

Paulina Achkinazi

An article by Yana Ovrutskaya

Paulina Achkinazi is a young Jewish composer. The word "young" only refers to her age, and says nothing about her experience, maturity and originality. Generally, reference to age can be misleading, especially toward composers and writers: a composer can be considered "young" even in their forties. And Paulina is still younger than thirty.

How did it all start? Probably at a family celebration, when sixteen years old Paulina played and sang three Jewish melodies "Hava nagila", "Tum-balalayka" and "Lomir ale ineynem" for the first time. Her singing brought tears to her father's eyes. Like many other Jews in Soviet times, he had almost forgotten his Jewish heritage and could hardly have imagined that his young daughter would bring it all back.

In the early 90s Paulina Tovshteyn left her hometown Naberezhniye Chelni for Kazan, to study at Music College. It was then that she got involved with the Jewish community revival and realized the link between Judaism and Music in her world, and learnt that for her they were inseparable. One could say that she grew to realize herself as a Jew through the music. And she was not the only one who found her self in that way. Kazan was a very fortuitous city and became a birthplace for an unique Klezmer ensemble "Simkha", whose concerts and especially the playing of Leonid Sontz, violinist and leader, united the Jews of Kazan. Jewish national consciousness came to them through the music. Paulina and many others in the Kazan Jewish Youth Club were among Sontz's fans but she shone and became one of his the most talented followers.

She started as a participant in the group Simkha, which made its first appearance on stage at the Chanukah celebration in Kazan in 1991. She went on to work as a soloist and arranger in the group. In 1992, she created the vocal quartet "Lekhaim", whose repertoire consisted mostly of her arrangements of popular and later, less well known Jewish folk songs. The line-up of the group has changed many times since then, and the ensemble was renamed "Ashkenazim" in 2002. Within the ten years of its existence, the group became a well-known professional collective and prizewinner of the Mikhoels' International competition of Jewish musicians (Moscow, 2002)

The year 2000 became a turning point in the life and creative work of Paulina and her quartet. Paulina attended Klezfest in St.Petersburg for the first time; then her whole group participated in the Ukrainian Klezfest in Evpatoria, where musicians had a privilege to make their personal presentation. Although the musicians were already well-known in Russia, there in Ukraine, they were met with so much warm approval on the part of their professional colleagues. Creative contacts with many like-minded people; an almost uninterrupted sequence of music sessions and concerts within four days; lectures and master-classes from the recognized authorities in the world of Jewish music - this is deeply encouraging for young musicians. For Paulina, Klezfests-2000 were a great help to realize that, on the one hand, her music arrangements are really interesting and important, and on the other hand, that there is a whole community of young people as enthusiastic about Jewish music and ready to share their ideas as her. The Klezfests allowed everyone to show themselves and to see others.

The quartet "Lekhaim" became a winner of the First prize on the Solomon Mikhoels' Competition in Moscow the same year in fall. Shortly afterwards they released their first CD "[Jamda](#)". And just this year Paulina started writing her own songs. A tune "[Ay-yay-yay](#)", one of her first compositions, was recorded on the first CD and during nearly 3 years serves as visiting card of the group.

Since 2000, the annual Klezfests have become a real creative laboratory for Paulina Achkinazi. This is the place, where she presents her new songs and extracts from the new programs of her quartet. There she finds interpreters for her compositions: by that time her songs already became a part of the repertoire of the famous performers in USA, Israel, former SU.

The year 2002 was also very important for Paulina and her group. The first performance of the program "[Di Yidishe Gas](#)" (The Jewish Street) took place in January 2002 in Kazan and later - in May - in New York. 12 of 21 songs included in this new program, were Paulina's own compositions. Her mastery significantly improved just in the process of this project, and it was here that she elaborated her particular music language. Her style features beautiful expression of Jewish folk songs, combined with challenging modern harmonization and also paying special attention to folk elements such as Yiddish ornamentation and phrasing.

Paulina Achkinazi's songs can already compile a whole book. And their number increases day by day. And new songs never use old cliché, even if they succeeded before. New programs always feature updated

methods, more elaborated, even avant-garde language, strong influence of improvisation, more free forms, non-traditional part-writing.

Adrienne Cooper, a popular American Jewish singer and Paulina's Klezfest teacher, succinctly characterized her style in the introduction to the last quartet "[Ashkenazim](#)" CD, "[Di Yidishe Gas](#)"... "Di Yidishe Gas" is an impassioned journey of the imagination. The young composer/arranger at the center of this endeavor, Paulina Achkinazi, possesses a rare gift. She brings to this work an original harmonic vocabulary that leads Yiddish song in a new direction, all the while pulsing with traditional rhythms. She is also on a discovery mission, researching and selecting fine undiscovered Yiddish poetry never before set to music. Working in relative isolation from the world of Yiddish cultural institutions, she often discovers a text, unaware that it has been set to music before. In some cases - Paulina gives a new melody to a traditional folk song. And the work pours out of her in thick sound - with such distinctive harmonic colors and melodic arc, that, once you've heard her work, there is no mistaking it for anyone else's composition."

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