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Two New Albums from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music Showcase Liturgical Masterpieces and Pay Homage to Victims of Holocaust

Given the fact that the history of Jewish music in America spans centuries and includes a broad range of artistic approaches, it seems only fitting that the two new albums released this month by the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: *The American Experience* span decades and include a sacred service, a cantata, and two secular classical works that commemorate the Holocaust.

While the collective repertoire of American Jewish sacred music contains dozens of synagogue services composed for large orchestral and choral forces, probably none are considered as important as [Ernest Bloch's *Avodat Hakodesh*](#). Commissioned by San Francisco's Temple Emanu-El (which later commissioned a sacred service from [Darius Milhaud](#)), under the direction of Cantor Rueben Rinder, Bloch's service is widely considered to be the first successful and most enduring exploration of the Hebrew liturgy for serious artistic purposes. It took Bloch approximately five years to complete and inspired a deep engagement with the liturgical text. Fully aware of its Jewish intention but also cognizant of its universal appeal, Bloch once referred to it as "a gift of Israel to the whole of mankind."

If it weren't enough that *Avodat Hakodesh* was composed by Bloch, heralded by many as history's greatest Jewish composer, the present recording of the work features two of the 20th century's most revered musicians: [Leonard Bernstein](#) and Robert Merrill (of Metropolitan Opera fame). The legendary 1960 recording is considered a watershed event and amongst the most important in the collective repertoire. In that sense, it seems long overdue that it should join the Milken Archive's collection alongside liturgical masterpieces by the likes of [David Diamond](#), [Arnold Schoenberg](#), [Yehudi Wyner](#) and others.

Also featured on this album is [Stefan Wolpe's *Yigdal Cantata*](#), a moving, if slightly severe, setting of the medieval hymn of faith known as *yigdal* [*elohim hai*] (We exalt the presence of the living God) and based on Moses Maimonides' thirteen principles of faith—familiar to synagogue-oriented American Jewry from its role as an optional concluding hymn following Sabbath and holyday evening and/or *mussaf* services. One of

many pieces commissioned by Cantor David Putterman (cantor of New York's Park Avenue Synagogue from 1933 to 1976), it was premiered at that congregation's third annual service of new music on a Sabbath eve in 1945 (alongside settings by Leonard Bernstein, Darius Milhaud, and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco) and was later adapted as a cantata for concert performance. Both the Wolpe and the Bloch are part of the Milken Archive's multi-album collection [Volume 7, *Masterworks of Prayer: Art in Worship*](#).

[Benjamin Lees](#) is the featured composer on the second release, the Archive's latest addition to its [Volume 19, *Out of the Whirlwind: Musical Reflections of the Holocaust*](#). Listeners familiar with Lees' work will likely already know his [Symphony No. 4, subtitled "Memorial Candles."](#) An extensive work composed in honor of the victims of the Holocaust—as well as those of other genocidal atrocities—it was intended for premiere on the 40th anniversary of the Allied victory over the Third Reich. At more than an hour in length, it's a gargantuan work of mostly instrumental forces, but incorporates three thoughtfully set poems by Nellie Sachs. Richly orchestrated and powerful, a *Washington Post* review of one of its early performances described it, colorfully, as portraying a "'Wailing Wall' of sound, which the orchestra dismantles with wrecking ball efficiency."

Lees' [Piano Trio No. 2](#), subtitled "Silent Voices," opens with a forceful statement that is developed among all three instruments and serves as the unifying element of the single-movement piece. Described by the composer as a "small gesture of remembrance to those whose voices were forever stilled by pogroms and genocides of the past," it brings the album to a poignant, if somber, close. It is performed by George Marsh (violin), Steven Honigberg (cello), and Joseph Holt (piano).

All are meaningful additions to this extensive collection of music, videos, and oral histories documenting the history of music of the American Jewish experience—and a glimpse of what the Milken Archive has in store for 2015.

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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