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New Recording Features Organ Music for the Synagogue

Album of Organ Music Features Synagogue Pieces by Bloch and Milhaud

There is a commonly held assumption that the adoption of the organ into American synagogue worship was an act of assimilation. That is, that in order to appear more American, synagogues aimed to make their music sound more like that of their Christian compatriots. Two 2012 releases by the Milken Archive of Jewish Music featured Jewish liturgical music of American Reform congregation from the mid-late 19th century through the beginning of the Second World War, and were accompanied by an extensive online essay demonstrating that this was a conscious aesthetic decision rather than an assimilative one. With the release of [*Organ Music for the Synagogue*](#) (album 13 of Volume 4: Cycle of Life in Synagogue and Home), the Milken Archive focuses on some of the high points in the repertoire since the instrument's adoption some two centuries ago.

Among the gems included here are a set of six preludes by Ernest Bloch and four from a set of nine by Darius Milhaud. Bloch's were composed in 1949, an otherwise unproductive year that saw little else from the composer aside from the first recording of his *Avodat Hakodesh*, the most famous version of which the Milken Archive released in January of this year and will follow up soon with a short video documentary featuring Robert Merrill, who starred on that recording. The four Milhaud preludes have been excerpted from a larger set he composed in 1941 when he had recently arrived in California from Nazi-occupied France. Adapted from previously composed incidental music for a play, the preludes are based on Provençal and troubadour melodies from France's medieval period but display Milhaud's unique approach to counterpoint. Coincidentally, both composers spent considerable time in the San Francisco area and both composed major sacred services for its Temple Emanu-El.

Works by such accomplished composers as Ellis Kohs and Robert Starer, along with two exciting pieces by Ofer Ben-Amots, round out this interesting compilation. All deftly performed by Barbara Harbach and Juergen Essle, these compositions show that music composed for the functional purposes of synagogue worship can have equal value as art in its own right.