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SEDER T'FILLOT: Traditional and Contemporary Synagogue Services **Milken Archive Introduces Volume 3**

Get ready for a heavy dose of soul music. Jewish soul music, that is.

That's one way, at least, of looking at [Volume 3 from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience. SEDER T'FILLOT](#) (literally, "order of the prayers") is devoted to the musical soul of the Jewish people: the prayers that for millennia have been central to Jewish spirituality.

Music has always been a vital part of Jewish worship, and for good reason. Rabbis who long ago established the order and content of the Jewish prayer services knew that such rigid structures could lull congregants into routine repetition. And in the Jewish tradition, prayer without *kavanah*—the passion of the moment—is meaningless. Music, however, is the enemy of mindless habit, the antidote to mechanical recitation; cast as song, every prayer holds the promise of heartfelt supplication.



You can hear that depth of feeling throughout this volume. And you can also hear how the musical tastes of the American Jewish community have evolved over time, from the strongly European-flavored Orthodox synagogue services of the immigrant era to the distinctively American sounds of the postwar Reform movement.

"[A Traditional First S'lihot Service](#)" offers a sterling example of how American Jewish composers, both immigrant and native-born, adapted Old World traditions to New World settings. Assembled from contributions by some of the finest composers of Orthodox Jewish liturgical music, this idealized service is shot through with the hallmarks of traditional Ashkenazi prayer, from earth-shaking bass solos (*p'ne na*) to the piping, ethereal sound of boys' voices (*b'motza'ei m'nuha*).

The First S'lihot service is a prelude to the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when observant Jews atone for their sins and plead to be written into the Book of Life for another year. And there is plenty of shirt-rending, chest-pounding repentance going on here. Just listen to *sh'ma kolenu*, by [Joseph Rushimsky](#), a giant of the Yiddish musical theater; *r'tze atiratam*, which was once recorded by [Yossele Rosenblatt](#), the

Ukrainian-born cantorial superstar who made more than 200 records and lent his voice to the very first talking film; and the electrifying *Ashrei yoshvei veitekha*.

The last is a textbook example of how to work a crowd of worshipers into a penitential frenzy, beginning with its muted, mournful *a cappella* opening and leading right up to cantor [Benzion Miller](#)'s fervent rendition of a melody based on an improvisation by the great Polish-born cantor [Moshe Koussevitzky](#). Miller, who serves the same Brooklyn synagogue that Koussevitzky once did, ramps up the tension just as he would if his congregation's salvation (not to mention his own) were really on the line. There are lighter moments, like the tripping *Rahamana* and march-like *Tvi'enu* by the popular (and populist) cantor and composer [Joshua Lind](#), who slyly marked his manuscripts with the symbol "mf," for "*mit* feeling." But if this service doesn't leave you contemplating your immortal soul, you must be a saint.

"[A Reform Sabbath Eve Service](#)" and "[A Reform Sabbath Morning Torah Service](#)," meanwhile, testify to the musical renaissance that occurred in American Reform circles between the 1940s and 1970s, when Reform rabbis and congregations embraced new and innovative prayer settings. American Jewish composers like [Isadore Freed](#) and [Max Helfman](#) responded by clothing some of the most familiar prayers of the Jewish liturgy (*L'kha dodi*, *Sh'ma yisra'el*) in the vestments of high art music; subtly nuanced, harmonically sophisticated, and crafted with the same rigor as anything written for the concert stage, settings such as these reflected modern currents in "serious" American music while still honoring earlier European models. (See, too, the finely wrought organ preludes by Ben Steinberg and Ernest Bloch, both of which display the kind of textural variety and ingenious counterpoint that's only possible on an instrument whose practitioners are encouraged to use all ten fingers and both feet.)

By the time we reach the [post-1970s Reform Yom Kippur services](#) that conclude this volume, the musical offerings have acquired an even more unmistakably American quality. Consider Jerome Kopmar's Coplandesque *Mi yit'neni*, which brings a touch of folksy Americana to this most severe of Jewish rites; or [Michael Isaacson](#)'s tuneful "Yizkor Prelude," *Enosh*, and *Shiviti*, any of which could pass for modern Broadway ballads (that's what I thought!). Such music serves as a potent reminder of just how far American Jewish composers have come in fashioning something truly unique: a repertoire of Jewish liturgical music unlike anything found anywhere else in the world.

Yet even these most modern and distinctively American works have the same soul-stirring effect as their more traditional predecessors. And that's as it should be, given their common purpose. For all are intended to render an act of faith more beautiful, more powerful, more immediate, and more intentional. As the old saying goes, the melody changes—but the song remains the same.

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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