

# *GREAT VOICES*

*OF THE*

*SYNAGO GUE*

**CHAGY  
HERSHMAN  
KWARTIN  
ROITMAN  
ROSENBLATT  
SHLISKY  
SIROTA**

JEWISH MUSIC ARCHIVES



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# GREAT VOICES OF THE SYNAGOGUE

## Chagy - Hershman - Kwartin - Roitman - Rosenblatt - Shlisky - Sirota

The seven cantors heard on this disc are among the greatest representatives of the East European style of Chazanuth, or cantorial art. The a capella performance of a master chazan, who on an ordinary Sabbath delivers, unaccompanied except perhaps for a male choir, two or three hours of florid solo and recitative, a good deal of it his own composition and improvisation, is a *tour de force* that few opera singers could equal, indeed attempt. Add to this the requirement that the music be based on traditional prayer modes and motifs (*nusach ha t'filah*), and that it serve not only as virtuoso display, but also as a deeply stirring musical interpretation and ornamentation of the prayer service and an inspiration to the worshippers.

Perhaps the best definition of the chazan, the *sh"lich taibur* - messenger of the congregation, is that he is a musical orator, whose unique power to move rests on his knowledge of the liturgy, his vocal endowment, his musicianship as singer and composer, and the strength of his faith. It is easy to see why the great chazanim became virtually folk heroes of orthodox Jewry.

Originally the cantor's art was pure improvisation on a set theme (the *nusach*), with the hummed accompaniment of the choir ("holding a tone") also improvised. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the custom of setting down an exact notation of the solo and the arrangements developed. The greatest cantors were admired for their compositions as well as their vocal abilities. Notable in this group as composers are Rosenblatt, Kwartin, Chagy, and Roitman. In many cases their original music is uniquely suited to their own gifts and cannot really be done justice by any other singer. This is especially true of the work of Rosenblatt and Kwartin, where the personal qualities of the singer seem to add an indefinable dimension that is lacking when the work is sung by another.

There are many interesting points of similarity in the biographies of the cantors on this record. All were born in Russia and began singing in well-known synagogue choirs as very small boys. Here they received their first and most deeply Jewish musical training. They sang with and heard the foremost cantors of their own time and learned the discipline of a fervent musicianship that is, in essence, devout prayer, not concert performance. Subsequently all but Sirota settled in New York City in prominent cantorial positions. All went on extensive concert tours, which together with their recordings, made in the early days of the "fabulous phonograph", gave them world reputations. Several even appeared in early sound films.

### Side One

**BERELE CHAGY** - b.1892 Dagda, Russia - d.1954 New York. Chagy took his first post at eighteen in Smolensk, where he began his cantorial career with the approval of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He left for the United States in 1913, when he was twenty-one. Here he held posts in Detroit (five years), Boston (four years) and Newark. In 1932 he accepted a position in Johannesburg, Union of South Africa, where he served for several years. Returning to America, he became cantor of Temple Beth-El in Brooklyn until his retirement. His voice has been described as a clear ringing tenor with a naturally graceful and flexible coloratura.



1. Y'SHOM'RU  
From the Friday Evening Service

It is a sign between Me and the children of Israel for ever  
That in six days the Lord made heaven and earth  
And on the seventh day He ceased from His labor and rested.

### 2. MI SHEOSO NISSIM

From the special prayers recited on Shabbat M'bar'chim  
(Sabbath Preceding the New Moon)

He Who wrought miracles for our fathers  
And redeemed them from slavery unto freedom,  
May He speedily redeem us  
And gather our exiles  
From the four corners of the earth,  
Even all Israel united in fellowship,  
And let us say, Amen.

**MORDECAI HERSHMAN** - b.1888 Chemigov, Russia - d.1940 New York. Hershman's first major appointment was to the Great Synagogue of Vilna in 1913. At the outbreak of World War I he was drafted for military service in the Russian Army, but his beautiful voice so pleased the commanding officer that he was released from duty and continued to serve the Vilna Synagogue for seven years. At the suggestion of Leo Low, the choir leader, he came to the United States, where he became very popular. For ten years he was cantor of Temple Beth-El of Brooklyn. He made extensive concert tours of Europe, South America and Palestine in his later years. Hershman has been described as "more a minstrel than a priest...with a beautiful tenor voice of great warmth and fire, a tool of hypnotizing power".



### 3. BENEDICTION BEFORE HALLEL - Psalms of Praise

From the Hallel Service recited on New Moon, Festivals and Chanukah

Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God  
King of the universe,  
Who hast hallowed us by Thy commandments,  
And hast commanded us to read the Hallel.

### 4. SHMA KOLEINU - Hear Our Cry

From both the Selichot (Penitential) Service and the five  
Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) Services

Hear our cry, O Lord our God,  
Have pity and compassion upon us;  
Accept our prayer in mercy and favour.  
Turn Thou us to Thee, O Lord;  
Renew our days as of old.

**ZAVEL (ZEBULON) KWARTIN** - b.1874 Novo Archangelsk, Russia - d.1952 New York. Although Kwartin's desire and talent for singing showed themselves early, he was thwarted by his family in this ambition. At one time he ran away from home to study with a cantor. Only upon his marriage in 1896 was he at last able to make singing his career. He studied in both Russia and Vienna, but turned down an opportunity to enter opera in favor of his primary interest, Jewish music. Kwartin's first post was in Elisavetgrad (1896-1903). From there he went to Vienna's Kaiserin Elizabeth Temple until 1908, briefly to St. Petersburg, then to the Dohany Street Temple in Budapest for ten years. Following a concert tour in 1920, he remained in the United States as cantor for Temple Emanu-El in Brooklyn. He had become interested in Zionism as early as 1910. In 1926 he made his first trip to Palestine, returning in 1930 to live there for seven years. His closing years were spent in the United States.



Kwartin possessed a mellow lyric baritone voice of extensive range and remarkable flexibility with a smooth coloratura of great quality. Modern ideas of Chazanuth acquired during his stay in Vienna and Budapest modified somewhat his early East European style.

### 5. L'DOVID MIZMOR - Psalm 24

From the Evening Service of Rosh Hashanah (New Year) in  
the Nusach S'fard (Chassidic Rite)

The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof;  
The world, and they that dwell therein.  
For it is He That hath founded it upon the seas,  
And established it upon the floods.  
Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord?  
And who may stand in His holy place?  
He that hath clean hands and a pure heart;  
Who hath not set his desire upon vanity,  
And hath not sworn deceitfully.

### 6. MORON D VISHMAYO - Lord in Heaven

From the Selichot Service

Lord in heaven! Unto Thee we address our supplication,  
Like a captive who entreatheth his captor.  
All captives are ransomed by money,  
But Thy people, the house of Israel,  
Only by prayer and supplication.  
O grant our petition and our desire,  
And let us not return from Thee empty-handed.

### Side Two

**DAVID ROITMAN** - b.1884 Dorozhinski, Russia - d.1943 New York. Roitman became chief cantor in Vilna in 1909, after studying at the Leningrad Conservatory. In 1912 he went to St. Petersburg, but the onset of the Russian Revolution in 1917 disrupted his congregation. The following year Roitman moved to Odessa, which was still comparatively peaceful. Finding it increasingly hard to live under the Soviet regime, he eventually came to the United States in 1921. His first appearance here was at the Shomer Synagogue in 1922. From 1924 until his death in 1943 he was the cantor of Congregation Sheare Zedek in New York City.



1. OSHAMNU MIKOL, OM - More Guilty Are We  
From the Selichot Service

More guilty are we than any other people,  
More to be ashamed than any other generation;  
Our joy is departed from us;  
Our hearts are faint because of our sins.  
Our lovely sanctuary is destroyed,  
Our ornament is shattered.  
Our holy temple is in ruins because of our iniquities;  
Our palace is desolate.  
Our beautiful land belongeth to strangers,  
Our strength to aliens.

**JOSEF (YOSSELE) ROSENBLATT** - b.1880 Byala Tzirkov, Russia - d.1933 Tel Aviv, Palestine. As a "boy wonder" of nine, together with his seven year old brother, Rosenblatt was taken on his first concert tour by his father, a Babel T'filah (precentor). Thus began a career that was eventually to make him the most popular cantor of his day. Because of his family's orthodox position he was not allowed to enter a conservatory and had very little formal musical training. However, he absorbed synagogue chant and Chassidic song from the Galician Chassidic world in which he spent his impressionable years.



From his first position at eighteen in Munkacs, Hungary, he went to Pressburg, Austria for five years, then to Hamburg, Germany, for six years. In 1912 a committee from the Congregation Ohav Zedek in New York traveled to Europe to engage him. In the United States his public appearances for war bonds and charities and his recordings made the reputation of Yossele Rosenblatt as great as that of Caruso. He created a sensation by refusing a rich offer to appear with the Chicago Opera Company because it conflicted with his religious principles.

To clear a debt of honor he had assumed when a Jewish newspaper he sponsored went bankrupt, Rosenblatt in 1925 resigned from Ohav Zedek and undertook a strenuous national tour on a vaudeville circuit (three shows a day) and thereafter toured all over the world in a vain effort to discharge the debt. (He never appeared on Friday evening or Saturday before nightfall). While working in a Jewish film being made in Palestine ("The Dream of My People"), he suffered a fatal heart attack in 1933. His tomb is on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Hershman and Kwartin, who were in Palestine at the time, chanted prayers at his funeral. His voice was remarkable for its enormous two and half octave range, with a brilliant falsetto, handled with unparalleled sweetness and technique.

### 2. KOL NIDRE

From the Evening Service of Yom Kippur

All vows, bonds, devotions, promises, obligations, penalties and oaths  
Wherewith we have vowed, sworn, devoted and bound ourselves

From this Day of Atonement unto the next Day of Atonement,  
May it come unto us for good -

Lo, all these, we publicly renounce.  
They shall be absolved, released, annulled, made void, and of no effect;

They shall not be binding nor shall they have any power.  
Our vows shall not be vows,  
Our bonds shall not be bonds,  
And our oaths shall not be oaths.

### 3. YAALEH - Let Our Prayer Ascend

From the Evening Service of Yom Kippur

O let our prayer ascend at eventide;  
May our cry come to Thee at dawn.  
And let our song be clear at dusk.

O let our sorrows rise at eventide;  
May our pardon issue at dawn,  
And let our cries be heard till dusk.

**JOSEF SHLISKY** - b.1894 Ostrowca, Poland - d.1955 New York. At the age of ten, Shlisky and six other boys were virtually kidnapped by a choir leader who told their parents he was taking them to London, but transported them instead to Toronto, Canada. There Shlisky managed to escape from the group, an old interview reveals, and went to live with a rag dealer. At the early age of thirteen he had his first cantorial position and sent for his parents as soon as he had saved enough money.



He attended the Royal Conservatory in Toronto, from which he was graduated in 1917. In 1919 he made his debut in New York. At that time a critic described him as having a "natural voice of limpid purity, a liquid diction...a melting pianissimo like a bird's woodnotes wild, and a full-throated crescendo, high, clear as a bell, and altogether manly".

For twenty years he held many important posts in New York, including one at the Shomer Synagogue. He also had a contract to sing leading roles in La Boheme, La Juive and Tosca with the San Carlo Opera Company. A stroke invalidated him in 1940.

### 4. OMAR RABBI ELOSOR - Rabbi Elazar Said

From the Friday Evening and Sabbath Morning Services  
(A composition of Cantor J. Rappaport)

Rabbi Elazar said in the name of Rabbi Chaninah:  
The disciples of the sages  
Increase peace throughout the world,  
As it is said:  
And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord;  
And great shall be the peace of Thy children.  
(Read not here *banayich*, Thy children,  
But *banayich*, Thy builders).  
Great peace have they who love Thy Torah;  
And there is no stumbling for them.  
Peace be within Thy ramparts  
Prosperity within Thy palaces.  
For my brethren and companions' sakes  
I would fain speak peace concerning Thee.  
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God  
I would seek Thy good.  
The Lord will give strength unto His people;  
The Lord will bless His people with peace.

**GERSON SIROTA** - b.1874 near Odessa, Russia - d.1943 Warsaw, Poland. Sirota began as a cantor in Odessa, then moved to the Great Synagogue of Vilna about 1900. From there he was called to the Tlomacki Synagogue of Warsaw where he served for nineteen years, with ever-increasing fame.

He came to America only on short concert tours, the first in 1912. Unlike the other famous cantors of this time who settled in the United States, Sirota preferred to remain in Warsaw. There he was killed, together with his entire family, in the holocaust of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943.

Possessor of a remarkable tenor robusto voice, Sirota was considered by many to be the greatest cantor of the twentieth century. Non-Jewish critics regarded him as the only cantor who could be ranked with classical singers, often comparing him to Enrico Caruso. Recently an American critic, Arthur E. Knight, writing in the British "Record Collector" of January, 1955 said of his voice: "...he was one of the most highly trained tenors of all time - his octave leaps, perfect three-note runs up the scale, fabulous trills... his facile coloratura (are) unrivaled by any other recording tenor".



### 5. HALBEIN CHATOENU - Turn Our Sins

From both the Selichot Service and the five Yom Kippur Services

Turn Thou our sins as white as snow or wool,  
As it is written:  
"Come now, and let us reason together", saith the Lord;  
"Though your sins be as scarlet,  
They shall be as white as snow;  
Though they be red like crimson,  
They shall be as wool".  
Sprinkle clean water upon us and cleanse us,  
As it is written:  
"Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you  
And ye shall be clean;  
From all your iniquities and from all your idols  
Will I cleanse you".  
Atone our sins on this day and purify us,  
As it is written.

### 6. OVINU MALKEINU - Our Father, Our King

From the N'filah (closing) Service of Yom Kippur Day (The text is also found in the other services of the day, except the evening service)

Our Father, our King, remember Thy mercy  
And suppress Thine anger,  
And remove pestilence, sword and famine,  
Destruction, captivity, iniquity and plague,  
All evil occurrences, and every disease,  
Every stumbling-block and contention,  
Every kind of punishment, every evil decree,  
And all causeless enmity  
From us and from all the children of Thy covenant.

-notes by B. Stambler