

# MILKEN ARCHIVE of Jewish Music



## Notes from the American Jewish Experience

*A living archive gives voice to the music -- and the spirit -- of a people*

Dave Brubeck. Leonard Bernstein. Igor Stravinsky. John Zorn.

What do these four men have in common, aside from being four of the most famous names in music?

If you said, “they’re Jewish,” you’d be wrong. (Bernstein and Zorn, yes; Brubeck and Stravinsky, no.)

But if you said, “they’re all represented in the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: the American Experience,” you’d be right.

And thereby hangs a tale.

Founded by philanthropist Lowell Milken—chairman and cofounder of the Milken Family Foundation known for advancing the causes of education and medical research—the Archive, as its full name suggests, is dedicated to preserving and presenting music inspired by or relating to the American Jewish experience; music that not only reflects the scope and variety of Jewish life in America, but also demonstrates the universality of the Jewish experience and its relevance to people of all faiths and backgrounds.

That notion of inclusivity is central to Milken’s vision, and to the structure of the Archive itself. For a piece of music to be included in the Milken Archive, it must have some clear connection to the lived experience of Jews in America; “every piece we have in here was conceived to be directly reflective of some aspect of the Jewish experience,” says Neil Levin, the Archive’s artistic director. But that connection can be expressed in any number of ways, from the use of traditional Jewish melodies to the expression of Jewish principles and beliefs.

Browse the Archive’s virtual museum—the online portal where every second of music and snatch of oral history, every explanatory essay and bit of contextual information can be accessed, searched, and cross-referenced by anyone at any time—and you will find an astonishing array of music relating to the American Jewish experience: Sephardic prayer

services from the 17th century, carried to these shores by the very first Jews to land in America—refugees from Brazil whose own ancestors fled the Iberian Peninsula for England and Amsterdam centuries ago; secular classical music, addressing Jewish themes or based on Jewish texts, by some of the most important composers of the past 100 years—Philip Glass, Arnold Schoenberg, Kurt Weill (the Archive encompasses not only native-born American composers, but also émigrés who had significant “American periods”); Yiddish theater music and cantorial classics from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rock-influenced works from the 1960s, klezmer-inflected pieces from the 1990s, newly commissioned music of the 21<sup>st</sup> century....

The list goes on. This is, after all, an archive that contains more than 700 musical works comprising approximately 100 hours of music, accompanied by some 800 hours of videotaped oral histories with composers, conductors, cantors, and others with intimate knowledge of the music and the context in which it was made. Chamber music, choral works, jazz piano trios, klezmer clarinets—you'll find it all and much more, along with expert commentary on the development of Jewish music in America over the past 350 years.

### **A Big Tent**

What you will not find, however, is music by Jewish composers that lacks some direct connection to the Jewish experience. So no George Gershwin, for example, who for all his virtues never aspired to write music with an explicit connection to the American Jewish experience. Indeed, the ethnicity and religious affiliation of the composer has no bearing whatsoever on the inclusion of a piece. “Whoever composed it—Christian, Muslim, whatever—is irrelevant,” says Paul Schwendener, the Archive's chief operating officer and artist & repertoire consultant, “so long as the music is intrinsically related to the Jewish experience.”

And so Igor gets in, despite his having been an adherent of the Russian Orthodox faith with a tendency toward anti-Semitism, for the simple reason that he contributed to the *Genesis Suite*, a group of seven pieces narrating the Creation story that was written by some of the most prominent émigré composers in America—including Schoenberg, the *enfant terrible* of 20<sup>th</sup> century music, and the man who famously declined to teach Gershwin (and just as famously played tennis with him every week) when both lived in California. A hugely ambitious work for chorus, orchestra, and narrator, the *Suite* premiered in 1945 and was promptly lost to history for nearly 50 years, until the Archive brought it back to life.

### **Bringing Great Jewish Music Back to Life -- and to the Broader Public**

That last bit is important. The Milken Archive is particularly interested in shining a light on music that has been forgotten, underexposed, or otherwise neglected. As a result, while approximately 20 percent of the collection consists of licensed recordings from

other sources, nearly 80 percent consists of recordings made by the Archive itself, including 500 world premieres. (While the Archive has for the moment reduced its own recording activities, it remains open to expanding its pool of donated and licensed materials. The 20 thematic volumes in which its contents are organized remain open-ended and new submissions are regularly reviewed.)

A good deal of that material—like the *Genesis Suite*, or Weill's epic music-drama *The Eternal Road*, or the 50 Yiddish theater songs that were recast in new, historically accurate orchestrations—had to be painstakingly reconstructed from bits and pieces of old scores; handwritten sketches that had been left, long forgotten, in basements and archives; and other ephemera. The *Genesis Suite* project required the assistance of a professional musicologist, the Library of Congress, and one of the best orchestrators in Hollywood. It took more than a year to complete. The Yiddish theater project involved seven orchestrators, interviews with countless people now lost to blessed memory, and old cartons of music that had languished for decades in the basement of the government of the City of New York. It took nearly three years to finish.

“I spent hundreds of hours with research assistants,” Levin says as he recalls the effort that went into assembling the material in the Archive. And that doesn't include the scores of recording sessions that he and Schwendener organized with some of the finest musicians in Europe and America: Maestros Gerard Schwarz and Sir Neville Marriner, klezmer clarinetist David Krakauer and virtuoso cantor Alberto Mizrahi, the Vienna Boys Choir, the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the Juilliard String Quartet and others too numerous to mention. Fifty CDs worth of music have been released through the Naxos record label as part of its American Classics series, selling more than 300,000 units and receiving numerous accolades, including a Grammy™ for audio producer David Frost and an ASCAP Deems Taylor Award for Neil Levin's program notes. The virtual museum contains all of it, and the equivalent of another 50 CDs worth, all in digital, downloadable form.

### **A Resource for Repertoire**

The scope and ambition of the Archive are nearly unprecedented. To find something even close, one must turn back the clock nearly four decades, to the mammoth bicentennial recording series of American music that was made by New World Records beginning in 1974. Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, New World distributed a 100-LP set to libraries across the nation, accompanied by richly detailed essays offering historic and cultural context—a service provided at the Archive by Levin, a leading scholar of Jewish music. Like the Archive, the bicentennial project was intended to rescue and revive a great musical tradition; and it has by any measure succeeded, exerting a profound influence on concert programming and attendance.

The Archive aims to exert a similar influence, providing a resource for those who seek to produce, perform, or program more music relating to the Jewish experience in America. And it, too, is succeeding. “People turn to us all the time for programming suggestions,”

says Levin. “Composers, too, come to us for source material and commissions. And not only from the United States; we get correspondence from as far away as Vilna.” Thanks to its online presence, the Archive promises to be more accessible and influential than ever before.

## **In the Beginning**

The origins of the Archive lie in the late 1980s, when Lowell Milken developed a passion for synagogue music. That passion gradually deepened to include all music written for or inspired by the American Jewish experience; and Milken commissioned the composer Michael Isaacson and his mentor, the renowned German-born composer and conductor Samuel Adler, to assemble some 14 hours of music under the heading: “The Milken Family Archive of 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Jewish Music.” “Lowell has always been interested in his Jewish roots, and he has always enjoyed music,” says Richard Sandler, Milken Family Foundation executive vice president, who’s been involved with the Archive since those early days. “And it was through his love of this particular music that he came to feel it should be shared with the general public.” Recorded at the Eastman School of Music, where Adler was on faculty at the time, the project featured a handful of contemporary composers, and a small number of pieces from earlier periods.

In the mid-1990s, Levin came aboard, replacing Isaacson as artistic director. A recognized authority on Jewish music who teaches the subject at Jewish Theological Seminary, Levin's expertise ranges from cantorial art to Yiddish and Hebrew folksong; and he brought to bear his encyclopedic knowledge of American Jewish music to greatly expand the Archive's scope. With the assistance of the Archive's editorial board, Levin assembled a list of music covering all realms, from opera to solo piano, klezmer to jazz, Hassidic-inflected concert music to Jewish vaudeville.

Soon after, Schwendener arrived; and from 1998 to 2001, he and Levin embarked on a whirlwind recording project, assembling the bulk of the material now in the Archive. “We recorded all over the world—in Seattle, in New York, in Prague and Barcelona and London and Berlin,” says Sandler. “And we did hundreds of hours of video interviews with many of those involved in the music, many of whom had never been interviewed before.” Those interviews help fulfill Milken's vision of a “living archive” that will not only grow and expand along with American Jewish music, but will also preserve the words and images of those who made the music and knew it best -- an Archive that speaks of the American Jewish experience in its own voice.

The fruits of the Archive's international recording efforts were organized into 20 thematic volumes, from “The Classical Klezmer: Rebirth of a Folk Tradition” to “Swing His Praises: Jazz, Blues, and Rock in the Service of God,” “Golden Voices in the Golden Land: The Great Age of Cantorial Art in America” to “A Garden Eastward: Sephardi and Near Eastern Inspiration.” Each volume was intentionally structured so as to include pieces by different composers from different historical periods, the better to illustrate the many threads that run through and bind together the Jewish experience in America.

Peruse Volume 10, for example—"Intimate Voices: Solo and Ensemble Music of Jewish Spirit"—and you will find a string quartet by the saxophonist and composer John Zorn, who helped redefine avant-garde jazz in New York City in the 1980s, nestled alongside one by the great French-Jewish composer Darius Milhaud, who first encountered jazz on a trip to Harlem in 1922.

### **The Virtual Museum**

Once the bulk of the recording had been completed, the Archive's focus turned from preservation to dissemination. The first step involved releasing those first 50 CDs worth of material on Naxos, a label whose commitment to presenting new, unduplicated repertoire jibed neatly with the Archive's own educational mission of bringing lesser-known works to a broad audience.

The rise of the Internet and of digital downloading eventually revolutionized music distribution. And the Archive capitalized on that revolution by constructing a virtual museum, one that provides unprecedented access to its holdings—not only the music, but also the program notes and biographical essays, the musical scores and performance videos, the nearly 50,000 photographs and hundreds of oral histories that together help put the music in its proper context. "From the beginning, Lowell's intention was to have as broad an awareness of this music as possible," says Sandler. "And this is the most efficient way of getting this material out to as many people as possible."

Its searchable multimedia interface also allows users to sift through the Archive's contents in ways that were previously unimaginable. "The virtual museum provides the opportunity to represent the history of American Jewish music in its totality," says ethnomusicologist Jeff Janeczko, the Archive's curator. "The historical sweep of the Archive is unique—we have music that stretches back to colonial times and the 19th century that is, as far as we know, the oldest surviving Jewish music in America; and the technological platform really allows us to look at it in multiple ways. You could search for 'sacred service' and see anything from a colonial-era Sephardic service to a jazz service that was written in the 1960s, with a jazz chorus and soloists."

### **More than Music**

That historical sweep, coupled with the power of the virtual museum to make unexpected connections between different genres and time periods, is of value not only to those within the Jewish community, or with an interest in its affairs. For the music contained within the Archive is not only intrinsically valuable as art; it is also a roadmap of the complex, winding relationship that has evolved between Jews and American society over the past several hundred years, a relationship that has much to teach us all.

The Archive's refusal to screen material based on the ethnicity or religious affiliation of its originators stands in symbolic accord with the principles of tolerance and inclusion

that have made the American Jewish experience possible. But the embrace between Jewish and American culture has not been simple, and this, too, can be viewed through the lens of the Archive. For example, one can link the gradual rise of secular Jewish art music after WWII to a growing sense of security within the American Jewish community, a heightened interest among Americans in the minorities within their midst, and a concomitant willingness among composers to wear their heritage on their sleeves—trends that have not only affected American Jews.

Similarly, relations between Jews and other minority groups in America have sometimes been prickly; and this, too, is captured within the Archive. Dave Brubeck's *The Gates of Justice*, for example, harks back to a time when the historic alliance that existed between Jews and African-Americans during the civil rights era was beginning to unravel; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been assassinated, there were hints of anti-Semitism among some black nationalist groups, and Jewish commitment to the movement was cooling.

Brubeck, who studied with Milhaud when the latter was on faculty at Mills College, was commissioned by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the lay association of Reform synagogues, to write a piece that would reaffirm the spiritual parallels between Jews and blacks. (The Archive, in its ecumenical sweep, also includes complete synagogue services in the Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox traditions—many of them never before recorded in their entirety.)

The result—a cantata for jazz trio, brass orchestra, chorus, and two singers—incorporates snatches of King's speeches and Hebrew liturgical texts; quotes pop music from the late 1960s; and calls for both a Jewish cantor, and a black singer familiar with Negro spirituals. Brubeck hoped it would communicate “the universal theme of brotherhood”; but as a work by a non-Jewish composer who sought to develop a musical language rooted in both Jewish and black idioms in order to bring the two groups closer together, *The Gates of Justice* also provides a unique window onto black-Jewish relations in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—and, perhaps, some lessons on how to heal the rifts that inevitably arise within a diverse, democratic society.

And if you want to look for exemplars of the American immigrant experience, look no further than Volume 13, “Great Songs of the American Yiddish Stage: Yiddish Theater, Vaudeville, Radio, and Film.” Initially derived from Eastern European models and produced for immigrant audiences, American Yiddish musical theater, or Second Avenue as it is commonly known, evolved into an archetypical American art form, one that combined nostalgia for the Old World with popular song styles from Tin Pan Alley—along with echoes of Viennese operetta, synagogue music, and the sounds of all the other ethnic groups (Ukrainian, Russian, Roma) that jostled for space in lower Manhattan. This polyglot genre, as American as apple pie, was successfully exported to Europe and South America, not to mention Broadway.

We could go on forever. But why waste time? Better you should dive into the Milken Archive and explore its wonders for yourself. Look around; sample some music.

Chances are, you'll find something you like.