

**REVIEW**

Ruth HaCohen

***The Music Libel Against the Jews***

(New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011),  
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In all the festivities, performances, and critical discussions surrounding the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Richard Wagner's birth in 2013, the antisemitism of Wagner's notorious 1850 essay "Judaism in Music" has certainly not been ignored. Indeed, if anything, the celebrations of 2013 have focused new attention on Wagner's attitudes toward Jews and Judaism and the relationship between his antisemitism and his operas. But few journalists or critics have grasped the extent to which this infamous tirade against Jewish infiltration into the quasi-sacred terrain of European classical music might be far more than just a challenge for how we are to come to terms with Wagner, his politics, and his cultural legacy. As Ruth HaCohen demonstrates, Wagner's polemics against Jewishness in the musical world rest on a long and deep tradition in Western culture of setting Jewish noise in opposition to Christian harmony, on a "music libel" against the Jews that charges Jews with producing noise in a Christian world governed by harmonious sounds. Wagner may be an extreme example but he is also typical of the way European musical culture has celebrated itself by identifying its Jewish others with offensive noise.

Other critics might explore this problem by investigating the genealogy of Wagner's treatise, locating intellectual-historical precursors and tracing influences over time in a linear fashion. HaCohen undertakes a much more ambitious project in *The Music Libel Against the Jews*. Trained as a musicologist, she examines a truly staggering array of materials: oratorios by G. F. Handel; dramas by G. E. Lessing; Heinrich Heine's poetry

and short fiction; operas by Fromental Halévy, Giacomo Meyerbeer, and Wagner; ethnography of the Frankfurt Jewish ghetto; George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*; Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*; the works of Arnold Schoenberg; and the Nazi blockbuster film *Jud Süß*. This severely truncated list can only gesture at the wealth of the materials HaCohen analyzes in her 507-page study. Working chronologically and focusing her gaze largely on German, French, and British material, she creates a subtle, complex, and multifaceted narrative that brings to light the rich and intricate natures of the texts she puts under her critical microscope. She exposes both the ongoing unease over Jewish noise constitutive of much Western musical culture and the dramatic changes that occur, starting in the mid-eighteenth century, as the sonic worlds of Jewish and Christian culture begin to collide and interact to create a new, shared sonic sphere.

HaCohen is eager to explore the broad contours of the history she is studying “beyond [the] intentions and reflections of its protagonists” (p. 12), and in this spirit, she traces not a linear history of ideas but the “imagined constructions and reconstructions” (p. 363) undergirding the music libel against the Jews. HaCohen’s goal is not to explore historical causality but to uncover a deep structure in Western thought and culture, a project she theorizes in her epilogue with reference to Freud’s theory of trauma. Emblematic of this approach is the fascinating encounter she stages in her fifth chapter between Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* and Wagner’s *Parsifal*—an imagined interaction that did not take place, but, she insists, could have. And she also reflects explicitly at times on her own complex personal investments in this project, as an Israeli academic whose mother was a refugee from Hitler’s Germany.

HaCohen proves herself a master-interpreter of the material she studies and is equally at home discussing eighteenth-century oratorio as she is offering a close reading of George Eliot or studying the sonic world of Nazi film. The result is a book that is truly interdisciplinary and one that will be mined in years to come for its provocative thesis, its rich and complex

narrative, and its in-depth analyses of the individual works it studies. HaCohen writes beautifully, and often passionately, creating an argument that draws tremendous vitality from its close readings and analyses of music, literature, ethnographic texts, etc. Indeed, each of her paragraphs is truly a pleasure to read. To be sure, *The Music Libel Against the Jews* is not—and does not want to be—a conventional history, and students or scholars in quest of a simpler and easier-to-read historical narrative might choose instead to turn to David Conway’s *Jewry in Music: Entry to the Profession from the Enlightenment to Richard Wagner* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). But both in its historical scope and in the range of cultural materials it studies, Conway’s book is far more limited than HaCohen’s work, and it lacks the methodological creativity of *The Music Libel Against the Jews*.

Despite its beautiful prose, HaCohen’s book can be difficult to read at times. Those unfamiliar with the materials she analyzes may wish for more background information to frame her close readings, and her commitment to working so rigorously with the material she studies sometimes prevents her from posing and grappling with some of the questions her book poses implicitly. What role did other “others” play in the Christian musical imagination, perhaps alongside or at times in place of the Jews? How might one integrate, say, the nineteenth-century craze with “gypsy music” into her narrative, or the nascent interest in non-Western forms of music that emerged in modern Europe? HaCohen focuses primarily (and appropriately) on Central and Western Europe. But how might analysis of the soundscape of Eastern Europe complicate the history she constructs for us? Along these lines, one also has to wonder about nineteenth-century America, where both German and Jewish musicians played crucial roles in creating a culture of classical music. Of course, these are all questions raised by HaCohen’s fascinating study and ultimately peripheral to it. This beautifully written book is a major accomplishment that cannot be ignored by scholars and students in musicology, Jewish Studies, European history, or Jewish-Christian relations.