Sara Levy’s World: Gender, Judaism, and the Bach Tradition in Enlightenment Berlin, edited by Rebecca Cypess and Nancy Sinkoff, brings much-needed attention to the life of a remarkable German Jewish musician and patron who helped to shape German musical heritage as we know it today. Born in Berlin to the prominent Itzig family, Sara Levy’s (1761-1854) appreciation of music was fostered from a young age. She took piano and harpsichord lessons from Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710-1784), the eldest son of Johann Sebastian Bach, and later served as a patron of Wilhelm and his brother Carl Philipp Emmanuel (1714-1788). Her music salon was renowned and many of the works she commissioned from the Bach family were first performed there. In addition to these commissioned works, Levy amassed an impressive collection of musical manuscripts during her lifetime, which she later donated to the Sing-Akademie zu Berlin. However, while her musical archive may have sparked initial interest in Levy, this volume probes far beyond the “Bach Tradition” she fostered. Emerging from an international and interdisciplinary symposium held at Rutgers University in 2014, this rich collection of essays takes Levy’s life as a springboard to rethink the role of elite Jewish women in the Jewish and German Enlightenments, and, more broadly, to reconsider assumptions about the Jewish co-constitution of German culture at the turn of the eighteenth century [1].

Nancy Sinkoff’s introduction situates Levy in the scholarship of Jewish studies, German studies, music history, and women’s history. As a Jewish salonnière who did not convert to Christianity; as a woman participating in the Haskalah; as a Jewish woman who helped to preserve and promote the music of a canonical German composing family; and finally, as a female musician who performed publicly, Levy was exceptional on many fronts. Sinkoff also articulates the stakes of bringing Levy to the forefront of scholarship—neglecting the stories and contributions of individuals like Levy, she argues, leads to a “distortion” of our understanding of a number of key aspects of life in Enlightenment Berlin, from the “Court Jewish phenomenon” to the role of Jews in “cultivating musical historicism” to the engagement of enlightened Jews with music and musical aesthetics (p. 8).

The rest of the volume is organized into three sections. The first focuses on Levy as a salonnière, a patron, a Jew, and a musician; the second reflects on art and aesthetics as a reflection of Jewish-Christian relations in Levy’s time; and the final section analyzes the musical manuscripts in Levy’s collection, using these documents as a lens...
to understand the dynamics of the social world in which Levy moved. The epilogue offers a documentary analysis of selections of Levy’s correspondence. Thus, the first and third sections and the epilogue speak to Levy’s own life and influence, whereas the essays in the second section reflect more broadly on ideas about art, gender, and religious-cultural identity circulating in Levy’s time.

The first section begins in a space familiar to those studying the role of elite German Jewish women in eighteenth-century culture: the salon. Marjanne E. Goozé’s essay, “What was the Berlin Jewish Salon around 1800?” offers an overview of this cultural establishment and an insight into its reception history. Goozé also notes how recent scholarship has challenged assumptions about the salon, in particular, the idea that these were necessarily spaces of Jewish “integration” into German society, leading to religious conversion. This context is helpful for understanding the significance of this space for Levy; the salon allowed her to showcase her prodigious musical talent and her patronage of talented artists, such as the Bach sons, and it also created a “liminal space” where she might engage with others of different faiths without the need to abandon her own (p. 29).

Christoph Wolff’s essay, “Sara Levy’s Musical Salon and Her Bach Collection,” focuses on Levy’s own relationship to the Bach family and to the Sing-Akademie. According to Wolff, Levy’s collection of music manuscripts reveals “a scope and character without parallel elsewhere” (pp. 44-45) in that it includes not only the scores of significant works by J. S. Bach and his sons but also individual instrument parts, likely performed by Levy and her friends. In his reflection on the chamber works that Levy commissioned from C. P. E. Bach, Wolff remarks on the unique orchestration of these works, which call for dialogue between woodwinds and string instruments, and in particular the use of a viola rather than a violin to acoustically draw attention to the “middle ground” of the score (p. 45). Wolff likens this arrangement to the ideal of a balanced conversation between opposing viewpoints fostered at Levy’s own salon. This essay concludes with a brief synopsis of the history of the Sing-Akademie archive, which disappeared after the Second World War. Only with its recovery in Kiev in 1999 were Levy and her music collection finally made known to a wider public.

Natalie Naimark-Goldman’s essay, “Remaining Within the Fold,” highlights Levy’s support of leading maskilim in the Haskalah. While the Jewish Enlightenment has traditionally been read as a movement “created primarily by and for men” (p. 58), Levy’s subscriptions to Hebrew books and the financial assistance she provided to Jewish writers and intellectuals demonstrates the active role that women played in promoting education and modern ideas in the Jewish community at this time. Moreover, they offer further evidence of Levy’s public commitment to Jewish culture and institutions, even as she performed at the Berliner Sing-Akademie and donated to this Christian organization her considerable manuscript collection. These actions, Naimark-Goldman notes, point toward Levy’s ambiguous position in between the Jewish and Christian worlds that she navigated daily.

George B. Stauffer’s contribution, “Women’s Voices in Bach’s Musical World,” turns back in time, focusing on the careers of two female performers of J. S. Bach’s works in the generation preceding Levy: Christiane Mariane von Ziegler (1695-1760) and Faustina Borndoni (1697-1781). Stauffer’s essay reveals how these vocalists paved the way for Levy to perform Bach’s music in public at a time when such opportunities for women were rare.

The second section address how Jewish-Christian relations in Levy’s time resonated in the realm of aesthetics. Essays by Martha B. Helfer and Elias Sacks focus on two of the most prominent thinkers of the Jewish and German Enlightenments who were contemporaries of Levy—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn. Helfer’s essay, “Lessing and the Limits of Enlighten-
ment,” complicates the image of Lessing the philo-
Semite, highlighting the latent anti-Semitism in
popular dramatic works such as *The Jews* (1749).
Turning from drama to other aesthetic forms, Elias
Sack’s essay, “Poetry, Music and the Limits of Har-
mony,” examines Moses Mendelssohn’s transla-
tion of the Psalms and his “aesthetic critique” of
Christianity. Mendelssohn’s critique is grounded in
music, which he links to the ethical life. He suggests
that with its neglect of the musical recitation of
biblical text, the Christian tradition “lost a critical
tool for moral formation and human flourishing” (p.
135). Sack’s analysis of this argument reveals
how Mendelssohn’s aesthetic writings stood at
times in contrast to the larger Enlightenment
project of identifying uniform and universal val-
ues. For Mendelssohn, a study of musical practices
reveals not commonalities between the two reli-
gious, but rather a central flaw in Christianity.

While Helfer and Sack’s readings focus on the
works of canonical male Enlightenment writers,
Yael Sela’s essay, “Longing for the Sublime: Jewish
Self-Consciousness and the *St. Matthew Passion* in
Biedermeier Berlin,” centers on the writings of
Jewish women for evidence of how the tensions be-
tween Jewish and Christian culture played out in
aesthetic debates. Sela suggests music can be read
as a “distinct topos” in the epistolary and autobiog-
ographical texts written by women; she defines this
topos as “a literary strategy of critical reflection,
self-fashioning and cultural negotiation through
learned scrutiny and sensual contemplation” (p.
148). In her essay, Sela focuses on the revival of
Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* by Felix Mendelssohn
in 1829 and the reception of this performance by
Levy’s contemporary, Rahel Varnhagen. A number
of other contributions to this volume draw atten-
tion to Sara Levy’s personal connection to this
event: Felix Mendelssohn was Levy’s grand-
nephew; the manuscript of the *Passion* was gifted
to Mendelssohn by Levy’s sister, Bella Salomon;
and Mendelssohn’s teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter,
who likely fostered the young composer’s fascina-
tion for Bach, was the caretaker of Levy’s musical
estate at the Sing-Akademie. As Bach was the com-
poser who for many defined the German Protes-
tant music tradition, the revival of this work by a
Jewish composer has been viewed as a great Ger-
man-Jewish collaboration, and arguably as one of
the most significant musical events in nineteenth-
century German history [2]. In her essay, however,
Sela highlights Varnhagen’s ambivalent review of
the work, which the *salonnière* believed failed to
achieve the sublime—the “expressive marriage be-
tween music and words that brings out the deep-
est, most primal sentiments of all human exis-
tence” (p. 164). Instead, Varnhagen expresses a
preference for oratorical texts that recognize the
sublimity of the Hebrew scriptures (such as Han-
del’s *Judas Maccabaeus*) and for Bach’s instrumen-
tal works. This essay reveals how the writings of
Jewish women highlight key moments of Jewish es-
trangement from the project of building the Ger-
man *Kulturnation* through music.

The third section of *Sara Levy’s World* brings
us back to the salon to examine the chamber mu-
sic manuscripts found in Levy’s musical collection
for insights into the cultural norms and debates of
elite Prussian Enlightenment society. Rebecca
Cypess reads Levy’s duets as expressions of con-
temporary aesthetic and religious philosophy, in
particular, Moses Mendelssohn’s idea of “Einheit
in der Mannigfaltigkeit” (Unity in Multiplicity), his
model for a “tolerant society in which Jews and
Christians could co-exist in perpetuity” (p. 182).
Steven Zohn turns to more recent studies of mu-

cical sociability and Edward Klormann’s idea of
“multiple agency” (p. 215) to demonstrate how the
salon’s ideals of dialogue and conversation shaped
the quartets by C. P. E. Bach that Levy commis-

dioned and performed in this space. These essays
are supplemented by audio recordings of works by
Bach and his sons found in Levy’s collection. Per-
formed by the Raritan Players, these excellent
recordings are accessible on the website of Acis
Productions and offer a unique experiential com-
ponent to the volume. Not only do these record-
ings allow readers to follow along with the musical
examples cited in the text, but they also provide
the opportunity to “listen in” to Levy’s salon as it
might have sounded in her own day.

Finally, Barbara Hahn’s epilogue, which
features four letters sent by Levy to the Swedish diplo-
matic to Prussia, Karl Gustav von Brinckmann, high-
lights how correspondence allowed for sociable
and intellectual exchange between Jewish women
and Christian men. For Hahn, Levy’s correspon-
dence might be read as a “stage” upon which she
“presented to her addressee … a world created by
Jewish women” (p. 252). These personal notes illu-
minate Levy’s personality and wit as well as offer
documentary evidence of the individuals with
whom she regularly interacted. While the relation-
ships fostered through correspondence, like those
in the salon, may not have been sustainable out-
side of these spaces, these institutions and prac-
tices nonetheless reveal significant interactions
that took place between individuals of different
genders, cultural backgrounds, and religious faiths
during the Enlightenment.

Sara Levy’s World offers a compelling portrait
of a woman who shaped the musical and intellec-
tual landscape of her time. In fact, it was so suc-
cessful in piquing my curiosity about Levy that I
must confess to disappointment that not all of the
essays link their arguments back to Levy and her
life in a substantial way. As a result, one at times
loses the “red thread” tracing Levy’s unique posi-
tion that Sinkoff sets up so convincingly in the in-
roduction. Nevertheless, with its contributions
from scholars of Jewish studies, German studies,
and musicology, this volume speaks to a broad, in-
terdisciplinary readership and offers diverse read-
ings of eighteenth-century German and Jewish cul-
ture. Its essays challenge familiar narratives about
the salon as an institution, about gender roles in
the Jewish Enlightenment, and about Jewish “ac-
culturation” and the Enlightenment credo of reli-
gious tolerance. They also invite us once again to
rethink the role that music played for German
Jews as a foundational aspect of Bildung—educa-
tion and self-fashioning of character—believed to
be a necessary step to becoming a fully engaged
member of modern culture. The contributors to
this volume reflect critically on what it meant for
Jews such as Levy and her contemporaries to build
and sustain a German musical tradition grounded
in a faith that was not their own. Scholars such as
Ruth HaCohen, Leon Botstein, and Philip
Bohlmann have identified the Enlightenment as a
crucial moment in the development of narratives
surrounding Jewish otherness in music; HaCohen
reminds us in particular how the Enlightenment
search for a “normative aesthetics,” revived long-
standing stereotypes of Jews as “noisy” and “un-
musical”—the antithesis of Christian harmony.[3]
Although Levy’s archive does not appear to con-
tain any specific documentation articulating her
position on these issues, she was likely aware of
these articulations of cultural difference. More-
over, reading Levy’s life and musical archive
through this lens reminds us once again that Jew-
ish engagements with German culture during the
Enlightenment were often quite contradictory, and
that categories of belonging must be understood as
dynamic and fluid, always developing in response
to shifting social landscapes.

This introduction to Levy’s world thus offers
further evidence of the unique cultural entangle-
ments between Germans and Jews during the
Berlin Enlightenment that created the German
musical tradition we celebrate today. It serves as a
model for interdisciplinary, collaborative scholar-
ship and is an important contribution to the ongo-
ing work of moving Jewish female artists and intel-
lectuals from the margins of German Enlighten-
ment history to the center.

Caroline A. Kita is Associate Professor of Ger-
man and Comparative Literature at Washington
University in St. Louis and the author of Jewish Dif-
ference and the Arts in Vienna: Composing Com-
passion in Music and Biblical Drama.

Notes


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