JEWISH RELIGIOUS MUSIC IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

Restoring the Synagogue Soundtrack

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INTRODUCTION

On May 9, 1798, as the United States anticipated war with post-revolution France, New York synagogue Shearith Israel joined other houses of worship to observe a “Day of Public Humiliation” declared by President Thomas Jefferson. Its service that day, partly preserved in a pamphlet issued two months later, featured an English-language sermon by presiding reverend Gershom Seixas.¹ Music, however, framed the oration: after an opening prayer, the attendees intoned Psalms 46 and 51, “chaunted verse by verse; first by the Reader, and repeated by the Congregation”; and after the sermon, the sanctuary resonated with Psalms 120, 121, 130, and 20, all “chaunted jointly by the Reader and the Congregation.”² The ritual appeared consistent with public services at Shearith Israel dating back to at least 1760 (when “the Reader gave out the psalms” for singing on either end of the sermon). But the 1798 pamphlet highlighted two distinct musical strategies: short tunes repeated responsively for lengthier psalms (twelve verses for Psalm 46, twenty-one for Psalm 51), a practice often described as “lining out,” and a suggestion of longer compound melodies for the shorter concluding psalms (eight to ten verses each).³ The pamphlet lacks information on specific tunes, harmonic and instrumental conventions, language choice, and even the worshipers’ existing musical knowledge. Specific clues emerge, however, when seen within the American context: the emphasis on psalmody reflected a popular congregational practice that inspired a number of contemporary versified English translations. While Seixas led the assemblage by singing single-voiced (monophonic) chants, congregational responses likely included voluntary harmony, a practice consistent with contemporary understandings of the term chanting (as seen in the works of numerous contemporary American composers including Andrew Law and William Billings). The tunes, moreover, probably came from a small corpus of known melodies that could apply flexibly to a variety of texts. Two of the psalms (46 and 121) had been chanted at Shearith Israel’s first Thanksgiving service in 1789, but their appearance in 1798 alongside other less common psalms suggested few, if any, special tunes.⁴ While Seixas had Hebrew facility, moreover, most of the American Jews who sang that day had little practical knowledge of the language and likely preferred English.⁵
These clues hardly lead to definitive descriptions, but offer a glimpse at the complex role that music held in engaging a congregation, focusing them on a communal message, and giving them a public voice in America’s active political and religious landscape. Seixas and Shearith Israel used these conventions to shape their approach to civic worship, thereby balancing a sense of Jewish identity with the needs of the day.

Assembling these clues contradicts a number of assumptions long held in the study of music in Jewish life. Rather than seeing local practices as an even playing field upon which various denominations negotiated musical terms, the few scholars who have written on this period have presented an exceptionalist paradigm, treating Jewish musical customs as an extension of “tradition,” a shorthand term for communal efforts to preserve and control a body of cherished knowledge. Neil Levin, in the most detailed discussion of music of New York’s Shearith Israel congregation at this time, bases his discussion in a European parent population, Amsterdam’s Spanish-Portuguese (“Sephardic”) synagogue, which he claims was “known for its meticulous preservation and the continuity of its musical heritage and practice.” While allowing for “a degree of variation and adaptation” in American synagogue music practice, Levin asserts, such change “was somewhat minimal in this case, owing to the care taken by learned Sephardi ḥazzanim from Europe in teaching this repertoire and keeping it intact as much as possible.” In this view, the psalm singing for the 1798 event emphasized Jewish identity by staying true to a long-standing, transatlantic melodic corpus.

Perhaps regular religious services hewed more closely to this traditionalist point of view. But the psalms invoked at the May 1798 service appeared to serve a broader American mode of expression. The same presidentially decreed observance generated at least nineteen other such sermon-focused pamphlets across New England alone, and while Seixas’s sermon may have differed politically from many of them, the uniformity of the underlying ritual presented Jews as participants in a nation-defining act, ideologically, spiritually, and musically continuous with their non-Jewish neighbors. At a Wednesday service, which presented no specifically Jewish musical restrictions for the small group of worshipers, invention and adoption may have been considered in equal measure.

Seen as a creative and participatory act rather than one reliant on European precedent, this moment can offer a more expansive—and, perhaps, more realistic—portrait of what it meant for Jews in America to sound
out their religious identity. The May 1798 service also offers a useful starting point for this book, which seeks to define more clearly the sound of nineteenth-century American Jewry: a time and a place that scholarship on “Jewish musical tradition” renders “infirm and characterless” at best, and invisible at worst. In Europe, as Philip Bohlman has described, the very idea of “Jewish music” came into existence during this era, as Jews worked to match their hosts’ religious, ethnic, and national values of the time by creating their own compatible, systematically constructed, vision of the musical past. Geoffrey Goldberg, Tina Frühauf, and others have contributed significantly to this line of thinking, exploring Jewish debates over synagogue music, organs, choirs, and the nature of identity in both urban and rural settings. In the following chapters, I hope to bring the United States more fully into the conversation through discussions of its musical personnel, negotiations over leadership roles, and plans of action during a period of rapid growth.

Compared to Europe, antebellum America might seem at first like a quiet musical backwater. The young nation lacked widely recognized music academies. Music publishing, which required its own specialized processes, remained costly, laborious, and technologically demanding. Relatively few performance venues could accommodate large-scale public performances. The era of recordings and cheap sheet music that accompanied the nation’s late-nineteenth-century population explosion remained decades away.

Yet what America lacked in infrastructure, it balanced with an active and exploratory cultural and religious landscape. Jewish populations, like other minority religious denominations, began small but grew in number and resources. About 2,500 Jews lived in the United States by 1800, steadily growing to about 15,000 in 1840. In 1848, however, nationalist upheavals in Central Europe caused migration to jump dramatically, and between 200,000 and 250,000 Jews came to the United States as part of a total post-1848 exodus comprising about 3.8 million German immigrants. These Central European arrivals changed the face of American Judaism in ways that mirrored their non-Jewish counterparts, establishing institutions in their new environment that both recalled their lives across the Atlantic and addressed America’s new realities. Abuzz with musical activity and experimentation, the new country had different rules and a different character. Europe continued to exhibit an influence as an arbiter of taste, a center of musical training, and a supporter of new compositions. But America held its own as a dynamic voice in a transatlantic musical conversation, both
reflective and critical of European exports. Those who stayed in Europe, moreover, looked to America as a lucrative, welcoming, and more liberal market, open to innovation as it laid the groundwork for its own musical establishments.¹²

The view from America also illuminates new aspects of modern Jewish musical history, further nuancing distinctions between musical change as a broad form of theological experimentation and change attributed to the specific rhetoric of Jewish “reform.” Greater attention to this era gives a clearer view of the parameters of musical debates, which took zigzag paths through musical genres and practices rather than progressing evolution-like from simple solo chant to more complex choir-organ arrangements, as often romantically imagined. Different congregations altered their musical practices depending on such factors as finances, spiritual leadership, demographics, and communal cohesiveness—revealing, for example, a tendency to treat congregational singing, choral singing, instrumentation, and solo chant as separate items. This level of detail also opens a window onto the interactions between institutional structures, scholarship, and personnel that began to build up the cantor as a musical counterpart to the rabbi, while developing a repertoire that both inspired and was inspired by the beginnings of musicological research. Among other things, this book rebuts the all-too-frequently held view of this era as a time when Jews aimed to bring “Christian” forms of music into worship in efforts to create a “listening” congregation.¹³ To the contrary: Jewish communities, just like the Christian communities around them, engaged in wide-ranging discussions about the effectiveness of a variety of musical strategies to foster an active and dynamic congregational life, and made numerous efforts to adopt popular musical ideas to Judaism’s unique sound and spirit. A “silent” congregation, then as today, offered little benefit to synagogues that depended heavily on an active and prosperous membership.

“Jewish Music”: Shifting the Narrative

I gain inspiration in this project from the larger field of American music, a discipline that since the 1970s has worked to include the United States in musical history narratives by skillfully challenging and complementing Eurocentric scholarship. In this spirit, I follow John Graziano’s meticulously researched assertion that the Eurocentric perception of nineteenth century American cities (especially New York) as undeveloped proves more
imaginary than real. Complementing this perspective, scholars of American Jewish history over the past century have compiled a considerable literature amid a Jewish studies discipline that increasingly interrogates the purpose and organization of Jewish historical narratives. Yet the field of “Jewish music”—a term that only gained relevance late in the period covered in this book—has yet to take up this complexity with sufficient rigor.

Part of the dilemma with Jewish music research lies in both scholarly and lay efforts to approach music as a product of a linear and definable “tradition,” thereby heightening its symbolic capital. Two of the most prominent Jewish music researchers of the mid-twentieth-century, Abraham Z. Idelsohn and Eric Werner, frequently couched their meticulous scholarship in romantic notions of Jewish musical essences and origins, thereby turning music into a metaphor for passionate adherence to spiritual survival. Music’s indeterminacy, its reputation for emotional immediacy, and its near-magical treatment as a deeply held source of heritage consequently reinforced Werner and Idelsohn’s scholarly authority. Concepts such as “oral tradition,” which minimized lacunae in the documentary record by appealing to a sense of existential conservatism, thereby gave music the power to “prove” such unprovable as cultural continuity, religious longevity, and common origin.

The field consequently developed as an artistic parallel to twentieth-century rabbinic training and practice. Idelsohn, in his position at Hebrew Union College from 1924 to 1935, brought music into the institution’s rabbinic curriculum alongside Hebrew and liturgy. Austrian émigré and music scholar Eric Werner, Idelsohn’s successor, cofounded New York’s Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music in 1948, (re)establishing music’s physical embodiment in the cantor—a move that led other Jewish denominations to do similarly. Werner’s 1959 opus The Sacred Bridge gave music a role in Jewish-Catholic postwar reconciliation projects, his biography of composer Felix Mendelssohn thrust claims about Jewish identity into the trajectory of Western music history, and his 1976 book A Voice Still Heard promoted Central and Eastern European (Ashkenazic) Jewish culture as a crucial but endangered font of Jewish musical authenticity. Balanced between these intellectual and practical objectives, Jewish music took an active part in twentieth-century discussions linking the Jewish past with communal efforts to shape the future of Jewish life in America and beyond.

Yet ironically, American scholars of synagogue/“Jewish” music looked past America to reinforce their ideas: selecting Zionist, Eastern European, or Central European narratives to anchor grand historical arcs befitting
the Jewish people, while treating the United States as a fertile yet fragile ground. This strategy allowed scholars to imbue their work with a moral weight that confronted American Jews with a classic ethical conundrum: as inheritors of a (now) clearly delineated musical “heritage” in a new land, they could respect the burden of history, embrace the tradition, and build on it—or reject it at their peril.

I come to this study at a time when the veracity of these scholars’ broad claims comes under scrutiny. During my years of fieldwork at the Hebrew Union College School of Sacred Music (1999–2003), I learned how American cantorial students gained their identities as long-standing vessels of Jewish sound; yet nineteenth-century America rarely received any attention, save the occasional derisive remark that synagogue musicians of the time lacked knowledge and artistry and produced little of lasting value. At the same time, when I conducted historical research to bring depth to my ethnographic work, I found frustrating gaps in the history of cantorial music and leadership: inherited fact began fading into implication and reverse engineering based on the assumption of continuity. Mark Slobin attempted to address these issues by considering the cantor as a synagogue worker who gained increasing musical specialization into the late nineteenth century. Slobin’s concepts, in turn, began to point to an idea of synagogue musical leadership that developed its view of tradition through engagement with contemporary problems. Reappraised this way, Idelsohn, Werner, and their contemporaries came into focus as public intellectuals whose efforts to give Jewish life a musical “usable past” cemented their contributions to larger Jewish communal agendas. Their pragmatic attempts to link sound, concept and context usefully opened the door to the nineteenth century, where I found counterparts who made similar efforts to bring music and worship into the national conversation about American Jewish identity and culture. Ultimately, this approach also led me to see strong structural and intellectual continuities between the nineteenth century and the “dawning” of Jewish music research in the twentieth century—with rising leaders of each time constructing a history, legacy, and theory for the new age of Jewish sound.

This book contains the first fruits of that search.

Synagogue, School, and Home

Current research on nineteenth-century Jewish musical practice tends to focus on ideas of religious “reform,” most prominently by championing
synagogue musicians such as Salomon Sulzer (Vienna, 1804–1890), Samuel Naumbourg (Paris, 1817–80), Hirsch Weintraub (Königsberg, 1811–81), and Louis Lewandowski (Berlin, 1821–94)—figures that further reinforce European primacy as stewards of tradition and champions of modernity.\textsuperscript{22} The larger narrative attempts to lay claim on these composers’ careers as a function of that transition, with the move into the modern requiring negotiation between lives devoted to artistry and Judaism. Yet a closer look at communities in the United States reveals a broader canvas upon which musical figures and congregants acted, that ranged well beyond the sanctuary. David Conway’s recent work provides comparative insight into the European relationship between music and Jewish identity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a career choice, a form of leisure, and a mode of patronage.\textsuperscript{23} A somewhat different topography, perhaps imported from smaller Central European towns, emerged in the United States, with many nineteenth-century Jewish populations developing a community model that intertwined the synagogue, the school, and the home in an expansive musical topography. Each of these realms connected intimately with the others, with its own forms of activity and accompanying music. The synagogue represented the community’s public life as a place of gathering, ritual, and social events throughout the Jewish year. The school served as a place for transmitting religious, civic, and intellectual values to the community’s children, while preparing them for Jewish adulthood. And the home provided a private, intergenerational, (ideally) stable unit that modeled both personal and public behavior across the life cycle. Isaac Mayer Wise promoted this arrangement as the pretense for his \textit{Minhag America} liturgy and treated the synagogue sanctuary as a gathering site for each unit to mark its progress on Sabbaths and Jewish holidays. Many other congregations pursued similar programs, emphasizing in the process both internal coherence and continuity with the rest of American society.

Such an arrangement also allowed American Jewish populations to connect deeply with a musical culture that pervaded the national landscape. Family singing, often from communal songbooks, became a mark of the cultured household; a repertoire of educational hymns promoted order and achievement in the classroom; and prayer brought the whole community together—with adults, children, and seniors contributing in kind to a ritual overseen by clergy, with choir and (sometimes) keyboard accompaniment. Jewish communal leaders embraced this form of musical circulation as its own cohesive force, as musical literacy became a necessary skill for middle-class
adulthood, especially for women. And these leaders took steps to promote their musical practices to other communities through publications and positive publicity—because to many communal leaders, facility with musical repertoire potentially comprised an important indicator of American Jewish accomplishment. The works that emerged toward this end only occasionally aspired to the “greatness” or “majesty” often attributed to Sulzer, Naumbourg, and (later) Lewandowski. Rather, they more often emphasized enculturation and intergenerational communication in an effort to strengthen community amid changing linguistic, religious, economic, and social conditions.

Seeing music in this configuration also presents a clearer and more effective context for encountering the works of synagogue “art” music for which the nineteenth century has become known. In America, the trend toward domestic art music composition as a point of prestige became increasingly prominent by the late 1860s. Such initiatives brought attention to the synagogue; however, the other two domains hardly stopped developing—especially in congregations that had neither the resources nor the personnel (nor perhaps the desire) to follow such ambitions. Art music served mainly to clarify and promote the role of increasingly professionalized musical specialists—organists, choir directors, and especially the cantor—as a complement to the intellectual leadership of the rabbi. In particular, the cantor’s rising prominence during this time as an embodiment of musical “tradition”—unique among church personnel—also increased tensions between the urge toward artistic achievement and the enfranchisement of amateur congregational participation. In many ways, then, this time period laid out the terms of the “worship wars” that continue to roil in our own time.

**Nineteenth-Century Synagogue Music: A Study of Sources**

To view this era in greater depth, I aim to weave together individual, communal, musical, historiographic, and intellectual histories around a central core of published musical compendia—and in one notable case, a gold medallion. This source-based approach offers a set of landmarks for navigating a largely unmapped landscape, while at the same time acknowledging the works themselves as part of a material musical culture that measured success through production, circulation, and adoption. These sources also serve as point of entry for understanding the lives and journeys of their creators, who like their rabbinic colleagues traveled regularly and frequently crossed
paths. I also attempt to provide enough context to place these efforts locally within the synagogue–school–home continuum that surrounded them, nationally via the competing spheres of New York and Cincinnati, and internationally among the intellectual music centers of London, Berlin, Paris, Prague, Odessa, and especially Vienna. Organizing this narrative as a progressive “essential library” of sorts thus gives the complex richness of this story, with its overlapping and concurrent narratives, a place from which to emerge. To this effect, I conclude each chapter with a future projection, to address the fate of each work and its creator(s) as others superseded them.

This perspective deepens the existing literature on the complex relationship between Europe and the United States during the “German” era that Zev Eleff, Tobias Brinkmann, Cornelia Wilhelm, Shari Rabin, and a host of others have so ably brought to light. Eleff’s nuanced work on religious authority in nineteenth-century American Jewish communities, which he describes as developing “through gradual transformation helped along by rough-and-tumble conflict and critical determinants of change,” offers perhaps the most direct historical parallel to the discussions here. Chronicling this era in musical terms, however—with its own authorities, its own rules of engagement and education, and its own modes of forging community and practice—offers a useful counterpoint to Eleff’s examination of rabbinical leaders. Rabbis recognized the need to harness music in order to give their rituals character and uniformity, even as they warily eyed attempts to elevate musical leadership in the form of the cantor as potential challenges to their own power. Musical figures, in turn, followed rabbinical strategies of professionalization, publication, and scholarship to enhance their own positions, sometimes through mutually beneficial partnerships with leading rabbis themselves. Both figures recognized that music had the flexibility to provide meaning for any theological or cultural configuration, in essence illuminating the dynamic range of local and national approaches to American Jewish life. Thus framed, music generated unique debates about the status of sound as a symbol of Jewish identity that changed depending on who created, controlled, and presented it; where it came from; how it was used; and how it was interpreted.

Restoring the Soundtrack

The epigraph to this book highlights the critical role that music held to prominent liturgists such as Isaac Mayer Wise—to the point that Wise felt
his foundational prayer book *Minhag America* could only succeed with well-prepared music—and offers a way as an entry into the deep integration of musical activity in nineteenth-century American Judaism. The implications of this quote run in progressive layers throughout the rest of the book.

I begin in the 1840s, chronicling the shift from British musical paradigms to Central European ones during a time when instituting a choir could reinforce either reform or traditional/orthodox identities. While Salomon Sulzer, the best known of the new-wave European synagogue composers today, had already built his reputation during the previous decade in Vienna, his music had not yet become a regular part of American Jewish worship. Building off trends toward choral singing set by Sephardic populations in the early nineteenth century (which I address only briefly), some American congregations looked to England for their music, hoping to adopt models of choral singing and English-language hymns similar to those just sanctioned by Chief Rabbi Nathan Adler. This activity, particularly in the mid-Atlantic states, established early strata upon which German American synagogues could define their own musical prayer leaders and build their own music programs. Thus, through the work of Ansel Leo (1806–78, arrived from London c. 1846), Henry A. Henry (1800–79, arrived from London in 1849), Leon Sternberger (1819–97, arrived from Bavaria in 1849), Isaac Ritterman (1820–90, born in Kraków, arrived from Bavaria in 1855), and Louis Naumburg (1813–1902, arrived from Bavaria in 1850), among others, a nascent class of synagogue music figures emerged. Their portfolios incorporated an array of official and unofficial roles as musicians, educators, and liturgical leaders as they negotiated energetic rabbinic discussions about religious ritual in American Jewish life. However, when Sulzer’s paradigm-shifting music spread across North America during the late 1840s, spearheaded in part by Sternberger and Ritterman in addition to Isaac Mayer Wise, they had new decisions to make.

In contrast to these figures, I offer at the end of chapter 1 a possible counternarrative exploring what may have been lost in the move to new forms of musical identity. As many congregations trended toward family pews and mixed choirs, they began to shift away from other practices, including possible musical leadership roles for women in synagogues with gender-separated prayer through the end of the nineteenth century. While largely overlooked today, the presence of figures such as the *sagerin* in sources from this period destabilize assumptions of linear development and bring into question reform’s own role as a herald of gender parity.
In the next section of the book, I explore the efforts of several religious leaders to treat music as a medium for ecumenical community building. These figures promoted a rich sonic overlap between German American and German Jewish identity, following a philosophy of civic harmony that viewed Jews and other subgroups as meaningful contributors to a culturally rich and diverse society. In their worldviews, music linked the synagogue with the institutions and discourses of the public square, with each sonic space reinforcing the others.

Chapter 2 opens with a discussion of hymn singing and singing societies, popular forms of music making among German populations on both sides of the Atlantic during this time. Developed as modes of national identity in the years before the 1848 unrest, group singing enacted a sense of liberal progressivism that envisioned an open, pluralistic society. In the United States, this environment offered an opportunity for Wilhelm Fischer, a respected (non-Jewish) organist and choral director, to publish one of the first notated Jewish hymnals for Philadelphia’s Keneseth Israel congregation in 1863. Fischer received plaudits for channeling Jewish music effectively in his idiomatic four-part settings of psalms and prayer texts. His work, however, faced problems translating to broader Jewish America due to his alliance with ultra-Reform figure David Einhorn and the centrality of the German language to his philosophical goals. Combined with a greater concern for synagogue composers’ Jewish identity as a test of musical authenticity, Fischer’s work fell out of favor. While the singing society retained its social and liturgical relevance in American synagogue music for several decades, critics’ reconfiguration of the practice as a borrowing from Christians—and therefore inappropriate for the synagogue—eventually took hold as a persistent narrative.

The career of Gustav M. Cohen, the focus of the next chapter, presents an alternative pathway for Jewish progressivism. Cohen understood choral singing as a symbol of liturgical reform, a barometer of cultural advancement, and a means of American acculturation. Serving a succession of communities as both spiritual leader and Jewish music specialist, however, he often faced a paradox in defining his portfolio. On one hand, he saw music as a public and immediate manifestation of ideology, through which Jews could connect with the broader community’s musical practices. On the other hand, he sympathized with architects of both religious reform and Bildung (self-cultivation), who sought to integrate music into a larger program of Jewish cultural sophistication. Cohen attempted to balance these
two goals in compendia such as *The Sacred Harp of Judah* (1864), which placed music education and development into the hands of the people. In parallel with his work in B’nai B’rith, a Jewish fraternal organization created in the 1840s, he hoped that such musical education could become a self-renewing resource that transcended denominationalism, even as he ultimately achieved mixed results.

The development of a distinct Jewish musical repertoire also called for the development of a matching scholarly rationale. In chapter 4, I explore the intersecting lives of Gustav S. Ensel and Simon Hecht, two German-born musician-teachers whose public debates over music started in Europe and continued as they relocated to smaller congregations in the American Midwest. Ensel, with his extensive musical background, produced the nation’s first substantial scholarly treatise on music in Judaism, significantly predating—and predicting—twentieth-century developments by the likes of Idelsohn and Werner. Hecht, in contrast, applied his scholarly ideas to synagogue song, and in 1868 produced a widely used hymnal that nonetheless failed to meet the standards of a nationwide search committee. Ensel and Hecht’s stories point to the musical pragmatism needed for a tiny Jewish minority to establish itself in the church-based ecosystem of America’s small towns. Opening Judaism to broad-based scholarly discussions of ancient musical origins not only created an intellectual basis for worship, but also allowed Jews to assert their historical relevance in environments where musical resources needed to be shared among houses of worship.

In contrast to Fischer, Cohen, Ensel, and Hecht, who sought to empower congregants’ voices by having them sing in harmony, a series of other figures emerged after 1865 who emphasized musical and compositional artistry in the synagogue, marking the ascent of a cantorial culture.

Postbellum America developed a critical mass of more than a dozen cantors trained or inspired by Vienna obercantor Salomon Sulzer. Although many synagogues sought musical expertise of some sort, usually connected to education, communities that could afford a full Vienna-style model rose to the status of flagships. Offering job security in return for musical prominence, these congregations partnered with individual “Sulzer-cantors” to develop music’s potential as a symbol of Jewish cultural excellence. Their voices complemented well-trained choirs—of men and boys or men and women depending on religious leaning—and often organs as well, swelling synagogue music budgets and generating new controversies. The growing urban economic centers of Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, for
example, had the resources to foot the bill, even as they increasingly turned to non-Jewish choristers to maintain the quality of their sound.

As I present in chapter 5, by 1866 the United States had developed the musical infrastructure to join an international celebration of Sulzer’s fortieth year in his Vienna pulpit. His American disciples marked the occasion by sending a nice gift. But more importantly, they approached the anniversary as an opportunity to reinforce their connection to Sulzer and his spreading cantorial network, raising their own standing in the process.

Through Sulzer, cantors used their pulpits to reconfigure the idea of “Jewish music” into its own tradition that paralleled rabbinic textual interpretation, with far-reaching implications. While several prominent works of synagogue music saw publication during this time, none proved as central or significant as Zimrath Yah, a four-volume compendium of Jewish liturgical music published from 1871 to 1886, edited and distributed chiefly by cantors Samuel Welsch of New York City and Alois Kaiser of Baltimore, with the assistance of then–New York cantor Morris Goldstein and pianist-turned-industrialist/polymath Isaac L. Rice. Zimrath Yah reflected a major effort to establish a national synagogue-based musical repertoire of the highest quality. Created in the same spirit of American unification that led others to found the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873) and Hebrew Union College (1875), the compendium exemplified a maturing American Jewish population’s ambition to stand alongside its European siblings. As with several of the other publications addressed here, Zimrath Yah eventually gave way to new liturgical and musical paradigms. In its time, however, the collection’s critical engagement with European synagogue music, and its effort to cover all the country’s major prayer books, solidified the cantor’s position as a guardian of American Jewish sonic heritage.

In the 1880s, the idea of “Jewish music” took on an ethnic tinge inspired by ideas of ancientness and the developing field of musicology—including the codification of a series of modes, the increasing popularity of the augmented second interval, and the start of a timbral shift in cantorial singing from the refined bel canto style to a more exotic “cry in the voice” idiom. Central European cantors in America, seeing the populations changing around them while also dealing with populist trends toward empowering congregational singing, had to negotiate these changes carefully. Chapter 6 consequently tracks the path of American synagogue music through three key works of the period. William Sparger and Alois Kaiser’s 1893 compendium A Collection of the Principal Melodies of the Synagogue from the Earliest
*Times to the Present* gave contemporary synagogue music a public historical narrative that cohered with the American spirit of the Chicago World’s Fair. The following year, the same two cantors led the recently formed Cantors’ Association of America to produce an interim synagogue music manual for the *Union Prayer Book*, a long-anticipated liturgy that rabbinical leaders hoped would unify the nation’s Jewish communities. Kaiser’s continued work with these rabbis led to a more permanent (if problematic) solution in 1897 with the *Union Hymnal*. Exploring the stories behind these related publications and their attendant controversies reveals the complex terrain that cantors navigated as they tried, and often failed, to make music an equal player in Jewish liturgical discussions.

In the concluding chapter, I reflect on these interconnected narratives to comment on the way that we see, and especially hear, history. The nineteenth century, I argue, set the terms that we still use to look at music in Jewish life, defining music as a worthy bearer of tradition with its own history, philosophy, and spiritual import. At the same time, by reintroducing a complex view of sound to an era long buried in Jewish history, we can understand better how Jews of the “German period” curated music as part of a larger national dialogue on American identity. I offer here a way to parse the deep cultural and historical conversations embedded in their music-related materials, while arguing that sound must factor into any study of this era: in doing so, I contribute to a growing number of studies of American religious musical life and music. Adding American Judaism to this mix, I hope, will add a few more strands to our understanding of the American musical tapestry.

I have relied on a raft of primary materials—available through new digital databases in addition to standard archival and microfilm sources—to give this era greater scholarly focus. Yet I make no claims at a comprehensive overview. Rather, I ask the reader to see this book as an attempt to create a structure for further correction, critique, and detail. My case studies mainly highlight the shifting ground between the Midwest and the East Coast as different Jewish populations, economic conditions, and migration patterns changed over more than half a century. In taking this approach, however, I give less attention to the early nineteenth century, as well as developments in the Southern and Western United States. Each area stands ready for deeper investigation.

Moreover, because of the nature of the available materials, the main musical figures I address in this book are all male. Although I present few women’s stories, I urge the reader to look below the surface of these narratives
to see hints of a significant, if still fragmentary, chronicle of women’s involvement in synagogue music. Music, after all, served as a meeting point of philosophy and practice, emphasizing Elisheva Baumgarten’s assertion about the medieval period that “despite the authority held by rabbinic leadership . . . rabbis alone did not determine practice.” When translated to the nineteenth century, Baumgarten’s claim suggests that women’s participation both buoyed musical practices in many Jewish communities, and often made male musicians’ careers feasible. In some cases, women’s synagogue attendance (more consistent than men) may have ensured a uniformity of congregational responses and hymn recitations that enabled new musical practices; in other cases, women lent their voices to both volunteer and paid choirs. Women often served as conduits for musical culture and instruction in the home, a crucial setting for learning synagogue melodies. Publications directed toward women, especially Die Deborah (a German-language companion to Cincinnati’s Israelite), included extensive discussions of music as part of a broader interest in culture and the arts. Later in the century, Jewish women’s organizations frequently took responsibility for sustaining musical activities and promoting musical scholarship as a social good. While few women receive mention by name in these pages, in other words, their audible contributions to musical practice and authority during this time made possible the rise of specialized musical forms and their (male) figureheads.

The period I address here also bears some responsibility for historians’ continued tendency to relegate music to “specialists,” because that very concept became a pretext for cantors’ professionalization campaigns (as it did on a different level with the field of musicology). Widening the circle, however, shows music’s more appropriate place during this time as a subject of enthusiastic general knowledge and discussion. By shifting the angles of the stories that we already tell, in other words, we can learn much about how we have come to define ourselves, and how we can see ourselves differently if only we trusted our historical “ears” a bit more.

A Note on Language

This book introduces a wide range of previously undiscussed materials from contemporaneous periodicals and synagogue records, including many German-language sources. In order to satisfy an English-language readership, I present these sources in English translation—nearly always my own. Although academic transparency encourages the inclusion of
original texts in footnotes or an appendix, the volume of referenced sources makes that approach impractical here. Interested readers can follow the citations I provide for verification, often in publicly available databases; I can only hope for some indulgence that my translations are usable, or at least not deceptively incorrect.

As with many multilingual and transnational studies, moreover, proper names of synagogues, institutions, and people appear with multiple spellings in the available sources. While I maintain my sources’ orthographic variety in quoted materials, I regularize spelling in the main text to conform to local conventions.

One crucial term, however, stands out: that of the musical prayer leader, which occupies a central place in this narrative. While twenty-first-century discussions of the “cantor” or “hazan” typically agree on at least the basics of the figure’s overall portfolio and history, no such agreement existed in the nineteenth century. As Mark Slobin notes, even Salomon Sulzer’s revered status as a model “modern cantor” in many circles traded in neologism rather than convention. Many others used alternate terms, including “reader” and even “rabbi,” to indicate a range of community roles (musical and otherwise), or to present an idealistic, if blurred, desire for musical change. In this one instance, then, I present a spectrum of terms in all of its diversity, and I ask the reader to interpret their inconsistent usage as the open and shifting signifiers they were during this age.

Beyond the Book

This book serves as part of a larger web-based project aimed to bring the sound of nineteenth-century American Jewish life to life through recordings, mapping projects, and extended analyses. In that regard, what you read here offers a first step, one way into an era with many overlapping musical ideas and sonic identities. Hopefully, before long, those interested in visiting this world can access a rich array of sources, past documents and scores, and ideally, musical interpretations.

Notes


13. See, for example, Idelsohn, Jewish Music, 241–43.


CONCLUSION

Restoring the Soundtrack of Jewish Life in Nineteenth-Century America

In his 1929 field-defining book *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development*, US émigré Abraham Z. Idelsohn largely dismissed the previous American century in a few presumptive sentences:

The Jewish settlement in the United States is comparatively very young—all in all somewhat more than two centuries. During that period the settlers struggled hard to acclimatize themselves and adapt themselves to the new environment. This adjustment caused them to drop a great part of their inherited conceptions and to abandon manners to which they had been accustomed in their old dwelling places. Such a period of struggle immigrants and new settlers usually have to endure in the first few generations, until they root themselves in the soil of their adopted country. Thus, during the period of acclimatization and adjustment there was no possibility for spiritual creation. Yet, following that period of struggle, forecasts of creations of a new Jewish—we may say American Jewish—type are noticeable. It is from this point of view that the achievements in the field of Synagogue song in America have to be considered. And it is, therefore, not a history of achievements that we can offer here, but rather an insight into its first steps.¹

Most of the key figures who had built the field of Jewish music in the nineteenth century had passed on. Leon Sternberger died in 1897. Gustav S. Ensel and Samuel Welsch died in 1901, in Paducah and Prague, respectively. G. M. Cohen and Louis Naumburg died in 1902. Francis L. Cohen left the field of musicology in 1905, when he earned his rabbinical degree and assumed the pulpit of Sydney, Australia’s Great Synagogue. Morris Goldstein died in Cincinnati in 1906, outliving his Viennese brother Josef by seven years. When Jewish newspapers across the United States and Europe marked Alois Kaiser’s 1908 death, Idelsohn was in Jerusalem with a portable
phonograph machine, about a year into the fieldwork that would establish his career.

Josef Singer died in Vienna in 1912. And Pinchas Minkowsky, whose musical career and writings could have made him Idelsohn’s most prominent intellectual foil, died weeks after his 1923 return to the United States to found a Boston-based cantorial school—a loss that likely changed the course of Jewish music scholarship.\(^2\) Idelsohn, who had come to New York just months before Minkowsky, parlayed a short turn at Stephen S. Wise’s Society for the Advancement of Judaism into a thriving intellectual career by taking advantage of the musical structures these forebears had established: connecting with Rabbi Jacob Singer, then head of the Central Conference of American Rabbis’s Committee on Synagog Music; working closely with A. Irma Cohon, whose musical activities included a textbook written for the National Council of Jewish Women; and assuming a faculty position at Cincinnati’s Hebrew Union College, where he trained rabbinical students in music and Hebrew far from centers of cantorial activity in Chicago and the east coast.\(^3\) In essence, Idelsohn fulfilled the connection between rabbis and cantors that Kaiser and his colleagues had long sought, even as he left the pulpit to do so. Yet at the same time, Idelsohn only superficially acknowledged the labors that made his American career possible. He treated his adoptive nation as a fallow field, privileged the primacy of Europe, and following Cyrus Adler introduced the Middle East to Jewish music study as the basis of new ethnic-sounding “traditional melodies.”

Whether he acknowledged it or not, Idelsohn correctly surmised that as the social and liturgical music landscape changed, so should the history of Jewish music. German Jewish culture ebbed in the United States after Isaac Mayer Wise’s death in 1900. Where Cincinnati and the Midwest had been a central influence in Jewish ideology, New York began to dominate as the Jewish population’s center of gravity shifted eastward. Local German Jewish newspapers persisted, but the national German-language paper Die Deborah folded in 1902. A heterogeneous range of Central European–focused religious practices had generally consolidated under the Reform movement and its Union of American Hebrew Congregations. New institutions, however, ensured a vibrant and changing marketplace. New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary, under the presidency of Solomon Schechter, became a prime competitor, establishing the United Synagogue of America in 1913.\(^4\) And the Orthodox Union (founded at Jewish Theological Seminary in 1897) emerged as the most prominent of a series of organizations devoted
to Jewish orthodoxy that cultivated their own array of musical practices—from celebrated Eastern European cantors and choirs to the congregational singing of Young Israel. Most of these new groups viewed America through the eyes of recent arrivals, who treated American soil as a place to give their practices new roots. And so, in the context of a renewed search for musical relevance, the voluminous activity of the previous century faded.

Remnants of the Nineteenth Century

By his death in 1908, Alois Kaiser had become the doyen of his profession and his era. His compositions had characterized the changes in synagogue music since the 1860s, his writings sought to keep up with changing perceptions of music and Judaism, and his work on the *Union Hymnal* attempted to keep his labors relevant as the *Union Prayer Book* superseded regional liturgies. Over the course of his travels and activity, he had amassed a large collection of music. Just as he had sent copies of his work to colleagues in Europe and the United States, so did much of his music library reflect active exchange with his brothers in arms.

In his will, Kaiser left his music collection to his nephew, lawyer Hugo Steiner, who also sang in the Oheb Shalom choir. Steiner held on to his uncle’s materials for eleven years before Adolph Oko, director of the Hebrew Union College library, acquired the collection and brought it to Cincinnati. Although Oko, in a contemporary account, noted about 600 items in Kaiser’s library, the Hebrew Union College library’s December 1919 accession books list only 124 entries. Combined with the acquisition of the much larger Birnbaum Collection at around the same time, the Kaiser/Steiner materials represented a significant moment for Jewish music collection in the United States, in essence defining the field and placing Hebrew Union College at its forefront. “The subject of Jewish music had just begun to come into its own with musicologists and musicians,” Oko recalled at the time, “and the material was not easy to gather—it was not represented even in our leading libraries.” Still in the twenty-first century, these collections represent the large majority of musical materials available from before 1900.

The two collections, however, had diverging fates. Over the following decades, Birnbaum’s much larger, manuscript-heavy European collection became a celebrated source for scholarly Jewish music study, facilitating the hires of both A. Z. Idelsohn and his successor Eric Werner. Kaiser’s smaller, more publication-focused collection, in contrast, filtered into the library’s
general holdings, becoming a cryptic record of America’s own contributions to the field. The active musical life that Kaiser had preserved thus became buried in the twentieth-century scholarly landscape.

Listening Again to the Nineteenth Century

Even though rabbis, cantors, scholars, and laypeople experienced music and sound in their everyday lives throughout the American nineteenth century, the era all too often seems mute when viewed through the pages of Jewish history. This book, I hope, turns up the volume at least a little, showing that amid the era’s local synagogue discourses, sermonizing, and theological debate, music wove deeply in and around the conversation: serving as a central domain for expressing Jewish identity and practice, and even as an alternative philosophical entry point when ideological languages clashed. Musical leadership proved crucial for the development of American liturgy: rabbis needed to partner with composers to introduce new prayer books, empower a congregation, and connect with civic observances. Music also served as an important means of differentiating American Judaism from European Judaism, both indicating distance from a land of origin and affirming the ideological integrity of the émigré population. Musical personnel, in turn, developed their own rich vocabulary of negotiation that engaged with broad musical practices while seeking to understand the sounds that qualified as Judaism both locally and nationally. The sound of Jewish communal life that aimed to span the synagogue, school, and home, in other words, comprised a culture and understanding of its own. Readers and cantors stood on the musical front lines, directly shaping congregational involvement, and helping Jewish populations choose who, when, and what to sing, both in and out of the sanctuary. While such movements certainly took place in Europe as well, they took a unique contour and history in the United States, where musical figures became important liaisons to national conversations on Jewish liturgy, identity, and education.

Musicians knew, moreover, that music did not adhere to specific theologies as tightly as religious leaders would have wanted. Isaac Mayer Wise hoped music would elevate the community spirit of his Minhag America services, and he trumpeted in The Israelite every time a synagogue introduced organ and choir to its worship. The musicians who insinuated such changes, however, had their own things to say about music’s purpose and function: epitomized by Wise’s own struggle to find a clergy partner who
could satisfy his mercurial musical philosophy. Instead, musical figures often shifted nimbly to accommodate structures of leadership, in both flagship and small congregations; they developed a range of strategies for bringing their musical abilities into mainstream religious discourse. Comforted by America’s claims of church-state separation, religious musical leaders freed themselves from Central European regulations imposed on their training and qualifications and worked to produce a spirit of Jewish peoplehood with a distinctive sound. Sometimes they tried to establish themselves as men of letters, whose musical aptitude represented one facet of a larger skill set; sometimes they cast themselves as artists; and ultimately many campaigned to establish their own clerical class in the cantor. The works they produced during this time reflected music’s significance for normalizing, historicizing, and socializing ideas across the ideological spectrum amid a constantly shifting and contested set of parameters for defining the future of American Jewry.

This book also shows that as synagogues developed during this period, two different musical approaches began to emerge. Smaller congregations tended toward unified communal models whose leaders had to handle both rabbinical and musical responsibilities. While these congregations formed choirs and included keyboard-based accompaniment, they relied heavily on the broader community for musical vitality, seeking to create a cohesive and multigenerational repertoire while often sharing musical resources with other churches and musical institutions. Lee Shai Weissbach points out that pragmatism proved to be the norm in this context, and I add that at least when it came to music, that pragmatism included intimate exchange across religious and civic lines. The common association of Jewish “reform” with the local inclusion of choral and instrumental-based practices, in other words, both oversimplifies the wide-ranging religious landscape of the mid-nineteenth century and largely denies agency to orthodoxy’s own fluid and modernizing musical creativity.

Larger congregations, in contrast, increasingly sought specialized musical figures who could reflect a striving for high cultural norms, while explicitly connecting musical professionalization with the progressive values of “Reform Judaism.” In this capacity, well-moneyed congregations provided fertile ground for the development of a musical figure—the cantor—who sought his own autonomy as a religious and intellectual authority fluent in the emerging field of “Jewish music.” With these congregations as a base of operations, America saw a proliferation of sheet music, whose authors’ lofty
ambitions equaled those of their rabbinical colleagues and aimed to provide a normative model for communal pride and belonging. Smaller congregations received plaudits when they adopted these musical agendas, but more often, they admired these flagships from afar. The flagships, in turn, became the recognized voice, and sound, of American Judaism.

I have attempted to present the sound of mid-nineteenth century American Jewish life in its expansive, if sometimes messy fullness as a series of intersecting narratives and organic conversations. Details mattered. Should a choir have men only, men and boys, men and women, or women only? How many people could create a sufficient choral sound and in what vocal distribution? Should the choir’s members come from the congregation or outside, and did religious preference matter when it came to encountering their (sometimes unseen) voices? Should the congregation grant singers benefits, salaries, or debts of gratitude, and how could they maintain hierarchies of ringers and volunteers in order to maintain a consistent or desired sound? Who could lead the choristers and/or train them and when? What music could they use? How did the choir function vis-à-vis the congregation and the reader/cantor/organist/rabbi? How did congregations weigh their choirs’ quality versus their value? And how did congregations adjust as styles, populations, educational standards, and musical norms shifted in the new American environment?

Musical accompaniment faced a similar wide range of possibilities: Did a community feel comfortable using a parlor piano, a guitar, a melodeon, or a full-ranged instrument? How did populations acquire instruments, maintain them, and find people to play them? How did they determine when to play instruments, or when not to play them? And perhaps most importantly, how did these instruments relate to fluid or even seesawing theological norms? While the best endowed congregations could invest in conspicuous and pricey pipe organs, most congregations employed smaller, portable, relatively inexpensive instruments that came and went as ideas about music changed.

New compositions also abounded during this period. Many authorities sought to uphold the efforts of Sulzer and Naumbourg as paradigms of excellence. Others, however, saw them as unnecessarily elitist and out of touch with American realities, treating music instead as an educational medium for congregants to connect to their civic institutions as both Jews and Americans. Sulzer could inspire, but G. M. Cohen could get the masses to sing.
This era also opens a rich discussion on music and gender. At a time when men occupied nearly all pulpit positions, Jewish and otherwise, the domestic associations of musical training and performance in America as an agent of embourgeoisement ensured women a role in any attempt to improve the standing of worship. Indeed, the long business hours associated with the American work ethic meant that women typically outnumbered men in the pews and, where allowed, the choir. While the case of Julie Rosewald, the San Francisco–based cantor-soprano, has been held up as a notable anomaly, it may well have represented a practice that spread far more widely in the proverbial (and literal) choir loft. Educational innovations, combined with the institution of the confirmation ceremony, showed ample evidence of a shift toward coeducation. Dovetailed with the significant integration of vocal training into educational curricula of the time, women could gain a foothold in musical leadership. In smaller communities, the congregation likely could see them plainly; but even when placed out of view with the rest of the choir, their voices had a clear presence in the liturgy. Synagogue women’s groups, moreover, sometimes took responsibility for musical activities as the century came to a close, becoming stewards of practice as the field of Jewish music gained its own sense of history and legacy.

The still-larger question looms about the relationship between Europe and the United States. Indeed, even at the end of the nineteenth century, nearly every musical figure covered in this study migrated to the United States after training in Europe. To many, Europe remained a site of authenticity, or at least aesthetic entrenchment, that could define the idea of “tradition” more effectively in its existing precedents than in the relatively young American nation. Yet while Europe remained a place of ambivalence, America represented a land of opportunity. What America lacked in structure, hierarchy, and musical reverence, it gained in democratization, freedom, and the attractions of capitalism. Musical figures fluidly moved in and out of jobs, sometimes shifting between pulpit officiation and business, synagogue song and art song, rabbinical and cantorial responsibilities. Music publications faced a high but surmountable financial burden, receiving support from communities, individuals, and organizations. And in a number of cases, fame in America led to a European return, as Welsch did to Prague, Minkowsky did to Odessa, and Kaiser did through the wide circulation of his compositions.

This book hardly exhausts the topic. However, I hope it revitalizes the discussion beyond the occasional reference in American Jewish
history accounts, and beyond Eurocentric perspectives that all too often see America through the lens of Salomon Sulzer or the Eastern European cantorate. Part of the issue here lies with the aesthetic standards of musicology, which largely established itself on the basis of musical sophistication and “greatness”—standards that Jewish music scholars have had little choice but to adopt since Richard Wagner’s 1850 *Das Judenthum in der Musik* put Jews on the defensive. America’s related but fundamentally different view of Jewish community, culture, identity, and future found little place in this discourse. Yet rather than assuming that American Jews lived in a state of musical ignorance or naïveté, we can now see how Jewish musical figures in nineteenth-century America set the stage for what scholars tend to recognize as the “golden age” of American cantors to come: whether through scholarship, musical composition, institutionalization, or (perhaps most importantly) education. As subsequent waves of arrivals brought their own backgrounds and fresh eyes to American shores, they also stepped into a preexisting Jewish sonic infrastructure that would shape their musical aesthetics even as those who created it faded out of view.

A detailed trip to the nineteenth century can thus illuminate the way we see music in Jewish life during the first part of the twenty-first century. Jonathan Sarna points out in his 2004 history of American Judaism that like many religious groups, Jews have faced a constant set of “contradictory trends operating in their community, [of] assimilation and revitalization.” This study layers musical activity onto Sarna’s paradigm, oscillating in this case between movements toward congregational singing and artistic veneration, universalism and particularism, innovation and tradition. And we can still see these concerns in action during our own era. To give but one example, the recent “conflict” between the cantor and the song leader that dominated the second half of the twentieth century here finds a remarkably similar precedent a century earlier—effected, moreover, by many of the same aesthetic values of education and group singing as we see today, alongside concerns about religious continuity and the commitment of young people. Rather than seeing cantors as classic figures and “song leaders” as newcomers, we can now see them as complementary figures who have developed side by side for almost two hundred years, if not more. There still remains, in other words, much for us to learn by seeing ourselves as the product of those who came before.

I hope that this study helps establish more clearly the historical persistence of the musical dialogues and issues at play in America, while
offering a stronger, more balanced view of where and how those dialogues took place. Too often, to paraphrase David Lowenthal, we allow the past to become a foreign country, claiming its fundamental difference even as we seek to preserve it as a site of heritage. But by listening carefully, perhaps those echoes we once thought too distant to be heard can now gain proper recognition as the background to which we now harmonize our own voices.

Notes

7. Hebrew Union College accession books, December 1919, no. 28201-28325. Klau Library, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, OH. I am grateful to Noni Rudavsky for locating these records. It is possible that Oko’s initial assessment of the collection included individual issues of cantorial journals, which the Accession Records grouped by year.
9. The study of American Jewish orthodoxy itself has been marginalized until only recently. See, among others, Jeffrey Gurock, Orthodox Jews in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), and Zev Eleff, Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).