record and to tour in concert, and these precedents helped make a great musical heritage accessible to an ever-increasing audience abroad. As a result of this interest and demand among the American Jewish public, such famous artists as Rosenblatt, Kwartin and Hershman (among others) had emigrated to the United States and were already well-established competitors. It didn't take very long for Sirota to become restive and anxious to be part of this upsurge, if only as a visitor. He contacted the Jonas Brothers Concert Bureau in New York and arranged for a series of concerts. His daughter, Helena, who had gained some reputation as a concert singer, and his son, Naftali, as accompanist and business agent, would join him. Sirota was again eager to work with Leo Leow and his choir, but Leow was under contract with Mordechai Hershman and Boris Tomashevsky, Director of the National Yiddish Theatre, which precluded any possible assignments with Sirota.

With Meyer Machtenberg as choir leader (formally a boy soprano in Sirota's choir of 1912-1913), he gathered a chorus of almost 100 voices, and, along with Helena, made his début at the Metropolitan Opera House on March 13th 1921¹². The concert was a sell-out and the throngs who came to hear him were far beyond the capacity of the box office. Many celebrities of musical America attended, Arturo Toscanini, Alma Gluck and Joseph Schwartz among them. Josef Rosenblatt (Yoselle), the adored cantorial star of New York, came to listen. *Musical America* wrote, "The stage looked like a garden of flowers ... [It] was transformed by the countless wreaths and bouquets of roses. With such cantorial concerts Gatti-Casazza could easily eliminate the chronic deficits at the Metropolitan."

Sirota started singing somewhat tentatively. The brilliant sheen, the flexibility, were wanting and the audience showed concern. However, midway into the programme the voice warmed. The stiff and dark and somewhat clouded sound lifted, and the bright, easy-flowing heroic tenor, with the Caruso-like timbre and the mighty golden sound, rushed towards the audience. The Sirota sparks were again flying.

On his programme were Av Horachamim (Merciful Father) by Joseph

Brody, arranged by Machtenberg, the popular Retzei (with which he was so closely identified), Adon Olom (Lord of the Universe), the songs A Din Torah mit Gott (A Lawsuit Against God) and A Dudele (Hymn to God). His son, Naftali, accompanied him on the organ. Helena sang a few operatic arias as well as some Jewish duets with her father, such as Ahavti (I Loved) and A Pastuchl (A Shepherd). However, this time Sirota omitted any operatic arias from his program. It was decided not to venture into areas that others were more accomplished in performing.

Finally, in 1921, Sirota ascended the shtender (podium) in a schul (a traditional synagogue) for the first time in the United States and led an entire service, Machtenberg directing the choir. This was in the old Temple Ohab Zedek on Norfolk and Houston Streets in New York. He followed this with Sabbath services in several other temples, as well as concerts, one at Carnegie Hall, and another, a benefit for the Warsaw Relief Fund, at the Seventy-First Street Armory. He completed this New York visit with services for the last days of the Passover Holiday at the Hunt's Point Palace in the Bronx. He then continued with a concert tour across America.

He was ready now to return to Warsaw. Almost ready.

Days before Sirota was scheduled to sail back to Europe he was offered yet another contract in the United States: To officiate for the three days of Rosh Hashonah and Yom Kippur services at the New Kalvarier Synagogue on Pike Street in Manhattan for the outstanding fee of \$10,000. He was aware that after a six-month absence from the Tlomatzka, his decision to sing the services of the highest of the Jewish Holy Days in New York would be, in effect, an abandonment of his contractual obligation at home, thus putting his position in jeopardy. Yet, Sirota decided to accept the purse and to officiate in New York. He then returned to Warsaw, but to a greatly disappointed congregation and a weary and angry board of directors.

Fortunately for Sirota, his eminence and unique talent assuaged the wave of opposition that called for his dismissal. Apart from his personal ambition, he was encouraged and influenced, by family, friends, advisors and sycophants, who were most anxious to share in the material aspects of his success. And, Sirota was by nature a generous man.

Settled back at the Tlomatzka, he resumed his post. However, from the time he returned to Warsaw in 1921, he continued to maintain contact with agents and congregations abroad and during the next few years numerous offers were transmitted in attempts to bring him back. He knew the trustees would not grant him further leave. In 1924, he received an offer hard to refuse: Ten thousand dollars, once again, offered him for the High Holy Days from another New York congregation, Beth Hamidrosch Hagodol. To the fury of his Board he accepted this offer without leave. The Directors were livid. Perhaps his congregation was willing to overlook this repeated violation, but the abuses were overriding and the official feeling was that these affronts had caused a schism which was irreparable. (Sirota was Oberkantor of the Tlomatzka for a total of nineteen years.)

Sirota returned from New York after this brief but critical engagement to find himself dismissed. This dismissal was by no means the result of a unanimous decision. The controversy over Sirota's seeming impunity and ensuing battles within the Tlomatzka hierarchy smouldered on for two years. During this time he was able to freelance untethered, concertizing and officiating at synagogues in Europe and abroad. By 1926, the Directors of the Tlomatzka were faced with the folly of their decision. In silent protest at his dismissal and with the unsuccessful attempts to find a suitable replacement, the public's attendance dwindled at the great Warsaw Temple, along with the necessary revenues. The directorship was forced to recant its decision and in June 1926 Sirota was re-hired.

What followed in Sirota's career seems an irony. He gave mightily of his voice and virtuosity, as he always had, but changes were now more apparent in his style and presentation. With most of the public, he still remained heroic and unmatched, but to the cognoscenti of cantorial music, Sirota had replaced tradition and European conservatism with a brilliant facade and embellishments. These "excesses" had less to do with the content and meaning of the prayers and more with showmanship. Trips abroad and demands of American audiences had precipitated a transformation. These stylistic imports were not to the satisfaction of the devout of Warsaw, who preferred simpler, dryer modes and eschewed these "vulgaritys". Now there was a mounting criticism of the "new Sirota", who for so long was considered the exemplar. Understandably, Sirota was incensed. He was still being sought after by synagogues and impresarios around the world. Yet at home his talent and style were under critical scrutiny. In July 1927, frustrated and angered over these attacks, Sirota tendered his resignation, and took the occasion of this upheaval to make yet another voyage to America, officiating at the High Holy Days services in New York for the Beth Hamedrosh Hagodol of Harlem.

When he returned to Warsaw he did so with the erroneous expectation that the storm would have abated and that the Synagogue would once again welcome him back. It was not to be. The Tlomatzka trustees ended this long association of nineteen years by hiring the aspiring Moshe Koussevitsky as their Oberkantor. There would be no reconciliation. Sirota had toured and made guest appearances as the renowned Chief Cantor of Warsaw. He now had to relinquish this title. His eminence secure nonetheless, this constantly travelling freelance cantor performed across the United States and also gave concerts and conducted services in Montreal, Buenos Aires, Tel Aviv and so forth. In 1928 he was the first cantor to conduct services at the Allenby Avenue Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv, even before this edifice was completed.

Sirota was now over fifty years of age, and past his vocal prime. After thirty years of singing, the strain on his voice became apparent. The singing was harsher, the sustained tones were beginning to shred, the robust trumpet and forte became a more continuous mode of vocalizing. But, Sirota had that amazing stamina and power of voice. Undoubtedly, the physical effort in the

singing was more noticeable. The gears were remarkable in the works, but the method was now a more audible part of the performance.

By 1930, the chazzan was tiring of travelling and international touring and wanted to be close to his family. He accepted an offer to officiate at the Nozvik Synagogue of Warsaw. He remained at there for the next five years.

On June 6th 1934 a thirtieth anniversary gala celebration honouring Sirota took place at the Coliseum in Warsaw. Internationally celebrated cantors, such as David Steinberg of Wilna and Aaron Helfand of London, and prominent operatic artists performed, the great baritone Titta Ruffo¹³ among them. Sirota sang solos, duets with Helena and trios with Helena and Cantor Steinberg, along with a chorus of 100 voices directed by Davidovitch. Pinchas Szerman spoke of Sirota's performances at the Tlomatzka as a "religious symphony". He at mused, "He would have done a good deed if he had donated some of his high C's too other cantors." Curiously, Moshe Koussevitsky, his successor at the Tlomatzka was among the notables present, but did not perform. The evening was one of glory and homage for the celebrated chazzan and the accounts of it in the Yiddish press were full of praise.

In the year he set yet another precedent. He sang two prayers of the New Year service, Unsaneh Tokef (Let us celebrate the mighty holiness of the Day) and Ato Nigleiso (Thou hast appeared), on the radio with the Davidovitch Choir. This broadcast was transmitted as far as America.

In 1935 he conducted the High Holy Days services at the Mograbi Theatre in Tel Aviv, reunited with his original choral director, the now internationally renowned Leo Leow, and choir. He went as far as Buenos Aires to give concerts and was back in Lodz during the period of 1936-37 to conduct services at the town's Symphony Hall, assisted by the Hazomir Ensemble. In 1938, Sirota travelled to Chicago, where he conducted Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services at the Mariampol Congregation, Anshey Shalom. His final appearance in the United States was for a Succoth service in Milwaukee. He ended this visit with a guest performance in Winnipeg, Canada.

For the second time in Sirota's life a telegram bearing grave news would alter his future, this time most tragically. Sirota was summoned back home with the news that his wife was seriously ill. He sailed immediately with Naftali for Warsaw. He would not leave again.

The Nazi troops were poised to occupy the city. At this decisive moment, warnings and pleas from friends to get out of the country went unheeded. However, when Sirota came to the realization that Warsaw was a deadly trap, his attempts to solicit aid from abroad were devastatingly useless. Pleas to Leo Leow and his Chicago manager, J. Hyman, failed. There was no one now to help, Perhaps no one could. The golden voice, fame and prestige, were no longer factors in defining his course. A final anguished attempt to reach another cantorial agent was sent from the rubble of Warsaw on April 24th 1941. To no avail. His fate was sealed within the hell of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Gershon Sirota, his family and friends were killed in the cellar of 6, Wolynska Street in an assault by the Nazis under the command of General Jürgen Stroop, during the heroic "Uprising" of April 1943.

A memorial monument was erected to Sirota in the Gensher Cemetery of Warsaw in 1961.

In the history of music, as in other arts, there are those few who capture the imagination, affection and respect of people all over the world. Like meteors, they light up the scene with a blazing light. They are rare unsolved riddles in the cultural history of mankind. Sirota was one of them.

A few notes about Sirota's recordings which were so significant in gaining him pre-eminence:

Sirota made over 175 records over a span of 30 years, thus there is a splendid documentation of his voice throughout much of his career.

The first sessions were for the Gramophone & Typewriter Company in 1902 in Warsaw. The voice is already formidable in its timbre, range and coloratura agility, but a feeble choral accompaniment detracts from the otherwise stirring performances. He continued with the Gramophone & Typewriter Company, subsequently the Gramophone Company, for some years. A wealth of correspondence between the Company's "Home Office", its representatives in Germany and Russia, and Sirota's agents in Warsaw testify to the importance of the artist as one for whom pains were to be taken to satisfy. It should be noted that all issues on the Victor label were from Gramophone masters provided for Victor between 1903 and 1912.

There were some lapses between contracts and these enabled Sirota to record for other companies. There were ten Pathé discs (probably also issued as cylinders) in 1905 (Gerard and Barnes), followed by the pink label Russian Favorites of 1908, the latter subsequently licensed to the Columbia Company in the United States. The Favorites, made only five years after Sirota's earliest records, show the voice in its prime and at its most brilliant.

There is some question as to whether the dates on the Favorite labels, e.g.: 1/15/08, 1/31/08, etc. denote recording or issue dates.

Soon after, there followed a session for Beka, and all of these titles are listed in a catalogue of 1910. A later Beka series is as yet undated, although known to have appeared in a 1925-26 catalogue.

Between 1912 and the early 1920's there seems to be a gap in Sirota's recording activity. The Imperials, most likely recorded in England, date from 1923. They are a group of major importance, since there are titles among them which he otherwise did not record. In addition, the growth of Sirota as interpreter is very apparent among the cantorial pieces. El Mole Rachamim is dedicated in the chant as a memorial to Dr. Max Nordau, an ardent Zionist leader who died on January 23rd 1923. As these matrices are sequential, at least some of the discs were recorded after January 23rd.

The Syrenas which followed at first presented a puzzle. Sirota recorded

some titles for the company with orchestral accompaniment during the last few years of the acoustical process. Syrena was apparently a "licensee" for some of the aforementioned Imperial masters. Syrena issued these with their own catalogue and matrix numbers, but with Imperial matrix numbers etched under the label for only the discerning eye to discover. Furthermore, when the company began issuing the new electrical process, they continued to use some of these acoustical masters with the new label Syrena Electro, Nagranie Electryczne. This misrepresentation took some investigating to uncover, but once resolved, the facts fell into place.

In 1928 Sirota recorded the Orchestrola/Broadcast series and the Columbias, his first electrical recordings. These present Sirota toward the end of his recording career when the voice was much darker and less pliable, but yet so seasoned and majestic. Though the sessions may have taken place within days of each other, the results vary greatly. The Orchestrola/Broadcast group, affiliated with Vocalion in Europe, produced eight-inch and ten-inch discs, trying to include the same amount of music as on a conventional twelve-inch disc. To achieve this the groove went too close to the centre of the disc and running time was also gained by reducing amplitude. These factors in combination with pressing on inferior stock and the company's mediocre recording process resulted in less good sound quality. Nonetheless, there is a great deal to listen to. The eight-inch Orchestrola pressings, in spite of the limited sonic quality, give the impression of charged live performances, as if the great cantor was recorded in a temple.

The Columbia Company, conversely, produced pressings of the highest quality. Listening to the Schomah Vstismach Zion, one can only be impressed with the solemnity and richness of interpretation, the singularity of the mighty voice and the precision with which they had been captured.

From a brief recording session in late 1931, Decca issued only two titles. These were Sirota's last published recordings. The only evidence of a later recording session is the one single sided test pressing made for the Crystalate Company in 1932 and labelled Imperial Record - British Made. The above companies do not represent all the labels which carried Sirota's voice. His records appeared on the Gramophone affiliate, Zonophone, also on Brunswick in South America, as well as on odd licensees and pirate labels including Odeon, Clausophon, Usiba, Scala and United.

A discography has long been in preparation and is long overdue. Hopefully, this compilation will soon be ready for publication.

One further piece of information. Sirota's voice appears on the sound track of the famous Yiddish Film *The Dybbuk*, produced in Warsaw in 1937. Reference in the credits reads: Ritual Songs by Chief Cantor Sirota, though it is most unlikely that the figure that appears in the film for a fleeting moment is the great Chazzan.

Endnotes:

- 1 Cantor Samuel Vigoda quoted from *Legendary Voices*
- 2 Hasin, Haissin, Ajszyn, Gaysin etc., spelling varies with ethnology.
Haissin is 62 kilometres west of Uman.
- 3 Most references give the year as 1874. However Menachem Kipnis a contemporary and friend of Sirota, states the date as 1873.
- 4 Wilna, referred to as the 'Jerusalem of Poland':
- 5 According to a census of the time the Jews of the city numbered 63,996 out of a population of 154,532.
- 6 Wilna Balabysel Joel David Loewenstein-Strashunsky, legendary 19th century Chief Cantor of Wilna.
Balabeysel, young recently married head of the household.
- 7 Leo Leow (also spelled Low), pronounced 'Liov' (1878-1960);
Choral director, composer, arranger, musical director and historian.
- 8 Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) founder of political Zionism.
- 9 From a conversation with Leow in the late 1950s when he was nearly 80 years of age. Perhaps he somewhat exaggerated to make a point, rather than state a fact
- 10 Cantor Pinye Minkowsky was an outspoken critic of Sirota, of his concertizing and particularly of his recording of sacred music.
- 11 Of Sirota's eight children, at least two were involved musically in their father's career, daughter Helena, soprano, and son Naftali, accompanist and some time business manager.
- 12 The first concert by a cantor at the Metropolitan Opera House.
- 13 Cantor Vigoda mentions Titta Ruffo as a participant, but his name does not appear in a lengthy contemporary account by Pinchas Szerman.

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1 MIMKOMO HU YIFEN From the Kedushah of the Sabbath and Festival Additional Service Amidah (Standing Prayer). The Kedushah as its name implies, is one of the most sacred parts of the liturgy. It is recited alternately by congregation and Reader, standing, feet together. It can only be recited with a Minyan (a quorum of 10 adult males). Its theme is the sanctity and Unity of G-d. "From His place, may He turn with compassion and be gracious to the people (Israel) who declare the Oneness of His name, every evening and morning, twice daily, proclaiming the Shema with love."

2 RETSEI The pre-penultimate blessing of the Amidah, known as the Avodah and referring to the Temple (sacrificial) Service. The liturgy was composed to replace the Temple Service when the first Temple was destroyed (586 BCE). It is a prayer for the restoration of the Temple and its Service. "Be favourable L-rd our G-d towards your people Israel and their prayers, and restore the Service to the Holy of Holies, Your Temple. Accept with love and favour the fire offerings of Israel, and may the Service of Your people always find favour with You."

3 VEHOSER SOTON From the blessing Hashkiveinu in the Evening Service. It expresses belief in G-d as our protector and seeks His protection as night falls, for in darkness lurks danger. "Remove Satan (those forces which endanger us spiritually or physically) from in front of us and from behind us. Protect us under the shadow of Your wings, for You are a G-d who protects and preserves us, a King who is Gracious and Compassionate. Guard our coming and going for life and for peace, from now and for ever."¹¹

4 OHAVTI KI YISHMA From Psalm 116, from Hallel. Recited on Festivals and New Moon (Rosh Chodesh). The six Psalms (113-118) of Hallel were always sung as a unit of praise and thanksgiving at times of national deliverance. They contain five fundamental themes of Jewish faith: the Exodus, the Splitting of the Red Sea, the Giving of the Torah at Sinai, the future Resurrection of the dead and the coming of the Messiah. "I love Him for He hears my voice, my supplications. Because He has inclined his ear to me - so (all) my days I shall call."

5 AV HORACHAMIM The second paragraph from the service Ein Komocho when taking the Torah out of the Ark on Sabbath and Festivals. One of the most colourful parts of the Service when Reader, choir and congregation all sing in unison. We emphasise G-d's greatness and plead for the rebuilding of Jerusalem. "Oh Father of compassion do good to Zion according to your will, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, for we trust in You alone, Oh King, G-d, exalted and raised up, Master of the worlds."

6 and 20 YEHI ROTZON Known as Birkat Hachodesh, blessing for the New Month. On the Sabbath before Rosh Chodesh this prayer is read. It

pleads for a successful month ahead. "May it be your will L-rd to renew for us this coming month for good and for blessing. Grant us long life, a life of peace of goodness of blessing, of sustenance and physical well being. A life in which there is a fear of heaven and an awareness of wrong, a life without shame or reproach, a life of wealth and of honour, a life in which there is a love of Torah, and the fear of Heaven, a life in which all our aspirations will be realised for good. Amen."

7 KOL NIDREI This is regarded by many as the most dramatic piece in the Jewish liturgy. It is recited by Reader and choir in a packed Synagogue to open the evening service of our most sacred day and fast, Yom Kippur. Its melody is centuries old and the text itself is found in Seder Rav Amram Gaon (9th cent.). It emphasises the gravity the Torah attaches to oaths and vows and to the concept of keeping one's word. We must scrupulously honour our commitments. Kol Nidrei declares null and void any vows we might make under a misapprehension, vows of our own volition which affect only ourselves. It does not include an oath imposed on us by a court, by a gentile or by any outsider. Such oaths stand. 'All vows, prohibitions, oaths, sanctifications (and all forms of statements which declare things forbidden to us) which we (might) make from this Yom Kippur to the next (may it come upon us for good) we regret them. They will all be permitted, abandoned, cancelled, null and void, without power and without standing. The vows shall not be valid, the prohibitions shall not be valid and the oaths shall not be valid."

8 ODOM YESODO MEOPHOR This is the concluding passage from Unsane Tokef in the Additional Service of the High Holy Days. It describes the fragility of life and human weakness. Man is created from the dust and returns to the dust when he dies; yet if he is so inclined, he can reach great spiritual heights. It is tragic then, if he ends his life without having risen higher than the dust (Chiddushei Harim). "A man's origin is from the dust, his destiny back to dust, he risks his life to earn his bread, he is like a broken shard, withering grass, a fading flower, a passing shadow, a disappearing cloud, a blowing wind, flying dust - a fleeting dream."

9 TSADIK KATOMOR YIPHRACH The concluding verses of Psalm 92, the Sabbath Psalm, recited during Kabbalat Shabbat section of Friday evening service. "The righteous man will be as fruitful as a date palm and as sturdy in health as a cedar (of Lebanon) planted in G-d's house they will flourish in His courtyards. They will still bear fruit in old age. They will remain vigorous and fresh, to declare that the L-rd is just. He is my rock, in whom there is no wrong."

10 VESHOMRU Exodus 31:16-17. Recited during the Friday evening service. Its theme is the observance of the Sabbath. "And the children of Israel

shall keep the Sabbath, an eternal covenant for their generations. It is a sign forever between Me and the children of Israel that in six days the L-rd made Heaven and Earth and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed."

11 HAMCHADESH B'TUVO From the first blessing preceding the Shema in the Morning Service. It describes G-d's continually active creativity. He reviews daily the work of creation perpetually. "As it says - Give thanks to Him who, in His goodness, makes the great luminaries (Sun and Moon). His kindness endures for ever. May You shine a new light on Zion, and may we all speedily deserve its light. Blessed are You, L-rd, who creates the luminaries".

12 TSUR YISRAEL The last blessing of the Shema leading up to the morning Amidah. We plead for the coming redemption from exile. Rock of Israel, arise to aid Israel and liberate, according to Your word, Judah and Israel. Our Redeemer, G-d of hosts is His name, the Holy One of Israel. Blessed are You, L-rd, who redeemed Israel" (once before - and will do so again).

13 & 14 KVODO MOLEH OLOM From the Additional Service Kedushah (see note 1) The theme is G-d's Sanctity and the Unity of His Name. "His glory fills the world. His ministering angels ask one another: 'where is the place of His glory?' (rhetorical - since G-d cannot be limited to any one space). Those facing them reply, 'Blessed is the glory of the L-rd from His place (i.e. everywhere).'"

SHEMA "Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d - the One and Only."

HU ELOKEINU "He is our G-d, He is our King. He is a Saviour who will let us hear, in His compassion, for a second time, in the presence of all humanity (news of the final redemption) . . . "To be a G-d to you (Israel). I am the L-rd your G-d."

15 HALBEIN CHATOEINU From the penitential prayers read during ten Days of Penitence and on Fast Days. A plea to eradicate our sins according to His prophecies. "Bleach our sins as white as snow and wool, as it is written (Isaiah 1:18) 'Come now let us reason together' says G-d 'Stop wrong-doing, return to an upright life; then you will tell Me you have done your part, and I will do mine. "though your sins be scarlet they shall be as white as snow, though they (have stained) as red as crimson they shall be as white as wool. Sprinkle clean water upon us and cleanse us (of sin) as it is written (Ezekiel 36:25): "And I will sprinkle clear water upon you and you shall be clean and I will cleanse you from all that defiles you and from all your idolatry."

16 KORUTS MECHOMER From the Yotsrot of 2nd Day Shavuot (Routledge Machzor p. 20). The theme in the 10th commandment, "Do not covet something which belongs to someone else!" "Man is created from matter; what good does it do him - he desires and covets that which does not belong

to him. Even that which he has, does not (really) belong to him (G-d lends it to him for his use). So why should that which is not his, belong to him? Let him realise and understand this with his own reasoning and common sense; let him be happy and strong with the gifts he has been allotted."

17 V'CHULOH M'KABLIN ALEIHEM Another part of the first blessing of the Shema from the Sabbath Morning Service. Contrast the behaviour of angels with that of humans. Competitive jealousies cause people to thwart each other; angels urge each other to take the initiative in praising and serving G-d. "They accept upon themselves the yoke of Heaven's Sovereignty - from each other (i.e. the angels) they encourage each other to sanctify their creator with calm, with clear words and with sweetness. All of them, as one, proclaim His holiness with awe."

18 ADONO(Y) MOLOCH Psalm 93 (Friday Psalm) recited in the Kabbalat Shabbat of Friday evening. G-d's greatness will be recognised at the coming of the Messiah. His grandeur and omnipotence at creation are described, "donning grandeur" and "girding Himself" - like the Jew who puts on his fine clothes for the Sabbath - so it became the Friday Psalm sung by the Levites in the Temple. "The L-rd reigned. He donned grandeur. He donned might and girded Himself with grandeur. He made the world firm that it should not falter. Your throne was established from of old. You are eternal. Like rivers, O G-d, they (our enemies) raised their voices. Like rivers they raised their destructiveness. More than the roaring of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, You are mighty, L-rd on high. Your testimonies about Your Temple (that it will be rebuilt in Messianic times) are trustworthy. O G-d may it be (rebuilt) for eternity."

19 OVINO MALKEINU ZECHOR RACHAMECHO From the Reader's repetition of the Amidah on Yom Kippur (the penultimate blessing Thanksgiving, a plea for physical protection from all calamities). "Our Father our King remember Your compassion and suppress Your anger - bring an end to pestilence, bloodshed, famine, captivity, destruction, iniquity, plague, misfortune, every illness, every obstacle, every strife, every kind of punishment, every evil decree and baseless hatred from upon us and from upon all members of Your covenant."

20 (as number six)

21 KI CHOL PEH From Nishmat (the concluding blessing for the Sabbath morning Psalm readings P'sukei D'zimra) Nishmat is called in Talmud (Pesochim 188a) 'The Blessing of Song (Birkat Hashir)'. It is a most beautiful outpouring of praise and gratitude to G-d, and summons all mankind to join in. "For every mouth shall offer thanks to You, every tongue shall vow allegiance to You, every knee shall bend to You, every erect person shall bow

to You, all hearts shall fear You, all innermost feelings shall sing praise to your name - as it is written. - "All my bones shall say, 'L-rd, who is like You?' You save the poor from the stronger man, the destitute from one who would rob him. Who is like you? Who is your equal? Who can compare to you? Great mighty and awesome G-d. supreme G-d, Creator of Heaven and Earth.(a section is omitted here) O G-d in Your mighty strength, great in Your glorious name, forever mighty, awesome through Your awesome deeds, O King enthroned upon a high and lofty throne.

22 SIM SHALOM The ultimate blessing of the Amidah, a plea for peace, G-d's ultimate blessing which comprehends all others. "Set peace, goodness, blessing, grace, kindness and compassion upon us and upon all Your people Israel. Bless all of us, our Father, as one, with the light of Your countenance. For with that light of Your countenance You gave us the Torah of life, a love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, compassion, life and peace. May it be good in Your sight to bless Your people Israel in every season and in every hour with Your peace. Blessed are You, L-rd, who blesses His people Israel with peace.

23 VESEOREV LEFONECHO This introduces the Priestly Blessing in the Festival Additional Service Amidah as the Priests ascend in front of the Ark. "May our entreaty please you as a burnt offering and sacrifice (in Temple times). Please o Merciful One, in Your abounding mercy, restore Your Presence to Zion Your city and the Temple Service to Jerusalem. May we witness Your return to Zion in mercy and may we serve You there in awe, as in days of old and in former years. Blessed are You, L-rd, for You alone we serve in awe.

24 KODESH ATOH Concluding the extended third blessing of the High Holidays Amidah. It expresses the awe and majesty of G-d the King, sitting in judgement during these Days of Awe. "You are holy and Your name is awesome. There is no G-d other than You, as it is written: The L-rd, Master of Hosts will be lofty in judgement, and the holy G-d will be sanctified in righteousness. Blessed are You, L-rd, the holy King.

25 ATOH NIGLEISO The three middle blessings in the New Year Additional Service Amidah are accompanied during the Reader's repetition by the blowing of the Shofar. The third, Shofarot, recalls the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The Shofar blast announced the moment G-d would proclaim His commandments and how the people trembled in awe and expectation at G-d's revelation. We pray that He will hear the Shofar today and answer our prayers. "You appeared in Your cloud of glory to speak to Your holy people. From the heavens you made them hear Your voice. Moreover the entire world shook before You and every creature trembled when you appeared on Mount Sinai to teach Your people Torah and commandments. You made them hear

Your voice and Holy Speech out of burning fire. Midst thunder and lightning You were revealed to them and with Shofar accompaniment You appeared to them. As it is written in the Torah (Ex. 19:16), "And it was on the third day when it was morning, there was thunder and lightning, a heavy cloud was on the mountain, and the sound of the Shofar was very strong, and the entire people in the camp trembled" - and it is said, (Ex. 19:19) "And the sound of the Shofar became even stronger. Moses would speak and the L-rd would respond with a voice" (which people could hear). And it is said, (Ex. 20:15) "And the entire people witnessed the sounds and the flames, the sound of the Shofar and the smoking mountain, and they saw and trembled and stood at a distance." And in Your Holy Scriptures it is written (Psalms 47:6), "G-d has ascended with a blast, with the sound of the Shofar." Voice and music imitate the shofar and create the atmosphere at Sinai.

Notes by Rabbi Sidney Silberg, M.A.

To assess the contribution made by Gershon Sirota to the art of cantorial singing we must first take into consideration the fact that the voice itself was a natural phenomenon.

Blanche Marchesi in her book "A Singer's Pilgrimage" states that although the voice of Caruso was remarkable, she was of the opinion that the voices of Tamagno and the Cantor from Warsaw, Sirota, were just as outstanding. As a long time observer at the classes given by her mother, Mathilde, and from her own career as singer and teacher she was in a position to hear many of the greatest singers in the world at the time. Thus any comment of hers as to an artist's vocal abilities, whether natural or highly cultivated, must be taken seriously. Sirota possessed a rare elemental quality of tenor voice which invariably invokes in the listener a reaction usually associated with hearing artists like Rosa Ponselle or Titta Ruffo, Caruso, Chaliapine or the young Gigli for the first time. We marvel at the weight of tone throughout the range with sudden climaxes which can take the listener by surprise. The basic sound transcends the technique having an unusually dark quality, tinged with a baritone hue, the bottom and central tones prompting the listener to think that the range must be limited. Not so however, as the uninhibited confidence in his own resources enables Sirota to attack his acuti (high notes), which extended through the high A natural, B flat and top C, in full voice with enormous power and penetration. Coupled with this ability to excite with the upper extension of the voice, which imparts a very dramatic frisson to many of his renditions of the liturgy, is the complete freedom and flexibility enabling him to produce a perfectly modulated shake (trill) on any given note throughout his range. This is a particular aspect of cantorial technique much admired in the recordings of Hermann Jadowker and it can also be found in many discs of other famous cantors.

These effects are very different to the classical build-up to the calculated musical climax of the operatic repertoire and no doubt stem from the aspect of extemporisation which played such an important part in the formation and development of cantorial singing.

The material, entirely from the Jewish liturgy, demonstrates Sirota's art at its most dramatic and committed. Although he softens his burnished tones to suit the text and mood, he is not given to flights of falsetto (Kopfstimme, head-voice) associated with recordings of other famous cantors of the past. However, people who heard him in London at the time of his recordings there, attest that he did possess an excellent head-voice. Maybe what was effective and acceptable in the Synagogue and on the concert platform was not so as captured on wax.

A very wise commentator once expressed the view that cantors seemed to fall into two classes: those who by their plaintive chanting "pleaded" and those who by their vocal quality and delivery "demanded" that the Almighty should answer the prayers they offered up on behalf of their congregants. Gershon Sirota certainly fell into the second category. Had he not had very pious leanings perhaps he too could have developed a sense of operatic style that could have led to a theatrical career. Thus his few attempts at operatic music do not shew him to his best advantage. Fortunately his fame as a cantor ensured that his renditions of the Jewish liturgy were extensively recorded and a number of companies managed by and large to capture the special colour and grandeur of the voice, none more so than the early electric "Broadcast" records. Many pre-electric examples are with, organ and choir, the choral sound is rather poorly captured and attempts by some of the soloists to make an impression are dwarfed by the somewhat overwhelming effect of Sirota's contributions.

The producers of this disc have tried to give as wide a choice as possible covering Sirota's recording career with various companies over a period of thirty years. It may be of interest to note that brief examples of his speaking voice are included in two recordings which he announces himself. From beginning to end, in spite of varying ambience of the acoustic and electric recording processes and what might be thought to be a change in vocal quality over a period of three decades, it is apparent that Sirota possessed a rare and magnificent talent which deserves to be preserved for future generations.

Alan Bilgora

There are various conventions for transliteration into Roman characters. This production follows the original labels.

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