

CHOIRMASTERS OF SHEARITH ISRAEL

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One of the distinguishing features of our synagogue service today is the participation of a professional choir. In the early days of our congregation services were

conducted without any choral accompaniment. By the early part of the nineteenth century, a choir was formed to accompany special services. Thanksgiving Day services, consecration ceremonies of the Second Mill Street and Crosby Street Synagogues, and other special events all enjoyed the participation of a choir. However, a choir did not participate regularly in our services until the late nineteenth century.

The consecration ceremony of the Nineteenth Street Synagogue in 1860 was held with the participation of an eighteen voice choral ensemble. The chorus included several professional opera singers which apparently was the first time this was done. The beauty of this event led to the adoption of a choir at Shearith Israel followed by congregations Bnai Jeshurun, Anshei Chesed, and Temple Emanu-El. Little is known about the choir from 1860-1883. It is likely that the Hazzan Jaques Judah Lyons or his son Julius J. Lyons, served as choirmaster at various times during this period. In 1883, Leon Kramer was hired by the congregation to succeed the previous choirmaster, Daniel Korn. Little is known about Korn's tenure as choir master.

Leon Kramer

Served from 1883 until 1943

Leon Kramer studied music at the Royal Academy of Arts in Berlin and had served as an assistant to the great German synagogue composer, Louis Lewandowsky. He served Shearith Israel as choirmaster from 1883 until 1943 (60 years!) Outside of the synagogue he was influential in the formation of the Rubenstein Amateur Orchestra and the Halevy Hebrew Singing Society (both funded by the Educational Alliance). He was also a principal conductor of the Jewish-American Opera Company and influential in the International Music Festival Chorus. Kramer was probably the first to compile, transcribe, and arrange Shearith Israel's liturgy into four part harmony. From some of the older transcriptions we can deduce that the choir of the late nineteenth century probably included men and boys singing music arranged for Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass (SATB). In the early 20th century these arrangements are replaced by ones with two Tenor lines, Baritone, and Bass (TTBB).

Kramer composed several oratorios and plays as well as liturgical compositions for the synagogue that are still part of our repertoire today. This includes one of the settings for the 23rd Psalm, Emet Malkenu, El Erekh Apayim, and a Misheberakh. (These can be heard on the CD Choral Music of Congregation Shearith Israel, available for purchase through the synagogue office). At the very end of his life, Kramer began work on publishing the congregation's music. He had



Sigfried Landau



Leon Hyman

only completed the Friday Night Service when he passed away in 1943. Therefore, volume I of the Music of Congregation Shearith Israel was only put into its final form and published with the aid of his successor, Oskar Guttman.

Oskar Guttman

Served from 1943 until 1953

Oskar Guttman was a prominent German Musician and Musicologist. He came to the United States as a refugee from Nazi Germany. Before his arrival in this country, Guttman was the Music Director of the Oranienburger Strasse Synagogue in Berlin and a contributor to the prominent musical journal “Melos.” Unfortunately, he passed away only two years after becoming choirmaster at Shearith Israel. He was succeeded by Raphael Bress, who had been member of the choir since 1917. Bress served as choirmaster until 1953 when the congregation hired Sigfried Landau.

Sigfried Landau

Served in 1953

Sigfried Landau was born into a famous orthodox rabbinic family in Germany (and was related to our former parnas, Dr. Dennis Freilich). Like Guttman, he was a refugee from Nazi Germany, arriving in the United States in 1940. At the time of his hire by Shearith Israel in 1953, Landau already had a great musical resume. He had studied with Pierre Montreux and was the chair of the Opera and Orchestra departments

of the New York Musical College. He had been the conductor of the Kinor Sinfonietta of the Hebrew Arts Foundation, director of the chorus of the Young Men’s Hebrew Association, and was a member of the faculty of the Cantors Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Landau was only choirmaster at Shearith Israel for a short time although he had a significant impact.

At the time of his arrival, the choral music was mostly written in individual books for each of section of the choir. This was a vestige from the days of Leon Kramer. Landau rewrote (and at the same time rearranged) the entire repertoire of Shearith Israel’s music into full scores. He also began the recording of Shearith Israel’s choral music. Some of his style can be heard on recordings published by the Shearith Israel League (Historic Music of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue). Volume 3 of the League’s 3 CD set (available from the Synagogue office) also contains several choral pieces under his direction. During his short tenure, Landau apparently became embroiled in some controversy among the synagogue leadership and Hazzanim. My grandfather, former Shamash Judah Guedalia, recalled that Landau requested to conduct the Hazzan during services, a proposal that did not sit well with the Hazzanim of the time, and which was not adopted.

In 1953, Landau left the synagogue to become the Music Director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic. He served as their Music Director for 17 years –

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CHOIRMASTERS (continued)

This past year, the choir introduced several new pieces composed specifically for our synagogue. Two of these were composed by Leon Hyman, and third piece (“Tehillat”) was composed by Jonathan Koch (a long-time tenor in our choir). The pieces composed by Leon are dedicated to his parents, who were immigrants from Poland and Lithuania and for whom music was important culturally despite never having been educated musically. Leon’s composition Yehi Hasdekha is dedicated to his mother, Rebecca Hyman, and his Ubnoho Yomar is dedicated to his father, Abraham Hyman. Leon is grateful for their sacrifices which permitted him to pursue an education and career in Music. He describes these compositions as an attempt to stay within the style and musical sense of our congregation while expressing a unique point of view regarding the settings and texts.

Leon is also near completion of a new setting for the 23rd Psalm. This composition uses the musical theme of the Az Yashir to explore the interplay of melody and harmony; it challenges our ideas of dissonance with a colorful and harmonic base built out of conventional dissonance. We hope that this piece will be premiered at a choral concert which is planned for this coming Spring.

and was noted for his emphasis on new music. He died tragically in a house fire along with his wife in 2007.

Maurice Edwards

Served from 1953-1955

A member of the choir, Maurice Edwards served as interim choirmaster until the appointment of our current choirmaster, Leon Hyman.

Leon Hyman

Serving from 1955-present

In 1955, Leon Hyman was conducting the Halevy Choral Society (a large chorale of amateur singers which had been founded many years before by Shearith Israel’s Leon Kramer). One of the choristers informed Leon of an opening for choirmaster at Shearith Israel. Currently, he is the synagogue’s longest serving employee, having been choirmaster for 59 years. Leon studied with the noted choral conductor Hugh Ross, and has had a long career conducting classical, choral and operatic music as well as Broadway musicals. He served as the conductor of the Montclair State University Chorus for 25 years and was a founder and director the New Philharmonic of New Jersey. He has also served on the faculties of The Juilliard School, Teachers College of Columbia University, and Montclair State.

One of the major contributions Leon made with our choir was a complete re-setting of the prosody of Landau’s arrangements. This refers to the matching of the Hebrew syllabic pronunciation and phrasing with the musical score. He also introduced several of our most beloved pieces into the repertoire, including arrangements of Solomon de Rossi. Leon recently told me that one of the things he is most grateful to the congregation for is permitting him to tour the United States and Russia in 1963 with the Robert Joffrey ballet, and to go to Tokyo in 1964 as the conductor of the West Side Story, which was the first Broadway musical ever staged in Japan. Leon’s son, Adam, is the congregation’s associate choirmaster, and leads the choir throughout the year whenever Leon is unavailable.