



For Release: August 11, 2015
Video/Photos/Tracks available

Contact: Bonnie Somers
310-570-4770 or bsomers@mff.org

Liturgical Settings, Vocal Works, and Chamber Music Comprise Three New Albums from the Milken Archive

Diverse repertoire highlights various ways in which composers and worshipers connect to faith and heritage.

The Milken Archive continues building out its comprehensive collection with three new albums featuring vocal and choral works, chamber music, and liturgical settings for the Sabbath day.

From Samuel Adler and Ralph Shapey, [*Volume 17, Album 8: Choose Life and The Covenant*](#), comprises two extended works: one a mediations on choice and responsibility; the other a painful inquiry on the crisis of faith.

[*Choose Life*](#), Adler's 1986 oratorio takes Moses' Third Discourse as its central text, creatively combining it with other texts from the books of Micah, Isaiah, and Psalms, and with contemporary poetic interpretations of the role of human choice in mankind's present and future welfare. In the composer's eyes, the work "tries to capture the excitement of being fully alive—fully part of life: its ecstasy as well as its vicissitudes, its triumphs as well as its defeats." Commissioned by the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the work combines Adler's typically dissonant approach to harmony and choral writing with upbeat, driving rhythms and percussion.

Scored for soprano solo, sixteen instrumental players, and two prerecorded tapes, Ralph Shapey's [*The Covenant*](#) (1977) was composed to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the State of Israel, and took its inspiration from the themes of Israel's international composition competition that year: Holocaust and "rebirth." It draws on a variety of sacred and secular literary sources, as well as from inscriptions purportedly found on the walls of cellars where Jews hid from the Germans during the Holocaust.

Its four sections refer to four significant incidents or transformative confirmations of faith in the history of the Jewish people: the Sinaitic covenant between God and the people; the Holocaust; a spirit of reaffirmation; and the biblical assurance of messianic redemption. Described by one critic as being rooted in "a musical language that is often

strident, prickly, dense and convoluted to the ear,” *The Covenant* addresses the question of individual faith. Accompanying this release on the Milken Archive’s website is an oral history with the late composer discussing this work of very deep and personal significance.

Ernest Bloch is considered by many to be the ultimate Jewish composer. His most significant work of Jewish connection was his Sacred Service (*Avodat Hakodesh*), which was incorporated into the Milken Archive earlier this year. But Bloch also wrote a good deal of music based on Jewish scales, perceived Jewish “feeling,” and events and figures from the bible. This is the focus of [Volume 10, Album 8: Chamber Music of Ernest Bloch](#), which includes the suite *From Jewish Life*, [performed here by the up-and-coming young cellist Julian Schwarz](#); and *Visions and Prophecies*, performed by pianist David Holzman. Both pieces combine characteristic Jewish scales and motifs with a compositional approach that emphasizes deep emotionality and passionate energy. Also featured are recordings of *Meditation Hebraique*, *Five Jewish Pieces*, *Abodah*, and the masterful 1961 recording of the *Baal Shem Suite* for violin and piano by Isaac Stern and Alexander Zakin.

[Volume 4, Album 9: Liturgical Settings for the Sabbath Day](#) adds 23 liturgical settings to the already voluminous Volume 4, *Cycle of Life in Synagogue and Home: Prayers and Celebrations throughout the Jewish Year*. Hebrew liturgy, apart from silently recited devotions, nearly always implies musical delivery. And this, combined with the relative autonomy of American synagogues, has spawned a range of musical styles and orientations in Jewish liturgical music. *Liturgical Settings for the Sabbath Day* features individual settings for the Sabbath day by some of the most notable composers of American Jewish music, including Debbie Friedman, Michael Isaacson, Samuel Adler, Ernest Bloch, and William Sharlin. Of no less significance are the musical artists who’ve helped give this music its highest expression. Cantor Alberto Mizrahi’s performance on Isadore Freed’s *K’dusha* and A. W. Binder’s *Adoration* will remind listeners why he spent a portion of his early career moonlighting as an opera singer. The dark and woody timbres of Cantor Raphael Frieder’s baritone imbue excerpts from Ernest Bloch’s *Avodat Hakodesh* with fitting devoutness. And though the settings by Friedman and Sharlin are the stylistic outliers on this otherwise fairly traditional compilation, their provenance is instantly recognizable, serving as a reminder of the why their music so profoundly affected so many people.

Taken together, these new releases point to the vast range of musical styles and subject matter that have been embraced—in various quarters—in the musical life of American Jewry. They further illustrate the diverse ways in which composers and worshipers of various backgrounds connect to faith and heritage through music.

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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