

THE American Organist

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN GUILD OF ORGANISTS AND THE ASSOCIATED PIPE ORGAN BUILDERS OF AMERICA

SEPTEMBER 2026



Coffee Break

with Assaf Levitin



Assaf Levitin
(photo: Boaz Arad)

Assaf Levitin is a singer, conductor, editor, and synagogue cantor based in Berlin, Germany. Together with his colleague Amnon Seelig, he is editing a landmark collection of some of the most important yet neglected works of synagogue music for choir and organ—the first anthology of its kind for 70 years. The inaugural volume is published this month by Edition Peters.

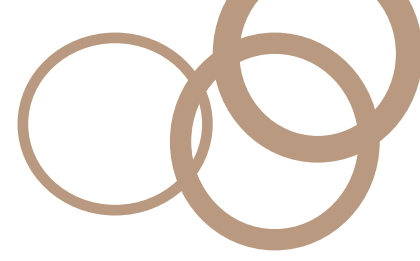
ALEX HODGKINSON

I was born in Israel, and my first job was as a journalist for a magazine. I was a reporter and had to run around everywhere, but I eventually got an editorial job. During that time, I met a girl who sang in a choir, so I went along too. And singing became my greatest passion. After a year studying music in Tel Aviv, I moved to Germany for further study. At first my career was very much in opera. I became a soloist, and singing was my whole professional life. I met my wife, our son was born, then our daughter, and around that period I found myself becoming more and more interested by *chazanut*, the traditional art of the synagogue cantor.

It is actually the cantor, rather than the rabbi, who leads the liturgy. In many ways the role is closer to that of a priest in a church. The rabbi is primarily a teacher, a guide, someone who answers questions and accompanies the community through life. Leading the service belongs to the cantor. As I became more experienced, I naturally encountered the great German synagogue tradition. If people know only one composer from this world, it is usually Louis Lewandowski (1821–1894). He was probably the most important composer of 19th-century Reform Judaism in Germany, and he transformed synagogue music.

Before the Reform movement, synagogue worship was much more participatory. The cantor would begin a phrase, and the congregation would answer. Everybody sang together. Lewandowski was heavily influenced by church music, and he imagined something different. He introduced mixed choirs singing music that was too sophisticated for the congregation to perform. Suddenly the service became something more elaborate, more carefully crafted.

And then there was the organ. During the 19th century, organs appeared in almost every major German-speaking Jewish community, built by the great craftsmen—Sauer and others. Lewandowski published complete settings for the entire liturgical year with organ and mixed choir. The organ became part of the musical language of Reform Judaism. This was quite revolutionary,



because traditionally, there had been two restrictions in Orthodox practice: Women would not sing as part of the liturgy (so if there was polyphony it would be sung by men alone), and instruments were rarely permitted in the synagogue—certainly not on the Sabbath. Reform Judaism challenged both of these conventions. Lewandowski did not invent synagogue organ music, but I think he brought it to perfection.

He was not alone, either. Almost every important German city had composers producing beautiful synagogue music. In Munich there were composers like Maier Kohn, Emanuel Kirschner, and Max Löwenstamm. They published small editions of their music—perhaps only one or two hundred copies—which they sent to colleagues in other cities. They composed for everything: Friday evening; the Sabbath morning service; the dramatic moments when the Torah scroll is taken from the ark and returned again; the great pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot, as well as Hanukkah and Purim; plus weddings, funerals, and every stage of Jewish life. Each feast had its own musical language and characteristic motifs.

Then came Kristallnacht. When the synagogues were burned in November 1938, the organs were destroyed with them. After the Holocaust the destruction was almost total. Many cantors had been murdered. Entire congregations disappeared. Those who survived often emigrated, and those who returned found communities completely transformed. Not only had people been lost; an entire musical tradition had almost vanished.

Before the war, a scholar named Aron Freimann had compiled a catalog of Jewish books. After the war, Frankfurt University painstakingly reconstructed the collection, and around 20 years ago they digitized it. Hidden within this enormous archive were around 400 music publications—something like 20,000 pages. When I started exploring this catalog, it felt like opening buried treasure. I would discover a wonderful anthem or a moving organ accompaniment and think, *Why has nobody sung this for 80 years?* That discovery led to what has become one of the biggest projects of my life.

Together with my dear friend and colleague Amnon Seelig, I began creating a new edition called *Hashivenu*, which means “Bring us back,” taken from the prayer *Hashivenu Adonai elecha v’nashuvah*—“Bring us back to you, O Lord, and we shall return.” I like to imagine that it is actually the music speaking to us, asking to be brought back to life.

Our aim is not simply to restore this repertoire to synagogues. We want Christian choirs, Jewish choirs, and com-

pletely secular choirs to discover it. After all, I happily sing Bach without being Christian. Why should someone not sing Lewandowski without being Jewish? Great music belongs to everybody.

We have just completed the first of what will eventually be eight volumes. We were incredibly fortunate that Edition Peters, the publisher, immediately understood the importance of the project. The Nazi ideology did not spare the Hinrichsen family, the Jewish owners of Edition Peters. Their property was confiscated, and many members of the family were later murdered in cities and concentration camps. Today, the publisher is making a considerable effort to confront this shameful segment of its history. Nothing can turn history back, but bringing back the music that had been silenced by Nazi brutality is a significant act of responsibility. Following the publication of a choral series with arrangements of Yiddish songs a few years ago, synagogue music will now finally become part of the Edition Peters catalog. This is a fortunate development for both sides: the publisher and the music, together with its editors.

We decided to modernize the Hebrew, to standardize the transliteration, and to have something that is easily understandable for German-speaking singers as well as English speakers, French speakers, and so on. I know there will be people who won’t like the modernization, but we tried to make a version that will save you the need to find an Israeli or a Hebrew professor to tell you how to sing it correctly!

The repertoire itself is wonderfully varied. Some pieces, like Lewandowski’s *Ma Tovv*, are immediately rewarding and quite approachable. Others, such as Abraham Duna-jewski’s *Hashkivenu*, are more technically demanding, with fugal passages, wide vocal ranges, and difficult rhythms. The collection spans nearly a century of composition, so there is enormous diversity.

Editing it has been much more complicated than we imagined. Nine months ago, we confidently believed we could publish two volumes every year—now we know better! It is the first major compendium of synagogue music to appear since 1956, and we have accepted that it will take the time it deserves.

I feel incredibly privileged to be part of bringing this forgotten world back into the light. Every time I discover another beautiful piece hidden away in those old collections, I have exactly the same feeling: This music deserves to be heard again.

Alex Hodgkinson, FRCO, is director of music for the Cathedral and Diocese of Madison, Wis.