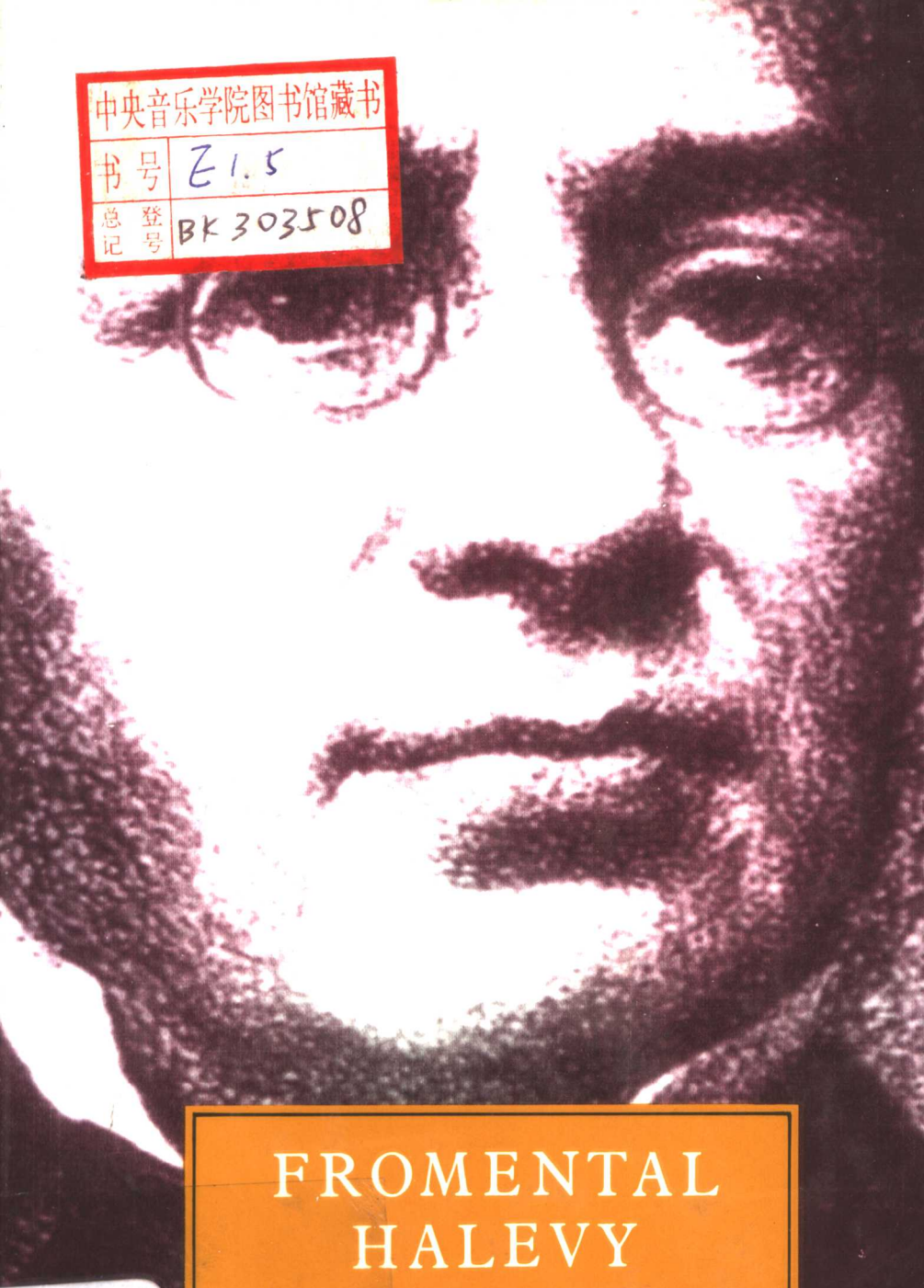

FROMENTAL HALEVY

HIS LIFE & MUSIC 1799-1862

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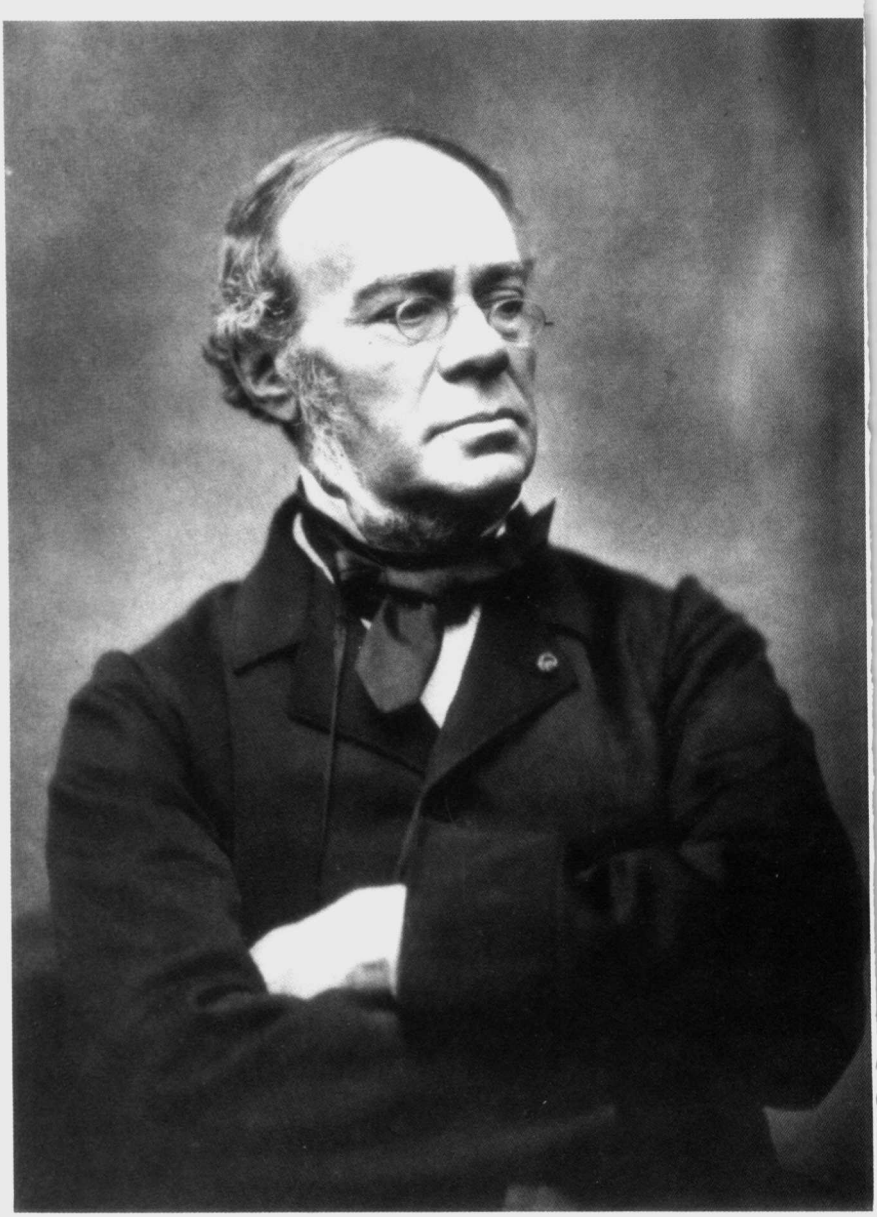

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FOREWORD

MOST PEOPLE WHOM I ASKED whether they had heard of Fromental Halévy thought they had. Wasn't he that fellow who wrote librettos for Offenbach? He was not; the librettist was his nephew Ludovic. Some facetiously suggested that Fromental was a kind of Swiss cheese. Only one person, a man in his seventies, immediately plunged into a rendition of Cardinal Brogni's aria *Si la rigueur* from the first act of *La Juive*. He remembered it from a 78 rpm record he heard in his youth. He had never seen any Halévy opera staged.

Not many people have. It was only natural that after his death in 1862 Halévy's operas should have gradually given way to new works by younger composers, among them his former Conservatoire students Gounod, Bizet and Saint-Saëns. Only *La Juive* held on in Paris until a storehouse fire in 1893 destroyed its lavish scenery. A Covent Garden scenery which claimed to be the most magnificent in Europe was destroyed by fire even earlier. Twentieth-century revivals include *La Juive* by the Paris Opéra in 1933 and by Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in 1960. In 1973 it had two concert performances, one in Frankfurt and one at the Royal Festival Hall in London; there was also a performance in 1974 by the Nottingham University Opera Group. *L'Eclair* was revived in Germany in a German translation. Not enough to re-establish Halévy as the household name he was until the turn of the century.

My own interest in his music was indirectly due to my American stepmother who, for my ninth birthday, had ordered from New York a child's clockwork record player complete with Yankee Doodle Went to Town. My father tactfully brought home from the local music store a 78 rpm record which had a sweet voiced girl called Lakmé Delibes singing on the one side, and a distraught lady called La Juive Rachel Halévy pouring her heart out on the other. The clockwork mechanism was not powerful enough to cope with a full-size record and usually ground to a halt long before Rachel did. When I graduated to the use of a more sophisticated record player I got hold of whatever was available on the old Odeon, Decca and CBS labels – bass Cesare Siepi singing Cardinal Brogni's aria *Si la rigueur*, tenors René Verdière and Tony Poncet singing Elazar's *Dieu que ma voix tremblante*, Caruso singing Elazar's *Rachel, quand du Seigneur la grâce tutelaire* accompanied on the piano, soprano Jane Rhodes singing Rachel's aria *Il va venir*.

For an opera to be properly appreciated it has to be seen as well as heard. When treating Halévy's work I therefore had to find a way of introducing and arousing interest in operas which, at the time of writing, do not feature on any known current repertoire, and are only scantily represented in record catalogues. A solution was suggested by the practice prevalent in Halévy's time.

In order to acquaint and familiarise the public with a new opera, editors of nineteenth-century quality periodicals allowed their reviewers yards of print space. Sometimes no less than three weekly instalments, of some two thousand words each, would be devoted to a single new work. The first would introduce it and recount the plot in great detail act by act. The next two would discuss the music, painting a word picture of an andantino in a minor key or an unusual percussive accompaniment, explaining why it was effective or faulty. It was not an easy undertaking. Reviewers did not have the benefit of a score; hand copied scores were not available, while printed ones would be published only long after opening night. Some cautiously prefaced their pronouncements with 'as far as one can judge by one single hearing.' The conscientious did not go into print until they had seen and heard the opera in question a second time.

Berlioz and Wagner were wizards of the word picture. Other distinguished reviewers of the time were Théophile Gautier,

Blanchard, Catelin, Fiorentino, Monnais, G. Bénédit. Their vivid and erudite accounts of plot and music helped readers see and hear in their mind a distraught Ginevra groping through the streets of a plague-ridden Florence, a repentant she-devil dying while a ruined castle goes up in flames, a tense Lyonel, blinded by lightning, waiting for the last stroke of eight to remove his bandages and know whether his eyesight has been restored. What they did for audiences of their own times they may well do again for present-day readers, introducing them to music which was once all the rage in the western world.

Painting a word picture was one way of popularising a new opera. Publishing easy arrangements of operatic highlights for the use of amateurs was another. Such arrangements were the 19th-century equivalent of today's record industry, the precursors of today's hit tunes. It was taken for granted that educated people could play the piano, sing, perhaps even form a trio or a quartet. Music publishers would acquire the publishing rights of an opera and commission easy arrangements of best tunes, mostly for voice and piano, sometimes for strings, more rarely for wind and brass. During his meagre Paris years in the early 1840's Wagner made arrangements of *La Juive*, *La Reine de Chypre* and *Le Guitarrero* by Halévy and *La Favorita* by Donizetti. Without always seeing what was on offer at the Paris venues, without having to wait for the Paris successes to be produced in the provinces, the public became familiar with the All-Time Greats and Forty Best Melodies of the day.

In our own time the record industry has taken over from the arrangers of the past, though in the case of Halévy not enough to do him justice. There have been several recordings of highlights and selected acts from *La Juive* as well as a complete recording on cassette and CD. There is at least one non-commercial recording of his most popular opera comique. By the time this is read more new recordings may be available, illustrating his versatility and his gift for melody and orchestration.

Halévy lived during one of the most eventful periods of French history, witnessing the fall of Napoleon, the rise and decline of constitutional monarchy, the re-emergence and demise of a new wave of Republicanism, the establishment of the Second Empire under Louis Napoleon. Far from living in an ivory tower he took part in what was happening around him, finding time for causes

he believed in. As a musician his life reflected what a reviewer called 'the seven stations of the cross' meted out to a young generation of French-born composers. Like many of his co-evals he experienced the frustrations of a budding musician, the envy of colleagues, the hypocrisy of reviewers, the backbiting and scandal-mongering of the profession.

Born when emancipation was opening new doors to French Jews yet at the same time enticing them to total assimilation, he followed the golden path. Without being an observant Jew he was proud of his ancestral heritage, moving confidently in a gentile ambiance. He was affable and peace-loving, ambitious without being disloyal. He was erudite, a good writer, an engaging public speaker. Above all he was a composer of opera, that magic spectacle which brought together music, dance and painting, which drew on the joint talents of great artists and craftsmen, which used the most sophisticated of stage machinery. At a time which saw the ascendance in Paris of French-born composers like Boieldieu, Hérold, Auber and Adam over their Italian contemporaries, he was the acknowledged leader of the nascent French school of his generation.

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BORN IN FRANCE

FRANCE, IN COMMON WITH MOST European countries since the Middle Ages, found it expedient from time to time to expel her Jews who, notwithstanding, persistently infiltrated back. In 1394 they were expelled by Charles VI, better remembered as the king stricken by madness, who in Shakespeare's *King Henry the Fifth* was the loser of the battle of Agincourt, and who some four hundred and fifty years later was the subject of a patriotic French opera by the Jewish composer Fromental Halévy. The last time Jews were expelled from France was in 1615, by Marie de Medici, Queen Regent during the minority of Louis XIII. Again they crept back. From then on their presence was tolerated except in certain towns, including Paris, where they were denied the right of residence.

Louis XIV was reputed to be well disposed towards them. The story goes that in 1657, after he had won a battle near the town of Metz, he was prevailed upon to honour the local Jewish community with a visit to the synagogue. When he arrived with the royal retinue two rabbis came out to welcome him, holding up the scrolls of the law wrapped in velvet richly embroidered with gold and silver thread, calling the blessing of God upon His Majesty.

'Are you the rabbis of this synagogue?' His Majesty enquired.

'We are, Sire.'

'Are you sure you are?'

Both rabbis assured His Majesty that there was no doubt about their Rabbinical status.

'How dare you call yourselves rabbis of a synagogue in a French town without a Royal Appointment?' His Majesty bawled. 'This is insubordination.'

The terrified rabbis nearly dropped the scrolls of the law, went down on their knees and begged for mercy. Louis XIV graciously granted the royal pardon, confirmed the kneelers as Rabbis by Appointment to His Majesty the King of France, and the Jewish community of Metz flourished ever since, none deterred by the occasional persecution or execution of coreligionists called Moshe, or Levy, or Halévy.

Most of the Metz Jews had crossed over illegally from Germany, some having started from Poland. The only languages they used were Yiddish and Hebrew; Yiddish for everyday life, Hebrew for prayers and religious studies. As yet no attempt was made to learn French. They continued to follow the traditional Jewish occupations which had been imposed upon them by the circumstances of history – peddling, selling on credit and money lending which, when transacted on a large scale, came to be known as banking. Gradually they moved further inland, settling in nearby Lorraine. In 1715 one Samuel Levy, Rabbi of the Metz Jewish community, became Court Banker to the Duke of Lorraine. A few years later he went bankrupt and took himself off to Paris. He had just begun to prosper again when the police caught up with him and threw him into the Bastille, together with another Jewish banker, to serve a seven-year sentence. In no time the two prisoners arranged to be provided with Kosher food, were allowed to say their daily prayers and celebrate the Sabbath in style.

Officially Jews had no right of residence in Paris but the French police, with the exception of a rare perfunctory raid, turned a blind eye to their presence. By 1789 the Jewish community in Paris numbered about 500 people out of a total of 40,000 in the whole of France, all basking in the promise of tolerance heralded by the Revolution. On 27 September 1791 the National Assembly, under the seal of Louis XVI, gave them full civil rights. On 22 August 1795, long after Louis XVI had been guillotined and the First Republic proclaimed, the law was reaffirmed and extended. After years of illicit infiltration and life lived in perpetual appre-

hension, the Jews of France were full French citizens, free to practise their religion and take up any craft or profession they wished to follow.

At the time of the 1795 re-affirmation of full rights of citizenship and freedom of religion, there was a German Jew living in Metz, who had either smuggled himself into France a few years earlier, or had just recently arrived. Born in 1760 in the prosperous culture-loving Jewish community of Furth, not far from Nürenberg, he had been given the Hebrew names of Elyahu Halfon Levy; in France the first became Elie, the second was dropped while the third was kept. Levy however was not a surname but just another forename, bestowed on male infants in addition to other forenames to denote their descent from the tribe of Levy, whose members were by birthright the exclusive instrumentalists and choristers of the ancient Temple of Jerusalem.

From his native Furth Elie Levy had brought a taste and aptitude for study. Not only was he a Talmudic and Biblical scholar, but also a linguist, counting among his languages his native Yiddish and German as well as excellent French, Hebrew, Aramaic, some Greek and a smattering of classical Arabic.

It was probably the local matchmaker who arranged a marriage between the respected though impecunious scholar of Metz and young Julie Meyer from the small Jewish community of Lorraine. Mlle Meyer's parents must have crossed over illegally from Germany, but she herself was born in France, in the village of Malzeville, near Nancy. They married c.1798, the bride just over seventeen, the bridegroom nearly thirty-eight. Shortly after the marriage the couple bade farewell to family and friends and went to Paris to seek their fortune in the brave new world that was opening up before them.

By then Paris Jews had left peddling behind, becoming shoemakers, jewellers, engravers, embroiderers. Some were teachers of Hebrew and religious studies, while the astute and worldly went into commerce and banking. Although they had become conversant with French, they still preferred to live among themselves, congregating in Le Marais, in the vicinity of the local synagogue, the centre of their religious, social and cultural life. No exception to the rule, Elie Levy and Julie found a modest accommodation among their coreligionists in what was then rue

Neuves-des-Maturins, and it was there that on 27 May 1799 the future composer Jacques-François-Fromental-Elie Halévy was born. Some six months later, on 9 November 1799, Napoleon staged his *coup d' état* and was made First Consul. The Reign of Terror with its fierce anti-clerical notions and its closure of religious institutions of all denominations was over. Synagogues could be reopened.

A firm believer in emancipation, Elie Levy preached at all times the French version of the slogan of the Jewish Enlightenment: *Tiens au pays et conserve ta foi*, freely translatable as Be Loyal to Your Country and True to the Faith of Your Fathers. Thus, when the Peace Treaty of Amiens was concluded on 27 March 1802 between Napoleon, Great Britain, Spain and Holland, he demonstrated his combination of French patriotism and traditional Jewishness by composing a dual language poem to celebrate the event, causing it to be sung in Hebrew and read out in French at the synagogue of rue Saint-Avoye. Fromental, still under three, would have clung to his father during the ceremony while his mother, pregnant for the third time, would have watched from the Women's Gallery.

On his arrival in Paris Elie Levy tried his hand at commerce, promptly losing all the money his wife had brought him as a dowry. From then on he eked out a living from small administrative tasks within the Jewish community, by preference devoting himself to scholarly pursuits. He edited the distinguished but short-lived periodical *L'Israëlite français* founded by Chief Rabbi Abraham de Cologna, started working on a Hebrew-French dictionary, wrote a treatise on the fables of Aesop which he compared with those of King Solomon. His thoughts on Jewish education were assembled and published in a text book entitled *Instructions réligieuses et morales à l'usage de la jeunesse israëlite* subtitled in Hebrew *Limudey Dat U-mussar*, with Mosaic and Talmudic injunctions rendered in their original Hebrew, explained and interpreted in French. When, under Napoleon, a Central Jewish Consistory was established, he translated into French loyal poems of praise written in abstruse Biblical Hebrew by community rabbis for State occasions; and an outstanding translator he was too.

There was no poverty in the household, but money was scarce. Young Julie, who during the first eight years of their marriage