

# Meyerbeer, Judaism and French Music Criticism of the 1830s \*

*Kerry Murphy*

---

As is well known, the operas of Meyerbeer, a Berlin Jew, dominated the Paris Opéra during the July monarchy. They infiltrated the homes and salons of the bourgeoisie in piano transcriptions and arrangements for all possible chamber combinations. Their presence was felt in popular orchestral arrangements at outdoor concerts such as the *Jardins Turcs* where the orchestra was accompanied by fireworks.

French music critics during the July monarchy were inclined to welcome Meyerbeer as an honorary Frenchman. On his death in 1864 the obituaries in the French newspapers almost all claimed him as their own. Joseph d'Ortigue put it most picturesquely:

Meyerbeer is not only French because his principal operas are French, but because they are written with French taste and spirit. He made himself French by his morals, his habits, by his welcoming relationships, so full of elegance and urbanity, so fine and delicate, so fashioned with surprises, with the nuances of the salon language that he used with such easy grace and circumspection, and with which he mixed, how shall I put it—just the merest hint of the naive German. It was in Paris that Meyerbeer learnt who he was, since until this point, say in his scholarly German period, or his even more brilliant Italian period, he wasn't himself. He stumbled, he was looking for a path. It was in Paris that he found it.<sup>1</sup>

This paper looks at critical writings on Meyerbeer during the July Monarchy, focusing on the issue of 'Meyerbeer as Jew'. Meyerbeer's 'Jewishness' has not previously been seen as an issue in discussions of how his music was received in Paris during the 1830s in France, although later in the century it becomes an important issue, when anti-Semitic sentiments are widely

---

\* An expanded version of this paper is forthcoming as 'Berlioz, Judaism and French Music Criticism of the 1830s' in *Berlioz: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Peter Bloom (New York: U of Rochester Press, 2003).

<sup>1</sup> 'Meyerbeer n'est pas seulement Français parce que ses principaux opéras sont Français, mais parce qu'ils sont écrits dans le goût et l'esprit français, parce que il s'est fait lui-même Français, comme dans la seconde période de sa carrière il s'était fait Italien. Il s'est fait Français pas ses moeurs, les habitudes, pas son commerce si bienveillant, si plein d'élégance et d'urbanité, sa conversation si fine, si déliée, si façonnée aux surprises, aux nuances du langage des salons, langage qu'il maniait avec cette grâce aisée et circonspecte, à laquelle il savait mêler je ne sais quel léger accent de naïveté germanique. Ce fut Paris qui donna à Meyerbeer la conscience de ce qu'il était, car, jusqu'alors, soit dans sa période de musique scholastique allemande, soit dans sa période, beaucoup plus brillante de musique italienne, il n'avait pas été *lui*. Il tâtonait, il cherchait sa voie. Ce fut à Paris qu'il la trouva.' *Le Ménestrel* 8 May 1864: 1.

expressed.<sup>2</sup> While there is little hard evidence for anti-Jewishness being openly voiced against Meyerbeer in this earlier period, the criticism of his work finds a curious and striking echo in the later anti-Semitic stereotypes of the Jewish character of art.

A recent socio-cultural analysis of Halévy's opera *La Juive* by Diana Hallman has shown how the opera and its reception were enmeshed with contemporary views of the role of Jews in French society, and also includes examples of anti-Semitism in its reception.<sup>3</sup> Some of the criticism of Meyerbeer in the late 1830s and early '40s can also be read as revealing certain prejudices against Jews. Hallman uses the term 'anti-Semitism' even though it did not gain currency until 1879,<sup>4</sup> yet the term is not inaccurate since she is referring not so much to reactions against the Jewish religion but to 'aspects of their [Jews] character that found expression in their behavior.'<sup>5</sup> I shall be examining more the prejudiced use of certain ingrained cultural stereotypes of Jews.

Information on attitudes towards Jews in France during the middle part of the nineteenth century is quite difficult to find—there is a big gulf between literature on the enlightenment and literature on the Dreyfus affair, the Vichy government and the rise of modern anti-Semitism.<sup>6</sup> Jews had been made French State citizens during the Revolution in 1791, and were granted full legal equality during the July Monarchy. As Esther Benbassa comments, Jews in nineteenth-century France

distinguished themselves in the arts, literature, journalism, scientific research, the academy and the civil service ... to a degree out of all proportion to the Jewish population's size in relation to French society as a whole.<sup>7</sup>

Jewish academics held important posts at all the major academic institutions. Meyerbeer, for instance, was an associate member of the Académie des Beaux-arts from 1834–1864.<sup>8</sup> As is well known Jewish composers completely dominated the Paris Opéra in the mid century and were not required to convert to Christianity to succeed, as was often the case at that time (and later) in other European countries.

The 'State' Jews of France became rapidly integrated into French society, calling themselves by the end of the century *français israélites*—as a sign of assimilation, French citizens of the

<sup>2</sup> James H. Johnson, 'Antisemitism and Music in Nineteenth-Century France,' *Musica Judaica* 5.1 (1982–83): 79–96. 'Notices of their works [Meyerbeer, Halévy, Auber and Offenbach] in the 40s, 50s, and 60s did not refer to their Jewishness,' 80.

<sup>3</sup> Diana R. Hallman, 'The French Grand Opera *La Juive* (1835): A Sociohistorical Study,' diss., City U of New York, 1995. Now available in book form as *Opera, Liberalism, and Antisemitism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge UP, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> It was first used in 1879.

<sup>5</sup> See Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700–1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980) 4.

<sup>6</sup> Some of the most useful literature has been Esther Benbassa, *The Jews of France: A History from Antiquity to the Present*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1999); Michael Graetz, *The Jews in Nineteenth-Century France: From the French Revolution to the Alliance israélite universelle*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996); Paula E. Hyman *The Jews of Modern France* (U of California Press, 1998); Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction*; Christine Piette, *Les Juifs de Paris (1808–1840)* (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1983); Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, vol. 3 (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Eugen Weber, *My France: Politics, Culture, Myth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> Benbassa, *The Jews of France* 115.

<sup>8</sup> For instance Jews held posts at the Ecole Normale, the Sorbonne, the Collège de France, the Ecole Pratique des hautes études, Académie des beaux arts. See Benbassa, *The Jews of France* 117.

Jewish faith.<sup>9</sup> But integration into the State did not entail a total assimilation or rejection of Jewish identity, and as Hallman has shown very clearly in the case of Halévy, for many Jews their relationship to Judaism remained very complex.<sup>10</sup>

Despite appearances to the contrary, there was still an undercurrent of social intolerance towards Jews throughout the first half of the century in France. In the early decades of the century the emancipation of the Jews had been strongly opposed by many Catholic or other clerical groups who maintained a resentment that became less theologically based and more racially prejudiced as the century progressed.<sup>11</sup> Jews remained equated with usury, and the description of the Jew in the 1840 dictionary of the Academy was, 'One calls a Jew a man who lends at usurious rates of interest, who sells at exorbitant prices, and who seeks to earn money by unjust and sordid means.'<sup>12</sup> Many socialists developed a Judeo-phobic anti-capitalism which equated the Jews with 'money, power, banking, capitalism, and usury ... symbolically incarnated in the Rothschilds.'<sup>13</sup>

For some this equation resulted more in the condemnation of the perceived 'rule of money' than of the Jews as a race.<sup>14</sup> It is clear, however, that in Paris during the July Monarchy, language was used to describe Jews which today would be totally unacceptable but which then passed almost without notice. Chopin, for instance, used the word Jew as synonymous with deceiver, continuing a Polish tradition.<sup>15</sup> But as Jim Samson comments 'there is nothing of Wagner's considered theorizing in Chopin's references to Jews, but rather an unthinking (albeit unfortunate) acceptance of long-established traditional prejudices.'<sup>16</sup>

Intolerant attitudes towards Jews were crystallized in an extraordinary event that took place in the partly Christian town of Damascus in 1840, when a Capuchin monk and his servant disappeared and were never found. French Consuls blamed the Jewish community and a number of Jews were arrested, imprisoned and tortured. They were charged with ritual murder and this charge was supported by the head of the French government, Adolphe Thiers. The event became a major international incident, with the majority of newspapers in France supporting the government.<sup>17</sup> As a critic for the *Quotidienne* rather tellingly put it, if one wants the Jews to be innocent, 'one would have to accuse the Muslims or the Christians. That is an unhappy alternative.'<sup>18</sup> All suspects were eventually cleared, and Thiers forced to resign. But

<sup>9</sup> Benbassa, *The Jews of France* 126.

<sup>10</sup> Benbassa, *The Jews of France* 133.

<sup>11</sup> This is a point that is made throughout the chapters on France in Poliakov's *The History of Anti-Semitism*, vol. 3.

<sup>12</sup> 'On appelle juif un homme qui prête à usure, qui vend exorbitamment cher et qui cherche à gagner de l'argent par des moyens injustes et sordides.' Ben-Levi, *L'Israélite français*, 1842, cited in Hallman, 'The French Grand Opera *La Juive*' 459.

<sup>13</sup> Weber, *My France* 289.

<sup>14</sup> See Katz's comments on Toussenel's *Les Juifs, rois de l'époque*, for instance: 'This book can rightly be called an anti-Semitic classic ... However, there are no traces of overt racism in Toussenel's book.' Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction* 126. Katz (chap. 10) also discusses the anti-Semitism of liberal thinkers such as Michelet and Renan. This relates more to the period post 1860, however.

<sup>15</sup> Jim Samson, *Chopin* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 27. Samson comments how the word Jew was synonymous with deceiver in the Polish language and Chopin often used it to refer to publishers.

<sup>16</sup> Samson, *Chopin* 27.

<sup>17</sup> Excepting *Journal des Débats* and *L'Espérance* (Protestant paper); see Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism*, vol. 3, 348.

<sup>18</sup> *Quotidienne* 9 April 1840, quoted in translation in Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 114.

this was a significant incident in the history of French Judaism and it was an important impetus to the establishment of a specifically Jewish press. For instance, the *Archives israélites* was founded in 1840 the same year that the incident occurred.<sup>19</sup>

It is true that very few critics during the July monarchy actually mentioned the fact that Meyerbeer was Jewish. The odd exceptions occur in the context of a discussion of religion. For instance the critic for the *Gazette de France* argues that Meyerbeer ought not to have so misrepresented the Catholics in *Les Huguenots*. As a Jew he ought to have been less in favour of the Protestants, who in Prussia subjugate the Jews 'under the humiliating yoke of medieval laws,' and more in favour of Catholicism, a religion that he claims to be full of 'tolerance, sweetness and reason.'<sup>20</sup> An astonishing response to call for a more evenhanded approach to one of the darkest episodes in the history of religion in France, but what is also striking is that there is no perception that in creating an opera about religious persecution in Europe an obvious analogy could be drawn with the history of the persecution of the Jews.

The following comment on *Les Huguenots* by Henri de Bonald<sup>21</sup> in the conservative paper *La France*, is more suggestive of anti-Jewish sentiments:

Poetry has a certain license no doubt, but this license has limits independent of those that taste demands; however for the love of fashion, 'pour les beaux yeux de la musique', in the interests of the pleasures of the spectacle to constantly sacrifice because of a desire for vulgar sensation, the sacred traditions on which the morality and religion of our country rely, to create a Jewish apotheosis to the detriment of the dogma of our faith, for the sole purpose of serving the inspiration of a Jewish musician, or at times to make a holocaust [sacrifice] of the Catholic religion ... seems to me to be going too far.<sup>22</sup>

It is likely that Bonald's reaction is more theological than racist, nevertheless, it is important to note that his comment carries unquestionable anti-Jewish connotations and also foreshadows the later nineteenth-century criticism of Meyerbeer pandering to the 'philistine tastes of the masses' by 'sacrificing artistic taste'.<sup>23</sup> The point that mid-nineteenth views of Meyerbeer and his music foreshadowed racial stereotypes stated more overtly and frequently later in the nineteenth century, is worth pursuing. One of the images used to symbolize the Jewish race in the nineteenth century relates to their so-called 'nation-less state'. The 'wandering Jew' (*juif errant*) became a widely-used symbol in French romantic literature and art, and was seen both positively, as a representative of toiling suffering mankind<sup>24</sup> and negatively, as what Charles

<sup>19</sup> Benbassa, *The Jews of France* 130.

<sup>20</sup> '[T]int encore sous le joug humiliant des lois du moyen-âge', 'tolérance, de douceur et de raison.' 'A', *Gazette de France* 10 March 1836: 1. Indeed there were many similarities to be drawn between the fate of the oppressed Huguenots in France and that of the Jews. See 'Huguenots and Jews in Brandenburg and Prussia' in Myriam Yardeni, *Anti-Jewish Mentalities in Early Modern Europe* (Lanham, MD: UP of America; [Haifa]: U of Haifa, Reuben Hecht Chair of Zionism and Jewish Political Thought, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> Surely a relative of Vicomte Louis de Bonald, a strong Catholic and vehement opponent of Jewish emancipation.

<sup>22</sup> 'La poésie a ses licences, sans doute, mais ses licences doivent avoir des bornes, indépendamment de celles que le goût lui impose; or, pour l'amour de la vogue, pour les beaux yeux de la musique, et l'intérêt des plaisirs de la scène, immoler constamment à l'appétit des sensations vulgaires les traditions sacrées sur lesquelles reposent la morale et la religion de son pays; faire tantôt une apothéose judaïque au détriment du dogme de notre foi, uniquement pour servir les inspirations d'un musicien de la religion juive, et tantôt un holocauste du culte catholique ... voilà ce qui nous paraît aller trop loin.' *La France* 2 March 1836.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, 'Antisemitism and Music' 81.

<sup>24</sup> This is how Poliakov sees Eugène Sue's *Juif Errant* of 1838.

Didier called in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* 'a parasitic plant with no roots in the soil.'<sup>25</sup> By the end of the century the French psychiatrist Charcot had even coined the psycho-pathological type of 'the wandering Jew.'<sup>26</sup> Another common racial stereotype of the nineteenth century relates to the perceived inability of Jews to be truly creative or inspired. Both issues become dominant and indeed linked, in Wagner (1850s) and Vincent d'Indy's later writings,<sup>27</sup> and I think are also foreshadowed here in some of the early criticism of Meyerbeer.

I shall now consider the occurrence of these stereotypes of Jews, starting with the issue of the 'nationless Jew.' Critics constantly claimed that in his music Meyerbeer combined the national characteristics of three countries, Germany, Italy and France. This is elaborated in a number of ways. For some Meyerbeer wrote German music in Germany, Italian music in Italy and then French music in France. However French music was also seen as a fusion of the characteristics of German and Italian music or, as some expressed it, of melody and harmony. Desnoyers is referring to this view when he claims that, 'Meyerbeer now writes French music, that is to say, a mixture of Italian and German music, perfectly adapted to French taste.'<sup>28</sup> But here, of course, the words 'French taste', are the sting in the tail. And in the conclusion to his article Desnoyers drives this home by describing the overall style of *Les Huguenots* as that of a diorama compared to a great artistic masterpiece. He concludes philosophically that in France only a very few go to the Louvre but the masses 'La foule' flock to see dioramas.<sup>29</sup> There were critics, however, who saw Meyerbeer's mixing of various national styles as demonstrating his lack of national roots. Gustave Planche exemplifies this in the following review:

[Meyerbeer] has not reconciled the German and the Italian school in the French school, he hasn't reunited in himself alone, Mozart and Cimarosa; it is true, he has tried to blend and merge the style of several schools ... As he didn't feel he had the ability within himself to create a new style ... he decided to borrow from all dynasties some elements of their coats of arms; his plan was realized ... But his coat of arms belongs to all races. He forcefully ennobled himself but he forgot only one thing, to give himself any ancestors.<sup>30</sup>

I think this review is referring indirectly to Meyerbeer's status as 'juif errant.' The critic also draws links between the lack of a 'home-base' and the need to borrow from others—the lack of an original style.

What is interesting in these reviews is that while they are talking of national styles in music, the national identity of Meyerbeer as a person remains vague—of German origin, but

<sup>25</sup> 'Le Maroc,' *Revue des Deux Mondes* 4.8 (1 Nov. 1836).

<sup>26</sup> Jan Goldstein, 'The Wandering Jew and the Problem of psychiatric anti-Semitism in Fin-de siècle France,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 20.4 (1985): 521–52. Charcot identified certain mental characteristics, in particular related to nervousness and restlessness which he saw as being the result of the Jews' lack of a 'homeland'.

<sup>27</sup> See Vincent d'Indy, *Cours de composition musicale* (Paris: A. Durand, 1912).

<sup>28</sup> Meyerbeer fait maintenant de la musique française, c'est à dire un mélange de musique italienne et de musique allemande, parfaitement accommodée aux goûts du public français.' *Le National* 16 March 1836.

<sup>29</sup> *Le National* 16 March 1836.

<sup>30</sup> '[I]l n'a pas réconcilié l'école allemande et l'école italienne dans l'école française; il n'a pas réuni en lui seul Mozart et Cimarosa; il a tenté, il est vrai, d'allier et de confondre le style de plusieurs écoles; ... Comme il ne sentait pas en lui-même la force de créer un type nouveau...il s'est proposé d'emprunter à toutes les dynasties quelque trait de leurs armoiries; son dessein est réalisé...mais son blason appartient à toutes les races. Il s'est anobli violemment et n'a oublié qu'une chose, de se donner des ancêtres.' Planche, *Chronique de Paris* 1 (1836): 253.

no longer really German. There is little clear sense of Meyerbeer's national identity in the reviews of the 1830s.

I shall now discuss the other stereotype, that of originality. The view, which comes up again and again in the daily press of the 1830s, is that of Meyerbeer having achieved his success through hard work but not through natural genius. This argument encompassed a number of points, for instance Meyerbeer was not inventive; Meyerbeer was a very skilled imitator but not original; Meyerbeer although very talented, lacked inspiration, and Meyerbeer, unable to create himself, borrowed extensively from others. I shall give a few examples here.

The notion of Meyerbeer lacking inspiration is expressed in the following quote from the *Gazette de France* of 1836:

Thus great skill can take the place of inspiration. Or rather M. Meyerbeer is a much more talented composer than an inspired one. He owes to the intelligence of his art, to its science, or to their combination, what others find in their soul and in the exaltation of ideas. That is to say, talent, directed with true and just feeling, can with work produce what some imaginations conceive at first glance, it can imitate the flame of inspiration.<sup>31</sup>

Louis Desnoyers' remarks in *Le National* are more damning:

I think it is a mistake to claim that [Meyerbeer's] compositions lack melodies: the melodies are there, but the composer, on the other hand, is not. Meyerbeer lacks melodic invention, in fact. It is rare that you can quote some phrase from one of his latest works that is entirely and completely new; that, to take an example of words written in another language, doesn't have its root in phrases we already know ... But if Meyerbeer has few melodic ideas of his own, he is on the other hand the most skilled jeweler who can take others' ideas ... he chooses perfectly those that he wants to highlight, he fits them to the given situation, he modifies them, he colors them, assembles them, puts them together and cleverly disguises their original form by the richness of the new setting.<sup>32</sup>

It is impossible to know whether the analogy of the jeweller, a well-known Jewish profession, is intentional or not. Desnoyers continues:

For us, Meyerbeer is not a man of genius ... We have searched in vain in his works but we couldn't find there any of the inspirations that change or modify the face of art; or those innovations that mark an époque, or those unexpected spontaneous creations whose reason is contained in themselves and not in works of the past ... on the contrary we noticed, such a groping manner, such an absence of spirit, such patience, such reading

<sup>31</sup> 'Ainsi une grande habilité peut tenir lieu d'inspiration. Or M. Meyerbeer est un compositeur beaucoup plus habile qu'inspiré, Il doit à l'intelligence de son art, à la science, à la combinaison ce que d'autres trouvent dans leur âme et dans l'exaltation des idées. Or l'habilité, conduite par un sentiment juste et vrai, peut produit avec du travail ce que certaines imaginations conçoivent du premier coup; elle peut imiter le jet de l'inspiration.' 'A', *Gazette de France* 10 March 1836.

<sup>32</sup> 'On s'est trompé selon nous, lorsqu'on a prétendu que ses compositions en manquaient de chants: les chants s'y présentent, au contraire; c'est que le compositeur seul qui manque. M. Meyerbeer manque en effet d'invention mélodique. On citerait rarement, peut-être, quelque phrase de ses dernières oeuvres qui fût entièrement et parfaitement neuve; qui, à l'exemple des mots composés d'une langue, n'eût pas sa racine dans quelque phrase déjà connue; ... Mais ... si Meyerbeer a peu d'idées mélodiques qui lui appartiennent, c'est, en revanche, le plus habile joaillier que puissent trouver les idées d'autrui.; Soit bonheur de réminiscence, soit délicatesse de goût, il choisit toujours parfaitement celles qu'il veut mettre en relief; il les approprie à la situation donnée, il les modifie, les colorie, les enchaîne et déguise adroitement leur forme primitive sous la richesse d'une nouvelle monture.' *Le National* 16 March 1836.

of proofs, such searching for effect ... such forced originality ... features that distinguish what we have come to see as typifying men of talent ... if one insisted on putting [Meyerbeer] in the other category, one would have to say, in spite of the apparent contradiction in terms, that if he has genius—it is the genius of arrangement, the genius of imitation, in a word, the genius of not having it [but] if he hasn't got genius, at least in the eyes of many people, he gives the appearance of having it.<sup>33</sup>

In a similar vein Gustave Planche comments:

All the pieces are written with care and with the patience of a monk. One couldn't find even amongst the most renowned Benedictines a more hardworking and perseverant worker than M. Meyerbeer; but the patience that is sufficient for erudition is not sufficient for music; and M Meyerbeer, despite his unflinching courage, is not and never will be a first-class musician.<sup>34</sup>

To give one final example, Castil-Blaze argues obsessively in a series of four articles for *La France musicale* that *Les Huguenots* is nothing but a patchwork of reminiscences from other people's work and that Meyerbeer 'does not have a great richness of ideas, sustained inspiration, or a well-established flow of melody' since 'he dreams, above all of combining scenic effects.'<sup>35</sup> Castil-Blaze discusses these effects:

To move the spectators, in the duos, trios, or whatever ensemble pieces, [Meyerbeer] employs the alarm signal, the curfew, fists, gunshots, assassins, massacres ... He arranges Catholic psalms and Protestant hymns, he groups priests, monks, nuns, witches, gypsies ... he creates churches, caves, fields of carnage; he exhausts all the resources of acoustics; he doubles his orchestra; he breaks rhythms ... he reinforces the voices of the chorus with paper trumpets ... The musical effects are in large part derived from this formidable apparatus.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> 'M. Meyerbeer n'est pas pour nous un homme de génie ... Nous avons beau fouiller ses oeuvres, nous ne saurions y découvrir de ces innovations qui changent ou modifient la face de l'art, de ses inspirations qui font époque, de ces créations imprévues, spontanées qui ont leur cause en elles-mêmes, et non point dans des créations antérieures. Nous y remarquons, au contraire, ce tâtonnement de manière, cette absence d'élan, cette patience, cette correction, cette recherche de l'effet, cette complaisance de détails, cette originalité factice ... qui distinguent ce qu'on est convenu d'appeler les hommes de talent ... Si l'on tenait absolument à le ranger dans l'autre catégorie, il faudrait dire, malgré l'apparente contradiction des termes, que s'il a du génie, c'est le génie de l'arrangement, le génie de l'imitation, en un mot le génie de n'en avoir pas ... s'il n'a pas de génie, peut de moins en avoir le semblant aux yeux de beaucoup de gens.' *Le National* 16 March 1836.

<sup>34</sup> 'Tous les morceaux sont écrit avec soin et avec une patience toute monacale. On ne trouverait pas, parmi les bénédictins les plus renommés, un ouvrier plus laborieux et plus persévérant que M. Meyerbeer; mais la patience qui suffit à l'érudition ne suffit pas à la musique; et M. Meyerbeer, malgré son courage inébranlable, n'est pas et ne sera jamais un musicien du premier ordre.' *Chronique de Paris* 1 (March 1836): 252.

<sup>35</sup> '[L]e compositeur n'a pas une grande richesse d'idées, une inspiration soutenue et un jet mélodique bien prononcée... et qu'il songe, avant tout, de combiner des effets de scène.' *La France musicale* 22 May 1838: p.

<sup>36</sup> 'Pour émouvoir les spectateurs, dans les duos, trios, morceaux d'ensemble quelconques, les musicien emploie le tocsin, le couvre-feu, les poignards, les coups de fusil, les assassinats, les massacres ... il arrange les psaumes catholiques et les cantiques protestant; il groupe des prêtres, des moines, des religieuses, des sorciers, des bohémiens; ... il lui faut des églises, des cimetières, des caveaux, des champs de carnage; il épuise toutes les ressources de l'acoustique; il double son orchestre; il brise tous les rythmes ... il renforce la voix de ses choeurs avec les cornets de papier ... l'effet musical procédant en grande partie de ce formidable attirail.' *La France musicale* 22 May 1838: 1–2.

Castil-Blaze's major point, which in many ways looks forward to Wagner's 'effects without causes' is that all Meyerbeer is concerned with dramatically is scenic effects, and that to provide music for these effects, he draws almost exclusively from the music of others.

I am aware that the critics' emphasis on Meyerbeer the 'hard-worker' must be put into the context of the very public knowledge of the amount of time taken by Meyerbeer over his scores; his meticulous attention to detail, the reworkings, the long rehearsals, the hard slog. This inevitably must have affected how critics saw the final product. Yet the references to his industry in the reviews serve only to reinforce the view that that is all there is and that Meyerbeer, despite his conscientiousness, lacks originality and inspiration.

Many of the critics are also directly or indirectly drawing on the distinction between talent and genius that was much discussed at the time, and often used in reference to women's music. Indeed many comments on Meyerbeer's lack of originality bear a striking resemblance to comments that can be found in reviews of women composers in the nineteenth century. The similarities in perceptions of the 'racial' and 'female' other, is obviously an area that bears further investigation.<sup>37</sup> I have also found references to Meyerbeer's lack of originality that claimed it to be the result of his extreme cultivation and urbanity. For instance, Heinrich Heine writes on Meyerbeer:

A king's ransom was spent on his education ... What he learnt he took as nature, and he developed to the fullest in the world's school; he is one of the small number of Germans whom even France must acknowledge as models of urbanity ... Yet ... Cultivation destroys that sharp emphasis in the artist, that unexpected colouring, that originality of ideas, that emotional immediacy.<sup>38</sup>

Accusations of urbanity and cosmopolitanism have been seen as containing veiled derogatory anti-Semitic connotations, in writings about Mendelssohn, for instance, they came to suggest rootlessness and insincerity.<sup>39</sup> Given Heine's extreme ambivalence towards Meyerbeer, and indeed towards his own Jewishness, he is possibly intentionally implying anti-Semitic sentiments here.

I am aware that some people—and let's face it—there are very few lovers of Meyerbeer's music around today, might be thinking that my critics were in fact surprisingly perspicacious. But this does not really impinge on the fact that the subterranean stereotype of the Jewish composer as an unoriginal imitator had impacted either consciously or unconsciously on the critics' references to Meyerbeer's lack of inventiveness. Even if the critics' intentions were not anti-Semitic, their reviews do feed into later anti-Semitic stereotypes in Germany and France. Although I could be accused of using my privileged knowledge of the future to interpret the past here, it is hard to resist just giving a few later examples from D'Indy's criticism. These are taken from his books on Wagner and composition respectively:

---

<sup>37</sup> I would like to thank Elizabeth Kertesz for pointing out that these comments on Meyerbeer's lack of originality bear a striking resemblance to many of the comments that she found made about Ethel Smyth in her work on the reception of Smyth's operas.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera: Music Theater in Paris in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1998) 316.

<sup>39</sup> Michael P. Steinberg, 'Mendelssohn's Music and German-Jewish Culture: An Intervention?' *Musical Quarterly* 83 (Spring 1999) 39.



The Jew possesses a marvellous gift of assimilation, which permits him to produce surprising imitations, but the qualities of invention, which alone can further art, fail him completely. The Hebrew race ... has never and in no time been a creator of art.<sup>40</sup>

and:

Gifted with admirable powers of assimilation, [Mendelssohn] quickly learnt all that was possible to learn in music; but the spirit of invention was totally missing. We observe ... that such qualities and such faults are extremely widespread with the Israelites; so clever at appropriating the knowledge of others, they are hardly ever true artists by nature.<sup>41</sup>

This also echoes Wagner's writings on Mendelssohn.

It is interesting to note that the philosopher Wittgenstein, in the twentieth century was tormented by his perception of himself as being unoriginal in his work because of his racial origins. To give one final quote from Wittgenstein,

Even the greatest of Jewish thinkers is no more than talented (Myself for instance). I think there is some truth in my idea that I really only think reproductively. I don't believe I have ever *invented* a line of thinking. I have always taken one over from someone else.<sup>42</sup>

Of course the crucial difference here is that D'Indy and Wittgenstein are referring directly to Jews, and the so-called Hebrew race. Yet the sentiments expressed are very similar to those expressed by the 1830s French critics, many of whose writings can be read as displaying a decidedly ambiguous attitude to Meyerbeer, and although Meyerbeer's Jewishness is rarely mentioned, the types of criticisms that are made of him mesh uncannily with these later derogatory stereotypes of the Jewish composer.

---

<sup>40</sup> Vincent d'Indy, *Richard Wagner et son influence sur l'art française*, quoted in Johnson, 'Antisemitism and Music' 84.

<sup>41</sup> 'Doué d'admirables facultés d'assimilation, il sut bientôt tout ce qu'il était possible de savoir en musique; mais l'esprit d'invention lui manqua presque totalement. Nous constaterons ... que de telles qualités et de tels défauts sont extrêmement répandus chez les israélites: toujours habiles à s'approprier le savoir des autres, ils ne sont presque jamais véritablement artistes par nature.' D'Indy, *Cours de Composition musicale*, vol 2. (Paris: Durand, 1909) 406.

<sup>42</sup> Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, The Duty of Genius* (London: Vintage, 1990) 316.