

The cellist who loves chazanut

Sonia Wieder-Atherton says Chasidic singers know how to put emotion into music



Cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton tracked down liturgical melodies in France and Israel

By Jessica Duchon, March 10, 2011

Jewish liturgical music will get the classical treatment next week when the American-French cellist, Sonia Wieder-Atherton, brings her extraordinary concert, called *Chants Juifs*, to London.

The concert (the CD version of which is already out) started life when the film-maker Chantal Akerman asked Wieder-Atherton to work on music for her *Histoires d'Amerique*, a series of filmed monologues exploring the experiences of Jewish eastern European immigrants in the United States. Researching suitable material, Wieder-Atherton found herself increasingly drawn to the singing of cantors and the spiritual power of Chasidic music.

"It is really liturgic, but with moments of joy, because that's what the Baal Shem Tov - the founder of Chasidic Judaism - brought to the Jewish religion," she says. "He was a revolutionary. He said that you should welcome God in dancing, believe in God in singing, enjoy every passing day. It was fantastic! And of course, it also influenced the music."

Wieder-Atherton explored sources in libraries in Paris and Jerusalem, but was most intrigued by the word-of-mouth connections that came to light as she worked. "Sometimes people would sing me one or two lines of a song, and then I'd find the same themes in a book in the Paris library, but the melody would be developed in another way. Those were fascinating moments: I could recognise the same themes being used differently in different parts of the world. Next I listened to some extraordinary cantors and studied the way they develop a phrase, which helped me to build the structure of those pieces."

It seemed so natural, as if those melodies had been there for ages

The personal resonances were intense. "My mother is Romanian Jewish and she never wanted to talk about her early experiences because there were traumas she preferred to forget," Wieder-Atherton says.

"This was something that existed in the background to my life, but I knew nothing more about it. When I began that work, suddenly it seemed so natural, as if I knew those melodies, as if those sounds had been there for ages. It was a very strong, strange, even frightening impression - something you know so well, yet you have never met it before.

"After that I wanted to study Talmud and understand better the relationship between thinking and feeling which I think is so strong in Judaism. They are always related: one never works without the other."

Wieder-Atherton was born in San Francisco and spent her early childhood in New York. But when she was eight, her mother, who had endeavoured to put her past behind her, decided that she wanted after all to return to Europe. The family relocated to Paris and Wieder-Atherton still lives there. The country's traditionally rigorous musical training also seemed to dominate her initial years of study. But it was another land that provided the revelation she sought.

"When I was at the Paris Conservatoire I heard a lot of different string players and I was absolutely attracted by the style of the eastern European sound," she says. "I was sure there was a secret there that I wanted to discover. A summer course was being given by teachers from the Tchaikovsky Conservatoire in Moscow, especially Natalia Shakhovskaya, so that summer I went to study with her. I was absolutely hypnotised by her teaching.

"After I graduated, I jumped on the train, went straight to Moscow and stayed there more than two years."

Looking back, she knows what she found so compelling: "This approach to playing is closer to what I discovered in the chazans: it's a very vocal style and I knew it would give me the ability really to express emotion."

Sonia Wieder-Atherton plays 'Chants Juifs', one of a series of three concerts, at Kings Place, London N1, from March 17-19. Tel: 0207 520 1490. Jessica Duchon and Sonia Wieder-Atherton will give an introductory talk at the Institut Français on March 15. Tel 020 7073 1350