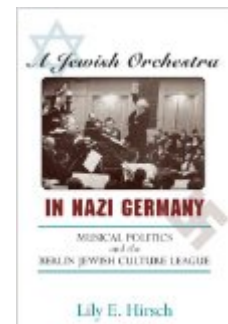


Lily E. Hirsch. *A Jewish Orchestra in Nazi Germany: Musical Politics and the Berlin Jewish Culture League*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. viii + 258 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11710-9.

Reviewed by Adam Cathcart (Pacific Lutheran University)

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Cleft Identity: Jewish Musicians in Berlin, 1933-41

Choral and orchestral performances in 1937 Berlin were simultaneously products of cultural habit, acts of political sycophancy, and assertions of identity. Adorning the cover of Lily Hirsch's book is a photograph from one such performance: it reveals a cluster of kinetically disciplined string players swaying around Kurt Singer, the maestro-administrator, as he stands and implores the chorus to intone the opening phrases of George Frideric Handel's 1739 oratorio *Israel in Egypt*. It is a powerful image because it reveals Jews in Berlin laying claim to a great German composer, drawing back to the Old Testament for sustenance, led by a skillful Jewish conductor, and performing for a Jewish audience who witnessed the artistic labor. Yet for the Jewish Culture League (Jüdische Kulturbund) in Berlin, the performance—like the League's very existence—was only made possible by the grace of National Socialist bureaucrats. The activities of the League, therefore, ultimately served as Nazi propaganda to mollify foreign audiences, slow the pace of migration abroad, and argue that life in Nazi Germany might not be so bad after all. This situation changed as Nazi policies towards using German cultural heritage changed: Handel's emblematic oratorio was revised and renamed. Jews could no longer perform his music, and the Nazis banned the League in 1941. Far worse, conductor and administrator Kurt Singer would be deported from the Jewish Theater in Berlin to Terezin, where he died in February 1944. His musical initiatives met a bitter reward.

By delving into the politics and repertoire choices of the Jüdische Kulturbund and Kurt Singer, one of its foremost leaders, scholar Lily E. Hirsch takes an important step toward a more complete examination of the politics of resistance and collaboration among Jewish communities in Europe. Hirsch also makes significant contributions to the literature on musicology during the Third Reich and the "reception history" of various composers in Germany, most of all Franz Schubert.

Because the Third Reich held such tremendous sway over the German cultural apparatus from 1933-41, the promotion of concerts by Jewish musicians, for Jewish audiences, in Berlin in those years remains a curious salient for musicological research. While the Nazis were steadily purging ostensibly Jewish elements from the canon of German composers—Felix Mendelssohn being the most notorious example—the National Socialists simultaneously created a parallel set of cultural institutions: concerts for Jews, by Jews, of Jewish composers. Jewish musicians found themselves removed from orchestras like the Berlin Philharmonic, even while Nazis encouraged the establishment of new Jewish orchestras in many major German cities. This dual system served a propagandistic need for the Nazi state and allowed German musicologists, bureaucrats, and concert-goers to justify the segregation of supposedly Jewish music from the German canon while sanctioning the creation of a new Jewish canon until its ban in 1941. As Hirsch writes, "Music associated with Jews [and] America ... for ex-

ample, were targets of censorship within Aryan cultural institutions. But this general policy of censorship was reversed inside the League. This music often banned outside the League was in most cases allowed within it, and vice versa” (p. 29). The Jewish Cultural League therefore stood twisted at the nexus of German Jewish cultural identity debates, Nazi propaganda, and musical arguments dating back to the nineteenth century.

Hirsch’s energetic research of the Jewish Cultural League has yielded several new data sets. Hirsch researched extensively at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, worked in the Akademie der Kunst in Berlin, located the personal papers of one of the League’s most active writers, and conducted interviews with surviving participants. With the aid of new sources, the author thus makes an admirable effort to clarify the activities of Jewish musicians amid the larger concerns about German classical music and musicology in those years. She compellingly interweaves the text with references to a prolix group of North American musicologist/historians (including Michael Kater, Leon Botstein, Pamela Potter, Celia Applegate, and Alan Steinweis) and references to a smattering of German publications. Hirsch has established a unique voice in this field. As distinct from the discussion of music in the camps themselves (as in the elegant work of Rebecca Rischin), Hirsch’s concern with concert life among Jews in Berlin in particular is inherently worth pursuing.

One of the book’s more intriguing aspects involves Anneliese Landau, a pianist and musicologist whose writings and lectures spanned and exceeded the life span of the League. Landau was a protean figure who seemed addicted to the pedagogical exposure of giving lectures, writing concert reviews, and consistently promulgating a more adventuresome line regarding the music chosen for League concerts. She immigrated to the United States in 1939 and subsequently struck up a correspondence with the composer Ernst Bloch. Landau’s unique materials are among the author’s most valuable finds, and they surface periodically as anecdotes throughout the manuscript. When Joseph Goebbels put forth a pivotal edict forbidding Jewish performances of German music after Kristallnacht, for instance, Landau complained that the action forced her revise all of her many lectures for the League (p. 57). Readers seeking more extended excerpts from Landau’s memoirs will certainly wish to consult Hirsch’s recent article in *Musical Quarterly*.^[1]

Landau’s push for more progressive repertoire choices in League programs highlights the rather conser-

vative cultural bent of the concert-going Jewish community in Germany. As Singer explained in an animated memorandum unearthed by Hirsch, the audience was “the first problem.” Singer described his audience as “not want[ing] to be confused, neither in taste nor in feeling ... [and] resistant to the unfamiliar” (p. 43). Hirsch further contextualizes these claims by showing how some Jewish composers were rejected as desirable subjects for League activity. While the targets of the 1938 Entartete Kunst exhibition were lionized in places like Los Angeles, among fellow Jews in Germany, the avant-garde composers would appear to have received at best tepid support. The best example of this gap can be seen in the case of Arnold Schoenberg, the leading member of the Second Viennese School of composition. Although Schoenberg was Jewish, the League rarely went beyond performances of his opulent but basically tonal *Verklärte Nacht*, the string sextet tone painting of the poem by Richard Dehmel. Schoenberg had also written opera on themes from the Jewish past (*Moses und Aron*) but the League, when it had access to the entire choral-orchestral apparatus, preferred to access such stories via the imminently more palatable German composer Handel, or the living Jewish composer Ernest Bloch.

Bloch’s interactions with the League are among the most interesting sections of the text, and are etched with incisive strokes by the author. Bloch had left his native Switzerland after the First World War, moving into careers as a conservatory head, successively, in San Francisco and Cleveland. Like Singer, the composer Bloch was comfortable with contradictions: he was foremost an artist, but he engaged in artistic administration because it was a vehicle for him to realize a rather quixotic vision of the arts, not merely part of a quest for recognition. Hirsch is perhaps at her most intrepid in dealing with Bloch, whose ideas of ethnic origins and whose desire to infuse music with a kind of “racial essence,” she notes, mirrored certain ideological proclivities of Richard Wagner, Wolfgang Herder, and even Goebbels. Hirsch notes also the guarded praise for Bloch’s racial consciousness by the authors of the *Lexicon der Juden in der Musik* and pulls out a rather damning quote from 1947 in which Bloch, by way of mocking Schoenberg’s compositional style, goes so far as to agree explicitly with Richard Wagner’s seminal 1850 essay, “Judentum im Musik.” Wagner’s antisemitism is to be understood as axiomatic, but to find the foremost self-selected Jewish composer of the twentieth century finding comfort in the exclusive ideological architecture of Bayreuth is indeed vexing. Here, Hirsch has produced a probing and well-researched in-

vestigation that represents political musicology at its best. page 97.

If in fact Nazi bureaucrats like the narcissistic Hans Hinkel supported the programming of Bloch's work with apparent enthusiasm, why was Bloch not more prevalent within League programs in the 1930s? Hirsch's answer is intriguing, but lies slightly obscured in her text. In the 1930s, Jews attending concerts in Berlin might well have found Bloch's music to be almost a self-caricature, a setting apart of a community from its integration into Berlin, a kind of musical ghettoization. Thus Bloch's concerti grossi were more popular in League concerts and performances than, for instance, his more grandiose *Sacred Service*. Hirsch has a strong command of the repertoire, but one would have liked to have seen more discussion of *Baal Shem* as a test case for the performance of overtly Jewish music in League concerts, and the balance League administrators sought to strike, perhaps, between nostalgia for a distant imagined homeland and participation as Germans in the national culture. Hirsch brings light to the issue via a fascinating early argument between the Zionist periodical *Jüdische Rundschau* and the League on July 25, 1933, in which the periodical questions the repertoire choices of the League as not being Jewish enough. Perhaps programming Bloch's music allowed the League to stave off similar criticisms that its activities merely existed in order to glorify German culture.

Similarly, the book's discussion of composers from an earlier age does not shy away from controversy. The author navigates through more than a century of Schubert scholarship to explain why Jews in Germany were particularly attuned to that Viennese composer's work. It is a densely documented discussion touching upon many of Schubert's most beloved works. Unfortunately, the argumentative logic that should undergird all this wonderful data is somewhat watery: according to Hirsch, Schubert's "outsider status" was his primary appeal to Jewish audiences (pp. 98, 100, 103), along with his Psalm settings. Is it possible that Schubert was simply popular among all audiences in the 1930s, and that persons could be familiar with his tragic life history without using Schubert as a metaphor for their own suffering? Although the author cites new research on how people respond to music, she seems to have found but scant evidence from the 1930s in which the point appears about Schubert's specific appeal to Jews. Non-musicologist readers may find this lack of empirical data frustrating. Hirsch, however, addresses the need for ambiguity in a tactful note on the difficulties of "reception history" on

The author then enters the debate on *Hausmusik*, an area where the League could have taken much greater latitude with its choices, but still tended toward the Schubertian. Clearly, listening to Schubert in a room full of Jews in 1938 Berlin would have been a different experience than listening in a room full of Austrian sympathizers just after the Anschluss. But to state as Hirsch does that "Schubert's music of loneliness and loss, such as [the song cycle] *Winterreise*, appealed to League members as a means of controlled grieving," seems to be either painfully obvious or an unnecessary stretch (pp. 101, 109). The same logic is later applied to the reception of Gustav Mahler's Second Symphony, a piece that "paralleled League members' own optimism and pessimism—their hopes and fears" (p. 142).

Returning to Schubert, if "music of loneliness and loss" is what satisfied Jewish audiences in the 1930s, why then did they not turn to more music by that depressive Romantic, Robert Schumann? Hirsch follows on her treatment of Schubert by looking into the League's reception of Schumann, reminding readers that Schumann essentially replaced Felix Mendelssohn in the Nazi musical canon and that Schumann was beloved by Nazi musicologists. For violinists in Nazi Germany, the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party) offered up Schumann's violin concerto—a late-period work of disputable quality and for many years associated with Schumann's mental decline—over Mendelssohn's masterwork in E minor. Hirsch is absolutely correct to note this juxtaposition, but fails to underscore the point that Jewish audiences loved Schumann's music nevertheless. Performances in Dusseldorf of the composer's symphonies and the A-minor Cello Concerto with Emmanuel Feuermann are a case in point. Instead, readers are given the idea that Jewish audiences blanched at Schumann because of his appropriation by Nazi musicologists like Wolfgang Boettcher, whose Schumann biography Hirsch cites in support of this claim. The logical problem is that Boettcher published his gargantuan book in 1941, four years too late for it to have had any impact on Jewish views of Schumann (as Schumann was banned for performance by Jews in 1937). Like Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann had a history of extensive cooperation with Jews, particularly the poet Heinrich Heine, whose *Lyrische Intermezzos* formed the basis for Schumann's canonical *Dichterliebe*.^[2] How is it that the erudite concert-going and musicology-reading Jewish public of 1930s Berlin would be so aware of Schubert's heritage of Jewish sympathies but so dismissive of Schu-

mann's connections? A deeper investigation of the articles, both popular and scholarly, about Schumann in the 1930s might have been helpful.[3] But these are minor quibbles: the musicological presses were thundering practically continuously in Berlin in the 1930s, and Hirsch has done admirable work in capturing and assessing what Jews were reading (and writing) about music in those years.

Hirsch's text is intently focused on covering the League itself, and the meaning of its musical selections. This approach has its advantages, but the reader gets only a vague sense of the total crisis that confronted newly unemployed Jewish musicians in German cities. For Jewish musicians in Berlin who were not surviving via the challenged but existent administrative regularity of the Jewish Cultural League, life in Germany was both furtive and dystopian.[4] The ultimate crisis of the Holocaust, in other words, was preceded by a host of minor tragedies in the musical communities of Berlin. The ingenuity of Jewish musicians in banding together under such circumstances, and the compromises required, is a subject approached in Hirsch's work very candidly and with clear and abundant documentation.

As a teaching tool for graduate seminars in Holocaust history, music history, or music and politics, Hirsch's work certainly has merit, and advanced undergraduates could readily digest a chapter or two. In the case of undergraduate seminars on topics like Music and War, one could pair Hirsch's work with that of Martin Goldsmith, the National Public Radio announcer who produced an interesting if not entirely scholarly overview of League activities based upon interviews with survivors.[5] Goldsmith's work, while a bit maudlin, is an easy read which has the advantage of dwelling more on League activities in Frankfurt and Dusseldorf. Using Hirsch and Goldsmith in tandem, instructors might ask students to write an essay comparing the two texts in terms of content, style, credibility, treatment of maestro Singer, or the League as set up in different cities. It is doubtful that Hirsch published this book with the purpose of sensitizing university students to the power of a good footnote or the defensive structure of an excellent bibliography, but in comparing her work with amateur histories on the same basic subject matter, these are also important

lessons which she may provide for the next generation of political musicologists.

Notes

[1]. Lily E. Hirsch, "Anneliese Landau and the Kulturbund: In Her Own Words," *The Musical Quarterly* 90 (2007): 508-520.

[2]. Joseph A. Kruse, eds., *Das Letzte Wort der Kunst: Heinrich Heine und Robert Schumann zum 150. Todesjahr* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 2006).

[3]. Again, a lacuna in the book appears to have been already neutralized by the author's steady publishing output. See Lily E. Hirsch, "Segregating Sound: Robert Schumann in the Third Reich," forthcoming in *Rethinking Schumann*, ed. Roe-Min Kok and Laura Tunbridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[4]. One Reichsmusikkammer police report from Berlin in 1937 describes a number of examples: a Jewish trio, banned from Reichsmusikkammer activities, was making a living playing music for Jewish women and "underage girls" in what the police called "Homosexuelle Frauen-Clubs." A Jewish music teacher, surnamed Velden, had his music conservatory shut down; using a false front, he proceeded to advertise in the *Volkischer Beobachter* and attract fifty-two students, all of whom were scattered when the Nazis broke up his studio. Another teacher on Schoenbergerstrasse in Berlin had his home studio shut down by Reichsmusikkammer police on the pretext of his having undertaken "Homosexueller-sadistischer Klavierunterricht." See M. Adress, Leiter der Kontrolleiten der Reichsmusikkammer, Berlin-Kurmark, 15. April 1937, "Bestätigung der Kontrollbeamten der Reichsmusikkammer zu Hilfspolizei-Beamten," Bericht #13 des PVG von 1 Juni 1931, in Bundesarchiv, Berlin, RG I/141, Fiche 1.

[5]. Martin Goldsmith, *The Inextinguishable Symphony: A True Story of Music and Love in Nazi Germany* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000). Goldsmith's parents were a flautist and violinist, respectively, in the League Orchestra in Frankfurt; they fled to the United States just prior to the Holocaust, ultimately settling in Cleveland, Ohio.

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