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Hern un Horkhn (Hearing and Noticing)

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Hern un Horkhn (Hearing and Noticing)

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Production and Design for Stage and Screen with a Concentration in Sound

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Abstract

For my thesis, I decided to take a closer look at the listening that is required of me in my field. As a sound mixer for musicals, I listen to the actors' speech and adjust the microphone levels accordingly. I am expected to learn to expect specific changes in the cadence, timing, and dynamics of the lines. The script does not change, but line delivery can change moment to moment, leaving much room for error on my part. Where is the line between being proactive and anticipating, versus truly listening in the moment and adapting with a more reactive approach? My most recent mixing challenge initially provided me with an extra layer of unpredictability: a musical spoken and sung entirely in Yiddish, mostly by non-Yiddish speakers.

I investigated what made Yiddish stand out, but more prominently, what was universal about it. I researched nonverbal communication and other telling signs that transcend language. I spoke with Yiddish scholars to get their perspective on different Yiddish dialects and accents. Even silence plays a role in what I do, and witnessing what is physically happening onstage can influence my performance in the aural arena as well. I gained a better understanding of how I am able to adjust to actors' varying performances, whether they are in English or not. At the conclusion of my research, I finally committed myself to fully learning the language of Yiddish. I am excited, not only to learn a new language, but to observe how my active listening changes with my growing knowledge, as I enter my eleventh month of performances of *Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish*, or *Fidler afn Dakh*.

Table of Contents

1. List of Figures.....	5
2. Introduction.....	6
3. Line Mixing.....	6
4. Mix Script.....	8
5. Yiddish Dialects.....	9
6. Differences in Pronunciations.....	9
7. Listening in the Moment.....	10
8. Adjustment to Hearing from a New Location.....	10
9. Improvisation: <i>Yes, and?</i> or <i>Yo,</i> <i>un?</i>	11
10. The Importance of Familiarization with the Material.....	12
11. Improvisation II: <i>Oy vey!</i>	13
12. Sign Language.....	13
13. Silbo.....	14
14. Nonverbal Communication	
14.1. Universal Signs	15
14.2. Hints in Physical Performance.....	15
15. Consistency	
15.1. Is There Room for “Play”?.....	15
15.2. The Role of Consistency in Commercial Theatre.....	16
15.3. Contributing Factors That Effect Change	17

16. Conclusion: Why We Ought to Listen.....17

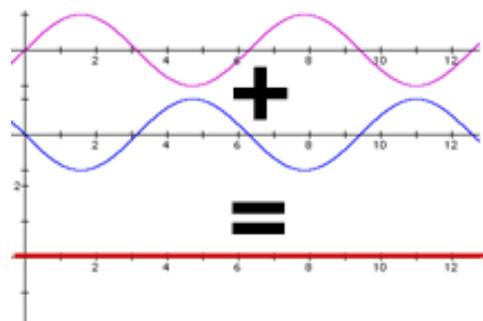
List of Figures

1. Two Sine Waves Demonstrating Phase Cancellation.....7

Mixing a musical involves many levels of listening. In the most basic theatrical scenario, you are listening to two people having a conversation. You may even be listening to one person divulging their inner thoughts aloud. Add electronics. Now you have to familiarize yourself with equipment that is typically only available to you once contracts are signed and you are in the room with the beast. Add a sound designer. What your aural taste consists of is out the window. You are there to implement their vision and maintain the integrity of their design. Add producers. Once the design team has left the theater, you may be haunted by the producers checking on their show. Now you must integrate opinions of people who know nothing about what you do, aside from the bottom line concerning what you cost them to exist while trying to maintain the integrity of your sound designer's wishes. Now that you are relatively comfortable with your job and what you do, let us spice it up. Add Yiddish, a language you do not speak or understand. Successfully mixing a musical is a triumph. Mixing a musical in Yiddish is an enigma, and a victory may hint at a more important form of listening.

Contemporary mixing for musicals revolves around line mixing. With a proper budget, each performer will have their own wireless microphone that corresponds to its own input on the mixing console, where the magic happens. Line mixing is the concept of only raising the fader when a person is directly speaking at that moment. In high school, I used to keep multiple people up as long as they were all present onstage and had a line coming soon. That does not cut it anymore. Although two people speaking into each other's faces may sound kosher in an acoustic environment, electronics complicate things. In this scenario, phasing is bound to occur. Let us imagine a sine wave. With two microphones placed at different distances from the source of the sine wave, the positive peaks and troughs will be misaligned ("Understanding Audio Phase"). If

they line up perfectly opposite, they are said to be out of phase with each other. With a perfect sine wave, this will actually cancel out the sound, as the troughs subtract from the peaks. When



Two Sine Waves Demonstrating Phase Cancellation

two actors are singing in each other's faces, into each other's lavalier microphones, phasing does not take the perfect, predictable form that a sine wave would. Here we have two different sources, as opposed to just one, and the signals consist of irregular human voices modulating and changing in real time. Without perfectly opposite peaks and troughs, different frequencies are either added to or subtracted from at unpredictable and varying rates, creating an unpleasant effect to the ear. The average audience member might recognize that it sounds "weird," without having the knowledge to understand exactly what is going on. Phasing is not entirely avoidable in live theater, but there are techniques for combating it. For certain lines or lyrics in *Fiddler*, I would choose one of the two actors' microphones to pick up two or more people's words. In this case, the sound is still compromised. Each actor's microphone is EQ'ed differently to complement the conditions of each particular microphone's placement and circumstances. For example, a person wearing a flat *shmata* (head scarf) wearing the microphone at the top of their forehead will most likely have a very different EQ from someone with an ear rig wearing a wide-brimmed hat. Using someone's else microphone to pick up a line or two may be the lesser of two evils, but it could still sound out of place with someone else's EQ. Nevertheless, it is preferable to leaving both microphones up and letting physics throw you endless curveballs. In this way, line mixing is crucial and often the only option when it comes to live sound in theatre.

It is important to be in the moment, listen attentively, and make adjustments on the fly. However, we mixers do have scripts. In the case of *Fidler afn Dakh*, each line of dialogue was typed up in three ways. The first version of the line was the Yiddish transliteration. Traditional Yiddish is spelled using Hebrew letters, as opposed to the Phoenician alphabet that we use in English. Learning another language is challenging enough without having to learn to match new sounds to corresponding new letters. For this reason, our actors learned the pronunciations with the help of the English transliteration and Yiddish dialogue coaches. There are variations on the spelling of the transliteration, so we should not be so fast to judge others when they spell their Yiddish with different English letters. A popular discrepancy is using “ch” instead of “kh” to symbolize the guttural, phlegmy sound most commonly associated with Yiddish and other Germanic languages. Although spelling variations are welcome by some, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research has a standardized format, and they use the “kh” spelling (“Yiddish Spelling Guidelines”). The second version of the scripted line was the literal English translation, with the best judgment of translator Shraga Fridman. Understanding these lines had its uses. Being able to anticipate the actors’/characters’ intentions provided hints regarding the flow of conversations and inflections throughout their sentences. Anticipating inflections (and any other surprises) is necessary for the mixer to be able to control and regulate the dynamics of the performers in the room. The third and final version of the line provided was the original English line from the classic Broadway version of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Seeing the difference between the Yiddish and English versions of the dialogue is interesting, if superfluous at times. At its best, it provided more information about the intention of the line, potentially peeling back the secrets of the

actors' performances and interpretations of particular moments. At its worst, it served as an unnecessary distraction and even diversion from the current version of *Fiddler* at hand.

As with any language, there are different variations to Yiddish. One aspect that makes it special, though, is its lack of a formal homeland. The language has no national presence. This means there are not national dictionary services acting as the language police, though there is the YIVO standard transliteration (Allardice). The YIVO Institute is known for its standardized system for spelling Yiddish words using the Phoenician alphabet ("History of YIVO"). The dialect used in our production of *Fiddler* is most representative of a more Lithuanian origin, called *klal yidish* (Yashinsky). Note that, in the Yiddish transliteration, the word "Yiddish" is spelled with only one "d," as is "fiddler" in Yiddish: *fidler*. As there are no capital letters in the Yiddish language, this is respected in the transliteration. *Fidler afn Dakh* being in *klal yidish* is especially notable, as most Yiddish theatre is done using a more Romanian version called *biene*, meaning that it is for the people (Yashinsky). As far as the transliteration is concerned, the most obvious difference is the appearance and sound of vowels. For instance, "tsu," meaning "to" in particular cases, may be written and pronounced as "tsi." I experienced this differentiation while working on a staged reading of Paddy Chayefsky's "The Tenth Man" in Yiddish. This change does not make a world of a difference for me, but it does affect the way the actors work. Depending on which dialect they have a background in, if any, their accent and delivery may be different than other people.

When it comes down to hearing our actors' delivery of the lines, we are left with a mixed bag of pronunciations. Yes, we have Yiddish dialect coaches who have worked with the cast, but over time, some of the actors' delivery takes a shift. Sometimes when the actors feel more at

liberty to convey the meaning of their lines, they will interpret them in a way that muddies the proper dialect techniques. I wonder if my brain finds it easier to break down this tainted pronunciation on my way to move the faders. Similar to this English-friendly interpretation, we have one actor in particular who grew up learning Yiddish in New York City. Her New York shines through even in her Yiddish, and I cannot help but think that lessens my load more than someone who was to speak in a more regional-specific way of Eastern Europe or somewhere foreign to my phonemes.

At the root of audio engineering is the art of active listening. You are always listening to the current speaker and waiting for the next on deck. It is important to stay attentive in the moment, in the theater, without losing oneself to fleeting thoughts about how the show is going that night. In *Practicing the Power of Now*, spiritual author Eckhart Tolle wrote, “Listen to the sounds; don’t judge them. Listen to the silence underneath the sounds” (38). Once I felt more comfortable with mixing *Fidler afn Dakh* and, at the same time, piqued with an interest in the Yiddish language, I found myself being distracted by the literal English translation. It was tempting to peak at the translation, even if I understood the intention of the moment, to start to attribute individual words meaning. This was a waste of the moment. A mixer must listen to even the silence between the words, as Tolle suggests, to stay on the right page and be ready to move the next fader.

Once I got my printed script, it was time to familiarize myself with it as I tailored it to my needs. Learning to eventually mix this show was a singular experience for me, as I started out as A2 on the production. As the deck audio technician, I spent the first two months of the run working backstage, listening to the mix of the show via headphones each performance. When I

made it to the front of house position, there were two major roadblocks. The first was adjusting to hearing the show from the house as opposed to backstage. It took time to get acclimated to what was normal, and what was a subpar mix. The other culture shock was having to understand the words the actors were saying. Listening to the show for two months prior gave me a somewhat-useful foundation upon which to build much greater knowledge and familiarity. I began with a sense of the rhythm of the cadences of the actors' speech and the pacing of the show on the whole.

Sometimes during a scene an actor will forget their line. In some cases, the actor may improvise something close to the scripted words and intentions, and their scene partner will carry on without pause. When the show is in a different language, however, it is more likely that the actors will jump text and skip to a later part of the scene. While this poses an obstacle to the other actors onstage, the supertitles operator, and ultimately the audience's understanding of the story, it also heavily impacts the mixer. Line mixing is unforgiving when it comes to mistakes. Even if the actor improvised a similar line to the scripted one, it falls on the mixer to anticipate when they are ending their flub and the next person is picking it back up with the preplanned text. This is when the knowledge surrounding the second and third versions of the lines in the script comes in handy. There comes a time when you have to have trust in the work you put into getting to know the show. The script will always be sitting there for your reference, but with enough time and practice, the mixer need not stare at it for every word of the play. There is a reason why even experienced sub-mixers are trained for each production and not left alone with just the script without other knowledge bestowed upon them by the original or current mixer on the production.

There are more practical reasons for familiarizing oneself with each version of the text in the script. As theatre is a live experience, it is always changing. The downtown production of *Fidler afn Dakh* lasted for the better half of a year. In that time, people got sick, had surgeries, had loved ones' funerals to attend, had monumental family events to attend, and pre-planned vacations to see through. Understudies and swings were an integral part of the production, preparing to go on at a moment's notice. By understanding the meaning and happenings of each scene and even each line in English, I was able to better communicate with stage management and actors alike about any changes. Generally speaking, a swing would cover the entirety of an actor's track. This includes the onstage blocking, backstage traffic, and all of the lines that person might normally deliver. There were more than a few occasions, however, when multiple people would be out, so the production had to get creative. Split tracks, in which multiple people pick up the slack of missing onstage folks, were implemented often. Sometimes one person's lines would be somewhat-randomly distributed to any number of people who had a spare moment onstage to deliver. In these instances, I would have to be familiar enough to know about what page to look for and reassign the line to another microphone by reprogramming parts of the show in the mixing console. Then, during the show, I would really have to be present, as usual, to anticipate any errors, mispronunciations, shortened lines, or even just different cadences that I am used to for the reassigned lines. Former conductor Kathleen Macferran did a TEDx Talk on the art of listening. She described that even when the musicians got out of sync or out of tune, it was coming back to harmony that created the beauty of the moment (Macferran). When mixing a musical, it is a skill to have the ability to bounce back and rock the mix even after a mistake.

Letting go and moving on is difficult, but failure to do so will create another mistake in the next moment. This is also true for actors.

On one unfortunate occasion, an understudy went on for a character that has a handful of sporadic lines before a lengthy monologue toward the end of Act I. The understudy, like the vast majority of our actors, did not speak Yiddish, but was training regularly with language coaches and learning the lines of the few different characters he covered. At his first and only performance playing this particular part, he got by with his individual one-liners and replies to other characters. He did his best to listen to others onstage. He spoke in a harsh and hurried manner, which changed the way I mixed his lines. I learned and adjusted to pull back and anticipate his staccato quips. Once his big monologue came, he got up onto the prop stool and completely blanked. He lowered his head, looking at his feet, trying to remember the beginning of the monologue, the middle of the monologue, really just anything in Yiddish at this point. The irony is that the actor he was filling in for speaks Yiddish, as does another actor who was out that night. Our only two hopes at improvising us forward into the scene were absent. Eventually, another cast member onstage started ostentatiously feeding the understudy some lines from his monologue. This life-saver of the moment does not speak Yiddish but proved he is an avid listener night after night. Soon enough the understudy got through the speech, skipping around and messing up profusely, but we made it to the end when other characters take to the apple box. In this instance, it was important for me not to panic, but to pay attention, look up from the script, and look for body language to take the wheel.

Although we often think of language as a spoken form, there are many iterations of it, some being nonverbal. Sign language is absolutely considered a language despite its visual

emphasis. At the same time, “sign language was [not] a system invented and then handed over to the deaf community as an assistive device” (Okrent). Just like every other language on earth, sign language was crafted regionally by deaf people as a means to communicate wants and needs to others in their local communities. This is why American Sign Language differs from other sign languages, even British Sign Language, despite both being created in English-speaking lands (Okrent). In addition to hand gestures, facial expressions are integral in the language. For example, when asking a “who-what-when-where-why question,” the eyebrows are supposed to be lowered (Okrent). This is similar to how verbal language speakers communicate. We scrunch our faces when asking a question we do not know the answer to, or when we are puzzled or confused by something. Many forms of nonverbal communication are universal.

Less common is the language of Silbo, which is still being taught at schools on one of the Canary Islands of Spain (Plitt). Silbo is an ancient whistling form of communication. On the island of La Gomera, the makeup of the Spanish language is compacted into Silbo Gomero, a form of communication whereby one must stick a finger in their mouth to create the different sounds. Different languages are born out of different survival needs. Sign language was born out of giving the deaf, and later those who love them, a way to experience each other’s inner thoughts, to communicate without being able to hear with ears. Silbo Gomero was a way for locals to warn each other about the intrusion of the Civil Guard (Plitt). It also was useful for communicating around the mountains of the region, as the whistling can travel up to two miles (Plitt). In this way, communication was not just a way for people to pass the time in leisure, but for survival purposes with dire consequences in the absence of fluency.

While local regions build languages from scratch in their own tongues, there are universal tendencies in the form of nonverbal communication. It has been estimated that fifty-five percent of meaning stems from body language, thirty-eight percent from tone of voice, and only seven percent comes from the words chosen (Vitelli). Studies show that people from all variations of culture express happiness, sadness, disgust, anger, fear, and surprise using exactly the same facial expressions (Hollinden). Faces display a whirlwind of emotions and feelings that are perceptible to those willing to observe. People in sales and other professions use this knowledge to advance in their fields and get what they want out of different situations.

In my field of choice, I also use this to my advantage. There is one layer of separation, given that the people onstage are acting and not always reacting genuinely in the moment, but their body language still provides hints to their vocal performance. Reading their gestures for volume and dynamics gets easier once you see the same person giving a similar performance for several months straight. For example, one actor will bobble her head forward and then recede back. When she jolts herself forward, the words come out quicker and a bit louder, matching her aggression. When she retreats for the end of the line, she loses the momentum, and the words can get lost. Once I am able to anticipate this, I punch the end of certain lines of hers to compensate for the lost air and oomph.

There is a lot that can be said about consistency from one performance to the next. Often the actors will deliver their lines similarly each night. While certain lines change in the moment as a reaction to an actor's scene partner, there are quite a number of lines that you can count on to be delivered exactly the same night after night. Creatively, is this the right path? Actors are meant to live and breathe on that stage as if they are inhabiting the roles they have been assigned

and are being paid to play. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Nursing, “play” is “any spontaneous or organized activity that provides enjoyment, entertainment, amusement, or diversion” (“Play”). Putting on a production with the same script, score, and technical elements night after night for different collections of people is, in fact, an organized activity, meant to provide entertainment for the paying audience. That is the agreement that is made when a consumer purchases a seat for a specific date and time. With all the pressure and finances attached, are we leaving room for spontaneity?

Clear consistency is a welcome facet of commercial theatre. According to the New Oxford American Dictionary, “play” as a verb is defined as “engag[ing] in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose” (McKean). It is safe to say that practically all people involved in the more creative aspects of theatre took this route in life as a means to enjoy themselves in their careers. We could have chosen to pursue any other job, but we chose to try and make it in this industry of live make-believe. At the same time, commercial theatre, which is certainly the type of theatre that makes it in the spotlight and in the bank, does have a large element of seriousness and practicality. We have producers and general managers and marketing staff and merchandise vendors and box office managers all for the sake of providing a living to all (or most) of the people involved with the production. With this in mind, can an actor even feel comfortable living in the moment up on that stage, submitting to whatever influences and fleeting instincts overcome them in front of a hopefully large, paying audience? Can the mixer relax, breathe, and enjoy the moment of experiencing different frequencies whizzing through the air, affecting all of the individual human beings in the room collectively?

We have to ask ourselves what our priority and agenda is in doing what we do. The show changes when the company knows that a high-profile celebrity with social and political power is in the room. The show changes when the original authors of a revived work are in the room, silently judging every aspect of each actor and crew member's performance. The show changes when I can hear my designer shifting in his seat next to me, solely present to give me notes on how I am taking care of his show, what he encourages me is my show too. The study of months of the "same" mix is the study of how outside influences get to the theatre-makers and change their methods. I have never mixed the same show twice. It does something to the ego and the Id to know that one show's success does not guarantee the next. I must persist in listening. The only option is to be present and adjust accordingly. It takes a *bisl more hern un horkhn*.

Everyone in the theater can join in on this mission. By listening to Yiddish for nearly three straight hours, audiences are keeping alive the tradition of the Jewish people. Heritage is being shared and celebrated. By opening our hearts and our ears - and occasionally our tear ducts - we are choosing to let in a shining beam of hope and joy. Theatre has always been a shared human experience. It is a communal act of ruthless compassion. Whether we are listening to universal nonverbal cues, regionally-crafted gestures, tight-knit community whistles, the familiar sounds of our native tongue, or the guttural articulations of a foreign language yearning to be heard, we are choosing to engage.

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