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

Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum Introduces Volume 4

Cycle of Life in Synagogue and Home: Prayers and Celebrations Throughout the Jewish Year

Few Jewish holidays generate as much good cheer among Jews and non-Jews alike as Hanukka. And it's easy to see why: The Festival of Lights has it all, from fried treats and fun props (donuts and dreidels, anyone?) to some of the best songs of the holiday season.

Those songs appear in many guises in the latest offering from the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience. This double-album set of Hanukkah music is the first installment in Volume 4, which covers the vast trove of music that accompanies every aspect of Jewish life, from holiday celebrations and synagogue services to weddings and funerals.



Nowhere is the depth of that repertoire more evident than in these two albums, which feature original compositions and settings of traditional melodies by three generations of American Jewish composers. Raymond Goldstein's treatment of the prayers that accompany the lighting of the Hanukka candles (*B'rakhot l'hanukka*), for instance, might be a lot more refined than what you would expect to hear in a typical Jewish household as everyone is gathered around the *menorah*, or Hanukka candelabra. But it's a great example of the concert music that many American Jewish composers have crafted for the Hanukka celebrations that are a staple of the winter holiday season here in America.

Compare that to The Western Wind's rendition of the Ladino classic *Ocho Kandelikas* ("Eight Little Candles"), complete with flamenco rhythms and vocal imitations of castanets and muted trumpet; or to [Aaron Miller's Yiddish rendering of Ma'oz tzur](#), sung here by his son Benzion. The senior Miller dressed the centuries-old hymn, which praises God for seeing the Jewish people through their many tribulations, in a bouncy melody that sounds as if it might have strutted off the stage of Second Avenue. Benzion himself was born on the first night of Hanukka, and his mother sang this version of the song both before and after the blessed event.

The theme of survival in the face of persecution that lurks beneath the cheery surface of Miller's *Ma'oz tzur* exposes the seriousness of purpose at the heart of the holiday. This is, after all, an eight-day-long commemoration of the victory, some two millennia ago, of a ragtag group of Jewish guerilla fighters (the Maccabees) over the Syrian Greek tyrants who had outlawed Judaism in the Holy Land. It's especially fitting that a hard-fought war for religious freedom should have become the basis for such a popular and festive event in America, where Jews have long cherished the right to practice their religion openly and as they see fit. In some ways, Hanukka is the archetypical American Jewish holiday—one that celebrates Jewish identity in a land where such celebrations can be held without fear or apology.

You can hear the combination of high drama and deep joy that defines the holiday throughout this collection. It illuminates [Samuel Adler's "Hanukkah Motet,"](#) which adds an undercurrent of urgency to an otherwise lighthearted setting of the traditional benediction *Al hanissim*; and lights up [Debbie Friedman's rousing "Not by Might, Not by Power,"](#) performed by the composer herself with headlong intensity. Some of the material that was crafted before the creation of the State of Israel also exudes a sense of nostalgia for a time when Jewish warriors prevailed over the well-armed forces of oppression. That's the sense one gets from [Leo Low's wistful *Likhtelekh*,](#) which sets a Yiddish poem by Morris Rosenfeld, the "poet laureate of labor," who famously captured the plight of Jewish sweatshop workers at the turn of the 20th century but here cast his gaze further back. ("Jew, you warred once; Jew, you were once victorious.' God! It seems unbelievable now!")

A folksong melody that often accompanies the same poem makes a cameo appearance in [Samuel Adler's "Flames of Freedom,"](#) as do some of the most popular Hanukka tunes of all time. Most of those crop up in Adler's "To Celebrate a Miracle" as well; and while that last work is a wordless suite for wind ensemble, you hardly need lyrics to appreciate the ingenious contrapuntal settings of favorites like *Mi y'mallel* and *Al hanissim*, much less to recognize the innate appeal of the melodies themselves. (As if to prove that last point, Ludwig Altman uses *Mi y'mallel* as a countersubject in his remarkable ["Theme and Variations on Ma'oz tzur,"](#) which amounts to a master class in musical development.)

The choral writing in "Flames of Freedom," meanwhile, nods in the direction of Benjamin Britten's "A Ceremony of Carols"; and given the proximity of Hanukka and Christmas, it's no surprise that further references to that other major winter holiday should crop up in this collection, as well. For example, [Michael Isaacson's "Aspects of a Great Miracle"](#) includes one segment that was inspired by "Carol of the Bells" ("Christmas is here, bringing good cheer..."), and another that was originally written for a television movie about a Christmas theme park.

Isaacson's tunes aren't very Christmassy at all, but that's only appropriate. Despite the frequent comparisons, Hanukka is not the Jewish Christmas; not even close. It is very much its own holiday, with its own history, traditions, and music—all of which find their

greatest resonance and expression right here in America, the land where Jews have always enjoyed the freedom for which the Maccabees once fought so hard.

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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