



Congregation Ahawath Chesed, now Central Synagogue, 1872.



**Sounding Jewish Tradition:  
The Music of Central Synagogue**

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**Central Synagogue  
New York, New York**



ISBN #9780971728523

Library of Congress #2010938555  
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Published by Central Synagogue  
New York, New York 10022



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This history would not have come about had it not been for the generosity of Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein, Rabbi Laurence H. Rubinstein, Robin Rubinstein, and the Rubinstein Family Archival Fund. Their interest in the history of Central Synagogue has brought to light a rich and multilayered story that builds an increasingly complex understanding of American Jewish life with each new study.

I am grateful to Cantor Angela Warnick Buchdahl for her enthusiastic support of this project and its inclusion in Central Synagogue's archival series, and to Cantor Elizabeth K. Sacks who skillfully set forth the project. Archivist Anne Mininberg and Amy Goldberger, Chair of the Central Synagogue Archives Committee, generously opened to me a meticulously kept and beautifully arranged archive that contained many important and substantive documents. Gerald Kiel, one of the best research assistants a scholar can hope to encounter, made my job a great deal easier with his full charting of musical references in Central Synagogue's minute books and congregational bulletins; I learned much from our discussions. Mark Kligman and Jonathan Sarna offered valuable comments on the manuscript-in-progress. Thanks also to Joshua Handel, who transcribed my interviews, and to Terry Jennings, whose skillful editing has brought this manuscript to a high degree of polish.

Some of the material in this essay received its first airing in a lecture-concert at Central Synagogue on May 6, 2010. That event benefitted immensely from the partnership of music director David Strickland, German synagogue music authority Ralph Selig, and Cantor Angela Warnick Buchdahl. Their efforts led to a beautiful balance of sound and history that night. While you hold the history, the sound will become available in the near future via a link on the Central Synagogue website ([www.centralsynagogue.org](http://www.centralsynagogue.org)).

Finally, I extend my thanks to Central Synagogue's Senior Director, Livia D. Thompson, FTA, and her talented staff for their skilled assistance.



## FOREWORD

Central Synagogue has its roots in the formative years of our country and our city. Since the 1830s, it has been giving spiritual leadership and comfort to its membership, and it has also been a landmark institution in the overall function of the community. What decisions were made in determining the place of Central Synagogue in both the religious and secular community, and how these decisions were arrived at, can teach us a great deal about how our community and our people functioned and developed. Every generation stands on the shoulders of the previous generations. The more we learn from our history, the better we are able to cope with the present and plan for the future. For these reasons, and at the urging of our brother, Rabbi Peter J. Rubinstein, we have chosen to endow the Rubinstein Family Archival Fund. The purpose of this fund is to provide for research in Central Synagogue's Archives by appropriate scholars resulting in lectures and papers on the congregation's history. The first award-winning monograph as a result of that fund was by Andrew Dolkart of Columbia University. It was entitled *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood* and won a Regional Historical Services Award for Excellence from the Lower Hudson Conference in 2002. The second monograph, entitled *Congregating and Consecrating at Central Synagogue: The Building of a Religious Fellowship and Public Ceremonies* by Elizabeth Blackmar and Arthur A. Goren, also of Columbia University, was awarded an Historical Services Award for Excellence from the Lower Hudson Conference in 2004. The third monograph, entitled *The Americanization of the Jewish Prayer Book and the Liturgical Development of Congregation Ahawath Chesed New York City*, was by Gary Phillip Zola of the American Jewish Archives. In 2008, it received an Award Towards Excellence from the Greater Hudson Heritage Network. This monograph is the fourth in this series.

Robin and Larry Rubinstein



## EDITORIAL NOTE

Due to changing conventions of Hebrew pronunciation and orthography, the names of Central Synagogue's constituent congregations Ahawath Chesed and Shaar Hashomayim, the title of the *chazzan*, and the names of prayers appeared in several different spellings throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These spellings have been retained in quotations from primary texts, but standardized in the rest of the essay according to the Union for Reform Judaism's Transliteration Guidelines and Master Word List.



## HISTORICAL NOTE

In the nearly two centuries covered by this essay, the nature of what has been considered “reform” and “orthodox” in Judaism (whether capitalized or not) has undergone many shifts. It is important to recognize, for example, that contrary to conventional wisdom, what we know today as Orthodox and Reform Jewish observance largely developed in tandem during the nineteenth century, with each responding to the era’s new philosophies of Jewish life and practice. Jews describing themselves as “orthodox” hardly rejected all changes to Jewish liturgy and ideology, just as those describing themselves as “reformers” often strenuously claimed their own connections to Jewish tradition. Under Alexander Kohut, moreover, Central Synagogue itself briefly affiliated with the Jewish Theological Seminary, in what would later become the Conservative movement. Adding music to the discussion complicates the matter further. Although reformers often used musical practices to promote progressive ideologies, “innovations” such as choirs, organs, and instrumental music have never been exclusive to Reform Judaism. (Several Orthodox Jewish movements have experienced their own musical revolutions, moreover, including the one wrought by guitar-playing rabbi Shlomo Carlebach [1925-1994].) Consequently I have avoided using terms such as “Reform” or “Orthodox” in this essay to make blanket statements about musical practice and Jewish identity, particularly during the nineteenth century. Instead I attempt here to present Central Synagogue’s musical story through the words and music of those rabbis, cantors and congregants who created, experienced, and discussed music in all its complexity as they navigated the changing norms of Jewish communal life and practice.



## INTRODUCTION: The Music of a Congregation

Central Synagogue\* has a long and dynamic history of musical life. Revealed in well-tended archives, audio recordings, and newspapers, that history brings sound into the center of discussions about Jewish tradition, identity, and practice. Through Central Synagogue's example, we see how Jewish communities use music to frame their liturgy, to burnish their public presence, and to represent religious ideologies and outlooks. Through music, a congregation invokes time, space, and intellectual history. Yet music is also fleeting, requiring renewal at each service, event, and gathering. Emphasizing a synagogue's constant need for reinvention, this musical history also reveals the continuous efforts required to communicate Judaism not just from one generation to the next, but from day to day. What appears at first to be a single "great" musical tradition at Central Synagogue turns out, upon closer scrutiny, to be far more complicated, involving many contrasting voices in perpetual and passionate counterpoint that together reflected the community's collective vitality.

Music exemplifies the paradox of Jewish tradition. Synagogues, with their attendant congregations, have been described as "the oldest, hardiest, and most participatory institutions maintained by Jews in the United States."<sup>1</sup> Their durability and flexibility have made them bellwethers for evaluating Jewish identity and practice across shifting

\*Central Synagogue is the name used since 1918 for the merged congregations Ahawath Chesed and Shaar Hashomayim. The merger took place in 1898. The name Central Synagogue was later incorporated in 1973.





historical landscapes. But synagogues are also places of echoes, ever resonating with, and responding to, their own local histories. Music gives these echoes shape. Produced in the moment, music quickly fades; yet its memory almost instantaneously links to ongoing congregational discussions about Jewish community and heritage. A synagogue's desire for longevity— its need to see Judaism as a place of long-term stability within an evanescent world— thus comes up against the quest for contemporary relevance.

Music's role in these discussions ranges well beyond the sanctuary itself. Kay Shelemay, in her study of Houston's Congregation Beth Israel, has observed that religious school classrooms, youth events, concerts at local performance venues, and informal gatherings have played crucial roles in establishing a synagogue's musical identity.<sup>2</sup> Music accompanying gala dinners, public commemorations, institutional retreats, and club meetings has helped congregants express their ties to a broader American society. These realms provide a fuller view of the synagogue "soundscape," reflecting the values of a community with active programs both inside and outside of liturgical ritual.

This study of Central Synagogue's music, then, opens up fundamental discussions about the sound of American Jewish life. Chronicling the many groups of people that made up Central Synagogue over the years, this history illustrates how sound accompanied efforts to keep the congregation vibrant, progressive, attractive, and spiritually inquisitive. By following Central Synagogue's music, we look at the development of an American Jewish community through a new lens.



Our limited ability to “freeze” music in place for analysis, especially before the advent of sound recording technology, means that the resources for understanding this history are at best fragmentary. Newspaper stories, choir pay ledgers, and accounts from cantorial search committees inadequately express what it was like to experience music at Central Synagogue before the early twentieth century. Likewise, the limited quantity of printed music held in Central Synagogue’s archive is informative, but will never reveal the *real* sound of the congregation: the majestic yet familiar qualities of the synagogue choir during the service, the heterophonic singing of the religious school’s young people dutifully practicing a cantor’s compositions, the grand instrumental music of the lavish communal Purim balls, the songs quietly transmitted between generations during congregational retreats. The best we can do is to hear their echoes through the documents that remain, revealing through them music’s role as a generative force of Jewish communal identity.

## Liturgical Music in Mid-Nineteenth Century America

The congregations that eventually merged to become Central Synagogue formed during a period of rapid change for Jews on both sides of the Atlantic. European nations’ increasing acceptance of their Jewish residents in social and political circles led to new patterns of education, marriage, professional opportunity, and culture. The diverse Jewish populations enjoying religious freedom on American soil, meanwhile, engaged in larger communal debates over standards of Jewish practice and religious authority. In both settings, Jews



fashioned the synagogue ritual to fit their changing identities, modifying service length, using vernacular languages, enforcing ritual decorum, and reflecting new religious philosophies. Music played an important role in these efforts.\* Israel Jacobson's 1810 institution of organ music and choral singing at his academy in Seesen, Westphalia (today central Germany),<sup>3</sup> the 1826 appointment of Salomon Sulzer as *Oberkantor* to a liberal-minded Jewish community in Vienna, the rededication of the Prague Old Shul with an organ in 1836, the Charleston, South Carolina, Jewish community's vote to introduce an organ into worship in 1840, and emerging debates over organ and choir usage in numerous other cities, tied music intimately to ongoing attempts at liturgical and theological reform.<sup>4</sup> By the 1830s and 1840s, the German and Bohemian Jews who founded Shaar Hashomayim and Ahawath Chesed in New York undoubtedly had some familiarity with these initiatives. Following in their peers' footsteps, they incorporated musical worship idioms into their services that suited their own progressive Jewish ideals.†

Finding individuals who would make informed musical choices for synagogue liturgy was a complicated task. From the 1820s through the 1840s, it appears, central European-associated (Ashkenazi) congregations in America sought leaders who excelled in both the

\* Jews in Prague and Venice, for example, periodically incorporated organ and other instrumental music into their worship from the mid-seventeenth through the mid-eighteenth centuries. Anti-Jewish actions largely brought these eras to an end (Tina Frühauf, *The Organ and Its Music in German-Jewish Culture* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], 22-26).

†We tend to apply words such as "Reform" to these practices in hindsight. However, at this time such liturgical and musical choices often represented local attempts at contemporary self-definition more than aspirations to a specific "Reform" ideology.



chanted and spoken aspects of prayer services; those who came forward typically took the title of Reader (*Vorleser/Vorbeter*) or Minister (*Geistlicher*).\* While the Sephardic congregations founded in the previous two centuries often employed formally trained scholars from abroad (*Chachamim*) as their readers, central European prayer leaders initially seemed to emerge either from the local community or as itinerant travelers, having developed their skills largely through personal experience. Hired for their knowledge, their devotion to Judaism, and their competence in presenting the liturgy, these readers likely needed to have only slightly better liturgical and musical abilities than those of their congregants. They conducted services, officiated at weddings (for supplemental income), and in many cases directed children's religious education as well. In an era when the United States had no Jewish seminaries, and thus could not produce its own ordained Jewish religious authorities, these ritual-focused figures often became bearers and guardians of Jewish tradition, and figureheads of its music.†

While ordained rabbis started settling in the United States in

\*Inc. 1859, Moldavian traveler Israel Joseph Benjamin, in his visit to New York, used the terms "Vorleser" (Reader), "Vorbeter" (Prayer Leader) and "Geistlicher" (Minister) to describe leadership roles in the various synagogues (I. J. Benjamin II, *Drei Jahre in Amerika 1859-1862*. [Hanover: Self-Published, 1862], v. 1, pp. 35-39). For a broader discussion of this period, see Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002[1989]), 34-40. Slobin's choice to focus on occurrences of the terms "cantor" and "chazzan" as part of a larger study on that figure limits his work on this section, but still offers insight into the roles cantors played in the nineteenth century conversations between American and European Jewry.

†Mark Slobin notes a great deal of discontent with the Judaic knowledge and character of many of these figures, though largely through the eyes of self-appointed Jewish authorities such as Isaac Leeser and Isaac Mayer Wise (Slobin, *Chosen Voices*, 36-48).



1840, Cantor Leon Sternberger's 1849 arrival in New York marked an important moment of *musical* transformation in the American synagogue. To many American Jews, Europe's well-established art and religious institutions exemplified high cultural achievement. The same perceptions held for Jewish religious music, where the choral and cantorial compositions from Salomon Sulzer's Vienna Stadttempel represented a particularly desirable paradigm.<sup>5</sup> Sternberger, a student of Sulzer's, consequently experienced little problem securing a position as the cantor of New York's congregation Anshe Chesed; and his apparent success caught the attention of other American synagogues. By the mid-1850s, New York's weekly paper *The Jewish Messenger* regularly printed want ads from congregations across the country seeking cantors with similar qualifications.

Shaar Hashomayim and Ahawath Chesed made similar musical choices. Both appeared to employ local prayer leaders during the 1850s and early 1860s who did not regularly take the title of *chazan*.<sup>6</sup> We know their names largely through marriage registers: Shaar Hashomayim included names such as Israel Gotthold, Raphael Lasker (1862-1871), and I. Falkenstein, while Ahawath Chesed's religious leadership included Nathan Hassberg, Ch. Morgenstern, Ignatz Horowitz, and (Jacob) Falkman Teberich.<sup>7</sup> These individuals either were respected local members of the community who could deport their responsibilities with the appropriate solemnity and competence, or, like Lasker,<sup>\*</sup> were prominent rabbis with

<sup>\*</sup>The Prussian born Lasker (1838-1904) became a prominent figure in the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and was the founding editor of the *New Era Jewish Magazine* in 1902 ("Rabbi Lasker Dead," *New York Times*, September 13, 1904).



decent musical skills. Neither synagogue attempted to hire a musician permanently until Ahawath Chesed's unsuccessful efforts to call Isaac (or Ignatius or Ignatz) Ritterman to the pulpit in 1863.

Born in Krakow, Ritterman received musical training in Vienna before heading to the United States around 1854.\* After a brief tour in Syracuse, he was quickly elected to the position of *chazan* at New York's congregation B'nai Jeshurun, displacing existing minister Ansel Leo. During his three years in B'nai Jeshurun's pulpit, Ritterman established and led a 24-voice male choir that regularly performed compositions by Sulzer and others during Shabbat services.<sup>8</sup> Ritterman and B'nai Jeshurun parted ways on June 15, 1858,<sup>9</sup> likely so the cantor could assume the position of *chazan* at St. Louis, Missouri's United Hebrew Congregation. After several years in St. Louis, during which time Ritterman started a choir in addition to running a religious school and performing weddings, the board of Ahawath Chesed called him to its pulpit as a *Chorchasen* (a *chazan* regularly accompanied by a Vienna Stadtempel-style choir).<sup>10</sup> Ritterman, however, objected to Ahawath Chesed's requirement that he lead weekday services as part of his duties, and he refused the New York congregation's follow-up offer to hire a separate weekday reader in exchange for a 20% salary reduction (from \$1000 to \$800).<sup>11</sup> Instead, Ritterman continued officiating in St. Louis until at least 1870; and two months later, Ahawath Chesed offered the position to David Woolf. Woolf did not have the same pedigree. However, he agreed to conduct all the congregation's services for less than the

\*It is tempting to infer that Ritterman studied with Sulzer, though no current evidence corroborates such a suggestion.