

COLONIAL HARMONIES:

The Musical World of Luis Moises Gomez

*A Joint Project of Vassar College,
The Gomez Mill House,
and the choir of Lauderdale Road Synagogue, London*

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Luis Moises Gomez (c. 1660–1740,) was in many ways a New Yorker typical of his age— an age in which everyone in the New World had come, fairly recently, from somewhere—a time and place in which everyone was starting anew. Gomez’s ancestors fled the Inquisition in their native Spain, and the family passed through both France and England before settling in New York. He quickly integrated into the exciting swirl of commercial and cultural activity of his new environment— a well-assimilated businessman and man-about-town.

And he left distinct traces of himself: His home— the oldest home in Orange County listed on the National Register of Historic Places—now called the Gomez Mill House, was the site of a profitable fur trading post, run by him and his sons for thirty years. His limestone quarry and timber mill provided building materials for the growing City of New York, 60 miles down the Hudson River.

At the same time, Gomez was a proud Jew who sought and received an Act of Denization from the British Crown that allowed him to conduct business, own property, and live freely within the Colonies without an oath of allegiance to the Church of England. He was the first Parnas (President) of America’s oldest Jewish congregation, Shearith Israel, was one of the principals involved in the construction of its earliest building, the Mill Street Synagogue in lower Manhattan.

While we have historical documents relating to Luis Moses Gomez, and a charming account of the man and of the family more generally by his great grandson Isaac Gomez, born in New York in 1768, our picture is somewhat incomplete because at our distance, it is difficult to see his world through his eyes. While we can easily imagine him as business man, trader with Indians, man about town, we are prompted to ask about his other ties and allegiances: What, for instance, was it like to be both a part of the British colonial universe, and a proud Jew? One can imagine Gomez as having owned some Jewish ritual objects—probably items typical of colonial American housewares marshalled into service as religious objects—perhaps a silver Kiddush cup or a pair of pewter candlesticks. These would have been objects hallowed *by their use* rather than *created with the intention* to serve as Jewish religious objects.

There was however, one realm in which the intentional inner Jewish landscape of Luis Moses Gomez can be traced— the musical or auditory world. This project attempts, on the basis of archival records in London, Amsterdam and New York, to reconstruct the liturgical culture of Shearith Israel in its earliest days— the “Jewish music” with which Luis Moses Gomez would have been familiar. The thesis is that the music he would have heard (and in which he would have had a hand in regulating) as Parnas of that mother ship of American Jewry was an amalgam of several strata:

It contained *survivals* of pre-Inquisition Spanish tonalities, *echoes* of late Stuart and early Georgian melodic structures, hymnodic meter, and harmonies. But it was also something *fresh and new*—something distinctly American colonial, resonating, in particular, with the work of Gomez’s rough contemporary William Billings (1746–1800).

Billings created music that chimes remarkably with the English Sephardi music of his time. And he created music for Psalm texts adopted by Isaac Watts, circa 1701— that auspicious date carved over the door of Bevis Marks Synagogue— on themes from the Hebrew Bible, since the American Colonists identified with the Biblical Hebrews in the Promised Land. Thus, the music of Luis Moses’ Gomez’s environment was, thus, like Gomez himself: derived from Spain, influenced by late Stuart and Early Georgian England, distinctly American colonial, with a Caribbean connection.

For this project, funded by the Fishman Family Endowment for Jewish Studies at Vassar College, I worked with the archives of the Gomez Mill House, and the American Sephardi Foundation as well as investigating the lived traditions of the performance of this music in the three major synagogues of the Western Sephardic world—Bevis Marks/Lauderdale Road in London, the Esnoga in Amsterdam, and Shearith Israel in New York City and Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. (I have investigated the possibility of research at various Caribbean venues, but the congregations are no longer Western Sephardic, and the archives can be accessed in Jerusalem.)

The research was then put to practical use—producing arrangements of musical compositions for a professional studio-recorded CD/streaming album in collaboration with Hazan Adam Muzikant and Choirmaster Jason Silver and the Choir of Lauderdale Road Synagogue. The album will be titled *Colonial Harmonies: The Musical World Of Moses Luis Gomez*. The historical and archival research will be published as the brochure for that album. The centerpieces of the album are two works— *Mizmor Shir Hannukat HaBayit Le-David* and *Adon ‘Olam*, which are set to tunes by the American colonial composer William Billings (1746–1800) newly transcribed for the Lauderdale Road Choir.

It is hoped that the music will be premiered in an actual living liturgical setting London at a time to be determined. It will also be introduced in New York, at a concert co-sponsored by Gomez Mill House and Vassar College with a chamber choir joining forces with a period-music ensemble.

The concert and album will include narration, including excerpts from the papers of the Gomez family, poetry, translations of lyrics, Colonial American Western Sephardic liturgical and secular compositions, with parallels in English and Caribbean music, and, of course, in the works of the great American colonial composers. It will be a sumptuous, elegant, literate, and, it is hoped, entirely lovely production.