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Review: The Music Libel Against the Jews

The Music Libel Against the Jews by Ruth HaCohen

Review by: Michael Marissen

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of reading. For endnotes Page “decided to follow the practice of ending a paragraph, where necessary, with a note giving a bibliographical conspectus of the material there discussed” (p. 6) rather than a note for every reference. While sometimes difficult to follow, many of the notes provide valuable annotations to the substantial Bibliography.

Replete with creative insights and compelling new interpretations, astonishingly rich in detail and breadth of coverage, this book is Page’s crowning accomplishment to date. Only he could have told this tale, not only because of the knowledge and skills that he brings to it, but also, perhaps more importantly, because of the imagination that characterizes all of his research. The book doubtless will repay more than one reading and may in the end serve best as a reference resource. It will provide information and inspiration to the disciplines of musicology, literary studies, liturgical studies, and medieval history for a long time to come.

ELIZABETH AUBREY

The Music Libel Against the Jews, by Ruth HaCohen. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2011. xvi, 507 pp.; 9 plates.

“What concord has Christ with Belial?” asks the Apostle Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians.

A few decades later, the Gospel of John’s Jesus exclaims: “Why do you [Jews] not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil . . . *you are not of God.*”

Centuries afterward, Shakespeare’s Lorenzo brings together such sentiments in act 5, scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*, when he delivers to his Jessica lines obviously meant to be applied to the likes of Shylock, the Jew:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

God and Satan, light and darkness, concord and discord, Christian “harmony” and Jewish “noise”—this is the subject of Ruth HaCohen’s brilliant new book, *The Music Libel Against the Jews*, a title inspired by the centuries-old anti-Semitic “blood libel,” according to which Jews murder Christian boys to use their blood in rituals and, as HaCohen notably underscores, to silence the Christian child’s “harmonious musicality” (p. 9).

You might expect that a book about musical anti-Semitism is going to make for rather unpleasant reading. In this case, you’d be mistaken. HaCohen has produced a volume filled with profound insight, and her work is always

ethically engaged but never moralistic, appropriately rueful but not at all lachrymose, and hard-hitting but not at all strident.

Most noteworthy for this **Journal**, HaCohen's book is one of the few in our field that is interdisciplinary in the strongest sense, embracing a breathtaking range of connections with aesthetics, history, literature, liturgy, philosophy, poetics, politics, psychology, religion, semiotics, theater, and theology.

Musicology, to its credit, has in recent decades devoted itself much more seriously to interdisciplinary work. A valid criticism, though, is that whereas musicology is good at drawing on other fields to enhance our understanding of music, it hardly ever explores music in a way that contributes significantly to the understanding of those other fields.

HaCohen is high unique in publishing work that philosophers, theologians, and literary critics could read with great benefit to their understanding not only of music but also of *philosophy*, *theology*, and *literature*. That is to say, HaCohen is one of the few musicologists who is making significant contributions to the humanities in general, not just to musicology within the humanities. We should be deeply proud to have such a one in our midst. HaCohen is an extremely gifted scholar, a true renaissance person.

Now you're doubtless going to want details. The nature of this closely argued five-hundred-page study, however, is such that to summarize properly, let alone critique, the proceedings would itself require at least five hundred pages. So I'll simply draw attention to a few matters, hoping briefly to give a just impression of HaCohen's work and its great value. I'll have only three small criticisms, two of which, however, serve to *strengthen* her narrative.

HaCohen indicates that many educated people are familiar with depictions in painting and sculpture of a triumphant *Ecclesia* opposed to an abject *Synagoga*. Generally less well known, she rightly points out, are the *sonic* worlds of Church versus Synagogue.

The musical sounds of the traditional western Church will be familiar to music-history and theory students who have gone through their modal theory, Gregorian chant, species counterpoint, Renaissance masses and motets, four-part chorale harmonizing, Baroque cantatas and passions, and so on. And those who have attended services in a great cathedral will have experienced the spectacular production values encountered all-round in High *Ecclesia*: sublime reverberant spaces, hushed mysterious silences during sacramental rituals, and magnificent synchronized choral or congregational singing, the latter typically to the accompaniments of a massive pipe organ.

The sonic world of the traditional Synagogue, however, will be unfamiliar to most gentiles. Here, HaCohen explains, for the western-Christianized sensibility, the melodies often stray from expected modalities, and the vocalizing is notorious for its continual apparent yelling and lamenting, while what few instrumental soundings there are will seem weird and terrifying (e.g., the blasts of the *shofar*). The whole atmosphere may appear rather chaotic, even offensive to some (further proof for these folks, if for them any were needed,

of God's abandonment of the Jews), with its typically nonsynchronized, *heterophonic* soundscape. Hence, for example, as HaCohen emphasizes, the pervasive and nasty German expression: "*Lärm wie in einer Judenschule*" (noise/shouts/ado as in a synagogue; p. 2).

These contrasts are typically taken in a church-dominated culture, notably in its art, to be emblematic of those between *the Christian* (who is "harmonious," "believing," and good) and *the Jew* (who is "noisy," "unbelieving [in Jesus]," and evil).

Regarding this alarming "noise," HaCohen importantly notes (at p. 128; see also pp. 138 and 194):

Lärm, this common wisdom imparts [i.e., the customary notion of *noise* in the synagogue as an essential, unavoidable fact], originates in the synagogue and characterizes its basic soundscape—the soundscape of a defeated people—as is often its denotation in Luther's translation of the Hebrew Bible, such as in the verse from 1 Samuel 4:14: "*Und als Eli das laute Schreien hörte, fragte er, Was ist das für ein großer Lärm?*"—When Eli heard the sound of the outcry (Hebrew: *Kol Haise'akah*) he said: What is the noise of this multitude (*hamon*)? . . . [Endnote, p. 430:] The word *Lärm* recurs nine times in Luther's translation of the Hebrew Bible and only once in the New Testament. In [Luther] *Lärm* is the word standing for a variety of Hebrew words . . . always connoting masses, or a mob, usually defeated.

This represents an uncharacteristic, but significant, instance of slippage within HaCohen's research. Luther's Bible is well known to have had an extremely powerful influence in shaping the modern German language. HaCohen has used as her source, however, not Luther's translation but the heavily revised text of 1984, published by the German Bible Society as *Die Bibel: Nach Martin Luthers Übersetzung, Neu Bearbeitet* ("The Bible: After Luther's Translation, Newly Revised") and often referred to, confusingly and misleadingly, as "the Luther-Bible." Luther's own translation uses *Lärm* only once in the Hebrew Bible, and twice in the New Testament, never regarding defeated groups. (His version of 1 Samuel 4:14 reads, *Und da Eli das laute Schreien hörte, fragte er: Was ist das für ein lautes Getümmel?* [And when Eli heard the loud outcrying, he asked: What is this loud commotion?].)

The argot of Luther's Bible can't, then, have had a role in the discourse on Jewish "noise" that HaCohen traces. It is interesting and perhaps disturbing to see, though, that *today's* various German Bibles make a much greater use of the word *Lärm* than earlier translations did.

On the Christian "harmony" side I offer an observation that may significantly bolster HaCohen's narrative. "Harmony" in music is widely understood today to mean something like: "The combining of notes simultaneously, to produce chords, and successively, to produce chord progressions." Less well known is the fact that the very pitch material of diatonic music can be, and was historically, understood as itself a "harmony":

If you take three strings, such that one is twelve units long, another six, and the other three, you will be able by plucking them to produce the lowest, mid-

dle, and highest notes of the ancient fifteen-note gamut. Moving from these two 2:1 ratios, you can now generate the rest of the diatonic gamut's pitch classes via 4:3 ratios. Notes twelve (eight units long), nine, five, and two are generated in relation to the top note of our original three pitches, and rest of the pitch classes via the bottom note. These fifteen resulting notes came to be known as a series of tones and semitones labelled A–B–C–D–E–F–G–a–b–c–d–e–f–g–a. Any octave-species scale (e.g., C–D–E–F–G–a–b–c) that is segmented from this gamut is thus not a series of tones and semitones per se, as we've been taught in intro courses and music lessons. Rather, the series of tones and semitones is an epiphenomenon of the *armonia* of the generative system that involves ratios using only the numerals 1, 2, 3, 4.

The system, then, of diatonic music is fundamentally *quadral*, and therefore, for a host of time-honored philosophical and other reasons, is understood to be “harmonious” and thus “good.” The very pitch content of “Jewish” melody, however, with its characteristic (non-diatonic) augmented seconds, would have to be understood, in this way of thinking, as essentially “unharmonious” and “bad.”

In this light, HaCohen's nuanced discussions of traditional synagogal melodies, Reformed synagogal chord-progressions, Cesti's hebraizing mothers, and Schoenberg's serialism, on the one hand, versus the music of the various luminaries in Western classical composition, on the other, comes even more sharply into relief.

In her last chapter, “The End: Essentializing Jewish Noise in Nazi Movies,” HaCohen analyzes the notorious films *Jud Süß* and *Der ewige Jude*. Here too her expert knowledge and critical ear serve to bring all manner of remarkable insight.

By concluding with the Nazis, however, HaCohen may unwittingly give some readers the impression that the story of “harmony” versus “noise” in high and popular art essentially ended there. But all elements of the narrative are evidently still alive and well in the twenty-first century, as we can see in one of the most successful films ever produced, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, a strong confirmation of myriad elements discussed in HaCohen's book.

Thus the themes of HaCohen's story generate new material even today for people who, one should think, ought to know better, a *lot* better.

For a start, it's astonishing how many of the clichés of anti-Jewish sentiment have made their way into Gibson's aesthetically magnificent film. The chief priests and their coreligionists—with the exception of only one or two passing “good Jews”—are relentlessly and unidimensionally depicted as large-nosed and fantastically bad-dentured (highlighted in virtuosic chiaroscuro cinematography), coin-jingling, venal, obsequious to authority, and blood-thirsty. They also wear wraps that look like today's prayer shawls. In contrast, Jesus and John (the Beloved Disciple) have attractive pan-European features, and the two Marys, in conspicuously nun-like habits, look and act properly “Christian,” their knowing nod to the Passover Haggadah notwithstanding.

Disciples of Jesus who betray, disavow, or forsake him appear rather—well—“Jewish,” in the same ways the chief priests do.

But probably the most powerful way this film can affect viewers is through a means that is typically the most emotionally expressive and the least consciously attended to: the music. Only the Jewish malefactors proceed to continually dark minor-mode strains that feature the augmented second, the stereotyped interval of Jewish music, familiar to anyone who has ever heard a Klezmer band or a production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. Jesus and his loyal followers, in glaring contrast, move to the lush harmonies of a rock-oriented orchestra which accompanies choirs of pure, angelic sopranos singing radiant major-mode melodies that emphasize the perfect [!] fifth.

In short, via all sorts of anachronistic and even unbiblical narration, and most notably through music, Jesus and his loyal followers are once again aligned with Good, and the Jewish leaders and their faithful coreligionists with Evil. This view is not incidental to the movie but built into its very structure and fabric, its words, images, and sounds. (How, then, can so many people say there is no anti-Jewish sentiment in this film? Have they not eyes to see and ears to hear?)

Ultimately, Jewish “noise” and Christian “harmony” are for HaCohen not simply unfortunate binaries that generate great explanatory power for history and art. In a brief Epilogue, HaCohen passionately concludes her magnum opus on a profound sociopolitical note, with a marvelous plea for world peace that is surely the driving point of her whole endeavor: “Questions of identity ever arise . . . [‘Christian’ and other impossibly longed-for ‘harmony’ can be most dangerous and oppressive, and] one still hopes, at least, for a better orchestrated cacophonous, or even, in one’s wildest dreams, [‘Jewish,’ ‘noisy’] heterophonic existence” (p. 372).

MICHAEL MARISSSEN

Liszt as Transcriber, by Jonathan Kregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xiii, 299 pp.

Walter Benjamin, in his much touted 1936 essay “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” situates copying as a form of cultural emptying. Reproductions fail to transmit the aesthetic and historical resonances, the “auras,” of their source works and are thus acts of artistic erasure, of mere mechanism. “The presence of the original,” he argues, “is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity.”¹ These ideas have not only colored attitudes

1. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in his *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217–51, at 220. Kregor gives the same quotation, as well as a brief summary of Benjamin’s argument, on p. 37.