

## Interlude C

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# Producing the Revival

## *Making Golden Ages the Album*

After experiencing the charismatic talent and powerful sense of community evinced in cantorial kumzits parties, the idea entered my head to produce a record of Hasidic cantorial revivalists. How I brought this idea to fruition was a process that involved strengthening, and at moments straining, my connection to the artists who participated in my research project. Rather than being simply an unusually intense fan who had followed the cantors around for years, I began to take on a role in producing the music. This began with me leveraging my access to the resources of my research institution, Stanford University, to promote the work of the cantors. Already by the time I began pursuing the record project, I had been involved in producing concerts of the Lemmer brothers and Yoel Kohn.

My new, self-nominated role as record producer of the “cantorial revival” involved some negotiations. I was trying to establish a modicum of trust beyond the scope of my relationship with the artists as an academic researcher. My new goal was to engage in dialogue with the artists about what a record of their work should document and how we would go about making it. The process of raising the funds for the recording project, confirming the participants, juggling schedules and engaging the studio that I thought would be best suited to the aesthetic of the performers took the better part of six months. Over this period, I had numerous discussions with the performers about what material they would perform, exploring the classic cantorial records they wanted to create “covers” of, and conversations about which artists to include in this recording project.

Following what I considered to be the organic ethos of a khazones party I had attended in Williamsburg, I organized the recording session around the lineup that had been present that night. I invited David Reich to take the role of accompanist on keyboard. My reasoning was that his knowledge of the cantorial

repertoire and comfort with the style would give the cantors the freedom to be able to take their performance in whatever direction they desired. My hope was that the session would provide a degree of openness that would allow the artists to follow their musical fantasies, to improvise, to perhaps create new pieces or sing classic numbers that rose to their mind spontaneously in the context of the music making environment. I focused on Hasidic cantorial revivalists who were participants in my research in deciding who to invite. This decision was not an obvious one, as the cantorial community that these singers interface with embraces cantors from a variety of backgrounds, not only the Hasidic community. The fact that I was crafting a “narrative” about cantors from the Hasidic world did not escape notice and was not approved of by all the participants.

I had hopes that having all the cantors in the studio at the same time would allow for creative interplay and possibly facilitate collaborations. In making decisions about how the session would be carried out I was building on my years of experience making records of my own but was also guided by my fantasies about the kind of record I hoped to listen to in the future. My goals were informed by my personal aesthetics that favor a documentary approach to capturing performances “live” in the studio and that embraces the human “noisiness” of music making, especially the rough edges that are key to the emotive qualities of cantorial performance. While I discussed these aesthetic issues with the participants in advance, I did not predict how my aesthetic choices might conflict with the desires of the artists.

In this Interlude, I will offer some ethnographic vignettes from the recording session that led to the recording of the album “Golden Ages: Brooklyn Chassidic Cantorial Revival Today.” I will attend to the problems of aesthetics and artistic control that emerged while working on the album. As I discovered, the cantors were not in agreement with me about some basic decisions I had made in planning the recording. Embracing the situation with its limitation, the cantors and I worked together to create a document that brought out remarkable performances, even if it is not “the final word” on these artists, their work, and their musical self-conceptions. In the dialogue between their musical lives and my own, I was brought into a deeper awareness of the space between my stance of interpretation and reception, positioned outside the Hasidic cantorial revivalist scene, and the inner lives of the artists, which are more textured and complex than any critical perspective can contain.

## GETTING STARTED

Seeking to build on the aesthetic of the cantors’ musical interests, I sought a sonic counterpoint in the production quality. In hopes of achieving this end, I got in touch with Gabe Roth, the founder of Dap Tone Records, a record label associated with neo soul music. In addition to having worked as a band leader and an entrepreneur, Roth is a lauded recording engineer who has built a reputation as

an important exponent of analog recording technologies associated with classic mid-twentieth century records. I was able to engage Roth to take on the project and booked the studio for an extended multiday session. The recording was scheduled to take place from January 13 to 15, 2019.

Dap Tone studio is located in a two-story brownstone building in Bushwick, Brooklyn. It is situated in a part of Brooklyn that has undergone a radical gentrification, although its working-class character as an immigrant neighborhood has not been completely covered over by the thriving economy of businesses catering to young college-educated whites and upper-middle-class professionals. The studio has been in operation since the early 2000s and has a pleasingly ramshackle quality. After entering via the first floor, one sees that there are two rooms: the first is a control room with tape deck, an audio mixing board, and a variety of out-board processing equipment mounted in racks. The room also contains images of Sharon Jones, the late rhythm and blues singer whose work is closely associated with the studio. The second room is the “live room” where the musicians perform. The studio is located just blocks from Williamsburg, where several of the participants in the session grew up or still live. It is literally in their neighborhood; and yet it is a world apart, situated in the realm of secular society and the arts, far outside the perimeters of the Hasidic world. And yet, Dap Tone was not entirely unknown to the cantors. For example, Yanky Lemmer expressed excitement that we would be recording in the same studio where Amy Winehouse made her Grammy-winning 2006 album *Back to Black*.

On the first day of the session, I arrived early with Tatianna McCabe, the videographer I had engaged to document part of the recording session. Gabe Roth and an assistant were in the control room setting up. I walked into the live room where a Hammond organ and an upright piano were set up in a corner opposite each other so that a performer could easily switch from one instrument to the other between songs. The piano looked terrible. Many of the keys were chipped, missing their ivory casing, but it played well and sounded beautiful. The state of the piano was typical of the space. The studio possesses a perhaps intentionally dingy grandeur—it is unarguably shabby in its décor and has many pieces of partly broken music gear lying around.

David Reich arrived first, followed shortly after by Yanky Lemmer. Gabe Roth gave Reich a quick lesson on how to control the organ draw bars to achieve different sounds. David had never played on an actual organ before, the synthesizer being the instrument he has extensive experience with. Yoel Kohn arrived, increasing the intensity and energy in the room with his anxious and, at moments, almost hysterical antics and seemingly uncontrollable impulse to make scandalizing comments. His repartee with Yanky Lemmer was jovial, bordering on manic. The three cantors were in high spirits, joking around. Yoel did a spot-on impersonation of David Roitman’s Yiddish-language records, mimicking Roitman’s pinched, overly precise vocal approach.



FIGURE 12. David Reich, Yanky Lemmer and Yoel Kohn in front of Daptone Studios. Photo by Tatianna McCabe.



FIGURE 13. David Reich at the organ. Photo by Tatiana McCabe.

We planned to begin with Yanky. In conversations preparatory to the session, I had expressed to Yanky that I wanted him to follow his desires and impulses in choosing what he wanted to sing. For his first piece, he decided to record Zavel Kwartin's "Ribono Shel Olam," an eight-minute-long record that is intensely challenging, both in its technical and its emotional qualities. Choosing this piece was indicative of the seriousness with which Yanky was approaching the project, but it made warming up vocally very challenging and created the sense that recording it would be a difficult task rather than one that would foster a sense of pleasure and satisfaction in the experience. Yanky sang beautifully but got caught on difficult passages. Yoel kept running into the live room from the control room to discuss complex ornamentation patterns. In the control room, Yoel sat in intense concentration listening, frequently singing along and noting whenever Yanky's performance departed from Kwartin's original.

After working through the piece painstakingly for several hours, Yanky was in need of a break. Yoel went in to record; however, like Yanky, he had chosen an incredibly challenging piece, Gershon Sirota's "Hashem Malach," a piece that has been recorded by many cantors over the years, perhaps most famously in a stand-out performance by Moshe Koussevitzky. Yanky and David worked out a beautiful trio vocal arrangement for the middle section of the piece. Yoel took a variety of approaches to recording, including singing the piece one section at a time. Even with this detailed and methodical process, he was not able to finish a take





FIGURE 14. Yanky Lemmer. Photo by Tatiana McCabe.



FIGURE 15. David Reich and Yanky Lemmer. Photo by Tatiana McCabe.

he felt satisfied with. Both Yanky and Yoel are keenly aware of the possibilities for hyper-perfectionism granted by digital recording technologies that allow micro-editing of performances and a variety of forms of enhancements that smooth out “flaws.” They chafed at the absence of these tools. At the same time, Yanky was excited by the beautiful sounds being achieved by the skillful use of recording methods. He seemed to be aware that his voice was being captured with a rich and detailed timbre that was unlike what he had experienced working in other studios.

When Shimmy Miller first walked into the studio, he looked in amazement at the reel-to-reel 24 track tape machine. He said, “I saw something like this when I was a child.” Shimmy is no stranger to recording studios, being the son of a cantor who has been making records throughout his life and having done a fair amount of recording of his own as soloist and choir leader.

The idea of not being able to micro-edit performances quickly and seamlessly during the session was an annoyance and challenge for the cantors. My intention in planning the recording session was that the demands of “live” performance would lead the singers to achieve a heightened sensitivity and would elicit committed performances. The idea that some degree of human imperfection would also be documented did not strike me as oppositional to the powerful impact of the cantors’ voices that I had heard and been moved by on numerous occasions.

Digital recording platforms have the power to create stylized representations of sound that can effectively manipulate audio signals to produce a sense of sonic smoothness. Digital editing tends to be used to erase a variety of human noises, intentionally blurring into the background “mistakes,” including a variety of artifacts of vocal anatomy. This editorial function plays a powerful part in the experience of contemporary music-making and has influenced perceptions of what a professional recording should sound like. Not having access to the digital recording toolkit was perceived as problematic by the cantors. The perceived technical challenge of the analog recording environment was a source of ongoing tension during the sessions. The cantors blamed the analog gear for a variety of problems, ranging from reasonable qualms about the difficulty of editing takes, to more questionable claims, such as blaming beginning a take before the record button had been hit on the tape machine.

Working together with the cantors in the studio, I found that they had their own concept of how they would like to record and a strong grasp of the technical process of recording and recording technologies. The key conflicts that emerged during the session focused on questions about digital versus analog recording technologies, as well as the aesthetic problems of documenting “live” performances, in opposition to sculpting a stylized representation of vocal performances that would be smooth and “flawless.” While the cantors spend much of their musical lives listening to old records that are characterized by the mid-range distortion and surface noise of shellac discs and that mostly document unedited performances, perhaps unsurprisingly, their concept of how records should be made is influenced by the mainstream music in the Hasidic community and more broadly in American pop music.

To the extent that the cantors had experiences of recording, they had worked in digital studios where pop-style record producers make music using computer programs that facilitate a cut-and-paste approach to recording. The distinctive creative approach facilitated by computer audio software enables engineers to edit performances to achieve a performance that minimizes human error. The “mistake-free” aesthetic that is attainable using a digital recording platform extends to the use of effects that smooth out dynamics and timbre. In recording the human voice, pop records typically cut out the sound of breathing and many of the vocal mannerisms that draw attention to the embodied presence of the singer.

This digital approach is radically different from the kind of recording that we were set up to do at Dap Tone studio. At the recording session, we recorded live to analog tape, not to a computer program. While editing is not by any means impossible with tape, it is an unwieldy process that cannot be achieved instantly with a few clicks of a button. The cantors did not want to eliminate the distinctively cantorial timbres and vocal effects that might read as “noise” to the ears of pop music listeners, but they did want to be able to have greater control over fine details of



performance. They wanted, quite reasonably, to be able to break up phrases and to redo elements of their singing where they felt they had not performed according to their highest standards. This kind of “punching in” was basically impossible because of the setup in the room where all the instruments were bleeding into each other’s microphones, reducing the ability to isolate and manipulate individual channels of sound. While I was focused on the particular strengths of the recording aesthetic in the studio and saw this setup as ideal for creating a beautiful document of their work, the cantors had doubts, especially about my goal of documenting complete performances.

The cantors were disturbed by the fact that their recorded performances would be flawed—that is, from the stylized perspective of a recorded music aesthetic. My concept for how to capture their *khazones* revolved around documenting a performance that a cantor would give, working through a piece of music from start to finish. The cantors understood the value of this approach but generally disagreed with the idea of prioritizing the integrity of a performance over the perfection of the vocal quality being documented. Push and pull over this was a constant issue throughout the recording session and led to the cantors expressing disappointment with the experience.

While I am not concerned with answering the question of who was “correct” from an aesthetic perspective, the issues around representation and defining meaning in the presentation of the work of the cantors present theoretical problems with real ethical resonances. The ethics of control over the public image of Hasidic cantors is a troubling topic for me that brought out self-doubt about the meaning of my role in presenting the work. As scholar and curator, what I do, indeed what I think, has the potential to misrepresent or, worse, do damage to the integrity of the artists and their life’s work.

The full story of cantorial revival requires the cantor’s authorization in order to be fully articulated. While I have endeavored to act from a place of curiosity and deep respect for the artists, my own aesthetic impulses are always a force in the way I write about the cantors and even more so in the recording process. I am hopeful that the cantors will have the opportunity to produce their own records in the future. At moments during our days in the studio, I imagined that the reason the cantors desired a digital recording platform was to cover for the idiosyncrasy and antinormative qualities of their musical pursuits. The cantors seemed to express the desire that the representation of their work would be ameliorated into a smooth, flawless sound, akin to the norms of Orthodox pop music. Such a representation, while offering fidelity to the desires they expressed during the session, would create a picture that would blur out some of the noisy humanness, conflict, and sonic otherness that are characteristic of their musical lives. It is possible that I value this “noise” quality of their work more than the artists themselves do.

“TIHER RABI YISHMAEL,” ANTISEMITISM,  
AND THE ABUSE OF THE HASIDIC MYSTIQUE

At the end of the first day of recording, dissatisfied with what he had sung, Yanky asked to be given more time to work than had originally been scheduled for him. We ended up coming in early the next day, before the other artists, and he sang two more pieces, both drawn from the records of Zavel Kwartin. I accompanied him on organ, in a quiet session, free from the raucous energy of the previous day. These two pieces satisfied him to a greater extent than what he sang the first day.

On a break after completing a take of Zavel Kwartin’s “Tiher Rabi Yishmael,” Yanky and Gabe Roth had an extended conversation. Yanky explained the text of “Tiher Rabi Yishmael,” a liturgical prose poem that recounts the persecution and martyrdom of first-century CE rabbis at the hands of the Romans. The text is part of a longer memorial prayer titled *Eilo ezker*, which is recited on Yom Kippur and includes gruesome depictions of violence. Yanky spoke about the resonance of the prayer with Holocaust memorial, and with ongoing issues of antisemitism.

Yanky told an anecdote about singing at a Holocaust memorial in Poland and how he felt that his image as a Hasidic man was being used to forward a narrative about Polish heroism during World War II. Ironically, Holocaust memorials have been abused as part of a whitewashing campaign by the right-wing government seeking to present an image of Polish victimization, resistance, and national greatness, obscuring and erasing the role Poles had played as perpetrators of anti-Jewish violence. He felt that his presence had been used propagandistically to present the government as tolerant by manipulating his visual identity to erase the taint of antisemitism.

Concern about the misuse of his image is a recurring theme for Yanky. This is in part the result of the fact that he has become something of a star in Poland, performing primarily to a non-Jewish audience. Yanky has expressed the idea that his Polish fans see in him a vision of authenticity and the Polish past, before the Jewish community of the country was destroyed, and that at times he is employed to perform this past as a kind of reenactment in a theatrical form, perhaps calculated to assuage feelings of guilt Polish people may be troubled by.

I perceived that Yanky’s perceptions of the misuse of the image of Hasidic Jews as signifiers of authenticity played a role in his criticisms of the organization of the recording session. Yanky has been involved in numerous productions of internationally known prestigious cantors, usually outside the Hasidic community. He suggested that my selections of personnel and the exclusion of non-Hasidic cantors were part of advancing a “narrative” rather than being motivated by purely aesthetic standards.

Yanky's critique made sense. I took note of the fact that Yanky was alive to my decision-making process and was critical of it. I also noted that Yanky's cantorial community was quite different from that of the other cantors who participated in the project, having expanded through his career to encompass cantors from a variety of communities, including cantors from the liberal movements such as Cantor Azi Schwartz of the Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan, whom Yanky views as a friend and peer. While there is a "scene" of Hasidic cantors in Williamsburg and Borough Park who share commonalities in terms of their family backgrounds, education, and musical interests, this is not the only community that Yanky, or any of the cantors for that matter, belong to. It was I, the outsider, who had chosen to group these singers based on this facet of their identity.

Yanky's critique rang true to me; he was showing me the mirror of my gaze and revealing the ways in which my perception is reductionist and perhaps exoticizing. I chose to see him as a Hasidic Jew, categorizing him according to his visual identity and thereby reifying the same form of gaze he and the other cantors face in their day-to-day lives in New York; *this* is how he and they are appraised in daily life by outsiders to his community such as passersby on the street or people on the subway. I foregrounded this identity above other aspects of his public persona, such as his professional identity as a pulpit cantor, an aspect of his life that aligns with the contemporary American cantorate outside Orthodoxy; or simply as a musician—for example, through the lens of his work as a vocal soloist in philharmonic orchestral concerts. Instead, I chose to identify him through the markers of his visible identity.

With the "Hasidic cantorial revivalist" lens that I lean on in this project, my intention was to foreground Yanky's self-proclaimed most keenly held passion: khazones. As Yanky himself has noted, the professional communities that he moves in, especially the synagogue, inhibit this passion and frustrate some of his musical ambitions. My research has been trained on the genre Yanky foregrounded in his self-presentation as an artist. I sought to learn what early twentieth-century cantors and cantorial music meant to him and the possibilities he finds in the music for self-expression and the creation of a musical life. My goal with making a record was to create space for him to do whatever he wants musically. I thought my plan could in some way work in opposition to those aspects of his musical life that have inhibited him from holding agency as an artist. Yanky was aware of this goal.

I have a list of maybe five, ten khazones pieces that literally almost every time I hear them, I just get chills. They do it for me. And these are those pieces and I never really felt ready to record. I still don't feel ready. But I figured I'll give it a shot. Because you're the first producer, so to speak, that told me, just feel what you connect to most. Just sing that. (Yanky Lemmer, January 14, 2019)

And yet even in the context of this recording session, which was designed to integrate artists in the production process, Yanky seemed to feel that the “narrative” or stereotype around his identity played a role in the creative decision making. By foregrounding his connection to Hasidic Jews, I foreshortened and limited other potential formations of identity. As Yanky is well aware, his visual identity works heavy-handedly to create stories in the heads of other people. These stories, in turn, are at times used as the basis for constructing musical or cultural narratives that he is expected to fulfill, usually in the context of concerts for non-Hasidic people.

As philosopher Linda Alcoff notes in her defense of the value of identity as an analytic tool for describing human experience, “Where the salience of identity is affirmed, it is sometimes all too easy to then concretize identity’s impact, to assume clear boundaries, and to decontextualize and dehistoricize identity formations.”<sup>1</sup> While Yanky is proudly unapologetic for his Hasidic identity, he is aware of the problems of perception and the ways in which he is liable to be reduced to stereotype.

Yanky affirms the importance of his identity and enculturation in giving him tools he needed to approach the cantorial tradition, and audible traces of Hasidic upbringing in his music are part of his appeal to certain audiences. Yet his music also makes problems for him with conservative members of his birth community, which rejects khazones as representative of a different, putatively less “religious” version of Jewishness. At the same time, outsiders to the community are all too happy to collapse Hasidic identity into a public role as a “traditional musician,” disregarding the particularities of Yanky’s community. In all these narratives, the intense discipline and the personal sacrifices involved in cultivating his craft as a cantor and artist are blurred and disregarded.

#### “HALLELUYAH”: CONFLICT, RESOLUTION AND LEONARD COHEN

After a quiet morning and early afternoon spent with Yanky on the second day of the session, more and more cantors started to arrive. First to appear was Yossi Pomerantz, a cantor with an international biography. He was born into the Israeli Hasidic community and had experience as a choir singer starting in childhood. Yossi worked for some time as a cantor in Montreal and had recently moved to Brooklyn. I met him at a kumsitz party in Brooklyn and had been startled by his unusually powerful, loud, and expressive voice, which Yoel Kohn had described succinctly with the words, “He is God.” Pomerantz had suggested that he was in poor voice and expressed nervousness about recording, and yet his performance was extremely strong. Pomerantz recorded “V’al Yedai” by Sholom Katz, a cantor who survived the Holocaust and whose recordings were popular in the years immediately after World War II.





FIGURE 16. David Reich and Yossi Pomerantz in the control room. Photo by Tatiana McCabe.

As Yossi was recording, we were joined by Yoel Pollack and Shimmy Miller. Yoel Pollack is a first cousin of Yoel Kohn, on his mother's side, and unlike his cousin, he has retained his powerful ties to the Satmar community. While most of the other cantors involved in this project have worked in synagogues and performance venues outside the Hasidic world, Yoel Pollack expressed satisfaction with the music-making opportunities he is able to put together within the community. When I asked if he has worked in Modern Orthodox synagogues or only works in Satmar synagogues and community events, he pointedly rejoined, "What do you mean, 'only'?" Yoel Pollack serves as a High Holiday prayer leader and also composes his own pieces, which are sometimes premiered at communal events presided over by the Satmar rebbe. While he shares with his cousin and the other cantors a passionate interest in golden age khazones, his aesthetic pursuits have not led to the kind of crossing of boundaries of identity that typify the cohort of Hasidic revivalist cantors.

Yoel Pollack's presence seemed to delight his cousin Yoel Kohn, and to excite a nervous tension as well. The two men sat with their arms around each other, chatting loudly, joking, and at one point bursting into intense argument. Yoel Kohn at times displays a habit of making provocative comments—sometimes aggressively directed at whomever he happens to be in the room with—which are often characterized by humorous antisantimony. As someone who has rejected a religiously fundamentalist approach to life, he is given to making comments that mock



FIGURE 17. Yoel Kohn. Photo by Tatiana McCabe.

religious beliefs and ritual acts, often hinging his barbed comments on the putative irrationality of religiously prescribed behaviors, travestying sacred texts and the concept of the divine origin of ritual. These areas make up the basis of the lifestyle of the other participants in the recording session, and I was therefore concerned with how his behavior would impact the others. However, Yoel Kohn was a known quantity to the other cantors present; the cantorial community is fairly small and the singers mostly already knew each other from musical or social events. For the most part they seemed to be willing to countenance his comments without shock, even laughing at him and his scandalous speechifying.

After Yossi Pomerantz finished his first piece, with everyone present packed into the control room to listen back to his performance, a serious argument erupted. Yoel Pollack and Yoel Kohn had been engaging in banter, at first arguing about music. Yoel Kohn expressed the controversial opinion that the revered cantor Samuel Malavsky's style of *khazones* is "boring." He clarified his opinion, expressing that while he loved the heartfelt qualities of his *parlando* style of prayer recitation, sometimes referred to in cantorial discourse as *zogn* (Yiddish, speaking), he thought that these expressive vocal mannerisms were mismatched with a simplistic approach to composition. This playfully contentious conversation about music had somehow gotten out of control, descending into a debate about the validity of obeying the tenets of Orthodox Jewish life. The ensuing argument, fueled by Yoel Kohn making provocative statements, spilled over into open

conflict. Yoel Pollack never raised his voice and remained outwardly calm in the face of Yoel Kohn's crescendo of hurried, agitated speech. His cousin's outward tranquility seemed to fluster Kohn and to increase the intensity of his emotions. Raw feelings were expressed. Kohn leapt up from the couch and started yelling, Yiddish interspersed with curses in English. I tried to smooth over the conflict and calm Kohn down, to minimal effect. Yoel Kohn later explained to me that his outburst came in response to comments both his cousin Yoel Pollack and David Reich had been making that he felt were intended to belittle and demean his decision to leave Hasidic life. Their remarks brought to the surface some of the painful ongoing tension that troubles his relationship with his family and old community.

My goal to keep the session running smoothly was interrupted. With some effort I got all the singers back into the live room to begin working on the next piece scheduled. Shimmy Miller was supposed to be accompanied by the whole group singing as a chorus. Yoel Kohn continued to yell at his cousin, and the whole room was discordant with everyone speaking at once, the group overexcited by the fracas. David Reich, an unusually level-headed and calm person, came up to Yoel Kohn and said, "It's not about who's right or wrong in the argument. You are using bully tactics to win and it's not fair." This comment seemed to have some impact.

Then David sat down at the piano and started playing Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah." All the cantors, including Yoel Kohn, stopped talking or yelling, and began to sing. They all knew the song, and not just the chorus; they sang through multiple verses. David had found a way to tame the anxious roving energy that had been unleashed by the family drama.

Listening to the eruption of tension between the two Yoels, I imagined that their family argument also managed to invoke old controversies around the nature of *khazones*, with Yoel Kohn embodying the accusations made by critics that cantors and their music are in some ways at odds with traditional Jewish ideals of piety and adherence to communal norms and forms of sociability. The scandal of the disconnect between Yoel Kohn's powerful performance of prayer music and his unapologetic condemnation of the religious context the music emerges from is confusing, potentially upsetting. It occurred to me that perhaps the other cantors see in him a dangerous reflection of how they are perceived by some conservative elements in their community. Words were inadequate to cover the breach in the norms of behavior that was brought into the open by the two cousins' fight; instead, it seemed to me, music was needed to bring the group back into something resembling cohesion.

The music that achieved this repair was not a piece of *khazones*, the shared musical passion of the group of men and the reason for the gathering, but rather a piece of music with a bicultural identity. "Hallelujah" is the creation of a recognizably Jewish figure, and yet stylistically it is connected to secular popular music, or even Protestant church hymns, not to the Jewish



FIGURE 18. Yoel Kohn, Yoel Pollack, Shimmy Miller, and Zevi Steiger. Photo by Tatiana McCabe.

musical styles these singers are associated with. Yet the Leonard Cohen song was acceptable, perhaps even uniquely fitting in that moment to achieve a modicum of shared communal feeling of purpose that was necessary in order for the session to proceed. Perhaps the song was fitting because of its broad approach to the concept of the sacred in music that embraces worlds of feeling deriving both from art, here conceived as a secular branch of knowledge, and religious life.

This ecumenical approach was appropriate in the context of the recording session because of Yoel Kohn's critiques of Orthodoxy. His stance in opposition to his birth community rendered him an outsider, even while his knowledge and feeling for religious music was acknowledged by all present. Singing "Hallelujah" reconfigured the category of "religious feeling" as something that could fit into the space of the non-Hasidic world that Yoel Kohn had entered. And at the same time, the song was welcome in an intimate Jewish space that was recognizable to this group of Hasidic men. The "Jewishness" of the song was achieved through the identity of its composer, the lyrics that contain recognizable references to images and themes from the Bible, and perhaps some other quality that is harder to articulate. The cantors were laughing while they sang, acknowledging the contrivance of the device of foisting a "kumbayah" sing-along moment on the group to quell an experience of disunity and eruption of long-simmering tensions. Even while the cantors were too sharp to accept the clumsiness of the musically





FIGURE 19. Yoel Kohn, Shimmy Miller, and Yossi Pomerantz. Photo by Tatiana McCabe.

brokered reconciliation, the tensions in the room were nevertheless calmed to a point where we could continue.

Finally, we got to work on Shimmy's piece, a performance of the Yehi Rotzon prayer for the blessing of the new month. As I discussed in interlude B, this prayer is the center piece of Shimmy's father Benzion Miller's monthly services held at Temple Beth El, a bastion of cantorial culture. Yehi Rotzon is a central part of the cantorial repertoire and exists in countless version with different melodies. Shimmy's take on the piece was partly improvised but included a chorus that recurred twice in the song that the entire cast of cantors sang in a resounding burst of sound. The unmetered recitative sections were lent a special impact by the contrast with the charming waltz metered melody the group sang together in unison. His years of choir leading were put to good effect, and he quickly taught the group the melody and offered easy-to-follow directions to guide the tempo and the dynamics with his hands and even, partly, through his facial expressions. Shimmy was in excellent voice, easily accessing his upper register and executing beautiful and complex coloratura. The engineer Gabe Roth, a staunchly secular Jewish man, offered the opinion, "If it sounded like this in synagogue, I'd go every week."

#### VULNERABILITY, CONTEMPORARY KHAZONES, AND CONTROL OF THE MEANS OF REPRESENTATION

While the recording session included many moments of excitement and aesthetic success, the moments that were most characteristic of the endeavor involved frustration, especially for two of the lead artists in the project, Yanky Lemmer and Yoel Kohn. For these singers, the high standards of vocal quality and precision in execution of the ornamentation patterns associated with each piece in their repertoire set a bar for performance that they did not feel they had achieved. This frustration created tensions and led to a perception that the technical parameters of the recording were at fault and were stymying the achievement of their desired musical concept.

On the third day of the session, Yoel Kohn's desire for performance excellence effectively derailed the session. He spent many hours working on single pieces and cajoled me into giving him more time than had been scheduled. He tried breaking up a piece in sections, working complex passages one at a time. He sang sections of pieces over and over to try to achieve a completely accurate and fluid line in passages that contained high notes or particularly important coloraturas. In the process, Kohn wore himself out before achieving the sound he wanted. The fact that the organ and voice were being recorded in the same room and bled into each other's track on the multitrack tape recording system was extremely troubling to Kohn. He felt that he should be completely isolated so that he could sing his part over and over without having to rely on the ensemble performance with David Reich's organ.

While Kohn's reasonable critique of the recording process was troubling and, at times, caused distress for multiple members of the group, the intensity and seriousness of his approach were unmistakable and lent a certain heightened state to the undertaking; this had a potent effect. His high emotional register acted as a goad to the entire communal effort, pushing everyone to strain for their highest level of performance achievement.

Kohn's criticism of the studio and my production choices resonated for me as a challenge to some of my ideas about what constitutes a "correct" recording aesthetic. It also pushed me to reexamine how the cantors think about historically informed performance. I was attracted to the idea of producing the album of Hasidic cantors, utilizing vintage recording technologies. My goal was to privilege documentation of "real" performances. I wanted to avoid the digital processing of much of contemporary recording studio work. My approach did not adequately take into consideration the multiple concepts about what constitutes a documentation of the real on record.

Despite my intention to facilitate the documentation of a living musical expression and my goal of giving agency to the artists, my idea of what the Hasidic cantorial revival should sound like played a key role in shaping the project, outweighing the artists' own musical goals. As the producer of this document of the Hasidic cantorial revivalist scene, my aesthetics and musical desires guided the choice of participants, the recording technology employed, and the scheduling and flow of the session. The initial decision to foreground the Hasidic identities of the performers, while growing organically out of the particularities of the music scene, was not a transparent choice simply reflecting reality.

I chose these particular artists based on my assessment that they belong to a cohort of singers whose musical interests are in dialogue with the Jewish musical past in ways that challenge the norms of multiple contemporary musical communities. Their work articulates a conception of prayer that imagines aesthetics as a key constitutive element. They privilege their personal artistic vision over the conventions of synagogue ritual, prioritizing a musical experience based in the work of gramophone-era cantors over the norms of contemporary Jewish American life.

These basic assessments about what the work of these cantors means is not especially controversial among the cantors—it derives from information and opinions they have shared with me. But my intervention by writing about them, and especially by producing the album, has the effect of turning my opinions into fact. I have learned about these artists, about the vulnerability of their anti-normative artistic personalities working outside the bounds of convention. My perception of Hasidic cantorial revivalists as nonconformists has now been reified in recorded media and in the public relations campaigns to support performances and the release of recordings. The album that resulted from these sessions, titled *Golden Ages*, was released in 2022, in collaboration with the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival. I produced a record release concert in Krakow featuring Yanky



FIGURE 20. Yanky Lemmer, Jeremiah Lockwood, David Reich, and Yoel Kohn. Photo by Tatiana McCabe.



Lemmer, Yoel Kohn, and Shimmy Miller that played to a sold-out audience and was featured on Polish national television. Over the summer months, the *Golden Ages* album was featured on a segment on NPR's *Morning Edition*, further cementing my narrative about cantorial revival and Hasidic musical nonconformity as the "official" story of the cantors. While these successes are far from mainstream, they have furthered the reach of these artists beyond their usual orbit. The outcome of this collaboration is still in the middle of unfolding. The *Golden Ages* album is a continuation of the cantors' struggle to attain agency and self-expression through music, not a magical answer to their urgent project of self-authoring and musical community building.

In the three interlude sections of this book I have attempted to generate a picture of the lives of the cantors in a manner that is more purely ethnographic and less filtered through my analysis and assessments. And yet at no single moment in this work is my intervention absent. This is especially true with regard to recording the album. The story of this collaboration has brought into focus the ambiguity of my place in the Hasidic cantorial scene and the multiple roles I play as academic, promoter, producer, as well as artistic collaborator and friend. These roles do not always sit easily with each other, but they are motivated by an impulse toward sharing in community with the cantors and offering them something in return for the transformation and inspiration their work has given me. It is my hope that somewhere in all this is a contribution to creating a future in which their outsider approach to the aesthetics of prayer will have a place to live.