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American Jewish Personalities

## George Herzog: A Peerless Musicologist Remembered

*Edgar E. Siskin*

During my first year as a graduate student in the department of anthropology at Yale, I took a course in primitive music taught by a young instructor by the name of George Herzog. Herzog had come to Yale from the University of Chicago with Edward Sapir, the celebrated linguist and anthropologist, who in 1930 had been appointed head of the newly created department of anthropology and linguistics. Sapir had brought with him a group of disciples, brilliant young linguists and anthropologists—Swadesh, Newman, Haas, Dyk, Dollard, Osgood—who became faculty members and fellows of the newly founded department. One of these was George Herzog.

The course Herzog taught dealt with the musical culture of West Africa. Soon enough we became aware of his mastery of the gamut of West African native life. When analyzing the songs of a tribe he disclosed a minute familiarity with the cultural setting. A description of Ewe drum signaling might move into a discussion of the structure of the Ewe language, then of its material culture, its kinship system, its religion. He would often compare musical styles. An Ovambo song would suggest similarities with the songs of proximate or distant peoples. A drum rhythm in Liberia closely resembled one in South America. His knowledge of primitive music ranged over much of the tribal world, and we were made aware of new vistas of musical interrelatedness.

And almost all from memory. Herzog seldom had recourse to notes. It was astonishing to see with what facility he would write on the blackboard transcriptions of native songs, with all the runic chicken tracks of melodic line, pitch, and rhythm. And you would wonder how so young a man could have absorbed, marshaled and mastered so much knowledge.

While lecturing Herzog would saunter around the classroom,

speaking naturally, Central European accent slightly in evidence, making occasional forays to the blackboard. Physically he was slight and of short stature. He smoked a good deal, and you noticed that his fingers were stained with nicotine. David McAllester has described him as “intense,” with a “bristling black mustache.”<sup>1</sup> I do not recall him as particularly intense—somewhat restless, perhaps. Nor was I aware that his mustache bristled. His demeanor rather gave the impression of informality, casualness. Always pleasant, he exhibited the easy courtesy of the well-bred European. But he wore no airs. There was nothing pretentious or self-important about him. You never felt he was playing a role.

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Herzog was not too far removed from me in age. After class we would sometimes talk, usually about our respective fields of first interest, music and religion. His familiarity with music of every conceivable variety was awesome, from primitive to folk to classical to popular. While a student at Columbia, his days were spent in the study of primitive music; his evenings, playing popular music in some cafe for his keep.

His religious outlook was fashioned by his upbringing as the son of a well-to-do Jewish family in Budapest. The Herzogs were acculturated liberal Jews, members of the Hungarian progressive Jewish movement known as Neolog. The Neologs had originated in the middle of the nineteenth century, mustering in time a considerable following among middle- and upper-class Jews. The Herzogs' membership in the Neolog community tells us something about their social status.<sup>2</sup> George himself was not religious in any formal sense, his attitude toward religion, that of most early-twentieth-century artists and intellectuals. But he always showed a sensitive regard for my religious sensibilities.

Sometimes he would come to my house for Sunday dinner. He was as yet unmarried and so was I. I had a housekeeper, an excellent cook, and Herzog seemed to enjoy her cooking. Another attraction was the Bechstein piano which sat in the bay window of the living room, where the afternoon sun would bathe it in brilliant light. The piano was something of a family heirloom, and in its exquisite rosewood case

adorned with shining brass sconces, it was a replica of the piano played by the beautiful young woman in Renoir's painting.

Herzog would seat himself at the instrument and begin playing. His small hands took command of the keyboard and there would issue music drawn from all the random corners of the musical world. There was nothing he could not play. He might begin with a movement from a Bach Partita, to be followed by a Debussy or Bartok bagatelle. He might tell some anecdote of Bartok, whom he had personally known in Budapest and whom he admired. "Would you like to hear some Rumanian carols?" he might say. After playing these for several minutes, the announcement, "Here are some Slovakian shepherd calls." He might then demonstrate some Ewe drum signals in the bass clef. Finally he would likely segue into some Gershwin tunes, improvising in the approved jazz tradition. It was a breathtaking display of pianistic virtuosity. All without a hint of vanity or conceit. He sat and played effortlessly from a massive musical store as though it was the most natural thing in the world. After hearing him play, one could understate McAllester's attestation, "George Herzog was admired and loved as a genius and a delight to his intimates."<sup>3</sup>

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Two elements in Herzog's career have not received the attention they perhaps deserve. One is the influence of Edward Sapir in determining Herzog's theoretical grounding and research agenda. Sapir's eminence among the linguists and anthropologists of the twentieth century has gained increasing recognition in our day. Besides possessing a phenomenal capacity for absorbing languages, scores of which he commanded, he made brilliant seminal contributions to culture and linguistic theory. Franz Boas attributed to Sapir the adoption of phonemic principles and the phonetic method in the study of primitive languages. He was, in addition, a poet, a pianist, and a composer, having studied composition with Edward MacDowell. Godfrey Lienhardt has described Sapir as "a character of Henry Jamesian sensibility."<sup>4</sup> His students found him an inspiring mentor. His colleagues called him a genius.

Herzog and Sapir shared artistic and intellectual interests and predilections, and it is not difficult to understand how they gravitated to-

ward each other. Herzog's research and writing clearly reflect Sapir's influence. His work on the music and languages of American Indian tribes living in the Great Basin and southwest—Pueblo, Pima, Papago, Yuma—followed directly in Sapir's wake. Especially noteworthy is Herzog's preoccupation with speech melody, the relationship between music and tonal language. Sapir had learned Navaho, a language with three tonal registers, and we have it on the word of Father Berard Haile, an authority on the tribe, that the Navaho counted Sapir the only non-Navaho they had met who could speak the language "like a native." Herzog went out to New Mexico and Arizona in 1929, 1931, and 1932 to work on Navaho music and poetry.

Both Sapir and Herzog worked on Jabo, a West African language with four tonemes. In Chicago Sapir had by chance met a black working in a bowling alley. He was a Jabo, Charles Blooah. Working with Blooah as informant, Sapir wrote a lexicon and grammar of Jabo and learned to speak it. In 1936 Oxford University Press published Herzog's *Jabo Proverbs from Liberia: Maxims in the Life of a Native Tribe*. The title page carries the information that the author was assisted by Charles G. Blooah. Obviously both Sapir and Herzog worked with Blooah, perhaps at the same time.

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A component of Herzog's contribution to ethnomusicology which has a claim on our attention was his interest in Jewish music. In New York while at Columbia he joined the Society for the Advancement of Jewish Musical Culture, participated in its meetings, became a member of its executive board, and contributed articles to its journal, the *Jewish Music Forum*. One article, written in 1941, "The Work of A. Z. Idelsohn in the Light of Modern Research," was an evaluation of Idelsohn's contribution to Jewish music from the perspective of comparative musicology. Until his death in 1938, Idelsohn was considered the foremost authority in the world on Jewish music, renowned for his ten-volume *Thesaurus of Hebrew Oriental Melodies*.<sup>5</sup> Herzog confesses his awe at Idelsohn's *oeuvre*, his "monumental work" on cantillation, the "massive achievement" represented by his research for which all subsequent workers in the field will be "profoundly indebted." At the same time, he felt it necessary to point out that modern

research requires “a new formulation of the methods and objectives Idelsohn set for himself.” With this tactful balance of courtesy and candor, Herzog called for a new approach to the study of Jewish music.<sup>6</sup>

Two years later, in an article entitled “Anthropological Bases for Jewish Music,” Herzog addressed some of the persistent questions about the authenticity, indeed, the reality, of “Jewish” music. His answer, based upon an anthropological approach, is that since genuine musical culture, like any manifestation of culture, can emanate only from a society which is homogeneous and stable, and since there are few human groups less homogeneous and stable than the Jews, a specifically Jewish music is difficult to identify. The exception is the ritual music of Orthodox Jews, much of which is undoubtedly very old. For Herzog, incidentally, it is not possible to posit a connection between this ancient music and the work of Jewish composers past or present.<sup>7</sup>

There was another Jewish association in Herzog’s life, an intimate one. His wife, Elizabeth, was co-author with Mark Zborowski of *Life Is with People*, published in 1952. This study of the East European *shtetl* has become a minor classic among Jewish books of recent decades. Regarded today as a somewhat romanticized portrayal of life in the small Polish Jewish town, it is memorable as much for its evocative writing as for its ethnology. The ethnologist of the book was Mark Zborowski, the writer Elizabeth Herzog. I knew Elizabeth as a fellow-student in Sapir’s legendary Yale seminar on culture and personality. She had come from Chicago and was a fourth-generation descendant of one of its patrician German-Jewish families. Her own background was worlds removed from the *shtetl*, and her re-creation of *shtetl* culture in *Life Is with People* stands as a literary tour de force.

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Herzog was first beset by illness in 1948 when he was forty-seven years old. After 1951 he wrote no more. The man whose research and writing comprehended the sociomusicology of vast areas of the world—from West Africa to Micronesia, from Siberia to Yugoslavia, from Maine to Arizona, U.S.A.; whose musical horizon encompassed not only primitive and folk music, but also music in the modern classical and jazz idioms; whose writings, in their scope and insight, marked

an apogee in musicological comparative and creative research; whose skills and industry built great archival repositories of folk and primitive music; whose qualities as a man inspired many—this man became incapacitated, silenced in the high tide of his life. He lived for thirty-three more years and died in 1984 at the age of eighty-three.

It is interesting to record that Idelsohn also became incapacitated in his fifties. His health began to fail when he was forty-eight, and by the time he was fifty-two he was permanently disabled. Four years later he died. Edward Sapir also died in his fifties. After recurrent heart attacks in the last three years of his life, he died in 1939 at age fifty-five. Three men recognized as preeminent figures in their respective and interrelated fields, who made revolutionary contributions to musicology, linguistics, and anthropology, all died at the height of their creative powers.

It was my rare good fortune to study at different times with George Herzog, Abraham Zvi Idelsohn, and Edward Sapir. I came to know each personally, savoring their extraordinary intellectual and artistic gifts, which some called genius, and receiving their friendship. As for George Herzog, all ethnomusicologists have been the beneficiaries of the singular scholarly, artistic, and personal heritage he bequeathed.

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### Notes

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1. David P. McAllester, *In Memoriam: George Herzog, 1901 - 1984* (New York, 1985), p. 86.
2. Theodor Herzl's family were Neologs, and it was in the Budapest Liberal Temple that his Bar Mitzvah took place. Almost half a century later Herzog became a Bar Mitzvah in the same synagogue.
3. McAllester, p. 87.
4. Godfrey Lienhardt, *Observers Observed* (London, 1985), p. 647.

5. Idelsohn taught Jewish music and modern Hebrew at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati from 1924 to 1934. He changed the music and liturgy of the chapel services, himself acting as hazzan and chanting the Sabbath services in a rich baritone. It was one of the earliest appearances of a hazzan at a Reform service. Idelsohn utilized the authentic Jewish traditional modes, marking a radical departure from the Germanic music of classical Reform worship.

6. George Herzog, *The Work of A. Z. Idelsohn in the Light of Modern Research* (New York, 1941), p. 6.

7. Herzog, *Anthropological Bases of Jewish Music* (New York, 1941), p. 17.