

## JEWISH OPERA: AN INTRODUCTION

by NEIL W. LEVIN, *Anne E. Leibowitz Visiting Professor-in-Residence in Music*

“... a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient  
to procure for these shadows of imagination that  
WILLING SUSPENSION OF DISBELIEF  
for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.”  
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817)

Opera: “When a tenor and soprano want to make love,  
but are prevented from doing so by a baritone.”  
—George Bernard Shaw

Opera: “An exotic and irrational entertainment.”  
—Samuel Johnson

“Whenever I go to an opera, I leave my sense and  
reason at the door with my half-guinea,  
and deliver myself up to my eyes and ears.”  
—Lord Chesterfield

Unknown to the vast majority of seasoned opera aficionados, opera patrons, producers, and conductors is the rich variety of repertoire of Jewishly related opera—viz., operas based directly on one or more aspects of specifically Jewish life, literature, and culture throughout history, sacred or secular, and from Jewish perspectives.

In fact, there is no lack of operatic expression of genuinely Jewish subject matter, themes, or content, even though most such works have escaped awareness.

The broad sweep of Jewish history, sacred and secular literature, and folklore bursts with an abundance of potential operatic material, spanning an arch from antiquity to the modern and so-called postmodern eras. From operatic-theatrical vantage points, one might even view the totality of Jewish political, social, biblical, religious, and cultural history, with all its tributaries and offshoots, as a continuously developing opera in itself. It would be open-ended, with an ever-evolving libretto replete with a nearly infinite array of constantly unfolding plots and subplots, new twists, and an always expanding cast of characters and newly created operatic roles. It could invite various interpretations and reinterpretations, reimagined stagings, nearly every musical style and compositional technique, productions in an any language, and every conceivable critical reaction. And with unshakable faith in a timeless Jewish continuum, the opera would have no final curtain.

Recalling the Bard's view of the world as a stage, we might imagine the venue of the aggregate story of Jewish civilization and culture as a multiplex opera house, with stages both large and small—some with dangerous trapdoors, some with extended prosceniums and aprons fanning out into the audience, some in the round, some with secondary stages within stages, some with scenes behind scrims, some with full pit orchestras or onstage chamber ensembles, and all with lighting technology to create every possible effect from brilliant illumination to near darkness.

In the conceit, the composite opera of the Jewish people would be diverse, on occasion a “mixed-media” production. It would embrace within its formal scope all the variety of operatic types, subgenres, and forms—from tragic to comic, chamber to grand, lyric to dramatic, fanciful to verismo, opera seria to opera buffa, Singspiel to music drama, and aria-driven to through-composed. Eventually it might even invite unforeseen operatic forms of its own. And, like some important—even seminal—operas by masters of the genre, it could always remain incomplete and open to reconstruction.

Given the superabundance and varieties of genuine Jewish themes, incidents, characters, values, ideas, stories, and settings that almost cry out for operatic treatment, it might appear surprising at first glance that hardly any (if any) operas based on such foundations, or from such ingredients, predate the twentieth century—dismissing entirely in this consideration the many dozens of operas of the past several centuries on biblical or Apocryphal subjects from Christian perspectives. The wonder dissolves, however, when we are reminded of the obvious: that opera itself, as a Western art form, has not been a traditional mode of Jewish or Judaic communion, communication, or expression. Also, until the twentieth century, Jewish presence among the ranks of opera (or, for that matter, any Western classical music) composers was a rarity—the glorious but short-lived episode of Jews in the vanguard of the leading composers for the Paris Opera in the nineteenth century notwithstanding.

Then, too, until well into the second half of the twentieth century—especially outside certain circumscribed Jewish circles—most composers and librettists (including Jews) were largely unaware of or unfamiliar with the variety of Jewish material that could make for opera: Jewish folklore, literature, history, religious life or topics, and other cultural artifacts. More widespread general awareness of these things is a relatively recent and welcome phenomenon, as is the reasonable expectation of audience interest. Outside modern Israel, this is a development that arose and blossomed primarily in America not much earlier than the postwar years, and it was fed by an overall interest and fascination with ethnic cultures, which took root in the 1970s and continued to expand in succeeding decades.

Even a famous writer such as the late Nobel Laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer (1903–1991), for example, could not and would not have attracted a wide general readership (in translation) until after or the beginning of the 1950s. Nor would such writers as Bernard Malamud (even had his stories been published earlier) been of interest to the general educated readership until the second half of the twentieth century.

A musical such as *Fiddler on the Roof* could not and would not have been produced on Broadway prior to the 1960s, before which it would have been relegated by prospective producers to “downtown” Jewish theaters that were already beginning to mix Yiddish with English in the 1950s. (No Broadway musical can survive financially for long by attracting only New York Jewish audiences, without appealing to tourist audiences from across the country in order to recoup not only the investments but be profitable as a commercial venture.) In fact, the 1950s Broadway production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* was deliberately denuded of Jewish content and heavily “Americanized” in order to resonate with non-Jewish (and even many oblivious Jewish) audiences, which would not have been felt necessary had a play on the same subject been produced initially in, say, the 1990s. Competing playscripts of the 1950s based on Anne Frank's diary were turned down by producers, who told those playwrights outright that their scripts were “too Jewish.” Only by the end of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first could a major book by Elie Wiesel, based on Shoah reflections, be required reading in major public high schools and even touted nationally by so visible a TV hostess and personality as Oprah Winfrey.

A late-twentieth- early twenty-first-century convergence of delayed post-Shoah sensibilities, previously repressed memories and personal accounts, and nostalgic fascination with an often imagined Jewish past, particularly in Europe, has manifested itself increasingly in audience attraction to Jewishly related (if sometimes artificially) music not only in America, but in Europe and England as well.

By the second half of the twentieth century, Jewish music festivals, cantorial extravaganzas, and similar events had become all the rage in Germany, Poland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, London, and the Czech Republic—growing year by year. Some of these festivals and related one-off concerts began to showcase little-known music by Shoah victims of the Germans’ mass murders, as well as by those who had survived but whose music, even before the Anschluss, had been banned in the Third Reich and in Germany as ipso facto “degenerate” art by Jews. By the 1990s there were even some productions of new Jewishly related operas by the American-Israeli composer Ofer Ben-Amots in, of all places, Vienna and Zurich—the latter in a country that was supposedly neutral during the war, but, shall we say, really not so neutral. In 2014 there were two performances in Germany of a long-forgotten Yiddish opera (performed in Yiddish) by Henschel Kon: *Dovid un bas sheva*. It had not been heard since 1924 in Warsaw and was meticulously reconstructed by the Berkeley, California, based composer Joshua Horowitz, and extremely well received by mostly non-Jewish German audiences.

By German law (together with Nazi Party directives), in 1930s Germany, a Hebrew opera, *Hechalutz* (The Pioneers), by Jacob Weinberg, could be performed only in a synagogue or other exclusively Jewish venue. Thus it was presented at Berlin’s Prinzregentenstrasse Synagogue in a concert version with full orchestra. By the end of the twentieth century of course any Jewishly related opera could be performed at any German opera house or other venue, fully staged.

Some perceive all this European non-Jewish attention to Jewishly related music admirable, a cause for Jewish pride and an acknowledgment of Jewish national survival and regeneration despite the Third Reich’s ultimate goal and the enthusiastic wartime participation and cooperation of its Ukrainian, Polish, French, Croatian, and even Dutch collaborators (some underground resistance groups, especially in Poland, notwithstanding). Others, however, have found this exuberant activity misleading and unwelcome (even if naïvely well-intended) as unintentional exploitation and almost ghoulish appropriation of invented nostalgia—playing retroactively on the calamity of a people that was supposed to have become extinct with the Germans’ war against the Jews. For the most severe among such rejectionists, all this can even be a painful reminder of the Germans’ envisioned plan for a museum of the extinct Jewish people once Germany won the war and succeeded with the “Final Solution.”

## CHARACTERIZATION OF AN OPERA AS “JEWISH” or JEWISHLY RELATED

Without falling into the often hopeless trap of attempts at an airtight definition, how shall we define, identify, or explain what we mean here (and don’t mean) by “Jewish opera”? Keeping in mind the painter Mark Rothko’s words—“to classify is to embalm. Real identity is incompatible with schools and categories, except by mutilation”—we nonetheless need some guidelines and boundaries.

We might begin by accepting a priori the generic term “opera” according to a reasonably liberal construction, erring if need be on the inclusive side. Stabs at a narrow definition will not and cannot satisfy everyone, whether opera aficionados or Jewish cultural critics. We can easily identify musical stage works that all would agree are operas in the conventional context of high art that the term implies, even though some operas of past centuries were at the same time popular entertainment. On the other hand, there are musical-theatrical or dramatic works, musicals, Broadway or other, or light operettas that no one would suggest qualify as operas. Yet certain works written originally for Broadway, such as Bernstein’s *Candide*, Marc Blitzstein’s *Juno*, or Stephen Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* turned out to be better suited to the opera stage. But on the wide spectrum between these two poles is a large number of musical-theatrical works about which consensus has never been reached—including even Mozart’s *The Magic Flute* (Singspiel or opera?). The boundaries between so-called serious operatic art and artistic popular

entertainment can be more porous than some opera buffs would be willing to concede. Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*, a major Broadway hit, is but one example of Broadway fare that is really closer to opera. Another in that category might be *Showboat*.

The *New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (1986) offers a reasonable identification of opera as a “drama that is primarily sung, accompanied by instruments, and presented theatrically.” That characterization distinguishes it from dramatic works in which music is incidental and/or “clearly subsidiary to the drama.” The *New York Times* critic Bernard Holland once suggested that wider embrace by referring to opera simply as “a work containing music and words that one puts on in an opera house”—as if to forestall needless bickering over whether a work is an opera or not. No doubt his tongue was curled a bit against his cheek—as was that of the composer Stanley Silverman when, at the inaugural meeting of the National Opera Institute, he attempted a distinction between American musical theatre and opera, saying, “Opera is an octave higher.” Along the lines of clever cynicism, Martin Kalmanoff wrote a one-act opera in the early 1950s titled *Opera, Opera*, a hilarious spoof on operatic conventions—with numbers instead of words sung and a gorilla in a featured role.

Obviously, the composer's intention plays a role in determining a work's operatic genre. Bernstein called his *Trouble in Tahiti* an opera, but many consider it an artistic Broadway musical. Moreover, not all composers have indicated in their own catalogues or even on their scores their preferred designation. And surely Holland's reference to an opera house was not meant to exclude other venues that can handle an opera's staging and accommodate a pit orchestra, even if an opera house may be the ideal facility. Moreover, most American opera houses today will rent their property out of season or on dark nights to just about anyone for just about any type of production or entertainment. Chicago's fabled Auditorium Theatre, for example, was home to the city's enviable and internationally esteemed opera company until it was abandoned during the Great Depression.

After closing altogether, it fell into complete disrepair, crumbling inside like a forlorn ghost house, yet, as a landmark structure designed by Adler and Sullivan, it could not be demolished. In the 1960s, as a nonprofit project, it was meticulously restored at enormous expense, with attention to every interior detail of its past glory. Still, any hope of its reclaiming its former grandeur as an opera venue was more than naïve, for—despite its superior acoustics—it had been replaced by the Civic Opera House, which hosted the Metropolitan Opera tours and Chicago's own Lyric Opera. For a short while the Auditorium hosted classical music recitals, some ballet, and other similar events, but eventually it came to reap its revenue from heavily amplified multimedia extravaganzas and rock “concerts.” For that matter, even the Metropolitan Opera House in New York came to be rented out on dark nights or out of season not only for some serious classical music recitals, but for independently produced nonoperatic events and, in at least one case, an inexcusably amplified cantorial circus—with one supposedly virtuoso cantor after another showing off at the microphone. So much for Holland's connection between opera and opera house.

Opera *can* serve, however, as a legitimate generic umbrella for many different, even radically divergent types and varieties of staged musical-theatrical art forms and expressions. And our perceptions of what is opera will probably evolve over time.

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For our purposes here, the “Jewishness” of an opera is entirely dependent on its specifically Jewish or Judaic content and perspectives—on the libretto's principal foundation in some aspect of concrete Jewish life, folklore, history, sacred or secular literature, religious observances, Hebrew biblical or Apocryphal subjects from Judaic standpoints, or later texts of the rabbinic continuum beginning with the Mishna and Talmud (*g'mora*), Gaonic responsa, and traditional rabbinic commentary.

The Jewish qualification also depends on a composer's intention to create a work of fundamental rather than marginal Jewish connection or content, even if it *also* has universal significance. But as with all classical music

of Jewish experience or connection, the religious faith, ancestry, and/or ethnicity of the composer should be irrelevant, along with everything else about the composer's personal life. Assumed to have been an atheist (whatever that means)—or at least an agnostic without religious loyalty to the Church of Rome—Verdi composed what many consider the finest setting of the Requiem. It is even sometimes called “his greatest opera.” And several of the more than six hundred works recorded by the Milken Archive for Jewish Music were composed by non-Jews: the oratorio *The Gates of Justice* by the jazz “great” Dave Brubeck, for example, a Roman Catholic (by conversion from a Protestant denomination), or the oratorio *Yizkor Requiem* by Thomas Beveridge.

Unfortunately, this irrelevance of a composer's faith, identity, or ethnicity has not always been honored by some arts organizations, which on occasion have included and billed as a “Jewish opera” any opera by a presumed Jewish composer, regardless of content or subject matter.

Marginal Jewish characters or unexplained passing references to a Jew, such as “Rabbi David” in Mascagni's *L'amico Fritz* certainly do not render the opera one of Jewish connection. Nor necessarily do roles based on characters who happen to be Jews, even if they may be central to a drama that has nothing to do with Judaism, Jewishness, or Jewish culture.

This can also apply to an opera in which a Jewish character (or characters) is deliberately portrayed negatively as a presumed evil Jewish stereotype, where that is the sole purpose or substance of the opera. Much can depend on a number of factors, including the composer's apparent purpose. Whether one considers Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* a principally antisemitic play, consciously intended to paint or reflect vehemently and ignorantly anti-Jewish sentiments and bigotry as we understand those modes of prejudice in the modern world—and many Shakespeare scholars, including some Jewish ones, do not so consider it while others insistently do—the work would not be considered a “Jewish” play or Jewish literature by virtue of Shylock's portrayal. It will always be first and foremost English dramatic literature. It is worth noting the likelihood that Shakespeare never so much as met a Jew, other than, improbably, an illegally resident pawnbroker or the like. The Jews were expelled en masse from England in 1290 and not permitted to return until Cromwell's protectorate in the seventeenth century. In Shakespeare's England, the *only* image of a Jew was the miserly, anti-Christian, money-hungry vengeful character whose vile stereotype appertained throughout Europe. This coincided with the assumption of the new Church of England (as much as it did with the Church of Rome) and its Supreme Governor or head, Queen Elizabeth I, whose royal legitimacy as a Tudor monarch—and indeed the questionable legitimacy of the Tudor dynasty—Shakespeare was always careful to support. Yet he rounded out the character of Shylock, according him (and thus Jews) a measure of humanness: “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” In any case, like his other plays, *Merchant* could be staged in new settings anywhere, within any time frame, and still work as purely English drama.

Similarly, no one would suggest that Fagin in *Oliver Twist* renders Dickens's novel “Jewish” rather than English literature. And the same applies to the musical and the film based on the story.

By the same token, Verdi's *Aida* is Italian, not Egyptian opera; nor is his *La Traviata* anything but fully Italian opera, despite its setting in France and its basis in a French novel, *Camille*, which exploits French sensibilities and mores. His *Un Ballo in Maschera*, about regicide originally in Sweden and then alternatively in Boston to comply with the censors, is nonetheless purely Italian, not Swedish opera, as is his *Macbeth* Italian, not Scottish opera. But perhaps most important to emphasize here is that Verdi's *Nabucco*, which many unaware Jews like to claim as Jewishly related opera and often program it as such in concert versions or excerpts at Jewishly related events, is no more “Jewish opera” than is his *Rigoletto*. His source for *Nabucco* was the Christian Old Testament, not the Hebrew Bible and its indispensable commentary. The significance of the Babylonian Captivity differs markedly between the two sources, which is not to attach any opprobrium to Verdi's operatic expression. In similar vein, Puccini's *La Bohème* is purely Italian opera, even though it takes place in France among typical Parisian bohemians; and Giordanos's *Andrea Chénier* is equally Italian opera even though it is set in the midst of the French Revolution.

Even Jews as victims of vicious Jew hatred within an opera—or, for that matter, deadly anti-Israel convictions



or sentiments (as if there can be any difference between the two attitudes)—might not ipso facto make for a “Jewish opera.” It would once again depend on the primary substance of the libretto and storyline, as well as the composer’s intention.

The most egregiously shameful, self-serving exploitation of Jew hatred in any opera of the modern or postmodern eras is undoubtedly John Adams’s *The Death of Klinghoffer*, which by no standard measure can be considered a “Jewish opera” on a Jewish theme, as some have proposed. It is an American opera about, and sympathetic to, an Arab-Islamic terrorist atrocity of the cold-blooded murder of an elderly, wheelchair-bound American Jew—in the supposed but inapplicable name of the terrorists’ anti-Israel campaign, but in this case for no reason whatsoever other than that Mr. Klinghoffer was a Jew. And the composer’s own bias comes through transparently in his libretto.

Based on an actual incident in 1985 in which Arab-Islamic terrorists seized an Italian cruise ship and calmly threw Klinghoffer in his wheelchair into the sea to drown, the opera’s central message is one of open political sympathy with and “understanding of” the murderers—allowing them a measure of humanness and conflicting human sensitivities to the beautiful sounds of nature before doing what they felt they had to do. But the opera neither explores nor offers anything whatsoever about Jewishness, Judaism, Jewish life, or Jewish convictions. It leaves one with the impression that, at the *very worst*, Klinghoffer’s murder was a regrettable but necessary by-product of the terrorists’ ultimate overall campaign against Israel and thus the Jews.

It is astonishing that even the most severe critics, who justifiably condemned both the murder and Adams’s poor judgment in turning it into an opera, failed to observe that nothing in it tells us anything about Klinghoffer’s views about Israel, Zionism, or the state’s policies and internal politics. For all we know from the opera, he could have been uninterested or indifferent about anything to do with Israel one way or the other. That he was murdered simply because he was a Jew should have been obvious, putting the lie to the tired, mendacious claim that opposition to Israel—whether its right to defend itself as it deems appropriate and necessary or its right to exist—does not equate to Jew hatred. In this regard, it may be useful to recall that it was none other than Martin Luther King, Jr., who declared that anyone who calls himself an anti-Zionist is ipso facto an antisemite.

Even the title of the opera is revealing about the composer’s own bias, inasmuch as it could at least have been titled more appropriately as *The Murder of Klinghoffer*. He did not, after all, just happen to die.

As if the Metropolitan Opera’s production of *The Death of Klinghoffer* were not inexcusable enough in the first place, its announced revival in 2014 set off vehement protests, both from the Klinghoffer family—who pleaded for its cancellation owing to the renewed emotional pain it would cause them—and from a significant segment of the general New York public via letters, emails, and a densely packed picket line in front of the opera house. But in refusing to back down, the Met’s general manager, Peter Gelb—himself a Jew—disingenuously invoked the doctrine of “freedom of expression.” One wonders how far he would allow that “freedom of expression” to extend to mounting a production of some other generally condemnable topic involving contemporary hatred.<sup>1</sup>

A reverse scenario is illustrated by the following: In the spring of 2004 a Harvard professor devoted an entire class lecture to the Dreyfus Affair without so much as mentioning French antisemitism or even that Dreyfus was a Jew, nor that ingrained French Jew resentment was at the heart of the matter, and why we even remember it. According to this professor, Dreyfus was simply a captain in the French army who was falsely accused of having been a secret agent of the German army. As Dara Horn, who served on Harvard’s Antisemitism Advisory Group before becoming a witness in the congressional investigation of Harvard, wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* article about that class lecture, she had to be escorted across campus by an armed guard. Imagine, she wrote, a Harvard professor teaching about the American Civil War (viz., the War Between the States) without so much as mentioning slavery or that slaves in the South were black. “Academic malpractice at the price of \$80,000 a year,” she quipped. So while the Dreyfus Affair was one of the most significant episodes in modern Jewish history (as well as in European history in general) and, among other things, the catalyst for Theodor Herzl’s epiphany that spawned the Zionist movement, any opera

about the Dreyfus Affair to a libretto by that professor would not only not be a “Jewish opera,” but a classically anti-Jewish revisionist one to boot.

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Naturally, the issues surrounding an opera’s “Jewishness” are not always so clear-cut; nor are the dividing lines between those operas of distinctly, unquestionable Jewish content and those involving only biased behavior toward Jews as the central theme. To turn analogously to film, consider the classic motion picture *Gentleman’s Agreement*, in which a non-Jewish news reporter poses as a Jew in order to expose a “New England brand” of “genteel” anti-Jewishness vis-à-vis “restricted” hotels. Magnificently written (with Gregory Peck as the reporter), is this a Jewish or primarily an American film? Clearly the latter in our judgment. None of the characters are Jews, and there is not an iota of Jewish life or experience in the film. And were this film to be made into an opera, the same would apply. Most would relate to the film more broadly in universal terms as a condemnation of ethnic or religious prejudice of any kind—an accepted reality of American life of that time. If anything, the film reflects American Jewish acceptance of that reality without yet any campaign of opposition or resistance. The main themes are the courage of the reporter and the unspoken “gentleman’s agreement” concerning American antisemitism that he seeks to reveal. (It is probably a safe bet that few if any Americans born after, say, 1950, would even know—without seeing this film—the term “restricted” or what it meant specifically with regard not only to hotels, but to For Sale signs posted in residential neighborhoods.)

An opera based on, for example, the Jewish quota systems at American universities—and, in particular, medical schools as late as through the 1960s—could make for a Jewishly related opera if it traced the origins of those quota systems *and* if it delved into Jewish family and professional consequences, along with the beginning of Jewishly engaged opposition and resistance.

In the end, whether a particular opera should be viewed under the umbrella of Jewish opera may come down to an issue about which reasonable people might disagree. And in some cases the composer’s intention may count for more than our own judgment.

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## OPERA, THE BIBLE, AND JEWISH ANTIQUITY

The Bible, the Apocrypha, and certain postbiblical heroic Jewish episodes in antiquity have appealed repeatedly to opera composers over the past three or more centuries. Biblical opera, however, is more or less a self-contained genre in the history of Western music. It played especially well during the baroque and through the early-to-mid nineteenth century, and is not necessarily always (if ever) synonymous with grand opera based faithfully on biblical subjects of the Hebrew Bible. Nor does the genre equate automatically with “Jewish opera” as intentional expression of specifically Jewish themes, history, or sensibilities, even in the absence of specifically or transparently Christological agendas—viz., whether overtly stated or simply understood. Such agendas were generally intertwined with some form of quasi-religious expression or purpose, often with a theological message couched in musical-dramatic treatment. These biblical operas, devoid of any Judaic perspectives, can be akin to staged versions of the religious oratorio genre, which usually involved the use of Christian Old Testament or Apocryphal stories primarily as theatre.

Many of those works now belong to operatic or oratorio arcana, whose production is usually confined to small companies specializing in obscure revivals. This applies to a host of composers whose names would not be recognizable now beyond the circumscribed circles of musicologists devoted to those times frames, which involve both so-called early music and part of the baroque.

On the other hand, certain famous and familiar composers of some of today's favorite operas in the standard repertoire also wrote Christian-based biblical operas that are rare today: for example, *Moïse* (1818) by Rossini, and many Christian Old Testament-based oratorios by Handel that are regularly performed today: *Israel in Egypt*, *Solomon*, *Jephtha*, or, among others, *Judas Maccabeus*—commonly but erroneously thought (especially by Jews) to be “Jewish,” and therefore often performed or programmed inappropriately in connection with Hanukkah—in Yiddish and Hebrew translations as well as in English.<sup>2</sup> Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, whose libretto is typically assumed to have an intended Jewish connection, is actually not Judaically based or linked; it was written from Christian (Old Testament) perspectives of the significance of Elijah.<sup>3</sup>

In our consideration of operas drawn from the Bible or the Apocrypha, it cannot be overemphasized that the Hebrew Bible (the *Tanakh*) and the Christian Old Testament are not quite the same thing. In Christianity, the latter sets the stage as the foundation for the New Testament and its central tenets of Christian life and faith, whereas in mainstream Judaism the raw text of the *Tanakh* is inseparable from the commentaries and explications of the rabbinic continuum. Similarly so for the difference in approaches and interpretations between Christian and Judaic readings of the Apocrypha. At the same time, there are certain major biblically based operas in the standard repertoire that may not have been composed with any particularly Christian agenda in mind, though still not based on any Judaic sources. For example, Saint-Saëns's *Samson and Delilah* would not be considered a “Jewish opera,” inasmuch as it was not written to express anything Jewish—even if nothing intentionally Christian—but primarily inspired by the theatrics of the story as known to Saint-Saëns from the Christian Old Testament account.

One of the stories in the Hebrew Bible that appears to have elicited a strangely disproportionate number of operatic (as well as oratorio and other musical) treatments is the incident in the Book of Judges involving Jephtha and his daughter. Very few such operas, oratorios, or other works were written from Judaic perspectives, but, once again, came from the Christian Old Testament account: for example, Pol-Larolo's [Pollarolo] *Jeftha* (1692), one of the earliest Jephtha operas; *Mehala, die Tochter Jephtha* by Rolle (1716–1785); and others by Sanpieri (1872), Luis Cepeda (1845), a Spanish opera in Madrid, and one by Monteclair (1832?) in French, with a prologue and five acts, which was prohibited by Cardinal de Noailles after its first performance. On the other hand, a manifestly Jewish opera on the story was composed by Abraham Zvi Idelsohn in Mandatory Palestine. It is generally thought to be the first opera in modern Hebrew.

Its operatic merit, however, is wanting from artistic standpoints, and its chief value is historical rather than musical or dramatic. Idelsohn, after all, will not be much remembered as a composer (his other compositions are largely mediocre), but rather as the revered so-called father of Jewish musicology—viz., for his landmark contributions to the emerging field of Jewish musicology, if not to its beginnings in earnest.

Ernst Toch, the American Jewish composer originally from Vienna, wrote a programmatic symphony on the Jephtha story. He intended to expand it into an opera, but did not live to do so.

Unknown even to the most fervent American musical Yiddish theatre aficionados, Sholom Secunda—one of the principal, most illustrious composers for that mass-oriented popular entertainment medium commonly known as “Second Avenue”—tried his hand at opera. His *Shulamis* (1926) was based partly on Avraham Goldfaden's famous operetta of the same name, and he used some of Goldfaden's melodies for thematic material. But that opera never acquired any recognition. Another of Second Avenue's long-reigning and most prolific composers, Joseph Rumshinsky, a dominant force in American musical Yiddish theatre, wrote a full-length opera in Hebrew: *Ruth*. It has never been performed and remains in manuscript, but it has much musical worthiness.

More operas appear to have been inspired by the story and character of Judith than any others in the Apocrypha. Among them are such obscurities as Leopold Kotzeluch's *Judith and Holofernes* (1799); S. Levi's *Giuditta* (1844); Arthur Honegger's *Judith* (1926), an *opéra sérieux* in three acts that is an expansion of his earlier incidental music for a play about Judith by René Morax; *Yehudit and Holofernes*, completed in Mandatory Palestine in the 1930s by the Israeli composer Gabriel Grad; and others by Achille Peri (1860); Sarri (1875); Naumann (1858); Doppler (1870);



Myron Fink, premiered in 1978 and based on Giraudoux's play; and David Lang (1989). The once better-known American composer George W. Chadwick wrote a Judith opera, which, when he was unsuccessful in having a staged production, he transformed into a cross between a concert version and a cantata. Martin Roder has written an opera about Judith, as has Siegfried Mattus.

The same caution about distinguishing between Christian Old Testament and Hebrew biblical sources from Judaic perspectives must be exercised with regard to many operas based upon stories from the Apocrypha. The story of the Hasmonean-Maccabean revolt against the Greco-Syrian Seleucid Empire in 168–165 BCE (essentially, for Jews, the Hanukka story and festival) has attracted numerous operatic treatments, beginning as early as the seventeenth century. The librettos follow to varying degrees the account contained in the Books of the Maccabees (the last two books of the Apocrypha) as well as other legendary sources and original material in some cases. But there appears to be a variety of purposes and political or Christian agendas, among other motivations, behind most if not all of these operas. In some cases, like other operas based on Apocryphal books, the basic story serves as a *mise-en-scène* in which secondary invented plots and newly imagined heroes and heroines interact. In others, the story is exploited as a romantic tale of heroism that might have resonated at certain times with emerging nationalist sentiments. And in still other conceptions the Maccabean victory—perceived as a permanent triumph of the ancient Judeans (Israelites) over forced idolatry and paganism—becomes a harbinger for future events in Jerusalem. In that context, the outcome of the revolt provides, from Christian standpoints, the foundation for the future cultural and theological merits—even the perceived superiority in terms of universal truths—of what in the West would eventually become the Judeo-Christian heritage.

Overtly or subliminally, such Maccabee-based operas of the past could thus serve to emphasize the restoration of Israelite monotheism and Judean religious autonomy in the Holy Land as the necessary precondition for the messianic arrival of Jesus of Nazareth. Seen and heard in that context, the Maccabean episode in the Apocrypha offered a necessary reconfirmation of monotheism, out of which subsequent religious history could unfold at the “ripe” time and develop into Christianity—equally monotheistic, with the same one God.

Obviously, none of the Christian-based readings of the narrative in the Books of the Maccabees—which served without Judaic or historical commentary for all such operas—were in accord in any way with Jewish tradition vis-à-vis the Hanukka story, its evolved celebration and observances, or its meaning, significance, and relevance in Judaism. But Jews did not make up the audiences for such operas. And those few who might have attended in the nineteenth century would have been sufficiently assimilated yet still unaware of Christian implications (unless they were converts) in the librettos.

Then there are the extra- or nonreligious issues concerning various probable historical and geopolitical realities: both the true nature of the military campaign and the motivations behind the Greco-Syrians' eventual willingness to back down and negotiate a truce that restored to the Judeans their complete religious freedom and practices, within and outside the cleansed and rededicated Temple. These matters were not addressed in any of the Maccabee-based operas that were not composed from Judaic perspectives, nor was the question about to what degree the Maccabees may have embellished their role.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps no Maccabee-related opera illustrates this difference between Judaic and Christian perspectives as transparently as does Anton Rubinstein's now nearly forgotten *Die Makkabäer* (1874–75), in four acts. Composed to a libretto by Mosenthal, adapted from a drama by Otto Ludwig, the opera includes a secondary plot with additional characters. It was premiered in St. Petersburg in 1877 and for a time enjoyed some currency in Germany.

Upon noticing this opera's title, without examining the libretto, some Jews have been tempted to assume that Rubinstein's interest in the subject was a nod to his Jewish parentage or ancestry. Nothing could be further from the reality. He was converted as a baby to the Russian Orthodox Church. And though there was never any secret about that, neither was there the slightest thing about his life to suggest any “desire to explore roots,” as some have imagined. (The highly respected Jewish music bibliographer and refugee from Germany, Alfred Sendrey, thought

he discerned in the opera some use of traditional Jewish melodic and other musical materials, but nothing in the score substantiates that. In any case, Rubinstein would not likely have ever heard any such Jewish musical material, especially not as early as the 1870s in St. Petersburg.)

In the opera, when Ludwig's freely introduced character Leah—while pregnant with the future Eleazar—dreams about an “announcement from heaven” that God will eventually send a “savior” who will one day “mount the throne of King David,” no doubt is left concerning the opera's transparent Christian agenda and Christological implications. Now that the Maccabean victory has restored monotheism, the way has been paved for the future arrival of Jesus.

Other such Maccabee-related operas include J. W. Franck's *Die makkabaische Mutter* (1670, Hamburg); Ariosti's *La Madre del Maccabei* (1704); and Ignaz von Seyfried's *Die Makabäer, oder Salmonäa* (1818), among many others. But all of them have Christian agendas one way or another. As of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, we still await a serious, truly Jewish opera about the episode. It could be composed from an objective historical angle, taking into consideration the degree to which the Maccabees might have written their account to suit them. Or it could be more in line with the popular legend as commonly celebrated and as ingrained in traditional Jewish observances as Hahukka, going along with the legend of the supposedly miraculous but fictitious lasting of one day's worth of oil burning in the rededicated Temple for eight days. Or it could address what we actually know about the restoration of the Temple upon the truce, which is that a belated celebration of the previously forbidden Festival of Sukkot was held in it—what actually accounts for the eight days of Hanukka as this postbiblical popular festival evolved over the next few hundred years. Of course a new opera could also include various subplots, additional roles, etc., and it could be set in any time frame and/or locale, perhaps showing various Hanukka customs.

Among other pre-twentieth-century operatic portrayals that reflect the Christian world's perception of Jewish antiquity, we may mention Giovanni Pacini's *L'ebrea* (1844); Apolloni's *L'ebreo* (1855), with a prologue and three acts, which was premiered in Venice in the year of its completion and then produced in Barcelona and Malta. Given a different title, *Lida [Leila] di Granata*, for performances in Rome and Bologna by order of the censors, the opera was also produced in Milan, Rio de Janeiro, Santiago, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City. Twentieth-century revivals have been mounted in Venice, Trieste, Malta, and Vicenza. And then there is the aforementioned *Moïse* by Rossini.

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The number of operas on genuine Jewish themes and experience, which have been written in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is too great to include more than a selection here—each with its own chapter. The slogan of a mid-twentieth-century chocolatier in Chicago, “Mrs. Snyder,” used to be imprinted on the boxes and advertised as: “I can't make all the candy in the world, so I just make the best of it.” In a way that has been the policy followed here, except that only a small number of worthy operas could be accommodated in a book of this length. There is also an appendix with a list of additional Jewishly related operas for future consideration. Of course some measure of subjectivity has been unavoidable in the selection of operas discussed.

The aim has been a balance of subjects as well as musical approaches, techniques, and styles—ranging from sources of Jewish folklore to serious literature, from biblical narratives to Jewish historical incidents and personalities, from dramas to short stories and novels, from secular to religious Jewish life, and from tragic to comic.

As the twenty-first century progresses, we can hope—even expect—that an increasing number of composers as well as commissioning agencies will consider Jewish themes for new operas in a variety of forms, styles, and interpretations. The wealth of Jewish subjects, themes, and materials of all types should continue to fascinate and inspire fresh operatic treatments that will be welcome additions to the repertoire.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 This was the same Peter Gelb who, in some weird pursuit of “wokeness” even before that mindset became the rage, determined that for the first time anywhere in a production of Verdi’s *Otello*, Iago would wear no necessary facial darkening stage makeup. Why? Because it might offend and cause harm and pain to black people—as if anyone of any so-called race had ever even thought to be offended previously by the required stage makeup for this role. Worse, did Gelb really not know that *Otello* is not black, but a North African/Iberian Moor, viz., a Caucasian of comparatively dark complexion? OR was he simply seeking publicity as some misguided effort to court favor with potentially diverse audiences? Would he also forbid the appropriate and needed stage makeup (greasepaint or “pancake”) for a milk-toned, pale-complexioned Scandinavian mezzo-soprano singing the Gypsy role of Carmen? Why not dispense with stage makeup altogether? For that matter, what about hair color (whether a wig or one’s natural hair that was not so long ago not permissible in opera)?

Of the hundreds of letters and emails sent to Gelb pleading for cancellation of *The Death of Klinghoffer* revival, one declared that his great uncle, Jascha Heifetz—probably the most famous of the greatest violinists of all time—would turn in his grave. (Heifetz took no fee when he played in Israel in its early years as a state.) Another letter from a Shoah survivor (and there were many on the picket line) asked Gelb if, according to his promotion of “freedom of expression,” he would also allow an opera that accorded even a tinge of conflicting humanness to any of the architects of the “Final Solution” or death camp commandants—suggesting that even they could be sensitive to the sounds of nature and the singing of birds, appreciate the humanity in Bach’s music, or ultimately overcome inner conflicts regarding what they were about to do in the name of their “necessary” mission in which they believed. Neither letter received a reply.

Might we also ask if “freedom of expression” could even extend analogously to a hate-filled opera about, say, a Ku Klux Klan lynching, in which one of the murderers was accorded a measure of human inner conflict and/or hesitancy before proceeding with the collective atrocity in the name of a “cause” in which they believed they were justified? One tends to doubt it. But where is the line to be drawn?

- 2 The long-held (perhaps by now inextinguishable) assumption of a connection between *Judas Maccabaeus* and Hannuka is absurd. Not only do they have nothing to do with each other, but Handel’s oratorio is a fundamental Christian work written to celebrate an English military victory over the Scots. We cannot even be certain that Handel knew what Hannuka is or anything of its celebration among the relatively small London Jewish community at the time.

*Judas Maccabaeus* reflects the English public’s heightened nationalistic spirit and burgeoning of imperial pride, which had grown in the decades following the War of the Spanish Succession, which resulted in the Treaty of Utrecht and England’s possession of a number of economic, geographic, commercial, and colonial benefits as spoils—including territorial increases in its spreading empire. Closer to home, in 1746—when the oratorio was composed—English audiences were also basking in the glow of their army having quashed the latest (and final) Jacobite Rebellion in Scotland.

Although the Act of Union in 1707 made Scotland and England one country under the name of Great Britain, some Scots remained loyal to James Stuart, son of the king who had been forced out in 1688. In 1715 these Jacobites (as they were called) rebelled and were defeated, but the Highlanders rose again in 1745 in support of James’s son Charles Stuart, a.k.a. “Bonnie Prince Charlie.” His troops marched into England but were beaten back in retreat. English armies then forced a decisive battle on Culloden Moor in 1746 and destroyed

once and for all any and all hopes of the Stuarts. Bonnie Prince Charlie fled into the Highlands and later escaped to France.

Handel's oratorio, which became *Judas Maccabeus*, was conceived first and foremost to honor the Duke of Cumberland for his role in that military victory, the triumphal conclusion of which reconfirmed the 1707 Act of Union permanently. But Handel's determination to compose the oratorio preceded his decision on a subject. He only subsequently chose the Maccabean victory of the ancient Israelites/Judeans, his source for which was the Apocrypha, albeit naturally from Christian perspectives: Maccabees I and Josephus, *Antiquities* xii.

Once he determined his subject, Handel's creative focus was on the righteous defeat of a tyrannical Greco-Syrian regime that had forbidden the Judean worship of and obedience to the laws of the only true God—the exclusive God not only of the Israelites (and Judaism ever since), but, as promoted by Christian theology, of the universe and of all humanity. The Maccabeans' victorious outcome was actually not a complete military victory that released Judea from Greco-Syrian rule, but a truce that permitted a return to open Judaic worship together with all observances without interference.

Though not an anti-Jewish (“antisemitic”) oratorio, but not particularly philosemitic, that would allow us to view it as a dramatic work of Jewish experience, its portrayal of the ancient victory of monotheism over paganism among the Israelites was intended to demonstrate that the stage had been set for the ensuing events in Jerusalem that led to the narratives contained in the Gospels and for the arrival of the first phase of the messianic era in New Testament, Christian terms. Thus the oratorio played vicariously and theatrically to the popular mood. Throughout that time frame, into the height of the empire in the next century and a bit beyond, the English typically harbored imagined analogies between their nationalist-imperialist enthusiasm and the “chosenness” of the ancient Israelites—a fantasy of connection that could offer justification for their ambitions. Like many other oratorios and musical works, *Judas Maccabaeus* underscored and gave to those attitudes a sense of biblical legitimacy through their identification with its heroes, missions, conquests, and Temple hierarchy.

That phenomenon resurfaces still in coronation ceremonies and various related rituals. It is worth recalling, for example, that Handel composed *Zadok [Tzedek] the Priest*, which refers to the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, for the coronation of King George II in 1727. It has been performed at every coronation since then. *Judas Maccabaeus* was an instant success and became the most popular of his oratorios performed during his lifetime.

The misguided inclination to embrace *Judas Maccabaeus* for Jewish purposes has become mistakenly and, in a way, ironically expected during the season that has also come to feature its composer's *Messiah* at Christmastime, even though the latter is primarily about Easter, which is how it was understood in Handel's day—and only secondarily, if at all, related to Christmas.

### 3 Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, too, is a manifestly Christian oratorio—no less so than his others: *Mose*, *Paulus*, and his unfinished *Christus*.

For Mendelssohn, the eponymous character in *Elijah* was the Elijah of the Christian Old Testament, as understood and projected by Christian theology and its interpretation of messianic predictions, assurances, and sequels, not *Eliyahu Hanavi* (Elijah the Prophet) of the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic deliberations, and Judaic literature—the “angel of the Covenant” (Malachi 3:1) who would one day restore and adjudicate rabbinic controversies as well as herald the coming of the Messiah.

The Christian perspective was hardly unusual—indeed logical and expected—for a baptized, self-avowed, and for the most part enthusiastically Christian composer such as Mendelssohn. That Nazi ideology

and policy, enforced by German law, “turned him into a Jew” whose music was thus forbidden is all the more reason for us not to follow suit. And the reading of or into the work is not mitigated ipso facto by the happenstance that his father was born a Jew but then converted to the German Evangelical Church (Lutheran, in American terminology)—and then had his son baptized and provided him with at least a nominal Christian upbringing—nor by the fact that the composer’s paternal grandfather, from whom he wanted to some degree and at certain times to distance himself, was the founder of the Haskala (the modern Jewish Enlightenment) in Germany, arguably the most significant modern Jewish thinker of his generation in Europe.

Even if we allow for the *possibility* of certain religiously neutral and perhaps deliberately ambiguous aspects of the libretto, it cannot be maintained—as some have insisted—that *Elijah* represents any attempt by its composer to “reconnect with his Jewish roots,” which is a late twentieth-century cliché anyway. That wishful supposition is not supported by any evidence that Mendelssohn had any such concerns, nor interest in Jewish family, historical, or religious heritage. Nor is it for us to assign him any such obligations. The fact is that *Elijah* as a work of art speaks equally to Jews and non-Jews alike.

- 4 For a capsule discussion of the possible historical, geopolitical factors behind the “Hanukka story” and how it is thought to have evolved from a folk custom to a required religious observance, see my essay in the accompanying booklet to the Milken Archive/NAXOS CD, *A Hanukka Celebration*, 8.559410, which can also be found on the Milken Archive of Jewish Music website under Volume 4.