

New Jewish Liturgical Music concert was a treat

By [Leon Cohen](#)

of The Chronicle staff

June 19th, 2008

If you are a lover of Jewish music and you were not among the 300 or so who attended the Third International Festival of New Jewish Liturgical Music at Cardinal Stritch University on June 15, you missed a real treat.



Rabbi Shawn Zevit sings and plays the shruti at the Shalsholet concert on June 15. Photo by Leon Cohen.

I think this was the best Jewish liturgical music concert I have heard here since the Cantors Assembly came to town in 1994 to help celebrate Milwaukee Jewry's 150th anniversary.

Of the 19 new compositions presented, 16 are works I would like to hear again. It is only personal quirk that leads me to mention the following few of them:

- “*Ozi Ve-Zimrat Yah*” by Israeli composer/singer/guitarist Orit Perlman. This was a deliciously Sephardic-sounding setting of part of Psalm 118, with a catchy rhythm that made you want to move. Perlman herself performed it with Hazzan Ramon Tasat also on guitar and voice, and the combination melted in one's ears.
- “*Gam Zeh L'Tovah*” by Jhos Singer. This maggid from the San Francisco area chose a somewhat harrowing text. It is a phrase from the Talmud (Ta'anit 21b), meaning, “This too is for the good” and was apparently the motto of Rabbi Nahum, a Job-like sufferer.

But Singer made the setting for the wedding of two friends of his who appeared to be totally incompatible; they have been married now for 18 years. I don't know whether this

joyous song helped with the marriage; but with its chanting tune, Middle East flavor and slow-accelerate to fast-return to slow structure, it is made for singing by congregations or campers.

- “*Ve-Shamru*” by Rabbi Shawn Zevit. This wasn’t just a musical highlight; this was the spiritual highlight of the evening.

Zevit is a Philadelphia-based rabbi and teacher. He accompanied himself on a shruti, an accordion-like instrument from India that produces a drone; over it, he sent the words of Exodus 31:16-17 flying in an exultant chant that made time stand still.

- “*Da*” by Cantor Terry S. Horowitz. The Shalsholet Festival Choir was very fine throughout the program, whether conducted by Milwaukee’s own Joyce Altman or by Tasat, whether featured in a choral piece or accompanying a solo singer.

But the group really sparkled in this composition for chorus. Horowitz, based in Albany, N.Y., mixed passages from the Talmud and Isaiah and set them with tricky rhythms and intricate imitative counterpoint; and the choir made the performance sound easy.

- “*Magein Avot*” by Jeremy Stein, a cantorial student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. So why shouldn’t a setting of part of the Friday evening liturgy sound a bit like the song “Sixteen Tons”? And why shouldn’t a quintet of men make one smile and even chuckle as they sing about how the Sabbath is “overflowing with delight”?

As one can gather even from this sample, the composers and compositions spanned an amazing range of styles — Sephardic and klezmer, chant and lieder, soft rock and gospel. Our community contains a wealth of musical creativity that deserves to be more widely known.

All praise to Shalsholet: The Foundation for New Jewish Liturgical Music for its efforts in uncovering and encouraging these efforts and presenting them in these festivals. And all thanks to the Wisconsin Society for Jewish Learning for bringing this event to town. If this festival ever returns here, I will plan to be there.

For more information about these organizations, visit www.shalsholet.org and www.wsjl.org.