



For Release: April 14, 2015
Video/Photos/Tracks available

Contact: Bonnie Somers
310-570-4770 or bsomers@mff.org

Liturgical Music of Yehudi Wyner Featured on New Release from the Milken Archive

Two commissions from the 1960s stand as giants in composer's diverse oeuvre

[Yehudi Wyner](#) is among the most decorated and celebrated contemporary American composers. With more than 100 works to his credit, he has received commissions from Carnegie Hall, the Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts to name a few, has won a Pulitzer Prize (2006), and in 2014 was named President of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Wyner's career has also been marked by consistent engagement with Jewish music. In addition to being the son of composer Lazar Weiner (in his time among the most active composers and conductors in Jewish music), Yehudi Wyner attended the Brandeis Camp Institute (a Jewish Tanglewood of sorts), and has composed klezmer-esque suites and incidental music as well as significant liturgical works.

Complete, authorized versions of [Wyner's Torah Service](#) and [Friday Evening Service](#) are featured on a recording out this month from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience.

In Jewish tradition, the Torah service encompasses the readings or cantillations of portions of the Holy Scriptures, or excerpts from the biblical Prophets—together with their accompanying *b'rakhot*, or blessings. Composed in 1966 on commission from a private individual, Wyner's *Torah Service* combines traditional liturgical texts with some from more recent sources, opening with a setting of *yih'yu l'ratzon* (May the words of my mouth and my heart's meditations be acceptable . . .). The meditative quality of that setting contrasts with most that follow, which are often dramatic and characterized by punchy, staccato brass and intense choral motifs. In the program notes to *Torah Service*, Wyner emphasizes the heralded position the Torah holds in Judaism: "Of all the artifacts in Jewish life, it is the Torah alone that is held in veneration. . . . All basic wisdom is supposed to flow from its teaching. No amount of study devoted to any aspect of it is considered excessive." Wyner's musical treatment of the Torah service reflects this reverence, but infuses it with a drama and intensity that connotes a Hassidic-like ecstasy.

Friday Evening Service was commissioned by New York's Park Avenue Synagogue, which for more than forty years commissioned sacred services and prayer settings by leading American and European émigré composers. Composed in 1963 and premiered at the Park Avenue Synagogue that same year, *Friday Evening Service* serves as an excellent companion piece to *Torah Service*. It is clear Wyner approached both services with similar reverence and frame of mind.

The recordings feature Cantor Joshua Breitzer and the New York Virtuoso Singers, accompanied by an ensemble of two trumpets, horn, trombone, and double bass.

Accompanying the recordings online are a number of excerpts from Wyner's [oral history session](#) with the Milken Archive. Two [video excerpts feature detailed commentary](#) by the composer discussing each service, while an extended audio portion focuses on his memories of and relationship with his father, who is widely considered the supreme exemplar of the Yiddish art song.

That Wyner's services are so successful speaks both to his abilities as a composer and to the power of the centuries-old texts that inspired him. In the notes to the original recording he reflected on those texts: "There is so much in the ancient sacred texts that conveys the impression of a culture under extreme pressure, with the need to express thoughts and feelings with great intensity and to lament or exult in prayer and prophecy. The language is full of alliteration and internal rhyme, often displaying explosive compression and irregular rhythm."

Excerpts from Wyner's *Friday Evening Service* from a separate recording were featured on previous releases from the Milken Archive, and an album devoted entirely to his music was among five Milken Archive recordings produced by David Frost in 2005 when he received the Grammy award for Producer of the Year. Wyner was heavily involved in the production of these recordings. Their addition to the Milken Archive of Jewish Music offers listeners a chance to hear performances the composer has said reflect his "ideas about the essential thrust of each work."

Founded in 1990 by philanthropist Lowell Milken, the Milken Archive of Jewish Music reflects the scope and variety of Jewish life in America. The Archive's virtual museum www.milkenarchive.org is an interactive guide to music, videos, oral histories, photos and essays.

For information or interviews, contact media@milkenarchive.org.

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