

**Title of presentation as announced in Program Book: “Mahler, Copland, Bernstein and Rumshinsky? Reflections on the Yiddish Theater and its Legacy,” by Zachary M. Baker.**

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**Description:**

In 2005 and again in 2008 Michael Tilson Thomas, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, led a concert program entitled "The Thomashefskys." This semi-staged concert program, highlighting the theatrical accomplishments of MTT's grandparents, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky - pioneers and stars of the American Yiddish theater - has been performed at Carnegie Hall, Chicago's Symphony Center, Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco, and Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. That the Yiddish theater has - at least indirectly - influenced American performance practices is by now widely accepted, with Stella Adler (daughter of Boris Thomashefsky's great rival Jacob P. Adler) and Method Acting serving as Exhibit A for that contention. In "The Thomashefskys" Tilson Thomas has thrown the spotlight on composers for the Yiddish stage, such as Joseph Rumshinsky, and the indirect influence that they have had both on the American musical theater and classical composition. The research that went into "The Thomashefskys" was based on decades of spadework done by librarians, archivists, encyclopedists, and theater historians. Their role in helping to make "The Thomashefskys" concert program possible will also be explored in this presentation.

**[SLIDE 1]**

**MAHLER, COPLAND, BERNSTEIN...AND RUMSHINSKY?  
Reflections on the Yiddish Theater and Its Legacy**

**Zachary M. Baker  
Stanford University Libraries**

*The “Elvis” of the East Side*

In the mid-1920s, Abraham Cahan, the editor of the mass-circulation Yiddish daily *Forward* reflected on his experiences as a young theater-going immigrant in New York City some four decades earlier:

The New York Yiddish theater began in 1883 [*he wrote*]. Few of the actors were professionals; most were amateurs, young men and women from Odessa who in the old country had fallen in love with the theater.

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The leading playwright was Abraham Goldfaden. The leading star was youthful Boris Thomashefsky, who played many female roles because the companies lacked women actors. For a short time during the winter of 1882, I boarded with Thomashefsky's mother in a house on Mott Street near Bayard Street. I remember him as a handsome youngster of sixteen who was already a temperamental star.<sup>1</sup>

Later in the same volume, Cahan shared his impressions of Boris Thomashefsky circa 1890, when the actor was in his early twenties and had become the “Elvis” (or the “Michael Jackson”?) of the Jewish immigrant quarter.

He was just perfect for the historical operettas and biblical stories which were then at the height of their popularity on the Jewish stage. One could not imagine a more handsome biblical prince. As a prince, he wore short puffed breeches so that the women could admire the shapeliness of his legs. Thomashefsky had the most beautiful pair of legs on the Yiddish stage.

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He became the darling of the public, especially of the women. Girls would save their pennies to buy a ticket to a Thomashefsky show. From the excited reports of those who had already seen the play, they knew in advance every revealing move he would

make, at what position of the stage he would stand and what part of the theater afforded the best view.<sup>2</sup>

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At the turn of the twentieth century, Cahan served as indispensable tour guide for the American journalist Hutchins Hapgood, whose sketches of the Jewish immigrant scene were eventually published in the much-cited book, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*. Hapgood's contemporary take on Boris Thomashefsky was somewhat more jaundiced than Cahan's retrospective appraisal:

Joseph Latteiner is the most popular playwright in the Bowery, and Boris Thomashevsky perhaps the most popular actor. Latteiner has written over a hundred plays, no one of which has form or ideas. He calls them *Volksstücke* (plays of the people), and naïvely admits that he writes directly to the demand. They are mainly mixed melodrama, broad burlesque, and comic opera. His heroes are all intended for Boris Thomashevsky, a young man, fat, with curling black hair, languorous eyes, and a rather effeminate voice, who is thought very beautiful by the girls of the Ghetto. Thomashevsky has a face with no mimic capacity, and a temperament absolutely impervious to mood or feeling. But he picturesquely stands in the middle of the stage and declaims phlegmatically the role of the hero, and satisfies the "romantic" demand of the audience. Nothing could show more clearly how much more genuine the feeling of the Ghetto is for fidelity to life than for romantic fancy. How small a part of the grace and charm of life the Yiddish audiences enjoy may be judged by the fact that the romantic appeal of a Thomashevsky is eminently satisfying to them.<sup>3</sup>

What *really* drew Hapgood to the Yiddish theater were its vivid productions of plays by such European moderns as Ibsen or the relatively realistic (if still melodramatic) Yiddish repertoire of Jacob Gordin. And when it came to performers, he reserved his

highest praise for Thomashefsky's occasional collaborator and perpetual rival, Jacob P. Adler, whom he described as "the best actor in the Ghetto."

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"[Thomashevsky] and Adler are now the leading actors of the People's Theatre, but they never appear together," he continued, "Thomashevsky being the main interpreter of the plays which appeal distinctively to the rabble, and Adler of those which form the really original Yiddish drama of a serious nature."<sup>4</sup> Hapgood was clearly echoing the fevered denunciations of *shund*, or lowbrow drama that were appearing in the pages of the New York Yiddish press. It was surely no accident that Hapgood's book included portraits of Gordin and Adler – drawn by the young Jacob Epstein – but not of Thomashefsky. Only lately has a cohort of researchers begun to reassess the disposable legacy of Yiddish theatrical *shund*.<sup>5</sup>

***The Metamorphosis of "Shund"***

There is a pronounced tendency among English-speaking chroniclers of the Yiddish theater, to seek out its connections with "mainstream" American entertainment. In particular, the "Method" school of acting, which was pioneered by Jacob P. Adler's daughter Stella,

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is cited as the most enduring contribution of the Yiddish theater to the American entertainment industry. According to this reading, Stella Adler's leading students, such as Marlon Brando, are the true heirs of Jacob P., and through them his "voice" can still be heard.<sup>6</sup> ["Stella!"]

But what of the *shund* heritage (if we may indeed call it that)? What is *its* legacy? There is more than one answer to that question, but for present purposes I will dwell on one of the more improbable episodes in the metamorphosis of Yiddish *shund*.

To set the scene: It's the evening of October 22, 1969, and William Steinberg has fallen ill in the middle of a Boston Symphony concert that he is conducting at Philharmonic Hall in New York City. After intermission, the Symphony's 24-year-old assistant conductor, Michael Tilson Thomas, replaces him on the podium. This extraordinary debut does not go unnoticed; in his review of the concert the next morning, *The New York Times*' veteran music critic Harold C. Schonberg writes: "Mr. Thomas knows his business, and we shall be hearing from him again." Then, on October 25<sup>th</sup> the *Times* runs a two-column profile of the young conductor, which notes in passing that "he is a grandson of Boris Tomashefsky [*sic*], a pioneer in Yiddish theater in the United States, and the son of Ted Thomas, a writer and director of film and television."<sup>7</sup>

Michael Tilson Thomas's mid-concert substitution was eerily reminiscent of the most famous conducting debut of the American Century. That time it was front-page news: On November 15, 1943, the *Times* reported on "a dramatic musical event yesterday when the 25-year-old assistant conductor of the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra Leonard Bernstein, substituted on a few hours' notice for Bruno Walter, who had become ill, and led the orchestra through its entire program."<sup>8</sup> Bernstein's path would eventually intersect with that of the young Michael Tilson Thomas.

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As his career as a conductor developed, "Boris Tomashefsky's grandson" inevitably served as one of Tilson Thomas's calling cards. However, any connection one

might make between the young maestro's music making and his grandfather's theatrical heritage might seem quite tenuous. Michael was, after all, a graduate of the University of Southern California's famous music school, and a protégé of the severely modernist composer and conductor, Pierre Boulez. Furthermore, Joseph Rumshinsky and Herman Wohl's musical compositions for Thomashefsky's productions most definitely did *not* enter into Michael's repertoire during his stints as Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic or Principal Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra. This had to wait until after 1995, when at the age of fifty Michael Tilson Thomas was appointed Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony.\*

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The expression *dos pintele yid* is a construct that refers to the irreducible quotient of Yiddishkeit (however that might be defined) that even the most assimilated of Jews is presumed to possess. It is also the title of one of Boris Thomashefsky's most famous theatrical productions.

**[SLIDES 9 & 10]**

Michael Tilson Thomas's musical pantheon would doubtless confirm the worst nightmares of Richard Wagner, that quintessential composer of Teutonic music dramas, and author of the notorious tract *Judaism in Music*.

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This pantheon begins with Gustav Mahler, one of Europe's leading conductors, and the composer of sprawling song cycles and symphonies that entered the standard orchestral

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\* At the same time, he continued as the Artistic Director of the New World Symphony, in Miami Beach, a training orchestra that he helped found for aspiring, conservatory-trained classical musicians.

repertoire decades after his demise. It is worth noting here that the San Francisco Symphony's high-profile, multi-year recording project under MTT's baton is the complete cycle of Mahler symphonies, which is still in progress.

*[SLIDES 12 & 13]*

Next in line comes Aaron Copland, the inventor (by MTT's account) of the "American" sound in twentieth-century classical music. And then of course there is Lenny.

Each of these figures can moreover be taken to personify a different phase in the ways in which prominent Jewish cultural figures situated themselves as Jews. Mahler was a late nineteenth-century Bohemian Jew who converted in order to be granted a conducting post in Vienna. Elements of his adopted Catholic faith suffuse his compositions, most notably, his Second Symphony (known as the "Resurrection") – even as some listeners have detected Central European "klezmer" tonalities in his First Symphony.<sup>9</sup> Copland, a native Brooklynite, was born in 1900 and had his bar mitzvah in the Kane Street Synagogue, in Cobble Hill. Its spiritual leader in those days was one of America's leading composers of Jewish liturgical music, Rabbi Israel Goldfarb (best known for the melody that he composed for the Sabbath hymn "Shalom Aleikhem"). Copland would, however, have resisted the label of "Jewish composer." Bernstein, who came of age musically during World War II, openly drew upon Jewish themes and motifs in his compositions, and he maintained an emotional identification with Jewish causes, especially the Israel Philharmonic.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, he was a composer of mainstream Broadway show tunes and recondite classical pieces. And MTT? He positively flaunts both his musical and his personal pedigrees. Indeed, what is perhaps most fascinating about Mi-

chael Tilson Thomas is the way in which he ingeniously attempts to meld the very distinct legacies of Gustav Mahler and the Thomashefskys.

**[SLIDE 14]**

***Enter the Bibliographer, Stage Left***

In the autumn of 1999 I was introduced to Linda Steinberg, a museum professional by background who was the Executive Director of something called The Thomashefsky Project. MTT himself was the guiding force behind this enterprise. At that point I had been working on a bibliography of the Lawrence Marwick collection of Yiddish play scripts at the Library of Congress on and off, for over a decade. The completed bibliography was finally published on the Web in 2004.

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At Linda's request I generated a fifteen-page printout from my bibliographical database, listing all instances where the members of the family were mentioned in it. Linda passed along my report to the Project's researcher, Ronald Robboy, in San Diego. Ron, a classically trained cellist and self-taught Yiddishist, had already spent many hours in libraries and archives tracking down and copying scripts, posters, photographs, correspondence, and other Thomashefsky memorabilia.

***“The Thomashefskys,” Brought to You by the San Francisco Symphony***

Mention the name “Thomashefsky” and “Boris” inevitably comes to mind. But Michael Tilson Thomas never knew his grandfather; he did, however, grow up with his grandmother, Bessie Thomashefsky, a famous actress in her own right, whose career on the Yiddish stage began sixty years before Michael was born.

***[SLIDES 16 & 17]***

Boris and Bessie had a tempestuous marriage, punctuated by scandal and ending in separation – a factor that probably colored the recollections that she shared with her grandson. Bessie died in 1962, when Michael was seventeen years old, and the Thomashefsky Project is at least as much of a tribute to her legacy as it is to Boris's.

***[SLIDES 18 & 19]***

Early in 2000, a small group of Yiddish theater researchers was invited for a brainstorming session at the spacious Arts-and-Crafts house in the San Francisco neighborhood of Pacific Heights that Michael Tilson Thomas shares with his partner and business manager. As far as I know, this was the only meeting of the Thomashefsky Project's Academic Advisory Committee ever to take place. Our host showed us some of his theatrical heirlooms and conveyed his thoughts regarding the direction in which the project was headed.

Ultimately, it was five years before the Thomashefsky Project had its official rollout, which took the form of a semi-staged theatrical and musical performance at Carnegie Hall in April 2005. The performers included several veteran Broadway performers and a house band comprising members of the San Francisco Symphony. Two months later, at the end of June, there were repeat performances of "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theatre" (as the program was called) at Davies Symphony Hall, in San Francisco.

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The program was tinkered with and, in 2008, repeated before symphony audiences in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Francisco.

The cover of the *Playbill* for the 2005 San Francisco performances reveals their implicit premise, namely, that the musical traditions of the popular Yiddish stage fed, first, into Tin Pan Alley and, ultimately, into the American classical music tradition. The six faces featured on the *Playbill* cover tell it all: Bessie Thomashefsky, in right profile, is the dominant image. Her picture is accompanied by inset portraits of Boris, the Gershwin brothers, Bernstein, and Copland. As Linda Steinberg explains in her *Playbill* essay, “The program assembled by Michael Tilson Thomas for *The Thomashefskys* enables us to travel the distance from Goldfaden to Rumshinsky, to stand on the threshold where sounds of Jewish music entered mainstream American life and gradually evolved into something new.”<sup>11</sup> The ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin characterizes Joseph Rumshinsky as “the most prolific and influential of the operetta composers. He lived through the transition from the older European-based plots and musical styles to the advent of the lighter Americanized shows that set popular taste in the 1920s.”<sup>12</sup> In short, the “family tree” of mid- and late-twentieth century classical music in America has very diverse lines, including one that MTT traces straight back – through his grandparents – to Rumshinsky and then Goldfaden.

Another of MTT’s central claims is that the original Thomashefsky repertoire – Latteiner’s plays notwithstanding – should by no means be classified as *shund*. Rather, in his view, it was “entertainment [that was created] around controversial social issues. It was a reflection of the concerns of Yiddishkeit, which of course had very much to do with social transformation. When you look at plays like ‘Death of a Salesman,’ ‘Inherit the Wind’ or even ‘West Side Story,’ these are all very entertaining evenings with underlying social messages. That’s very much the tradition of the Yiddish theater.”<sup>13</sup>

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The program proper of “The Thomashefskys” merits a few observations. The script is by MTT, and his narration provides the bridge between the semi-staged musical segments. Naturally, it calls upon his personal and family reminiscences about growing up in a show biz family in LA. “As a boy in North Hollywood,” writes the Yiddish-theater historian Nahma Sandrow, “Michael Tilson Thomas adored his grandmother’s flamboyant yet down-to-earth personality, her generosity, and her youthful zest for life.”<sup>14</sup> As Michael himself once put it, “My father over many years wanted to do some kind of evening about the Yiddish theater and Boris and Bessie. I was always delighted by the music and stories, but I didn’t appreciate it as a kid.”<sup>15</sup> But a more ambitious agenda was of course also at stake.

This was an evening of musical performances above all, presented mostly in chronological order according to their dates of composition. The exceptions came right at the beginning of the program, with a short piece called “Green Horn Blues,” composed by Ted Thomas (Michael’s father) in 1958, and Joseph Rumshinsky’s overture to *Khantshe in Amerike*, dating from 1915, which was one of Bessie’s main vehicles. Otherwise, the progression went from Abraham Goldfaden in the late 1870s through a host of (mostly) American Yiddish theater composers, and concluding with Rumshinsky’s song “Vatsh yor step,” from *Berele Tramp*, composed in 1923. Participation by both Broadway and classically trained singers demonstrated the seriousness with which Michael Tilson Thomas regards this music, and the degree to which he has come to appreciate it on its own terms.

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Wherever they might be now – that great Yiddish theater in the sky, perhaps – Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky must surely be smiling. And meanwhile, off in his little corner of *Gan-eden* our snobbish connoisseur, Abraham Cahan – who was an opera lover at heart – is without a doubt finding it difficult to stifle an ironic laugh. For through their grandson, the Thomashefskys have finally succeeded in showing up the Adlers.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan*, translated by Leon Stein, Abraham P. Conan, and Lynn Davison (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), 275-276.

<sup>2</sup> Cahan, 391-392.

<sup>3</sup> Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York*, with drawings from life by Jacob Epstein (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1902), 139-140; reprinted by the Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1967 (with an introduction by Moses Rischin).

<sup>4</sup> Hapgood, 156, 159-160.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Nina Warnke, "Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization," *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 3 (1996), 321-335; Nina Warnke, "The Child Who Wouldn't Grow Up: Yiddish Theatre and Its Critics," in *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*, edited by Joel Berkowitz (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), 201-216; Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> This, at least, is one of the messages that one carries away from Stefan Kanfer's recent book, *Stardust Lost: The Triumph, Tragedy, and Mishugas of the Yiddish Theater in America* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, "Music: Steinberg Ill at Concert; Assistant, 24, Takes Over," *The New York Times*, October 23, 1969; Allen Hughes, "Conductor, 24, Is at Ease with Steinberg's Baton," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> "Young Aide Leads Philharmonic, Steps in When Bruno Walter Is Ill; a Warm Reception for 25-Year-Old Conductor," *The New York Times*, November 15, 1943.

<sup>9</sup> Here is a typical example, taken from a review of the Zürich Tonhalle Orchestra's recording of Mahler's First Symphony: "The episodes of Jewish klezmer and marching band music are well handled; [David] Zinman encourages the orchestra to embrace them with tenderness rather than looking for a grotesque quality, or maximum comic effect." See Andrew McGregor, "Music – Recordings: Gustav Mahler, Symphony No. 1," [*BBC Classical Review*]: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/release/xwvr/> (accessed May 29, 2007).

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<sup>10</sup> Copland and Bernstein were drawn to the famous Yiddish play by Sh. An-ski, *Tsvishn tsvey veltn (Der dibek)* – best known in English as *The Dybbuk* – and both composed music that was inspired by it. “Vitebsk; study on a Jewish melody for violin, cello and piano” (1929) is Copland’s contribution to the repertoire surrounding *The Dybbuk*. Bernstein began thinking about setting *The Dybbuk* to music in the 1940s; his ballet, composed in collaboration with the choreographer Jerome Robbins, was first performed in 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Steinberg, “Pursuing the American Voice: Introducing a Festival,” in *Of Thee I Sing: Yiddish Theater, Broadway, and the American Voice*, San Francisco Symphony *Playbill* 7, no. 10 (June 2005), 35.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); quoted by Linda Steinberg, in *Of Thee I Sing*, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Dan Pine, “Lower East Side Story: Tilson Thomas Honors His Yiddish Theater Grandparents,” *J: The Jewish News Weekly of Northern California*, 109, no. 13 (April 1-7, 2005), 37a.

<sup>14</sup> Nahma Sandrow, “Stage Legacies,” in *Of Thee I Sing*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Pine, 36a.