

## BOOK REVIEW

Rebecca Cypess and Nancy Sinkoff, eds, *Sara Levy's World: Gender, Judaism, and the Bach Tradition in Enlightenment Berlin* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018), x + 292 pp. \$99.00

Sara Levy (1761–1854) – a redoubtable nonagenarian whose lifespan exceeded the tectonic shifts of 1789 and 1848 – was a matriarch of a Berlin salon, dedicated philanthropist, student of W.F. Bach, patroness of C.P.E. Bach, connoisseur of J.S. Bach, highly skilled keyboardist, and great aunt of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. The novelist Fanny Lewald, who frequented Levy's circle along with Bettina Brentano, J.G. Fichte, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and E.T.A. Hoffmann, found her to possess 'a rather unbecoming masculine aspect',<sup>1</sup> a slightly coded, gendered recognition, perhaps, of her formidable intellect. That said, until now she has received relatively scant attention in the scholarly literature. Only recently, for instance, has her foundational role in amassing a library featuring compositions of the Bachs, ultimately donated to the Berlin Singakademie, been accorded the full attention it deserves, owing to Christoph Wolff's success late in the twentieth century in tracking down the holdings of that institution that had been dispersed from the German capital to Kiev toward the end of the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> And though a number of Levy's female relatives, among them her sisters Fanny von Arnstein and Cäcilie von Eskeles, and her niece Lea (Salomon) Mendelssohn Bartholdy, were actively engaged in what J.F. Reichardt described as a 'veritable Sebastian and Philipp Emanuel Bach cult'<sup>3</sup> at the Berlin residence of Daniel Itzig (maternal great-grandfather of Fanny and Felix Mendelssohn), their activities have largely been subordinated to Felix Mendelssohn's epic revival of the St Matthew Passion at the Singakademie in 1829, the event often thought to have triggered the nineteenth-century Bach revival.

Teasing out from the shadowy, scantily documented domain of the Berlin *salonnières* a full accounting of their significance for Prussian culture of the time is indeed a decidedly difficult, vexing enterprise. Be that as it may, this present volume of essays, an outcome of a conference held at Rutgers University in 2014, contributes significantly to advancing our understanding of Sara Levy's world. Broadly interdisciplinary, the new publication comprises an introduction and nine essays that engagingly treat topics in musicology, gender studies, Jewish studies and philosophy, and provide a rich variety of perspectives that inform and cross fertilize each other.<sup>4</sup> At the centre of the volume is the idea that

<sup>1</sup> Fanny Lewald, *The Education of Fanny Lewald: An Autobiography*, trans. and ed. H.B. Lewis (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Christoph Wolff, 'Recovered in Kiev: Bach *et al.*: A Preliminary Report on the Music Collection of the Berlin Sing-Akademie', *Notes*, 2nd series, 58/2 (2001): 259–71. See also Peter Wollny, 'Sara Levy and the Making of Musical Taste in Berlin', *Musical Quarterly* 77 (1993): 651–88.

<sup>3</sup> Cited after Adolf Weissmann, *Berlin als Musikstadt: Geschichte der Oper und des Konzerts von 1740 bis 1911* (Berlin, Schuster & Löffler, 1911), 36.

<sup>4</sup> A supplementary appendix prepared by Barbara Hahn includes a selection of letters from Levy to Karl Gustav von Brinckmann, a Swedish diplomat to Prussia.

the arts and music played a vital role in the 'aspirational culture of modernizing elite Prussian Jews in the eighteenth century' (Nancy Sinkoff, 'Introduction', p. 2). While *maskilim* such as Moses Mendelssohn were 'slow to include Jewish daughters in their modern pedagogical efforts' (Sinkoff, p. 3), a number of German-Jewish women – prominent among them were Henriette Herz, Rahel von Varnhagen, Amalie Beer and Sara Levy – nevertheless found meaningful creative spaces in the salons and other venues, and cultivated their artistic interests to a high degree, even if largely in semi-private spaces, relatively well removed from the glare of public scrutiny.

If the early Berlin salons, modelled after French antecedents, privileged literary readings and discussions, musical performances probably were not excluded. And outside the institution of the salon, musically inclined and talented women found creative ways to practice their craft. Thus in 1807 Sara Levy dispatched the key-board part of the Bach Fifth Brandenburg Concerto at the Berlin Singakademie, at a time when precious few had access to manuscript copies of that work, and fewer still bothered with what would have been considered by many to be an outdated museum curiosity.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Lea Salomon, who secretly read Homer in the Greek, made an avocation during her adolescence of playing the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, a practice she inculcated in her daughter, Fanny Mendelssohn, who performed 24 preludes from memory privately for her father, Abraham, when she was 14. (Still, that Herculean feat earned an earnest reprimand from Fanny's Parisian aunt, Henriette Mendelssohn, who admonished that the exertion might well have harmed her health.)

Approaching how Sara Levy negotiated the Berlin salon culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (roughly the period from 1780 to 1840), Marjanne Goozé reviews some distinguishing features of the institution ('What Was the Berlin Jewish Salon around 1800?'). Here we read, for instance, that a significant factor in the emergence of salon-like gatherings in the city was 'the desire of a very small group of Jewish women to attain an education in German secular culture' (p. 22). These women, who generally speaking were excluded from the male-dominated *Haskalah*, were able to attract a heterogeneous mixture of guests to their salons that included nobility and commoners, Jews and Christians, and men and women who could exchange ideas and refine the art of conversation in 'neutral' settings. In the case of Sara Levy, as Christoph Wolff reviews in 'Sara Levy's Musical Salon and Her Bach Collection', this active pursuit of *Bildung* took several forms: she joined the Singakademie, where she frequently played concertos of J.S. Bach (her last documented performance, of the Triple Concerto in A minor, BWV 1044, occurred in 1831, when she was 70); she amassed a significant library of eighteenth-century instrumental music that featured music of the Bachs; and, finally, she commissioned new works. These included from C.P.E. Bach the three quartets for fortepiano, flute, and viola in A minor, D major, and G major (Wq. 93–95) and the late Double Concerto in E-flat major for fortepiano and harpsichord (Wq. 47), and from Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach (the Bückeberg Bach), possibly as well a Double Concerto for fortepiano and viola in the same key.

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<sup>5</sup> One who did a decade or so later was the young Felix Mendelssohn, who discovered in Bach's 1721 presentation autograph a passage with parallel fifths in the first movement, causing C.F. Zelter to boast about his student's 'hawk eyes' to Goethe. See R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 46.

Of these commissions, the three quartets are the subject of a probing chapter by the Telemann scholar Steven Zohn, who explores them as a metaphor for the 'sociability of salon culture'. If Levy's interests in the music of J.S. Bach betray her 'antiquarian' inclinations that mirrored the conservatism of Berlin, her relationship with C.P.E. Bach, and specifically her role in commissioning the quartets and double concerto, among that composer's most experimental music, reveal a distinctly progressive side of her tastes. For Zohn, this music represents 'a shift away from an aesthetic of self-expression ... and toward one emphasizing collaboration between multiple instrumental personas' (p. 207). It is, in short, a new kind of sociable music in which the competing instrumental timbres now interact, now collide with one another, evincing an 'egalitarian dynamic' that mimics with musical fidelity the conversational exchanges in the salons.

Zohn's fruitful line of inquiry relates to a similar approach taken by Rebecca Cypess, a musicologist and accomplished fortepianist/harpsichordist, as well as a driving force behind *In Sara Levy's Salon*, a CD released in 2017.<sup>6</sup> In her highly original essay, 'Duets in the Collection of Sara Levy and the Ideal of "Unity in Multiplicity"', Cypess uncovers another example of 'sociable' music as an analogue for salon culture in the significant number of duets for identical or similar instruments that Levy collected (and, in some cases, possibly commissioned). These include examples for two violas by W.F. Bach, for two flutes by or attributed to Telemann, as well as for two keyboards.<sup>7</sup> Cypess suggests that 'the equality between the two parts in a musical duet represented a model for the socialization of individuals within an enlightened society' (p. 182). Pursuing this line of argument still further, she finds Moses Mendelssohn's aesthetic of 'unity in diversity' (*Einheit in der Mannigfaltigkeit*) applicable to the genre of the duet, in which the performers asserted 'their individual identities even as they accommodated their partner'. In short, duets offered 'an aesthetic model for the kind of tolerant society that Mendelssohn imagined' (Cypess, p. 198).

Moses Mendelssohn figures significantly in two other essays. Martha Helfer's 'Lessing and the Limits of Enlightenment',<sup>8</sup> offers a nuanced critique of the writings of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, whose friendship with the philosopher was celebrated in Moritz Oppenheim's painting *Lavater and Lessing Visit Moses Mendelssohn* (1856).<sup>9</sup> While acknowledging Lessing's reception as an 'icon of interfaith friendship' and an 'unequivocally pro-Jewish author and political activist' (p. 99), the author nevertheless finds evidence in the plays *Die Juden* (1749) and *Nathan der Weise* (1779)<sup>10</sup> of anti-Semitic stereotypes and rhetorical gestures that complicate the idealized vision of Oppenheim's painting. From the other side of Jewish-Christian relations in Enlightenment Berlin, Elias Sacks explicates the philosopher's own evaluation of Christianity ('Poetry, Music, and the Limits of Harmony: Mendelssohn's Aesthetic Critique of Christianity'). For Mendelssohn, the dominant religion in Prussia had neglected the aesthetic dimensions of biblical poetry and, in particular the musical recitation of the Psalms, and as a result had

<sup>6</sup> Acis Productions APL00367.

<sup>7</sup> The author includes in this category arrangements for two keyboards in Levy's library of other, non-duet works such as J.S. Bach's organ trios, BWV 52–30.

<sup>8</sup> The chapter is reprinted from Martha B. Helfer, *The Word Unheard: Legacies of Anti-Semitism in German Literature and Culture* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Magnes Collection of Jewish Life, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>10</sup> The latter's title role was understood to represent Moses Mendelssohn.

missed an opportunity to 'discover and create common ground between religious communities' (Sacks, p. 124). To the extent that common ground was found between Jews and Christians, the salons did provide spaces where 'shared aesthetics ideals could narrow the gaps between Jews' cultural practices and those of their Christian neighbors, highlight the existence of beliefs and values shared by members of both communities, and forge more inclusive forms of civic life open to adherents of both traditions' (Sacks, p. 137).

The larger question of how Sara Levy and other Jewish *salonnières* negotiated their place in Berlin society as they sought cultural inclusion in Protestant Prussia is a topic that animates two other essays in the volume. Natalie Naimark-Goldberg ('Remaining within the Fold: The Cultural and Social World of Sara Levy') reminds us that, unlike several of her relatives – including Abraham and Lea Mendelssohn Bartholdy, who chose to have their children convert to the Protestant faith in 1816 before they themselves received baptism five years later – Sara never left the Jewish faith. She read maskilic literature, supported the Jewish *Freischule* founded by her family in 1778, and as late as 1832 was heavily involved with a Jewish orphanage and other charities. Levy's Jewishness was never in doubt, though she was a member of the Singakademie, which specialized in sacred Christian music of the eighteenth century, immersed herself in the music of J.S. Bach, and attended her great nephew's seminal revival of the St Matthew Passion in 1829. In short, she 'embraced Christian elements from German and European culture', without, however, altering her faith. In this regard, Levy's stance contrasted with that of her contemporary Rahel Levin, who, according to Yael Sela ('Longing for the Sublime: Jewish Self-Consciousness and the St. Matthew Passion in Biedermeier Berlin'), initially seemed to 'link aesthetic experience and its ethical imports with the quest for religious pluralism' (p. 167), but then, after her conversion and marriage to K.A. Varnhagen von Ense, and after hearing the St Matthew Passion, maintained an ambivalent stance toward Bach's masterpiece, preferring instead to locate the musical sublime in the Old-Testament oratorios of Handel and Bach's instrumental works.

These essays necessarily present only selected facets of the Berlin music culture that Sara Levy knew and experienced over the protracted course of her life. What nevertheless emerges are illuminating cross-disciplinary perspectives that help situate a largely forgotten female musician who was active in the very centre of Jewish acculturation in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Prussia. As George Stauffer points out in 'Women's Voices in Bach's Musical World', there were other examples of 'prominent figures who defied the traditional constraints on women and achieved international fame' (p. 76), including, in the Saxon circle of J.S. Bach, the prolific cantata librettist Christiane Mariane von Ziegler, evidently the first woman to produce cantata texts for a complete annual cycle, and the soprano Faustina Bordoni, who earned 30 times Bach's annual salary. These earlier counterparts to Sara Levy remind us that there is still much history to be rediscovered and reclaimed, even if significant portions of that history, as in the case of the Berlin salons, have come down to us with refractory gaps in the documentary record.

Well edited and handsomely produced, *Sara Levy's World* contains sound scholarship that leaves little to be desired. Just a few inadvertent slips might be quickly noted: on p. 5, the composer Mendelssohn, child prodigy though he was, became Zelter's student around 1819, but not in 1811, when he was but two years old. Also on p. 5, Mendelssohn and his siblings were not baptized 'at birth', in 1805, 1809, 1811, and 1812, but rather together in 1816 (coincidentally or not on 21 March,

J.S. Bach's birthday), when Felix was seven. And on pp. 154 and 165, Bach's Passions are mistakenly referred to as oratorios. These *corrigenda* aside, *Sara Levy's World* offers highly recommended reading for the new light it shines on an unjustly neglected area of German music history, the relative obscurity of which belies its broad significance for several fields.

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