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Music for the Sabbath

Milken Archive's two new albums explore wide-ranging styles and reflect arc of Jewish liturgical music over 100 years

As with most religions, Jewish life is punctuated by events that mark important transitions and regulate the overlapping cycles of time that make up the polyrhythm of life. Celebrations mark significant life turning points. Major holidays occur at transitional times of year. For the deeply observant, prayers help regulate the flow of time throughout each day.

Two new albums out this month from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: *The American Experience* focus on music for the Sabbath—the occasion of which has spawned an astonishing amount and variety of music. At the same, the albums reveal more or less chronologically the development of American Jewish liturgical music over the past 100 years. Titled *Music for the Sabbath*, the two-album set is the most recent installment in [Volume 4: Cycle of Life in Synagogue and Home](#).

In his [introduction to the volume](#), Neil W. Levin points to the wide range of musical approaches that have evolved: “At one far end of the spectrum is the eastern European–based *hazzanut* of American experience. At the other extremity are the radically divergent and sometimes experimental expressions found in contemporary popular idioms of innovative services.” *The two albums*

have been designed to follow the prescribed order of the liturgy while juxtaposing these varied approaches and occasionally presenting back-to-back settings of the same prayer.

The first several tracks offer a microcosm of this design, tracing a path from Abraham Wolf Binder through Jack Gottlieb, William Sharlin, Charles Davidson, and Debbie Friedman. Following Binder's short blessing, "[Kindling of the Sabbath Lights](#)," are Gottlieb's "[Three Candle Blessings](#)," featuring narrator [Tovah Feldshuh](#) with choral accompaniment and Sharlin's "[Shiru Ladonai](#)," with the innovative vocal abilities of the Western Wind ensemble. Juxtaposed for the sake of comparison are settings of "Sing Unto God" by [Davidson](#) and [Friedman](#).

Davidson and Friedman provide an interesting point of analysis of the contemporary scene. Davidson has been a significant voice in Jewish music for decades, at once on the forefront of innovation and deeply rooted in tradition. A composer of jazz and folk-rock oriented Sabbath services, Davidson has also composed widely in more traditional molds, as evidenced by his "Sing Unto God" (album 1, track 6). Friedman's foray into Jewish music grew out of an epiphany. As she related [during a Milken Archive recording session](#), she was riding a bus one day when a melody came to her and the only words she could think to use came from the *Ahavta* prayer. Thus was born "[And Thou Shalt Love](#)," (album 1, track 19) and, later, a revolution that would change Jewish liturgical music for generations to come. Several other tracks by Friedman, who died in 2011, are included here as well.

Five settings of *V'shamru* open the [second album](#). Two by Cantor William Sharlin bear echoes of traditional *hazzanut* (cantorial art) but more closely resemble modern art song and choral music. The settings by Samuel Adler, Herbert Fromm, and Zavel Zilberts are more reminiscent of a Central European approach, featuring a cantor and choir accompanied by organ.

The inclusion of Fromm and Adler here points to the important role that individuals and small groups can play in shaping the course of history. Fromm, along with Samuel Adler's father, Hugo Adler, belonged to a generation of composers who spearheaded an American renaissance in Jewish liturgical music in the early–mid-20th century. Much of the Jewish liturgical music outside of the folk-oriented repertoire in part owes its existence to this renaissance. At the same time, it reveals history's uneven hand: Adler and Fromm were both successful musicians in Germany prior to the ascension of the National Socialist Party and emigrated to America for the sake of survival. Like many émigré composers of that scene, Fromm's involvement in Jewish liturgical music began in America largely out of necessity. (See [a video excerpt](#) of Samuel Adler discussing this topic.)

While figures like Binder, Fromm, and Adler set the stage for American innovations in Jewish liturgical music, artists like Friedman soon took it over. The folk-oriented approach to Jewish worship services became so widespread and influential that Friedman received a faculty appointment at Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion. Yet, the contention most have with the folk-pop oriented approach is not that it exists but that it has too large a share of the market.

If at first glance it seems that the world of Jewish liturgical music is divided between the traditionalists and the folkies, this obscures the richly diverse field that it is. For it's a field large enough to accommodate an [Adon olam](#) by Sol Zim (album 2, track 17) that sounds like it came straight out of a Persian night club, alongside one by [Robert Stern](#) (track 18) that is dreamlike, ethereal, and invokes the close-interval harmonies of Bulgarian choral music. It is a field that welcomes the idiosyncratic stylings of Max Janowski, the modern classical orientation of

David Schiff and Samuel Adler, the popular approach of Friedman and Craig Taubman.

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.

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