The eclectic composer Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990) wrote music in a variety of genres, including musical theater, film, and concert music. He was equally comfortable creating music infused with a Jewish flavor, either by direct quotation or stylized reference. Numerous scholars have investigated Bernstein’s Jewish background and his compositions, but one area that has not received appropriate attention is the influence of his childhood synagogue in Boston, Congregation Mishkan Tefila. Its rabbi, Herman Rubenovitz, and especially its music director, Solomon Braslavsky (1887-1975), made a life-long impression on Bernstein.

As a young man, Braslavsky gained valuable experience working with his father, who was a cantor, and with his choir. Braslavsky, who was born in Russia, later immigrated to Vienna, where he held numerous teaching and conducting positions and was widely respected. In 1928, Mishkan Tefila hired Braslavsky, who elevated its music program to spectacular heights, and contributed original compositions. He expected nothing short of perfection from the synagogue’s choir, which he accompanied on the organ, an instrument not frequently found in Conservative or Orthodox synagogues.

Braslavsky’s music enthralled the young Bernstein, who had not been exposed to much music in formal settings. Braslavsky’s compositional integration of western harmonies with European synagogue song, as well as his commanding personality and exacting musical standards, made a substantial impact on Bernstein. This study investigates the influence of Mishkan Tefila, its clergy, and Braslavsky on Bernstein. Central to this dissertation are interviews with family and friends of Braslavsky and Bernstein that provide previously unknown details of their lives. Braslavsky instilled a love of Jewish music in Bernstein, who would go on to incorporate synagogue chants and modes into several of his pieces, including Psalm 148, Hashkiveinu, and Chichester Psalms,
examined here. Two compositions by Braslavsky, *Birchat Kohanim* and *Un’saneh Tokef*, will also be analyzed to illustrate the rich musical tradition of both Mishkan Tefila and American synagogue music in general. This musical environment helped rocket Bernstein to international acclaim in large part because of Braslavsky’s influence and tutelage.