

**TRANSCENDING JEWISH DENOMINATIONAL LINES:  
THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF CANTOR MEIR FINKELSTEIN**

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**Notes:** *All sheet music and photographs are included with the express permission of Meir Finkelstein. Unofficial Jewish denominational terminology not commonly utilized in academia has been placed in quotes, while established terms have been capitalized.*

## INTRODUCTION: JEWISH MUSIC & IDENTITY

Born in Israel in 1951, and raised in the United Kingdom, at age 14, Meir Finkelstein became the youngest professional cantor in Europe. By the 1970s he had relocated to North America where he served Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform synagogues while also earning acclaim for his Jewish and secular compositions. From Israel to England, Scotland, Illinois, California, Ontario, Michigan, to Texas, Finkelstein encountered an array of Jewish communities, musical traditions, and cultures. This cantorial thesis maps the unique life experiences that most contributed to the formation of Finkelstein's Jewish identity and musical expression.

Just as Finkelstein physically and geographically migrated, he also embarked upon a spiritual and intellectual journey. Though he was raised in a halachically observant, Orthodox household marked by the full range of traditional Jewish customs, his religious beliefs and practices became more liberal over time. This thesis explores these changes and their resulting manifestation in his musical compositions. As the musicologists Lily E. Hirsch, and Amy Lynn Wlodarski wrote, "Issues such as cultural multiplicity (across a given society), cultural exchange and hybridity (between two groups within a society or between two culturally disparate societies), and the complex, often compound nature of 'identity' (for a given individual)—can affect the work that each of us does" (Hirsch and Wlodarski, *A Colloquy on Jewish Studies, Music, and Biography*, 122).

Finkelstein is an example, in the ethnomusicologist Marc Kligman's words, of how "contemporary Jewish music reflects American Jewry's religious and cultural diversity and also shapes it by staking a claim to a synthesized contemporary Jewish identity" (Kligman, *Contemporary Jewish Music in America*, 140). American Judaism in particular, "within

the context of the voluntarism and individualism of the American way of life,” forces us to consider which factors most contribute to one’s self-defined Jewish identity. In a recent report, the sociologists Bernard Lazerwitz, J. Alan Winter, Arnold Dashefsky, and Ephraim Tabory explained that:

“The individual American Jew defines his or her religious preference in response to two related questions: 1. Should one’s Jewish identity be based on modern, Western models of acceptable identities, or should it be based on traditional Judaic models, such as those embodied in Jewish law (halakha), as set forth in traditional Jewish texts? 2. Should Jewish identity be essentially religious, that is, based in the synagogue or temple, or should it be essentially ethnic—based in the history and traditions of the more or autonomous, self-governing Jewish people such as found in the shtetls of Eastern Europe or in the modern State of Israel?” (Lazerwitz, Winter, Dashefsky, and Tabory, *Jewish Choices: American Jewish Denominationalism*, XIX).

This analysis helps to further explain the uniquely American phenomenon of denominationalism:

“Denominations are...groups providing means of identification and location within the American social structure. Loyalty to the...denomination...involves loyalty to the denomination’s tradition, and particularly to those elements of the tradition which for reasons of history, geography, culture, or social structure, most sharply differentiate this tradition in the American experience from other traditions” (Lazerwitz, Winter, Dashefsky, and Tabory, *Jewish Choices: American Jewish Denominationalism*, 6).

This thesis illustrates how one cantor’s life and music has embodied and transcended those denominational distinctions. It is based on primary sources—interviews with cantor / composer Meir Finkelstein, his brother, fellow cantor and librettist, Aryeh Finklestein (he prefers this spelling), friend and composer Stephen Glass, and longtime

friend Ari Zev, as well as my own first-hand experiences as his congregant and cantorial mentee at Congregation Shaarey Zedek, in Southfield, MI.

Each chapter of this thesis focuses on a contributing influence to Finkelstein's musical and theological development and is accompanied by pertinent biographical details. I provide a critical analysis of Finkelstein's compositions, in search of musical patterns, trends, and stylistic elements that illustrate themes from Finkelstein's biography and his religious and ideological commitments. I have explored the various contextual factors that influence the music, from historical and geographical to social elements. Finally, I complement the analysis of primary sources with historical research on the various synagogue communities that Finkelstein served, and the specific customs they observed as they pertain to liturgical music.

My research indicates that liturgical music within American synagogues is coded by denomination. Each Jewish movement has a distinct style that best represents the values and identity of the congregation and its members.<sup>1</sup> I will compare and contrast the musical worship practices, structures, and trends within the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements. Of course, the denominational descriptions that follow are generalizations; outlying examples could be identified. However, these generalizations are necessary counterpoints that illuminate how Finkelstein's life and musical compositions transcend and defy these denominational structures and expectations.

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<sup>1</sup> "Every sector of the Jewish community—from the most right-wing Orthodox to the most secular—participates in the Jewish music endeavor, creating, performing, and listening to the particular music that meets its taste and needs. Jewish music is sung and performed in synagogues of all sizes and types, in schools, community centers, and summer camps, at organizational conclaves, and in college campus auditoriums or in concert halls as august as Carnegie Hall" (Kligman, *Contemporary Jewish Music in America*, 88).

Though I organized this thesis by designating chapters for each significant influence that contributed to Finkelstein's life, and the formation of his Jewish identity, there is much overlap in these sections. Several transformational and diverse experiences occur within the same timeframe, and numerous influences become evident in his compositions simultaneously—they are all interconnected. As a result, I tried to provide a coherent and chronological accounting of these experiences in each chapter. This further demonstrates how challenging it is to dissect the origins of one's Jewish identity and the most consequential contributing factors. Ultimately, who we are and our contributions to the world are the culmination of all of the influences in our lives up until this point. Through this biographical and musical case study, moreover, I demonstrate that it is both challenging and divisive to assert that one style of Jewish music is more authentic than the next. Rather, Jewish music—like identity—is the culmination of exposure to a variety of cultures, traditions, and experiences over time.