

Review

The Music Libel against the Jews, by Ruth HaCohen. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

The calumny that Jews are a noisy bunch and that Christians always sound like the music of the spheres is one well rooted in the dichotomy between *Ecclesia* and *Synagoga* in the early Church. It plays itself about after the Reformation in the stereotype of the *Judenschule*, a proverb even today for acoustical chaos in German. In what is the best and most detailed (and most complicated) account of this tradition, and how it impacted on Jewish (however defined) musicians and thinkers, Ruth HaCohen's prize-winning study presents a major contribution to what we can now call acoustical history. This new field—stemming from the study of cinema music and Foley effects to the representations of “sound,” “noise,” and “music” in art and literature (or indeed on the operatic stage)—begins to blur the edge between traditional musicology, which uses genre definitions and their history as a means of delimiting the field of “music,” and the more ambitious and critical fields of the study of representations as well as material history. Mary Douglas had made the useful definition between acceptable (flowers) and unacceptable (weeds) categories in our organization of the world. Ruth HaCohen's extension of this is to understand the impact of such historically constructed categories on the producers of musical art as well as their recipients. By focusing in on the distinctions between noise and music (and their producers), she is able to sketch how such images structure the very acoustical environment of European culture.

Ruth HaCohen's study begins with a broad sweep of the discussion of Jewish noise and music in the medieval and early modern European context. She examines the eighteenth-century world of Bach, Lessing, and Handel: she could easily have expanded this to include Hayden, given the excellent work by Caryl Clark at the University of Toronto on her theme, but the core examples show the tension in both musical production and theory in the Enlightenment. The move to the world of the Jewish composer in the modern age brings the question of the Jewish stereotype into the analysis of the works of Mendelssohn, Meyerbeer, and Halévy (as well as Heine's widely read comments on music and noise). Here the impact of such views on composers and writers who were not defined religiously as “Jewish,” such as Mendelssohn (and indeed the convert Heine), is an important aspect of her work. One can imagine that Mendelssohn's reinvention, discovery, promotion of Bach is heavily impacted by such views. Most engaging in the contentious field of Wagner Studies is her radical rereading of Wagner's *Parsifal* against George Eliot's image of the musical Jew in *Daniel Deronda*. Her chapter on Schoenberg provides a reading not only of his music but also explores his visual art for an index of how the transvaluation of “noise” comes to impact on his self-image. Moreover, her chapter on the image of the noisy Jew in theory and literature, from Franz Kafka attending a Prague synagogue to the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, provides a case for the inclusion not only of music and its representations but also of sound and its implications.

Ruth HaCohen's chapter on the representations of the noisy Jew in Nazi cinema is brilliant. Here, the role of sound in race theory used by the Nazis is crucial to any such study. In 1930, Hans F.K. Günther, one of the leading racial anthropologists of the

Weimar academy, published his full-scale *Anthropology of the Jews*.¹ Günther's work came to be seen as the standard work on the anthropology of the Jews, especially in the Third Reich, where he received the Goethe Medal for Arts and Sciences in 1940 from Hitler. In his chapter on the special nature of the Jewish voice, Günther observed that the Jew's speech is set apart from that of all other peoples. For Günther, there is no gender difference in terms of the signification of the Jew's voice. The *Mauscheln* of the Jews, according to a standard German dictionary cited by him, is the "presence in language of unique Jewish elements" (254). The most important authority for Günther's proof of Jewish difference is Richard Wagner, who characterized the special language of the Jews as being found especially in the "song, as the song is the language spoken in the most extreme passions" (254). Wagner explains *Mauscheln*, especially in musical form, as the sign that all Jews, male and female, no matter how long they have lived in a land, will always speak its language as an outsider. For Günther, the specific nature of Jewish speech reveals itself especially in the singing voice, the example not only of Jewish difference but also of its difference in a world, that of the arts, to which the Jews cannot belong. Günther finds the clearest representation of Wagner's theoretical statement in a later musical text. It is Richard Strauss's opera *Salome* (1905) and, specifically, the "contested conversation among the five Jews, which is an attempt to represent the *Mauscheln* of excited Jews in artistic form" (255).

Noise and stereotypes permeate the world of "science" as well as art: and science uses art as proof. Ruth HaCohen's work is original and stellar in its reach. It is a model for anyone working on acoustical history within and beyond musicology.

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¹ H.F.K. Günther, *Rassenkunde des jüdischen Volkes* (Munich: Lehmann, 1930).