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Jeanne R. Swack
University of Wisconsin-Madison (emerita), jswack@mac.com

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Abstract

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Keywords

Women, Music, Eighteenth Century, Nineteenth Century, Germany

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Rebecca Cypess and Nancy Sinkoff, Editors. *Sara Levy's World: Gender, Judaism, and the Bach Tradition in Enlightenment Berlin*. Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, University of Rochester Press, 2018. 302 pp. ISBN 9781580469210.

Reviewed by Jeanne Swack
Professor Emerita, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Sara Levy's World: Gender, Judaism, and the Bach Tradition in Enlightenment Berlin presents a fascinating multi-disciplinary collection of essays situating Sara Levy (1761–1854), the wealthy and brilliantly talented daughter of the Prussian king's Jewish financier Daniel Itzig, and the granddaughter of Felix Mendelssohn's maternal great-grandfather, within the milieu of Berlin society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The book is the product of a symposium on this topic held at Rutgers University in September 2014. Drawing on a variety of approaches—biographical, cultural, religious, and musical—the book situates the Itzig and Levy families within the burgeoning salon culture in Berlin at the beginning of the emancipation of the Jews in Prussia. Chapters are grouped (sometimes loosely) by topic, reflecting the wide variety of subjects presented at the 2014 symposium. The book is organized into three substantial groups of essays: “Portrait of a Jewish Female Artist: Music, Identity, Image”; “Music, Aesthetics, and Philosophy: Jews and Christians in Sara Levy's World,” and “Studies in Sara Levy's Collection,” preceded by a general introduction, “Experiencing Sara Levi's World,” by the volume's co-editor, Nancy Sinkoff. This review discusses selected essays from this larger and fascinating group of papers, not all of which focus on Levy and her circle but do help to provide (for the most part) a contextualization for the position of prominent Jews in Germany during the time in which she lived, and their connection with broader intellectual, religious, and musical trends, especially the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment).

In chapter 2, Christoph Wolff lays out the history of the Itzig family and their connection to members of the Bach family in late eighteenth-century Berlin, including the acquisition of much of the Bach estate on the death of C.P.E. Bach's daughter Anna Carolina by Felix Mendelssohn's father Abraham, which he donated to the Berlin Sing-Akademie, leading to the initiation of the Bach revival. Wolff takes the Seven Years' War (1756-63) as a turning point in the cultivation of music among affluent Berliners, “establish(ing) Berlin as a major center for the performance and reception of music by the Bach family.” After tracing the continuation of this revival into the nineteenth century, he turns back to the main subject of the book (and the composer Felix Mendelssohn's great aunt), Sara Itzig Levy, as a keyboard player, salonnière and collector and preserver of manuscripts from the Bach family and the commissioner of new chamber works from C.P.E.

Bach. The chapter delves into the extensive musical activities of Levy and her husband, the wealthy banker Samuel Levy, documenting Sara's activities as a performer until 1831, when she ceased public performances (44), stressing as well that the large collection comprised performing parts as well as scores (45), testifying to live performances of the works. As Sara's husband was an accomplished flutist, Wolff provides some speculation on possible performances of three chamber works by the elderly C.P.E. Bach, scored unusually for flute, viola, and harpsichord. (45). Equally original was C.P.E. Bach's final work, also commissioned by Sara Levy, the Concerto for Harpsichord, Fortepiano, and Orchestra (47), a work which juxtaposes the two most prominent domestic keyboard instruments of the time (48).

Chapter 3, Natalie Naimark-Goldberg's "Remaining within the Fold: The Cultural and Social World of Sara Levy," examines the tension between Levy's lifelong adherence to Judaism, an adherence despite the pressure to convert, and her participation in performances of Christian sacred music. As Naimark-Goldberg notes, conversion to Christianity often caused families to split apart into Jewish and Gentile branches (she points out that all of Sara's many siblings remained Jewish) and led to cultural assimilation. That adherence to Judaism at this point did not necessarily imply a lack of social interaction with Christians in Berlin is clear; as the article reminds us, Sara Levy had close relationships with some of the leading Enlightenment figures of the day. Especially crucial is the section on Levy's affiliation with the Berlin Sing-Akademie, in which she actively participated as a musician, and sometimes as a soloist. Her participation in specifically Christian musical works was not unique at the time for a Jewish musician; as Naimark-Goldberg remarks (56), "The inclination of acculturated Jews for church music could encompass more than aesthetic appreciation; it could involve active participation in its performance" (56).

In chapter 7, "Longing for the Sublime: Jewish Self-Consciousness and the St. Matthew Passion in Biedermeier Berlin," the most extensive essay in the collection, Yael Sela begins by pointing out that Madame Levy, quite unlike "other contemporary women of the enlightened Berlin Jewish elite," had left no autobiographical writings or letters that might have shed light on her ambitions and choices as a female Jewish musician and patron in a male-dominated, non-Jewish cultural universe" (147). Expanding her reach, however, to other "enlightened" Jewish (or formerly Jewish) women engaged with writing about music in letters and memoirs (148), Sela focusses attention on an elite group who "had come to embrace Enlightenment ethics of *Bildung* and culture while emulating the lifestyle of German aristocracy," describing how "for the emerging enlightened Jewish elite, the consumption of European art, literature, theater, music, and opera had become, by the last third of the eighteenth century,

increasingly common as an expression of a new civil self-consciousness and ‘life feeling’” (149). This leads to the high point of this chapter, a discussion of the “Berlin *salonnière* and writer Rahel Varnhagen von Ense” (born Rahel Levin). A prolific letter writer, Rahel Varnhagen bore witness to the revival of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion in Berlin in March of 1829, which she described “in a letter written shortly after the event. . . .” (152). Sela provides an assessment of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion in Berlin: “in a grand public concert,” the first “modern” performance of the work, taking place not in a church but the new and packed concert hall of the Berlin Sing-Akademie, and conducted by Felix Mendelssohn, the converted grandson of the prominent Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Sela stresses the importance of the event both musically and culturally: “. . . not only was it (the performance) a turning point in the public reception of Bach’s music that heralded his veneration in a nineteenth-century imagined pantheon of German composers; it was also a seminal event in the formation of a national German culture” (154). Sela then returns to the role of Jews in the early nineteenth-century Bach revival as a whole, which is clearly both strong and compelling, and which the concluding chapters of the book also address.

One of the book’s strongest chapters, chapter 8, “Duets in the Collection of Sara Levy and the Ideal of ‘Unity in Multiplicity,’” Rebecca Cypess adopts an interdisciplinary approach, addressing the complexities of Sara Levy’s life by considering

. . . a portion of the music that she is known to have held in her collection and that she likely played or heard in her salon. I will then explicate the social practices upon which this music drew, and read it metaphorically, attempting to understand what it might have meant for the modernizing Jews of Berlin (181).

As her test case, she considers “duets for two identical or similar instruments that Levy collected, some of which she is thought to have commissioned. These include duets for two flutes, two violas, and for two keyboard instruments.” While the topic may seem quite simple, she draws an analogy between the duets and social interactions:

The special challenge presented by the genre of the duet was to maintain an even balance between the parts, allowing them to play equally important roles even as they supported one another. The analogy to social music making during the Enlightenment is apparent: the equality between the two parts in a musical duet represented a model for the socialization of individuals within an enlightened society (182).

Cypess draws upon Johann Georg Sulzer's aesthetics of the duet, which stressed the equality of the parts, in which "first one, then the other lets itself be heard for a while, yet afterward, both [sound] together, each, however in its particular way. From this stems the requirement, in both types, that the duet should be fugue-like and worked out in double counterpoint . . .," and she further cites Sulzer's idea of the "aesthetic dichotomy of *Einheit*" (unity) and *Mannigfaltigkeit* (diversity)," in which the instruments maintain their individuality while acting in concert. The chapter continues with wide-ranging discussion of duos in various scorings, including two keyboards, suggesting (186) that Sara Levy probably played them with her sisters, and indeed she and two of her sisters, Zippora Wulff and Fanny von Arnstein, owned double keyboard concertos by J. S. Bach (186).

The last chapter in the book, Steven Zohn's "The Sociability of Salon Culture and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's Quartets," focuses on C.P.E. Bach's three quartets for flute, viola, and keyboard (Wq. 93-95/H/ 537-39), composed in January 1788, and likely commissioned by Levy (206). Taking note of their conversational style, he argues that the works provide musical parallels with the conversations of the salons. Briefly comparing C.P.E. Bach's Berlin chamber works to earlier chamber works, such as Telemann's two sets of quartets for flute, violin, viola da gamba or cello and continuo and works of other composers in similar scorings, he examines such works in Levy's collection, which indeed include, for example, Telemann's 1730 *Quadri* and a set of six quartets for flute, viola and harpsichord by C.P.E. Bach. He concludes his chapter with an analysis of sections of C.P.E. Bach's Quartet in D Major, Wq. 94, to demonstrate its "sociability."

Sara Levy's World: Gender, Judaism, and the Bach Tradition in Enlightenment Berlin, provides a set of cogent analyses and description of music making by Jewish women in late eighteenth- to early nineteenth-century Berlin. As an anthology stemming from a conference with a specific but broad-ranging theme, the book provides a generally engaging, accessible, and historically grounded assessment of the role of wealthy Jewish *salonnières* and their participation in both domestic and public music-making, centering on the role of Sara Levy, her salon, as well as her activities in the public sphere, but reaching as well into the participation of generally wealthy and emancipated Jews in the wider culture. The articles are generally clearly written and connected to the central theme of the book (but see below), and most of the chapters complement each other well. The chapters are enhanced by generally well-placed musical examples when appropriate.

As a book instigated by a conference, there is some overlap in topics, and some of the chapters treat topics outside the focus of the book. For instance, Martha Helfer's chapter, "Lessing and the Limits of Enlightenment," is a reprint from her

earlier book, *The Word Unheard: Legacies of Anti-Semitism in German Literature and Culture* (2011), while Elias Sack's chapter, "Poetry, Music, and the Limits of Harmony: Mendelssohn's Aesthetic Critique of Christianity," is quite good but tangential to the theme of the book. George B. Stauffer's chapter, "Women's Voices in Bach's Musical World: Christiane Mariane von Ziegler and Faustina Bordoni," likewise is well-researched and written but not really part of the book's theme, as their only connection is that the subjects were female musicians in the eighteenth century. There are occasional small slips: for example, Yael Sela's assertion that Jewish women with strong ties to maskilim (Jewish Enlightenment thinkers) spoke German as an alternative to Hebrew, is incorrect, as the usual spoken and written language (aside from German) was Yiddish at this point, and Hebrew was largely a liturgical language that was generally not taught to women.

This book certainly focuses on the roles of women, particularly Jewish women, in music and culture in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Berlin, and the book is definitely a contribution to the field. Most books on music in Germany in the late eighteenth- to early nineteenth century focus on male achievements during this period, and do not look at Jewish participation until they come to Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, who were converted very early in life and thus were not practicing Jews. The format of the book and general tone make it much more suitable to graduate seminars than to undergraduate courses. Advanced undergraduate music majors, or at least students in disciplines like Women's Studies or Jewish Studies who can also read a musical score, would also find this book useful and interesting.