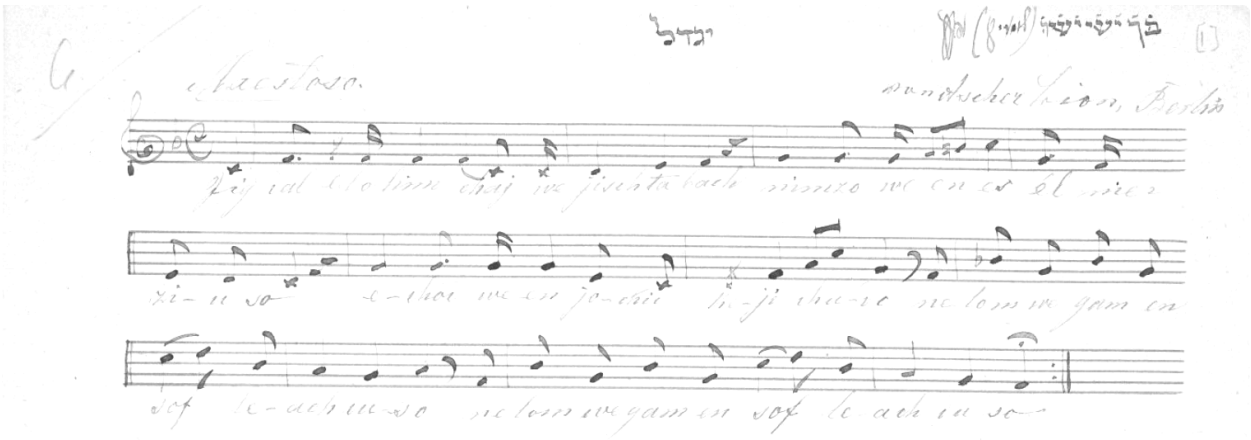
From Manuscript to Music: Reinterpreting the Works of the Birnbaum Archive

On February 9, 2022, I presented a practicum on the assigned topic of *Shacharit l'Shabbat: Baruch She-amar through Chatzi Kaddish*. The selected material was an attempt to unify *nusach*, archival sources, and modern music practice into a complete, sung-through rubric of liturgy following the current Reform text as determined by *Mishkan T'filah*. For each piece, I selected an extant melody, utilizing disparate sources, and then edited and arranged the music to fit the service as a whole. While I utilized many different pieces and sources throughout this presentation, for illustrative purposes, I will chart the transformation of one piece: *Yigdal*,[1] in a melody written by Asher Lion[2] (1776-1863).



Mus. 80.6 in the Birnbaum collection is single leaf of manuscript paper 24 x 24 cm containing three distinct pieces of music. All three contain full text underlay in Romanized Hebrew. The first piece, *Yigdal*, is by Asher Lion of Berlin, while the remaining, *Hayom t'amzenu* and *V'neemar*, are by G. Lewin of Myslowitz. While little is known of Asher Lion, he remains a significant, albeit minor, figure in the history of Jewish music. Following the creation of the Seesen Temple by Israel Jacobson, "Jacob Herz Beer, the father of the composer Meyerbeer, opened a Temple in his private home, according to Jacobson's program."[3] This home, however, was no insignificant dwelling. In fact, nearly a quarter of the Jewish community of Berlin would regularly attend services there, to hear the singing—and the organ: "they have even brought the organ from Seesen."[4] From there, Asher Lion was appointed *chazzan* at the Old Synagogue—

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[1] [Mus. 80.6] Yigdal, Asher Lion

Lion, A. (n.d.). ms, Hebrew Union College. Retrieved from https://music.huc.edu/mus-80-6/.

[2] Not only did this piece begin the program, but it was the first melody I uncovered from the archives and decided to use for this project. As such, it became the framework for the remainder of the work which followed.

[3] Idelsohn, A. Z. (1929). Jewish Music: Its Historical Development. Tudor Publishing Company, pg. 236.

[4] Frühauf, Tina. "The Organ as a Jewish Religious Response to Modernity," in *The Organ and Its Music in German-Jewish Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

This quote comes from a letter by Leopold Zunz, quoted by Frühauf.

then known as the Great Synagogue—in Berlin, following the death of its previous *chazzan,* Ahron Beer[5] in 1821. In contrast with the reform-minded Temple, the Old Synagogue discouraged congregational singing, and invested its musical authority in the presence of the *chazzan*: "If a person hear a tune but once a year, it will be impossible for him to sing with the cantor during the service, and therefore he will not be able to confuse the chazzan."[6] This likely appealed to Lion, who long resisted choral singing and its democratizing influence in his congregation.

This resistance would come to a head by 1840. Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894), the famed composer, began his musical career as apprentice and *singerl* under Lion in 1833. Having moved from Wreschen, Prussia—in what is now Poland—to the big city of Berlin, Lewandowski sang and studied, both in conservatory at the Berlin Academy, and in traditional synagogal music, under Lion and Hirsch Weintraub (1817-1881).[7] Through a series of interpersonal infighting, Lion was able to ascertain that much of Weintraub's music at the time was in fact the unpublished manuscripts of Salomon Sulzer (1804-1890), an Austrian *chazzan* of enormous influence and repute. In an attempt to curtail this foray into sacred choral music, Lion demanded of his congregation the scores of Sulzer's work, assuming this to be an impossible task. However, the congregation was able to acquire a copy[8] and Lion's minimal musical training proved insufficient to the task of deciphering the works.[9] It was this musical failing which led to the appointment of Lewandowski as choirmaster of the Great Synagogue in 1840.[10]

Lion lived in an acculturated Berlin, where the intellectual elite of the time had embraced the values of *Haskalah*. Enlightenment tastes dictated not just theological determinations, but had an enormous impact on musical taste, both secular and religious.[11] The music of Handel, Mozart, and Beethoven were heard in the streets, and the sounds of the synagogue began to

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[5] Beer was a comprehensive compiler of music; he passed his assortment of some 1,200 pieces to his successors at the Great Synagogue, before it finally found its way to Eduard Birnbaum, where it forms a portion of the musical archive of the Hebrew Union College to this day.

Aaron Beer. Jewish Music Research Centre. (n.d.). Retrieved December 8, 2022, from https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/aaron-beer

[6] From the title page of Beer's festival music collection; *ibid*.

[7] Weintraub, an itinerant musician, proved instrumental in the development of choral music for the synagogue, and his works were published in three volumes, and included as a part of the Out-of-Print Classics series by Sacred Music Press.

[8] Possibly, though certainly not definitely, the first published edition of *Shir Tziyyon* in 1840.

[9] Goldberg, G. (1992). Jewish Liturgical Music in the Wake of Nineteenth-Century Reform. In L. A. Hoffman & J. R. Walton (Eds.), *Sacred Sound and Social Change: Liturgical Music in Jewish and Christian Experience*. University of Notre Dame Press, pg. 63–4.

[10] The information in this paragraph is gleaned from Idelsohn, pg. 269-275.

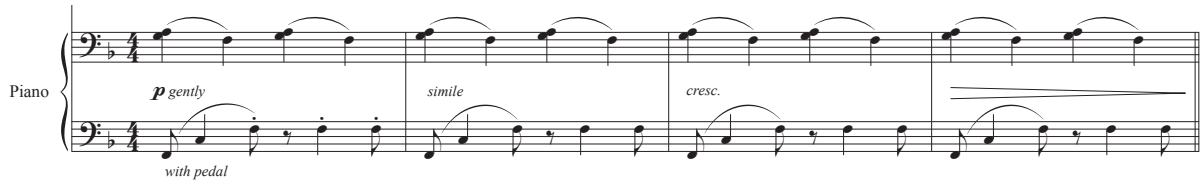
[11] Frühauf

reflect those changes; Lion served a community on the cusp of transformation. Willingly or not, Lion oversaw the transition from the *chazzanut* of the 18th Century[12] to the formalized compositions of Lewandowski which reigns supreme amongst 19th Century Jewish sacred music. By the time of his death in 1863, Lion would have witnessed the groundbreaking of the *Neue Synagoge* in Berlin, which, with its 3,000 seats and substantial pipe organ, stood as a monument to the new wave of choral music.[13] It is within this context which Lion must have written his *Yigdal*.

In manuscript form, *Yigdal* is a simple piece, in a major mode. Set in common time, the melody is an easy-to-sing march in a *maestoso* tempo. In the third measure, it utilizes a *b natural* as a leading tone, which is indicative more of 19th Century music traditions than it is of Jewish liturgical modes. The final four measures feature near direct repetition: in the first statement of this secondary theme, the final note is an *a natural*, the third degree of the F major scale; in its repetition, this note is changed to an F, the tonic, and a natural landing place in the music. The included underlay of text offers only the first two verses of *Yigdal*, though the repeat sign at the end implies repetition of the tune with the remainder of the text.

The opening measure, with its back-and-forth between F and C implies an F major chord, which continues with the second measure. Beginning in the third measure, there is an implied C major chord, highlighted by the *b natural* leading tone within the penultimate beat. In measure six, the implied harmony becomes significantly less static, with a half cadence leading to measure 7 where the melody spells out a G minor chord, followed by an implied perfect authentic cadence in the eighth bar. The final two measures harmonically are a repetition of the preceding bars.

In harmonizing and transforming[14] the music from its extant melodic line into a fully realized piece, the music underwent several distinctive stages: first, the melody was harmonized for piano, built upon an *ostenato* repeated F.



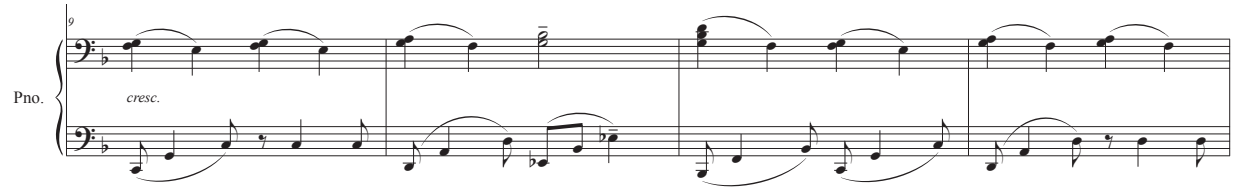
[12] Exemplified by Isaac Offenbach, whose archive of manuscripts forms a substantial portion of the Hebrew Union College collection.

[13] Frühauf compelling quotes Lewandowski himself on this point:

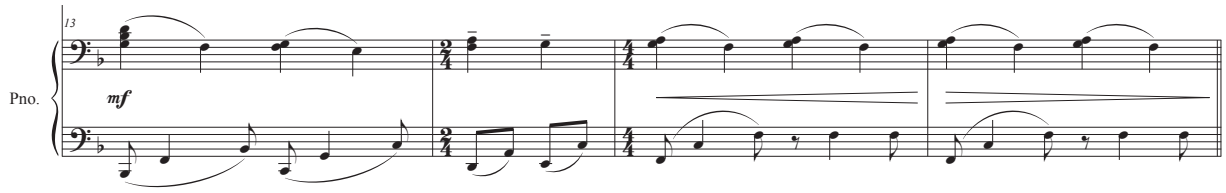
"The necessity, in the almost immeasurably vast space of the new synagogue, of providing leadership through instruments to the choir and most particularly to the congregation imposes itself on me so imperatively that I hardly think it possible to have a service in keeping with the times in this space without this leadership."

[14] An immediately obvious change is not analyzed harmonically here: the text. While *Yigdal* is a traditional opening melody for Shabbat morning within the Ashkenazi community, it does not appear within Reform liturgy, nor does it occur explicitly during *P'sukei d'Zimrah*. Therefore, I utilized the melody during the presentation as a *niggun*, a wordless introduction to the rubric of prayer.

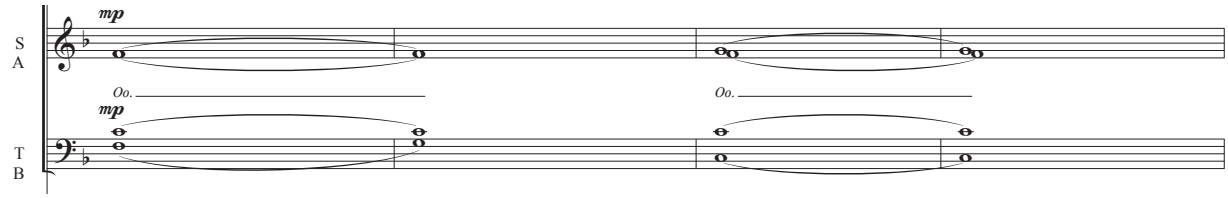
Next, I embellished the harmonic structure, while honoring the musical guideposts left behind by Lion. The opening five bars maintain their static harmony—two bars of F followed by three bars of C. The half cadence in measure 6, however, is replaced, as the realized score moves the music from a D minor chord to an E *flat* major chord. This lowered seventh is a musical acknowledgement of *Adonai Malach*, the primary major mode in Jewish liturgical music. This E *flat* major chord next leads to a B *flat* 6 chord, setting up a deceptive cadence within the eighth bar of music.



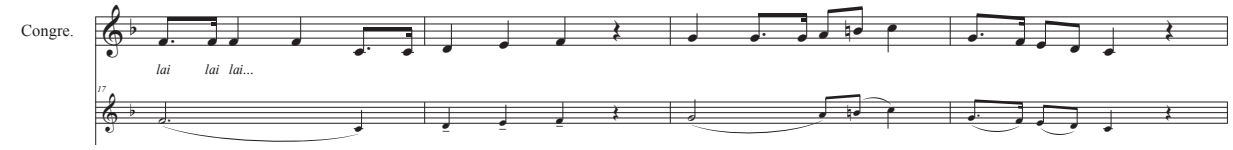
And while melodically, the next two bars continue verbatim, harmonically, the deceptive cadence is replaced with an imperfect authentic cadence, while the final bar is translated rhythmically. By removing two beats from the measure, the final note of the melody is allowed to cadence both to the tonic and the downbeat, strengthening its position and providing stability to the music.



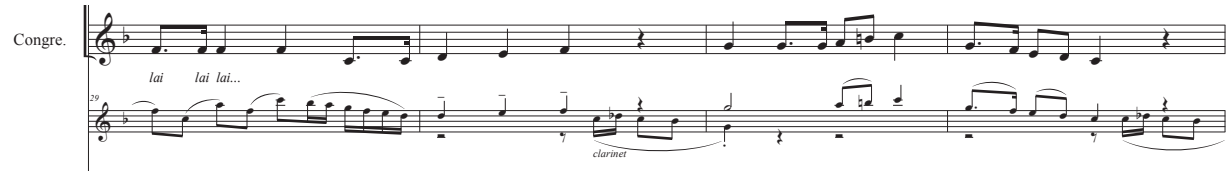
Next, I underwent the process of amplifying the underlying harmonic tendencies in the music through orchestration and ornamentation. With the addition of chorus, the main theme was bolstered initially through unison singing, and then supported chorally.



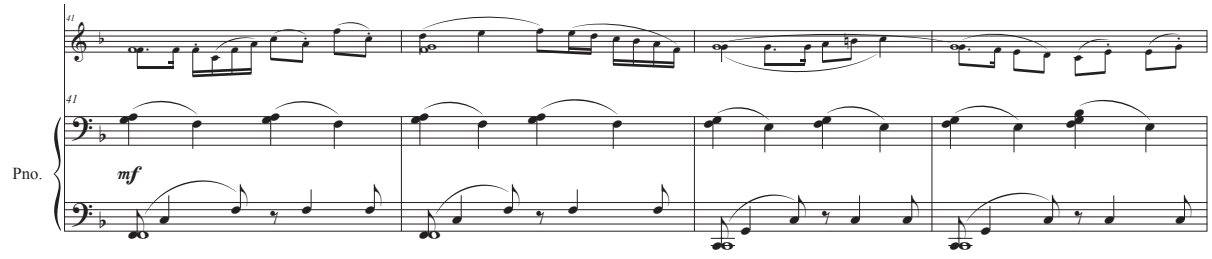
The choral writing reinforces the harmony found within the piano, while adding additional color and sustain. Finally, the addition of violin and clarinet finished the setting. The violin enters first, quietly, through long, sustained notes, before joining the melody (albeit rhythmically simplified).



On the third repetition of the theme, the violin is allowed to embellish upon the theme, while the clarinet enters for the first time with a counter-melody.[15]



Finally, during the last repetition of the theme, the violin is allowed to recede into the background, while the clarinet is given the opportunity to play an elaborate, ornamented version of the initial theme.



Inspired by the inherent repetition of this melody, and the strophic nature of *Yigdal* as a text, the completed harmonization of Lion's composition builds upon preceding verses, with each new voice or instrument adding an additional layer. First piano, then solo voice and minimal violin, then congregational voice, until finally the full soundscape of soloist, piano, violin, clarinet, choir, and congregation is revealed. Just as unearthing music from the archives requires peeling back its layers, searching for meaning and understanding, here, the successive additions of music were meant as a herald of what was to come: a reinvigoration of music long disregarded, presented as vibrant and new and wholly relevant to modern life. Asher Lion lived his life on the verge of the unknown; while it is impossible to tell how he responded to the modernizing forces exploding around him, bringing his music to contemporary synagogue life[16] is an attempt to honor the legacy of Jewish sacred music he shepherded—willingly or not—to the world.

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[15] The score analyzed here is a conductor's score, and therefore the Clarinet is presented at concert pitch.

[16] Using an altered version of this setting, I successfully sang this melody as intended—as *Yigdal*—for Congregation Beth Yam in South Carolina in December 2021.