



Daniel Beller-McKenna. *Brahms and the German Spirit.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004. 243 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01318-6.



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Assimilation at Any Price

When the musicologist Hans Joachim Moser wrote in 1924 that a “decidedly Jewish element” of Felix Mendelssohn’s music was “evident in the ‘stylistic’ imitation of Handelian dotted figures and the use of ‘dangerously’ frequent six-eight rhythms,” he drew on a widespread belief that music carries ideological references and meanings.[1] Although one can fairly argue that rhythmic structures contain no more inherent meaning than any of the grammatical syntax in this review, the task of establishing a relationship between music and ideology is far less difficult when music contains words, and even less so when a historical record can reveal the origin of the piece.

These analytical methods fall generously at Sposato’s disposal in his examination of Felix Mendelssohn and the nineteenth-century antisemitic tradition. In *The Price of Assimilation*, the author draws on his personal experience to examine how the complex interplay of Christian and Jewish identities influenced the development of Mendelssohn’s sacred music (p. 11). Sposato brings this examination to bear as a scholar who demonstrates how music can both reflect social relationships and project the

composer’s vision of these relationships. What emerges from his account of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy is a picture of a man caught between two worlds, the Christian and the Jewish. Sposato examines how Mendelssohn attempted to construct an identity between these spaces, despite a heritage that presented a monolithic obstacle to his efforts to identify himself as a Christian and a German. Sposato fulfills this task well by showing how the composer struggled to negotiate a genealogy burdened by the legacy of his Enlightenment luminary grandfather. Mendelssohn’s father Abraham, as the author asserts, was the driving force behind the Christianization of his children and the source of confessional discord within his son Felix. Abraham Mendelssohn’s own ambivalent relationship to Judaism was manifest in, for example, his residence in a non-Jewish quarter of Hamburg, as well as the family’s later social separation from the Jewish community in Berlin (pp. 18-19). Furthermore, Abraham Mendelssohn, as Sposato shows, adopted the surname “Bartholdy” in 1812 in order to distance himself from his Jewish past and reinforce the cultural assimilation of his family (pp. 21, 26-28). The result was that Judaism provided for Felix and his three siblings a “nebulous” history

that did not encourage pride in their past (p. 23).

Still, Mendelssohn continued to experience indignities because of his heritage, despite his early childhood baptism. Indeed, Sposato's narrative posits a reciprocal relationship between antisemitism and a Christian, German identity. The more closely Mendelssohn identified with the values of the German *Bürgerertum*, the more deeply these attitudes and prejudices permeated his compositions. Yet the fact was that even during Mendelssohn's life, his music was, as Georg Feder has pointed out, in high demand by audiences.^[2] Although Sposato devotes little attention to performance reception of Mendelssohn's sacred music, he does concede that the audience's perspective on the antisemitic nature of the work depended on the relationship of its individual members to their broader national and confessional communities. If Mendelssohn absorbed and participated in an antisemitic tradition that appealed to a broad audience, it merely reflected one way that the *Bürgerertum* circumscribed its social and cultural identity.^[3]

The most compelling aspect of Sposato's work is his examination of the unfolding of these personal conflicts in Mendelssohn's settings of sacred music. In the short 180 pages of this volume, the author examines the following: Mendelssohn's psalm settings; the composer's central role in the 1829 *St. Matthew Passion* revival; the abandoned libretto for A. B. Marx's oratorio *Mose* (1841); the completed *Paulus* (1836) and *Elias* (1847) oratorios; and finally, the unfinished *Christus* (1847). In each of these cases, Sposato artfully weaves together a historical narrative with an analysis of libretto and text, showing how the composer's music expressed an evolving relationship to his Jewish, Christian and German identities.

Sposato's introduction includes a summary yet informative discussion of the psalm settings as a starting point to challenge existing arguments about Mendelssohn's relationship to Judaism. He suggests four ways of situating the psalm settings in a proper historical and functional context. First, Sposato argues that, rather than serving as a profession of faith, the settings composed during the 1820s demonstrated Mendelssohn's "ability to compose, among other things, a variety of different kinds of fugues" (p. 7). Second, he points out that many of the settings written during the 1840s were designed to satisfy the responsibilities of his appointment as "Generalmusikdirektor für kirchliche und geistliche Musik in Berlin" (p. 7). Third, he shows that Mendelssohn "regularly composed sacred music for traditions outside his own" during the 1840s (p. 8). Indeed, many of the psalms

set during the 1830s "contain elements that orient them toward a Christian audience," such as the incorporation of melodies drawn from passion chorales, and texts set from the Latin Vulgate (p. 8). The composer's psalm settings, Sposato concludes, "provide little useful evidence of Mendelssohn's feelings toward his Jewish heritage" (p. 8).

Thus, Sposato quickly turns his attention to Mendelssohn's "editorial choices" for the 1829 revival of J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. The preparation of a performance edition, as the author argues, guided Mendelssohn's compulsion to "adapt Bach's masterpiece" according to the theological and musical demands of an early-nineteenth-century audience (p. 38). The demands of the audience had been shaped by such staples of Passion Week performance as Carl Heinrich Graun's *Der Tod Jesu* (1755), which Sposato asserts had contributed to the establishment of an "anti-Semitic tradition in nineteenth-century oratorio" (p. 57). Mendelssohn, as Sposato writes, "felt incapable of challenging" this tradition, to the extent that he left intact "highly anti-Semitic theme[s] in the passion narrative ... that reinforced long-entrenched stereotypes about Jews" (p. 53). However, the antisemitic tradition exercised only one influence on Mendelssohn's arrangement of the *St. Matthew Passion*. Sposato argues that Mendelssohn's cuts to the score of this "arguably antisemitic work" were motivated primarily by "theological concerns" (p. 48) and an "early attempt to overcompensate ... for his background" (p. 9). The author's comparison of contemporary performance editions underpins his conclusion that "Mendelssohn's knife cut deepest in the category of arias and nongospel recitatives" in order to reinforce his "credentials" as a Christian (p. 48).

Mendelssohn's fear of being perceived as harboring a "philo-Semitic agenda" (p. 55) motivated an increasingly antisemitic content in the libretto he began to write for A. B. Marx's oratorio *Mose* in 1832. In this libretto, Mendelssohn imparts a Christological interpretation to Moses, portraying the Jews as a "people incapable of true faith" (p. 65). Mendelssohn accesses a range of nineteenth-century antisemitic stereotypes in his setting of the Exodus text: that of Jews as greedy, slothful, parasitic and adhering to a religion based on "barbaric ritual" (p. 65). According to Sposato, Moses's designation of the Hebrews as a "blind people" was only one example that evinced a "distinct lack of concern on his part for the safety of the Jewish image" (p. 66). The complex of antisemitic associations that Mendelssohn wrote into the text led Marx ultimately to reject the libretto as offensive

and rewrite the majority of it before its 1841 premiere (p. 75).

The antisemitic stance of Mendelssohn's work, according to Sposato, reached its apex in the 1836 *Paulus* (p. 177). In early drafts of the oratorio, the two protagonists Stephen and Paul "reject and ridicule the Jews," while the Jews themselves continuously persecute the two apostles (p. 79). Outside influences such as A.B. Marx, Julius Schubring, the composers Carl Loewe and Louis Spohr and his father Abraham Mendelssohn contributed to the moderation and intensification of the character stereotypes in the libretto during the course of oratorio's composition. But it was not until the death of Abraham Mendelssohn in November 1835 that Felix was able to come to terms with conflicting identities (p. 92). At this point the "discomfort" his father had encouraged with regard to his Jewish heritage began to dissipate (p. 178). "The published score," Sposato argues, "reveals a softening of the work's antisemitic content and the beginning of a new attitude ... no longer fueled by a need to demonize the Jews in order to prove the sincerity of his Christian faith" (p. 178).

Sposato suggests that this release from his father's expectations allowed Mendelssohn the liberty to develop a "dual perspective" in his music, which inspired both Christians and Jews (p. 179). Indeed, "Mendelssohn's attempts to reconcile his Christian faith with his Jewish heritage" led him to integrate a "variety of interpretive possibilities" in *Elias* and the unfinished *Christus* (p. 180). Mendelssohn began to "strike a balance that allowed him to carry out his Christological program without needlessly disparaging the Jews or the Jewish faith in the process" (p. 147). In *Elias*, this solution first unfolded as a universalization of the Hebrew experience, where the erring tendency of the people (*das Volk*) became an allegory for the failures of Christian and Jewish believers alike (p. 147). *Elias* depicts the Jews as a "discontented people, but one that has not lost its faith in God" (p. 148). Later in the 1847 *Christus*, Mendelssohn developed a "multitiered evocation of universal guilt" based on Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which associated "Jesus's heavy cross with the sins of all mankind" (p. 174).

The enthusiastic reception of *Elias* by both Christians and Jews suggests to Sposato that the oratorio's libretto provided members of each faith with meanings they desired. Sposato writes that the opening chorus of *Christus* ("Hilf, Herr") "might conceivably resonate with the stereotype of the parasitic Jew," while Jews could interpret it as a symbol of their "continu-

ing faith in times of hardship" (p. 179). Sposato's conclusion reveals even more about how members of European "Judaism in its transitional period" (in the words of Abraham Mendelssohn) attempted to reconcile their confessional identity with their cultural aspirations (p. 23). Although *Elias* and *Christus* reveal a "clear intention on Mendelssohn's part to protect the Jewish image" (p. 164), the overarching conclusion of the book is that Mendelssohn's success as a composer and conductor necessitated a negotiation of his religious faith and confessional identity, one that ultimately required him to reject his Jewish heritage. For Mendelssohn, the "price of assimilation" was having to "recognize, acknowledge, and work around the sensibilities of his audiences" (p. 180).

Sposato's conclusions, however, require him to invoke a functionalist argument. Although Christian audiences did not demand such avid avowals of faith, Mendelssohn nevertheless made them in order to demonstrate his allegiance to his German and Christian identities. Here, the absence of performance reception is striking. One wonders, for example, how a "philosemitic" work such as Marx's *Mose* oratorio would have fared with audiences. In place of drawing out such historical connections, Sposato is often deeply speculative, supporting his argument with multiple conditional clauses and circumstantial evidence.[4] In addition, many of Sposato's terms and definitions lack precision: "anti-Semitic movement" (p. 188), "growing anti-Semitic climate" (p. 179), "atheistic lifestyle" (p. 181), "philo-Semitic sense" (p. 188), the "Jewish image" (p. 178). Sposato attempts to square social and political conflict by explaining these categories in less detail than the narrative requires. He presents, for example, at least three images of Jewish identity—namely, Felix Mendelssohn, A.B. Marx and the observant Jewish community—but in the final analysis considers only the latter to have required "protection."

But these criticisms are largely disciplinary in nature. Historians who dare to trespass their disciplinary boundaries will be richly rewarded. They may even find, as Daniel Ziblatt has recently suggested, that this interesting and lively work holds the potential to "open opportunities to ask new questions." [5]

Notes

[1]. Hans Joachim Moser, *Geschichte der deutschen Musik*, vol. 2 (Stuttgart and Berlin: Cotta, 1920-1924), p. 153, cited in Clive Brown, *A Portrait of Mendelssohn* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 494.

[2]. Georg Feder, "On Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's

Sacred Music,” in *The Mendelssohn Companion*, ed. Douglas Seaton (Westport: Greenwood, 2001), p. 266.

[3]. Musical aesthetics and musical taste, as Carl Dahlhaus has observed, “served an unambiguously social function,” helping a group (and as Celia Applegate has pointed out, a nation) “to cohere from within and to insulate itself from without.” See Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, tr. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 246; Celia Applegate, *Bach in Berlin: Nation and Culture in Mendelssohn’s Revival of the St. Matthew Passion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 126.

[4]. See, for example, Sposato’s assertion: “Mendelssohn may have believed that a noticeably positive representation of the Jews would have led to

doubts concerning the sincerity of his Christian faith” (p. 73).

[5]. Daniel Ziblatt, “A Response to Sperber’s Review of ‘Structuring the State’: In Defense of Trespassing,” H-German Discussion Network (April 21, 2006), available at <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-german&month=0604&week=c&msg=5BP8XO5DDq9vYnGWzG21Fw&user=&pw=>. Celia Applegate’s *Bach in Berlin* is one example of a cultural history that has used Sposato’s musicological analysis to unlock new perspectives. Applegate referenced Sposato’s 2000 dissertation in order to reconstruct the relationship of libretto and score to performance reception. See Applegate *Bach in Berlin*, p. 24, n. 43; p. 39, n. 87; pp. 230f, n. 182; p. 249, n. 36-37.

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