

**Yiddish Music in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Merovitz Project**

Compiled by Itsik Gottesman

Musical projects come and go; before one notices, bands have split up; groups that one would have wanted to hear again. For example, I received a new CD from Montreal, produced in 2009, called the Merovitz Project + Brass (Live in Montreal) with the singer Alan Merovitz. The recording is not among the very best of the last few years, but nevertheless one hears talent on this CD, and it is a shame that it won't be possible to see or hear them in the future.

According to Henri Oppenheim, the accordionist and arranger for the group, the Merovitz Project began in the fall of 2008 and ended in the fall of 2010. The same musicians continue to play, but without Merovitz; with another singer, the Montreal actress Michelle Heisler. Naturally the band changed its name, and is now known as Magillah ([magillah.com](http://magillah.com))

Alan Merovitz is known in the wider klezmer world outside Canada as the first singer of the Flying Bulgars, a band founded and led by Toronto trumpeter David Buchbinder. This band was for many years the best of its kind in Canada. However, according to their website, they have not performed together for the last two years. Merovitz became famous for his unique singing style – emotional, but not theatrical, with a great need to pull the audience into the performance. After the “Flying Bulgars” Merovitz performed with “Ot Azoy Klezmer” (Amsterdam) and “Beyond the Pale” (Toronto). With his personality and voice, he takes center stage with whatever band he sings with.

Henri Oppenheim, the musical director of the “Project”, was formerly a mathematician. In 1998 he decided to devote himself entirely to music and became the leader of the Montreal group “Kleztory”. (Incidentally, he is not the only mathematician-klezmer; one can add to the list the saxophonist Alex Kantorovitch and the pianist Adrian – both mathematics professors and researchers). In 2007 Oppenheim won an important award from the Quebec Music Organization (?) for his recordings. The ensemble “Merovitz Project” consisted of 7 musicians, featuring the violinist Julie Triquet (?) and brass instruments.

Oppenheim writes that with “Merovitz Project” the musicians wanted “to reflect the roots and crossroads of the musicians in the multi-cultural city of Montreal – Québécois, English-Canadian, French, Jewish and non-Jewish; klezmer, jazz or world-music specialists” – a reflection of the musical traditions in the city – both old and new.

The CD, recorded during a live concert, begins with the Sephardi-style “Shalom Aleichem”, with a Middle-Eastern rhythm. Merovitz sings the song with perhaps too much enthusiasm, and one can feel that the emotion is contrived. There is more sincerity in his rendition of the other songs, like his own composition “In Calgary” –

*In Calgary there lives a klezmer  
With his faithful wife and daughter  
And so they start to revel/celebrate  
Ay day day, day day*

*In Toronto there lives a rabbi  
Near his friend, even a gentile  
And when he starts to pray  
Boy, boy boy boy*

Merovitz is a fine singer, but definitely not a Shakespeare.

In his arrangements, Oppenheim has added new rhythms to old songs, and the combinations are mostly successful. For example, in “Tantst a Freylekh” the Jewish melodies are played to a Caribbean reggae beat. A hip-hop rhythm was added to Molly Picon’s “Abi Gezunt”. But calling these arrangements “experimental”, as Oppenheim does in the CD-booklet, is too extreme – klezmer musicians around the world “experiment” in the same manner these days.

As a singer Merovitz is at his best in Moyshe Oysher’s “Dray Dreydelekh” (Three Small Dreydls), a lively Khanuka song. While it’s clear that Merovitz likes to party, he can also sing a slow song like “Mayn Ru’eh Plats” (My Resting Place) by Morris Rosenfeld with heart and feeling. He also does a good interpretation of “Sapozhkelekh”, a folksong from Bronia Sakina’s repertoire. Oppenheim has added a a rhythm that sounds more Turkish-Greek than Jewish to the folksong “Lomir Zikh Iberbetn” (Let’s Make Up); and Merovitz improvises while singing that the whole world must make up in order to make peace in the world. Oppenheim’s only original piece, “Yonas Stocato”, played by the violinist, makes a deep impression and the listener would like to hear more original compositions.

The recording ends with the campfire song “Arum Dem Fayer” (Around the Fire) played to a tango rhythm. Why such a rhythm? I really don’t know; it seems to me that not all rhythmic changes make sense. In general however, the playing is very good and Merovitz is among the best contemporary Yiddish singers. We look forward to new projects by the group, if not together, then as individuals.

(draft translation from the Yiddish: Rivka Augenfeld      September 25, 2011)