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Music for the High Holy Days: A New Album from the Milken Archive

Musical Prayer Settings Illustrate Continuum of Tradition and Innovation in the American Diaspora

In the annual cycle of events marking the Jewish calendar, few loom as large as the High Holy Days. Known in Hebrew as the *Yamim Nora'im* (Days of Awe), the High Holy Days consume a 10-day period, commencing on the Sabbath before Rosh Hashana with *S'lihot* and concluding on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement.

A [new album](#) featuring High Holy Day liturgical settings from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music illustrates how Jewish liturgical music's openness to development and external influence has helped it flourish in the American diaspora.

Rosh Hashanah services often open with [Essa enai](#) from Psalm 121. So Lazare Saminsky's setting featuring Cantor Alberto Mizrahi is a fitting way to start *Music for the High Holy Days*. The Psalm's question-and-answer structure is reflected musically in the way Saminsky pairs cantor with choir. Mizrahi's sotto voce delivery of the phrase "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, whence comes my help" is met with the chorus's confident "My help comes from the Lord who made the heaven and earth." Framed in this way, it comes across as a kind of internal dialogue.

There is perhaps no cantor more central to the Milken Archive's success than Mizrahi, whose voice has graced dozens of its recordings. So it is equally fitting that the album closes with his rendition of [Samuel Adler's El melekh yoshev](#). Adler is a towering figure in the Jewish music world, one who has composed Judaically related works ranging from individual prayer settings—such as this one—to large scale choral and orchestral forms. His *El melekh yoshev* is simple and direct, using drone- and chant-like motifs to convey the finality of a service's close.

Kol nidre—one of the group of fixed tunes of the Ashkenazi rite known collectively as the *missinai* tunes, which date to the medieval Rhineland communities—is arguably the most ubiquitous of Jewish melodies. Inextricably associated with Yom Kippur, it is also

widely known beyond the Jewish world. Here, a 1950s cantorial performance by Richard Tucker of [Sholom Secunda's arrangement](#) is juxtaposed with a recent recording of [Max Bruch's version](#) for cello and organ performed by the young Julian Schwarz. Their juxtaposition helps to highlight the inherent qualities of the centuries-old melody, and points to the diverse continuum of Jewish music and the American experience.

Meir Finkelstein's setting of the prayer text [Uv'khen yitkadash](#) (And thus may/will Your name [*adonai*, be hallowed . . .]) for the *mussaf* services on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is a welcome contribution to the High Holy Day repertoire. Featuring subtle jazz harmonies and a lush contrapuntal soprano-alto duet, its mood is supplicatory and reverent.

Mark Silver's setting of the prayer [Ki hinne kahomer](#) (We are like clay [in the hand of "the Potter"])—a *piyyut* inserted into the *s'lihot* (penitential liturgy) during the Yom Kippur eve service in most Ashkenazi rituals—is accompanied by an extensive essay that unpacks the layered meanings of the text and provides a historical analysis of the many ways the text has been treated musically by both European and American Jewish composers.

Additional settings feature a broad spectrum of composers and cantors. Among their ranks are composers Herman Berlinski, Max Janowski, and Michael Isaacson, and cantors Ida Rae Cahana, Benji Ellen-Schiller, and Robert Abelson.

Music for the High Holy Days is the latest installment in the Milken Archive's multimedia volume, [Cycle of Life in Synagogue and Home: Prayers and Celebrations Throughout the Jewish Year](#), which also includes music for Hanukkah, Passover, Weddings, and Funerals and Memorials.

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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