

Report on the 7th European Cantors Convention 2 – 5 July 2012, Prestwich Hebrew Congregation, Manchester Robert Marks

Beyond its place in concert halls and a declining number of synagogues, there is a distinct possibility within Anglo Jewry that chazanut and Jewish liturgical music will become a fading remnant of a once traditional world.

In today's age of instant satisfaction and fast-paced living, of hyper-speed minyanim and a lack of proper understanding of Jewish text, the once indispensable chazan has become – at best – a much-loved extra and at worst, a tolerated nuisance.

It is set against this backdrop that Manchester hosted the 7th Annual **European Cantors Convention** at Prestwich Hebrew Congregation from 2 – 5 July 2012. Its theme was to ensure that cantors should continue to be relevant to today's congregations and strengthen their position as important members of their kehillas. The **European Cantors Association (ECA)** which was launched at the Convention will provide the cantors themselves with a platform to carry out programmes that will safeguard the future of Jewish liturgical music and ensure that chazanim have a base from which to inspire future generations.



The launch of the European Cantors Association Alex Klein, ECA Convenor, Geraldine Auerbach MBE, former Director of the Jewish Music Institute and Cantors Joseph Malovany, Yechezkel Klang and Aaron Bensoussan

2 July, 2012, Manchester UK

Alex Klein shares a joke with Yechezkel Klang



Opening with the **Julian Klein Memorial Concert**, the week's convention consisted of masterclasses and lectures. The concert commenced with a rousing performance of Lewandowski's Halleluka, performed by the **Leeds United Hebrew Congregation (UHC) Choir**, under the baton of **Phil Cammerman**. The **specially** resurrected **Manchester Jewish Male Voice Choir (MJMVC)**, conducted by **Alexander Tsaliuk** – a guest from Moscow's Tchaikovsky Conservatory – performed K'vodo and Mogen Ovos, and for the latter piece, they were joined by the renowned Chazan **Joseph Malovany**. (see below)

The attentive audience was treated to a feast of great music by some of our local cantors together with invited international guests. They were thrilled by the power and emotion of Chazan Malovany from New York, the beauty and majesty of Chazan **Yechezkel Klang** from Israel and the exotic blend of Eastern and Western Chazanut brought by Moroccan Chazan **Aaron Bensoussan** now residing in Canada. (accompanied below by himself on oud and by Guy Schalom on Darbukka)



Prestwich Hebrew Congregation's Chazan **Adam Caplan** joined the UCH Choir for a moving performance of Secunda's Pischu Li and Chazan Bensoussan delighted the audience with a performance of his own Eastern-styled composition - Ana Avda - which was repeated on Shabbos by the MJMVC. Chazan Klang joined Chazan Bensoussan in performing a touching rendition of Benoussan's Avinu Shebashamayim and Chazan Malovany returned for a tour de force, accompanying himself on piano whilst singing a 14 minute piece of his own composition. (with Alex joining in see below)



The concert concluded with an inspiring performance of Sol Zim's Avinu Shebashamayim and Zol Shoyrn, sung by all of the chazanim and joined on stage by both choirs. Those in attendance were certainly left with a taste of the inherent beauty of Jewish liturgical music and an understanding of its place in Jewish prayer.



The week's convention began with a welcoming message from the convenor, Mr. **Alex Klein** and a blessing from the Rabbi of the Prestwich Hebrew Congregation, Rabbi **Dovid Eisenberg** (below) who highlighted the conduct and role of the chazan. He affirmed the importance of having a committed and skilled chazan working in tandem with a shul Rabbi to create a strong unit through which to lead the synagogue, retaining the sanctity and traditional layout of the Tefilla and synagogue service.



Immediately afterwards, the day's sessions – based around Nusach and Improvisation – began in earnest. Chazanim **Malovany** (above), **Bensoussan** and **Klang** all gave joint and

independent lectures, presenting examples of traditional nusach and discussing ways of including new, more modern tunes, whilst keeping within the frameworks of accepted modes of prayer.



Later in the day, the first of several masterclasses was held, calling on delegates to sing and listen to the guest cantor's (sometimes!) critical assessments of vocal styles, technique and attitudes to the text. Of the entire convention, these classes provided delegates with an unparalleled opportunity to enjoy one-to-one advice and tuition from three of the leading chazanim in the world.

The day ended with Manchester's **Yehuda Marx** (Heaton Park Synagogue) presenting the second part of his talk, entitled 'In Defence of Chazanut'. The first half of the presentation had been given at the previous year's convention and Chazan Marx resolutely defined the rights and allowances of the Cantor in the synagogue, covering topics such as *hefsek* in prayer and the ever-disputed issue of repetition. A thought-provoking and brilliantly researched lecture, it contained food for thought for all who heard it.

The second and third days of the convention focussed on the repertoire of Shabbos and the Yomim Noraim. Chazan Klang delivered an address explaining the importance of staying true to nusach, whilst Chazan Bensoussan, accompanying himself on the oud, entertained the delegates with a colourful session showing how one can meld **Sefardi melodies** into Ashkenazi services. (With a little help also from Cantor Malovany on the piano -see below)



Local Rabbi **Ariel Abel** gave a clear assessment as to the importance of understanding the text of prayer, with his talk, entitled ‘The Cantor in the Synagogue Today’. In it, he emphasised the essential need for all lay leaders to fully comprehend the tefillos that they lead, and presented numerous examples of how a slight change in pronunciation can render the original meaning of a text worthless. His comprehensible and insightful talk provided a fresh message to all who were present of the significance of the Chazan in the synagogue – not only someone who should beautify prayer, but also truly as a *shaliach tzibur* – a representative of the people.

A second masterclass was held before the day was over and **Geoffrey Shisler**, having travelled up from London, presented his second volume of ‘Songs for the Synagogue’.

After the day’s official events were over, a group meal was enjoyed at JS Restaurant, including a sing-a-long with the chazanim.

On the final morning of the convention, **Natan Fagleman** – a native of Manchester – gave an account of his year studying at the prestigious Tel Aviv Cantorial Institute, entitled ‘My Year at TACI and How It Helped Me.’ His fascinating recollection of a year spent surrounded by some of the leading musical and liturgical teachers of the generation can serve as motivation for any aspiring young chazan and he made clear the benefits of such an education. Leaving the Institute with a greater love for his profession and more confidence that he was properly educated to do his job were just two of the major benefits that Natan highlighted.



[Young Northern Delegates riveted: \(Adam Caplan \(Prestwich\) Natan Fagleman \(Sale\) Albert Chait \(Leeds\) Geraldine Auerbach and Robert Marks \(Stenecourt\)](#)

Midway through the morning, **Alexander Tsaliuk** – a graduate cum-laude of the Moscow Conservatory and Musical Director of the exceptional Moscow Male Jewish Choir – gave a fascinating lecture on ‘Choral Music for Special Occasions’, using videos of his own choir to exemplify the settings in which choirs and liturgical music can be appropriate. The Moscow MJC has performed for Royalty and heads of State across Europe and America and has been called upon to accompany and appear with many famous orchestras and soloists. . Alexander, known to all as Sasha, is desperate for funds to ensure the survival of the choir and hoped that delegates might see a way of inviting them to tour in the United Kingdom. The possibilities of benefiting from his knowledge and passion – along with the beauty of his choir – are endless. What a delight and privilege it would be for Anglo Jewry to make use of his services.

Sasha Tsaliuk (left) with Jeremy Nussbaum the coordinator of the newly re-formed Manchester choir



Sasha created a choir out of the convention delegates – splitting up all attendees into four sections – and conducted an hour-long rehearsal, learning Roitman Rumshinky’s Ba’avur Dovid. His liturgical knowledge and musical expertise were of great value to the convention – not least in his ability to

prepare the MJMVC for the Shabbos that was to come.

One of the most important aspects of this year's convention was the launching of the European Cantors Association. The first meeting of the ECA was held in the Shrubberies Shul on Friday 5 July, with Geraldine Auerbach acting as chair. Going around the room, each member was invited to put forward their ideal aims for the future – what changes they would like to see in Anglo-Jewry with regard to chazanut. Many of the assembled cantors, were united in their suggestions of finding means to once again strengthen liturgical music and return it to our synagogues. Leeds's Chazan **Alby Chait**, who has made a lot of progress with high profile concerts and shabbatot, declared the importance of changing the people, *not* the music.

The ECA will work to slowly reawaken the passion for chazanut that has dipped in this country and in Europe over the last decades. Be it through concerts, musical evenings, liturgical services or lectures on the subject itself, the Association can now provide a stable base from which all cantors can operate and look to each other for support. Special thanks must go to **Alex Klein**, **Geraldine Auerbach** and **Barbara Rosenberg** for organising and facilitating the entire week's events.



Alex Klein, Convenor of the European Cantors Association and of the Convention was delighted with the outcome. He said "May we continue to grow together through friendship and learning. May we all be blessed in continuing our work and bring beautiful services back to the synagogue where they rightly belong. Let us inspire our communities with uplifting prayers. Let us bring together our positive ideas, act on them and make things happen."

Geraldine Auerbach MBE, the former Director of the Jewish Music Institute, who worked alongside Alex to create the ECA felt encouraged by the commitment to action by young cantors. She said. "This new energy bodes well for the future. However, there is a long way to go in consultation with synagogal bodies and with schools, to stop or reverse the prevailing trends".

Although the convention ended on Thursday 5 July, the music continued. **Prestwich Hebrew Congregation** played host to a special **Shabbat Chazanut**, on 6/7 July with Chazanim **Klang and Bensoussan** leading the davening, accompanied by a 17-strong **Manchester Jewish Male Voice Choir**. Once again under the baton of Sasha Tsaliuk, the choir performed a gorgeous rendition of Mogen Ovov on Friday night to set the mood for the services to come, whilst Chazan Bensoussan sang Lecha Dodi to an exotic, Eastern tune.

On Shabbos morning, the choir accompanied Chazan Bensoussan in a wonderful rendition of his own Ana Avda – a delightfully catchy Sefardi melody that he had performed at the concert on Monday. The two Chazanim were joined by Prestwich Hebrew Congregation's **Adam Caplan** to

sing Ba'avur Dovid with choral backing, whilst in Mussaf, the choir reprised their performance of K'vodo while accompanying Chazan Klang.

A superb service was concluded with Chazan Klang singing Adon Olam in call-and-response form with the choir, mixed with his own unique vocal improvisations. A l'chaim – perhaps drunk to things yet to come – of premium Moscow vodka was shared between the choir, conductor and chazanim after the service, whilst many of those in Shul heartily congratulated all involved on a beautiful choral service – the likes of which are not heard often enough.

The week's convention was a resounding success and the coming together of chazanim from the **United Kingdom, Budapest, Toronto, Berlin, Frankfurt, Lyon, Johannesburg, Dublin and Moscow** presented a tremendous chance for ties between communities to be strengthened. Reaffirming the belief that chazanut certainly has a place in orthodox synagogues has never been more important – or indeed more essential – but the task could not be in better, more passionate or more musical hands.

The **ECA's website** can be found at www.cantors.eu and all those interested in the Association can join for £10 a year by downloading the Membership form. There is also a facebook page for the same purpose. Alex Klein can be contacted at alex@cantors.eu. The Association looks forward to welcoming new members who are committed to enhancing and strengthening the position of Jewish liturgical music in our communities.

Let us use this year's convention as a **catalyst** to begin bringing chazanut back into our synagogues and changing the attitudes and mindsets of the people who make up our communities to once again, see chazanut as the shining jewel in the crown of Jewish prayer.

Robert Marks, July 2012

(All pictures by Alexander Tsaliuk)