A Problem of Musical Historiography

The rediscovery of Johann Sebastian Bach in the Romantic period long after the composer’s death belongs among the most widespread misconceptions in the historiography of music. The following quote is symptomatic: “Bach and his works have met a strange fate at the hands of posterity. They were fairly well recognized in their day; practically forgotten by the generations following his; rediscovered and revived; and finally accorded an eminence far beyond the recognition they had originally achieved.”

Scholarship of recent decades has found it necessary to turn away from a Bach image that resembles the metaphorical paradigm of “Death and Resurrection” – the characteristic heading of the pertinent chapter in Albert Schweitzer’s *J. S. Bach* of 1908, arguably the most influential Bach book of all time. Today we differentiate between two complementary factors. First, the beginning of a broadly based public reception of Bach’s music in the early nineteenth century, for which Mendelssohn’s 1829 performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* represents a decisive landmark. Second, the uninterrupted reception of a more private kind, primarily confined to professional musical circles where Bach’s compositions were regarded as a continuing challenge, a source of inspiration, and a yardstick for measuring quality.

My remarks today will focus on a third and largely unexplored aspect: the role played by a small circle of early bourgeois Bach devotees in an atmosphere of emerging musical historicism. The phenomenon of historicism, which first arose in eighteenth-century England, had a growing impact on the public taste. It contributed significantly to an increasing interest in music of the past.

First season as music director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, established so-called “Historische Concerte” specifically featuring compositions of the past. Works by J. S. Bach were performed in public almost thirty years earlier, before Mendelssohn was even born, by a certain Sara Levy at a concert of the Berlin Sing-Akademie. Madame Levy, who stands at the center of my talk, was none other than Mendelssohn’s great-aunt, the younger sister of his maternal grandmother. Young Mendelssohn is generally credited with bringing about one of the most seminal events in musical historicism, the aforementioned 1829 performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* by the Sing-Akademie in Berlin. He certainly deserves credit as the inspired musical leader of this most influential performance attended by Friedrich Wilhelm IV and the royal family, the Prussian nobility, and notably the intellectual elite of the capital, headed by the theologian Schleiermacher, the philosopher Hegel, and the historian Droysen. However, the true origins of that particular event must be sought in the remarkable musical traditions of Mendelssohn’s extended family – a tradition underemphasized, underresearched, or neglected if not suppressed by earlier historical German scholarship for reasons of an apparent anti-Semitic bias.
Early Bach Veneration in the Itzig and Mendelssohn Families

Johann Friedrich Reichardt, last Kapellmeister in the service of Prussia’s Friedrich II (“the Great”), refers in his autobiography of 1813 to “a veritable Sebastian and Emanuel Bach cult” transpiring in the early 1770s at the house of Felix Mendelssohn’s great-grandfather, Daniel Itzig of Berlin, banker of the king and the most privileged and highest-ranking Jew in all of Prussia. Bach esteem, indeed adoration, in professional music circles of the later eighteenth century was nothing special; one need only remember Beethoven’s growing up with Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Yet, neither Haydn, Mozart, nor Beethoven pursued anything like a Bach cult. Hence, this particular characterization of reverence and cultivation in the Itzig family is a most unusual phenomenon. Moreover, it indicates a surprising continuity of interest in the music of J. S. Bach after his death in 1750, not traceable elsewhere in private homes.

Daniel Itzig, born in 1723 in Berlin, began his banking career as the principal supplier of the Prussian mint to the court and the army and was instrumental in assisting the king in funding the Seven-Years War against Maria Theresa’s Austria (1756 – 1763). While it is conceivable that Itzig heard J. S. Bach on the occasion of the latter’s visit to the Prussian court in 1747, he certainly would have known Bach’s second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, a prominent member of the king’s capelle through 1768. Be that as it may, Itzig had great interest in music, found the best possible music instructors for his children, and paid them well. For his two oldest daughters, Hanna and Bella, he hired Johann Philipp Kirnberger, one of J. S. Bach’s most prominent students and the one who codified Bach’s teachings in a two-volume treatise on strict musical composition, published in 1772.

Bella Itzig, incidentally, became Felix Mendelssohn’s maternal grandmother. She shared the same keyboard instructor with Felix’s paternal grandfather, Moses Mendelssohn, who also took lessons in music theory from Kirnberger. Mendelssohn, a faithfully practicing Jew, successful businessman, eminent philosopher of the German Enlightenment, along with Daniel Itzig and David Friedländer (Itzig’s son-in-law), “devoted himself to the emancipation, both civil and intellectual, of Europe’s ghettoized Jewish community.”

Abraham Mendelssohn, his second son, received no particular musical training, but he joined in 1793 the newly established Sing-Akademie, a bourgeois choral society modeled after the Academy of Ancient Music in London and founded in 1791 by Carl Fasch, C. P. E. Bach’s assistant and later successor as harpsichordist to the Prussian court. In 1796, Abraham Mendelssohn’s future wife, Lea Salomon, joined the same organization. He probably knew her from earlier family connections, for she was the daughter of Bella Itzig, now married to the Berlin banker Jacob Salomon. An accomplished pianist, Lea is known to have played the *Well-Tempered Clavier* regularly.

The newly-wed Mendelssohns moved to Hamburg in 1804, the year in which C. P. E. Bach’s daughter Anna Carolina, last custodian of the Bach family estate, died. When the estate came up for auction in 1805, the Mendelssohns quickly decided to buy the bulk of the music in order to donate it to the Sing-Akademie in Berlin, now under the direction of Carl Friedrich Zelter with whom they had developed a warm relationship. Mendelssohn’s acquisition of the Bach estate, which included not only the complete works of C. P. E. Bach but also a significant portion of the surviving works of J. S. Bach, represented a genuine rescue operation with respect to Madame Levy’s music collection was quite comprehensive, consisting almost exclusively of instrumental music by all major composers active in the second half of the eighteenth century.

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the latter’s music. Its importance for the survival of J. S. Bach’s music, contained in more than a hundred unique autograph scores, must not be underestimated and it is safe to say that, without Abraham Mendelssohn’s efforts, the losses of Bach’s music would be significantly greater than what we have to deplore already.

The acquisition of the Bach estate for the Berlin Sing-Akademie forms the immediate salient background for the later performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* under the baton of nineteen-year-old Felix Mendelssohn. This background, however, is even more directly and concretely connected with the Mendelssohn family. Shortly after Abraham Mendelssohn had donated the Bach manuscript scores of unpublished works to the Sing-Akademie in 1811, Carl Friedrich Zelter began to perform excerpts from the Passions, Masses, and cantatas of J. S. Bach based on the materials saved by Mendelssohn. Meanwhile, Abraham Mendelssohn’s family relocated to Berlin. At age ten, Felix joined the Sing-Akademie and, more importantly, was put under Zelter’s private tutelage. He could have had no better teacher who, among other things, exposed him to Bach’s vocal works, including the *St. Matthew Passion* — a work of undeniably Christian art handed down by a faithful Jewess, with Bach’s music standing above doctrinal and confessional traditions. She came to tolerate, if not accept, the notion expressed by Abraham Mendelssohn that true Christianity “contains nothing that can lead you away from what is good.”

**Sara Levy’s Salon and Music Collection**

Bella’s younger sister Sara held similar, probably even stronger, views about conversion. When she died at age ninety-four, childless, she left her considerable fortune to charity by establishing a foundation for a Jewish orphanage in Berlin. Otherwise, like the rest of the Itzigs, Mendelssohns, Salomons, Ephraims, Friedländer, and others in her extended family, she fit perfectly into the environment of intellectual, cultural, and to some extent political liberalism in a period quite unique in German history: the quarter century from 1780 to 1806, when Napoleon conquered Prussia. This was also a period in which a group of wealthy Jewish women in Berlin “achieved social glory by entertaining the cream of gentile society.” The literary and philosophical salons of Rahel Varnhagen, Henriette Herz, Rebecca Friedländer, and Dorothea Schlegel were among the most prominent and best known, and the success of these Jewish salons “was based on defiance of the traditional boundaries separating noble from commoner, gentile from Jew, man from woman. The public happiness achieved in these salons was a real-life enactment of the ideal of *Bildung*, encompassing education, refinement, and the development of character.”

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6 Ibid., 3–4.
Sara Itzig, after her marriage in 1783 to the banker Samuel Levy, established a weekly salon with a strong focus on music at her stately home in old Berlin’s poshest neighborhood. For about ten years, from 1774 to 1784, she had studied with Friedemann Bach, J. S. Bach’s oldest, and became a keyboard virtuoso in her own right. The silverpoint portrait by Anton Graff of 1786 (see page 26) shows a very attractive young woman at age twenty-five, who regularly performed at the weekly afternoon gatherings in her house but also elsewhere. After the death of her husband in 1806, she became more engaged in the public concerts of the Sing-Akademie where she regularly appeared as a soloist with the orchestra, performing concertos by Bach and his sons but also by other composers. Sometime after 1815, however, in her mid-fifties, she stopped performing in public (grand-nephew Felix most likely never heard her play).

An undated early photograph from around 1850 depicts Sara Levy in her old age; she survived her grand-nephew by almost seven years. The silverpoint and the photograph in juxtaposition show very dramatically the contrast of two different centuries, not just as reflected in the different age, changed face, body, clothing, and habit of one and the same woman, but also reflected in the technique of portraiture: drawing versus photography. More than that, the new industrial age left no room for the salon culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sara Levy observed and experienced this first hand.

After giving up public performance Sara Levy donated the bulk of her very large music collection to the library of the Berlin Sing-Akademie. Her substantial gift, never inventoried and evaluated in the past, was not accessible for more than half a century after the end of World War II. The Red Army had confiscated the musical archive of the Sing-Akademie together with numerous other trophy materials. Fortunately, since the archive of the Sing-Akademie was recently repatriated from Kiev to Berlin, the materials can now be examined and the extent of the Levy collection assessed. Only now it becomes clear how prominently this extraordinary woman figures in the early reception of the music of the Bach family.

Madame Levy’s music collection was quite comprehensive, consisting almost exclusively of instrumental music by all major composers active in the second half of the eighteenth century. The repertoire extended from solo keyboard works and chamber music of different kinds to concertos and symphonies – the music room in her house could easily accommodate an orchestra of eighteenth-century proportions. She owned many keyboard instruments of various kinds and was particularly fond of the fortepianos by Friedrich Silbermann of Strasbourg.

Within Levy’s music library, the works of J. S. Bach and his four sons – Wilhelm Friedemann, Carl Philipp Emanuel, Johann Christoph Friedrich, and Johann Christian – represent a significant section of a scope and character without parallel elsewhere. Moreover, her collection formed a library for practical use, that is, the collection contained not only scores but also performing parts. The title wrapper for a set of parts usually provides an incipit of the work for easy identification and usually shows Sara Levy’s characteristic round ownership stamp.

The names on the list of subscribers to C. P. E. Bach, Six Concertos for Harpsichord (Hamburg, 1772) includes Mademoiselle Itzig.
Sara Levy not only arranged musical performances, both with and without her participation, but she also occasionally commissioned new works and became a major patron for the two elder Bach brothers. Her teacher W. F. Bach wrote a song for her wedding in 1783—probably his last composition, for he died a year later. Sara Levy had supported him financially for the last ten years of his life; he in turn provided her with music. It was probably only after Friedemann’s death that she established direct contact with his younger brother Emanuel (who had left Berlin for Hamburg when she was only seven) and maintained relations with him and, after his death in 1788, with his widow. Her collection already contained 16 keyboard concertos by C. P. E. Bach when she commissioned him to write another concerto, this time for harpsichord, fortepiano, and orchestra, which turned out to be C. P. E. Bach’s last composition. Levy’s collection contains the autograph score of this most special piece that deliberately juxtaposes two different types, or if you will generations, of keyboard solo instruments: the traditional harpsichord and the modern fortepiano.

Just prior to this commission she apparently ordered from C. P. E. Bach a set of three quartets, also with an unusual combination of instruments: fortepiano, flute, and viola. Again, the autograph score of 1788 and sole surviving source of the work forms part of her collection. This score also shows the unstable and trembly hand of the seventy-four-year-old composer who suffered from gout and wrote with considerable difficulty. All three pieces are headed “Quartet fürs Clavier, Flöte u. Bratsche” (quartet for clavier, flute, and viola) and the layout of the score indicates Bach’s definition of quartet: rather than referring to four different instruments he stresses four independent contrapuntal lines of music, one each for flute, viola, fortepiano right hand, and fortepiano left hand. Haydn or Mozart would have called it a piano trio, but their standard scoring would be for violin, cello, and piano.

The unusual and innovative approach that C. P. E. Bach takes here in the last year of his life focuses on a well-adjusted distribution of the four instrumental voices and the clear distinctions between them. The integration of a woodwind and a string instrument adds different colors to the homogeneous keyboard parts. Moreover, using a viola instead of a violin puts emphasis on the middle ground of the score, that is, on the center of the sound spectrum. The result constitutes an evenly balanced instrumental discourse that permits the composer to engage in a lively, intense, and witty musical dialogue—in all likelihood a fitting interlude to the verbal conversations invariably conducted among the guests of Sara Levy’s literary-musical salon, which included the Humboldt brothers and other members of Berlin’s intellectual elite.

Their discussions are not recorded, of course, but their listening to the music of two different generations of Bachs, the father and his sons, would have invited them to compare stylistic dialects of the past with the best of what was new in the contemporary scene of music—like the works of Mozart, who performed in Berlin in the spring of 1789. This experience undoubtedly would have given them a clear sense of a historical dimension in music together with a sense of urgency in preserving the musical past for the future. That was eventually realized when in 1809 Wilhelm von Humboldt expanded the Prussian Academy of Arts by adding a music division. Its first head was Carl Friedrich Zelter, director of the Berlin Sing-Akademie, Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s principal teacher, and the one who consciously started an archive of music that eventually came to incorporate Sara Levy’s collection. © 2005 by Christoph Wolff.
Robert Levin (Harvard University), Christopher Krueger (University of Massachusetts at Amherst), Daniel Stepner (Lydian String Quartet), and Malcolm Bilson, seated (Cornell University) performed works by Johann Sebastian, Wilhelm Friedemann, and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.