

GIACOMO MEYERBEER: « Dreyfus of the Classical Music World”, Giacomo Meyerbeer arrived after centuries of anti-Semitism. By Benjamin Ivry... Published March 24, 2012, issue of March 30, 2012.

The sudden proliferation of Jewish composers in the mid-19th century was unprecedented in the history of classical music. Until then, Jews had been limited to the role of virtuoso performers, but that all changed when Germany's two most famous composers were of Jewish origin.

These two were Felix Mendelssohn, whose most prominent public manifestation was the oratorio "Elijah" (1846), and Giacomo Meyerbeer (born Jacob Liebmann Beer), the prolific composer of the operas "Robert le diable" (1831), "Les Huguenots" (1836) and "Le prophète" (1849). David Conway's "Jewry in Music: Entry to the Profession from the Enlightenment to Richard Wagner," published by Cambridge University Press in January, explains how Jews became such exemplary leaders in musical society.

Conway explains that in the 17th century, the Ashkenazi synagogue of Altona, Germany, forbade its congregants from attending the opera. Only toward the end of the 18th century did wealthy Berlin families attempt to "buy into Gentile culture as part of a process of entry to European society" by giving their children music lessons and emulating an "aristocratic style of education." Among such beneficiaries were Mendelssohn's great-aunt, Sarah Itzig Levy, and Meyerbeer's mother, Amalia Liebmann Meyer Wulff.

An unprecedented degree of public acceptance was required in order for German Jews to gain prominence in the quintessentially social role of composer. Wealth and societal standing were essential elements of this acceptance.

Thus, when the 11-year-old Meyerbeer's family had him pose for a formal oil portrait standing next to a piano, it was to place this child musical prodigy in the tradition of Mozart but also to underline his family's social position. Unlike the young Mozart, however, Meyerbeer performed in public not to earn money but to make his family proud. He also made German Jews proud that one of their own could attain such prodigious artistry.

One of those German Jews was poet Heinrich Heine, a longtime friend-antagonist of the composer, who would delight, in his 1834 poem "Angélique," in taking his beloved to see Meyerbeer's "Robert le diable": "It's a grand, enchanted piece/ full of diabolical merriment and love/ Meyerbeer wrote the music/ and [Eugène] Scribe the poor libretto."

Heine, in 1825 had converted to Protestantism, and Mendelssohn, who was baptized as a Lutheran in 1816. Unlike them, Meyerbeer never abandoned Judaism, which may have further inflamed German anti-Semites, even cultured ones such as the composer Robert Schumann, who in 1837 panned "Les Huguenots."

.....Those in search of explicit expressions of Yiddishkeit in his work will be disappointed, just as Conway is by "La Juive" ("The Jewess"), the 1835 opera by French Jewish composer Fromental Halévy, of which he writes: "Ironically, it seems very doubtful that the only great

opera written by a Jew about a Jew has anything much to say about Jews at all.” Indeed, “La Juive,” Conway says, “conforms closely, in its portrayal of [the protagonist] Eléazar, to the crudest prejudices about Jewish love of money, hatred of Christians and general implacability.”

.....Meyerbeer’s music was universally interpreted by the greatest stars, including tenor Enrico Caruso and baritones Mattia Battistini and Titta Ruffo. Closer to our own day, sopranos Joan Sutherland and Montserrat Caballé, mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, and bass Cesare Siepi all made stupendous recordings of Meyerbeer’s music....

Chaim Weizmann was fond of the dictum: “The Jews are like other people, only more so.” And so it is for Meyerbeer’s creations, whose most Jewish aspect is that they are like other operas, only more so: longer, bigger and demanding spectacular virtuoso singing. A mediocre performance of Mozart can still sound Mozartian, but a less-than-majestic rendition of Meyerbeer loses its whole reason for existence. Cast with a panoply of magnificent singers, Meyerbeer’s works can and will exalt and excite as they first did over 150 years ago.

Benjamin Ivry is a frequent contributor to the Forward.