

## How Do You Say “Bravo” in Yiddish?: Italian Opera for the Yiddish-Speaking Masses in Early 20th-Century America

*A 5-part series featuring Daniela Smolov Levy, Ph.D.*

Presented by the Lowell Milken Center for Music of American Jewish Experience at  
The UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music



### Overall series summary

Although the names of Ivan Abramson and Josiah Zuro are hardly known today, these impresarios were among many zealous opera democratizers in early twentieth-century America. By this point, foreign-language opera had become firmly established as the domain of elites. Yet, as this lecture series reveals, popular price opera in Italian aimed at not only Italian immigrants and native-born Americans but also the Yiddish-speaking public emerged as an integral part of the American cultural scene.

Each presentation in this series focuses on a key figure within the sphere of opera aimed at Yiddish speakers, as well as a concluding lecture that explores the broader social and cultural forces animating this operatic activity. This as yet untold story of Yiddish speakers' involvement with Italian opera in America sheds light on the connection between high and popular culture of the period, as well as on the relationship between immigrant culture and the mainstream American opera world.

### Individual lecture summaries

- 1) **Call Him *Signor* Isaac: Ivan Abramson's Italian Grand Opera Company**  
Tuesday, January 11, 2022, 5pm PT

According to Ivan Abramson, “Italians and the Jews are all lovers of music” who “prefer opera to drama.” This lecture delves into the interconnections between the Jewish and Italian opera spheres in the early 1900s, showing how Abramson capitalizes on the cultural overlap between the two immigrant groups as simultaneously outsiders and insiders in the world of opera to promote his popular price company.

2) **The One and Only Oscar Hammerstein: Bringing Downtown Uptown**

Tuesday, February 8, 5pm PT

An indefatigable early twentieth-century opera democratizer, Hammerstein wants to “give first class opera at prices within the reach of everybody” – which he aims to do, ironically, by building the Manhattan Opera that quickly becomes a rival institution to the venerable Metropolitan. Revealing the intriguing overlap between the elite and popular spheres, this lecture highlights Hammerstein’s savvy in making the typically snobby uptown opera scene accessible to those from the Lower East Side (and beyond).

3) **The Russian Bear: Mikhail Medvedieff’s Geographic, Linguistic, and Theater Crossover**

Tuesday, March 8, 5pm PT

The Russian opera singer Meer Haimovich Bernshtein (AKA Mikhail Yefimovich Medvedieff) is emblematic of the intricate web connecting a vast array of places, people, and genres in turn-of-the-century theatrical culture. This lecture focuses on Medvedieff’s foray into the New York Yiddish scene after a successful European career, examining his experimentation with different ways of appealing to Russian-Jewish audiences in not only opera but also the Yiddish theater.

4) **Bringing Everyone Together: The Zuro Opera Company**

Tuesday, April 12, 5pm PT

By the time Josiah Zuro emerges on the New York opera scene in 1911, popular price Italian opera companies have a reputation in the entertainment world as risky and short-lived endeavors. Examining the trajectory of Zuro’s career, this lecture reveals how the impresario and educator finds innovative ways of attracting Italians, Jews, and Americans to attend opera performances, uniting these groups through a common love of the genre.

5) **Why Promote Italian Opera Via the Mame-loshn?**

Tuesday, May 10, 5pm PT

Is a public that still gets its news from Yiddish newspapers likely to attend the opera? This lecture explores the implications of promoting Italian opera among a largely uneducated working-class population, the questions of assimilation and acculturation raised by these endeavors, the parallel English-language opera scene, and the complicated yet symbiotic relationship between the high and popular cultural spheres.