

FILM AND MULTIMEDIA REVIEWS

American Cantorate. Mark Slobin and Mark Kligman. 2012. Wesleyan University and Hebrew Union College. Website. <http://cantorate.wesleyan.edu/>.

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This website is both a companion to and an extension of Mark Slobin's 1989 book *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate*. Published in the University of Illinois Press's Music in American Life series, this monograph has become a classic in the literature of Jewish liturgical music. The culmination of the History of the American Cantorate project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, it was based on an extensive survey of Jewish cantors in the United States that Slobin conducted between 1984 and 1986 with the help of the Cantors Assembly, a team of historians and graduate students from Wesleyan University.

In the book, Slobin explores the historic, ethnographic and musical dimensions of the cantorate and Jewish liturgical practice in the United States, providing a comprehensive portrait of the history and contemporary status of that institution. Originally, the University of Illinois Press published a companion audiocassette that contained recordings of forty-one songs discussed in the book, encompassing variations on five different prayers. This website replaces and expands upon the audiocassette, offering Slobin's raw data to the world for the first time. It is hosted

by Wesleyan University, and is a joint project with Mark Kligman of Hebrew Union College.

The site's home page features an essay entitled "About this site" describing the background and methodology of the History of the American Cantorate project. Links on a title banner and a sidebar direct the visitor to eight additional sections, each containing a portion of the project data. "Books, Articles, and Documents" offers two e-books in PDF format, one of which is one of the first handbooks of Jewish liturgy, and one is about Abraham Baer, the author of the handbook. The page also provides a link to a half dozen historical documents related to the cantorate. "Chosen Voices: Audio Examples" reproduces the forty-one musical selections from the original companion audiocassette. Aside from the performer's name and the title of each selection, no information is provided about these recordings. These audio examples are still clearly meant to support the original book and are not re-packaged on the site with any contextual information or analysis. "Images and Video" contains a small number of photographs recently taken at the Reform movement's cantorial school, named the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music in 2011, as well as Seymour Hersch's twenty-seven-minute documentary film entitled *More than a Singer*, which was sponsored by the Cantors Assembly as a continuation of their outreach effort following the History of the American Cantorate project.

"Interviews" contains digital copies of all of the audiocassette interviews

originally conducted for the project whose subjects did not explicitly refuse permission to be included. This section offers over 120 interviews, including some with cantors who have since died. “Links” contains links to the websites of both professional associations for the cantorate and organizations of scholars of Jewish music. “Music Repertoire” contains recordings of ninety-six cantors performing variations on eight liturgical selections, as well as a table listing the cantors by name and date of birth. “Questionnaires” contains surveys completed by cantors, congregations and rabbis. Identifying information has been removed, but the individual responses to the surveys can be read. Finally, “Reports” offers four different documents pertaining to the project, including an analysis of the surveys, a performance analysis, fieldnotes documenting the structure of a Conservative Sabbath service, and a 1985 report on the non-Ashkenazic cantors in the Los Angeles area.

The design of the site is simple and functional, with large, easily read black type on a white background. The image of the title banner is adapted from the paperback edition of *Chosen Voices*. All of the site’s documents and sound files are actually located on WesScholar, an online research depository hosted by Wesleyan University.

American Cantorate is a valuable addition to the pool of resources for students of Jewish liturgical music. It is essentially an open access archival collection providing a rich and detailed portrait of the variety of liturgical practice in the United States, which in the 1980s was the largest Jewish com-

munity in the world. Although the site does not include any new information, it expands upon *Chosen Voices* significantly, both in the breadth of the material available and its historic depth. Slobin counted among his interviewees some of the most famous and beloved cantors of the twentieth century, including many who were teachers, composers, and pioneers in their art. Some of his interviews provide invaluable information about cantors who have subsequently died, and some represent early glimpses of cantors who were just beginning their careers and who have since become acknowledged masters of their art. *American Cantorate* also reveals the names of many of the cantors who participated in the original project, to whom Slobin referred in *Chosen Voices* only by coded initials.

It is clear that Slobin intended the site to be used as a source of research material, as almost all of the documents and audiovisual files come with a recommended citation for use by other scholars who might wish to avail themselves of the site’s resources.

American Cantorate can also serve as an excellent teaching tool for students of all branches of music scholarship, not just those who concentrate on Jewish liturgy. In his essay on the front page, Slobin discusses in detail exactly how he conducted the History of the American Cantorate project, describing the funding, institutional support and the nature of the collaborating teams, as well as the actual process of ethnography, including written questionnaires, audio interviews and recorded samples of song and cantillation for analysis. In this way, *American Cantorate* is both a re-

placement for the companion audiocassette and the equivalent of an extensive “Making of” featurette on a DVD.

While the site offers rich resources, it is also important to note that *American Cantorate* has its limitations. It contains information from the original History of the American Cantorate project but very little else subsequent to that project. Seymour Hersch’s documentary *More than a Singer* was a spinoff of the original project, created in 1986, after the project ended, and three years before the publication of *Chosen Voices*. The “Image Gallery” contains five photographs taken at the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College in the autumn of 2009 and the spring of 2011. The site indicates that more images of the American cantorate will be added to the site, but not from whom. These more modern photographs are also an odd juxtaposition to the content of the rest of the site which dates almost entirely from the time of the original project in the mid-1980s. The significance of these modern photographs is unclear, as is the reason that they are limited to images of one particular cantorial school, taken on only two separate occasions.

Because the National Endowment for the Humanities’ grant went to the Cantors Assembly, the association of cantors in the Conservative Jewish movement, that movement is well represented. The Reform movement, its rabbinical and cantorial training school, Hebrew Union College, and its professional association, the American Conference of Cantors, are also strongly represented, largely because research-

ers from those institutions contributed archival material to the project. The Women Cantors’ Network, originally founded in 1982, is mentioned in the project; however, since the publication of *Chosen Voices*, women’s presence and influence in the cantorate has expanded significantly. Relatively little attention is given to Orthodox cantors or to Reconstructionist practice, as the Reconstructionist movement did not ordain cantors until 2002 (Keneseth Israel Congregation 2013). *American Cantorate* is an immensely detailed record of great historic value, but it is the record of a project that is closed. It is a valuable resource, but a finite one, representing a particular moment in the history of the cantorate in the United States and challenging subsequent generations of researchers to continue its story into the present and the future. ♣

REFERENCES

- Keneseth Israel Congregation. 2013. Cantor Hordes. <http://www.kenesethisrael.com/index.php/cantor-hordes> (accessed September 19, 2013.)
- Slobin, Mark. 1989. *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.