Interwoven Voices of the Religious Landscape: G.S. Ensel and Musical Populism in the Nineteenth-Century American Synagogue

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On 16 March 1894, the small Jewish population of Paducah, Kentucky, dedicated its new synagogue building, featuring the Moorish architecture fashionable at the time. The dramatic affair reportedly involved, among other participants, “a choir consisting of twenty-four voices, selected from the best singers in the churches of our city.” Sixty-six-year-old volunteer music director Gustav S. Ensel, who enjoyed much local admiration, directed the group. A reporter writing to Cincinnati’s American Israelite highlighted Ensel’s “profound knowledge of music” and lauded his efforts to adapt “the very choicest compositions from the [Classical] masters … Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, Mendelssohn, Gounod, and other luminaries of music … to the texts of a Jewish hymnal.” Then, in perhaps an unexpected turn, the reporter

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1 *All translations from German sources are the author’s.

I am grateful to Curtis Mann, manager of the Sangamon Valley Collection at the Lincoln Library in Springfield, Illinois, for locating information about Ensel in the local historical papers; to the two anonymous reviewers, who provided invaluable suggestions for improving this article; and to Dana Herman, Gary Zola, and the staff of the American Jewish Archives, who provided me access to one of the few extant copies of Ancient Liturgical Music.

added that Ensel “has always prided himself on the fact that he never composed a piece of music himself.” Implicitly criticizing the high cultural strivings of a “Jewish chazzan educated in the school of Sulzer, Naumb[o]urg, and other shining lights of music,” Ensel considered “Jewish” sound in a more populist frame, as “a style of music which is at once suitable to the modern tastes of our co-religionists.” The program of arrangements from works by Meyerbeer, Rossini, Mercadante, and Mozart, as if by illustration, appeared to gratify the assembled ecumenical crowd deeply.

Ensel’s reported thoughts on American Jewish liturgical music provide insight into a formative era of Jewish musical expression that has received scant attention in current scholarship. What little research exists on mid-nineteenth-century American Jewish liturgical music tends toward dismissiveness or triviality: Juxtaposed against the cantorial “golden age” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the mid-nineteenth century almost disappears as a period of American experience involving a surfeit of non-Jewish musical leadership, a tendency toward importing popular music into the synagogue, and a disregard for “Jewish” musical tradition. Even those who have considered the era, such as John Baron and Neil Levin, largely efface perspectives like Ensel’s in favor of a trajectory of increasingly sophisticated art music composition that privileges the synagogue service over the broader community activities. I argue here, however, that underneath the relative scarcity of serious scholarship lies a far more interesting and rich musical topography, with Ensel’s example defying most of the stereotypes currently applied to it. Not only did Ensel have extensive musical experience,

3 Ibid. While the correspondent’s claim about Ensel’s lack of original compositions may not be completely correct (it appears Ensel wrote a few works while in Cincinnati c. 1857), it reflects a more general perception of Ensel as a musical facilitator rather than a bona fide composer.
but he also produced the first major scholarly Jewish music treatise on American soil, significantly predating—and predicting—the currently accepted historiographic timeline of Jewish music research. Moreover, Ensel rendered his ecclesiastical services in both professional and volunteer capacities, in some ways embodying an alternate ideal of American Jewish musical identity that allowed smaller, financially precarious communities to operate amid the uncertain availability of resources. In other words, rather than representing part of an illiterate and uninformed generation, Ensel’s story indicates a parallel trajectory of musical pragmatism necessary for a tiny Jewish minority to establish itself in the American church-based ecosystem, particularly in small towns. Opening dialogue with other religious music reform movements—such as the Germany-based St. Cecilia Societies and various Protestant groups who experimented with different approaches to corporate singing—Ensel promoted a musical approach compatible with broad-based scholarly discussions of ancient musical origins, while offering practical options for meaningful worship in the rapidly changing communal landscape of mid-to-late nineteenth-century Jewish life.⁶

From Germany

Ensel represented a generation of Central European Jews who sought to integrate their religious identities with Western culture. Born in the Bavarian town of Hechingen (Hohenzollern) Germany, on 7 April 1827, he received musical training from local masters, likely in parallel with his religious training.⁷ Once completed, he took his first Jewish leadership

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⁷ Ensel mentioned three musical mentors in his ad as a piano teacher posted in Die Deborah in July/August 1857 (v. 2, pp. 400, 408, 416): choral director Thomas Täglichbeck.
post under Rabbi Bernhard Wechsler in the northern port city of Varel (Friesland), where from 1846 to 1855 he worked as a “teacher, cantor, and slaughterer.” As part of his responsibilities during these years, young Ensel faced the challenge of invigorating the community’s music program at a time of public discussion about music’s role in contemporary German Jewish life. Undoubtedly also aware of the trend toward new composition emerging since Salomon Sulzer’s (1804–1890) appointment to the pulpit of Vienna’s Seitenstettengasse synagogue in the late 1820s, Ensel recognized that such a complex (and expensive) path was probably unrealistic in a small community without strong musical resources. Instead, he looked to musical facilitators such as Israel Jacobson (1768–1828, of Seesen and then Berlin) and Simon Hecht (1824–1908, of Weimarschmieden and later of Evansville, Indiana), who advocated similar hymnal-based approaches, empowering their members as bearers of religious spirit through orderly communal singing.

Writing in the 18 June 1849 issue of Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums, in the wake of his recent activities to support the dedication of Varel’s new sanctuary, Ensel reflected on earlier articles by Hecht and Simon Alexander (from Strelitz) assessing the aesthetic possibilities of congregational singing. Ensel added another comparative data (1799–1867; in Hechingen from 1827–1848), a Bremen concertmaster named Schmidt, and a Hamburg pianist named Friedrich.

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9 Ensel grew up at a time when Jewish songbooks and hymnals began to appear in local communities, created to promote a coherent, modern Jewish identity that bridged synagogue, school, and home. The Württemburg/Stuttgart Jewish authority (Ober-Kirchen-Behörde), close to Ensel’s hometown, produced a major revision of its hymnal in 1836 that likely influenced Ensel’s ideas. See Sefer Zemirot Yisrael. Gesang-Buch, zum Gebrauch bei dem Unterrichte in der mosaischen Religion und zur öffentlichen und häuslichen Gottesverehrung der Israeliten (Stuttgart: Hallberger, 1836).

10 Geoffrey Goldberg attempts to give these efforts at congregational singing some context, particularly entering the second half of the nineteenth century. See Goldberg, “An Overview of Congregational Song in the German Synagogue Up to the Shoah,” Journal of Synagogue Music 30, no. 1 (2005): 13–53.
point, laying out a practical philosophy of Jewish music, and criticizing attempts by cantors to “strengthen their own power” by composing complex harmonic music instead of “refurbishing and simplifying the existing chants” to champion congregants’ natural abilities.\footnote{Gustav S. Ensel, “Noch etwas über Synagogengesang,” Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums 13, no. 25 (18 June 1849): 339.} Recalling the Varel synagogue inauguration, Ensel described how he began, about three months in advance, to hold music sessions with thirty congregants two to three times a week. Rather than focusing on creating sonorous harmonies, he introduced congregational melodies through “repeated playing on the violin.” Ensel later reinforced these melodies by “providing rhythmic accompaniment on the piano” (likely indicating underlying harmonic changes) to give congregants a stronger structural context for their singing. By the July inauguration, he claimed, even those congregants who had not attended the training sessions felt comfortable singing along. People also added their own harmonies organically: Some improvised a second voice, and others added “an extremely simple but proper bass.” This account rebutted a previous letter writer’s claim that laypeople could not carry a tune, and it neutralized pressure for local music authorities to create increasingly sophisticated compositions. Ensel noted, instead: “If, in many communities, cantors have been less successful in their attempts at reform, in my opinion it is not so much because of the lack of suitable music, as it is by the incorrect use of existing music.”\footnote{Ibid., 338–339.}

Ensel concluded by outlining future steps for simplifying the liturgy in ways that could further enhance congregational participation. In particular, he advocated eliminating \textit{piyyutim} (poetic/liturgical hymns) that encouraged unnecessary musical complexity, and publishing an inexpensive monthly Jewish music journal, printed in a familiar format “already used in so many choral and folksong books.” In a parting shot to musical sophisticates, moreover, he added: “And to those zealots who do not want to sacrifice their own harmonious singing, we declare with [Ludwig] Uhland: ‘Where there’s singing, settle down/Evil people have
no songs.” 13 The twenty-two-year-old thus articulated his support of synagogue music reform as a means of democratization, joining others who questioned the “artful” leanings of Sulzer’s followers. Even Ensel’s most controversial assertion—that the “superficial yodeling” Hecht and others sought to strip from Jewish prayer actually contained much of the melodies’ “character”—spoke to his preference for a populist folk-aesthetic over imposed (elite) artistic standards. 14

Introducing Minhag America

In mid-1857, after serving about two years as the religious leader of Bremen’s young Jewish community, Ensel brought his views to the United States. Perhaps with an eye toward Isaac Mayer Wise’s leadership, he settled in Cincinnati and advertised his availability as a piano teacher. 15 By September the local Congregation Bene Yeshurun had hired him as “Chazan pro tem” at a prorated salary of $400 (paid $25 monthly). 16 The date of the hire, at the congregation’s annual meeting

13 Ibid., 340.
15 Max Markreich, Geschichte der Juden in Bremen und Umgegend (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2003), 81; Ensel advertisement, Die Deborah, 2 (July–August, 1858): 400, 408, 416. Markreich describes Ensel as coming from Berne (Oldenburg), and credits him with creating the Bremen Jewish community’s official seal.
16 Minute book of Bene Yeshurun congregation, Cincinnati, meeting of 20 September 1857 and Congregational Meeting of 24 September 1857, MS-62, Box 3, The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (hereafter BY Minute Book, AJA), Cincinnati, OH. It appears that Ensel’s lived near Morganfield, KY, in the early 1850s, though these early years are as yet undocumented. See “Adolph Ensel,” in Joseph Wallace, Past and Present of the City of Springfield and Sangamon County Illinois (Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1904), 481–482. (Adolph, who appears to be G.S.’s brother, was listed here as a member of the Episcopal Church.)
between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, gave Ensel little time to prepare the musically intense Day of Atonement services. But it also presaged a still more significant task: introducing Wise’s hotly anticipated Minhag America liturgy, adopted by congregational vote in the same meeting. Just the previous year, Wise had characterized the hazzan as an unnecessary drain of resources on congregations thirsting for intellectual leadership, arguing: “Let the singing of the Minister be altogether abolished, all the singing and chanting ought to be done by the choir or congregation or by both jointly … and let the Minister preside over it and direct it so, that his principal part may be the expounding of the Law.” The elaborate nature of the new liturgy, however, likely proved more than Wise could handle on his own. He backtracked for the sake of practicality, recognizing that choirs and congregational singing could not easily coordinate themselves.

Ensel inherited a well-formed musical program with a recently expanded building, an ample choir loft, and an organ with a professional organist; he also took a position in the community’s school, the Talmud Yelodim Institute (TYI), which had incorporated choral singing into the curriculum. Such an arrangement accelerated ongoing discussions about the choir’s relative professionalism during services, the role of congregational singing, and the status of the service as a balance of beauty, knowledge, and ideological “progress.” After the sanctuary’s expansion and rededication ceremonies in 1855, for example, the synagogue board faced regular requests from its “volunteer” congregational choristers for payment, and had to devise public (and low-cost) ways to honor its member-singers while keeping a budget for skilled outsiders (especially a “Tenorist”). It thus fell to Ensel to effect a balance between Wise’s ideal of organic congregational musicality and the practical aesthetics required to achieve such an ideal. Wise publicly affirmed Ensel’s initial work after

18 I.M. Wise, The Israelite (12 September 1856): 76.
19 BY Minute Book, AJA. Wise’s own account of this period, which essentially focuses on the hiring of non-Jewish choristers, greatly oversimplifies the situation. Isaac M. Wise, ch. 2, The History of The K.K. Bene Yeshurun, of Cincinnati, Ohio (Cincinnati: n.p. 1892).
Yom Kippur, especially noting his “grand chorus” of the hymn “Hayom Haras Olam” (“Today is the Birthday of the World”)—which “speaks well for the musical talent of this young man, and shows his thorough knowledge of harmony.” Yet he likely knew that the new liturgy would require coordination on a different magnitude.

Wise appeared to approach Minhag America as a collaborative form that brought the congregation’s musical forces, its progressive philosophy, and the TYI into a cohesive, mutually reinforcing system that satisfied all of the community’s demographic groups. Ensel, tasked with realizing Wise’s plan, consequently had to rehearse both the largely volunteer choir and the TYI students to prepare the music-heavy premiere as an event that balanced religious and pedagogical functions. Such intricately orchestrated expectations, however, taxed Ensel to the point that Wise ultimately had to delay the liturgy’s premiere from the first day of Sukkot (Friday night, 2 October 1857) to the first Friday after Sukkot (16 October), so Ensel could prepare the choral forces more fully. The delay seemed to pay off: Wise described afterward the complex interplay of choir, TYI students, and hazzan as an interactive liturgical community, with each linguistic, artistic, or age-based cohort contributing in kind. When the hazzan and the TYI students alternated lines of the Ashrei (mainly Psalm 145, with introductory and conclusion verses from other psalms), for example—a prayer presumably taught in the school but unfamiliar to many parents—Wise described the effect as a pedagogical experience “intended for the whole congregation, who should become used to it in this way.” Ensel presented similarly coordinated works throughout the Friday night and Saturday morning services, including a number of Sulzer compositions reconfigured to Wise’s significantly altered liturgical text. Thus enacted, the weekend aimed to establish a seamless, relevant ritual that could make the Sabbath a point of convergence for all of the congregation’s needs. Music’s centrality to

20 [Isaac M. Wise], “Cincinnati,” The Israelite (2 October 1857): 102. Wise’s comment comprises the only reference to an original composition by Ensel; the sheet music has not been found.

21 The Israelite (2 October 1857): 100; The Israelite (9 October 1857): 110.

the ritual’s success became still clearer when Ensel placed an ad in *The Israelite* the following week offering “to all congregations having introduced the MINHAG AMERICA, a complete copy of all the music, solos, choruses and recitations, as used in the Synagogue in Lodge Street.”23 This announcement, which preceded the announced sale of the *Minhag America* volume itself, remained in the paper for the next ten issues.

Ensel’s work with the congregation would be short-lived. While synagogue records show no open conflict with choir, laity, or leadership, the lofty agenda of the new liturgy and its music may have proven a less-than-perfect match with Ensel’s own ideas—exemplified by his January 1858 editorial in *Die Deborah*, where he cautioned against the trendy attractions of “Bildung” (Culture/Education) at the expense of a solid moral compass.24 In March 1858, the older and better-known Rabbi G.M. Cohen (1820–1902), who had proven his own musical and choral *bona fides* running the musical program at New York’s Temple Emanu-El from 1845–1852, indicated his availability for the Bene Yeshurun pulpit; by May, Cohen had won it in a competitive election (by a vote of fifty to twenty-eight).25 Ensel received a $50 severance payment, and remained at least a few months longer in the city as one of Wise’s recognized “professors of music” before departing westward.26

**Smaller Fields, Wider Visions**

Ensel soon arrived in St. Louis, where he established a liquor shop with his father and brothers (who had also recently emigrated). With business appearing to satisfy his financial needs, Ensel continued his musical activities on a volunteer basis with the city’s reform-minded B’nei El congregation. On 8 July 1859, Isaac Mayer Wise happily reported Ensel’s success in premiering the synagogue’s first choir with organ accompaniment; and the congregation showed its appreciation in the following months by presenting Ensel with honorary membership and an

23 *The Israelite* (23 October 1857): 126. *The Israelite* changed its name to *The American Israelite* in 1874, thus the title discrepancy.
25 BY Minute Book, 2 May 1858, AJA.
26 Ibid., 18 June 1858, p. 396.
Ensel continued as B’nei El’s volunteer choir director through the 1860s—seeming to take permanent direction of the choir only in 1863—and received regular approbation for his work from Wise and other correspondents. His participation in the cornerstone-laying and inauguration ceremonies for St. Louis’s new Shaarei Emeth (“Gates of Truth”) synagogue, in 1867 and 1869 respectively, led to particular praise. Though Ensel, who became a naturalized citizen in June 1866, appeared quiet publication-wise during this period, his method seemed mostly consistent with his 1849 editorial: empowering members of the choir to take charge of their own synagogue music, and leading the process as an amateur with professional experience. Ensel later pointed to this time as the start of his formal study of sacred music, perhaps in part because his switch to synagogue music as an avocation allowed him to engage in other sacred music pursuits, thus whetting his intellectual appetite.

Ensel had begun to split his time between St. Louis and Springfield, Illinois as early as 1868, where he ran a liquor business with G. A. Mayer; and he appeared to take up full residence in Springfield by 1874. Newspaper records show his involvement in several musical functions there, including as organist for a Baptist wedding and a Catholic Easter

28 See, for example, Die Deborah (27 August 1869): 31.
31 Holland’s Springfield City Directory, For 1868–1869 (Chicago: Western Publishing Company, 1868), 84 (listing both the firm of Ensel & Mayer, and listing Ensel separately as a resident of St. Louis); email communication with Curtis Mann, 21 January 2016.
service, and briefly as president of Springfield’s Musical Union. As in St. Louis, Ensel pushed to advance reforms, this time through the local synagogue Brith Sholem (“Covenant of Peace”)—a congregation that, noted Wise, “though small in number, is not so in means.” Banding together with the congregation’s well-off members, Ensel established a Sabbath school by 1875 and received credit for introducing the latest version of Benjamin Szold’s liberal-leaning Avodat Yisrael liturgy, recently released in a German-English edition by Philadelphia Rabbi Marcus Jastrow. The following year, when the congregation dedicated its new building, Ensel played the organ and directed an amateur choir of Jewish and non-Jewish singers. Music, regularly rendered in services alongside Ensel’s own English-language sermons, thus became a preoccupation of the community and a way for the congregation to assert its place in the changing national religious landscape. Ensel’s activity caused his stock to rise within the recently established Union of American Hebrew Congregations as well: As the congregation’s regular service leader, he received the title of “Reverend” in the Union’s 1878 meeting minutes, became a member of its national Finance Committee, and would represent his community in successive national gatherings.

Ensel’s financial security as a small business owner, moreover, gave him the time to dig deeply into the world of sacred music scholarship. Two years after the new synagogue building opened, Ensel gave a pair of lectures on religious musical traditions to general audiences: the first initially for the Springfield Literary Society and the second for the


33 [Isaac Mayer Wise], The Israelite, 16 February 1872.

34 Letter to the editor, The American Israelite, 15 September 1876.


local Scientific Academy. Drawing on the work of contemporary music scholars, Ensel used these lectures to trace an evolutionary history that paralleled similar theories about intellectual developments in human society—in this case, starting with the ancient Middle East/Orient and then tracking forward with increasing sophistication and complexity into modern Europe. In doing so, he engaged with musicologists who inevitably sought to create narratives that followed music from its beginnings into the melodic conventions of Gregorian chant and on into the broader development of Western art music. All of the major European music historians up to that time, including Giovanni Martini, Charles Burney, Johann Forkel, and François-Joseph Fétis, mentioned the ancient Hebrews as an early part of their narrative. Yet as Bennett Zon notes, in a claim easily extendable from his discussion of Great Britain to the Continent, the motivations behind this kind of scholarship reflected a quietly ingrained tendency to characterize Jews as relevant to the development of Western music only as precursors to Christianity. While Jewish musician/scholars such as Emmanuel Hecht, Hermann Ehrlich, Samuel Naumbourg, Arnold Marksohn, and William Wolf had begun to respond to these narratives by the time of Ensel’s lectures, their work had largely appeared in European publications intended primarily for Continental Jewish readership. Ensel, aware of these and other


efforts, sought to craft a narrative that appealed to a broad American audience by recounting the history of liturgical music as a joint development of the three major Abrahamic religions. In so doing, he activated a variant of the “ethnic genres” strategy that Ann Ostendorf deems “a practical way [for nineteenth-century Americans] to consider the various and clearly identified cultural groups through exposure to what was perceived to be their music ways.” Ensel’s broad comparative approach thus allowed the sound of Jewish liturgical music to emerge in a more comfortable middle ground in an Occidental/Oriental continuum (with Islam, rather than Judaism, epitomizing “the East”). Released from the tense sonic East/West opposition of previous works, Ensel could take the Jewish narrative beyond the biblical period into a broader ongoing conversation with Christianity, connecting along the way with a more modern spirit of ecumenical idealism. He consequently sought “to instruct [my] hearers, by demonstrating, through argument and vocal illustrations combined, that the many analogies which exist between the liturgical music of the Synagogue, Church, and even the Mosque, point to one common origin.”

Ensel gave his first lecture at Springfield’s Congregational Church on Wednesday night, 27 November 1878, featuring a number of poster illustrations and performing musical examples on the congregation’s organ alongside a mixed double quartet. Arranging his talk in a four-part chronological format, Ensel began by characterizing the Hebrews as bearers of music from the ancient period, made evident by artifacts in European museums’ instrument collections. He then turned to address Gregorian chant in the early church and followed developments through

the late Renaissance that transformed sacred music from a beautiful mu-

sic of the elite—illustrated with a performance of Giovanni Palestrina’s

1561 “Improperia”—into the more democratizing Reformation that

advocated group singing and brought popular tunes into religious cir-

cles. Ensel’s final section, on “modern” liturgical music styles, allowed

the two soprano soloists to shine with performances of Luigi Luzzi’s

1866 “Ave Maria” (Op. 80) and Rossini’s “Inflammatus” from his 1841

Stabat Mater. The enthusiastic response to Ensel’s lecture led him to

reprise the presentation twice over the next two months, reframed as

part of a benefit to ameliorate the city’s indigent population.43 Despite

his steadfastly ecumenical content, Ensel’s own Jewish identity clearly

seemed to influence the lecture’s reception both locally and nationally.

Coverage in The American Israelite, in particular, reprinted a local ac-

count of the talk under the title “Hebrew Music,” with a short editorial

introduction clarifying that Ensel “feels a special attachment to Hebrew

music, which, we expect he will place in a proper light before intellectual

friends of music.”44

The following December, in front of Springfield’s Scientific Academy,

Ensel offered a more critical assessment of biblical music by comparing

it with standards of contemporary liturgical performance. Relativizing

extravagant biblical accounts of music as awe-inspiring only in their own

time and context, Ensel claimed that today’s congregations would find

their performances inferior when considered in terms of pitch (ancient

instruments had only one pitch, if any at all), notation (no notation ex-

isted in ancient times, thus necessitating shorter, memorized melodies),

and talent (today’s musically-gifted performers could run circles around

ancient caste-based musicians). To illustrate his larger point, Ensel hu-

morously described how the short French folk tune “Malbrook,” played

in Egypt by Napoleon’s army band in 1799, roused the locals as no other
tune had done—before revealing that “further investigation developed
the fact that this tune was brought 700 years before from the Orient by
crusaders and troubadours, and after its migrations among European

43 “Relief and Aid,” Illinois State Journal (21 December 1878): 4; “Historical Concert,”
musicians came now back to its original soil.” That the tune remained a favorite in Euro-America as “We Won’t Come Home Till Morning” (and later as “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow”) offered Ensel a chance both to affirm the simplicity of ancient music, and to poke fun at the mindlessness of contemporary popular music.

Both lectures relied heavily on the precedents of Martini, Forkel, Burney, and Fétis, among others. Yet by critiquing their ideas in an American setting, Ensel could open up more recent links between Judaism and the hegemonic historical trajectory of Christianity. His access to and knowledge of the leading works of music history in at least three major scholarly languages, moreover, affirmed his cosmopolitan outlook within the small but busy state capitol and railroad hub. Combined with positive attention from the proponents of American Jewish Reform, who held a similar interest in integrating Judaism into American religious life through a narrative of European derivation, these lectures’ reception likely led Ensel to begin the process of formalizing his ideas on paper for a wider readership.

In the process offering glimpses of his updated synagogue-music philosophy, Ensel further burnished his authority on American Jewish music by publishing a review of Baltimore cantor/composer Alois Kaiser’s 1879 oratorio-like “Requiem for the Day of Atonement.” Writing in *The American Israelite*, he called the work a “valuable addition” to the “musical literature of the synagogue” and a meaningful replacement for the Yom Kippur afternoon Yizkor/Remembrance service. He praised Kaiser’s use of a recent integrated Szold/Jastrow text, which served to unify the liturgy, “instead of the disjointed hymns suggested by nearly all the modern

45 This and all other references to the Scientific Academy lecture come from “The Music of the Ancients,” *The American Israelite* (26 December 1879): 5. Malbrook, notably, has several variant spellings, including “Malbrouk” and “Malbrouch.”

46 While Ensel did not credit these works in his lectures, the numerous reported illustrations (à la Fétis), the similarity of his cited examples, and his crediting of these and other histories in his 1880 published work suggest that they were consulted.

47 In 1880, Springfield had a population of approximately 20,000, making it the 100th most populous city in the United States.

prayerbooks of the Reform Temples.” Consistent with his 1849 editorial, Ensel also gave high marks to Kaiser’s artful and organic use of the Yom Kippur Kol Nidre melody. Comparing it to the leitmotif concept in Meyerbeer’s *Les Huguenots* (which integrated “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”/“Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott”) and Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* (particularly the Venus grotto music and “Pilgrim’s Chorus”), he noted how “the different phrases of Kol Nidre appear as so many flowers, artistically and judiciously interwoven with the green leaves of wreath.” Kaiser’s “very successful attempt at utilizing our ancient traditional melodies into modern texts,” he wrote, not only gave the Yom Kippur liturgy a greater coherence as a whole by extending the sounds of Kol Nidre into the following day, but also presented a new model for musical emulation. “We ought to have a great many more of these old tunes, so arranged that they fit the texts of our modern prayer and hymn books.” Yet in making this call he also demonstrated a more nuanced and complex appraisal of piyyutim, viewing them as vessels for old melodies that might otherwise have disappeared: “If this [new approach to composition] is not done, [these tunes] will soon be lost, as our present prayer books have abolished a number of Piutim and other texts, to which these beautiful melodies were adapted many centuries ago.” Welcoming the potential of new art music compositions to the synagogue, even without direct congregational participation, Ensel steadfastly advocated approaches that valued musical organicism and historical continuity.

In the meantime, Ensel continued to work on his manuscript, which benefited from the suggestions of fellow central European émigré Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler. Kohler appeared to like the work but warned Ensel of numerous “Germanisms” in the text that might alienate American readers. Ensel consequently gave his manuscript to “an American friend”

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50 Kohler emigrated from Germany in 1869, and had recently moved from Chicago’s Temple Sinai to New York’s Temple Beth-El when Ensel approached him.
for editing, later noting with satisfaction that the editor’s “scientific education enabled him fully in making the review text readable.”

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Example 1: G.S. Ensel, *Ancient Liturgical Music*, Cover. (Courtesy American Jewish Archives)

51 Letter from Ensel to Edward Freiberger, 15 June 1881. At the Newberry Library, Chicago, bound in to the copy of *ALM*.

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Ensel originally planned to produce his work through a conventional lithographic (plate-based) method. The projected outlay for the copious illustrations he desired, however—which he estimated at $1,500–$1,800 (c. $35,000–$42,000 in 2017 dollars)—forced him to resort to a substantially less-costly hectograph process. This relatively recent publishing technique, requiring the author to write the original manuscript with a special ink that could transfer onto a gelatin surface, allowed for intricate images while circumventing the high cost of producing wooden or stone plates. Because the gelatin could store only a limited amount of ink, however, copy quality degraded quickly, and led to small print runs. Ensel’s (typical) case yielded about twenty usable copies, which he had professionally bound.

Inside Ancient Liturgical Music

The final work—with the grandiose title Ancient Liturgical Music: A Comparative and Historical Essay on the Origin and Development of Sacred Music from the earliest times, with illustrations of the music employed in the worship of the Synagogue, Church & Mosque (briefly, ALM)—presented Ensel’s musical philosophy in its fullest form. He emulated the approaches of prevailing treatises from both musicologists and composer/cantors, sometimes even incorporating passages directly into his own text (usually but not always cited). Yet his result went far beyond those works, aiming to correct the “exceedingly inadequate and in many cases inaccurate” claims of the non-Jewish writers, while expanding the brief offerings of “unquestionable authorities” on Jewish music into an accessible discussion that could comfortably occupy a place in general discourse. To support his argument, Ensel reproduced sixty-eight images of ancient instruments and included numerous meticulously copied musical examples that illustrated a history of musical notation: from chant,

52 Letter from Ensel to Edward Freiberger, 4 October 1881. Bound in to the copy of ALM at the Newberry Library, Chicago.
54 ALM.
55 Ibid., Preface.
to tablature, to conventional staff notation (“modern notes”). He also made an effort to present his musical material, particularly melodies he saw as ancient, in an idiomatic manner that contemporary general audiences could understand. Drawing from previous experience, he surmised that scoring these melodies with an “imaginary and modern” harmonic accompaniment could fulfill nineteenth-century readers’ expectations, while helping to lead them through phrasings and contours they might otherwise find foreign. These elements added up to an inquisitively transgressive approach, which Ensel bemusedly described on more than one occasion as equivalent to “the boy who broke his drum in order to see what made the noise.”

Ensel began by describing music as an organic outgrowth of human intellect, an important vessel of emotion (in the style of philosopher H.R. Haweis’s popular 1871 book *Music and Morals*), and, therefore, “the most important auxiliary to the Ritual of a Church.” This premise allowed him to promote the idea of music as “neither the invention of one person, nor of one people, nor yet of one period, but the gradual development of an inherent gift which grows up, under favorable conditions, from very small beginnings, like a seed corn to a mighty and stately tree, bearing on its branches the ripening fruit.” Although the prolonged evolutionary timescale used a common strategy for tracking musical development, Ensel’s use of the phrase “under favorable conditions” opened an opportunity for Jews to enter the narrative via an alternate pathway. He set up this narrative by dutifully describing the most ancient Israelite music as an inheritance from Egyptian culture during the biblical slavery period, illustrated through a setting of “Miriam’s Song on the Red Sea.” This transitional moment, which symbolized to

56 Letter from Ensel to Edward Freiberger, 15 June 1881. Bound in to the copy of *ALM* at the Newberry Library, Chicago.
58 Ibid., 4.
59 Ibid., 9–10. Aguilar and De Sola, *Ancient Melodies* (1857), 9 (music section), no. 12, described as “the most ancient [melody] whose origin is supposed to be prior to the settlement of the Jews in Spain” (p. 12, introduction). Ensel used only the melody, which he reharmonized.

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him the emergence of an autonomous Jewish culture, served to launch a millennia-long retelling of the Jewish musical story.

The first half of *ALM* presented a thoroughly researched summary of existing literature on the music of the ancient world, punctuated by
short sections of more original commentary intended to connect with current-day liberal Jewish practices. A long chapter on musical instruments (organology), with credited images reproduced from contemporary compendia and a significant bibliography, rehearsed the prevailing biblical taxonomy of string-based, wind-based, and percussion-based instruments before tracing their linguistic and evolutionary morphology across the ancient world (which also extended to China and “The Hindoos”).60 One part of Ensel’s discussion followed the ancient ram’s horn as—in his view—it gradually developed into the modern brass family of instruments. Ensel’s narrative included a description of this connection in contemporary Jewish life: “in many Synagogues (Temples) of the Reformed Jewish Congregations,” he observed, “a quartet of our improved brass instruments is added to the Shofar, the effect of which is augmented by a well-trained chorus of singers, whose voices blend harmoniously with the sonorous tones of the Cornet, Trumpet and Trombone.”61 A similar conversation about reed instruments repeated a well-circulated claim connecting the biblical magrepha and the contemporary pipe organ, with Ensel again noting “that the reformed wing of the present Synagogue—redeemed from the fetters of rabbinical medi‑aeval observances in the Liturgy, have adopted the Organ as the musical instrument of the modern Jewish Temple, as it has been for centuries that of the Church.”62 More than just histories, these accounts naturalized liberal Jewish musical choices as both religiously specific and deeply continuous with the larger (inherently Christian) religious soundscape.

Ensel addressed vocal practices similarly, normalizing exotic sounds by highlighting their transition into modern practice. In discussing a detail of an ancient Assyrian bas‑relief in which “one of the women

61 Ibid., 30.
62 Ibid., 41. See, among many other precursors to this argument, Stössel, “Ein Orgel im alten Tempel zu Jerusalem,” Sinai 7, no. 3 (April 1862): 121–23.

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holds her hand to the throat,” for example, he made a direct parallel to what “the Arab and Persian women still do, when they make those shrill sounds, peculiar to Eastern vocal music.”\textsuperscript{63} That view became the

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 24–25.
basis of a less-than-complimentary commentary on Eastern-European Jewish prayer leaders, with Ensel noting that “a similar custom is still prevailing among the cantors or Precentors of the Eastern and Polish synagogues.” Advocates of synagogue reform had connected new practices with biblical precedents before to minimize a seeming “break” from tradition. Ensel, in presenting this material for a broad American audience, appeared mainly concerned with opening new pathways of connection between ancient and modern, as befitted a Jewish story—but he also subtly added an idiosyncratic yet persistent overlay of orientalism to the conversation, as a distinguishing quality that needed to be carefully controlled.

In his next chapter, “The Character of Ancient Music,” Ensel repeated the assertions of his second Springfield lecture—that “glowing descriptions … [of] the magnificence of the musical performances in the Temples and other public places” could not compare to music’s modern standards—by explaining that ancient performances were not driven by contemporary aesthetic values but were “mainly directed to the awakening of sacred emotions during worship,” and that they aimed “to restore a deranged mind to its normal healthy condition.” Such a position on ancient music, supported by arguments claiming the inferiority of instrument construction and the general “unnatural” nature of drawings and architecture from that time, set the stage for a discussion of the next thousand years, when harmony and notation would manifest these “sacred emotions” in ever more sophisticated and varied forms.

As with his chapter on musical instruments, Ensel’s discussions of notation largely followed the parameters of existing scholarship but shifted their focus enough to place emphasis on a Jewish story. He began by describing Greek semiography (letter-based notation) as a system whose unwieldy rationalism strangled musical spontaneity and variability, with its (alleged) 1,620 symbols “secur[ing] the immobility of every note in a scale series, thus fixing pitch.” In contrast, Ensel turned to Oriental practices of scriptural recitation, exemplified by Hebrew

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 52, 54.
66 Ibid., 62.
cantillation. As opposed to the Greek (here read as proto-Western) system, Ensel claimed, “Oriental music is characterized by a slight melodic framework, around which profuse and extraneous ornamentations are clustering.” Used by “not only the Jews, but the Mahomedans, Parseis, Hindoos, and the Eastern Church,” this more flexible form facilitated emotional expression: “a sort of irregular cantillation, often combined with a lively gesticulation and movement of the whole body.” Citing a lecture by recently appointed Hebrew Union College Professor Rabbi Moses Mielziner, Ensel criticized what he saw as intentionally misleading attempts by non-Jewish scholars to attribute primitive harmonic and rhythmic characteristics to the Hebrew cantillation signs. Rather, after laying out the system symbol by symbol with accompanying Western notation, he claimed that Jewish cantillation represented a progressive musical practice with the flexibility to diversify as different religious systems developed. Thus he viewed the system’s melodic fragments as a forward-looking predecessor to Gregorian chant (and, consequently, the Western music tradition), since its “ornate phrases, called ‘melismatica’ … probably point to an early Oriental origin.” Ensel followed by juxtaposing transcriptions of Jewish, Catholic, and Muslim holy text chants to emphasize his alternate trajectory.

The psalms similarly became a point of progression from Orient to Occident, but this time for new compositions that could balance Oriental melody with Occidental attempts at fixed notation. Ensel began this section with an extensive discussion of music in the Temple during the period of King David, providing references from the Talmud that retrospectively addressed the training and performance practices

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 63.
69 Ibid., 64–65. Ensel particularly singled out an example by Forkel (“Vierstimmige Harmonie, nach welcher in einigen Synagogen der deutschen Juden die hebräischen Accente gesungen warden,” Allgemeine Geschichte 1, 167) as the extent to which “the misrepresentation of this branch of Hebrew music is, indeed, equal to the malignity of a Richard Wagner” (65).
70 Ibid., 71.
71 Ibid., 72–80.
of the Levite musicians and choir. He followed by highlighting both antiphonal singing and later psalm tunes as examples of the Oriental/Occidental balance, in particular a Jewish rendition of Psalm 144 that

72 Ibid., 81–89.
he dated to the Middle Ages and equated in its self-determination with
the later Lutheran hymn, “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott.”73 This material
allowed Ensel to make a historical pivot from Jewish chant to Christian
hymn singing, through the oft-stated claim that “the first Christians
... were mostly converted Jews, in whose religious assemblies Psalms
and Hymns were sung.”74 They rejected Greek and Roman music as too
secular; instead, citing a passage in Martini’s eighteenth-century Storia
Della Musica, Ensel claimed that newly created Christians used the
music of their birth religion to recruit other Jews.75 These melodies sub-
sequently became the bases for innovations that transitioned from the
Syriac chant of the “Eastern Church” to “Metrical Music” through the
innovations of St. Ambrose and Pope Gregory VIII, Hucbald, Guido
D’Arezzo, and the subsequent development of complex harmonic nota-
tion.76 In each case, Ensel implied, Oriental and Occidental influences
achieved an artful equilibrium in the church through the actions of
talented individuals.

Once Christianity had absorbed their liturgical musical traditions,
Jews found themselves pariahs, with constant persecution devastating
their public musical practices and disrupting any further innovation.
Using the axiom that persecuted peoples resisted adopting their op-
pressors’ music, Ensel characterized the Jews as looking inward, to the
synagogue, as their only place of refuge: “Henceforth, the Sanctuary
became the inexhaustible fountain, from which they drew the refreshing
new pure waters of spiritual culture,” Ensel claimed, in a nod to Jewish
historian Leopold Zunz.77 In so doing, the Jews of various communi-

73 Ibid., 90–94. Ensel’s presentation of Psalm 144 reproduced an arrangement of a
“Traditional Tune of the Ashkenas Ritual” by Samuel Naumbourg (90–91).

74 Ibid., 95.

75 Ibid., 95–97. Martini, Storia Della Musica I (Bologna, 1757).

76 Ibid., 95–130.

77 Ibid., 136. Ensel cites Zunz, Die gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden, historisch entwickelt:
Ein Beitrag zur Altertumskunde und biblischen Kritik, zur Literatur und Religionsgeschichte
(Berlin: A. Asher, 1832), but does not identify specific passages aside from writing on p.
134 of ALM that “the author of this essay acknowledges that the greater part of this chapter,
is copied from the work of Zunz.” The relevant material appears in ch. 21, p. 379ff. in the
second edition of 1892; I believe that the pagination in the first edition is the same.
ties turned to *piyyutim* and liturgy as a source of creativity through the middle ages. In addition to compiling extensive bodies of text that ushered in the modern prayer book, they developed a broad range of musical materials that selectively imported the melodic and rhythmic forms around them. Cantors, in Ensel’s view, became more prominent

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during this time as both communal leaders and repositories of the new body of material.\(^{78}\)

The next medieval era of Jewish dispersion and discrimination, in Ensel’s view, allowed different groups to absorb the music of their respective neighbors, leading to a period of rapid and diverse musical development that he saw as the foundation for “traditional” Jewish music. East and West met through both common heritage and forced events—such as the Crusades and the sharing of folk (i.e., non-sacred) song—leading to musical developments that regularly entered into the service via settings for new hymns. This contact-centered approach to musical innovation led Ensel to build a theoretical model that viewed music as the product of cultural interaction, in direct contrast to other scholars’ claims that Jews’ musical outlook varied based on their degree of social acceptance. Ensel rebutted in particular what he (mis)interpreted as Samuel Naumbourg’s argument that Sephardic Jews’ tendencies toward major tonalities resulted from their good relationship with the Moors, while the minor tunes of Ashkenaz reflected the sorrow of German-Jewish persecution.\(^{79}\) Instead, Ensel saw music emerging from more complex, localized interplay among different ethnic groups, emphasizing each community’s agency in making its own musical choices. “It may be safely asserted,” he claimed, “without fear of contradiction from unbiased critics, that the minor [mode] chants of the Synagogue originated more from ethnical causes, than from sentimental motives—or, in other

\(^{78}\) Ibid., 131–139.

\(^{79}\) Ibid., 163. Ensel’s claim conveniently conflates and misremembers comments on pp. 32 and 35 of Naumbourg’s introductory essay to *Agudath Shirim* (Naumbourg, 1874). On p. 32, Naumbourg suggests that Sephardic cantillation is always in the minor mode (“reste toujours dans la gamme mineure”), while Ashkenazic chant alternates between minor and major (“il passe alternativement dans les tones majeurs et mineurs”). Three pages later, Naumbourg points out that the freedom Jews had under the Moors and Arabs led them to adopt aspects of the surrounding culture, including melodies, as their own. Naumbourg makes these comments in the service of a larger agenda championing the authenticity of Ashkenazic chant, which he claims conserved tradition under Christian oppression, in opposition to Sephardic chant, which was compromised in the openness of Moorish society. Ensel in contrast, sought to rebut by claiming that everyone borrowed tunes, such that no one tradition could claim to preserve ancient Jewish melodies more than another.
words, the Synagogue, like the Church, has adopted secular tunes and adapted them to its liturgical texts.”80 The musical conventions of the surrounding societies, he felt, held greater sway on the development of Jewish religious musical forms than previously acknowledged.

The theme of Jewish musical self-fashioning continued to develop as Ensel moved into the Reformation, the emergence of Protestantism, the reassertion of congregational choral singing, and then into the Jewish emancipation period of the nineteenth century. Recounting the career of Vienna’s Salomon Sulzer as the Jewish analog to Giovanni Palestrina (c. 1525–1594), who removed “the dross, which centuries had accumulated” on synagogue music, Ensel welcomed the reintroduction of choirs and organs into Jewish worship and celebrated Naumbourg’s rediscovery of early-seventeenth-century Jewish liturgical music composer Salomone Rossi.81 Placed alongside similar accounts of Palestrina and hymn singing in the Catholic and Protestant churches respectively, Ensel implied Judaism’s return to a meaningful place in Europe’s liturgical landscape in this era. He emphasized this claim in his conclusion: Rather than attributing musical ideas to one group or another, Ensel asserted that liturgical music derived from a wide spectrum of processes, based on a combination of self-determination, musical cultivation, and the specific character of each group. The source for such musical activity lay not in the hermetic space of the sanctuary alone, he argued, but in a fluid interaction with all aspects of musical life: “both the Synagogue and the Church,” Ensel stated, “have at no time been reluctant in absorbing to their liturgies the music originally composed for other purposes than sacred.”82 Even selections from popular culture such as opera could have a home in the modern synagogue, church, or mosque, so long as they were tastefully chosen.

80 Ibid., 164–65. Emphasis in original.
81 Ibid., 192, 196. “The fact … that these compositions should have been permitted to lie hidden for more than two centuries, until accidently [sic] extricated from the dust of a library, bears sad testimony to the neglect of Jewish sacred music, when compared with the fostering care, which the Church bestowed upon the works of Rossi’s contemporary Palestrina, among others.”
82 Ibid., 217.
His ideas thus conceived, Ensel ended his book by presenting the “Trisagion” (Kadosh/Sanctus with preceding poetic verses) in notated versions for the synagogue (in his own arrangement), the Catholic church, and the Protestant church. Noting that “[n]o other tune, perhaps, can convey the vivid and ornate style of the Orient; massive and dignified chant of Rome, and the simple musical recitation of Wittenberg, Geneva, and Westminster,” his closing example highlighted the textual parallels between the three groups, and their ability to stand together as related, and even interwoven, traditions.83

Contemporary reviews of ALM, while few, were strongly positive; reviewers commended the book’s accessibility, its copious images, and its seemingly revolutionary comparative treatment of the three major faiths. A writer for Chicago’s Daily Inter Ocean hailed the work as “one of the most complete and valuable acquisitions to musical literature that has been published for several years.”84 The short-lived Chicago journal The Musical Bulletin (1879–1883) mentioned the book in late 1881, after Ensel provided a copy to the editor.85 And a reviewer in the prominent St. Louis-based journal Kunkel’s Musical Review described the book as “remarkable in more senses than one,” and deserving “the study not only of musicians but of the intelligent clergy of all denominations.”86 The Jewish press responded similarly, though with its own slant: Chicago’s correspondent to The American Israelite called it “a book of the greatest interest to every historian, to every lover of music and of art and to every rabbi,” while affirming its place as a long-elusive “correct, reliable, and unprejudiced history of Jewish music”; the German-Jewish paper Die Zeitgeist responded similarly.87 Bloch & Company became the book’s distributor, and a copy was donated to the young Hebrew Union College; however, the extremely limited printing severely curtailed the

83 Ibid., 219.
85 Letter from Ensel to Edward Freiberger, 4 October 1881. Bound in to the copy of ALM at the Newberry Library, Chicago.
87 Eduardo, “Chicago,” The American Israelite (10 October 1881): 122. See also the review in Der Zeitgeist: Israelitisches Familienblatt 3, no. 4 (16 February 1882): 56.
book’s spread, even among its specialized readership. Mainstream music education journal *The Étude* lamented the study’s scarcity in 1885, in an article aptly titled “An Unpublished Work.”

**Jewish Music on the National Stage**

Ensel, meanwhile, continued his work with Paducah’s small congregation Bene Yeshurun and its young but well-regarded choral program. During his tenure from 1880–1886, the first years of the congregation’s membership in the UAHC, he served in both musical and clerical capacities while teaching music lessons on the side as evidenced by his occasional contributions to *The Étude*. One of these articles, likely drawn from his experience, mused about the difficulties of improving liturgical choral singing in a small-town setting:

> The few good voices which may happen to be found in the place are distributed in the various denominations. The fine soprano is an Episcopalian, and would, of course, give the benefit of her voice to her own church. The alto, being a Baptist, would not accept the invitation to sing in the Presbyterian church; and the only good tenor in town does not like church music, nor attend church. Hence, another disappointment in the music teacher’s experience in a small city.


89 “An Unpublished Work,” 230. See also a similar article in the “Musical Melange” section of the *Daily Inter Ocean* (7 November 1886): 13; despite the *Inter Ocean’s* previous mention of the book in 1881, it offered a similar interpretation based on a copy that had come into the possession of F. Ziegfeld, president of Chicago’s musical college.


In July 1887, just after leaving the pulpit, Ensel returned to the speaking circuit, participating in an organized session titled “The True Style and Type for Congregation and Choir” at the eleventh national meeting of the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) in Indianapolis.93 Standing before 1,800 music educators, Ensel provided a Jewish voice alongside two major Christian-American musical figures with contrasting approaches to congregational singing. Episcopal minister Rev. William H. Cooke (1837–1889), of St. John’s Chapel in lower Manhattan, had founded the Church Music Association in 1874 and had served as president of the Oratorio Society of New York since 1876—both organizations aiming to elevate the aesthetics of amateur choral singing. Catholic priest Alfred Young (1831–1900) advocated tirelessly for “congregational singing” from the pews; he had edited The Catholic Hymnal in 1884 to achieve this end and wrote numerous articles supporting the practice in both Catholic and mainstream journals.94 While all three spoke on historical matters, the session emphasized pragmatic steps that music teachers could take well beyond the sanctuary, under the assumption of liturgical music’s status as a progenitor of the art music tradition.

Ensel’s message, which he had developed within an ecumenical environment, found particular depth juxtaposed with his colleagues’ presentations. All three offered idiomatic histories of music in their respective religious traditions, paying special attention to the congregation’s role in affirming an appropriate level of spirituality; and each pointedly criticized efforts to enhance the sound of worship through elite musical artistry. Young, in the style of the Saint Cecilia Society reformers, marked the Renaissance and its turn to “art for art’s sake” as the start of musical degradation in the Catholic church; Monteverdi’s popularization of the leading tone in particular, he claimed, opened an era of indulgently

complex harmony that took away from the corporate spirit of prayer.\textsuperscript{95} He advocated returning to mass chanting in the Gregorian style, which would give congregants greater claim on the service and present a more idiomatic harmonic and rhythmic connection to the text.\textsuperscript{96} Cooke, in contrast, framed the Reformation as a period of harmonic elaboration that established a healthy balance between the corporate expression of choral arrangements and the devotional music of basic chants and chorales, reflecting different levels of musical ability.\textsuperscript{97} In the United States, however, the balance tilted away from the congregation, with choirs attempting pieces that exceeded their capabilities and obscured the text. “The choir,” Cooke noted, “should never forget that in the devotional act the people have their proper place and function.”\textsuperscript{98}

Ensel’s speech, in sharp contrast, characterized Jewish chant as a creative stream that ran in counterpoint to its Christian analogs: focusing on Jews’ preservation of Oriental Egyptian/Chaldean chant, their music’s stunted existence in the era of Christian development, and its reinvigoration under the still-alive Sulzer. This history, particularly its orientalist angle, superseded the other speakers’ concerns about the balance of art music and congregational chant, since Jewish identity did not present the same tension. Although Ensel discussed Orthodox rejection of harmony and instrumentation during prayer, he framed the act as manifesting a lack of musical sophistication, producing a sound whose “sadness” could be seen as a mirror to the “spirit of the powerful [Catholic] church.” The music of this “lachrymose” worldview ended in America, however, where Jews “have no cause to lament over the victories of Vespasian, Titus and Hadrian” but rather needed to recognize

\textsuperscript{95} The leading tone, a crucial part of tonal harmony from the seventeenth century onward, refers to the tone one half-step below the fundamental note of the intended “arrival” chord (B if moving to a C-major chord, for example); contemporary listeners have been condition to feel the leading tone’s “natural momentum” toward musical resolution.

\textsuperscript{96} Alfred Young, “The Divine Idea of Church Song,” \textit{The Voice} 9, no. 7 (July 1887): 111–113 [Part I]; no. 8 (August 1887): 119–121 [Part II].

\textsuperscript{97} W.H. Cooke, “Church Music in the Episcopal Church.” \textit{The Voice} 9, no. 7 (July 1887): 101–103.

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid.
why Jewish populations elsewhere, still under persecution, continued
the older musical ways. Ensel ended his talk by describing Kol Nidre as
a tune that bridged ancient and modern, Orthodox and “Reformed,”
Occidental and Oriental—and, remarkably, represented a case where
the music itself took precedence over the words, which were “nothing
but the merest and driest of Talmudic casuistry.”

Ensel’s emphasis on
historical description, and his much milder series of moral prescriptions
than his colleagues, likely made sense to an audience that viewed Jewish
music as an ancient survival of uncertain significance. By inclusion in
the MTNA forum, however, his paper provided a substantive argument
for the continued inclusion of Jewish musical practices in Western musi‑
cal narratives, as seen through the lens of an active specialist.

Presented one way in a mainstream forum and published in the
MTNA’s journal *The Voice*, Ensel’s message shifted noticeably for a
Jewish audience. *The American Israelite* published the same speech in a
longer version with less invasive editing—including cues for live vocal
demonstrations by local singer Dora Messing. In this setting, lacking
the context of Cooke’s and Young’s talks, Ensel appeared to empha‑
size Jewish primacy where *The Voice* implied confluence—expanding
on the principle developed in *ALM* that *sui generis* musical innovation
could only happen during periods of national self‑determination.

Thus, while the ancient Hebrews included the musical style of their
Egyptian oppressors in their earliest liturgical music, only after “the
peaceful possession of the promised land … could the leaders of the
Hebrew people begin to mould whatever they had adopted from oth‑
ers, into such a type, as would become distinct from the parent stock.”
Referring to the musical liturgy developed by “Samuel, and after him
David and Solomon,” Ensel used Talmud‑based references to musical
practices to assert that the musical style developed during the Second
Temple period comprised “the true type, the only true style of church
music everywhere.” While both versions of his address noted that “the

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100 Ensel, “The Traditional Music of the Synagogue,” *The American Israelite* (22 July 1887):
4–5; 29 July 1887: 3.
primitive church, following the advice of the apostles … intonated the Psalms in exactly the same manner,” his American Israelite article reinforced the Jewish narrative by adding: “And there is no doubt that [the Psalms] were chanted to Hebrew music.”

Similarly, Catholic oppression during the medieval period led Jews to pair folk tunes of the time with a growing body of piyyutim, leading Ensel to claim that “it is to the synagogue, and later to the Protestant church, to which the musical world owes a debt of gratitude” for this practice. Moreover, while composer/cantor Sulzer, in The Voice, amiably participated in the European church music tradition, The American Israelite’s version noted how Sulzer’s “polyphonic anthem style” drew stark contrast with Catholic and Protestant musical conventions: “in contradistinction to the Gregorian plainchant, and the Lutheran Choral, the introduction of which, having been tried, never could captivate a Jewish ear.” Somewhat genteelly blunted in The Voice, Ensel’s (perhaps original) perspective in The American Israelite represented a Judeocentric revision of liturgical music’s timeline, placing Jewish creativity at the forefront of religious musical development and citing Jews’ history of oppression as a springboard for, rather than inhibitor to, such change.

Rather more subtly, The American Israelite version of Ensel’s address adhered to the ideological underpinnings of American Jewish reformers. While the article in The Voice noted that “it is to the Israelites to whom we have to look for authentic information in regard to ancient music,” the version in The American Israelite employed the more openly ethnic term “Hebrew people” [emphasis in original], possibly reflecting the contemporary Reform Jewish nomenclature used in, for example, the recently founded Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873) and its associated seminary, Hebrew Union College (1875). And where Ensel in The Voice described the introduction of “the organ and a choir of trained singers” into Jewish life as an innovation from “about forty years ago,” The American Israelite version added “after a lapse of nearly 2,000

101 The Israelite newspaper (called The American Israelite from 1874) likely retained its name for brand recognition, even as it represented an earlier era.
years,” fulfilling a Reform Jewish approach to theology that emphasized Jews as a biblical (rather than talmudic, or law-based) people. Ensel’s use of talmudic passages to describe ancient performance practices affirmed the Talmud’s place as a historical document in the reformers’ spiritual topography. Yet he openly criticized contemporary adherence to Talmud-based religious practice, noting specifically Orthodox Judaism’s rejection of organ and mixed choir because “the rabbins of the Talmud held that no other place in God’s wide world is fit to cultivate the old temple music but Zion.” This comment, which also affirmed Reform Judaism’s rejection of a Jewish state at the time, added a new dimension to Ensel’s concluding critique of Kol Nidre’s dry talmudic text in The Voice.

Taken as a whole, the differences between these two printed versions of the address highlighted the divergent interest that Ensel’s two key constituencies took in his work, and the lens through which each saw its relevance: adding a living Jewish voice for music educators, and championing musical reform among liberal Jews who sought to create a comfortable place for themselves in the United States. While at least one more conservative voice in the Jewish press (probably Henry S. Morais of Philadelphia’s Jewish Exponent) offered his own critique of Ensel’s ideas, that author nonetheless acknowledged that “the history of Jewish music is surely an interesting study” and affirmed Ensel’s “commendable acquaintance with that subject.”102 Such comments, and their wide exposure, legitimized music as both a distinct element of Jewish history, and as an active part of musical scholarship.

**An Effaced Legacy**

For the remainder of his life, Ensel appeared to look to music education as his primary outlet, as both a peer community and a forum where he could present his research on a national level. Speaking at the 1889 MTNA meeting in Philadelphia, Ensel repeated his story about the

102 [Henry S. Morais] editorial, The Jewish Exponent (29 July 1887): 6. Morais was one of three editors of the Exponent at the time but seems the most likely author for this article because of his simultaneous editorship of The Musical and Dramatic Standard. It is not clear to which version of Ensel’s talk the editorial responded.
origins of “Malbrook” (“We Won’t Come Home ’Til Morning”), and local and national media amplified his remarks anecdotally for years afterward.\textsuperscript{103} Although he no longer served as a full-time synagogue musician—indeed, one account described him as “inclined to have no particular religious views” late in life—he remained a member of the synagogue and continued to participate in select Jewish events that called for large-scale musical leadership, acting as orchestra conductor and arranger at the March 1894 consecration of Paducah’s new sanctuary.\textsuperscript{104} Mostly, however, he continued giving private music lessons in Paducah, while continuing to contribute short pedagogical articles and epigrams to \textit{The Étude}.\textsuperscript{105}

Ensel’s efforts became increasingly overshadowed by students of Sulzer who had come to the United States starting in the mid-to-late 1860s, especially Alois Kaiser and Morris Goldstein. Cantorial voices and the concept of the cantor as professional musician began to dominate conversations about synagogue music in the United States at this time, as aspirations toward congregation-led singing and the use of pre-existing melodies faced wavering support. Ensel’s adaptation of Rossini tunes and other “traditional” melodies retained some popularity through the 1880s: his arrangements of two Portuguese/Sephardic melodies and two “traditional” holiday tunes with hymn texts by Gustav Gottheil appeared in a prominent 1887 collection prepared by New York’s Temple

\textsuperscript{103} See, for example, “Origin of ‘We Won’t Go Home,’” \textit{Los Angeles Times} (28 July 1889): 12 (itself reprinted from the \textit{Louisville Journal}); “Historical,” \textit{Our Paper} 10, no. 50 (15 December 1894): 799; “‘We Won’t Come Home ’Til Morning’ as a Classic,” \textit{The Musical Record} (Boston) no. 418 (December 1896): 9 (reprinted from \textit{The Home Journal}). Ensel’s account of the origin of this song lingered, appearing, for instance, in S.V. Clevenger, \textit{The Evolution of Man and His Mind} (Chicago: Evolution Publishing Company, 1903), 216.

\textsuperscript{104} “New Temple Dedicated At Paducah, Ky,” \textit{The American Israelite} (29 March 1894): 7; “A Learned Man: Prof. G. S. Ensel Dies After a Long Illness,” \textit{The Paducah Sun} (15 November 1901): 1. Ensel appeared to suspend his membership in the local synagogue between 1886 and 1889 due to differences with the next minister, but subscribed consistently once he rejoined; see Temple Israel (Paducah, KY) minutes, 1880–1910, SC-93895, AJA.

\textsuperscript{105} See, for example, Ensel, “An Old Teacher’s Opinion” (and additional poem), \textit{The Étude} 9, no. 3 (March 1891): 53. The \textit{Paducah, KY Directory}, 1890–1891 listed Ensel as a music teacher.

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Emanu-El organist A.J. Davis. Yet American cantors’ emphasis on musical content as a basis for authenticity discouraged the use of music written by non-Jews, seeking instead an opportunity for Jewish identity to assert itself by reintroducing “traditional” melodies and elaborate new compositions. By the 1890s, cantors had formed professional organizations that aimed to enforce musical standards and argue for the legitimacy of the profession, assuming all musical responsibilities for the congregation and often eclipsing the work of nonprofessionals such as Ensel, G.M. Cohen, and Simon Hecht. To accompany a new 1892 Union Prayer Book, created to unify members of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Central Conference of American Rabbis looked to Kaiser and the Cantors Association to edit its complementary hymnal. When The Union Hymnal appeared in 1897, moreover, its stated emphasis of including original tunes by Jewish musicians and cantors largely shut Ensel out.

Aesthetic changes in the history and framing of “Jewish” music that came to emphasize modal ideas, cantillation, and oral tradition also affected the staying power of Ensel’s work, seemingly attempting radical sonic (and historical) dissociation from Christian musical forms where Ensel sought integration. Kaiser and William Sparger’s 1893 A Collection of the Principal Melodies of the Synagogue from the Earliest Times to the Present embodied the characteristic trend of mining contemporary melodies for surviving indicators of the ancient past, reversing

106 A.J. Davis, Music to the Hymns and Anthems for Jewish Worship by G. Gottheil 1 (New York: Kakeles, 1887). Isaac Mayer Wise also noted that Ensel’s arrangement of a Rossini piece to “Lecho Adonoi” was performed at the January 1884 consecration of the new Memphis, Tennessee, synagogue.

107 Alois Kaiser et al, eds., Anthems, Hymns, and Responses for the Union Prayer Book (New York: n.p., 1894). By the time Kaiser’s anthology was published, the Central Conference of American Rabbis had recalled the 1892 Union Prayer Book and replaced it with the edition of 1894–1895.

108 Society for American Cantors, Union Hymnal (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1897).

109 See in particular Josef Singer, Die Tonarten des traditionellen Synagogalegesangs: Ihr Verhältnis zu den Kirchentonarten und den Tonarten der vorchristlichen Musikperiode (Vienna: E.M. Wetzler, 1886), which became a touchstone of Jewish music modal theory.
the musicological techniques Ensel used. In 1899, British Rabbi and musicologist Francis L. Cohen described choral music as a recent Jewish phenomenon, distancing it from Christian practices, and emphasized the new trend toward monophonic chant and modal theory—a commentary that Werner’s Magazine (the successor journal to The Voice) placed in direct contrast with Ensel’s 1887 MTNA talk. By 1929, Abraham Z. Idelsohn’s foundational text Jewish Music in its Historical Development gave only a dismissive nod to Ensel’s major work as “an attempt to explain the Ancient Liturgical Music…” Despite helping to establish the field of Jewish music study, Ensel’s book largely disappeared from the scholarly landscape, its musical practices and theoretical approaches out of vogue.

Ultimately, Ensel offered another pathway for America’s Jews to place themselves in a religious-musical continuum in the second half of the nineteenth century. Rather than opting for monumentalism and new composition that emphasized a sense of Jewish uniqueness, Ensel advised Jews to use the music around them as their guide. Closer attention to music history, he claimed, revealed a much more fluid idea of musical tradition than had previously been considered—one that emphasized a sense of common origin, frequent interaction, and parallel if not always equitable development. At the same time, he made sure that Judaism (re)claimed a part in that story, standing alongside Catholicism and Protestantism (and Islam) as both progenitor and protagonist, significant for its role and influence even if limited via the comparative size of its population. Within a midwestern landscape of small congregations that needed to ration their musical resources, and working within a general era of unification and optimism that extended to progressive Jewish groups, Ensel put his intellectual work into action, prioritizing facilitation over composition, and community over uniqueness.


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While the content of Ensel’s work may be forgotten, the philosophy it espoused remains relevant. Large congregations still often set the landscape of Jewish musical paradigms, publicly justifying—with the backing of cantorial schools and movement-based institutions—the expense of a cantor, the production of high-quality synagogue music, and the broader sonic values of Jewish spirituality. Yet music remains an important part of the small society as well, where cantors can be scarce and prohibitively expensive, rabbinic leadership transitory, volunteers central to day-to-day spiritual leadership, and music (perhaps) more openly connected to contemporary popular styles. In this framework, Ensel spent a lifetime bridging ideals of Jewish reform with the pedagogy of a singing community, emphasizing music’s place in a broad social discourse that filtered beyond the synagogue, shared resources with other religious groups, and engaged openly with local cultural practices and norms. In some ways, then, the erasure of Ensel’s name from the historical record of music scholarship may, intentionally or otherwise, have proven his significance: balancing the idea of musical authority with the pragmatic role of a facilitator who placed the people and their cultural context at the center of the Jewish musical narrative.

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