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

**Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum
Introduces**

Volume 1: The Song of Prayer in Colonial and 19th-Century America

In its newest multimedia volume, [*The Song of Prayer in Colonial and 19th-Century America*](#), the Milken Archive of Jewish Music tackles the oldest American Jewish music in existence. It is music of the Western Sephardi tradition, a legacy of sacred song that was carried to the shores of colonial America by Jewish immigrants whose own ancestors fled religious persecution in Spain and Portugal. "Volume 1" also features the music of the 19th century American Reform movement: songs of worship in German, English, and Hebrew set to melodies inspired by traditional Jewish music or borrowed from classical compositions and arranged in the style of Protestant hymns. Crafted by Jewish and non-Jewish composers alike, these original works were created in response to the unique desires and tastes of a distinctly American Jewish community.

Ironically, it is the older material that may be more familiar to contemporary listeners. In the 15th century, when the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula were forced to choose between conversion, exile or death, many fled to North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean, establishing what became known as the Eastern Sephardi tradition. But many others stayed, and continued to practice their faith in secret. In the 16th century, these *conversos* or *marranos* also began migrating to more hospitable lands, establishing Western Sephardi beachheads in places like Amsterdam, London, and Brazil. Eventually, some of these Spanish and Portuguese Jews found their way to North America and founded the very first American Jewish community in New Amsterdam.

Fittingly enough, the music they brought with them was very much a hybrid. The *marranos* who founded the main Western Sephardi enclave in Amsterdam, and who later found their way to America, had lost much of their musical culture during their years in hiding, and were therefore forced to reinvent it. They did so by importing North African cantors who practiced a highly ornamented, Muslim-influenced singing style, and by combining bits and pieces of that Eastern tradition with elements of classical music, church music, and Ashkenazi, or Eastern European, Jewish music.

You can hear all of that in the music featured in the first part of Volume 1, from the keening vocal style and distinctive melodies of the [*Eikha*](#), a haunting biblical cantillation from the Book of Lamentations, to the ethereal [*Mizmor l'yom ha shabbat*](#), an ancient setting of Psalm 92 that sounds very much like Gregorian chant. There is similar variety among the handful of *kinot*, or elegies, whose texts recall various disasters in Jewish history even as their settings evoke Baroque dance music. Consider [*Aleikhem eda k'dosha*](#), whose tripping melody belies its references to 13th and 14th century massacres.

Many of these songs and prayers are still performed in American Sephardi synagogues. But because the earliest Ashkenazi immigrants to America also embraced the Western Sephardi tradition, much of this material will be familiar to anyone who has had any exposure to American synagogue music of any kind. In a very real sense, the Western Sephardi tradition has become part of the musical DNA of American Jewry. For proof of that, look no further than the second part of Volume 1: the music of the early American Reform movement.

As the number of Ashkenazi Jews in America increased in the 19th century, many began to yearn for a modern American synagogue music of their own – music that would be distinct from the Western Sephardi tradition, and would reflect the tastes and aspirations of a rapidly changing community. The eclecticism of this fresh repertoire, fashioned here in the New World by a diverse group of Jews and non-Jews, immigrants and native-born Americans, epitomizes the inclusive nature of the American Jewish experience – a musical melting pot if ever there was one.

[Frederick Kitziger](#), a prominent non-Jewish composer of synagogue music in 19th-century New Orleans, set Psalm 130 ("Oh, What Is Man?") to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. The arrangement became a standard in Reform synagogues in the Deep South, where it could still be heard until fairly recently. (For more information on the fascinating Kitziger, who was born in Germany and made his living as both a farmer and a street musician, [check out the online video interview](#) at the virtual museum between Milken Archive artistic director Neil Levin and musicologist John Baron.)

[Alois Kaiser](#), meanwhile – who was born in Hungary and trained in Vienna – crafted songs of worship that combined a mastery of Protestant hymnody with a deep knowledge of traditional Ashkenazi melody. At the same time, composers like [Max Graumann](#) (*Vay'khullu*) and [Edward Stark](#) (*Kedusha*) infused their original compositions with Ashkenazi cantorial inflections while hinting at church music and opera.

Even in this most ecumenical of mixtures, however, the old Western Sephardi tradition can still be heard. Kaiser's "[O Star of Truth](#)" and "[There Is a Majestic Tie That Joins](#)" both employ Sephardi melodies that were adopted by Ashkenazi synagogues in Germany and Austria. In a distinctly American turn, Kaiser used them as the basis for beautifully harmonized choral hymns – hymns written by an Ashkenazi immigrant for the Union Hymnal, the official songbook of the late 19th century American Reform movement.

Like all of the music on Volume 1, these classic Reform hymns help trace the early history of the American Jewish experience in sound – a history that is both distinctly Jewish, and profoundly American.

To arrange interviews or review copies of music and commentaries, contact Bonnie Somers at 310-570-4770 or bsomers@mff.org.