

The Classical Revolution in Jewish Liturgical Music

by Steven P. Meyer

The Musical Tradition of the Jewish Reform Congregation in Berlin

Hermann Schildberger, Music Director
Tel Aviv: The Feher Jewish Music Center of the
Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish
Diaspora, 1998
2 CDs, with liner notes, \$39.98

The *Musical Tradition of the Jewish Reform Congregation in Berlin*, is a fitting testimonial to the European Jews who perished in the Holocaust. The two CDs contain a portion of a recording, made in 1928-30, of prayers largely from the works of Cantor Salomon Sulzer of Vienna and choirmaster Louis Lewandowski of Berlin, who had revolutionized the music of the Jewish liturgy by composing in the Classical mode. Also included are Jewish prayers set to religious pieces of Beethoven, Schumann, Schubert, and Handel by Dr. Herman Schildberger, the Congregation's music director. In the recordings, Dr. Schildberger conducts some of Europe's most promising young Lieder and opera soloists, who are accompanied by a professional choir of some 100 people and two organs.

Few copies of the original records were ever pressed or distributed to the synagogues, hospitals, and homes for the elderly, for which they were intended. Instead, the financial crisis and Hitler's rise to power smashed the project. Through providence, Dr. Schildberger (1899-1974), was able to smuggle the master disks past German border guards when he fled his country in 1939. Schildberger emigrated to Australia, but, it was only six years ago that the recordings surfaced, when Rabbi John Levi of Australia presented them and their history

to the Goldmann Museum. Although the disks were damaged by the German border guards, the Feher Jewish Music Center has been able to enhance them through state-of-the-art recording equipment.

The Feher Jewish Music Center issued this recording in 1998 with the assistance of many individuals and organizations: Financial contributors included the Ministry for Arts and Science of the State of Hesse, Wiesbaden, Germany, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany, through its General Consulate in Melbourne, Australia.

A history of the recordings is presented in the liner notes by Rabbi Levi and Prof. George L. Mosse, Professor Emeritus of History, University of Wisconsin-Madison and Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Professor Mosse's father, Hans Lachmann-Mosse (1885-1944), was the moving force behind the recording project which accompanied a new liturgy.

Hans Lachmann-Mosse owned the Rudolf Mosse publishing house in Berlin and the influential *Berliner Tageblatt* newspaper. He was a major patron of the Berlin Philharmonic, which included providing tuxedos for the entire orchestra. His son recalls that dinner table discussions at home revolved almost exclusively around music and art, and that, every year until 1933, his family spent the New Year's holiday with Maestro Wilhelm Furtwängler.

The Reform Congregation of Berlin was also an important part of the Lachmann-Mosse family life. Hans Lachmann-Mosse was the chairman of the commission on liturgy which oversaw the writing of a new liturgy, while Dr. Schildberger, the Congregation's music director, was responsible for selecting and supervising the music. Lachmann-Mosse financed the entire project.

The Tradition of Moses Mendelssohn

The final, revised liturgy for the recording project was steeped in the ideas of the great philosopher and Orthodox Jew, Moses Mendelssohn, much of which can be found in his writing *Jerusalem* (1783). According to Professor Mosse, the liturgy “did not speak about angels, sacrifices, the physical resurrection of the dead or the imminent arrival of the Messiah. God was the supreme Deity. All human beings could praise God. The Torah was given to humanity. The Children of Israel were chosen by destiny to bring the prophetic vision of Torah [the Five Books of Moses, or the Pentateuch] to the world.”

Schildberger was trained in Berlin, where he received a doctorate in music at the age of 20. He became the music director of a festival in Upper Silesia, and served as guest conductor for the Berlin Symphony. To accompany the new liturgy, he chose largely from the Classical compositions of Lewandowski and Sulzer, and integrated pieces from the religious works of the Classical masters: J.S. Bach, Schubert, Haydn, Beethoven, Felix Mendelssohn, Bruckner, and Handel.

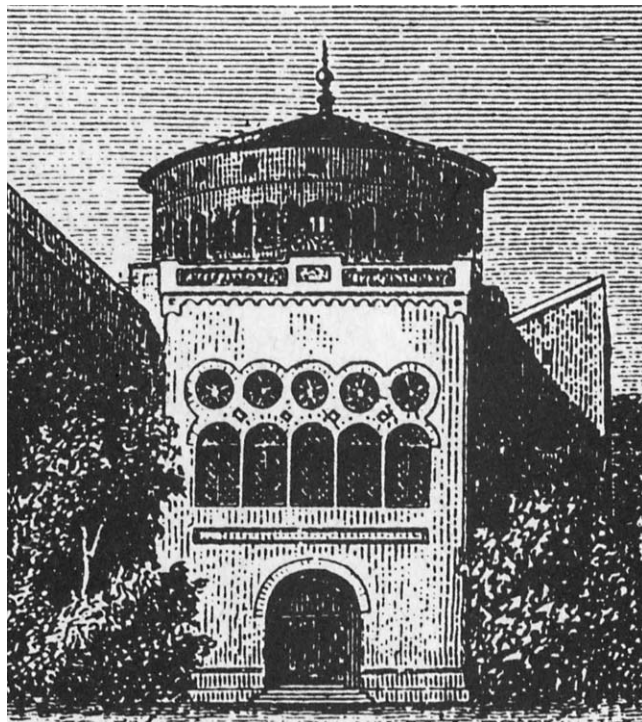
He also chose Classical secular compositions which were to be played to enhance the appropriate mood of the prayer service. Among these, were Bach’s Air on a G String and sections of the Brandenburg Concerti, the Sinfonia from Handel’s *Messiah*, the Andante from Haydn’s “Emperor” Quartet (the theme is familiar to many as the German national anthem), and the slow movements of Felix Mendelssohn’s and Brahms’s violin concerti.

The text for many of the traditional prayers remained in Hebrew, while others were set to German. In its entirety, it was a continuation of the revolution in musical prayer, which began with Bach’s weekly cantatas and continued with Sulzer’s and Lewandowski’s settings; and I believe that there is nothing that meets its greatness of purpose or intended potential effect to this day.

Lachmann-Mosse and Schildberger’s efforts represented a continuation, a great tradition in the Jewish community, which began in the modern period with the renaissance thinker Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86). Known throughout the world as the “Socrates of Berlin,” Mendelssohn sought to develop Classical music and make it available to the general population, explicitly for the qualities inherent in it: the uplifting of man’s soul, and its capacity to foster Reason.

‘Divine Musical Art’

Moses Mendelssohn was trained in Classical music and how to play the clavier by Johann Philip Kirnberger (1721-83), one of J.S. Bach’s (1685-1750) most gifted and devoted students. A selfless individual, Kirnberger devoted his life to teaching Bach’s method of composition and method of playing the clavier, and spent the final years of his life working to have many of Bach’s works published for the first time. He wrote two important works on Bach’s method



The facade of the Johannisstrasse Reform synagogue in Berlin.

for students, which he felt was necessary to carry on his master’s work, because Bach had never written on musical theory.

Mendelssohn treated the art of Classical music, on which he published “Divine Musical Art” in his philosophical treatise *On the Sentiments* (1755), to be most important for the development of the mind. He thoroughly enjoyed attending Classical concerts, and authored a piece on how best to construct a well-tempered clavier (1761).

Sara Itzig Levy (1761-1854), the daughter of Mendelssohn’s close collaborator and early patron, Daniel Itzig, the scion of the Berlin Jewish community, was the only student of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710-1784), J.S. Bach’s eldest son, for the ten years that he lived in Berlin. Her study with him, and her exceptional mastery of both the clavier and Bach’s musical ideas, gave her the unique capability of performing the compositions of Bach and his sons, as they were intended by their composers, which Bach’s first biographer, J.S. Forkel, emphasized had been sorely lacking at Bach’s death.

Beginning in the 1780s, Levy hosted a weekly music salon in her home, at which she performed exclusively the compositions of the Bach family. These performances continued for decades. She played an historic role in the development of Classical music and Classical culture, for she provided Berlin and representatives of the international community an opportunity to hear and understand J.S. Bach, during the decades



From left, Hermann Schildberger, Hans Lachmann-Mosse, and Ilse Schildberger, with members of the Reform Community, listen to the newly pressed recordings of the liturgy. Note the open Torah scroll on the table.

when he was either attacked or ignored. Much of Bach's music had not yet been published, and there were few public performances of his work. Her playing and repertoire became so renowned, that Haydn and Mozart came to hear her.

Levy commissioned many of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's most difficult late works, and at his death, she provided financial assistance to his widow. She also was the patron of her teacher, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. She maintained an immense music library of works of all the Bachs and their collaborators, and she performed publicly at the Berlin Singakademie, which was exceptional for a woman in that time.

Her great-nephew Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47), whose mother, Lea Itzig Solomon, had also been trained by Johann Philipp Kirnberger, attended Sara Levy's salon when he was a young boy. It was this intimate relationship to Bach's music which provided young Felix with the inspiration to perform Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at the Berlin Singakademie in 1829, which launched the great public revival of Bach's music.

Sara Levy's sisters, Fanny von Arnstein (1758-1818) and Cäcilie Eskeles (1760-1836), who considered themselves to be philosophical associates (*maskilim*) of Moses Mendelssohn, also played crucial roles in promoting Classical music where they lived, in Vienna. Both were patrons of Beethoven and intimate friends with his closest collaborators. Fanny von Arnstein started a music society, whose orchestra of amateur musicians played before large audiences of the general public, which was revolutionary. Beethoven chose this orchestra to premier his historic Ninth Symphony. That premier, in Vienna, was intended as a political defense of all the great Classical music, from Bach through Beethoven, which was under savage attack by the Romantics.

Classical Revolution in Liturgy

Both the Arnstein and Eskeles families were patrons of the Vienna Synagogue, whose young Cantor Salomon Sulzer (1804-90) was trained in composition by Beethoven's collaborators. Sulzer, whose magnificent voice was known throughout Europe, was a close friend of Franz Schubert. He mastered and performed Schubert's *Lieder*, whence began a long tradition of great cantors singing opera and *Lieder*.

Sulzer revolutionized the Jewish liturgy, by setting the prayers for the entire year to Classical composition. He took centuries' old melodies and set them in the Classical mode to preserve their historic content, as well as creating entirely new ones. Many of his associates who were not Jewish, contributed to the liturgical music: Schubert, for example,

wrote the music for Psalm 92, which was sung in Hebrew on the Jewish Sabbath. Entitled "Schir Zion," this masterwork was first published in 1839 and revised in 1865. Several of these prayers are included in this recording.

Louis Lewandowski (1823-1894), whose synagogue compositions predominate on this recording, was trained in voice and composition as a young boy through the graces of Alexander Mendelssohn, a grandson of Moses Mendelssohn. Lewandowski composed secular works as well, but is most noted for "Todah W'simrah" (Hebrew), his masterwork comprising the entire year's liturgy. Steeped in the influence of Bach, he used musical ideas and themes of Felix Mendelssohn, including the oratio *Elijah*. He also trained with Sulzer; but, in contrast to Sulzer, he wrote four-part choral pieces (some for cantor and choir, others for choir alone), with organ accompaniment. He was a good friend of the great Jewish violinist Joseph Joachim, Johannes Brahms's close associate.

The Artists

The soloists in this recording are products of this wonderful tradition, and they are outstanding.

Paula Lindberg, alto, was a graduate in mathematics at Heidelberg University and studied singing with, among others, the Bach expert Siegfried Ochs. She sang under the conductors Furtwängler, Walter Klempner, Bruno Walter, and others. During the 1920s and 1930s she was one of the most famous German concert singers. In 1939, she emigrated to the Netherlands, where she lived in hiding. In May 1943, she and her husband were deported to Westerbork concentration camp, from which they escaped. After the war, she devoted herself to teaching.