



## A report of services in the festival

### celebrating the rich variety and diversity of music in synagogues today

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#### Belsize Square and Central Synagogue Services 26/27 Jan 2024- Report

The ECA Festival Celebrating Synagogue Music got off to an exciting start on Shabbat Shirah (the Sabbath of Song) 26/27 January 2024 with two synagogues that both take a great pride and invest significantly in their music: Belsize Square Synagogue, NW3, and Central Synagogue, W1.

#### **Belsize Square Synagogue**

This community was established in Swiss Cottage in 1939 by refugees mainly from Berlin, Frankfurt and Vienna. Now numbering about 1200 members, they took the opportunity of the Shabbat of Song (where the reading of Beshalach mentions the children of Israel singing after crossing the Red Sea) to **honour their three regular choirs** that grace their services. **The Professional Choir; The Community Choir; and the Youth Choir.**



**Their music** follows the German *Liberale* liturgical tradition, which is heavily based on the Western harmonies of music by Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894, active in Berlin) with some music by Salomon Sulzer (1804-1890, active in Vienna) and a few others. It is gently supported and accompanied on the organ. In the picture is the **Professional Choir** of nine singers on the steps in front of their *Aron Kodesh*, Cantor Paul Heller is wearing the cantor's robe and hat and Benjamin Wolf, Music Director is next to him on his left. Michael Cayton, the organist is on the extreme left.

**The layout:** Completely remodelled in the 1990s the synagogue space is flexible with moveable upholstered chairs arranged around the 'stage' where the Aron Kodesh and rabbi's and cantor's chairs are set against the back semi-circular wall. As you can see in the picture, the



professional choir members are standing on the steps of the 'platform', and behind them, with the candles, is the readers desk.

**On Friday night**, 26 January, (6.45-8.15) Music Director Benjamin Wolf was invited to the bimah to speak to the congregation about the weekend's musical programme. He also mentioned Henry Kuttner who had done so much for music at the synagogue in his day. He spoke about the meaning of music in the services and explained what compositions they would be singing. He then went upstairs to the gallery from where he conducted the professional choir which attends every Friday night, and sings for the major festivals. The service was led by their cantor, Paul Heller who has been at Belsize since 2013. Paul, who is now the only full-time cantor in London, has the title of 'Cantor and Minister of Religion' and his role encompasses all liturgical, pastoral and educational duties, including standing in for the rabbi in his absence.

**The cantor**, leading the service, stands facing the Aron Kodesh, with his back to the congregation. The rabbi and the Leyeners stand with their backs to the Aron Kodesh and face the congregation. Men and women sit together wherever they please in the gallery or downstairs.

From their position in the front of the gallery that stretches across the back of the room, the **Professional Choir** with organ accompaniment sang the following to a satisfied and decorous congregation of 49, some of whom were guests of the family of a forthcoming barmitzvah.

*Lecha Dodi* – Mombach

*V'shamru* – Dunayewski

*Hashkivenu* – by their own previous Youth Music Director, Sue Mariner

*Yigdal* – Saqui as well as other Lewandowski melodies

## Shabbat morning at Belsize



**On Shabbat morning** at Belsize, (10.00am – 12.30) Cantor Heller officiated this time with the **Community Choir**, also conducted by Ben Wolf with Mike Cayton on the organ. This is a group of 16 to 20 men and women, which participates on Shabbat once a month and on special occasions.

This week they also celebrated their **Youth Choir** which was established in the 1950s to make the children feel at home with their synagogue music.

The Youth Choir is now conducted by Sofia Swenson-Wright. They rehearse during cheder, and sing the whole *Mincha* service on Yom Kippur as well as at all bar and bat mitzvah services. They also give performances throughout the year in the synagogue and at care homes. Rabbi Gabriel Botnick used the occasion, emphasizing the inclusive and multi-generational nature of the synagogue's musical tradition.

## The service on Sat 27 January included:

*Barechu* – Lewandowski

*Mi Chamocha* – Lewandowski

*Avinu Shebashamayim Sol Zim Youth Choir*

*Kedusha*.

*V'shamru* – Lewandowski

*Ki Lekach Tov* – Youth Choir to a favourite tune, composer unknown

*L'Dor Vador* – Finkelstein – all choirs together

*Ein Keloheinu*

*Adon Olam* - Uzi Hitman All choirs

The Previous week on Friday 19 January, **Yohel Heller was the guest cantor** at Belsize. He opened with Sulzer's *Ma Tovu* and *Lecha Dodi*, Birnbaum's *Hashkiveinu*, Putterman's *Ushmor* among other of the regular Lewandowski repertoire. cantor Paul Heller delivered the sermon, emphasizing the community's strong musical identity after the darkness of the Shoah, further highlighting the rich musical heritage of Belsize Square Synagogue

Read more here [About Benjamin Wolf](#). Read more about their music here [Music at Belsize](#)

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## Central Synagogue

**Central Synagogue** honoured two of their stalwart women in the community for *Shabat Shirah* on 27 January (9.15-11.45). As there was no sermon that day, Cantor Steven Leas, who has been the part-time Cantor at Central for the last 20 years, was **given the opportunity to talk about music**. He has a very warm rapport with his community of about 600, all of whom he knows very well. For many years Steven and his family lived 'above the shop', in a flat in the shul building, and was also the erstwhile synagogue events manager, so that he became part of the very fabric of the community and was always on hand.

Steven now lives in Hampstead Garden Suburb and officiates at Central three weeks out of four and their **choir of six men**, including a counter-tenor, conducted by Harry Style, come about once a month.



**The Central Synagogue congregation** was established in 1855 following the more prosperous Jews moving West out of the East End. At first, Central Synagogue was just a branch of the Great Synagogue, Dukes Place, occupying a large space between Great Portland Street and Hallam Street. It later became an independent constituent of the United Synagogue and after being bombed during the War, members of this wealthy congregation saw to it that a palatial synagogue with huge stained-glass windows was built on the same site in the late 1950s. The revered **Cantor Simon Hass** led the services at the synagogue known then as Great Portland Street Synagogue, for 37 years.





Being in so big a space, the choir stuck closely to Steven. When he was on the bimah (the reading platform, as traditional in orthodox synagogues of that era in the middle of the synagogue

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Steven and the choir sang *Mishebeirach* for Israel. The *kvodo* to 'Bring Him Home' from *Les Miserables*. The congregation was riveted by the Counter-tenor of the choir singing a traditional version of *Ein Keloheinu*. Steven keeps his community on their toes with a surprise up his sleeve each week for Adon Olam.

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with the rows of pews facing it and each other) the choir was close around him. When Steven went up near the Aron Kodesh, the choir followed him and stood on the steps, making the most impact on the spread-out congregation of almost 50 men downstairs and 55 women upstairs (an exceptional number perhaps because two of their special and long-time women congregants were being honoured).

At the end of the service – all the women upstairs were invited to come down and join the menfolk, sitting anywhere they chose, for the praising of the 'Women of Valour' in their community. Rabbi Lehrer spoke about the long and dedicated service to the synagogue. Then each of the women, seated in the presidential box in front of the Bimah, was invited in turn up to a special lectern set up for them. They each spoke about their devotion to Central Synagogue.

Read about [Cantor Steven Leas](#).

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Report by Geraldine Auerbach MBE, London February 2024.