

Hassimcho.  
Di Frejd.  
Fan Beethoven. (9te Symphonie.)

הַשְׂמֵחָה.  
דִּי פֶרֶיִד.  
(פֶּן בֵּעֲשָׂאָוִיעַן (9-טֵעַ סִמְפּוֹנִיעַ))



# Ode to oy

Beethoven was the poster boy for Jews broadening Yiddish culture at the turn of the 20th century, reveals **Alex Weiser** on the composer's 250th anniversary

In 1928 a children's story was published in Vilna purporting to tell the origins of Beethoven's 'Moonlight Sonata'. In the story, Beethoven goes for a walk and while passing a modest home hears someone playing one of his compositions inside. He opens the door and finds that the pianist is a blind girl playing for her brother. Beethoven generously plays the piano for the two children, leaving them rapt and in tears. The candle lighting the room suddenly flares out and the group is left bathed in moonlight. The blind girl and her brother implore Beethoven to play something else for them. He looks out the window and begins to improvise a new work...

It's no surprise that this children's story is apocryphal, but perhaps it is surprising that it was written in Yiddish by Shloyme Bastomski, a pedagogue, folklorist, writer and editor. It is just one of a variety of children's books about Beethoven that appeared in Yiddish in the 1920s. These stories were part of a larger move in the period to enhance the literary, cultural and teaching materials available in Yiddish. As a figure of what the Western cultural canon has to offer, Beethoven seemed attractive to those involved in creating a rich Yiddish cultural world that was not parochial.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw a boom of Yiddish translations of important world literature – you can read anything from Homer to Shakespeare to Molière in Yiddish. Beethoven was given similar status: there

are Yiddish novels, travelogues, newspaper stories, poems and even academic books about Beethoven and you can also sing many of his works in Yiddish. In 1912, Zusman Kiselgof and the Society for Jewish Folk Music in St Petersburg published one of the first important Jewish songbooks. The collection is rich in Jewish musical repertoire: religious music, secular Yiddish language folk songs, wordless Chasidic nigunim, trop melodies for the Torah, and other Jewish liturgical recitations. Perhaps less expected, however, is the inclusion of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' alongside pieces by Mozart, Mendelssohn, Mussorgsky, Glinka and Saint-Saëns: all found in schoolroom arrangements with Yiddish and Hebrew translations.

Alongside raising the quality and availability of musical materials with Jewish origins, the creators of this historic songbook also sought to bring into the Jewish world – and translate into Jewish languages – some of the best of European culture. Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' heralds that "all men will become brothers". It was a message that resonated deeply with Yiddish-speaking Jews yearning for an equal place in European society, and a message that still resonates in 2020, the year marking 250 years since Beethoven's birth. ■

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