

The remarkable and poignant story of the Comedian Harmonists, an early 1930s German singing group that was forced to disband because three of its members were Jewish. The banning of the group, which enjoyed a level of success in Europe similar to the Beatles in the 1960s, was part of the Nazis' attempt to erase all traces of Jewish life and culture from German society - an early aspect of the Holocaust.

The Comedian Harmonists: The Last Great Jewish Performers In Nazi Germany

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THE COMEDIAN HARMONISTS

THE LAST GREAT JEWISH PERFORMERS IN NAZI GERMANY



DOUGLAS E. FRIEDMAN

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“Hoppla, jetzt komm’ ich”¹

(Okay, Here I Come)

Beginnings

The year is 1910. The boy, only four years old, would go with his father to rehearsals of the Philharmonic, where his father sang in the chorus. The boy sat, sometimes in the woodwind section, sometimes among the brass instruments. As a boy would do, he tried to imitate the sounds coming from the instruments. It probably never occurred to him that the talents he was developing would help propel him to fortune and fame. It can be said with great certainty that the boy never dreamed that the path on which he was headed would also lead to persecution, disillusionment and exile.

Fast-forward to the 1950s. The boy is now middle-aged. He has little money. He sits in a rented room, in a foreign country, trying to produce a 28-track tape recording in which he uses only his voice to create the sound of a complete vocal orchestra. After many years of exile, his journey will eventually bring him back to his home country, where he is facing serious illness and ultimately death, likely hastened by the stress of the life he has led.

Rewind to 1927. The same boy, now 21 years old, has recently lost both his parents. However, he still has a keen interest in music and wants to form a singing group modeled after the famous Americans, the Revelers.² To find the other members, he places an ad in a newspaper.

A young man wanting to form a vocal group is not an unusual story. But this story will be different because the place is Berlin and the young man – Harry Frommermann – is Jewish.

The story of Frommermann and the group he founded, the Comedian Harmonists, is one of aspiration, great musicality, enormous success, the Holocaust, war, betrayal, the pursuit of the American dream, and more. Some may question whether this is a Holocaust story – but there were many aspects to the Holocaust. Yad Vashem (Israel’s Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority) defines the Holocaust as “the sum total of all anti-Jewish actions carried out by the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945: from stripping the German Jews of their legal and economic status in the 1930s, to segregating and starving Jews in the various occupied countries, to the murder of close to six million Jews in Europe.”³ The Comedian Harmonists are one of the most prominent examples of how the National Socialists tried to erase all traces of Jewish

1 Recorded by the Comedian Harmonists in 1932.

2 In Germany, the spelling was Revellers.

3 <http://www.yadvashem.org/> (accessed November 5, 2007)

civilization and culture from German society – as one writer called it, “the slow smothering of Jewish life.”⁴



The Revelers

Harry Frommermann was immediately taken with the Revelers. Their style and technique were new and unique and Frommermann was “enthused about their weightlessness in voice-giving.” He “started to write scores for a so far non-existent group – inspired by the popularity of the Revelers’ records. The scores differed from the Revelers in that in them I tried to connect my talent to imitate musical instruments with the composition for a men’s quartet.”⁵

An extremely important and popular group in the 1920s and early 1930s, the Revelers advanced the vocal group music genre by using more voice separation and a less formal style than previous popular groups, as well as by pioneering in the use of their voices to imitate instruments.⁶ They were also the group that began to build the bridge between the very formal vocal groups of the first two decades of the twentieth century (such as the American, Peerless and Haydn Quartets) and the musically freer

4 Grimes, William. *New York Times*, October 26, 2005, “The Radical Restructuring of a Germany Headed To War.”

5 Frohman, Harry M. *The Story Of The Comedian (Comedy) Harmonists*, Comedian Harmonists Archive, Theo Niemeyer (“Frohman story”). Frommermann later changed his name to Frohman. This story was written by Frohman in English.

6 The Revelers started as the Shannon Four in 1917 and recorded on the Victor label. The members were Charles Hart, Harvey Hindermeyer, Elliott Shaw and Wilfred Glenn. In 1918, Lewis James replaced Hindermeyer. They became the Shannon Quartet in 1923, but Hart left and they had no fixed lead tenor. Soon after, they became the Revelers, with Franklyn Baur as first tenor, James (also as tenor), baritone Shaw, Glenn as the bass and Ed Smalle on piano. The Revelers had 13 hit records from 1926 to 1930 on the Victor label, with their biggest being “Dinah” in 1926. In those days, some groups would record simultaneously for various record companies and use a different name on each label: on Columbia, they were called the Singing Sophomores; on Brunswick, the Gaiety Musical Comedy Chorus and the Merrymakers

and jazzier groups that followed. In his book *Stardust Melodies*, Will Friedwald said of the Revelers: “This vocal quartet was harmonically quite innovative and was an important influence on such later groups as [Paul] Whiteman’s own Rhythm Boys and the German Comedian Harmonists. Rhythmically, however, the Revelers were stiff beyond words and even the most rudimentary syncopation seems quite beyond them.”⁷ Another view of the Revelers – this from the other side of the Atlantic – comes from Comedian Harmonists biographers, Peter Czada and Günter Grosse [German: Große], in their book, *Comedian Harmonists, Ein Vokalensemble erobert die Welt* (*The Comedian Harmonists, A Vocal Group Conquers The World*): “Popular music in America started to experience a subtle change in the middle of the twenties, which would inspire [the Revelers’] Wilfred Glenn. He would later say that the character of the songs which the quartet would be requested to sing by the record companies at the beginning of 1925 increasingly displeased him. . . . [M]ore modern music was reserved for the instrumentalists. Glenn developed a new concept of arranging and presentation for his quartet at that time, supported by Franklyn Baur. . . . The result was a new, more relaxed style of singing, closer to jazz. . . .”⁸

German vocal music before the Comedian Harmonists was stiff and lacking in rhythm. German quartets sang traditional songs, wore gloves, and held songbooks in front of them. Frommermann wanted to break with that tradition. The Revelers had not yet performed in Germany because they demanded more money for performances than German promoters could pay. This encouraged Frommermann; he believed that a similar, German group could make a lot of money because their fees would not be too high, but could be high enough to make them successful.

Frommermann was right. And although he may have been inspired by the Revelers, what he and the others created was no mere copy. The Comedian Harmonists

15. Beiblatt zur „Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger“

Kleine Anzeigen

Filialennetz des Berliner-Vokal-Ensembles

Musik u. Gesang

Biolindilettant
sacht Privatanschluß. D. 5563 Eckelhaus, Zimmerstr. 35/41. [51600]

Adtuna. Zeltner.
Tenor, 30 J. (Vervollständiger, nicht über 25), sehr musikalisch, schön klingende Stimmen, für ein- und zweistimmige Ensembles unter Angabe der täglich verfügbaren Zeit gesucht. G. 25 - Eckelhaus, Friedrichstr. 136. [3463]

Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger, December 18, 1927

7 Friedwald, Will. *Stardust Melodies*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2002, p. 123

8 Czada, Peter and Günter Grosse. *Comedian Harmonists: Ein Vokalensemble erobert die Welt*. Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 1993, 1998 (“Czada”), p. 12. All references are to the 1998 edition.

were one of the best vocal groups of any era and had a unique sound that was and still is unmistakable.

Rare Opportunity

When Frommermann had completed 15 arrangements, he decided to put his plan into action.⁹ He placed an ad in the Sunday, December 18, 1927, edition of the *Berliner Lokal-Anzeiger*, a daily newspaper, that read as follows: *Achtung. Selten. Tenor, Bass (Berufssänger, nicht über 25), sehr musikalisch, schönklingende Stimmen, für einzig dastehendes Ensemble unter Angabe der täglich verfügbaren Zeit gesucht. Ej. 25 Scherffiliale, Friedrichstr. 136.* (Attention. Rare opportunity. Tenor, Bass (professional singer not over 25), musically talented, nice-sounding voices, for unique ensemble. Kindly give days and times when available [for rehearsals, etc.].) The ad, which included a reply address of a newspaper's branch office, cost 12.50 marks.¹⁰

At the time, the number one song in the U.S. was "My Blue Heaven" by vocalist Gene Austin. "My Blue Heaven" was the second best-selling non-holiday record of the entire pre-1955 period, selling more than 5,000,000 copies!¹¹ The Revelers had already charted ten times by then, but competition was not that fierce in those days: If you had a contract with a major label, such as the Revelers had with Victor, charting was almost assured.¹²

The *Lokal-Anzeiger* was a full-sized paper and the small advertisement could easily have been overlooked. But, luckily for Frommermann, the ads were listed by category – in this case under "Musik u. Gesang" or "Music and Singing." The *Lokal-Anzeiger* advertisement gave the address of a mail drop on the other side of Berlin. Frommermann and Theodor Steiner wrote individually to the applicants inviting them to audition at Frommermann's apartment. (Steiner was a childhood friend of Harry's who played piano and was also to be the baritone voice for the group.) The response to the advertisement was overwhelming. Times were not good for singers and there were few jobs available. According to Frommermann, about 70 people showed up for the January 3, 1928, audition, lining the staircase to his fifth-floor apartment and spill-

9 Frohman story

10 Harry Frommermann, Radio Bremen Interview, Loretta Findeisen, January 13, 1973 ("Radio Bremen Frommermann Interview")

11 Whitburn, Joel. *Joel Whitburn's Pop Memories 1890-1954*. Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin: Record Research, Inc., 1986, p. 38. The number one seller of the period was "Near You" by Francis Craig & his Orchestra in 1917. Whitburn p. 627.

12 The Merry Macs had already formed in Minnesota, but would not get a recording contract until 1932. Bing Crosby and the Rhythm Boys joined Paul Whiteman's Orchestra in 1926 and the trio had made the charts, with Whiteman, on "Side By Side" in July and "I'm Coming Virginia" in September of 1927. The Boswell Sisters recorded as early as 1925 but would not chart until 1931. The Mills Brothers' first hit was in 1931. The Peerless Quartet had faded, with its last chart hit coming in early 1926. The American Quartet had disappeared even earlier (in 1924).



The plaque on the wall at Stubenrauchstrasse 47, Berlin; it reads “In an attic of this house in the years 1927/1928 on the initiative of Harry Frommermann with Robert Biberti, Erwin Bootz, Erich Collin, Roman Cycowski and Ari Leschnickoff, the ‘Comedian Harmonists’ were founded. The world-famous vocal group was broken up in 1935 when the three Jewish members were forced to emigrate.”

ing out onto the sidewalk below.¹³ That number may be exaggerated; it seems a large number to invite to appear.

When I walked up those stairs and stood in that apartment on a May morning in 2007, it was difficult for me visualize the scene as it must have been 80 years earlier. The Stubenrauchstrasse neighborhood is a nice middle-class area, not a poor one, and it was hard to understand how Frommermann could afford to live there. Marina Seeger-Holle, whose family has owned the building since it was erected and who now lives in the famous top-floor apartment with her family, explained that the rooms were originally intended for storage and were not meant to be lived in. Because it was not a proper apartment, the rent was cheap.¹⁴

Frommermann told the story that one of the applicants, Robert Biberti, a “huge basso,” shouldered his way past the others and was “the first and only choice among the seventy” who showed up. A letter found in the Biberti Estate Archive at the Staatsbibliothek (State Library) in Berlin, dated December 29, 1927, from Frommermann and Steiner to Biberti, invites Biberti to appear at their Berlin apartment at Stubenrauchstrasse 47 for an audition on January 3, 1928.¹⁵

13 Frohman story

14 Interview with Marina Seeger-Holle in Berlin on May 9, 2007

15 The book by Eberhard Fechner, *Die Comedian Harmonists: Sechs Lebensläufe*. Berlin: Quadriga Verlag, 1988 (“Fechner book”) refers to an audition date of December 29, 1927, but the documents in the Archive contradict that date. See, Fechner book, pp. 156 and 163. (All references to the Fechner book are to the 1988 hardcover edition. There is also a paperback edition.)



Stubenrauchstrasse 47, Berlin

In his booming bass voice, Biberti made his case to Frommermann for inclusion in the group and demonstrated his not inconsiderable singing abilities. His audition number was the aria “O Isis and Osiris” from *The Magic Flute* by Mozart. Steiner accompanied him “a bit haltingly.”¹⁶

Biberti could sight-read music, which was a big advantage, and he was also a fan of the Revelers. He was perfect for the group in one other respect – he was willing to rehearse without payment.¹⁷ This was essential as Frommermann and Steiner did not have the means to pay anyone to rehearse; in fact, they barely had enough money for rent and food. Frommermann had to borrow money from his girlfriend, Jesta Nielsen (whose mother was Asta Nielsen, from Denmark, a famous stage actress in Scandinavia who became a silent film star in Germany) so that he could concentrate on music and not have to look for a job.¹⁸ Two singers – Louis Kaliger and Victor Colani – had already been chosen; Biberti convinced Frommermann and Steiner that he could supply the other singers for the group and the remaining applicants were sent home.

Why was Biberti willing to work so hard, without pay? He put it this way: “What am I now? A zero, a zero in a chorus, a nobody. But if this works out, I suddenly am somebody. I am sure this was in all our heads, at that time, when there were so many

16 Biberti in Fechner film

17 Czada wrote that one of the applicants who impressed Frommermann, but was unwilling to rehearse without pay, was Johannes Heesters, a Dutch-born actor and singer, who went on to a very successful 85-year career in show business in Germany. As of 2008, at age 104, he was still performing. However, according to information obtained by Theo Niemeyer from Heester’s wife, Heesters was not even in Berlin at that time.

18 Czada, p. 15.

unemployed people. And so every one of us tried to be disciplined and to conform oneself to the idea.”¹⁹



Interior of Stubenrauchstrasse 47 in 2007

Present at the first rehearsal at the apartment on January 16, 1928, at three in the afternoon were Frommermann, Steiner, Biberti, Kaliger and Colani.²⁰ Kaliger and Colani were never part of the official group and they disappeared very quickly. They were replaced by Asparuch “Ari” Leschnikoff, who joined the group that January, and Walter Nussbaum [German: Nußbaum], two tenors Biberti had brought over from Berlin’s Grosses [German: Großes] Schauspielhaus (“large playhouse”), a Berlin theater where they had been singing together.

The new group called themselves the “Melody Makers.”²¹ The English name was an obvious homage to the Revelers who, as mentioned above, used the name “Merrymakers” for some of their recordings on the Brunswick label. For reasons unknown, Steiner left the group in May 1928 and his place was taken by baritone Roman Cycowski, who shared a dressing room with Biberti and Leschnikoff at the Grosses Schauspielhaus.

As Steiner had been the group’s pianist, they now also needed a new accompanist. Erwin Bootz, a young piano student, had a Bulgarian neighbor and the two frequented the Bei Kirow restaurant, where Leschnikoff was a waiter. Bootz became friendly with Ari. One morning while Bootz was still in bed after a late night, Leschnikoff burst into

19 Fechner book, p. 167

20 Fechner book, p. 166

21 The name appears in the documents spelled several different ways – Melodie Makers, Melodiemakers and Melody Makers. The last spelling is used in this book.

his room and told him about the group that was practicing at Asta Nielsen's apartment. At first, Bootz did not understand what was going on because Nielsen was a famous film star and he could not make the connection between her and the group. Ari urged him to get out of bed to prepare for an audition with the group.²² Bootz went along the next day and was introduced to the group.

The final piece of the puzzle fell into place in March 1929, when Nussbaum left the group due to "confrontations" (according to Frommermann)²³ and was replaced briefly by Willi Steiner. Then Erich Collin (whom Bootz knew from the Hochschule für Musik²⁴ where they both studied) was recruited by Bootz to fill the second tenor slot.²⁵

22 Fechner book, p. 129-130

23 <http://www.comedian-harmonists.com/> (accessed December 5, 2007)

24 The State School for Music on Fasanenstrasse in Berlin.

25 Theo Niemeyer only recently discovered that Willi Steiner (no relation to Theodor Steiner), who was also a student at the Hochschule für Musik with Bootz and Collin, filled in as the second tenor between Nussbaum and Collin.

The remarkable and poignant story of the Comedian Harmonists, an early 1930s German singing group that was forced to disband because three of its members were Jewish. The banning of the group, which enjoyed a level of success in Europe similar to the Beatles in the 1960s, was part of the Nazis' attempt to erase all traces of Jewish life and culture from German society - an early aspect of the Holocaust.

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