

Rutgers celebrates famed Berlin saloniere

Sara Levy was essential figure in history of German Enlightenment



A portrait thought to be that of Sara Levy, who played and collected works by top German contemporaries.

Image by Anton Graff courtesy Christoph Wolff, with thanks to Peter Wollny

What: Sara Levy's World: Music, Gender, and Judaism in Enlightenment Berlin

When: Monday-Tuesday, Sept. 29-30

Where: Nicholas Music Center, New Brunswick

Details: europe.rutgers.edu/schedule or bildnercenter.rutgers.edu

Cost: All the events of the symposium are free and open to the public.

Sponsors: A collaborative project of the Mason Gross School of the Arts, the School of Arts and Sciences, the Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, and the Center for European Studies, among others

by [Michele Alperin](#)
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Born over a cup of coffee after a chance meeting of two Rutgers professors from different departments, a two-day symposium in New Brunswick on the life and legacy of one of 18th-century Berlin's most influential Jewish women will open Monday, Sept. 29.

"Sara Levy's World: Music, Gender, and Judaism in Enlightenment Berlin" will celebrate a saloniere and committed Jew who was a seminal figure at the beginning of the Jewish Enlightenment in Germany.

The great-aunt of Felix Mendelssohn, Sara Itzig Levy (1761-1854) performed works by Bach and his sons, hosted weekly salons and recitals, commissioned cutting-edge music, and assembled a large and noted music manuscript collection.

Often treated as a footnote, it turns out that Levy is in some ways an "essential figure in the history of German music," said Rebecca Cypess, co-planner of the symposium and assistant professor of music at Rutgers' Mason Gross School of the Arts. "She is the link that kept the tradition of J.S. Bach alive."

The symposium will open with an evening concert featuring music owned and played by Sara Levy, and continues with a symposium Tuesday that will intersperse academic talks with a reading of a satirical play from the period and a performance of a cantata by C.P.E. Bach.

The era in which Levy lived was "tumultuous," said Nancy Sinkoff, Cypess's co-organizer. It was "a time of lots of possibilities and potential, a remixing of the social and cultural boundaries that had existed for centuries in Europe," said Sinkoff, who is associate professor of Jewish studies and history at Rutgers and director of the university's Center for European Studies. "The fact that there were such dramatic changes at this moment allowed her to play such an important role in transforming her social, cultural, and religious landscape."

Each scholar brings to bear on Sara Levy her own disciplinary training: Cypess, her expertise in musical performance and music history, and Sinkoff, her knowledge of Jewish and European history.

Sinkoff explained that the late 18th century was the moment of the onset of modernity, particularly for Jews in Western Europe and more specifically in Berlin, the court city of the Prussian empire.

"Sara Levy is an extraordinary figure of the period about whom not enough is known," she said. "It is an opportunity to ask a whole series of new questions and revisit old questions about Jews and Christians, aesthetics, music, gender, anti-Semitism, modernity, and secularization in a symposium devoted to the whole person of Sara Levy."

They will not be exploring just Levy's contribution to music or where she fit in as a Jewish woman, but asking questions that cross disciplinary boundaries: How did her identity as a Jew affect how she studied and made music? How did her musical activities affect how she interacted with other Jewish women and men in her circle?

Levy took music lessons from Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, Johann Sebastian Bach's eldest son, known as a virtuosic composer and improviser; W.F. Bach even wrote a song for Levy that he gave to her at her wedding, said Cypess.

Levy's entry into the cultural and social circles of the non-Jewish German elite while remaining fully committed to and invested in her Jewish life requires a rethinking of the way historians conceived of Jewish women's participation in the Enlightenment, said Sinkoff.

"Until now much of the work focused on women who left Judaism," she said.

The symposium will also cast light on some of the culture wars familiar today, which Sinkoff suggested began in the late 18th century. "The entry of Jews into European society, the ability to negotiate as an individual outside of communal boundaries sets in motion many complicated issues about identity that are still being worked out today," she said.

<http://njewishnews.com/article/24510/rutgers-celebrates-famed-berlin-saloniere>