1 | 'Whatever the reasons'

The reasons why

'Whatever the reasons', incuriously writes the historian of anti-Semitism Léon Poliakov, 'in the realms of the fine arts, it was primarily as musicians that the emancipated Jews excelled'.[1]

But exactly why did Jews suddenly appear in the musical professions from the turn of the nineteenth century onwards? Why moreover did they meet, within the century, with such success as to hold notable positions in almost all branches of the profession – and in associated areas including management, publishing and patronage?

In casual conversation on these questions, I have often been met with a reaction of surprise, or even exasperation, by both Jewish and Gentile interlocutors, on the grounds that such progress was only to be expected from a people ('race' of course remains the unspoken word) with natural musical talent. But the conventional wisdom that Jews are especially musically gifted seems to have emerged fully formed during the nineteenth century – it certainly did not exist, even amongst the Jews themselves, before that. Rather the contrary.

True, the Jewish 'name' most familiar today in this context, Felix Mendelssohn, was brought up a practising Christian; but a roll call of the early nineteenth century would include many musicians or musical activists of the first rank, born Jews, who remained Jewish or seem to have converted for convenience – amongst them, for example, the composers Giacomo Meyerbeer, Fromental Halévy, Jacques Offenbach; the violinists Joseph Joachim and Ferdinand David; the piano virtuosi Ignaz Moscheles, Charles-Valentin Alkan, Henri Herz and Anton Rubinstein; writers on music such as Moritz Saphir, Heinrich Heine and Adolf Bernhard Marx; and the Schlesinger family of publishers – all of them commanding figures in their time, and having a significant effect in their own right, both individually and cumulatively, on the development of western music. In the middle of the nineteenth century Jews represented less than 1 per cent of the population of western Europe; it can therefore be reasonably asserted

that, at the very least, they were punching above their weight in the field of music.

Writers touching on the topic have been for the most part as blasé as Poliakov. Dictionary articles on Jewish music are extensive on music within Jewish communities, both religious and secular, but have nothing to say on music made by Jews in the wider social context. Academic histories of the Jews are opaque on the topic. One, covering the period from the eighteenth century to the present, ignores Jewish musicians before Gustav Mahler and blandly comments 'Most Jewish composers, writers and scientists moved with the times, keeping up with new ideas and theories, but rarely demonstrating a personal willingness to pioneer themselves.'[2]

This interestingly hints, doubtless unwittingly, at the jibe that Jews are culturally better fitted to be critics, imitators or analysts rather than creators; a concept that has typically underlain much anti-Jewish writing on music.

Those who look more closely at developments in particular countries in general do no better. A history of French Jews gives only the briefest of passing references to Meyerbeer and Halévy, who between them laid the foundations for the supremacy of Parisian grand opera.[3] A 'portrait of the Jews in Germany' has a paragraph on Felix Mendelssohn and no mention at all of Meyerbeer (who became, after all, court composer to the Prussian king). Mahler gets a one-sentence quote about his distaste for Polish Jews.[4] The reader would have no inkling from this of the intense involvement of German Jews in the concert and opera life of the country.

Works dealing with Jewish economic history concentrate for obvious reasons on the contributions of Jews to industry and commerce. Thus, except for passing references to printing, the Jewish role in the arts is ignored by the standard handbooks.[5]

In virtually all of these studies western culture is treated as a gravitational force that attracted to itself a few Jews of appropriate genius: thus conforming to what has been called 'the once-accepted view that placed political emancipation, social integration and cultural westernization at the teleological center of Jewish history'.[6] The scenario of Jews becoming 'serious' musicians fits ill with the paradigm, well summarised by a chapter heading of Jacob Katz's *Out of the Ghetto*, 'The Futile Flight from Jewish Professions'.[7] Conventional wisdom in Jewish social history has been to accept that the role of Jews in wider society after the opening of the ghettos in the Napoleonic Wars was in fact limited, despite their theoretical freedom to diversify.[8] Hence Jews were in fact constrained to continue their 'traditional' callings in commerce and finance. Perhaps, in this light, Jewish musicians are the exception that proves the rule: in the less formally

constrained world of the arts, maybe their peculiarities were not so outstanding (or were even an asset for their novelty). Katz does make a brave attempt at considering Jewish musicians in his essay on Richard Wagner's 'anti-Jewish phobia', but his absolute concentration on the central figures of Wagner, Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer significantly limits the headway he might have made in developing a broader view.[9]

Not even in works specifically dedicated to the history of Jewish music can we find any causal analysis of the dramatic flowering of Jews in nineteenth-century music, beyond the standard 'out of the ghetto' gambit. Peter Gradenwitz jumps from seventeenth-century Italy to a chapter entitled 'From Mendelssohn to Mahler' and notes that

> There is a conspicuous hiatus between the period of … Salomone Rossi Ebreo, and the composer who opens the next chapter of our survey … Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Considering the fact that Jewish artists have so often played important roles in periods of transition, it is somewhat puzzling that they had no part in the great stylistic changes that occurred in eighteenth century music.[10]

Setting aside Gradenwitz's debatable 'fact', it should be said that he then accurately identifies a major reason for the absence, until the end of the eighteenth century, of Jewish musical participation – inability to access the patronage of the Church or the aristocracy. Whilst regretting that 'none of the great Jewish nineteenth century composers created works that had a decisive bearing on the history of Hebrew music' he also provides the useful and largely appropriate formulation 'this is no longer the story of Jewish music but the story of music by Jewish masters'.[11]

This divergence between sacred music and 'concert' music, and their continuing occasional relationship thereafter, are indeed an important aspect of this survey. Gradenwitz's aperçu also teases out two other important threads: first, it signals as a topic for investigation the extent to which the careers of these Jewish masters may have been affected by their origins, and second, it stresses that these were masters whose work deserves to be considered in its own right in terms of European cultural history, not merely as an accessory to narratives of Jewish–European social relations.

Amongst music historians there often seems some surprising reticence on the topic of Jewishness. Maybe the Werner 'affair' – the scholar Eric Werner proved to be over-enthusiastic, and in some cases possibly fraudulent, in attributing pro-Jewish sentiments to Felix Mendelssohn – has made some scholars overly discreet on such matters.[12] For example, R. Larry Todd's substantial Mendelssohn biography nowhere mentions the Jewish origins

of many of the members of the composer's close circle, with the exception of a passing reference to the conversion of the poet Heine.[13]

When we consider the literature pertaining to Wagner and the Jew-hatred of his time, we find that the advance of political, and in particular Holocaust-orientated, history further muddies the waters. Bryan Magee for example is strong on the German philosophical background, yet (self-confessedly) has no understanding of Jewish history or culture.[14] Paul Lawrence Rose, whose work is regarded by some as a major landmark in both Wagner and Jewish studies, is strident in his denunciation of the development of anti-Jewish opinions and ideas in early nineteenth-century Germany, but not always coherent (or accurate) in linking these to Wagner; whilst he displays little interest in German Jews themselves.[15]

Moreover, neither writer (any more than Katz) shows any comprehension of the 'social' world of music during the period: that is, what musicians – Wagner, Jews and all the rest – were actually *doing*. The anti-Judaism of Wagner (and of Robert Schumann or others) was not just an abstract attitude with an independent intellectual life of its own unconnected to the world of events – it had its roots in, and was connected to, both Jews and music, and not only to the personalities of Wagner and Schumann, or to German developments in philosophy and politics. The first two elements – Jews and music – need to be understood and discussed as well as the others.

A survey of the existing literature therefore suggests that the absence of any formal historical consideration of the entry of Jews to the music professions in this period comes from the unease of social and political historians reluctant to deal with the history of music and/or that of the Jews, of music historians uncomfortable with the social and political background and/or uninformed on Jewish background, and of Jewish historians lacking specific musical and/or socio-historical insight.

We consequently further lack a parallel enquiry into the extent to which music provided opportunities of 'social entry' to Jews taking advantage of the equivocal accommodation that European societies began to provide during this period to these traditional outsiders.

Such enquiries clearly require some broader considerations, which have not been specifically undertaken to date, of events, personalities and ideas. This book is therefore a preliminary investigation of the extent to which the appearance of Jews in modern western European music was a consequence of, or was affected by, a series of processes of social, political, economic and technical change in the period; to consider how these various factors may have interacted with the 'Jewishness' (in any sense) of the newcomers; and

to survey how this appearance was received or interpreted by other Jews and interested Gentiles. Given the potential breadth and depth of the issues and narratives associated with these themes, it will be clear that to attempt a definitive, comprehensive and detailed survey of Jewish involvement in the musical life of early modern western Europe is beyond the scope of a modest volume. My hope is to provide a framework, both conceptual and narrative, to help clearly define the issues involved, and to serve to assist further research and comment.

This first section, 'Whatever the reasons', which seeks to clarify the terms on which the investigation is conducted, may therefore be considered as a prelude to the following three, which, were the book itself a piece of music, might be subtitled 'Theme', 'Variations' and 'Coda'.

The 'Theme' section ('*Eppes rores*: can a Jew be an artist?') considers the extent to which Jews of the period might be equipped for association with music, both from their own point of view – in terms of skills and traditions – and in the perception (and prejudices) of the Gentile societies in which they resided.

The 'Variations' section ('In the midst of many people'), the most substantial of the three, examines in this context the careers of Jewish musical professionals in five societies of western Europe up to about 1850 – the Netherlands, England, Austria, Germany and France. These careers are contextualised within the differing interactions of the particular social, economic and political backgrounds of the societies considered; with reference to the status of the Jewish communities in those societies; and in the light of the attitudes of those societies to Jews and to Judaism.

The 'Coda' section ('Jewry in music') is a brief review of the situation at my chosen terminus of 1850 (which is discussed further below), including a re-examination of the origins of Wagner's 'Das Judentum in der Musik' (hereafter itself translated as 'Jewry in Music').

Jewishness and *Judentum*

I do not limit the notion of 'being Jewish' to those who practise the Jewish religion, or to those who are Jewish by *halakhah* (Jewish law). By *halakhah*, for example, the child of a Jewish woman and a Gentile is Jewish, whilst the child of a Jewish male and a Gentile is not. Jewish parentage, or at least ancestry, is of course a sine qua non: it could be argued that it would not be inappropriate to include in this survey even the 'one-eighth-Jew' Johann Strauss II, given his following comments on his wife: 'Without thinking I

uttered a Yiddish phrase (*kommt mir das Jüdeln in den Mund*) and then – she stops being a Jewess: you can have no idea how offended she felt in that instant – she would have scratched my eyes out for my lovely *Jüdeln*.' Strauss, who was brought up in the Jewish quarter of Vienna, often referred to his wife with the Yiddish usage *Weibleben*.[16]

On the other hand the facetious comment of Brahms in a letter to Joachim – 'How goes it with the glorification of the race from which I sprang?' – apparently a sardonic comment on (completely unfounded) press speculation that his family name was originally 'Abrahams' – would scarcely qualify him.[17]

'Being Jewish' for the purposes of this book is therefore not necessarily a matter of religious belief or observance. There are many other criteria that can result in a person being considered Jewish – whether they wish it or not. Let us for some examples return to Felix Mendelssohn, a professing Lutheran, brought up without the slightest participation in Jewish religious practice.

There are physical factors – Queen Victoria's very first comment in her journal on meeting Mendelssohn was 'He is short, dark and Jewish-looking.'[18]

There is the collection of Jewish social attitudes – humour, phrases, customs, behaviour – called by Jews themselves *yiddishkeit* – and frequently displaying a persistence. Thus we shall see Mendelssohn, in a letter to his family from London in 1833, using the Yiddish/Hebrew word *Rosche* (Hebrew *rasha*) to describe a wicked fellow.[19]

And there is the question of the company one keeps: anyone considering the career of Mendelssohn will undoubtedly observe the great number of German Jews or *Neuchristen* converts who played significant roles in his musical and social life. Setting aside his direct relatives, we can reel off names such as Ignaz Moscheles, Julius Benedict, Ferdinand David, Joseph Joachim, Ferdinand Hiller, A. B. Marx, Meyerbeer, Heine, Ludwig Robert (brother of Rahel Varnhagen), Gustave d'Eichtal, Achille Fould and many more, which constantly recur in any Mendelssohn biography.

These and similar pointers all have some part to play in the history to be outlined, and I will be discussing their application to Mendelssohn and his circle in more detail.

Sartre's suggestion that a Jew is anyone who is perceived as a Jew lays onus on the perceiver as well as the perceived. There is a need clearly to demarcate the attribution or supposition by writers of the Jewish identity of groups or individuals, from profession or manifestation of Jewish identity by those groups or individuals themselves. As an example, the ballet historian Marian Winter notes in Italy:

a whole group of 15th century dancing masters, mostly of Jewish descent … Parenthetically, the astonishing number of Jewish dancing masters at the Renaissance courts forms an odd pendant of information to that of the equally astonishing number of Jewish performers among the acrobats, rope-dancers, marionette-showmen and later equestrian artists who travelled the European fairground circuit.[20]

This has given rise to the suggestion that many of the European dancing and circus families may have been of Jewish origin and that 'they were prepared to change their names and religion, if necessary, to conform to local municipal strictures'.[21] Hard evidence for these claims is not available, and in its absence it is necessary to temper any enthusiasm that Winter's statement (for which unfortunately no references or evidence are advanced) may arouse. Some writers (both well-meaning and malevolent) are notably more over-sanguine than others in identifying Jews in music, and mere attribution alone, on whatever authority, must be treated with the greatest caution.

In fact, where not clouded by opportunistic attribution, the question of Jewish identity is relatively simple in the period covered by this study. In the Europe of the ghettos, Jews were quite simply those who lived in these ghettos, both the physical districts and the self-imposed ghettos of self-differentiation. Jews defined themselves (to the Gentiles) by their dedication to their own religion and community and their unwillingness to change their ways. All those of Jewish birth who were active musicians before 1850 were only one generation from one or both of the physical and social ghettos and the social exclusions associated with them, and were perfectly aware of where they had come from; few had any illusions about the uncertainty of their social standing.

To make one obvious point, a vast majority of the male figures discussed below as Jewish will have been circumcised, a practice almost exclusively limited in western Europe at the time to Jews. This was a circumstance of which they can scarcely have been unaware, and of which they must indeed have been daily reminded, whether they later attended church or synagogue.

It is perhaps the 'purist' view of some writers that has militated against the study of many of these figures in a Jewish context. 'Does the fact of Jewish parentage fasten one's creativity to Judaism, despite a lifetime of Christian affiliation?', asks Irene Heskes. 'If so, the following can be considered Jewish composers' and she lists, with some evident disdain, Mendelssohn, Moscheles, Goldmark, Rubinstein and others, enquiring 'Is it the paucity of numbers rather than the specific ethnic inspiration

that prompts some Jewish writers to include these composers among their Judaic listings?'[22] The dubious criterion of 'ethnic inspiration', ironically so closely allied to the notions of the detractors of Jewish music and musicality (and of Jews in general) – such as Wagner's supposed *hebraisches Kunstgeschmack* ('Hebraic art-taste') – will not be used by me. Nor do I feel constrained to accept the implicit concept that Jewish origins cannot affect any creative actions (or actions bearing on creative lives) that are not explicitly 'fastened' to Judaism, and I shall provide counter-examples from amongst those listed above.

All of the musicians listed by Heskes – and very many that are not – at some point or other in their lives found their Jewishness impinging on their careers, and all of them would have been able to echo the words of the writer and convert Ludwig Börne (born Juda Loew Baruch) written in 1832: 'Some people criticise me for being a Jew; others forgive me for being one; a third even praises me for it; but all are thinking about it.'[23] That is the ethos, not today entirely extinct, in which Jewish musicians operated in the period from around 1780 to 1850, and that coloured both their successes and their failures.

Virtually the sole aspect of the advent of Jewish musical practitioners to have received academic attention to date is the involuntary role of Jewish composers and their music in the development of secular anti-Jewish ideology. The prime cause of this phenomenon is clear; it is Wagner's essay 'Jewry in Music', originally published under a pseudonym in a music magazine in 1850. Over the past forty years a substantial literature has been devoted to this essay, mostly asserting or denying the alleged political 'after-effects' of the essay and its significance as a milestone, or even its status as a 'missing link', in a line of philosophical and political anti-Jewish ideas from Kant and Fichte to Hitlerism. A smaller corpus investigates the nature of Jewish cultural involvement in European society in the light of what may be construed as valid insights on Wagner's part (that is, valid despite his acknowledgedly unacceptable anti-Jewish effusions).[24] Even this latter material only examines in passing Wagner's diatribe in the wider context of the music of its own time. In this way Wagner's essay has become a sort of upas tree, (or perhaps a nicer comparison would be the manchineel tree of the last act of Meyerbeer's opera *L'Africaine*), poisoning the academic terrain for leagues around.

Many of Wagner's perceptions about Jewish involvement in music were striking, although his analysis and presentation were often as wrong-headed in his own day as they are rebarbative, for different reasons, today. We shall

see that, by 1850, those trends in musical fashion to which Wagner was opposed, together with significant elements of the business apparatus of the music industry of the time, were indeed influenced, directly and indirectly, by many who were of Jewish origin: although the explanations for this are rooted, not of course in racial conspiracy, but in a complex interweaving of factors over the previous decades.

It is fair to credit Wagner as a pioneer commentator on Jews in music (though as will be shown he was not the first in this field). Before his initial outburst in 1850 (and even until his more flagrant second assault on the topic in 1869, when he reissued a greatly expanded version of 'Jewry in Music'[25]), there seems to have been limited intellectual discussion of Jews specifically as musicians, although there was plenty about Jews and society as a whole. With this in mind, the title of this book derives directly from the Wagner essay, which has been generally known in English, since Ashton Ellis's original rendition of the 1890s, as 'Judaism in Music'. But *Judentum* cannot be simply equated with the English word 'Judaism', which generally applies specifically to the religious beliefs and practices of the Jew, an aspect not touched upon by Wagner, and indeed of which he was generally ignorant. Magee more carefully calls the essay 'Jewishness in Music', and this reflects a wider sense of *Judentum*.[26]

For there was another important usage of *Judentum*, specifically pejorative, current in mid-nineteenth-century German, meaning 'aggressive haggling'.[27] (Compare the nineteenth-century English usages, 'to jew' and 'jewing down'.) The word *Judentum* does not in fact occur in the original magazine articles to which Wagner's essay was ostensibly a response. Wagner specifically chose the word for his title; and there can be no doubt that he also meant this 'economic' sense of *Judentum* to resonate – one of the clear messages of his text is what he claimed to see as the degrading commercialisation of opera by Meyerbeer. And the involvement of Jews in the opera and music 'business' in general in the nineteenth century is prima facie a major topic to be examined in the present survey. I therefore advance 'Jewry in Music', with its more comprehensive range of meanings (as well as its pugnacious undertone), as a better title for Wagner's essay in English, and as the banner under which this investigation sets forth.

I speak in this book, by the way, of Jew-hatred, anti-Judaism and Judaeophobia, but as regards anti-Semitism I seek to limit use of this word to its strict late-nineteenth-century sense, when indeed the word was coined by Jew-haters to give a respectable, quasi-scientific cover to their reformulation of traditional Judaeophobia as a political movement dedicated

to rescinding the civil rights that Jews had received in the previous hundred years. Apart from a regard for lexical accuracy, my avoidance of 'anti-Semitism' is an attempt to ensure that its twentieth-century connotations, extending to Nazi policy and practice, should not influence the reader. The ill-will expressed towards Jews in the period covered by this book was still generally rooted in its traditional and clerical forms. During this period, the word used by commentators was Jew-hatred (German *Judenhasse*) or, amongst Yiddish-speaking Jews, the equivalent term *rishes*/*risches*. Anti-Jewish feeling expressed at this time is therefore better understood in terms of 'traditional' anti-Jewish sentiment, then widespread in all layers of society; it can only doubtfully be attributed to the developing anti-Jewish philosophies of German nationalist academics, of which relatively few who expressed such sentiment were even aware.

Processes of change: a lightning review

There is no shortage of material about the profound changes, in all spheres, in Europe in the decades either side of the French Revolution. To attempt to address them in detail would swamp our topic: of how these changes manifested themselves in this book's twin focuses, Jewry and music, and how the consequences of these changes within these historical 'sub-sets' impinged on each other in a variety of ways. The whole picture of course needs to be considered in the context of the larger geopolitical/religious process summarised by Michael Burleigh: 'The nineteenth century commenced with the near-universality of the confessional state under which one religion, or Christian denomination, was privileged by the state … By the century's close, these arrangements had been abandoned, or modified, almost beyond recognition.'[28] The different way in which these changes took place in each country will be seen to affect the local involvement of Jews in music.

Alongside the studies on social, political and economic revolutions of the period, much has now been published on the emergence of Jewry in western European society at this period, fuelled by these same agents of change, but also driven by developments within Jewry itself that had been gathering pace over the previous 200 years.[29] The milestones in our period include the bridgehead between Jewish and secular European thought established by Moses Mendelssohn, the edicts of toleration issued by 'enlightened despots' in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the reforms of the Napoleonic period, the end of the ghetto system in western Europe as a consequence of