

Cedille Records
5255 N. Lakewood Ave.
Chicago, IL 60640
(773) 989-2515
www.cedillerecords.org

Press contact: Nat Silverman
Nathan J. Silverman Co. /PR
1830 Sherman Ave., Suite 401
Evanston, IL 60201-3773
Phone (847) 328-4292
Fax (847) 328-4317
Email: natsilv@aol.com

News

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‘EXILED’ JEWISH CABARET SONGS FIND A HOME ON CD

New Budapest Orpheum Society Continues Its Exploration and Revival of an Influential Musical Genre

The New Budapest Orpheum Society brings forth more treasures from the archives of 20th-century Jewish popular music on a new CD, *Jewish Cabaret in Exile* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 110), its second recording for Cedille Records.

On the new CD, the University of Chicago-based troupe, known for its “engaging zest” (*Fanfare*), offers the fruits of its latest research into the widely influential Jewish cabaret music of the early-to-mid-20th century — repertoire that is “often funny and always fascinating,” as *Audiophile Audition* noted in a review of the ensemble’s 2002 recording debut, *Dancing on the Edge of a Volcano: Jewish Cabaret, Popular, and Political Songs 1900–1945* (Cedille Records CDR 90000 065).

The new CD’s twenty-five songs of love, lament, observational humor, and social satire are presented in thematic sets addressing exile — external and internal, physical and psychological — from a variety of perspectives. The program unfolds along a timeline that begins in the wake of World War I and ends in the post-World War II period. “These are indeed the songs of exile and survival,” writes Philip V. Bohlman, artistic director of the New Budapest

Orpheum Society, in his extensive programs notes for the 64-page CD booklet, which also includes complete lyrics in English and the original German or Yiddish.

Cabaret, as Bohlman explains in the program notes, was a collaboration between poets, composers, and performers in a musical idiom that stressed “the poignancy of the fragment.” Its musical sources included jazz, waltz, tango, modernism, and traditional Jewish folk music from the Central European hinterlands.

The first set of songs, “The Great Ennui on the Eve of Exile,” includes compositions by Edmund Nick (1891–1973) and Erich Kästner (1899–1974). Neither was Jewish, yet the careers of both intersected with Jewish literary and musical traditions. “The Exiled Language: Yiddish Songs for Stage and Screen,” includes one song each by Moses Milner (1886–1953), Mordechai Gebirtig (1877–1942), and Abraham Ellstein (1907–1963). Two songs by Hanns Eisler (1898–1962) illustrate “Transformation of Tradition.” Songs by Eisler and Kurt Tucholsky (1890–1935) constitute “The Poetics of Exile.” For “Traumas of Inner Exile,” the ensemble chose *Three Yiddish Songs*, Op. 53, by Viktor Ullmann (1898–1944), written while he was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp. The CD concludes with two sets of songs representative of a particular postwar attitude and sensibility shared by exiles who returned to the cabaret stages of German-speaking Europe: “Nostalgia and Exile,” comprising songs by Georg Kreisler (b. 1922), Hermann Leopoldi (1888–1959), and Misha Spoliansky (1898–1985); and “Exile in Reprise: Friedrich Holländer on Stage and Film,” showcasing two Holländer works.

“When recorded at all, most of these songs exist on modern recordings only as re-releases of early 78 rpm discs,” Bohlman wrote in a letter to Cedille Records. “Even the old 78s tended to contain rather straightforward piano-vocal performances, say, of Hermann Leopoldi at the piano with a singer. Our CD uses new arrangements [by the New Budapest Orpheum Society’s

Ilya Levinson] to re-create the contexts of the cabarets in which they were originally sung before, during, and after the Holocaust.”

The CD offers the world-premiere recording of the complete *Die möblierte Moral* (*The Well-Furnished Morals*), a six-song cycle by Nick and Kästner. According to Bohlman’s extensive research, only two of the songs were recorded previously. The Holländer pieces, some of the most unusual and distinctive songs by the great jazz and film composer, receive their first modern recordings.

The CD program notes and the music itself serve as reminders of cabaret’s far-reaching influence on popular entertainment, particularly sound motion pictures and American musical theater. Bohlman points out that the first English-language sound film, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), “uses the cabaret stage in its multiple American forms of vaudeville and the revue.” The first German “talkie,” *The Blue Angel* (1930), was named for the wharf-side cabaret where much of the film was shot.

The New Budapest Orpheum Society, an ensemble in residence at the University of Chicago, takes its name from the Budapest Orpheum Society, a cabaret group active from 1889 to 1918 in Vienna.

The ensemble tours widely and has performed at Symphony Space and Café Sabarsky in New York City and the United States Memorial Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., among other venues. In January and February 2009, the ensemble performed at cabarets in Vienna and Berlin, including the American Academy in Berlin. In addition to artistic director Bohlman, an award-winning University of Chicago professor who appears at performances to provide commentary between songs, ensemble members include Julia Bentley, mezzo soprano; Stewart Figa, baritone; Iordanka Kissiova, violin; Ilya Levinson, music director, arranger, and pianist; Stewart Miller, bassist; and Hank Tausend, percussion.

Reviewing the New Budapest Orpheum Society's performance at the 2006 Chicago Humanities Festival, *Chicago Tribune* jazz critic Howard Reich said the "superb Chicago ensemble . . . dug deeply into the soul of a culture." He said Bentley "hauntingly gave voice to the ethereal, transcendent music" of Ullmann, while praising Figa as "an uncommonly imaginative interpreter who articulated a broad range of Jewish musical expression."

Celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2009, Grammy award-winning Cedille Records (pronounced say-DEE) is dedicated to showcasing the most noteworthy classical artists in and from the Chicago area.

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Jewish Cabaret in Exile
(Cedille Records CDR 90000 110)

**Songs by Edmund Nick & Erich Kästner, Hanns Eisler,
Kurt Tucholsky, Viktor Ullmann, Georg Kreisler,
Friedrich Holländer, and others**

New Budapest Orpheum Society