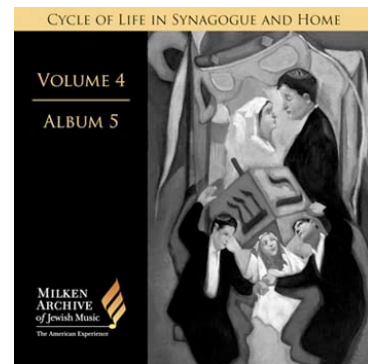


## Passover Album is Newest Offering From Milken Archive of Jewish Music

*Tracks feature famous as well as little known works  
reflecting American Jewish culture*

Is it too obvious to begin a discussion of an album of Passover music with the question: What makes this album different from all others? The newest release from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music contains a compelling mix of old and new, known and obscure musical settings pertaining to the Passover holiday. As part of the series [\*Cycle of Life in Synagogue and Home: Prayers and Celebrations Throughout the Jewish Year \(Volume 4\)\*](#), the collection highlights the nature of a holiday that is playful and poignant, serious and silly, and that seems to beg for theatrical interpretation.



Much of the older material here hearkens to an era when traditional communal seders were held at city ballrooms or Catskills hotels. These seders were events where tradition and ritual mixed with entertainment and where bitter herbs were served with something to make them more palatable. It was a time when, as Artistic Director Neil W. Levin points out in [the volume's introduction](#), seders featured high-profile figures and "catered to a clientele hungry for bits of cantorial, liturgical, and even Second Avenue Yiddish theatrical nostalgia."

The Milken Archive's chosen representative of this era, the "Passover Seder Festival" composed by Yiddish theater maven Sholom Secunda and featuring the great operatic tenor and cantor [Richard Tucker](#), couldn't be more apropos. Nor should it be a surprise that these two commercially successful artists should have devoted such time and energy toward a religious enterprise, since both began their musical training in the synagogue. As a boy, Secunda was known colloquially as "The Prince of the Young Hazzanim (cantors)" while Tucker (born Reuven Ticker) sang in the choir at Tifereth Israel synagogue in Manhattan where his talent was nurtured by the great choirmaster Samuel Weisser. Like others featured on this album, Secunda and Tucker found satisfaction throughout their careers in musical pursuits that were commercial as well as spiritual, with loyalties to both synagogue and stage.



Cantor Richard Tucker  
(Photo courtesy of the Richard Tucker Music Foundation)

That they take the matter seriously on a religious level is evident from the first *Barukh ato* that emerges from Tucker's mouth on the "[Kiddush](#)" to the final strains of "[Adon Olam](#)." Holding it all together are the Sholom Secunda Chorus and Alexander D. Richardson on the organ. Both of these elements serve as the primary vehicle for conveying most of "theatrical" aspects of the piece. Unexpected chromatic runs and vibrato rich chords call to mind the silent film sound tracks that organists once provided live, while the often declamatory style of the choral writing gives it the feel of an oratorio.

Tucker finds good company in two contemporary cantors, Simon Spiro and Alberto Mizrahi, who make brief cameo appearances.

Spiro channels Moishe Oysher in [Ha lahma anya](#), the text from the *Hagadda* that identifies *matza* as "the bread of affliction" and as a dual symbol of the Israelite's slavery and the Jewish people's freedom. Oysher's setting featured an orchestra and chorus, but Spiro's version is a cappella and features the all male cantorial choir Coro Hebraeico imitating instrumental effects with their voices. (Also, don't miss Coro Hebraeico backing up Ira Biegeleisen on Sidor Belarsky's [Hasal siddur pesach](#).) That the setting is both catchy and theatrical is not surprising, considering that Spiro has played the lead in the *Phantom of the Opera* and, in the 1980s, authored a disco version of *Adon olam* that hit number one on Israel's pop charts. Watch any of a number of [videos on the Archive's website](#) of Spiro performing Yiddish theater hits at Los Angeles's Walt Disney Concert Hall and you'll have no doubt he was born for the stage. But listen to this, or any of his numerous other cantorial performances and you'll also see that he's a master on the *bima*, which in a sense is entirely appropriate considering that Oysher too worked in both venues throughout his career.

Alberto Mizrahi (who moonlighted as an opera singer for much of his cantorial career) brings vibrancy and aptitude to [Meyer Machtenberg's Sheheheyanu](#), which could easily have come straight out of an opera buffa. Joining Mizrahi for this *b'rakha*—recited on various seasonal occasions to express gratitude for having been sustained and preserved thus far—are The Western Wind vocal ensemble and Zamir Chorale conductor Matthew Lazar. Machtenberg was a highly respected and sought-after synagogue choirmaster who worked with many of the "golden age" cantors. He composed a host of sophisticated liturgical settings, but is better known for a handful of more playful numbers like this that are still considered staples within the cantorial repertoire.

Of course, a Passover album wouldn't be complete without other essentials. Samuel Malavsky's setting of the "[four questions](#)" is in Yiddish and features the uber-charming soprano Amy Goldstein (who sang on many of the Archive's lauded Yiddish theater reconstructions), also supported by Coro Hebraeico. Two pieces by the recently departed Los Angeles cantor and educator William Sharlin feature the Zephyr Vocal Ensemble, while "[Passover Madrigal](#)" by Herbert Fromm is sung by England's renowned

Laudibus Choir. "[Chad Gadya](#)" is included as part of the Secunda/Tucker service, as well as in a strophic setting for choir and child soloist by Hugo Chaim Adler.

It is said that the aim of the seder ritual is to bring events of the exodus from Egypt into the present and to make participants feel as though they too came out of Egypt. If this recording achieves this goal, you'll likely feel as though you exited en route to a synagogue and popped into a Jewish variety show on the way.

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](http://www.milkenarchive.org) is an interactive guide to music, videos, oral histories, photos and essays.

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