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Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum Introduces Volume 18

Psalms and Canticles: Jewish Choral Art in America

The subject of Volume 18 from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience may be secular Jewish choral art in America, but the story behind the selections goes deeper than that.

A lot deeper.

The history of Jewish choral music stretches back to antiquity. Some of the earliest Jewish music was performed by choirs of Levites at the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. The psalms they sang inspired liturgical music by Jewish and Christian composers for millennia to come.



Yet secular Jewish choral music is a relatively young phenomenon. It wasn't until the 19th century that European Jews began singing the classics in Hebrew translation and performing original non-liturgical compositions in various languages. They carried those novel practices with them to America, where a new generation of composers began building a repertoire of secular Jewish choral music for professional singers, community choruses, and moonlighting synagogue choirs. The music in Volume 18 covers a lot of stylistic ground, but all of it illustrates the fundamental duality of the genre: its ancient, sacred roots, and its paradoxically modern origins.

Consider [*Akavyo ben mahalal'el omer*](#) and [*Ashrei ha'Ish*](#), by the great art song composer [Lazar Weiner](#). Weiner blends the distinctive sound of Eastern European synagogue music with something more contemporary; his cantorial solos might fit right into a traditional prayer service, but their choral and instrumental accompaniments are clearly meant for

the concert stage. So, too, are the adventurous psalm settings by [Leonard Bernstein](#), [Philip Glass](#), [Ralph Shapey](#), and [George Rochberg](#).

The clarion trumpet calls and rollicking percussion that mark the first movement of [Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*](#), and the sparse harp accompaniment of the second, bring to mind the horns, cymbals, and lyres played by the Levites at the Temple. But the rhythmic vigor and tuneful choral melodies—some adapted from the composer's theater works, including *West Side Story*—are pure Bernstein. There's no mistaking the mind behind *Psalm 126*, either. Glass' trademark repetitions, open textures, and piston-like rhythms hammer home the joyous account of a people restored by their God ("Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy").

On the other hand, you might be surprised to learn that [Rochberg's settings](#) of Psalms 23 ("The Lord is my shepherd") and 150 ("Praise the Lord") were inspired by the work of [Arnold Schoenberg](#), the father of atonal music. There are moments of great *agita* here, to be sure; but the overall impression is of euphony—especially fitting since Psalm 150 celebrates music as a means of praising God ("Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre"). The austere modernism of [Shapey's *Psalm II*](#) also matches the tenor of its biblical text: the terrible righteousness of the Almighty—"Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fires and brimstone, and a horrible tempest"—is embodied in leaping intervals, jarring dissonances, and the pellucid voices of the [BBC Singers](#), who offer up chords as bright and cutting as shards of glass.

There are other nods to the past here, as well. [Lukas Foss](#), who was along with Bernstein and [Irving Fine](#) (*A Short Alleluia*) a member of the Boston School of Stravinsky-influenced composers, based *Lammdeni* on the oldest known Jewish musical manuscripts: two prayer texts scribbled by a 12th-century European convert who spent time in the holy land. The manuscripts represent a unique fusion of early Jewish and Christian music, and Foss' response to them is an equally unique fusion of medieval plainchant and contemporary classical music. Even his use of imitation seems avant-garde, evoking the sound of voices bouncing off the walls of a medieval synagogue, or echoing through a ravine in the Judean desert.

[Joseph Achron's *Danse de Salome*](#) also casts a long glance in the rearview mirror. Inspired by a musical ritual that Achron saw carried out in Jerusalem by members of the ancient religious sect known as the Samaritans, the piece derives a timeless quality from its felicitous combination of driving percussion, wordless choral singing, sinuous Middle Eastern melody, and modern harmony. Achron builds the tension to a fever pitch, and the effect is thrilling; we don't know what these people are saying, but it must be terribly important.

As a tonic, you might want to listen to [Paul Schoenfield's elegant *Four Motets*](#). The first of these *a capella* pieces sounds like something from the quill of the Italian composer Salamone de Rossi, who made a rare attempt to dress Jewish liturgical music in the rich cloth of Renaissance polyphony. By the second, however, it's clear that we're not in

Kansas—or rather, 17th century Mantua—any more, as Schoenfield begins pumping new wine into these old musical bottles.

Ultimately, *Four Motets* reveals itself to be a thoroughly contemporary take on a most venerable form of Jewish music—something that can be said, in slightly different ways, about every selection in [*Psalms and Canticles: Jewish Choral Art in America*](#).

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.

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