

# Jewish American Music

## The Milken Archive on Naxos

by Peter J. Rabinowitz

### Sacred Music

Perhaps the most illuminating disc, from a historical point of view, is 'Jewish Voices in the New World: Chants and Prayers from the American Colonial Era'. The title may lead you to expect music composed in the New World; actually, the CD offers a glimpse of the traditional Sephardic sacred music brought to America by early settlers, some of which may date as far back as the eleventh to fourteenth centuries. Not surprisingly, the music is sparse: while there is a certain amount of alternation between cantor and choir, it's entirely monophonic. But there is, from time to time, a surprising robustness to the rhythms, a robustness well captured by Rabbi-Hazzan Ira L. Rohde and the Schola Hebraica, conducted by Levin. This disc won't attract a wide audience, but specialists may be fascinated (Naxos 8.559411, 1 hour 3 minutes).

facile note-spinning that marks so much of his large output. Still, for its best moments, the work is worth knowing. It would be more attractive still in a more forceful performance – but even with the excellent support from Rabbi Rodney Mariner and baritone Yaron Windmüller, Gerard Schwarz doesn't galvanize the Czech Philharmonic and the Prague Philharmonic Choir, who churn out the music in a surprisingly ho-hum fashion (Naxos 8.559409, 1 hour 5 minutes).

Castelnuovo-Tedesco's achingly melodic *Sacred Service*, with organ accompaniment, is more intimate, more contemplative than Milhaud's or Bloch's orchestral settings. There are a few dramatic splashes, and some bursts of joyful affirmation (for instance, in the 'Kidfush') – but you're more likely to be soothed than elated, especially in this mellifluous performance led by Ronald

Corp. The disc begins with Castelnuovo-Tedesco's brief *Naomi and Ruth*, written for soprano, women's chorus and tactfully deployed orchestra, and characterized by subtle harmonic twists that may bring the pastoral side of Vaughan Williams to mind. Ana Mariá Martínez, with Sir Neville Marriner conducting the Academy and Chorus of St Martin in the Fields, makes the most of the work's gentle redolence. A similar sensitivity graces Levin's radiant performance of three movements from the *Memorial Service for the Departed* (with Cantor Simon Spiro and the New York Cantorial Choir) – leaving us to wonder why the other movement wasn't included as well. Certainly, organist Barbara Harbach's performance of excerpts from the relatively bland *Prayers My Grandfather Wrote* doesn't compensate (Naxos 8.559404, 1 hour 10 minutes).



Sacred music with a broader appeal can be heard in the 1947 *Sacred Service* by Milhaud, which here receives its first complete recording – that is, the first to include the Friday Evening Prayers as well as the Morning Service. It's an eclectic score that may, at times, bring to mind the shadowed ambiguity of Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, the prairie openness of some of Copland's most popular ballets, the mystery of Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, and the pungency of Milhaud's own *Suite Provençale* (indeed, some of the thematic material is Provençale in origin). Granted, it never achieves the fervent intensity of Bloch's more famous *Sacred Service* (written for the same synagogue, Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, that commissioned Milhaud's score) – too often, Milhaud falls into the