

The Operatic Voice of Leoni the Jew: Between the Synagogue and the Theater in Late Georgian Britain

Uri Erman

Abstract Michael Leoni, a leading singer in late eighteenth-century London, became famous for his role in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's anti-Jewish opera *The Duenna*. He was discovered, however, at the Jewish synagogue, where his singing enthralled non-Jews in the early 1770s. Tracing Leoni's public reception, this article argues that the performative effect of his singing had a multifaceted relation to his audience's psychology of prejudice, serving to both reiterate and reconfigure a variety of preconceptions regarding the Jews. Leoni's intervention through operatic singing was particularly significant—a powerful, bodily manifestation that was capable of transforming listeners while exhibiting the deep acculturation of the singer himself. The ambivalence triggered by his performances would go on to define the public reception of other Jewish singers, particularly that of Leoni's protégé, John Braham, Britain's leading tenor in the early nineteenth century. Ultimately, the experience of these Jews' performances could not be easily deconstructed, as the Jewish performers' voices were emanating from within written, sometimes canonical, musical works. This representational impasse gave rise to a public discourse intent on deciphering their Jewishness, raising questions of interpretation, intention, and confession.

JEROME. Isaac Mendoza will be here presently, and tomorrow you shall marry him.

LOUISA. Never while I have life.

FERDINAND. Indeed, sir, I wonder how you can think of such a man for a son-in-law.

JEROME. Sir, you are very kind to favour me with your sentiments. And pray, what is your objection to him?

FERDINAND. He is a Portuguese in the first place.

JEROME. No such thing, boy: he has forsworn his country.

LOUISA. He is a Jew.

JEROME. Another mistake: he has been a Christian these six weeks.

FERDINAND. Ay, he left his old religion for an estate, and has not had time to get a new one.

LOUISA. But stands like a dead wall between church and synagogue, or like the blank leaves between the Old and New Testament.¹

Uri Erman is a doctoral candidate in the History Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and a fellow of the Honors Program at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. He would like to thank Dror Wahrman and Ruth HaCohen for their support and guidance, and, for their comments on earlier drafts, Daniel O'Quinn, Daniel Jonas and Tamar Rozett; members of the "Exegetical Imagination" research group at Scholion Center; and the editor and reviewers of the *Journal of British Studies*.

¹ Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Duenna*, in *The School for Scandal and Other Plays*, ed. Michael Corder (Oxford, 1998), 87–143; at 95–96.

The above dialogue between an unfeeling father and his two children sets the stage for the ensuing drama of *The Duenna*, Richard Brinsley Sheridan's enormously successful comic opera of 1775. The Spanish plot of the opera is a thinly veiled commentary on contemporary English society. It presents Isaac Mendoza's attempts to marry an innocent Christian girl while the disruptive powers of commercial society—mimicry, greed, and social climbing—loosen communal bonds and put fathers and children at odds. The character of Isaac, a rich “former” Jew, was an elaboration on a relatively new type of theatrical figure—the “Beau Jew” or “Beau Mordecai,” a deceitful interloper marked by incessant attempts to become an insider in polite society through strategic marriage.² A self-proclaimed “cunning rogue” and “Machiavel,” Isaac eventually turns out to be “the dupe of his own art” when he is tricked into marrying the eponymous Duenna, a penniless old maid.³ The unparalleled success of the opera, with an initial run of seventy-five performances and a prominent place in theater repertoire well into the nineteenth century, testifies to the continuing appeal of these issues to contemporary audiences.⁴

Where do these Beau Jews originate? The intended bride, Louisa, points to the obvious answer: Isaac emerges from the *synagogue* by attempting to traverse the immutable walls that separated the two communities. A place of projected fears and suspicions for centuries, the synagogue nonetheless served to contain the Jews within its communal walls, which were an emblem of the Jews' marginalized existence within European society. By attempting to traverse these walls, the Beau Jew threatens the clear and age-old demarcation of communities and also epitomizes the dangers of these modern times. He is a “blank” and “dead” figure, caught in a state of limbo, whose lack of attachment and consequent antipathy are potentially destructive societal forces that must be recognized and counteracted. As Michael Ragussis has shown, *The Duenna* was part of a larger theatrical enterprise of codifying and enacting ethnic identities on stage as a reaction to the challenges of the British imperial project.⁵ While attempting to “pass” as Englishmen, these stage strangers became cultural tropes to be deciphered and, through the cathartic mechanism of the drama, relegated to their proper place in society as either insiders or outsiders.

Within the operatic world of *The Duenna*, these processes of codification, enactment, and recognition are musically reinforced. While the four young lovers express themselves in heartfelt, lyrical vocal lines, Isaac and Jerome—the Jew and the Judaized father—reveal their callous nature through their syllabic, speech-like singing.⁶ In this way, *The Duenna* participated in another, much older, cultural

² This character type originated in William Hogarth's *Harlot's Progress* (1732), and its theatrical adaptation began with Theophilus Cibber's similarly titled afterpiece of 1733. See the discussion in Michael Ragussis, *Theatrical Nation: Jews and Other Outlandish Englishmen in Georgian England* (Philadelphia, 2010), 96–97.

³ Sheridan, *Duenna*, 96, 103, 112, 120, 140.

⁴ Music critic George Hogarth noted that “[*The Duenna's*] run was probably without a parallel in the annals of the drama,” comparing it to *The Beggars Opera's* run of sixty-three performances. George Hogarth, *Memoirs of the Musical Drama* (London, 1838), 2:433.

⁵ Ragussis, *Theatrical Nation*.

⁶ Linda V. Troost, “The Characterizing Power of Song in Sheridan's *The Duenna*,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20, no. 2 (Winter 1986–87): 153–72, at 164–66. At one point, the father, Jerome, explicitly denounces sentimental and romantic singing. See Sheridan, *Duenna*, 95.

enterprise, that of marking the Jews through their relation to music. In a recent book, Ruth HaCohen traces and defines what she terms the “music libel” against the Jews: an essentialist view, which grew in western Europe during the Middle Ages, of Jews as noise makers, as un-attuned to the harmonies of music, and as an a-harmonic presence in the world itself.⁷ The prime locus of this libel was, again, the synagogue, where Jews pleaded in cacophonous cries to a God who was no longer listening. Isaac’s emergence from the synagogue carries with it some of this sonority, albeit in the mitigated form of comic irony: his utterances are increasingly out of step with reality, thus revealing his flaws and announcing his imminent failure. The opera ends with Jerome making amends with both his children and restoring peace to the community, thus completely nullifying any of the Jew’s pernicious effects.

However, precisely on this front, *The Duenna*, as an actual opera performed on stage, muddied its own waters. While the opera seemed to resolve its tensions through the expulsion of the Jew, it concomitantly placed another Jew—a real, flesh-and-blood Jew—as a leading, virtuoso singer and as one of its prime attractions. This man’s stage name was Michael Leoni, but his given name was Myer Lyon; he was a Jew from the Ashkenazi community of London. By casting him in one of the most musically prominent roles in *The Duenna*, that of the gentlemanly Don Carlos, Sheridan capitalized on the recent discovery of Leoni in no other setting than the Ashkenazi synagogue in Duke’s Place, where his singing enthralled London’s fashionable society in the early 1770s. During the run of *The Duenna*, Leoni’s Jewishness was widely commented upon, and Sheridan was very particular in the way he presented Leoni within the opera. In light of this, I would argue, Leoni’s ability to transport himself from the synagogue to the heart of London’s fashionable society stood in stark contrast to Isaac’s failure to do the same within the fictional world of *The Duenna*.

This contrast, between the categorical rejection of the Jew in the fictional world of the opera and the conscious inclusion of him in its performance, points to a unique historical moment in the relation of British society to its Jews. The readmission of Jews into England during the latter part of the seventeenth century, executed within an ambiguous legal framework, was motivated both by instrumental approaches that prioritized economic stimulation and by millenarian beliefs that perceived the Jews’ return in eschatological terms.⁸ However, these affirmative approaches were countered by the rise of an elaborate paradigm of Otherness, as Frank Felsenstein has called it, that perceived the actual Jews walking the streets of (mainly) London through traditional formulas of prejudice.⁹ Leoni’s career would likewise serve as a lightning rod for the reiteration of a variety of preconceptions regarding the Jews but also, importantly, the reconfiguration of those preconceptions. His intervention through operatic singing was particularly significant—a powerful, bodily manifestation capable of transforming its listeners while exhibiting the deep acculturation of the singer himself.¹⁰ In the following pages, I will trace Leoni’s

⁷ Ruth HaCohen, *The Music Libel against the Jews* (New Haven, 2011).

⁸ David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England, 1485–1850* (Oxford, 1994), 107–44.

⁹ Frank Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes: A Paradigm of Otherness in English Popular Culture, 1660–1830* (Baltimore, 1995).

¹⁰ Michelle Duncan, “The Operatic Scandal of the Singing Body: Voice, Presence, Performativity,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 16, no. 3 (November 2004): 283–306. Duncan points to the inherent

career and its reception through the vibrant public discourse that they generated as his career moved between venues and was adapted to different genres. His performance in each of these contexts was often molded in relation to his Jewishness or was experienced as such by his listeners. His very transition to the theater testifies to a cultural climate that allowed, and even sought, the performance of “Jewish” voices. However, opening his listeners’ horizons to visions of past and present, fiction and reality, Leoni’s performances would quickly prove challenging in a variety of ways, especially when he sang Handel’s sacred oratorios. The ambivalence triggered by his performances would go on to define the public reception of other Jewish opera singers, particularly that of John Braham, Britain’s leading tenor in the early nineteenth century, whom I discuss in the last section of the article. Importantly, Braham was Leoni’s protégé, and his career served to carry these issues into the nineteenth century and the public debate regarding Jewish emancipation. Ultimately, the experience of these Jews’ performances could not be easily deconstructed, as the Jewish performers’ voices were emanating from within written, sometimes canonical, musical works. This representational impasse gave rise to a public discourse intent on deciphering their Jewishness, raising questions of interpretation, intention, and confession. Conversely, this experience could serve to confront British audiences with their own motivations and prejudices with regard to the Jews.

LEONI IN THE SYNAGOGUE

On Friday afternoon, 29 August 1766, the newly renovated and enlarged Ashkenazi synagogue in Duke’s Place was unveiled in an elaborate dedication ceremony attended by a large audience of both Jews and non-Jews. The event was used to present an Anglicized vision of the Jewish community—some of the prayers were performed not in the customary Hebrew but in English, and they were followed by a performance of Handel’s Coronation Anthems.¹¹ This refashioning of the liturgical soundscape reflected the burgeoning need of the Jewish community to display the synagogue as a more agreeable site, in both aesthetic and political terms. Just thirteen years earlier, the community was reminded of its ambiguous status within British polity when an act of Parliament allowing the naturalization of a limited number of well-to-do Jews was repealed following widespread public outcry.¹² The renovation of the synagogue, however, affected the surrounding neighborhood in ways that drew criticism. One contemporary guidebook noted: “This synagogue is just now enlarged ... and has approached so near to the church of *St. James’s*, that the congregations may be heard from each other.”¹³ This permeation of sound led

tension in the experience of the operatic voice, which is heard by listening subjects but which at the same time acts upon them as objects for its own powerful effects. In this way the operatic voice produces a “scandal” of subjectivity.

¹¹ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 1 September 1766. The foreign visitors were also supplied with translations of the performed Hebrew texts. See Cecil Roth, *History of the Great Synagogue* (London, 1950), 131–37.

¹² See the chapter “The Jew Bill” in Felsenstein, *Anti-Semitic Stereotypes*, 187–214.

¹³ John Entick, *A New and Accurate History and Survey of London, Westminster, Southwark, and Places Adjacent* (London, 1766), 3:357.

another guidebook to note that the synagogue “has been lately so enlarged as almost to join the church.”¹⁴ The overflowing sounds of the synagogue evoke fears of a possible infiltration as they pass uncontrolled over the segregating walls.

However, it was not the church that was soon infiltrated but the synagogue itself. The attendance of foreigners in the dedication ceremony, rather than remaining a singular event, proved to be the prelude for an outburst of public interest by which the synagogue was marked as a thrilling new venue for the musically curious. Thomas Somerville, a minister of the Church of Scotland, pointed out the main attraction: “The Jewish Synagogue allured the attendance of strangers, chiefly by means of the excellency of the performers in vocal music.”¹⁵ The source of this vocal excellence was Myer Lyon, a German-born Jew who immigrated to England as a child.¹⁶ At a young age, he performed in a small singing role in David Garrick’s 1760 afterpiece, *The Enchanter*, which was also when he Italianized his name to “Michael Leoni.” Although he was “received with great applause,” no substantial engagements followed these early performances.¹⁷ It was here, at the synagogue, that Leoni’s fortunes would change.

“He is much admired and followed on particular Days at the Synagogue,” wrote Benjamin Victor, a theater manager, in 1771, while the lawyer John Baker wrote in 1773, “To Synagogue or Shiloh in Duke’s Place; heard Leoni, most excellent treble.”¹⁸ The adult Leoni did in fact sing in the treble, or soprano, range, employing a technique called *falsetto*, a “false” upper extension of the vocal range produced by the limited vibration of the vocal folds. A consummate falsettist, Leoni served at the synagogue as a *Mesborer*, or harmonizer, to the cantor’s melody, particularly on Sabbaths and High Holidays.¹⁹ These performances—foreign and exotic yet virtuosic and familiarly harmonic—contradicted common perceptions of the Jewish soundscape as mere *noise*, thus allowing visitors to experience the synagogue as a modern incarnation of the Tabernacle in Shiloh.²⁰

¹⁴ Walter Harrison, *New and Universal History, Description and Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster* (London, 1776), 430.

¹⁵ Thomas Somerville, *My Own Life and Times, 1741–1814* (Edinburgh, 1861), 156. Somerville visited the synagogue in 1769.

¹⁶ David Conway, in his overview of Lyon/Leoni’s life, doubts whether he was born in Germany. See David Conway, *Jewry in Music: Entry to the Profession from the Enlightenment to Richard Wagner* (Cambridge, 2012), 75–78. However, Lyon’s origins are corroborated by two sources. First, a newspaper report referred to him as “the German Boy.” *Public Advertiser*, 11 December 1760. Second, a biographical sketch of Leoni, which was appended to a poem that satirized him, referred to his German heritage. Both the sketch and the poem were written by his acquaintance John Williams and published under the pseudonym “Anthony Pasquin” as part of the collection *Poems by Anthony Pasquin*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (London, 1789), 2:168–69.

¹⁷ An entry in the diary of the theater’s prompter, quoted in s.v., “Leoni, Michael,” in *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800*, vol. 9, *Kickill to Machin*, ed. Philip H. Highfill, Kalman A. Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans (Carbondale, 1984), 240.

¹⁸ Benjamin Victor, *The History of the Theaters of London* (London, 1771), 11–12. The quote from Baker is given at Conway, *Jewry in Music*, 77.

¹⁹ For more about the function of the *Mesborer*, see HaCohen, *Music Libel*, 143n37.

²⁰ Observing Jewish worship within the synagogue was already an established practice of early modern English travelers to the continent, who indeed tended to couch their descriptions in “noisy” terms. See Eva Johanna Holmberg, *Jews in the Early Modern English Imagination: A Scattered Nation* (Farnham, 2011), 68–81.

Leoni's performances at the synagogue quickly became a fixture of London's musical itinerary. Samuel Curwen, a Salem merchant forced to flee the revolutionary colonies due to his loyalist tendencies, described his persistent attempts over a period of several weeks to hear Leoni: "Went out ... to the Jews' Synagogue in Duke's Place but the impatience of my companion hurried me from out ... went to the Dutch Synagogue to hear Lioni chaunt, but was disappointed the service being over ... walkt down to the Jews' Synagogue in Shoemakers Lane, in order to hear Leoni perform in the vocal way, but again was disappointed."²¹ Spurred by his continued curiosity, Curwen would eventually get to hear Leoni, "the Jew," sing in no other work than Handel's *Messiah*, a performance marked by "a solemnity, which swells and filled my soul with an, I know not what, that enobled and exalted it beyond itself."²² The sublimity of this performance, which Curwen is at pains to describe, seems to be informed by the presence of his long-sought-out Jew and what this presence might foretell.

Such attitudes were underscored by millennial and evangelical currents that encouraged greater attentiveness and respect toward the Jews as a prelude to their conversion.²³ The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, visited the synagogue in February 1770 during a Sabbath evening service, held on Friday night, and found it an exceedingly solemn experience: "I was desired to hear Mr. Leoni sing at the Jewish synagogue. I never before saw a Jewish congregation behave so decently. Indeed, the place itself is so solemn that it might strike an awe upon those who have any thought of God."²⁴ Leoni's singing seems singlehandedly to have disciplined the noisy Jews and transformed the old synagogue into an awe-inspiring place, one that transcended confessional boundaries. One of Wesley's followers, Thomas Olivers, adapted a tune he heard Leoni sing at the synagogue, the "yigdal," and published it as a Christian hymn, "The God of Abraham praise."²⁵ The spiritual development of the Jews is made manifest in their liturgy, around which both Jews and Christians can commune.

A different account of Leoni's performance and its effects was given by James Boswell, always mindful of London's most recent attractions:

I went to the Jews' synagogue, and heard Leoni, a fine singer It was curious to see the Jews talking and laughing together, and no kind of solemnity in their countenances. It was just a plain religion. They executed so much, like a task, and like boys at a task looked off and intermixed other things I could not help feeling a kind of regret to see the certain descendants of venerable Abraham in an outcast state and sneered at and abused by every fool, at least to a certain degree.²⁶

²¹ Various entries in Curwen's diary between October and December 1775, in Samuel Curwen, *The Journal of Samuel Curwen*, 2 vols., ed. Andrew Oliver (Cambridge, MA, 1972), 1:81, 93, 97.

²² *Ibid.*, 1:122.

²³ Mel Scult, *Millennial Expectations and Jewish Liberties: A Study of the Efforts to Convert the Jews in Britain, Up to the Mid Nineteenth Century* (Leiden, 1978), 56–89.

²⁴ John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols., ed. Nehemiah Curnock (London, 1916), 5:354.

²⁵ Thomas Olivers, *A Hymn To The God of Abraham in Three Parts* (London, 1772). To this day this tune is called "Leoni" in the hymnody of the Anglican Church, as well as other churches. The "yigdal" is a medieval doxology still used today, with Leoni's melody, in the opening or closing of Jewish services.

²⁶ Boswell attended the Sabbath evening service at the Ashkenazi synagogue and the morning service at the Portuguese synagogue in April 1772. James Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence, 1769–1774*, ed. William K. Wimsatt (New York, 1959), 92–93.

Unlike Wesley, Boswell finds no solemnity at the synagogue. For him, Leoni's "fine" singing served only to accentuate a conclusion that he had reached through his secularized, comparative outlook—that this was "just a plain religion." Almost against his will ("I could not help feeling") and while marking certain persistent reservations ("at least to a certain degree"), Boswell nonetheless offers a sympathetic view of the Jewish community in its liturgical setting. What others might have perceived in derogatory, "noisy," terms—the Jews' casual, almost perfunctory, approach to their liturgy, while laughing and "intermixing" other things—Boswell deems an appropriate religious attitude.²⁷

The transformative powers of Leoni's singing allowed English visitors to listen to the Jews in new ways. In her book, HaCohen analyzes accounts of visits to synagogues in eighteenth-century Europe. These accounts, usually ethnographic in tone and aspiring to unbiased and "enlightened" judgment, generally retained some form of the familiar noise accusation.²⁸ Leoni is also measured in these terms—his singing serves as a sort of a temporary antidote to his people's natural inclination toward noise. The experience of listening to Leoni's singing was filtered through the auditor's own worldview, whether grounded in Enlightenment ideals and couched in rational and comparative terms, or in evangelical religious beliefs, discovering in the Jewish soundscape hints for a fulfillment of a prefigured past. The end result was similar: as long as Leoni was singing, the synagogue and the Jewish community were transformed in the eyes of the beholder, whose aspirations to hear the Jews anew were fulfilled.

TRANSITION TO THE THEATER: *THE DUENNA* AND ITS JEWS

The sensational discovery of Leoni at the synagogue eventually led him to a public career in London's patent theaters. The eighteenth century was a period of growing acculturation of Jews in major western European cities, a process keenly felt in the London theaters, where the Jewish presence became more prominent.²⁹ This presence in itself could become a performance of sorts, scrutinized by members of the general public who were keen to see these Jews fail in their new surroundings.³⁰ Thus, the auditoriums of Georgian theaters became contested grounds for the negotiation of Jewish participation in the public sphere. Furthermore, throughout the eighteenth

²⁷ Leigh Hunt gave a similar description, in which his visits to the synagogue as an adolescent in 1790s London served "to universalize [his] notions of religion, and to keep them unbogoted." Leigh Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, 2 vols. (New York, 1850), 1:115–16.

²⁸ In the chapter "Noise in the House of Prayer: Ethnography Transfigured," in HaCohen, *Music Libel*, 126–76.

²⁹ In 1758, Rabbi Zevi Hirsch of the Ashkenazi community spoke against his congregants visiting the theater and opera "instead of gathering in the houses of learning." Charles Duschinsky, "The Rabbinate of the Great Synagogue, London, from 1756–1842," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 9, no. 1–2 (July–October, 1918): 103–37, at 123. This was a challenge for many Jewish communities in western Europe. See Shmuel Feiner, *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia, 2011), 143–57.

³⁰ For examples, see the caricature "A certain Little Fat Jew Macaroni and his Spouse going to the Pantheon" and the attendant text in *Covent Garden Magazine*, October 1772, 138; and the poem, closely related to the noise libel, depicting a Jew vomiting during one of the "Handel Commemoration" concerts, in *Gentleman's Magazine*, July 1784, 533.

century, the theaters attracted many Jews who sought careers backstage and, eventually, as performers on stage.³¹ This vibrant network of exchange no doubt enabled Leoni's breakthrough: he became one of the earliest Jewish public performers and the first to be consistently associated with his Jewishness.³²

Other than talent, training, and networking, performing on stage in a leading role usually required the involvement of a dedicated patron. Leoni was first patronized by Aaron Franks, one of the leaders of the Ashkenazi community and a member of its elite, acculturated circle.³³ Horace Walpole attended one of the concerts at Franks' house and reported, "This morning, indeed, I was at a very fine concert at old Franks's at Isleworth, and heard Leoni, who pleased me more than anything I have heard these hundred years. ... Then he sung songs of Handel in the genuine simple style, and did not put one in pain like rope-dancers."³⁴ Leoni's simple style and solid technique allowed for a calm and pleasant listening experience, as opposed to those of other, less-assured performers. A few days later, Walpole concluded a letter to the Countess of Ossory with these words: "The only new thing I know is that I have heard Leoni, and don't remember that I ever was so pleased with a voice since *you* were born; and yet he was hoarse, by an accident which the Jews don't quite prevent."³⁵ As pleasing and impressive as Leoni was, Walpole's final, and enigmatic, comment makes clear that his ethnic identity was rarely lost on his audience.

In January 1775 we find "Leoni, from the Jews Synagogue" singing Handel's oratorios in a private concert series at Lord Sandwich's country estate.³⁶ Gaining the patronage of one of the most prominent politicians in the country, who was also an avid supporter of the "ancient music" movement, placed Leoni in the perfect position to launch his operatic career. Three months later, the *Public Advertiser* announced to its readers,

The musical world has infinite pleasure in finding that the celebrated Mr. Leoni, so highly and so universally extolled for his very extraordinary Performances in the Jewish Synagogue, is to appear at Covent Garden Theatre on Tuesday next the 25th inst., in the Character of Arbaces in the Opera of Artaxerxes. ... We hear that Mr. Leoni has undertaken the above part at the particular Request and Desire, and even personal Solicitation of some great Personage, besides many other Persons of Distinction.³⁷

³¹ Kalman A. Burnim, "The Jewish Presence in the London Theatre, 1660–1800," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 33 (1992–94): 65–96.

³² Like Leoni, a Jewish singer named Harriett Abrams was making her debut around that time, prompting one newspaper to note, "The number of Jews at the Theatres is incredible." *London Chronicle*, 31 October 1775. However, Abrams largely evaded Jewish associations, even with her overtly Jewish surname. This should be attributed to gendered aspects of the perception of Jews—as opposed to the male Jew, the Jewess was perceived as malleable and as subject to the possession of her viewer. See Uri Erman, "The Jewish Operatic Voice in Eighteenth-Century Britain" (MA thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2011), 51–55 (in Hebrew).

³³ Franks (1685/92–1777) was the son-in-law of Moses Hart (1675–1756), one of the richest Jewish merchants and a pillar of the community. Todd M. Endelman, *Radical Assimilation in English Jewish History, 1656–1945* (Bloomington, 1990), 34–38.

³⁴ Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole, Fourth Earl of Orford*, 9 vols., ed. Peter Cunningham (Edinburgh, 1906), 6:145. Walpole's report appears in a letter to the Earl of Strafford dated 11 November 1774.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

³⁶ *General Evening Post*, 10 January 1775.

³⁷ *Public Advertiser*, 18 April 1775.

Thomas Arne's 1762 opera, *Artaxerxes*, was the first English opera to be modeled on the Italian-style *opera seria*—the serious or tragic opera. As such, it was an important milestone in attempts to adapt the operatic medium to the English cultural sphere.³⁸ Leoni's debut in the leading role of Arbaces did not disappoint the audience: "Mr. Leoni ... was received with great applause by a brilliant and numerous audience."³⁹ Another critic, however, focused on the composition of the audience that night: "A theatrical correspondent informs us, that last night ... the Israelites and their connections had taken entire possession of Covent Garden theatre to hear their favourite Leoni sing."⁴⁰ A few lines later, the writer concedes that Leoni "as a singer, has much merit" but the tone of the exposition hints to a certain unease;⁴¹ the Jews, led by Leoni, are taking *possession* of the theatrical public sphere.

Leoni's success in *Artaxerxes* led to his major breakthrough—a leading role in Sheridan's *The Duenna*. Sheridan was involved in every aspect of Leoni's performance and in the creation of the character he was to play, an enigmatic companion of Isaac called Don Carlos. Throughout the opera, Isaac identifies Don Carlos as a "friend," but rather than functioning as an accomplice to the deceitful Jew, Don Carlos has no real dramatic function in the opera. Instead, he usually enters in specific moments to sing lyrically and beautifully to the leading female characters. Thus, while dramatically negligible, Don Carlos is perhaps the most musically prominent character in the opera, with three solo arias and a leading role in the extended finales of both Acts I and II. The peculiarities of the character are probably the result of Sheridan's attempts to insert Leoni, as a leading attraction, into the already structured plot of the opera. His considerations also extended to specific features of Leoni's performance, such as his accent and his vocal technique: by limiting the character's spoken dialogue, Sheridan presumably circumvented Leoni's pronounced foreign accent, which would have been less noticeable in singing than in speaking,⁴² and by describing in detail Leoni's voice and technique to the chief composer of the opera, Sheridan's father-in-law Thomas Linley, Sheridan was able to ensure that Leoni would "show himself advantageously" within the opera.⁴³

Perhaps the most telling adjustment Sheridan made to Leoni's role as Don Carlos was in relation to his ethnic identity. Thomas Moore, in his biography of Sheridan, states that "Carlos was originally meant to be a Jew, and is called 'Cousin Moses' by Isaac in the first sketch of the dialogue; but, possibly from the consideration that this

³⁸ The opera was a major success, but as an attempt to initiate a new operatic tradition, it proved unsuccessful. See Suzanne Aspden, "Arne's Paradox: National Opera in Eighteenth-Century Britain," in *Word and Music Studies: Essays in Honor of Steven Paul Scher on Cultural Identity and the Musical Stage*, ed. Suzanne M. Lodato, Suzanne Aspden, and Walter Bernhart (Amsterdam, 2002), 195–215.

³⁹ *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 26 April 1775.

⁴⁰ *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 26 April 1775.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² "The managers very judiciously had given him, as a foreigner, but few words to speak." *London Evening Post*, 23 November 1775. This consideration is described in more detail in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, July 1826, 25. Although preserving a kernel of ethnographic reality, such observations were molded into the perception of Jews as distorters of vernacular languages and hence of culture at large. See Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York, 1991), 10–37.

⁴³ These were Sheridan's own words in a letter to Linley, quoted in Thomas Moore, *Memoirs of the life of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (London, 1825), 160–61. Linley was aided in the composition of the opera by his son, Thomas Linley the younger.

would apply too personally to Leoni, who was to perform the character, its designation was altered.”⁴⁴ It seems that Sheridan, in distancing the Jewish Leoni from the character he was to play, strove to create a space free from religious prejudice for the reception of his virtuoso singer. But this was a halfhearted attempt: Don Carlos is still introduced and serves as a companion to Isaac, who shares with him his manipulations and maneuvers. Furthermore, at a certain point in the play, Isaac refers to Carlos as “coz,” a remnant of the earlier, discarded, version of the character.⁴⁵ Carlos, then, is not only a confidant of Isaac but quite possibly his cousin and a Jew himself, facts that would immediately cast doubts over his intentions and character.

This conflicted manner of handling the character of Carlos—formally de-Judaizing him while leaving him a Jew by association—was not an oversight but a subtle attempt to negotiate Leoni’s performance. The star singer, widely known to be Jewish, is made to wander into the production as an outsider and a latent Jew, thus tapping into the audience’s fascination with the exotic Other. In a recent article, Mita Choudhury singles out this preference for the contingent (Leoni’s Jewishness) and the performative (his singing) as an explanation for the incongruities of the character of Don Carlos.⁴⁶ Such preferences, while straining the traditional notions of dramatic form and genre, played a growing role in the reception of staged works and, in the case of *The Duenna*, were at the heart of the opera’s exceptional success. Sheridan superimposed upon his opera an ethnic spectacle, catering to the widespread fascination with the Other.

However, it seems to me that Sheridan did more than simply tantalize his audience with the spectacle of a singing Jew: he actively guided them toward a certain mode of listening to that Jew. Almost all of the lyrics that Leoni sang to his female counterparts revolved around one issue—the gaining of trust. In the first instance, Isaac and Carlos meet “Clara,” who is in fact Isaac’s intended, Louisa, while she is trying to reach her beloved Antonio. Louisa is feigning a call for trust, telling Isaac, “But, sure, sir, you have too much gallantry and honour to betray me,” while all along out-manipulating him. Mistaking her identity and thinking that this will serve his ultimate goal of marrying Louisa, Isaac entrusts “Clara” to his companion Carlos for safe travel. This picture of mutual deception then shifts to Carlos—“May I rely on you, good signor?” Louisa asks. Carlos answers decisively—“Lady, it is impossible I should deceive you”—and then goes on to elaborate in a full aria, of which the first sentence reads, “Had I a heart for falsehood framed, I ne’er could injure you / For though your tongue no promise claimed, Your charms would make me true.”⁴⁷ Carlos suggests that the womanly charms of Louisa would secure his benevolence. The aria was set to an old melody of presumably Irish extraction, a setting Sheridan himself felt “answer[ed] excessively well” the lyrics he

⁴⁴ Ibid., 169–70.

⁴⁵ Isaac’s reference to Carlos as “coz” appears in Act II, Scene II. See Sheridan, *Duenna*, 113. This seems more than an oversight, as it appears in all the printed versions of the opera, from the early unauthorized versions to the authorized version first published in 1794.

⁴⁶ Mita Choudhury, “Reflections upon Maintaining a Competitive Edge: *The Duenna* and Her Peers at Drury Lane,” in *Richard Brinsley Sheridan: The Impresario in Political and Cultural Context*, ed. Jack E. DeRochi and Daniel J. Ennis (Lewisburg, 2013), 83–103.

⁴⁷ Sheridan, *Duenna*, 103–4.

wrote.⁴⁸ Carlos begins his aria with a prolepsis, an anticipation of an objection and its rebuttal. This rhetorical move is also musically reinforced—the prospect of him harboring a false heart is contemplated in an ascending line, only to be resolved in a full cadence, promising no injury. This initial statement, musically coherent and independent, creates a foundation of trust that the following phrases further deepen.⁴⁹

This aria is closely followed by the three-part finale of the first act, which again revolves around the trustworthiness of Carlos. The first part, a “pert, sprightly air” as Sheridan requested from Linley, features an exchange between Isaac, haughtily singing in patter of his “expecting mistress,” and Louisa lamenting the fact that “in strangers I’m forced to confide.”⁵⁰ This marks the transition to the second part of the finale, a solo da capo aria by Carlos, who insists, “Gentle maid, ah, why suspect me?” Composed as a stately minuet, the aria conveys Carlos’s indignation while allowing Leoni an opportunity to exhibit more of his virtuosity, in a variety of embellishments, as part of his character’s insistence on being trusted. The act finally ends in a short trio, in which all three wish, “never may he [Carlos] happy be, If in aught he’s false to thee.”

The preoccupation with trust continues into Act II, after Carlos has conducted Louisa to Isaac’s house to wait for her beloved Antonio. The increasingly anxious Louisa expresses her lingering doubts over Carlos’s conduct toward “a lady who has trusted herself to your protection,” blaming his actions on his ignorance of the pains of love, to which Carlos replies, “Alas, I know it well.” This leads to another of Carlos’s solo arias, “O Had My Love Ne’er Smiled on Me,” relating the story of a past lover who ultimately crushed his hopes for marriage.⁵¹ This disclosure creates a new understanding between Carlos and the young lovers once they are united:

LOUISA. Antonio, Carlos has been a lover himself.

ANTONIO. Then he knows the value of his trust.

CARLOS. You shall not find me unfaithful.⁵²

The act ends when they join in a catch emphasizing the compassion that dwells at the heart of any past lover, such as Carlos, as a relic of his former sentiments. Carlos’s trustworthiness thus confirmed, this trio marks his final appearance within the opera.

These elaborations on trust and compassion, then, follow Carlos from his very first appearance and in fact form his only function within the opera. If Carlos was inserted into the world of *The Duenna* solely for the exhibition of Leoni’s singing and exotic ethnicity, as Choudhury suggests, it is still a most peculiar mode of insertion, leaving his character completely outside the dramatic arc yet continually obsessed with

⁴⁸ In a letter quoted in Roger Fiske, “A Score for *The Duenna*,” *Music and Letters* 42, no. 2 (April 1961): 132–41, at 134. The tune was known under various names but mainly as “Gramachree” or “Gramachree Molly.” For a discussion of the origin of the tune, see James Hogg, Peter Garside, and Peter Horsfall, *The Forest Minstrel* (Edinburgh, 2006), 250–52.

⁴⁹ Only a vocal score of the songs of *The Duenna* was published: *The Duenna; or Double Elopement, for Voice, Harpsichord or Violin* (London, 1776). A blueprint for a reconstruction of an orchestral score is offered in Fiske, “Score for *The Duenna*.”

⁵⁰ Sheridan, *Duenna*, 104–5. Sheridan’s request from Linley is quoted in Moore, *Memoirs*, 161.

⁵¹ The aria was set to a Scottish song, “The Bush aboon Trequair.” Fiske, “Score for *The Duenna*,” 139.

⁵² Sheridan, *Duenna*, 122.

proving the sincerity of his motivations.⁵³ However, I would argue that all of these elements—Leoni’s singing, his ethnic identity, and his character’s preoccupation with being trusted—should be viewed as an interlocking theatrical schema. Leoni was widely associated with the Jewish community and its synagogue. The novelty of a singing Jew was deliberately worked into an anti-Jewish opera, in which his singing became the mark of his distinction. As opposed to Isaac, the self-proclaimed “Machiavel” and ensnarer of innocent women, Carlos represents a different model of a modern Jew: benevolent and true in his dealings with women. His trustworthiness is established through his singing, which is direct and heartfelt, usually set to familiar ballads yet virtuosic when needed. Carlos’s flatness as a character and the alteration of his original, overtly Jewish name were only meant to highlight the real presence on stage of Leoni, the modern Jew who is vindicated through song. Critics were indeed impressed that Leoni’s singing conveyed his sincere feelings beyond mere theatrical representation: “Such an applause was never given to merely a singer, and which even his musical powers would not have commanded, had not the feelings of the man been added to them.”⁵⁴ However, it is important to note that Carlos’s interaction is always circumscribed, through echoing and retelling in song, and that he never threatens his environs by presuming to act the suitor himself. If Isaac has overreached and is stuck as the “dead wall between church and synagogue,” then Leoni, as Carlos, is only able to infuse both spaces with a shared song over and above the communal walls.

One issue that endangered this shared experience was Leoni’s decision to keep his engagement at the synagogue throughout the run of *The Duenna*, a decision that had major implications on the opera’s performance schedule. As the *Morning Chronicle* explained to its readers, “*The Duenna* ... can never be performed on a *Friday* on account of Leoni’s engagement with the Synagogue. The Jews Sabbath commences at six on the Friday evening and terminates on the same hour on the Saturday.”⁵⁵ This informative tone, discussing a simple matter of prior engagements, soon changed:

The most Christian Managers of Covent Garden regard the conversion of *Leoni* as a thing most devoutly to be wished for! In the midst of a run of crowded houses they are obliged to stop their opera of the *Duenna* every Friday. Great overtures have been made to him, even to stand neuter in his Faith, remaining (as his friend Isaac expresses it) “Like a dead wall between Church and Synagogue, or the blank leaf that divides the Old and New Testament.”⁵⁶

Unlike Isaac, whose calculated conversion leaves him “dead” and “blank,” Leoni refused such an existence, and so not only endangered the proprietors’ incomes but also the dramatic effect of *The Duenna*. While the opera centers on a Jewish interloper and his failed attempt to infiltrate society, the star singer chose an *opposite* mode of Jewish operation, the stubborn adherence to their religion. The uneasiness with a

⁵³ William Oxberry, writing years after Leoni’s death, indeed could not make sense of the character of Carlos: “He seems like a stranger, who, by some sudden chance, has been flung into a family party; and who, in spite of all his efforts, his bustling assiduities, and a word occasionally thrown in, still remains an isolated intruder.” William Oxberry, ed., *The Duenna*, by Richard Brinsley Sheridan (London, 1818), iii.

⁵⁴ *London Evening Post*, 23 November 1775.

⁵⁵ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 25 November 1775.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 28 November 1775. The writer misattributes Louisa’s phrase to Isaac.

Jew's performance on stage was succinctly phrased by *London Magazine*: “[Leoni is] A Famous Jew singer, in whom the playhouse goes snacks with the Synagogue.”⁵⁷

Notwithstanding these reservations, Leoni's overall reception was enthusiastic: “The highest instance of art exhibited in that excellent Opera the *Duenna*, perhaps, is the introduction of Mr. Leoni.”⁵⁸ A critical essay on *The Duenna* attributed much of its success to the “uncommon prepossession of the town in favour of Leoni.”⁵⁹ The laudatory review in the *London Evening Post* quoted above, after praising the managers “for his presence” and Leoni “for accepting,” concludes with the moral “how diffident is real merit.”⁶⁰ The talent hidden within the confines of the Jewish community found its way into the world in a move that exemplified the liberal and meritocratic ideals of British society. In this sense, *The Duenna* was a carefully staged performance of a new social reality—the (re)discovery of *merit*, in the form of operatic singing, in the Jewish community. This reality was staged within the opera as a semi-independent occurrence, in which the lines between real and fictive and between singer and role were deliberately blurred. Building in this way on the performative dynamics of the operatic voice, *The Duenna* adumbrated the possibility of a trustworthy Jew.

FALSETTO AND THE FALSE JEW

Leoni's public career spanned a total of fourteen years, during which he established himself as a leading virtuoso singer in operas, oratorios, and private concert series. He remained, however, most identified with his two breakout roles, Arbaces in *Artaxerxes* and Carlos in *The Duenna*, both of which he performed regularly in Covent Garden up to the 1781–82 season.⁶¹ His success was common knowledge —“*Leoni's* incomparable melody is so well known, and generally admired, that it would be fruitless to enlarge upon it”—and his name became synonymous with vocal excellence: “Medal and Vocal Chair, for the best singer ... were adjudged to Mr. John Jones ... now justly honoured with the appellation of *The Welsh Leoni*.”⁶² The quality of Leoni's falsetto was much appreciated and frequently commented upon. Horace Walpole noted that “there is a full melancholy melody in [Leoni's] voice, though a falsetto, that nothing but a natural voice ever compasses,” while a critic of *London Magazine* extolled Leoni for “singing in a manner sufficient to create jealousy and envy in the breasts of some of the most celebrated *castrati* at the Haymarket.”⁶³

⁵⁷ *London Magazine*, January 1776, 52. For other reports on schedule conflicts between Leoni's synagogal and theatrical engagements, see *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 17 January 1776; and Joseph Cradock, *Literary and Miscellaneous Memoirs*, 4 vols. (London, 1828), 1:122.

⁵⁸ *London Evening Post*, 21 November 1775.

⁵⁹ *The Devil: Containing a review and investigation of all public subjects whatever*, 2 October 1786.

⁶⁰ *London Evening Post*, 23 November 1775.

⁶¹ Charles Beecher Hogan, ed., *The London Stage, 1660–1800*, pt. 5, vol. 1, 1776–1783 (Carbondale, 1968), 35–36, 42, 54, 69, 123, 132, 139, 145, 159, 205, 210, 226, 242, 246, 305, 307, 310, 325, 328, 388, 390, 412, 419, 427, 465, 469, 473–74, 479, 494.

⁶² *New Morning Post or General Advertiser*, 7 December 1776; *Sentimental and Masonic Magazine*, October 1792, 336.

⁶³ Walpole, *Letters*, 6:145; *London Magazine*, January 1776, 48. The King's Theatre at the Haymarket was home to London's Italian opera company.

It was exactly this proximity to the castrati, however, that troubled many contemporaries. Since the introduction of Italian opera into Britain in the early eighteenth century, these paragons of song were accused of undermining British national standing with their gender ambiguity and effeminate singing.⁶⁴ Their arrival bode ill for the falsetto voice that, tainted by association, gradually disappeared from the parallel English musical drama of the early eighteenth century, after enjoying a prominent role in Restoration theater.⁶⁵ In this respect, Leoni's career was part of an important attempt, after decades of absence, to reintroduce high-pitched male singing as dramatically viable within English musical theater.

The spectacular success Leoni enjoyed with *The Duenna* seemed to indicate that this attempt would succeed, but it was very soon followed by growing anxieties and resistance to the spectacle of the high-pitched man. As operatic culture changed in the last decades of the eighteenth century, the castrati themselves were losing public appeal.⁶⁶ A new regime of vocal categories was beginning to form, giving precedence to sopranos and tenors and striving toward well-defined and relatable individual identities.⁶⁷ This change was perhaps a specific manifestation of a much larger cultural shift. In his book, *The Making of the Modern Self*, Dror Wahrman argues that, in the last few decades of the eighteenth century, English society grew increasingly intolerant toward any manifestation of an ambiguous self in categories such as gender, race, or the human-animal divide.⁶⁸ Leoni's career was therefore shadowed by a growing reluctance of British audiences to listen to men singing in a "female" voice. The eminent philosopher James Beattie was explicit:

I was shocked at Leoni, in "Had I a heart for falsehood," &c. A man singing with a woman's voice sounds as unnatural to me as a woman singing with a man's. Either may do in a private company, where it is enough if people are diverted; but on a stage, where nature ought to be imitated, both are, in my opinion, intolerable.⁶⁹

Theatrical mimesis, according to Beattie, has an educational function of denoting the "natural" through proper imitation. Leoni's performance, then, is not only bad

⁶⁴ Thomas McGeary, "Gendering Opera: Italian Opera as the Feminine Other in Britain, 1700–42," *Journal of Musicological Research* 14, no. 1 (January 1994): 17–34.

⁶⁵ Peter Giles, *The History and Technique of the Counter-Tenor* (Aldershot, 1994), 55–65; Suzanne Aspden, "The Role of the Countertenor on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage," in *Der Countertenor: die männliche Falsettimme vom Mittelalter zur Gegenwart*, ed. Corinna Herr, Arnold Jacobshagen, and Kai Wessel (Mainz, 2012), 99–111. Aspden shows, however, that countertenors found renewed, though limited, favor in Handel's oratorios.

⁶⁶ John Rosselli, "The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550–1850," *Acta Musicologica* 60, no. 2 (May–August 1988): 143–79, at 178–79.

⁶⁷ The last third of the eighteenth century was a period of conscious attempts at operatic experimentations and reform, mainly by the conflation of the Italian and French traditions and the seria and buffa (serious and comic, respectively) operatic genres. See David Kimbell, *Italian Opera* (Cambridge, 1994), 216–49. The resultant operas, exhibiting real-time musical response and structural continuity, emphasized the psychological development of the characters as they drive the plot forward.

⁶⁸ Dror Wahrman, *The Making of the Modern Self: Identity and Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2004).

⁶⁹ In a letter to the Duchess of Gordon dated 16 May 1781, in *Elegant Epistles, Being a Copious Collection of Familiar and Amusing Letters* (London, 1822), 626.

imitation but also has the potential of perverting the audience's concept of what is natural.

The question of nature stood at the center of public discourse concerning Leoni's falsetto. Characterized by a breathy, flute-like timbre and creating almost no overtones, the dry sound of the falsetto was often perceived as manifesting its innate *false-ness*—a manufactured voice born of laryngeal manipulation.⁷⁰ Commentators offered a variety of analogies in describing Leoni's voice as instrumental or otherwise non-human.⁷¹ Leoni *sounded* as if he was transgressing the bounds of the human, and he was always in danger of being classified as another castrato.⁷² One critic took Beattie's warning to heart and portrayed Leoni's "mechanized" singing as a fundamental distortion of human expression:

[*The Duenna*] has been a favourite entertainment with that enervated and sentimental part of the public, who die at soft notes, though squeezed out of such a wretched *machine* as Leoni. That man is a burlesque on all character, expression, and taste; and yet, by producing a merely sensual effect on the lax nerves of our depraved audiences he has been the means of giving the *Duenna* a run, which no English Opera has had since the days of Gay. We are sorry to observe that our countrymen are gradually losing their taste for manly and rational entertainments.⁷³

Leoni's singing is reduced, in a torrent of adjectives, to a physical and "sensual" effect, operating on the nerves of an already desensitized audience. His vocalization is admittedly "soft" and alluring, but this only serves to hide what is really a grotesque, "squeezing" machine. The writer has no tolerance for Leoni's seduction—his artificiality must be exposed and rejected.

Importantly, this anti-falsetto discourse led many commentators to associate Leoni's high-pitched voice with his *Jewish* identity through the proximity of castration to the ritual act of circumcision. When Leoni performed in Dublin in June 1777, one newspaper discussed the "arrival of the celebrated Israelite, whose warbling abilities are the only theme of polite conversation," then added, "the effeminacy of his voice being analogous to the Italian that several ladies who are very good judges of things have declared that circumcision alone could never produce such harmony."⁷⁴ Leoni, then, is just another castrato.

A long letter from a reader to the *Morning Chronicle* claimed to quote a backstage conversation between two of Covent Garden's performers, John Lee and Frederick Charles Reinhold, and their growing displeasure in light of Leoni's rising star. Lee is quoted as saying "Damme, I hate the *unnatural, squeaking tone* of that *son of Israel*," while Reinhold replies,

⁷⁰ "Leoni does not suit our taste. His voice engages the *ear* without affecting the *heart*. Even in singing there must be *nature* to satisfy the *understanding*." *Times*, 22 January 1787.

⁷¹ James Boaden, *Memoirs of the Life of John Philip Kemble* (London, 1825), 397; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 28 April 1787; *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, July 1826, 25; *Westminster Magazine*, June 1777, 4.

⁷² For example, see *The Treasury of Wit* (Sunderland, 1788), 157.

⁷³ *Selector*, November 1776, 57.

⁷⁴ Quoted in John C. Greene, *Theatre in Dublin, 1745–1820: A Calendar of Performances*, 6 vols. (Bethlehem, 2011), 3:1749. See also *New Morning Post or General Advertiser*, 14 December 1776.

Leoni's singing always *sickens me* so, that I can scarcely stand to hear one of his songs out ... there is something in the *shrill pipe* of that *circumcised dog* that *grates* my ears cursedly; I never can *get rid* of it, it *haunts* me in my *dreams*, and I often *wake* myself by *endeavouring* to *imitate* him.⁷⁵

Employing extremely abusive language, this dialogue reiterates Leoni's "known" faults—his shrillness and artificiality—but this time couched in anti-Jewish terms. His vocal emissions are here contingent upon his ethnic identity as a "circumcised dog," whereupon the sound of his falsetto becomes the haunting sound of Jewish noise.⁷⁶ At a certain point, Leoni himself enters, whereupon both actors attempt to persuade him to convert so as "not be pointed at for a Jew." Leoni replies,

Why, gentlemen, *my* tenet is, that the *profession* never disgraces *the man*, though the *man* may the profession. Take care *you* are never *pointed* at Mr. Lee; if performers had but CHRISTIANITY enough about them to lower themselves, in their *own* opinion, they would rise in the same proportion in the *publick* judgement.⁷⁷

The initial abusive language of the dialogue only prepared the ground for Leoni's decisive rebuttal. Lee acknowledges that "this last tune of his was not quite in the squeaking tone; it was in a tolerable manly voice."⁷⁸ Leoni's character and manliness are vindicated not by his falsetto but by his public conduct and *Christian* humility. These principles, as they are articulated in his speech, constitute the real essence of his voice—manly and tolerable.

Leoni's speech calls for a distinction between the character of a public singer and the effects of his singing, between the sincerity of his speech and the supposed artificiality of his song. Therefore, although this text strives to rehabilitate Leoni's reputation, it in fact does so by completely *eliding* the question of his falsetto. The fact remains that, for some listeners, Leoni's falsetto became a powerful emblem of the supposed inherent femininity and artificiality of the Jews, rooted in their bodies.⁷⁹ These associations, with deep cultural roots, had many expressions in British history.⁸⁰ With his singing, Leoni called attention to his own body, to its resonance and sonority; the listener, for his part, could easily juxtapose Leoni's falsetto with his presumed circumcision, thus deciphering his performance as a Jewish spectacle. For anyone inclined to make that connection, Leoni's *falsetto* served as the perfect manifestation of the Jews' inherent *falseness* as exposed in their voices.

⁷⁵ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 25 April 1776.

⁷⁶ For the dog metaphor in relation to Jews, see Kenneth R. Stow, *Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters* (Stanford, 2006).

⁷⁷ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 25 April 1776.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Gilman, *Jew's Body*.

⁸⁰ Already in 1702, an anonymous pamphleteer, discussing the arrival of castrati in England, remarked, "But this Evil increases upon us every Day; there are more of the *Circumcision* come over lately from Italy." Quoted in Lisa A. Freeman, *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage* (Philadelphia, 2002), 77. During the 1753 "Jew Bill" debates, the trope of circumcision figured prominently in the anti-Jewish discourse. Roy S. Wolper, "Circumcision as Polemic in the Jew Bill of 1753: The Cutter Cut?," *Eighteenth Century Life* 7, no. 3 (May 1982): 28–36. Curiously, one pamphlet from this period mentions a supposedly Jewish castrato who would bring his brethren from the synagogue for support. See *The Voice of Discord, or the Battle of the Fiddles* (London, 1753), 16–18.

THE RESURRECTION OF THE JEW IN THE ORATORIO

Leoni's career faltered in the 1780s for a number of reasons. In late 1779, he was embroiled in a public scandal involving Miss Montague, the illegitimate daughter of the second earl of Halifax and a ward in chancery, who was to inherit a sizable sum upon her marriage. Leoni was acquainted with the mother, a singer herself, and was accused of assiduously pursuing the heiress. The affair was portrayed in the media as another instance of the "Beau Jew" imposing on an innocent Christian girl, and Leoni, made famous for portraying the benevolent Don Carlos, found himself cast in the role of the sinister Isaac.⁸¹ Eventually, Leoni married within the confines of the Jewish community and at the synagogue: "In Duke's Place, Mr. Leoni, of Covent Garden theatre, to Miss Sarah Isaacs."⁸²

During the 1783–84 season, Leoni co-founded a new opera house in Dublin, a substantial financial investment that failed by the end of the season.⁸³ This venture was also perceived by some as a form of Jewish imposition: "Leoni, who sung between the Acts, Was on his first Appearance received with some Hisses amidst the Applause, and a Cry of 'No Jew Manager!'"⁸⁴ The financial repercussions of the failed venture would cripple him for the rest of his life.⁸⁵ Concomitantly, the high fees that he continued to demand for his performances were also associated by some with his Jewishness: "[Leoni] stated his note of mouth at twenty guineas: a little too much even for the conscience of the hardest of the Synagogue to exact. But *monies, monies, monies!* is the word with him on all occasions."⁸⁶ Alongside these career setbacks, Leoni seemed to suffer from a material decline of his voice; as one of his auditors noted, "[Leoni's] voice, always feigned, is not so good as it was."⁸⁷ Repeated notices in the papers informed the audience of Leoni's cancellations due to illness.⁸⁸ Toward the end of 1786, the *Times*, in a somber tone, would note, "Leoni, once the most popular singer ever known—no longer warbles the wood notes wild of Carlos."⁸⁹

This declaration was premature, however, as 1787 marked Leoni's successful return to Covent Garden with his signature roles as well as his participation in the

⁸¹ The most detailed account of the Halifax affair appears in the memoirs of the clergyman John Trusler, *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Dr. Trusler* (Bath, 1806), 63–69. Trusler claims that the girl was rescued by her friends, who "tampered with Leoni, and finding, Jew-like, that money was the only object he had in view, bought him off for the sum of £2,000, and he deserted her." *Ibid.*, 69. For other accounts of the affair, see *London Courant and Westminster Chronicle*, 17 November 1780; and *Mimosa, or the Sensitive Plant* (London, 1779), 15.

⁸² *Gentleman's Magazine*, December 1781, 593.

⁸³ Greene, *Theatre in Dublin*, 3:2185, 2201, 2204–5, 2210, 2216–17, 2231, 2273.

⁸⁴ *Public Advertiser*, 3 May 1784.

⁸⁵ The Jewish comedian James De Castro writes that, after Dublin, "[Leoni] came to England again quite *minus*." *The Memoirs of J. Decastro, Comedian* (London, 1824), 10. Eventually, Leoni was announced bankrupt. *Times*, 14 November 1785.

⁸⁶ *General Advertiser*, 25 April 1784.

⁸⁷ An entry from Syllas Neville's diary for 10 September 1784, quoted in s.v., "Leoni, Michael," in Highfill, Burnim, and Langhans, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Actors*, vol. 9, *Kickill to Machin*, 241.

⁸⁸ Greene, *Theatre in Dublin*, 3:2210, 2216, 2217; *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, 23 August 1787.

⁸⁹ *Times*, 30 October 1786.

opening season of the new Royalty Theatre.⁹⁰ Apart from his own performances, Leoni used both of these engagements to introduce to the public his most recent discovery, a young Jewish boy from the Ashkenazi community of London called John Braham (truncated from *Abraham*).⁹¹ Braham was orphaned at a young age, and Leoni, recognizing Braham's talent, took the boy under his wing.⁹² The papers promoted his debut: "The very great encouragement this young Gentleman has received from those that have heard him (and particularly from his own people) will venture to proclaim that he will become as great a favorite of the public as his master."⁹³ Braham would, in fact, greatly surpass his master and become the leading British tenor of the early nineteenth century.

As for Leoni, his return to the stage divided the critics, some commenting on his declining powers while others stressed newfound subtleties.⁹⁴ One issue that was frequently mentioned, as in the promotion of Braham, was the support that his performances received from his fellow Jews. One critic cited his performance as a reason for the low attendance at the rival Drury Lane Theatre: "As *Leoni* sung at Covent-Garden—there was not one Jew before the curtain."⁹⁵ Years later, James Boaden would write, "The bill at Covent Garden on the 2d of June, for Leoni's benefit, operated as an epistle to the Hebrews, and they crowded to assist a singer whom they so justly admired."⁹⁶ Despite the favorable tone, Boaden's choice of words hints at Leoni's evangelical effect in reinvigorating the Jewish community.

The tensions inherent in such a move were most palpable when Leoni performed in oratorios, a musical genre that strove to constitute a sense of community that is decidedly *Christian*. The fact that the Jewish congregation allowed one of their own to participate in such performances is in itself quite surprising.⁹⁷ For the British Christian auditors, the use of a Jewish singer in oratorios could, as we have seen, cater to certain eschatological outlooks, but on the other hand, it could also prove debilitating for the symbolic functioning of the oratorio itself. As the

⁹⁰ The Royalty Theatre was founded by the popular actor John Palmer in direct challenge to the theatrical patent system. See Jane Moody, *Illegitimate Theatre in London, 1770–1840* (Cambridge, 2000), 21–24.

⁹¹ An unidentified newspaper cut from 21 March 1787 still refers to him as "Master Abrams." THM/35/1, John Braham Archive, Victoria and Albert Museum Archive. When returning to the stage as an adult, he was introduced, "MR. BRAHAM, Whose original name was ABRAHAM, is one of the sons of Israel." *Tomahawk*, 4 March 1796.

⁹² The possibility that Braham was related to Leoni is discussed and largely dismissed in Conway, *Jewry in Music*, 78–80. In the Victoria and Albert Museum Archive, I had the chance to examine a "Biographical sketch," in what appears to be Braham's own handwriting, that states, without any mention of familial ties to Leoni, "I lost my parents in my infancy—was bound apprentice to Leoni the singer." THM/35/12, John Braham Archive, Victoria and Albert Museum Archive. This is most likely a draft Braham made for his contribution to John Sainsbury's *A Dictionary of Musicians From the Earliest Ages to the Present Time*, vol. 2 (London, 1824).

⁹³ *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, 21 April 1787.

⁹⁴ For the former, see *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 7 July 1787; and *Times*, 21 August 1787. For the latter, see *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, 15 January 1787; and *Times*, 15 January 1787.

⁹⁵ *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, 19 February 1787. See also *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, 15 January 1787.

⁹⁶ Boaden, *Memoirs*, 224. A benefit night was a performance whose proceeds (or part of them) would go to a specific performer.

⁹⁷ A later anecdote spread that the community fired Leoni from his synagogal post for performing in Handel's *Messiah*. This anecdote emerged long after Leoni died, its first instance being in s.v., "Leoni, Michael," in Sainsbury, *A Dictionary of Musicians*, 59. Conway doubts its veracity. Conway, *Jewry in Music*, 76.

Morning Chronicle succinctly declared, “We hear Leoni is engaged at the *Resurrection*. —A Jew!—How the Devil can that be?”⁹⁸ This genre of religious musical drama, especially as it was developed in the early eighteenth century by Bach and Handel, endeavored to transcend the limits of space and time dictated by direct mimetic representation, as it placed its audiences on a temporal continuum that extended from historical to meta-historical and eschatological times through a variety of “fictional planes.”⁹⁹ In the British context, the transformative power of Handel’s oratorios was at the center of eighteenth-century attempts to formulate national identity on the basis of a specific vision of Christianity and through a specific theological identification—that of *ancient Israel*.¹⁰⁰ Handel’s oratorios were, in this respect, part of a widespread cultural endeavor to crown Britain as the modern-day *chosen nation* of God—heroic, Protestant, and destined for glory. Leoni’s performances in these oratorios challenged this process of identification, as the figuration of Britain as ancient Israel now depended upon an actual Jew.

This problem stood at the center of a long column published in the *British Mercury*, a periodical edited by the radical journalist John Oswald.¹⁰¹ Titled “La Bagatelle” (“trifles”), the column is a satirical reportage of supposedly recent fluctuations in commerce and the tastes and manners of society. At a certain point, the writer turns to discuss the recent sensational triumph of Daniel Mendoza, a Jewish boxer, in a match attended by the Prince of Wales: “Nothing now is talked of among the disciples of the Broughtonian School but the celebrated Mendoza, the Jew bruiser.”¹⁰² A twenty-two-year-old Portuguese Jew, Mendoza was now making the first, sensational moves of his boxing career. The writer describes the Jews’ ecstatic reaction to Mendoza: “The children of Israel regard this jaw-breaking Jew as the Fore-runner of the Messiah, and now pant in present expectation of those happy days, when they shall rule over the heathen with rods of iron, and break in pieces the rulers of the earth, like a potter’s vessel!”¹⁰³

The writer paraphrases Psalms 2:9, “Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”¹⁰⁴ This psalm deals with the triumphant coming of the Messiah and his victory over his enemies. Christian exegesis interpreted it as describing the passion of Christ and his final triumph, thus charging it with distinct eschatological meaning.¹⁰⁵ However, Mendoza’s manifestation of

⁹⁸ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 29 January 1776. The *Resurrection* was an oratorio composed by Samuel Arnold and first performed in 1770.

⁹⁹ Ruth HaCohen, “Fictional Planes and Their Interplay: The Alchemy of Forms and Emotions in St. Matthew Passion,” in *Music and Signs: Semiotic and Cognitive Studies in Music*, ed. Ioannis Zannos (Bratislava, 1999), 416–34.

¹⁰⁰ See the chapter “British Israel” in Ruth Smith, *Handel’s Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1995), 213–29.

¹⁰¹ *British Mercury*, 26 May 1787, 48–52. For more on Oswald, see T. F. Henderson, s.v., “Oswald, John (c.1760–1793),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20922>, accessed 21 December 2015.

¹⁰² John Broughton (1703–89) was the founder of modern boxing as a gentlemanly sport following a set of codified rules. See Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London, 2008), 29–39.

¹⁰³ *British Mercury*, 26 May 1787, 51.

¹⁰⁴ All English translations are from the King James Version.

¹⁰⁵ The psalm opens, “Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? / The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed.” In Anglican liturgy, it is read during Easter.

superior physical power is supposedly seized by the Jews as calling into question this interpretation—the Messiah in the verses is their own, and Mendoza is his “Fore-runner.”

However, the writer used Psalms 2:9 for another reason: it was meant to echo in the reader’s mind the tenor aria from Handel’s *Messiah*, which sets this very text to a fierce musical texture, full of leaps and breaks, that evokes the violent vengeance of God. This aria appears toward the end of the second part of the oratorio, which covers the period from Christ’s passion to the spreading of his gospel and its rejection. The final scene of this part, titled “God’s Ultimate Victory” by the compiler of the text, Charles Jennens, expresses the continuous anticipation of God’s providential retribution, which represents historical time until the Last Judgment. This historical time, the very *present* of the oratorio’s listeners, is spent rejoicing in God’s triumph over his enemies, represented in this aria and in the singing of *Hallelujah*, the chorus that concludes this part of the oratorio. By alluding to this aria, the writer suggests that the Jews are trying to appropriate not only the sacred text but also Handel’s music, as it represents and evokes a sense of an increasingly triumphal present.¹⁰⁶

The allusion to Handel’s oratorio is not left as a mere hint—the writer proceeds to describe the Jews as they perform an oratorio of their own, led by none other than Leoni:

A jubilee was lately held by the sons of Jacob, to celebrate these glorious hopes, and a psalm suitable to the occasion was sung by Leoni. The following verses sung in chorus, formed the burden or refrain of the anthem: *The Lord hath said it, ye Sons of Israel, the merciful God of Jacob hath made it sure, o! ye daughters of Jerusalem! Ye shall break with clubs of iron the bones of their mighty men of war; ye shall thrust their young women through with spears; ye shall dash out the brains of their little ones against the wall! Ye shall utterly exterminate the nations, saith the Lord, and Jerusalem shall be the metropolis of the universe; and the sun, in his daily course, shall see nothing but JEWS upon the whole surface of the earth!*¹⁰⁷

For their oratorio, the Jews have chosen one of the most gruesome passages in the Bible, 2 Kings 8:12: “I know the evil that thou wilt do unto the children of Israel: their strong holds wilt thou set on fire, and their young men wilt thou slay with the sword, and wilt dash their children, and rip up their women with child,” words uttered by the prophet Elisha to Hazael, enemy of the kingdom of Israel. The writer suggests that the Jews have appropriated the qualities of the oratorio genre as a communal and transformative experience but infused it with their own violent sentiments as they prepare themselves for revenge. The prophet’s horrid vision, originally ascribed to an enemy of the Jews, is now espoused by the Jews

¹⁰⁶ This scene was at the center of a controversial interpretation of *Messiah* as an anti-Jewish work. See Michael Marissen, “Rejoicing against Judaism in Handel’s *Messiah*,” *Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 167–94. Marissen argues that the tenor aria alludes to the destruction of the Temple, whereupon the Hallelujah chorus triumphantly celebrates this divine act of revenge. If true, this claim only serves to accentuate the act of appropriation that our writer here ascribes to the Jews. Marissen’s claims were highly contested, however. See John H. Roberts, “False Messiah,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 45–97.

¹⁰⁷ *British Mercury*, 26 May 1787, 51.

themselves, marking their complete inversion.¹⁰⁸ Leoni plays a key part in these proceedings—he is once again leading his brethren in prayer, as he did in the synagogue, but now he is voicing their aspirations for a violent doomsday. By associating his own resonating body with that of the triumphant Mendoza, Leoni is also perceived as exhibiting the rightful claim of the Jews on history. Two powerful manifestations of the human body, boxing and operatic singing, coalesce into one triumphant Jewish body.

This elaborate column did not appear out of thin air but was in fact a response to an actual event, one that took place not at the synagogue but at the theater—Leoni's benefit at Covent Garden. This benefit took place just a few weeks earlier, and it presented Leoni in his most famous role—Don Carlos in *The Duenna*. Importantly, it was attended by none other than Daniel Mendoza, the boxing sensation, as reported in the *World and Fashionable Advertiser*:

Our old friend little Isaac Mendoza [the character in *The Duenna*], will this night in particular, receive a hearty applause from his brother Denny Mendoza, who has so dexterously shewd his skill in the Broughtonian science, who, we hear, means to lead above 200 levites in procession from the Three Nuns, Whitechapel, to the Theatre, to his brother Leoni's benefit.¹⁰⁹

According to this report, *The Duenna*, which at its heart is a staunchly anti-Jewish work, was in fact celebrated by a great number of Jews who assembled to support its one redeeming element—the performance of Leoni as Don Carlos, highlighted on his benefit night. The writer of the column in the *British Mercury* reconfigured this perceived act of Jewish mobilization into a theological drama. The celebration of Leoni's performance, coupled with the presence of the triumphant Mendoza, is here presented as transforming Covent Garden theatre into a Jewish synagogue and *The Duenna* into an oratorio of Jewish supremacy.

The writer of the column in the *British Mercury*, however, continued with one final, and redeeming, observation: "A small minority of Israelites, however, are doubtful whether the prediction will ever take place; and it was observed, as an omen unfavourable to their hopes, that Leoni sung more than commonly in *Falsetto* the above anthem."¹¹⁰ The Jews' effort toward performative ratification of their eschatological visions founders under Leoni's falsetto. The true essence, or non-essence, of the Jewish body is revealed in Leoni's throat, and thus also Mendoza's body, a much more challenging target, is disarmed.¹¹¹ Both are unveiled as false prophets of a false messiah, a truth that even some Israelites concede.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the biblical vision of Jerusalem as the center of the universe, which is usually predicated on the *recognition* of non-Jews, is here accomplished by their *extermination*. See Jeremiah 3:27; Isaiah 56:7; Psalms 48.

¹⁰⁹ *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, 21 April 1787.

¹¹⁰ *British Mercury*, 26 May 1787, 52.

¹¹¹ John Whale, "Daniel Mendoza's Contests of Identity: Masculinity, Ethnicity and Nation in Georgian Prize-Fighting," *Romanticism* 14, no. 3 (December 2008): 259–71.

¹¹² The decade in which this text was written, the 1780s, saw several important instances of religious contention between Jews and Christians in Britain, most prominently the conversion of Lord Gordon and the public debate between the dissenting theologian Joseph Priestley and the Jewish thinker David Levi. The Priestley–Levi debate explicitly revolved around the issue of the Jews' survival and its

The underlying threats throughout the text are the uses and abuses of music; anyone can play or sing music, if properly trained, and the constitutive musical expression of one community can easily be appropriated by another. By resorting to the genre of oratorio, the writer is able to stage a performance not only of contested music but also of contested sacred text and its attendant conflicting eschatological interpretations. The performative impulse of the text—evoking in the reader’s mind familiar biblical verses set to his own canonic music—gives thrust to the threat that Leoni and the Jews imply.¹¹³ With their performance, the Jews subvert and turn ominous the very basis of the listener’s identity as Christian and Briton—Handel’s *Messiah*. In the process, they reveal themselves as menacing duplicates that operate from the very core of the listener’s consciousness, threatening the constitution of his identity.¹¹⁴ However, this uncanny and unsettling effect is eventually put to rest as Leoni exposes his true non-essence. The reader, having deciphered the various allusions throughout the text, is finally inculcated with the understanding that the Jew’s body, however surprising some of its manifestations may be, is always rooted in a fundamental deficiency decreed from heaven.

The fact that this column was a reaction to an actual event—the Jews’ supposed “appropriation” of *The Duenna* during Leoni’s benefit—is particularly important. If *The Duenna* was a carefully staged performance of a trustworthy Jew who merits a degree of inclusion in society, then here the Jews are portrayed as taking advantage of this narrow opening, planting themselves firmly in the public sphere as triumphant duplicates of the British nation while subverting its sacred musical canon. What emerges from this description is the listener’s psychological difficulty in accommodating Leoni’s performance over and beyond his old prejudices. This ambivalence, which is already ingrained in the juxtaposition of Carlos and Moses in *The Duenna* itself, is almost inevitably brought to the fore when the performance of the Jew is extended as a recurring, social reality, one with which the listener has to contend in his public sphere.

CONQUERING THE SHIBBOLETH: THE EMANCIPATION OF THE JEW AS SINGER

Leoni’s last appearance on the Covent Garden stage was in June 1788, again as Don Carlos. In March 1789, the *Times* reported that Leoni left for Jamaica to serve “as reader to the Synagogue there,” probably in order to escape his creditors.¹¹⁵ Leoni died in Jamaica in 1796 and was buried with this inscription on his tombstone: “Mr Michael Leoni, Principal Reader of our Congregation and one of the first

eschatological meaning. See David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry’s Construction of Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, 2000), 136–183.

¹¹³ For the canonicity of Handel’s oratorios, well established by the 1770s, see William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics: A Study in Canon, Ritual and Ideology* (Oxford, 1992).

¹¹⁴ Here I allude to Freud’s concept of the *Doppelgänger* as part of his study of the uncanny. See Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London, 2003), 123–62, especially at 141–43.

¹¹⁵ *Times*, 26 March 1789.

singers of the age.”¹¹⁶ This seems a succinct summary of the two aspects which dominated his life.

The ambivalence which characterized Leoni’s public reception would go on to define the careers of his protégé John Braham and of many other Jewish performers on both the British and the European stages in the following decades. Braham’s status as the leading British tenor of his generation was indisputable. Michael Kelly, a renowned English tenor and rival of Braham, honestly declared, “[he] is, decidedly, the greatest vocalist of his day.”¹¹⁷ The German composer Carl Maria von Weber, upon hearing Braham, was reported as saying: “This is the greatest singer in Europe!”¹¹⁸ Braham’s prominence, however, only accentuated the tensions inherent in the performance of a Jewish singer, which, as with Leoni before him, rose to the surface in oratorios:

It is impossible always to divest oneself of particular circumstances, relating to the private character and *persuasion* of persons. Who can hear *Mr. Braham* sing in the *Messiah*, “*They that have seen him have scorned him,*” without sensations of a ludicrous kind, or something worse.¹¹⁹

Referring to the short tenor recitative in the scene depicting Christ’s passion in the *Messiah*, the writer insists on the need for compatibility between the liturgical work and its performer’s religious persuasion. The tenor’s vocalization in the oratorio is more than just singing; it is the mediating agent that enables the community of believers to direct their emotive capacities toward sympathy with Christ in his passion. If the performer is suspected of directing his own sympathies elsewhere, the result would be ludicrous or worse. Braham, as a Jew, is suspected as still *scorning* the Messiah, thus leading the performance of the oratorio into a complete inversion of its original meaning.

Unlike Leoni, who remained Jewish to the end of his life, Braham at some point converted to Anglicanism. This was not necessarily enough to clear his name. In his 1821 essay “Imperfect Sympathies,” Charles Lamb, under the pseudonym *Elia*, berated him for it:

B[raham] would have been more in keeping if he had abided by the faith of his forefathers. There is a fine scorn in his face, which nature meant to be of—Christians. The Hebrew spirit is strong in him, in spite of his proselytism. He cannot conquer the Shibboleth. How it breaks out, when he sings, “The Children of Israel passed through the Red Sea!” The auditors, for the moment, are as Egyptians to him, and he rides over our necks in triumph.¹²⁰

Braham’s proselytism could not solve the tension inherent in his voice as he sings Handel’s *Israel in Egypt*. Like the biblical shibboleth, Braham’s stubborn “Hebrew spirit” breaks out contrary to his intentions, revealing the contempt that is ingrained

¹¹⁶ Richard D. Barnett and Philip Wright, *The Jews of Jamaica, 1663–1880: Tombstone Inscriptions* (Jerusalem, 1997), 79. The date of his death is given as Sunday, 6 November 1796.

¹¹⁷ Michael Kelly, *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly*, 2 vols. (London, 1826), 2:80.

¹¹⁸ *New Monthly Magazine*, 3 vols. (London, 1834), 1:463.

¹¹⁹ *Monthly Mirror*, February 1808, 61–62.

¹²⁰ Charles Lamb, *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, 7 vols., ed. E. V. Lucas (London, 1903), 2:62.

in his voice. Braham latches on to the equivocal term “Israel,” thus completely overturning the symbolic array at the basis of the oratorio—ancient Israel is usurped by the Jew, and now the Britons in the audience are the ones drowning in the Red Sea under the riding voice of the *scornful* tenor.¹²¹ Like Leoni before him, Braham subverts the performance of the oratorio, effecting alienation and uncanniness in Lamb’s mind. However, unlike Leoni’s listeners, Lamb does not even have recourse to mark Braham’s voice as *false*—his was a full, heroic tenor.¹²²

The issue of Braham’s religious persuasion became the focus of public attention in the opening months of 1826. It started with a blunt letter to the editor of the *John Bull* magazine: “To hear MR. BRAHAM at any time, seriously telling twelve or fifteen hundred people ‘that he knows his Redeemer lives,’ when if he have any religion at all, he believes no such thing, is a little disgusting.”¹²³ Handel’s *Messiah* is marked as exclusively Christian territory, while Braham, in his Isaac-like conversion, is stuck in the *dead wall* of faithlessness. Braham felt compelled to respond to this offense with a public letter. Appealing to the readers’ compassion, he emphasized the suffering caused to himself, his family, and his wife and—after hoping that “it would not have been necessary for me now to declare to the world what can only be of vital importance to myself”—he eventually confessed that “I have long been a member of the Protestant Church, that I have married a protestant, that I have educated my children as Protestants, and that I trust I possess a greater portion of Christian charity than my unrelenting reviler.”¹²⁴

Even this ratification of formal religious boundaries, however, did not solve the tension but only raised the question of Braham’s *sincerity* in his conversion. Charles Lamb interjected in this debate as well. In an essay titled “The Religion of Actors” and published anonymously, he judged Braham’s declaration of faith to be evasive: “This gentleman, in his laudable attempt to shift from his person the obloquy of Judaism, with the forwardness of a new convert, in trying to prove too much, has, in the opinion of many, proved too little.”¹²⁵ Lamb’s obsession with Braham is particularly interesting, since it started out as admiration. Almost twenty years earlier, he had described in a letter his feelings toward Braham: “Do you like Braham’s singing? The little Jew has bewitched me. I follow him like as the boys followed Tom the Piper. He cured me of melancholy as David cured Saul; but I don’t throw stones at him, as Saul did at David in payment.”¹²⁶ This early admiration, itself formulated in ambivalent

¹²¹ For a description of Braham’s conquering effect in this recitative, overcoming his “unmistakably Jewish aspect” and ridiculous gesturing, see “Recollections of the Life of Joseph Heywood,” in *Cornhill Magazine* (London, 1865), 692–93.

¹²² For Braham’s role in the rise of the modern, heroic tenor, see John Potter, “The Tenor–Castrato Connection, 1760–1860,” *Early Music* 35, no. 1 (February 2007): 97–110. However, throughout his career, Braham employed a falsetto *extension* to his voice, which enabled him to sing certain high notes which lay outside the range of his “natural,” modal voice. This was a common feature in tenors at the time, but Braham’s supposedly excessive use of it gave rise to a critical discourse that, again, reverted to his Jewishness as an explanation.

¹²³ In the 13 February 1826 issue, quoted in Ragussis, *Theatrical Nation*, 83. The aria here alluded to, “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth,” is actually performed by the soprano.

¹²⁴ Both letters were published side by side in a variety of publications that week, including *Examiner*, 19 February 1826; *Spirit of the Times*, 18 February 1826; and *Theatrical Observer*, 15 February 1826.

¹²⁵ *New Monthly Magazine*, April 1826, 406.

¹²⁶ In a letter to Thomas Manning dated 26 February 1808, in Lamb, *Works*, 6:383.

terms of overpowering bewitchment, eventually turned sour, whereupon Lamb indeed found himself publicly “throwing stones” at Braham. In this, Lamb exemplifies the shift from initial fascination to growing hostility, as the Jewish singer was perceived to impose his “Hebrew spirit.” As the debate moved into increasingly private spheres—Braham’s household family, his faith, and his very consciousness—some commentators were eager to discern any shibboleths in Braham’s singing and to trace them to their inborn, Jewish origins.¹²⁷ This search was extended to other aspects of Braham’s public performance, such as his fashion or his speech, as manifesting his failed habituation to British social codes.¹²⁸ In this way, Braham’s performances—assertive and acculturated while adhering to the bounds of national identity—served as a powerful impulse for the rise of reactionary, essentializing tendencies in the anti-Jewish discourse of the nineteenth century.

Notwithstanding these belligerent reactions, the dominant public perception of Braham was as a national hero. This, however, usually necessitated omission of his Jewish origins. Braham facilitated this process by his conversion and by increasingly restricting his interaction with the Jewish community.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, some of his fellow Jews wished to emphasize his origins in an attempt to gain public recognition. Isaac Nathan, a musician and the composer of Byron’s *Hebrew Melodies*, wrote the following in his book of vocal pedagogy: “Those who have listened with enthusiastic delight to the sweet strains of Leoni, the perfect and masterly tones of Braham ... will all bear testimony that the power of song has not forsaken [the Jews].”¹³⁰ This statement was made in the midst of public debates regarding Jewish emancipation. Although British Jews had enjoyed a steadily growing variety of social and economic privileges, they still felt themselves to be politically excluded, especially following the Catholic Relief Act of 1829, which marked the United Kingdom as an ecumenical *Christian* realm.¹³¹ This situation mostly preoccupied a limited circle of ambitious individuals of Jewish extraction, and it was expressed in a public discourse intent on validating the Jews’ civic virtue.¹³² One of the prime exponents of this discourse was the young member of Parliament, Benjamin Disraeli, whose political career was

¹²⁷ I will only mention William Makepeace Thackeray’s satirical poem on the front cover of the *National Standard*, 11 May 1833 (published anonymously); and Leigh Hunt’s discussion of Braham in his *Autobiography*, 112–13. Both are, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this article.

¹²⁸ For the former, see *Monthly Mirror*, May 1808, 50. The issue of Braham’s pronunciation of English surfaced throughout his career: “Surely Mr. Braham might, amongst his acquaintance, find someone Christian enough to tell him that moment should not be pronounced *momunt*, nor principle, *principal*, nor indeed, *intect*, &c.” *Monthly Mirror*, November 1807, 47. Lord Byron repeatedly ridiculed Braham’s pronunciation of the word “enthusiasm” as “entusymusy,” in his journal or in letters to friends. See Thomas Moore, *Letters and Journals of Lord Byron*, 2 vols. (London, 1830), 1:440, 603, 2:106, 476; and James Thomas Hodgson, *Memoir of Francis Hodgson*, 2 vols. (London, 1878), 2:77. This was a recurring joke in Byron’s social circle, as Leigh Hunt describes. Hunt, *Autobiography*, 315.

¹²⁹ Conway points to the year 1816 as the turning point in this respect, after Braham’s marriage and his involvement (mostly by lending his name as contributing composer), in Byron’s *Hebrew Melodies* of 1815. Conway, *Jewry in Music*, 89–90.

¹³⁰ Isaac Nathan, *Musurgia Vocalis: An Essay on the History and Theory of Music, and on the Qualities, Capabilities, and Management of the Human Voice* (London, 1836), 116.

¹³¹ Geoffrey Alderman, “English Jews or Jews of the English Persuasion? Reflections on the Emancipation of Anglo-Jewry,” in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, ed. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton, 1995), 128–56.

¹³² Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714–1830: Tradition and Change in a Liberal Society* (Ann Arbor, 1979), 272–88.

enabled by his conversion to Anglicanism. In his 1844 novel, *Coningsby*, Disraeli presented a direct connection between the Jews' vocality and their standing in society. Disraeli used his novels as a platform to promote his political agenda, and in *Coningsby* that agenda is embodied in the character of Sidonia, a rich banker of Jewish descent, who guides the young eponymous hero in his political maturation and who is widely acknowledged to be voicing Disraeli's own opinions.¹³³ Halfway through the novel, Sidonia embarks on a long soliloquy pertaining to the impressive involvement of Jews in all aspects of modern life. This long speech ends with a distinctly *musical* note:

But the passionate and creative genius that is the nearest link to divinity ... has found a medium for its expression, to which, in spite of your prejudices and your evil passions, you have been obliged to bow. The ear, the voice, the fancy teeming with combinations... have endowed us with almost the exclusive privilege of MUSIC; ... I speak not of the past But at this moment even, musical Europe is ours Almost every great composer, skilled musician, almost every voice that ravishes you with its transporting strains, spring from our tribes. The catalogue is too vast to enumerate Enough for us that the three great creative minds to whose exquisite inventions all nations at this moment yield, Rossini, Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn, are of Hebrew race; and little do your men of fashion, your "muscadins" of Paris and your dandies of London, as they thrill into raptures at the notes of a Pasta or a Grisi, little do they suspect that they are offering their homage to the sweet singers of Israel!¹³⁴

Jewish genius found its highest expression in the field of music in a process that came to fruition in modernity. The perception of music as the medium enjoying the closest accord with the metaphysical and thus capable of revealing the highest truths was itself a burgeoning idea in Romantic Europe.¹³⁵ Importantly, this long speech of Jewish exceptionalism concludes with the *singer*, who seems to embody most perfectly the right of Jews to voice themselves in the public sphere.¹³⁶ Although taking a cosmopolitan perspective and completely omitting Leoni or Braham, the text addresses the political question of Jewish emancipation in Britain, arguing that the operatic voice, as a powerful bodily manifestation that requires a deep process of acculturation, reveals the Jews as rightful participants in modern British society.

However, more than simply a metaphor for envoicement, Sidonia implies that there is a unique fallacy in the image of the singer, a built-in blind spot, that reinforces the Jewish cause. The work of a Jewish composer could always be suspected as implicated by his Jewishness, and indeed this became a major preoccupation during the

¹³³ Daniel R. Schwartz, "Mene, Mene, Tekel Upharsin?: Jewish Perspectives in Disraeli's Fiction," in *Disraeli's Jewishness*, ed. Todd M. Edelman and Tony Kushner (London, 2002), 40–61, at 49–55.

¹³⁴ Benjamin Disraeli, *Coningsby; or The New Generation*, 3 vols. (London, 1844), 2:206–8.

¹³⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music* (Chicago, 1989).

¹³⁶ The singers mentioned here, Giuditta Pasta and Giulia Grisi, were two of the most important sopranos of the 1820s and 1830s. Conway claims that both had Jewish fathers. Conway, *Jewry in Music*, 224, 257. However, this claim is not supported by any cited sources. Pasta's Jewishness is called into question in Kenneth Stern, "A Documentary Study of Giuditta Pasta on the Opera Stage" (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1983), 1–2.

nineteenth century.¹³⁷ The singer, conversely, is simply executing a finished work, dictated to him by the composer's will.¹³⁸ If the composer's output is marked by innovation and difference, then the singer's production is marked by faithfulness and adherence. The listeners, for their part, "little do they suspect" that these singers are Jewish, as they operate from the inner core of the musical work, giving it life. For Sidonia, the Jews' ability to assume the majority's identity, via the faithful rendition of its music, is the perfect proof of their right to inclusion, a proof that asserts itself even beyond the "prejudices and evil passions" of the unsuspecting listener. Thus, the performance of Jewish singers can operate as a sort of litmus test, isolating the listener's own prejudices from the thick cultural environment of modern society. What earlier writers described in uncanny and subversive terms—the Jewish singer's ability to inhabit his listeners' identity from within by performing "their" music—is here reasserted as an ultimate manifestation of the Jews' right to share in that identity. Disraeli, as Sidonia, employs the singers as a final rhetorical gesture that forces the reader—now amazed to find that his singing idols are Jewish—into self-examination.¹³⁹ The shibboleth is not ingrained in the singer's voice but in the listener's own prejudices.

Evil passions, suspicions, and prejudices—these, according to Sidonia, were the psychological constructs that Jewish singers confronted. However, the relation between the performative effect of their singing and the psychology of prejudice was multifaceted. At first, with Leoni's performances at the synagogue, their singing served to *destabilize* old notions regarding the Jews. This, in fact, was the impulse that accompanied their move into the public sphere, a manifestation of the inclusive and meritocratic ideals of British society. However, this transfer soon revealed an inner conflict, as the performances of these Jews were perceived as making increasing demands on listeners' consciousnesses. This conflict often arose in reaction to the performance of oratorios, or was imagined as such, thus restoring the performance of these Jews to the conflicted, and insoluble, theological terrain. Some listeners strove to reconstitute older "walls" through the search for difference—first with Leoni's manifest falsetto, but then, in a changing social terrain of acculturated and converted Jews, with a growing variety of essentialized shibboleths. Throughout these historical dynamics, the allure of the operatic voice drew its listeners toward the singer and into contemplations of his identity, faith, and sincerity. In the process, listeners were confronted with their *own* sincerity regarding the Jews. The difficulty of accommodating them in modern society, over and above old prejudices, was powerfully brought forth once Jews started singing music that "belonged" to other people.

¹³⁷ Two of the composers mentioned by Sidonia—Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn—were at the heart of Richard Wagner's attack on Jewish musicians in his 1850 work, *Das Judenthum in der Musik*. The attribution of Jewishness to Rossini is unique, as noted in Philip V. Bohlman, ed., *Jewish Musical Modernism, Old and New* (Chicago, 2008), xiv–xvn2.

¹³⁸ The idea of a finished musical "work," conceived as an *idea* in the mind of a musical *genius*, was itself rather new. See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford, 1992); and Hilary Poriss, *Changing the Score: Arias, Prima Donnas, and the Authority of Performance* (Oxford, 2009).

¹³⁹ Hannah Arendt famously analyzed Disraeli's use of his Jewish origins for a spectacular display of ethnic exceptionality. Hannah Arendt, "The Potent Wizard," in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1973), 68–79. George Eliot, in her 1876 novel, *Daniel Deronda*, offered a different configuration of toleration and sympathy engendered by Jewish vocality. For a far-reaching analysis, see HaCohen, *Music Libel*, 239–85.