

For Release: July 3, 2012
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Milken Archive of Jewish Music Virtual Museum
Introduces

Volume 6

Echoes of Ecstasy: Hassidic Inspiration

"Music," the noted guitarist and philosopher Jimi Hendrix once said, "is my religion."

It's a fine credo. And as Volume 6 in the Milken Archive of Jewish Music: The American Experience demonstrates, it is also a very Hassidic one.

In America, Hassidic Jews are often viewed as the Jewish equivalent of the Amish: religious traditionalists who segregate themselves by custom and dress (black hats, long sidelocks, long black coats).

But when the Hassidic movement first got underway in Eastern Europe in the 18th century, it was genuinely radical. Under the guidance of charismatic, mystical leaders known as *rebbe*s, Hassidic Jews rejected the studious, bookish bent of conventional Jewish orthodoxy in favor of joyful communion with the Divine. And music was central to their ecstatic pursuit of spiritual fulfillment.

To Hassidic Jews, melodies were tools for elevating the spirit and "cleaving to God," while words only got in the way. Thus was born the Hassidic *niggun*, a wordless prayer containing only vocables (oy, oy, oy; bim-bom bom bom) of a kind that will be familiar to anyone who has seen *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Niggunim can be complex, with multiple phrases and sections. They range from upbeat pieces meant for dancing to long, meditative works sung at the table of the *rebbe*. Yet all are meant to bring the singer closer to God. In the words of one Hassidic master, "There are gates of heaven that cannot be opened except by melody and song."

At once joyous and profound, imbued with deep spiritual significance and comprising a musical language all their own, niggunim have long appealed to those outside the Hassidic community. When Hassidic Jews left Europe in large numbers after the Second World War, they brought their niggunim with them to the United States, where they were quickly taken up by American Jewish composers.

Some of those composers used Hassidic melodies as the basis for non-Hassidic synagogue services – like [Isadore Freed](#), who wrote [Hassidic Service for Sabbath Eve](#) for the annual music festival at the Reform synagogue where he served as music director. Freed's achingly beautiful "May the Words" might not be obviously Hassidic in origin

(though the hiccuping rhythms of "On That Day" certainly are), but the composer conscientiously draws on genuine Hassidic melodies throughout the service.

Others adapted the characteristic sounds of Hassidic music to altogether different ends.

For example, a Hassidic flavor suffuses even the most daring sections of [Herman Berlinski's *From The World of My Father*](#), which the German émigré wrote while serving as music director of a Yiddish theater in Paris, and which he subsequently lost and had to reconstruct entirely from memory in America. Yet if the work represents an aural homage to a lost world of Eastern European Jewry, it is also a magnificent example of modern symphonic music, one that draws deeply on the lessons Berlinski learned under the great French teacher Nadia Boulanger. As the composer says in a [video interview that can be seen online](#) at the Milken Archive's virtual museum, the result is "*Fiddler on the Roof* multiplied by a thousand."

[Ofar Ben-Amots](#) takes things even further with [Hashkivenu](#), from his opera, *Fool's Paradise*. Here, ethereal voices and glowing vibraphone tones announce within the first handful of bars that this is a thoroughly modern piece of art music. The same might be said of [Abraham Wolf Binder's *Two Hassidic Moods*](#) for string quartet, with its sophisticated counterpoint and mercurial flashes of dissonance.

It's instructive to set works like these alongside [Eshet Hayil](#) by [Ben Zion Shenker](#), a major collector and composer of niggunim within the Modzitzer Hassidic community. (You can [hear Shenker describe his initiation into Hassidic music in a video interview](#) at the virtual museum.) Shenker's piece is literally steeped in the sound of a particular Hassidic sect, while Berlinski, Ben-Amotz, and Binder use niggunim as a springboard into the realm of "pure" art music. Yet all of these works represent different ways of drawing musical sustenance from a shared tradition.

Still other composers have explored the connections between niggunim and other styles of music, Jewish and otherwise.

Though Hassidic Jews tend to isolate themselves within their own communities, Hassidic music has always been highly inclusive. From the very beginning, niggunim drew on Eastern European folk songs, Western and Central European waltzes and marches (listen to the martial snare drum patterns that flicker across [Leon Stein's *Three Hassidic Dances*](#)), Near Eastern melodies, and operatic airs.

The closest ties, however, have been with the Jewish wedding band music known as klezmer. So many tunes have traveled back and forth between the Hassidic and klezmer songbooks that it is hard to know where one repertoire ends and the other begins.

What's more, Hassidic singers employ the same sobbing, wailing inflections that make klezmer clarinet and violin so distinctive. You can hear precisely those effects in [Yehudi](#)

[Wyner's *The Mirror*](#), as well as in [Hassidic Dance](#), by the great Yiddish theater composer [Abraham Ellstein](#). (Visit the virtual museum to [see a video interview with Wyner](#), along with [concert footage of Hassidic Dance](#) performed by members of the Los Angeles Philharmonic.)

Hearing those instrumental moans and sighs yoked to the sounds of modern classical music, one can only marvel at how deftly American composers have negotiated the task of updating these deeply traditional Jewish materials, allowing them to speak afresh to new audiences in a new world.

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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