Song and music have always played an important role in Jewish culture. Indeed, the Bible itself enumerates the various musical instruments used during Temple days as well as the songs sung by the Levites during the services. The earliest reference to music is found in the Book of Genesis (IV,21) where Jubal is mentioned as the world’s first musician. Early Biblical music, however, was primarily of a religious nature, used mostly in prayer and during religious holidays. After the destruction of the Second Temple, synagogues called Mikdash-Mat became the centers of Jewish worship. In these small houses of worship, the services were conducted by a representative of the congregation, Sheliach Tzibbur. The first cantors were known as Payutim (poets) and they not only sang the melodies but also composed the tunes and poems as well. The Paytan took the place of the Levites who performed the Azdah (service) in the Temple. These cantors inspired the people with beautiful liturgical melodies of the written prayers and helped to maintain a continuous interest in Jewish song and music. Unfortunately, the early cantor was not professionally trained in the art of musical notation, thus many fine musical compositions were forever lost. The ancient melodies that remain today have been passed on from father to son, from generation to generation, and are accepted as the pillars of the synagogue liturgy.

With the advent of the Siddur, many new melodies were introduced to the Jewish people. Compositions called “Zmiroth” were chanted at the Sabbath table and on other religious occasions, adding beauty and spiritual uplift to the Jewish home.

The year 1734 marked the founding of the Chasidic movement by Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. This was most significant to Jewish musical history. Chassidism stressed the emotional rather than the rational aspects of religion. Their belief that certain emunot (religious beliefs) are better expressed by song or dance, paved the way for new compositions of spiritual inspiration and elevation. Early Chasidic leaders constantly encouraged their followers to create new melodies in honor of various religious occasions, thus enhancing their observance.

Cantorial music as it is known today first took root in Eastern Europe at the start of the 19th century. Eager students flocked about the early masters, and a number of cantorial schools soon developed. Each school was noted for its individual style. Musical notation was still uncommon in cantorial circles, forcing the young cantors to memorize hundreds of intricate compositions. This sometimes resulted in a temporary lapse of memory, which tested the cantor’s skill in improvisation.

The continuous appearance of new melodies and compositions eventually helped the formal acceptance of musical notation by the cantors. Unfortunately, this led to a more rigid rather than flexible service. It was not at all unusual for a cantor to attend a professional school of music, while continuing with his cantorial lessons. Larger cities engaged full time cantors who organized choirs to enhance the services. Smaller towns favored congregational singing without cantorial embellishments, blending their singing with that of the Baal T’filoh.

The twentieth century brought unrest and persecution to the Jews of Eastern Europe. Countless restrictions were placed on the Jewish community by the European governments and the Jew was the first to be deprived of his religious freedom. This unfortunate situation encouraged many Jews to leave Eastern Europe and settle in America. Little did those immigrants realize how truly fortunate they were. Those Jews who remained in Europe were later slaughtered in the greatest Holocaust that ever befell the Jewish people. Among the early immigrants that came to the Western world, were cantors with voices whose equal are seldom heard today. This marked the start of a new Jewish era known as “the Golden Age of Cantors.”

This golden era was not destined to endure for long. With the death of the twentieth century cantors, people were deprived of an art priceless to Jewish culture and music. Few cantors recorded their music. Today these recordings are collectors’ items and the original discs are extremely rare.

Many of the performances appearing in this series were among the first discs to be recorded on phonograph records.

Appearing is a collection of the most famous masterpieces of the great cantors. These recordings were expressly engineered to recapture for the listener the full flavor of actual concerts by the artists as they performed many years ago.

The latest technical advances have been employed to best represent the original voices in both range and quality of sound. Special engineering skills were used to make it possible for the Greater Recording Co., Inc. to offer you a recording of superior quality and the highest attainable standards.

ABOUT THE COVER

A beautiful oil painting by the late Saul Raskin, depicting the interior of a very ancient Sephardic Synagogue in Safed, Israel, appears on the jacket cover.
RARE CANTORIAL MUSIC

THE ART OF

CANTOR GERSHON SIROTA

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3. TZUR YISROEL
4. HOMTZAY LONU
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7. ZOREA TZDUKOS
8. ROSH CHODESH BENCHEN
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THE ART OF

CANTOR GERSHON SIROTA

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4. K'DUSHA
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