Dramatic Lives: Norwegian Jewish Musicians

15 years ago, in 2008, a former synagogue in Oslo reopened as a museum. The very first exhibition focused on special and generally unrecognized aspects of Jewish culture and history in Norway – mainly music. Central to the program were Issay Dobrowen (Russian-Norwegian pianist, conductor, composer and director of opera), violinist Ernst Glaser and pianist Robert Levin.

Dobrowen is one of the forgotten greats – but finally his music enjoys a renaissance. He was born into a Russian-Jewish family in Nizhny Novgorod in 1892. His birth family, who gave him the name of Yitskhok Zorakovitch Barabeitchik, was too poor to raise him, and he was adopted as a small child by a relative. His name was then changed to Dobrovel. He was a child piano prodigy and played his first official concert at the age of four.

He was 10 years old when the pianist David Shor discovered him. He was accepted as a student at Moscow Conservatory of Music, and quickly showed brilliance as a pianist. He graduated when he was 17, with a gold medal. Among his teachers at the Conservatory was the composer Sergei Taneyev. During his student years he changed his name again – this time to Dobrovejn.

He was allowed to leave Russia for Vienna, where he continued his studies with Leopold Godowsky at the Akademie für Musik und darstellende Kunst. When he lived for some time in Paris, he was part of the group of people that circled around Maxim Gorky, a close friend.

Legend has it that Dobrowen once played Beethoven’s *Appassionata* Sonata for Lenin at Gorky’s house – it was said to be Lenin’s favourite musical work. Lenin’s mistress was there too, she supposedly gave Lenin syphilis, but that’s another story. This meeting between Dobrowen, Lenin and Gorky is still known among many Russians – a film was made of it in 1963.

Before 1920 Dobrowen was an active pianist and composer, he played with conductors like Serge Koussevitsky and Nicolai Malko, in a trio with Gregor Piatigorsky and Mischa Mischakoff, and he often accompanied his friend Feodor Chaliapin – the world-famous Russian bass singer.

At the age of 26 Dobrovejn was appointed professor at the Moscow Conservatory of Music and two years later he made his debut as a conductor at the Bolshoi Theatre. His great passion was the theatre and the opera, and his favourite place was in the wings of Stanislavsky’s Artists’ Theatre in Moscow, where Chekhov had been working just a few years earlier. Dobrowen composed the incidental music for the performances, playing the piano as well and wandering around backstage, breathing in the atmosphere.

He had quite a career as a pianist and was without doubt a part of a rather unique artistic environment early on in the 20th century. During these years he composed his own music as well and his style is late Romantic, reminiscent of Rachmaninoff.

Dobrowen’s own index of works counts just over 20. Of special interest are his three piano sonatas and his piano concerto which he officially world premiered at the Dresden opera under Fritz Busch. The concert was a success and had quite a few performances around Europe and in San Francisco. Dobrowen was a famous name.

In 1922 Dobrowen was called to Dresden to conduct the German premiere of Mussorgsky’s epic opera *Boris Godunov* at the Dresdner Staatsoper. Leaving Russia, he changed his name for the third and last time – he was now Issay Dobrowen. He felt badly treated by the Bolshoi at the time – there were backstage intrigues and his contract was not renewed – he was happy to leave. Shortly after he became conductor-in-chief in Dresden, sharing the post with the legendary Fritz Busch. In 1924, invited by Furtwängler, Dobrowen conducted Berlin Philharmonic with great success. He always championed Russian music, not least Mussorgsky.

When Hitler came to power the rising antisemitism forced Dobrowen to leave Germany. Fortunately, he realized this early on, which saved his life. His work with the Oslo Philharmonic started in 1927 and lasted to 1931. His international career took off and in Oslo he was welcomed like one of today’s rock stars. He became a Norwegian citizen in 1929.

He arrived in Norway on a Nansen passport. Fridtjof Nansen was a polar explorer, diplomat, scientist and in the beginning of the 20th century the first one to cross inland Greenland on skis. There were millions of refugees all over in Europe after World War I, and the Nansen passport was the very first valid travel document for stateless refugees. In 1922 Nansen was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for this enormous humanitarian contribution. Nansen himself helped the Dobrowen family obtain Norwegian citizenship.

Everybody loved Issay Dobrowen, except maybe for the board of the Oslo Phil, who found his guest appearances with international orchestras, European and American, too many. In 1931, at the end of a bitter feud which he never could forgive or forget – he had asked for a two week leave of absence to conduct in San Francisco, and had even arranged for Bruno Walter to be his stand in – the board said no. It ended in the legal court after a prolonged and angry press debate. Even the audience took sides, mostly in favour of the conductor.

In 1934 Dobrowen became guest conductor with the New York Philharmonic and for two seasons the first guest conductor in San Francisco. In 1937 when the Bronisław Huberman established the orchestra which is today the Israel Philharmonic, the taken choice of possible conductors were Issay Dobrowen and Arturo Toscanini.

Dobrowen endlessly promoted Norwegian music. When Vladimir Horowitz, maybe the greatest pianist of the 20th century, gave a concert in Oslo in 1934, he was interviewed by the main newspaper and asked if he knew any Norwegian composers apart from Grieg. Horowitz answered that his father-in-law Toscanini very much appreciated Ludvig Irgens Jensen and had performed Jensen’s *Passacaglia* several times. Dobrowen must have introduced Toscanini to this music, and conducted the *Passacaglia* around 15 times just in the United States.

“Grieg is my ideal. His music tears me up,” He said, and was terribly disappointed when Grieg was to ill to see him. Asked if other Russian composers were influenced by Grieg, he said “But definitely! Russian music (about 120 years ago now) – would have had a completely different face if he never existed. You Norwegians don’t seem to truly appreciate Grieg. Scriabin’s music is unthinkable without Grieg. Rachmaninoff talked often about it."

In 1940 Hitler invaded Norway, and Dobrowen had to pack up and leave again. He moved to Sweden and became chief conductor of the Gothenburg Symphony. After the war he often conducted the Oslo Phil until his death in 1953, but the conflict had made deep wounds in his soul – according to his wife, Maria, who lived on in Oslo. After the war Dobrowen moved back to Oslo, and he is buried at the national cemetery.

While in Sweden he was going to conduct and direct Mussorgsky’s *Khovanshchina* at the Royal Opera in Stockholm. Ingmar Bergman wrote about it in his autobiographical *Laterna Magica*: “I stole the opportunity to follow his work. That was a momentous experience. We met a European capacity who determinedly and without regard for personal reputation decided to lift the artistic level of the theatre. (…) He wanted young singers, young virtuosos, young passion, young playfulness.”

It’s quite interesting that the Dobrowen Piano Concerto’s renaissance came about through a Norwegian pianist, Jørn Fossheim. Cooperating with Alexandr Dmitriev, in 2001 leader of the Academic Symphony Orchestra of St. Petersburg, Fossheim completely restored the musical material of the Concerto in C-sharp minor, as the original was in a bad condition. The Russian premiere of the work was done by Fossheim and Dmitriev’s orchestra at the Philharmonic Hall in St Petersburg in 2001, and recorded at the same time. Audiences and critics started to take note of Issay Dobrowen, the composer.

The work of Dobrowen that will be performed this evening, is not the Piano Concerto of course, but the atmospheric and nostalgic Opus 12, *Mélodie hébraïque* – Hebrew Melody – a typically Ashkenazy-Jewish folk melody which is carrying the old Eastern European musical heritage, and probably also musical memories of Issay Dobrowen’s childhood.

In 1939 Issay Dobrowen was asked if his work had been “colored by Norway”, he answered yes: “by the nature, the indescribably beautiful autumn colours and the atmosphere there.”

He conducted his last concert in Norway in 1952, a year before his death – Beethoven’s 9th with the Oslo Phil. Many people still remember that concert, among them my mother, who is now 108. She met Dobrowen many times together and was, like everyone else, utterly charmed by him. My father, being a pianist, and Jewish, had lots to talk about with Dobrowen. Not least during the war when both families were refugees in Sweden.

That is the common denominator of the three musical personalities this evening: Dobrowen, the violinist Ernst Glaser, and my father, Robert Levin. All three survived in Sweden while many in their families perished in the camps.

Dobrowen had experience as to what could happen to Jews in the Soviet Union. He had had a good life in Norway but knew when to leave – first from Russia, then from Germany and finally from Norway.

Before the war Oslo had two synagogues. After the war and the Nazi horrors, what was left of the Jewish population hardly filled the one. “All” is any case an exaggeration: there were never more than 2000 Jews in Norway altogether. In 1942, just before the deportations to Auschwitz, there were around 2200, but about 500 of them were recent refugees from nazified Europe. They probably thought they were safe in Norway. They weren’t.

Almost 1/3 of the Jewish population, 773 people, were murdered in the camps. About 1200 managed to escape to Sweden. In view of the colossal numbers of lost Jewish lives during the war, 773 sounds like very few. Even today there are only about 1400 Jews in the entire country. Fewer than before the war. There still is antisemitism.

Something Dobrowen, Glaser and Levin had in common, in spite of everything, was the strong and deep love for Norway, Norwegian music, literature and nature. Grieg was on top of their list and their way of supporting all things Norwegian in those years, was of course through music.

During the war years, Dobrowen worked only with Swedish orchestras and he stayed on in Sweden even for a time after the war was over and the whole world opened up to him. When the London Philharmonic was established in 1945, he was signed up for a long list of recordings. By 1952 he had recorded more than 20 hours of music for His Master’s Voice – many of them are still available on CD. He kept up his work as opera director, and took on scenography as well as conducting. At the Covent Garden in London and at La Scala where he had a leading position before the war, he was a more than welcome guest. The last years of his life he shared the leadership of these houses with Furtwängler, de Sabata and Karajan.

When Issay Dobrowen arrived in Oslo in 1927, people didn’t really understand that he was one of the foremost conductors in the world. Dobrowen provided the Oslo orchestra with endless advantages in terms of orchestral training, quality of playing, deep understanding of repertoire, old and new, and the brilliant way he presented it to the audience, which was growing both in size and in musical knowledge.

At that time what was discussed was what nationality the chief conductor of the Oslo Philharmonic ought to have. Dobrowen was not only a foreigner, but Jewish – like José Eibenschütz before him.

Public racist speech, newspaper notices, anti-Jewish demonstrations, was something Eibenschütz had had to deal with early in the 1920’s, and in Dobrowen’s time, when Hitler’s power grew, those voices also grew in strength and numbers.

Ernst Glaser joined the Oslo Philharmonic in 1928 as the principal – following his friend and teacher Max Rostal. The musical philosophy and ideas the two of them represented is still living on in Norway. More than anyone Glaser was responsible for two generations of Norwegian violinists. He was a “phenomenal violinist, up there with the best of them,” says one of his students today, Ole Bøhn, who is now a professor of violin at the Sydney Conservatory in Australia. Bøhn’s students are taught the way he was taught by Rostal and Glaser. When Bøhn looks at his old notations in the music, he realizes that Glaser must have started “a revolution” in music teaching.

Ernst Glaser was a driving force in Norwegian music from when he first arrived in 1928 and until he died in 1979. He was born in Hamburg in 1904, and after all his Oslo Philharmonic years he went on to become the dean of the Bergen Music Conservatory, city conductor and leader of a completely new musical education in Ålesund in Western Norway, conductor of the Arctic Symphony and finally teacher and professor of chamber music at the Norwegian Academy of Music in Oslo. He fathered four children, two of them musicians: from his first marriage, pianist Liv Glaser, internationally renowned *Hammerklavier* expert, and from his second, Ernst Simon Glaser, a most wonderful cellist.

Though his parents were Jewish, they felt relatively safe in Hamburg because they were not religious. Well…. they were wrong. They barely got out of Germany in time and fled to their son in Norway. In November 1942 they were on the run again – this time through the Norwegian forests to Sweden. Actually, Glaser’s parents were in the same transport as my mother and myself. I was 3 at the time. When, after an exhausting trek and with German soldiers and dogs at our heels, the border pilot led us across the border line, two of eleven people were missing. Glaser’s old parents. Our pilot crawled back and found them sitting on a tree stump, holding each other – they couldn’t keep up and had decided to die together. He got them across as well. The family was reunited in Sweden.

When he was small child, Ernst Glaser‘s mother decided that he was to become a violinist. He loved playing the violin, but because he was lefthanded he would have preferred the piano. And he loved having the orchestra in front of him, not behind.

Glaser studied with legendary Carl Flesch in Berlin for four years. Obviously, he had a great career ahead of him, so why did he go to poor Norway – of all places? Because his contemporary and friend Max Rostal wanted him to assume the position of principal after him. Ernst was embraced by the orchestra and the audience. With his reddish hair and big smile, he soon became a favourite of the audience.

Glaser quickly became a friend of Dobrowen. A common interest was contemporary and Norwegian music. Their pleasure in new Norwegian music changed the view of many in the audience as well as among musicians. The Norwegian teachers were a bit conservative, and it was time for something new! Glaser was progressive, modern and knowledgeable.

But during the war, things took the well-known ugly turn. Quite early on, Jewish musicians were barred from the broadcasting, the institution was nazified, Jewish composers *verboten*. Jobs for musicians were getting scarce. The theatre was heavily censored – musically and lyrically. The few Jewish musicians that had work, had to watch their every step – and sound.

Being a Jew, Ernst Glaser very soon became a prominent target for propagandist attacks with the Nazi-takeover in Norway. The most explicit one was an incident in Bergen. In connection with the 175th Ole Bull anniversary in 1941, Bergen Phil had presented the Oslo orchestra with Ole Bull’s violin by Guarneri del Gesù. Ernst Glaser was signed as the soloist, playing this violin.

Ole Bull was the first Norwegian artist to be acknowledged internationally. He was a virtuoso violinist, composer and a charismatic visionary who established the National Theatre in Bergen and tried to build his own state, Oleana, in the US. He hired Ibsen as house dramatist and director and sent Grieg for studies in Leipzig. Bull had a profound influence on both of them. Without doubt, he was a kind of a national treasure, as well as man of the world, a man with an open mind. In other words, exactly the opposite of the vulgar Nazis who would hear nothing of a Jew playing Bull’s violin.

January 16, 1941, when Ernst Glaser entered the podium in Bergen, with Ole Bull’s violin, pandemonium broke out. The Hird – the Norwegian equivalent of Hitlerjugend – got to their feet screaming and throwing propaganda flyers around, with words like “Our Germanic honour is soiled by the Jew Moses Salomon” (alias Ernst Glaser).

Glaser kept his cool – at least outwardly. A fight broke out between the Hird youth on one side and the shocked audience and musicians on the other. At one point the conductor Harald Heide tore off his concert coat and threw himself into the fight, yelling at the orchestra: “Damn it all, play the National Anthem!”

A brilliant idea, because the moment they started playing, the young Nazis stopped fighting, stood at rigid attention, with their right arm lifted in a hail to the Führer.

Ernst Glaser and the violin were smuggled out of the concert hall, and the violinist brough undercover. Soon after the concert, in February 1941, the German authorities demanded Glaser’s dismissal as Oslo Philharmonic’s concert master. A member of the nazi leadership is said to have prevented this. When in September 1942 the German Sicherheitspolizei ordered the Norwegian authorities to arrest and deport all Jews in Norway, the Hird’s music leader warned Glaser and offered to personally organize his transfer to Sweden. Glaser refused the offer and still hoped for a chance to be spared from sanctions in Norway – his wife was not Jewish.

It’s been said that Glaser acquired the tremble in his bow arm at the time of the Bull concert, but professor Bøhn is not so sure. His opinion is that Ernst got dystonia – a common stress ailment among musicians today. It means that the nerves and muscles don’t react to signals from the brain.

Ernst Glaser never gave up. For the rest of the war years, my father, together with Ernst and other Norwegians, toured Sweden to play for and build morale among the young Norwegian soldiers who were secretly training in Swedish forests, eagerly awaiting the end of Hitler’s era. They never forgot the musicians playing for them. My father never forgot playing in the back of a lorry in a snowstorm, snow blowing into the mouth of a soprano singing Grieg – she later sang at the Metropolitan in New York.

When my father was asked on the spur of the moment to compose a march by tomorrow, honouring the liberation of Kirkenes in 1944, he said yes, as always. Kirkenes is a city way up north in Norway, a terrible sacrifice to the German tactics of scorched earth. Hardly a house remained. Ernst helped him with the orchestration to get it ready on time. And when my father had to get my mother to the maternity ward, Ernst was my babysitter.

There was another common interest: Edvard Grieg. Ernst’s awe of Grieg was so immense that he never would compose anything himself. Robert Levin composed all sorts of melodies and marches, but he arrived in Sweden without his sheet music. Grieg was so ingrained in him, in both of them, that they couldn’t manage without. The sheer joy of being able to play Norwegian music in freedom, stayed with them forever.

After the war when the horror of the camps were unveiled, my father felt he could not go back to his former workplaces as if nothing had happened. He used to be a popular theatre and restaurant musician, a well-known studio musician and a celebrity radio name – in those years, before the radio, the restaurant ensembles were often the only live music for less affluent people, and the theatres always had a sizeable orchestra in the pit.

Even as a child Robert Levin supported his own family. The Levins arrived from Lithuania around 1904, dirt-poor and with their life in their hands. Robert, born in Oslo in 1912, started playing in restaurants to feed the family at the tender age of 12. They were poor but would rather go hungry than deprive Robert of his piano lessons.

But then work itself was often the musicians’ only education. All music education was private and expensive. The Norwegian Academy of Music was not established until 1973 – Robert Levin was appointed the first dean.

A professorship in interpretation and accompaniment followed. The students loved him. A street near the opera house in Oslo was recently named after him and a blue plaque placed on the house where he used to live.

When Robert was born in 1912, his mother decided that he was going to be a pianist. He made his debut at 19, and at the time of his death in 1996, there was hardly an internationally famous name he hadn’t worked with. Just to mention a few: Anne Brown, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Rita Streich, Kim Borg, Yehudi Menuhin, Henryk Szeryng and Camilla Wicks. When in 1946 he was asked to step in for an accompanist who fell ill, his fate was sealed. He became a musical partner of excellence.

He had a fantastic musical memory and could play anything *prima vista* – that is at first glance. Where his experience proved lacking, Ernst was again some help. He knew both the old and the new music, and he could lead my father into styles and techniques.

Robert Levin worked ceaselessly, he could have up to three or four concerts a week with different artists and music on the program. There were times when he entered the podium and was given the sheet music right there.

His passion was to better the musical education in Norway – starting with musical kindergarten. And he did. And Norway knew how to pay respect. He received many honorary prizes, degrees and mentions, royal medals – and many positions of trust in the musical community.

Music was the air he breathed. He always made a point to his students: it doesn’t matter where you play, it doesn’t even matter what you play – the only important thing is how you play!