

For Release: December 02, 2011

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

Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum Introduces

VOLUME 07: MASTERWORKS OF PRAYER* *Art in Worship

More than 20 Major Composers Seek Spiritual Connection In Multimedia Volume Featuring Music, Videos, Essays and Photos

"It is a work of love; it is the voice of a creature communicating with his God."

That's how Madeleine Milhaud, widow of the French-Jewish composer and American transplant Darius Milhaud, described her husband's [*Service Sacré*](#) during an oral history interview with the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience. (See a portion of the interview at the Archive's online museum.)

Milhaud wrote the *Service* in 1948 for Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, and it remains a masterpiece of sacred Jewish music whose appeal extends far beyond Jewish circles. Yet it is only one of many such works brought to life in Volume 7: Masterworks of Prayer.

Many of the composers featured in Volume 7—including Milhaud, who drew on the distinctive synagogue melodies of his native Provence for the *Service*—had a strong personal connection to Judaism. Others, like Roy Harris (*Mi khamokha*) and Douglas Moore (*Vay'khulu*), weren't Jewish at all. The case of Arnold Schoenberg, who contributed a typically idiosyncratic take on the *Kol nidre* from Yom Kippur with his own original words and music (imagine an Old Testament prophet declaiming a Kabbalistic text over an ominous bass line and clangorous percussion), falls somewhere in between: Born Jewish, Schoenberg converted to Christianity in 1898 and "reverted" back to Judaism in 1933.

Yet all of these artists crafted pieces that, while inextricably tied to Jewish liturgy, communicate with listeners regardless of religious affiliation or belief.

There is a grand tradition of such music in Europe. Most of it, however, is linked to Christian worship: Masses and Glorias and Requiems by musical luminaries like Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven and Britten. Notwithstanding the inevitable exceptions (Franz Schubert, Giacomo Meyerbeer), very few major European composers took up their pens to compose "serious" works for the synagogue.

But what was a trickle in the old world became a flood in the new one, as prominent Jewish American artists sought to connect with their religious roots—and as culturally minded rabbis and cantors reached out to leading contemporary composers, Jewish and otherwise, for fresh prayer settings. (More than half of the compositions included in this volume—from David Amram's *Shir l'erev shabbat*, described by the composer as "a delayed *bar mitzvah*," to Miriam Gideon's *Shirat Miriam l'shabbat*, one of the few major Jewish liturgical pieces by a female composer—were commissioned by American synagogues.)

Some of these works, including Max Helfman's *The Holy Ark*, which draws on traditional cantorial melodies, and Leonard Bernstein's *Yigdal*, which casts one of the core statements of Jewish belief (the "Thirteen Principles of Faith," by the medieval Spanish philosopher Maimonides) as a round, have become staples of the synagogue circuit.

Others, like the *Service Sacré*, Schoenberg's *Kol nidre*, and Herman Berlinski's *Avodat Shabbat*, made the leap to the concert stage—though sometimes by circuitous means, and not without a certain amount of drama. Schoenberg conducted the premiere of his *Kol nidre* in 1938 at the now-defunct Cocoanut Grove Ballroom in Los Angeles, an early venue for Oscar ceremonies (the orchestra came courtesy of the music department at Twentieth Century Fox); but the work sank into obscurity until the Milken Archive recorded it in London with the BBC Singers in 1999. And the online museum contains footage of a 90-year-old Berlinski leading a German orchestra and chorus through his *magnum opus* in Berlin in 2000, some 67 years after the composer was forced to flee the country as the result of Nazi persecution. "It pays to have lived that long," Berlinski said, "to go through that experience."

It's easy to play Jewish geography with the composers in Volume 7. For example, Miriam Gideon and Judith Lang Zaimont (*Sacred Service for the Sabbath Evening*), the other major female artist featured here, were both mentored by Hugo Weisgall (*Evening Liturgies*), a father figure to many American Jewish composers.

Gideon, meanwhile, also studied with the Russian-Jewish composer Lazare Siminsky, whose pioneering book, *Music of the Ghetto and the Bible*, was discovered by a young David Diamond (*Mizmor l'david*)—himself the son of Orthodox Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine—in the library at the Eastman School of Music. (You can hear Diamond talk about his Hebrew school background, his mother's Jewish fairytales, and his early interest in cantorial music in another online oral history interview.)

And Saminsky knew Berlinski, Bernstein, and Lazar Weiner (*Zecher l'maa'seh*)—father of Yehudi Wyner (*Friday Evening Service*)—from the Jewish Music Forum in New York City, once a gathering place for émigré composers and their native-born colleagues.

But it is the musical connections that are most compelling. Because it includes so many unique settings of the same prayers, Volume 7 provides listeners a rare opportunity to compare the styles and approaches of more than 20 major composers.

Volume 7: Masterworks of Prayer is one of 20 volumes being added to the Milken Archive's virtual museum site over the next year. Founded by philanthropist Lowell Milken in 1990, the Milken Archive's vast repertoire reflects the scope and variety of Jewish life in America, revealing the universality of the Jewish experience to people of all faiths and backgrounds. The Archive's virtual museum website is an interactive guide chronicling over 350 years of Jewish music and culture in a land of freedom. www.milkenarchive.org

For interviews or review copies of music and commentaries, contact Milken Archive Curator Jeff Janeczko 310-570-4746.