

The joy of Jewish song

Film offers glimpse of great cantors of the past

By Daniel M. Kimmel

In "Great Cantors of the Golden Age," the late Dr. Max Wohlberg – a cantorial expert then in his 80s – allows that the footage he is introducing is terribly dated. It comes from a 1931 movie called "The Voice of Israel" and, visually,

choirs, and preserve their musical style on film. Styles change, as Wohlberg notes, but it's important that we not forget the past. It's the sort of video that is deadly dull if you're not interested, and pure gold if you are.

The companion disc, "Great Cantors in the Cinema," is an

Movie Maven

even more fascinating compendium of short films and excerpts that would be impossible to see anywhere else.

Here's Cantor Rosenblatt in the Holy Land, singing – or lip syncing – selections from the liturgy at the Biblical locations called forth. Rosenblatt would die during this trip and so we are seeing his final performances. Also included is an excerpt from the post-war Yiddish film "We Who Remain" in which Moshe Koussevitsky sings at a memorial service for the dead.

On the light side, and one of

the real finds of the collection, is the short film "Cantor on Trial" featuring Louis "Leibele" Waldman. He comes out in top hat and tails like Fred Astaire to sing us the story of a shul committee auditioning chazzans for the holidays. There's an old style East European cantor, a strictly formal German one, and then a "modern" American one who promises to bring pep and jazz tempos to the service. It's amusing to see shul committees haven't changed in more than 70 years, and absolutely amazing to see Waldman playing all the cantorial candidates.

The combined DVD release includes some extras not available on the original VHS releases, with seven additional cantorial offerings, including ones from Moishe Oysher, Adolph Katchko and David Roitman. In the early decades of the 20th century, the can-



A re-release of "Great Cantors of the Golden Age" is now available.

tors shown here were the stars of Jewish liturgical music, packing in not only synagogues, but even going on tour to perform in theaters. In the 1927 "The Jazz Singer," it's just such a concert by Rosenblatt that moves Al Jolson's character to try to reconcile with his family.

Whether in small doses or one large feast, this offers a taste of one of the great chapters in Jewish music.

"Great Cantors of the Gold-

en Age/Great Cantors in Cinema" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$50. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.

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