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The immortal melodies of Louis Lewandowski

“Love makes the melody immortal” is the testament left behind on the gravestone of German-Jewish composer Louis Lewandowski and his wife. And this weekend in Berlin the International Festival of Synagogue Music the Lewandowski Days will also do its part to keep Lewandowski’s music—which renewed the liturgy of the Jewish worship music by combining it with contemporary European music of the time—with three days of his music performed by eight choirs from four continents.

Lewandowski was born in what is now Wrzesnia, Poland in 1821. At the age of 12 he left his family and went to Berlin to study piano and voice, after which he attended the Berlin Academy of the Arts to focus on composition. Under the wing of Escher Lion, he found a place among the Jewish community. He served as Lion's musical assistant and in return received room, board, and tuition to complete his studies. He graduated from the Berlin Academy with high honors and, in 1840, became the choirmaster of the Berlin synagogue. In 1865 he was appointed the Royal Director of Music.

At the time of his studies, synagogue convention banned the use of all musical instruments during services. The service was led by a prayer leader and two assistants—a bass and a soprano—who would sing or chant portions of the service. Lewandowski became one of the first composers to link these synagogue chants with modern European music. In 1894 he passed away, and his grave still stands in the Jewish cemetery in Berlin-Weissensee.

“The innovations introduced to the Jewish liturgy by the great master and reformer Louis Lewandowski ...transformed Jewish worship into a musical experience. The resurgence of pride and confidence in their identity among the Jews of the 19th century found expression in these innovations and imbued the Jewish liturgy throughout the world and across denominations with fresh vibrancy and popularity,” explains the festival website.

The Lewandowski Festival is unique in the world, but new to Berlin. From December 16th to the 18th eight choirs will perform in locations across the city in honor of Lewandowski and in celebration of contemporary Jewish choral music. For more information, visit the links below.