

# Akh, nit gut!

## Song cycle *From Jewish folk poetry* as Shostakovich himself would have liked to hear it

A beautifully varied program for four singers and a pianist, sung in Yiddish



Jewish folk music had made the most impression on him, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 - 1975) told his biographer. Outwardly, this music appears cheerful, but the undertone is sad. This characteristic is close to Shostakovich's own depiction of what music should be like: a smile through a veil of tears.

That is why soprano Elizaveta Agrafenina, mezzo-soprano Sára Gutvill, tenor Tyrone Landau, baritone Pierre Mak and pianist Jaap Kooi chose the title **Akh, nit gut!** for their album of songs on Yiddish folk poetry. The album was released in February 2023 by Zefir Records and contains songs by Joel Engel (1868 - 1927) in addition to Shostakovich's song cycle *From Jewish Folk Poetry*.

Engel, "the father of Jewish classical music," was the first classical composer to adapt Yiddish folk songs to create compositions for the concert hall. His *Yidishe folkslider* (1909 and 1912) are still close to the folk idiom and can be seen as the prelude to a development that culminated forty years later in Shostakovich's masterpiece.

Beautiful piano parts support the voices in narrative songs, which paint a kaleidoscopic picture of the life in the shtetls: both secular and religious themes are featured, life cycle events and historical scenes, songs of tragic heartbreak and songs of hopeful optimism.

Six of English's wonderful songs are recorded in new arrangements, for example the title song arranged for a vocal quartet, which can be heard at <https://vertoon.org/akh-nit-gut/>.

Shostakovich's song cycle became known in Russian - but originally the lyrics are in Yiddish, in which they are sung on this album. Maxim, the composer's son, confirmed that his father would have preferred his beautiful cycle to be sung in Yiddish. The sound and expressiveness of Yiddish bring the songs closer to their origins: Jewish folk poetry.

Part of the appeal of the cycle is the scoring that creates mini-dramas. In duets and trios, mothers sing dark lullabies, lovers reminisce at parting, a converted daughter evicts her Jewish father, while all the pain is accompanied by the cold wind of an endless winter. Only in the last three songs do happy young kolkhozniks and theater-loving matrons praise the good life in the Soviet Union, entirely in line with Communist Party ideology.

**Elizaveta Agrafenina, soprano - Sára Gutvill, mezzo-soprano - Tyrone Landau, tenor - Pierre Mak, baritone  
Jaap Kooi, pianist**



photo: Michel Marang, cover design: Meeuw

Short biographies of the musicians, concert photographs and further information can be found at <https://vertoon.org/akh-nit-gut/>.

### Concert programme

- Joel Engel: 16 songs from *Yidishe folkslider*
- Dmitri Shostakovich: *From Jewish Folk Poetry*, op. 79
- Viktor Ullmann: *Drei jiddische Lieder (Brezulinka)*, op. 53

### For your stage

- Lyrics can be projected; it is a powerful way to involve the listener in the true nature of the songs.
- The musicians introduce the pieces: they talk about the origins and content of the songs, and recite poems.
- The performance's length is flexible

<https://vertoon.org/akh-nit-gut/>