

Reviews

Edited by John Leeder



Figure 1: Lenka Lichtenberg.

Recordings

One Plus Three Albums of Music and Connections

Fusion or juxtaposition or simply (or not so simply) working together – this CD by Michael Alpert and Julian Kytasty, and these three albums by Lenka Lichtenberg, are all based on collaborations, finding and exploring old connections, and forging new ones, moving among centuries, across continents, in and out of cultures. All have Jewish culture as an intrinsic part of the albums' concept, and all actively seek understanding and connections. And each album, while thoroughly enjoyable on its own, really requires reading and absorbing the liner notes to experience the music in the contexts in which the artists created it.

I confess to not being entirely unbiased here, as I have known each of the artists whose albums are being reviewed for many years, and several of the musicians who join them as well. Then again, in the ever-more-connected world of folk-and-world music, more and more people know each other; and all too often, in the august realms of academe, a supposedly anonymous reviewer knows the reviewed, who in turn deduces, without undue difficulty, the identity of the reviewer, while both politely maintain the fiction of scholarly anonymity.

Michael Alpert & Julian Kytasty. *Night Songs from a Neighboring Village: Ballads of the Ukrainian & Yiddish Heartland.* RIEN CD 86. LC 03592. Oriente Musik, Hackerstr. 6, 12161 Berlin, Germany; info@oriente.de; www.oriente.de

It took years for master Ukrainian bandura player and singer Julian Kytasty and Yiddish song and culture master Michael Alpert to finally record and then release this project, and the result is a quiet (well, not always quiet), often haunting delight. The music demands – and amply rewards – attention, even in its lighter moments. The liner notes are not lengthy, but are essential, and pleasantly so, as both artists are as knowledgeable and as verbally adept as they are musically articulate – and I for one find it impossible to resist their comment on the orthography of the transliterations from the Ukrainian alphabet: “... we are gleefully aware of the discrepancy”.

Many people are not aware of the many centuries of shared Jewish and Ukrainian history. Julian's introductory paragraph explains that this project is “the expression of two lives spent exploring the what-might-have-beens of musical cultures left in fragments in the aftermath of the twentieth-century totalitarian psychosis ... together, we have let our musical traditions have their long-overdue conversation and

perhaps find unexpected parallels and counterpoints”. Or, as Michael puts it, the two are “fellow citizens of Yiddishland and Banduristan, singing of our neighboring villages together”.

The artists’ deep knowledge of their – and related – traditions, their ease in moving between old and new, the inextricable melding of melancholy and light in both traditions permeate every piece. Julian’s beautifully-played banduras and sopilka (end-blown wooden flutes), Michael’s accordion, violin, and guitar, and the expressive, idiomatic vocals of both, in Yiddish and Ukrainian, are heard alone and in various combinations, often unexpectedly – so that we ourselves are “gleefully aware of the discrepancy”.

The first song is, appropriately enough, “Adam and Eve”. The notes explain that it combines traditional Jewish study-chant, old Ukrainian religious chant, old and new lyrics and old and new music. The happy result is a controlled chaos which manages to be oddly, and appealingly, reasonable and coherent. “Buhai” is one of the few songs whose lyrics can be traced back to the wandering musicians of medieval Kyiv, the *skomorokhy*, an especially poignant image in the light of the recent upheavals in the city. “A Drop in the Ocean” is Michael’s wistful, new-old ballad of a golden swallow and a nightingale, with elements of both Yiddish and Ukrainian culture. Julian’s inimitable rendering of an old epic song flows into a Ukrainian Jewish Sabbath melody which epitomizes the trademark melancholy joy of so much Yiddish song. “The Wedding of the Birds”, a medley of Ukrainian dance tunes, features the *sopilka* (I confess to a partisan affection for this one, having had the immense pleasure of playing Renaissance recorder duets with Julian). Michael’s “Chernobyl”, which he composed in 1986 after the nuclear disaster in this “Ukrainian Jewish town/shtetl”, invokes the light of the Jewish spiritual concept of the *shekhinah*, the earthly, feminine divine presence, and the sinister new light of the disaster: “a new Angel of Death is dancing”.

The track which gives the project its title starts with a poem by Herts Rivlin, and a Ukrainian and English counterpart by Julian: “night songs from a neighboring village ... quench my sorrow, flow like liquid honey”. The traditional Ukrainian welcome song “The Rye is Green” follows it, followed in turn by more welcoming songs, a Yiddish one for the Sabbath and a Ukrainian one for all occasions of welcome and congratulations. A final bonus live track, unencumbered by liner notes, is “Homebrew”, which turns out to be a robust Ukrainian adaptation of “Rye Whiskey”.

I could go on about the other tracks, or the artwork by Benny Ferdman, and by the late Beyle

Schaechter-Gottesman – herself a composer and transmitter of Yiddish songs – about the long-shared history of Jews and Ukraine, about both musicians’ long and illustrious careers as researchers and teachers, and more. But instead I will let the album’s producer, Daniel Kahn, himself a well-known musician and longtime friend and colleague of the artists, have the closing words. More than “simply mixing” two cultures, he writes, Michael and Julian are “honoring, indeed creating a radical space of shared history, like a quilt, woven from shared joys, pains and passions”.

Three by Lenka Lichtenberg

Each of these three CDs is intensely personal in its own way, and each transcends the personal in an exploration of music in the quest for peace. *Songs for the Breathing Walls* is a kind of sung and felt research project on Lenka’s roots, through the old synagogues of Bohemia and Moravia. *Bridges* sings, not without humour, through the problems and rewards of Jewish and Palestinian friends/artists working together; and *Embrace* opens with Lenka’s introduction to the opening track, composed while she was staying in her mother’s hospital room in Prague.

Lenka Lichtenberg. *Songs for the Breathing Walls* (also titled in Czech and Hebrew). 246 Haddington Ave., Toronto, Ont. M5M 2P9;
www.lenkalichtenberg.com

Lenka, who lives in Toronto, was born and grew up in Prague. This self-produced album – which brought her the Folk Music Canada Traditional Singer of the Year award in 2012, and the Independent Vox Populi best album award for 2013 – is a testimony not only to her musical gifts and work, but also to her academic training: she holds a Masters in Ethnomusicology from York University. The liner notes, in English and Czech, include carefully-condensed historical information, with photographs, on each of the 12 synagogues where the music was recorded. Two small caveats here: while the Czech texts stand out clearly, the English-language notes are somewhat difficult to read, as they are superimposed on the coloured photographs; and it would be helpful to have the Hebrew texts along with these bilingual translations.

Of the nearly 40,000 Jews who lived in Prague in 1941, fewer than 8000 survived the Holocaust. The “breathing walls” are those of the synagogues not only in Prague, but throughout Bohemia and Moravia, most now abandoned or used as museums or cultural centres. One is the “lost synagogue”, discovered only in 1997, of the notorious concentration camp Terezin, where Lenka’s own mother and grandmother were

interned, and where the album ends, with the Hebrew prayer for the departed. Lenka explains that she felt that each synagogue conveyed something beyond the specific acoustics of each – something of those who “lived among them, loved, suffered, prayed for peace”. She embarked on a long journey, both metaphorical and physical, to record old and new liturgical and para-liturgical songs, each chosen for, and recorded in, one of these sets of “breathing walls”.

The songs are mostly psalms and liturgical texts in Hebrew, many associated with the most solemn moments of the Jewish calendar year and life cycle; one is a Yiddish lullaby by a woman of the Vilna (Vilnius) ghetto – “a stranger sings by your cradle; your parents won’t be coming back”. Lenka does most of the singing, in a clear, fairly straightforward – even when ornamented – style, at times ethereal, always deeply felt. While most of the texts are taken from Jewish liturgical and para-liturgical sources, the melodies vary from the traditional to the newly-composed – by Lenka and by others. The results are often haunting, though my personal preference would be to use gentler hand drums instead of the drum set, which, for me at least, injects a more pop atmosphere, somewhat intrusive.

The musicians reflect both the high standards and the cultural diversity one has come to associate with Lenka’s projects, here including several Czech musicians. In alphabetical order, for this album she is joined by Yair Dalal, Christian Dawid, David Dorůžka, Alan Hetherington, Anwar Khurshid, Ravi Naimpally, Zita Petrák, Tomáš Reindl, Alexander Shonert, Rasto Uhrík, and Jim Zolis – playing, amongst them, sitar, didjeridoo, tabla, dholak, clarinets, violin, oud, piano, baroque recorder, Brazilian tambourine (pandeiro), and drums. One violin has a history worth noting: for the well-known prayer “Adon Olam”, Yair Dalal sets the words to an old Babylonian melody, and plays it on one of the restored “Violins of Hope” which belonged to violinists who died in the Holocaust.

The links between each synagogue to the song or songs which Lenka chose to record in are clearly personal ones for Lenka. Her vision and musicianship, with the range of composers and artists, and the sense of immediacy from recordings made within these many different, but all connected “breathing walls”, take these links far beyond the personal.

Lenka Lichtenberg and Roula Said. *Bridges: Live at Lula Lounge, Toronto.* LENKA Music; www.lenkamusic.com; Om Laila Music, 943 Dundas St. West, Toronto, Ont. M6J 1W4;

info@omlaila.com; www.omlaila.com; Sunflower Records, 246 Haddington Ave., Toronto, Ont. M5M 2P9

When I was a kid in Jewish summer camp north of Montreal, we all learned a simple Israeli canon whose vocables, “Zum Gali Gali”, alternate with and serve as an ostinato to the modern Hebrew words: “the pioneer for work, work for the pioneer”. Lenka wrote new Yiddish and English lyrics based on Israeli musician-composer Yair Dalal’s mantra “Peace is the only way”: following the form of the original, the second phrase is “the only way is peace”. And, for the *Bridges* project, Toronto-based artist Roula Said wrote Arabic lyrics for it. Lenka’s Yiddish and Roula’s Arabic vocals swirl headily around each other, accompanied by qanun (Roula), tabla (Ravi Naimpally), doumbek (Roula, Ravi), bass (Chris Gartner), oud, guitars, Celtic bouzouki (John Gzowski), sax, ney, bansouri, flutes (Ernie Tollar) and clarinet (Ernie Tollar, Kinneret KiKi Sager).

I was present at the concert of which this CD is the recording: it was a warmly communicative evening, with the ill-lit, somewhat self-consciously upbeat, but unabashedly enthusiastic atmosphere often found at the Lula Lounge. At the concert, I had particularly enjoyed Lenka’s and Roula’s improbable but surprisingly effective – and infectious – juxtaposition of a Yiddish and an Arabic wedding song (Track 2 on the album). Among the other original/composed/adapted compositions is “Open my Eyes”, Lenka’s Yiddish/English version of a Yemenite tune and an old Sephardic religious poem (explained below under the album *Embrace*). Roula movingly sings Lebanese musician-composer Marcel Khalife’s song “Asfur”, about a small bird who escapes from its cage. The final track is Lenka’s arrangement of the traditional Hassidic song “Shnirele perele”, about the coming of the Messiah. Often sung by even secular Yiddish singers today, as a metaphor for the coming of peace, this hypnotic song is also frequently used as a piece for artists to demonstrate their skill and creativity, improvising on the deceptively simple melody.

The vocals and instrumentals are excellent, as one expects from this exemplary lineup of artists. The notes are sparse; while they do communicate the sincerity of the artists’ vision quest for peace, it would be helpful to have more explanations of the original songs which form the basis of several of the pieces heard here. Some of the arrangements are a trifle too jazzy and, especially, too drum set-y for my personal taste, but of course these same aspects might be a draw for others, possibly for most others. More important are the “bridges” of the album’s title. Both Lenka and Roula have traveled over, and helped to

build, many bridges in their own lives, often over seemingly unbridgeable abysses – it remains to see who follows them over these bridges, and others as yet unbuilt, and/or untrodden.

Lenka Lichtenberg with Fray. *Embrace*. Sunflower Records, 246 Haddington Ave., Toronto, Ont. M5M 2P9

Embrace was recorded with Lenka's stellar band Fray ("free" in Yiddish), and equally stellar guest musicians from Canada and abroad, including some heard in the other recordings. Her now trademark mix of "Western" and "Eastern" (depending, of course, where one is standing and which way one is looking) instruments includes: sarangi, tabla, kanun, oud, bell flute, clarinet, violin, guitar, accordion, mandolin, trumpet and drums. Fray's musicians, Chris Gartner, John Gzowski, Alan Hetherington, Ravi Nainpally, and Ernie Tollar, are joined by guest artists Yair Dalal, Christian Dawid, Dhruva Ghosh, Anwar Khurshid, Julian Labro, Hugh Marsh, Roula Said, Eric Stein, and Kevin Turcotte.

"Raise a Cup of Joy", the opening track, was the "Vox Populi Song – New Age" choice of the 2014 Independent Music Awards Toronto. As mentioned above, Lenka composed it while staying with her mother in a Prague hospital. Inspired, as Lenka writes, by Psalm 121, it manages to be very movingly written, sung and played without being sentimental. "Peace is the Only Way" is a more complex arrangement of the Israeli canon heard in *Bridges*, with some soaring vocals, and lyrics in English, Yiddish and Hebrew, but missing Roula Said's Arabic version.

Roula is heard soon after, however, playing the qanun in "Open my Eyes", which is also on the *Bridges* album. The liner notes are a little confused here. The song is described as "ancient Yemenite Shabbat liturgy", but without the name of the poem or its author, which are not in fact Yemenite, though the melody is. In fact, it is not really a liturgy per se, though it is typically sung on Sabbath Eve. The words are indeed ancient: this is a piyyut, a type of Hebrew religious poem, called "Dror Yiqra", by the tenth-century Sephardic poet Dunash ibn Labrat, who lived in Morocco and Córdoba. As is frequent in piyyutim, the poem is an acrostic which spells its author's name. Besides the popular, infectious Yemenite melody sung here, "Dror Yiqra" has been sung through the centuries to various different tunes, by Jewish communities in different countries and cultures. By chance, I also recorded it, with this melody, on my CD *Canciones de Sefarad* (Madrid, Pneuma, 2000). In any case, Lenka's English and Yiddish version, inspired by a famous late 18th-Century Yiddish reli-

gious poem, is an effective one, both musically and as a way to bring together different strands of Jewish traditions, and those of their neighbours.

The mystically wistful "Perfume Road" features Iraqi-Israeli Yair Dalal, who composed the song and plays oud and violin on it, with new Yiddish words by Lenka. (I've not yet heard Lenka and Yair's new album, *Lullabies from Exile*, intertwining Yiddish and Babylonian lullabies, but enjoyed their performance of it at the Ashkenaz festival last summer.) The album's most traditional song, "Tumbalalaika", is given a gently whimsical arrangement by Fray woodwinds wizard Ernie Tollar. The "bonus track", not identified in the liner notes, is the appealing "Der Eybiker Nign" – "the eternal song" – by Polish-American composer Mikhl Gelbart; many instruments accompany it, but the feeling is probably the most traditional of the album. "Shnirele, Perele" (also on *Bridges*) and "Aleynu" (also on *Breathing Walls*) return in somewhat different arrangements; "Danse Suite Macabre" and "2010" are Lenka's own compositions, while "Pigeons in Paris" and "Vayn fun Lebn" are her sensitive musical takes on Yiddish poems by Khayke Beruriah Wiegand and Simcha Simchovitch, respectively.

As an ethnomusicologist and a musician, I frequently find myself having to distinguish between "like" and "appreciate". I appreciate every song and every arrangement on these three powerful albums, but, on a purely personal level, find that some of the tracks on *Embrace* lack the immediacy and direct appeal of *Songs for the Breathing Walls* and *Bridges* – perhaps a little too fusion-esque, or too jazzy, or too New Age-y. However, this is far less important than the vision of peace which inspires and infuses these collections of musical breathing walls, bridges, and embraces.

Judith Cohen, Toronto, Ontario

Matthew Byrne. *Ballads*.

Matthew Byrne. *Hearts & Heroes*. 303 Hamilton Ave., St. John's, NL A1E 1J8; info@matthewbyrne.net; www.matthewbyrne.net

I hadn't come across the music of this fine balladeer from Newfoundland before, so listening to these two albums was like meeting a new best friend. Matthew Byrne was raised in the oral tradition, immersed in ballads and music from birth. He has shared his particular skill as a ballad singer on stages around the globe.

His debut album, titled very simply "*Ballads*", is a true homage to the singers in his family and friends, from whom the majority of the tracks come. The ten-

track CD feels too short, only 45 minutes in length, but it is full of rich story songs performed with purity and ease. There is no apparent theme to the album except, as Matthew states in his liner notes, “the ability to combine a good story and a beautiful melody to produce something satisfying”.

The album begins with a version of “The Banks Of Newfoundland” that he learned from his mother. It is one of six accompanied tracks. The majority of the songs are traditional. The exceptions are a Jean Ritchie song, “Come Fare Away”, and “Jack Ashton” by Keith Marsden. One of the most intriguing a cappella tracks is a ballad called “Donald Munroe”, which Matthew cites is a British Broadside ballad (listed in LAWS J12). The story, that of an immigrant who leaves his sons behind, has an ending very reminiscent of CHILD #14, “Babylon”, in which a robber realizes he has terrorized and killed his own daughters.

There is a perfect balance between voice and instrumentation throughout the album. Never once are the lyrics or stories overshadowed. The voice rings out clear and unadorned, allowing the stories full expression without being overdone. The instrumentation is varied. Matthew himself plays guitar, bouzouki and octave mandolin. Other instruments (whistles, concertina, fiddle, button accordion and percussion) and support vocals are provided by other musicians.

Four of the tracks are sung a cappella, with the same lack of distracting decorations that tempt too many singers, male and female. Singers with good natural voices do not need to show off or embellish. It is clear that what is important to Matthew is the story. There are only a couple of possible criticisms I might make regarding his singing, and both relate to style. Matthew has a tendency to abruptly revert to speaking the last few words in an a cappella ballad. This might sound annoying to some. Another tendency is to sing the long unaccompanied ballads with a very regimented beat, rather than singing the story as though it were being told. These are minor points, however, and it should be noted that these tendencies do not appear in his album *Hearts and Heroes*.

The album Matthew released four years following his debut is a longer CD, consisting of 13 tracks. It gives me pleasing thrills up and down my spine each time I listen to it. That perfect balance between voice and instrumentation is once more consistently maintained. Many of the musicians who participate on the first CD are again listed on this one. On the downside, there are only two a cappella songs: a terrific concluding number, “The Grey Funnel Line”, by Cyril Tawney, and a ballad called “Banks of Sweet Dundee” midway through the CD that comes to him from his aunt. This ballad exemplifies what might be

a bit of a sub-theme to the album: that of powerful or impressive females. Not only do many of the ballads tell stories along this line, but as with his first CD, Matthew honours the female sources in his family.

“Fair Ellen” is a case in point. Although it is a tragic tale similar to countless other “Pretty Polly” type songs, it takes the story of a lover who intends to murder his love “down by the willow tree” to new heights. It is a long detailed account in which his love pleads not only for her life but, when she realizes her death is inevitable, for him to tell her mother where she is buried. Matthew learned this from a cassette of his grandmother singing, recorded before he was born.



Figure 2: Matthew Byrne.

Matthew includes two of his own instrumental compositions, which he plays beautifully on guitar. The first is entitled “Hearts” and the second “Heroes”, making up both the album title and the primary themes pervading the recording. Among the tracks are a handful of contemporary ballads, two of which could be mistaken for traditional ones in both storyline and poetry. The first is called “Jolly Ploughboy”, written by Gina Dunlap, which tells a story of a very determined and resourceful woman. This song is reminiscent of versions of the traditional ballad “Jackie Munroe”. The second, “True Love Knows No Season” (also known as “Billy Gray”), written by Norman Blake, is a classic murder ballad featuring beautifully poetic lyrics.

The listener can sense that with every ballad Matthew performs, he sees the stories unfold in his mind as he sings and feels every nuance of emotion. Whatever his arrangement, he never sacrifices the stories to the music; rather, he uses musicality only to complement and enhance. Both of these albums are a MUST for all lovers of ballads.

Moira Cameron, Yellowknife, Northwest Territories