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Assimilating to Art-Religion: Jewish Secularity and Edgar Zilsel's Geniereligion (1918)

Cover Page Footnote
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After fleeing the Nazis, many European Jewish and Marxist scholars were fortunate to find a new sense of belonging abroad, at institutions like the New School for Social Research in New York City or among the émigré community in California. Others fell through the cracks. The philosopher-sociologist Edgar Zilsel (1891–1944), who left Vienna in 1939, could not find his footing in exile because he was never quite at home to begin with. His unusual writings were pushed to the fringe of Viennese academia before he left, and after his death, his work was largely forgotten until its rediscovery in the 1980s. One of Zilsel’s most interdisciplinary projects—his short book *Die Geniereligion* (The Cult of Genius), written in 1918—has much to offer musicology. A close look at *Die Geniereligion* and its cultural environs exposes a fresh angle on an old problem: the formation of the Western musical canon and its secularist ethics. Zilsel’s polemic reveals the canon’s central irony, which also manifests in art-religion (*Kunstreligion*): proponents of the canon positioned it as a secular “neutral space” for culture, but paradoxically, this neutral space was both inflected by Catholic practice, as Zilsel showed, and also populated by Jewish artists and intellectuals such as Zilsel himself. Musical institutions like concert halls, journals, and festivals became sites of assimilation where Austrian Jews sought cosmopolitan secularity and found art-religion instead—alluring for some, alienating for others, and downright dangerous for Zilsel.

From its first pages, Zilsel’s treatise set out to destroy the *Geniereligion*—that is, the parareligious cults of veneration that form around artists, scientists, pedagogues, and other secular figures. His text reads as an impassioned manifesto. As a committed Marxist, Zilsel wrote that it would be irresponsible not to speak out against a societal danger that allows charlatans to sway the masses. All of Zilsel’s projects were driven by this central investment in the abilities and vulnerabilities of the working class, including his last and best-known work, *On the Social Origins of Modern Science*, which traced the birth of empiricism to a network of artisans rather than a roster of lone geniuses. Even as the politics of interwar Red Vienna formed the context of his worldview, it is tempting (if anachronistic) to read *Die Geniereligion* as a text that offered chilling premonitions of fascism. With great clarity Zilsel identified key elements of the propaganda machine whose blueprint had already been laid by Karl Lueger’s Christian Social Party starting in 1897, and that later made Hitler into a paramount “genius” alongside Napoleon, Wagner, Goethe, and Beethoven.

Zilsel’s project was conceived amid a political minefield at the University of Vienna, where a polarized Philosophy Department pushed his scholarship to the margins. Zilsel was an active member of Moritz Schlick’s Vienna Circle, a network of liberal-socialist philosophers who developed logical and empirical methods grounded in physics. Schlick’s group found itself increasingly beleaguered by a conservative,
Given that the majority of intellectual leaders of Vienna’s Social Democratic Party were Jewish, it became increasingly common for outwardly “scientific” objections to Marxist schools of thought to operate as an excuse for conservative faculty to oust Jewish professors from their posts decades before the systematic purges of 1938. While Schlick insisted that his circle was apolitical, and while he himself was descended from Prussian-Lutheran nobility, he was nonetheless perceived as Jewish, or Jew-adjacent. As a result, his promotion to chair of philosophy was controversial and met with a pointed inquiry into his heritage. In 1936, Schlick was murdered by a deranged former student who was paranoid about a presumed romantic entanglement with a classmate; and as Lisa Silverman has shown, Schlick’s perceived status as a Mussjude, a Jew by association, led the Viennese press to politicize the psychiatric instability as a sensible reaction to Jewish corruption.

It comes as no surprise that Zilsel, as Schlick’s protégé, struggled to secure his footing at this university. Zilsel’s book Die Geniereligion was the basis for his Habilitation, his application for promotion at the University of Vienna, which expanded this slim manifesto into a more robust, and more explicitly Marxist, history of the “genius” concept. Its fraught reception by the committee, traced in detail by Johann Dvořák, led Zilsel to withdraw his application and resign. His colleagues implied that his approach was insufficiently philosophical because it was grounded in economics, a veiled rebuke of his Marxism. What’s more, his critique of celebrity pedagogues, combined with his apparent distaste for religion, touched a sensitive nerve after the contentious clerical reforms of Austrian public school curricula by the Christian Social Party during the Lueger era, which had been hotly contested by Austro-Marxists who advocated for secular, humanist, and more inclusive Bildung. After Zilsel stepped down, he found a space that was more welcoming, if less outwardly prestigious, at the Volkshochschule, a community college that became a hotbed of socialist intellectual freedom. Here, on the fringes of academia, his work became even more interdisciplinary.

With the Anschluss, Zilsel’s career was the least of his worries. As both a socialist and a Jew, he feared the growing climate of censorship that would impede his son’s education. (Whether he foresaw all the dangers ahead, we cannot know.) With his family he fled to Manhattan in 1939 and then settled among the German émigrés as a lecturer at Mills College in Oakland, California. Memoirs from his son Paul reveal a man perpetually out of place. Like Theodor W. Adorno, he began publishing sociological essays in English and even started his new book on the sociology of science; but he never felt quite at home in that language, in American customs, or in his role as a physics instructor at a women’s college. The tipping point, or so speculated his son, was his wife’s nervous breakdown and his own survivor’s guilt when his sister’s letters ceased. (As the family later learned, she had been sent to Auschwitz.) In 1944, before the war had even ended, Zilsel committed suicide, just as Stefan Zweig and Walter Benjamin did before him. His tragedy was not only death, but an ongoing struggle during his life to find a home for his ideas, which inhabited a space between languages, disciplines, and identities. Zilsel’s story was, in this
sense, a characteristically Jewish story of assimilation.

Zilsel’s treatise, in conjunction with his biography, shows us that the Western canon is a critical thread in this Jewish story and vice versa. The discipline of musicology formed around the monumental mountain peaks of German and Austrian “great men,” to borrow Nietzsche’s turn of phrase. Even today, it perpetuates itself through tautologies, self-supporting statements that Robert Fink has dubbed the canon’s “sleight of hand.” The central legerdemain of canonic ideologies is their claim to universal value that remains opaque—that is, they mask the historical processes that made universality desirable in the first place. Recent conversations about secularity, spearheaded by Talal Asad, may shed new light on the canon’s opacity. For Asad, secular ideologies play a similar trick: they claim universal value while concealing their contingency, their origins in Enlightenment thought, political liberalism, and the interiority of Pietism.

Nor is this resemblance superficial. The politics of canon formation mirror secularity because canons emerged at the intersection of sacred and secular, through a constellation of practices known as Kunstreligion, or art-religion. In the nineteenth century, cultural heroes like Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart became surrogate saints for the liberal elite, for whom Bildung, or educational self-cultivation, was integral to a sense of belonging. Yet Bildung was grounded in an amalgam of religious practices: Catholic sainthood, Lutheran Pietism, and Jewish educational ambition, all latent behind the smokescreen of secular self-improvement.

Jewish secularization long predates the politics of canon formation, even as it later became an agent in this process. Already in the eighteenth century, leaders of the Jewish Enlightenment, or Haskalah, used the tools of liberal ideology to enact Jewish “civic self-improvement” (bürgerliche Verbesserung), a constellation of reforms that later came to be called assimilation. The history of these reforms is complex because it operated at the intersection of shifting state policies of legal emancipation, a new philosophical movement, and a wide spectrum of individual personalities, each seeking an identity between the cracks. Even secularized Jews, whose cosmopolitan lives were so starkly different from those in the shtetls, found themselves fractured into an array of positions toward Judaism. Some converted to Christianity with great conviction, while others were baptized for convenience. Some defended Judaism as a religion that embodied liberal humanism, while others cast it aside in their devotion to German Bildung. And some appeared to disdain their roots with “Jewish self-hatred,” an expression of embarrassment at the poor Jewish immigrants who poured in from Eastern Europe, and especially Galicia. The term itself exemplifies how slippery assimilation can be: Paul Reitter has argued that Jewish self-hatred, paradoxically, could function as a means of empowerment, as Jews reclaimed their own stereotypes through self-criticism.

Assimilation was a powerful force in cosmopolitan music criticism and concert life. In the visual arts, Jews had a minimal presence; in the theater and the press, they dominated; and in music, their numbers were noticeably strong but not pervasive, which made the pressure to assimilate more urgent and transparent for those whose careers depended on it. Even as the optimism of nineteenth-century Bildung waned in the twentieth, its central ideologies remained embedded in Jewish self-perception and
ambition, and these manifested in musical composition and discourse, as Steven J. Cahn has recently shown. As Bildung was subsumed by the more extreme Geniereligion, Jewish composers, musicians, and music writers found themselves alternately intoxicated and repulsed by art-religious devotion to canonical great men. They were faced with the reality that the secular neutral spaces they sought were neither secular nor neutral, and some experienced a profound disillusionment that fueled early Zionism. Zilsel’s response to this problem was one among a spectrum of Jewish reactions to the realities of assimilation. If secularization is “a fugitive way for religion to survive,” as Judith Butler suggested in her essay on Zionism, then Zilsel demonstrated how it survived through the medium of art-religion.

The New Real Church

Secularity studies has found a new vocabulary to articulate the complex interaction between sacred and secular, which are rarely separate. “Secular enchantment” serves as a counterpart to scientific rationalism, as articulated by Akeel Bilgrami, and recent work by Jeffers Engelhardt and Janaki Bakhle adopts this term for musical practices that engage with the sacred in a secular world; similarly, religious studies scholars have posited “re-enchantment” as a counterpart to Weber’s “disenchantment.” These terms push back against the misconception that the secular worldview of the Enlightenment was homogeneous and ubiquitous.

Unlike this nuanced vocabulary, the term Kunstreligion remains a compound word in every sense. The word refers to a set of concepts at the intersection of German Romantic philosophical idealism, Catholic revival, and a growing interest in Eastern religions in the early nineteenth century. Its roots in musical thought have been traced to early Romantic writers like Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Friedrich Schleiermacher, who sacralized the listening experience as a form of devotion and likened religious feelings to a “holy music” (heilige Musik) that should accompany secular life. For some, the very idea of Kunstreligion has become emblematic of the early Romantic reaction to Enlightenment secularism, a means to “overcome secularization,” in the words of Nicole Heinikel. But even nuanced histories of Kunstreligion, such as the writings of Helmut Loos, tend to reduce this concept to a simple admixture of sacred and secular by focusing on linguistic conflation. This approach seems to take the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus at his word when he wrote that the early German Romantics thought art and religion “flow into one another” and that this “may be expressed through the formula that the ‘sacralization’ of the profane is analogous to the ‘secularization’ of the sacred.”

In recent years, historians have begun to understand how this concept manifested in culture long after it was first articulated. Kunstreligion was unusually complex in German-speaking regions, where artistic circles were divided between Protestant, Catholic, and assimilated Jewish identities. Karen Leistra-Jones has shown how art-religion was confessionalized in her recent study of Hans von Bülow’s performances, rhetoric, and hermeneutical analyses, which were not only vaguely art-religious but specifically Protestant, some of numerous cultural projects that used Kunstreligion to unify the young German nation. But in the same period as Bülow sermonized through analysis, the music-loving public engaged
in practices of veneration that appear markedly Catholic, not only in Austria but also in Protestant north Germany. When composers were treated as saints, Kunstreligion went beyond devotional listening. My own research has shown how composers’ hair-locks and walking sticks circulated as relics, their houses became museums that branded themselves as sites of pilgrimage, and their fans experienced not only transcendent listening but personal fantasies of closeness with dead celebrities, who became guardian spirits of the music room. The lofty transcendence of early Kunstreligion continued through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, when composers’ deathbeds were called “apothecoses” and their genius was hailed as a divine gift. But this Romantic idealism was tempered by a material fascination with composers’ daily lives, with their ailments, clothes, belongings, homes, and haunts. Material practices like these reinforce the particularity, not the universality, of secular devotion.

We find this same interplay of the abstract and tangible—of gazing at a looming monument while cherishing a hair-lock in a brooch—in Asad’s etymology of the “sacred.” He differentiates the medieval French sacré from sainteté: the former was institutionalized and politicized, especially during the French Revolution, while the latter refers to the everyday, accessible materials of religion—the relics, shrines, and pilgrimages that interface with the beyond.

For the music-loving middle class, material sainteté became a way to trade in divinity: those who could not afford to build collections could purchase ersatz relics like plaster masks for the music room.

Zilsel was among the first scholars to treat early Romantic Kunstreligion as a cultural practice, not only a concept. In the Introduction to Die Geniereligion, Zilsel noted these trappings of religion in the arts world, calling them the “external form” of a deeper religious dogma:

Outwardly already it appears that we treasure the relics, autographs, hair-locks, quills, and tobacco boxes of our great men just as the Catholic Church treasures the bones, accessories, and clothing of saints. . . . True, we build no chapels around the graves of our geniuses, nor do we offer burnt sacrifices on the altars of antique hero-temples; but we do bury some of them together in Westminster Abbey and in the Paris Pantheon, or erect their busts in Walhalla. . . . With holy awe, as if on pilgrimage to Lourdes, we journey to these genius-graves, to Weimar, to Stratford-upon-Avon, and above all to Bayreuth.

To this list of Catholic behaviors Zilsel added the manifestations of Geniereligion in popular literature and visual culture. He noted the brochures that showed geniuses gathered together in heaven; the images of a disheveled Beethoven that graced every music-room wall; the biofictional operettas, like Heinrich Berté’s Dreimäderlhaus, that fetishized artists’ biographies; and the earliest biopic films that made Geniereligion a product of mass culture. Zilsel was a cultural historian long before this was an established subfield, and his interdisciplinarity gave him striking insight into Kunstreligion. By blending sociology and philosophy, he was able to trace the dogmas that underlay these cultural products: genius as divinity, heroic individualism, and a cult of sentimentality (Schwärmern) that made geniuses immune to criticism. He called these dogmas because they went unquestioned in literate society, invisible
because they substituted for (and thereby hid behind) real religious practice. Zilsel, then, was in an ideal position to criticize these practices. With his own identity as an outsider—not just a Jewish outsider, but a Marxist intellectual who worked at the margins of Viennese academia—he could observe the oddity of practices that had become second nature to most.\textsuperscript{34}

Several years before \textit{Die Geniereligion}, Zilsel had already expressed skepticism about the cult of genius in Vienna’s music scene. His first publication in 1912 was not a sober work of sociology, but rather a surreal miniature—what he termed a “didactic fantasy”—that debunked the idea of timelessness in music culture.\textsuperscript{35} In this evocative allegory, operagoing dilettantes become a carnival of zoo animals; the narrator finds himself hurled between heaven and earth, grasping at Mozart’s sacred tones while dragged into the insipid pleasures of the eighteenth century; and finally, the “spider of time” sucks the narrator into its web, where all turns to slime, a writhing morass of old and new. In this piece, Zilsel revealed his own flirtation and disillusionment with \textit{Geniereligion}:

\textit{Thus I felt lonely, full of longing for a man, for Mozart, and I wanted to serve him. But as I searched for him here aloft and asked the tones about their creator, there began a roar, from all corners the rows of tones poured in and crashed against each other, separated themselves again and turned into a thousand-faceted complexity and through the universe romped the finale of the \textit{Jupiter} Symphony.}\textsuperscript{36}

As he searches for Mozart, he finds instead the sublimity of the work, but it resides in a Christian heaven where he cannot remain. In a devastating final passage, the narrator is cast down from the clouds into a swamp that devours civilization: “streams of mud [trickle] from Mozart’s grave” and merge with new floodwaters, leaves of paper fight toward the surface (that is, the canon), “sticky maggots” are “fattened on the dead rococo, and on national artists \textit{[Heimatskünstler]},” and everything succumbs to depths haunted by the Ouroboros, the mythic snake that eats its own tail (or as Zilsel calls it, “progress that progresses toward progress”).\textsuperscript{37} In this strange piece of juvenilia, we already see Zilsel’s disdain for canonic tautologies, for the empty promise of timelessness, and for sublime tones that reside perpetually out of reach.

Zilsel’s early disillusionment reflects a deeper contradiction of art-religion in the music world: religion shaped institutions of German \textit{Bildung} that purported to be secular neutral spaces. This problem was ingrained in the history of \textit{Bildung} itself, which had been torn by competing sacred and secular agendas since its emergence in the German Enlightenment. For Moses Mendelssohn, \textit{Bildung} promised to revive Platonic ideals by offering a moral education in virtue; his position on \textit{Bildung} dovetailed with his appeal for Jewish self-improvement, which favored a neutral Hellenism over a Christian-inflected moral code. But for others like Johann Gottfried von Herder, \textit{Bildung} was an offshoot of Lutheran Pietism, which sought to transform society by cultivating the inner self.\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Bildung} was decidedly more secular and political after the Congress of Vienna, when it became a tool to manufacture a Prussian bureaucracy. Outwardly, \textit{Bildung} was upheld as a means to distinguish German naturalness and social reforms from French courtliness and aristocratic backwardness; but beneath this ideology
lurked a pragmatic agenda to create citizens who would feed the growing bureaucracies of Prussia and the Austrian Empire. What was thought natural in the mid-nineteenth century became mannered by century’s end, and this shift is crucial for a reading of Zilsel’s Geniereligion. By 1900, a new wave of critics dismissed the Bildungsbürgertum—the educated class of civil servants—as conservative philistines, pedantic bureaucrats whose sole values were loyalty, obedience, and discipline. Zilsel’s disdain for the deluded masses was aimed not at the proletariat, the workers for whom he fought; his rebuke was leveled at the uncreative Bildungsbürger who served as arbiters of taste, enacting Geniereligion with bureaucratic efficiency.

Zilsel’s criticisms, then, can be read in part as a sign of disappointment that Bildung did not fulfill the liberal aspirations it promised. For Joseph S. Bloch, writing in 1885, liberalism promised a “spiritual asylum” for Jews, the “port of shelter after a thousand years of homelessness”; but by 1900, it became apparent that this was a false beacon. Yuri Slezkine, in his book The Jewish Century, has defined Jewish emancipation as “a search by individual Jews for neutral . . . society where neutral actors could share a neutral secular culture.” But in order to do this, he argues, Jews had to “convert to a national faith” to access the inalienable rights promised by secular society. Here it is worth quoting Slezkine’s argument at some length, as he postulates how, for Jews in nations across Europe (here citing Germany and Hungary as examples), Bildung could function paradoxically as both a secular space and a nationalist religion:

To enter the neutral spaces, one had to convert to a national faith. And that is precisely what many European Jews did—in much greater numbers than those who converted to Christianity, because the acceptance of Goethe as one’s savior did not seem to be an apostasy and because it was much more meaningful and important than baptism. After the triumph of cultural nationalism and the establishment of national pantheons, Christianity was reduced to a formal survival or reinterpreted as part of the national journey. One could be a good German or Hungarian without being a good Christian (and in an ideal liberal Germany or Hungary, religion in the traditional sense would become a private matter “separate from the state”), but one could not be a good German or Hungarian without worshiping the national canon. This was the new real church, the one that could not be separated from the state lest the state lose all meaning, the one that was all the more powerful for being taken for granted, the one that Jews could enter while still believing that they were in a neutral place worshiping Progress and Equality.

Zilsel might well have agreed with Slezkine’s metaphor of the “new real church.” For him, Geniereligion was espoused by priests, founded in dogmas, and housed in institutions of culture. Even as Zilsel seldom discussed his Jewish background, when he criticized the Austro-German canon for its religious undercurrent, his critique bears a tone of disappointment in a promise unfulfilled. When we read Zilsel’s Geniereligion through Slezkine’s insights, we see how Jews needed to assimilate not only to secularity, which offered the protections promised by legal emancipation, but also to Kunstreligion, which offered a sense of national belonging, or Deutschtum.
This need for national identity was particularly urgent in Austria after 1918. Prior to the war, the monarchy found ways to unify its fractured empire by building a cultural center that welcomed the Jewish middle class, a paradox that historian Ernest Gellner famously termed the “Habsburg dilemma.” David Brodbeck has discussed how key figures in Vienna’s musical life, such as Eduard Hanslick and Karl Goldmark, sought to exchange their Jewish identity for Deutschtum in what he calls a “quid pro quo.” As such, Jews became the architects of the new real church, in part because, in Vienna, they were 1.5 times as likely to send their children to the Gymnasium, which helped them rise to the ranks of cultural arbiters (to the protestation of many colleagues). But in 1918 this pluralistic empire, which considered itself a nationalities-state, was supplanted by the Republic of Austria that conceived of itself as a nation-state, and that was considerably less welcoming to Jews.

Spaces of Assimilation

The debates over Jewish assimilation grew particularly heated after Karl Marx’s seminal essay of 1843, “The Jewish Question.” In it, he articulated arguments that some found to be indicative of self-hatred: that Jews should abandon Jewishness if they hope to end their oppression; that emancipation would help Jews shed their negative dispositions and mannerisms; and that assimilation would benefit society at large. His thinking remained controversial well into the twentieth century, discussed first by Judeo-Marxists in Russia, then by Marxists in Western Europe, and finally by the early Zionists who disagreed about whether to rebuild Jewish life at home (cultural Zionism) or to resettle in Palestine (political Zionism).

As Enzo Traverso has shown, the Judeo-Marxists in Western Europe who were active during Zilsel’s lifetime focused on two facets of Marx’s essay: whether a nation can exist without a single territory, and whether Jews are partly responsible for antisemitism due to their mannered otherness. By 1900, German-speaking Judeo-Marxists were torn between the views of Karl Kautsky, who urged assimilation, and Vladimir Medem, who sought to preserve Jewishness across borders. Where Medem held that a Jewish community can be linked through Yiddishkeit, even without a national territory, Kautsky upheld Marx’s teleological view that Jewish assimilation is a fated step along the evolutionary process that culminates in socialism. Kautsky’s views were popular in part because he, along with Otto Bauer, absolved Jews of responsibility for their discrimination and described antisemitism as provincial backwardness that would vanish as society advanced. But for many Jewish Marxists, Zilsel included, Marxism itself was an equally satisfying surrogate for national consciousness, leaving little room for a Jewish identity alongside it. Socialism promised a more equitable society than Zion, Yiddishkeit, or assimilation to Deutschtum ever could.

These debates on paper found echoes in other corners of Jewish life where assimilation was not clear-cut. The Jewish population of Zilsel’s Vienna was divided: roughly half were acculturated Jews from Moravia and Bohemia, a quarter were from Western Hungary (a demographic that
ranged from Orthodox to assimilated), and a quarter were the newest wave from Galicia, who were both Orthodox and separatist. And despite efforts during the First World War to convene Jews of all stripes in a single Gemeindebund, the city's population remained fractured into a wide spectrum of identities.\textsuperscript{48} In pamphlet wars and coffeehouses, Jewish assimilation emerged not as a linear process, but as a series of individual paths through a patchwork of spaces with fluctuating rules of entry.

These rules varied most dramatically in Austria, where Jews were no longer protected by the pluralism of an empire under the umbrella of Deutschum, of a German Kulturnation in which Jews might participate equally. Building upon Marsha L. Rozenblit's history of Jewish life before the First World War, Lisa Silverman has argued that Jews who had previously found patchwork identities as Austrians before the war struggled to identify with a new republic that defined itself by what it was not, leading to a heightened attention to Jewish difference that complicated "becoming Austrian."\textsuperscript{49} Silverman’s study, together with other recent work on Jewish assimilation, shows how remarkably convoluted Jewish self-understanding could be. Some, for instance, felt a strong nostalgia for Catholicism as the marker of an empire where they found a friendlier coexistence, but when they worked too hard to efface their own difference by participating in Catholicism, they created a new stereotype of self-conscious overcompensation. Above all, Silverman argues that spaces, more so even than people, could be coded as Jewish or non-Jewish. In cosmopolitan centers like Vienna, Budapest, and Berlin, Jewish modernity was shaped most profoundly in zones of leisure like coffeehouses, restaurants, and salons.\textsuperscript{50}

Music was another space of discourse where Jews could seek out an identity as Germans and Austrians. The more earnestly Jewish artists wanted or needed to assimilate, the more they constructed the “new real church.” For Arnold Rosé, it was the Vienna Philharmonic and the Rosé Quartet, the beating heart of Vienna’s musical life; for Joseph Joachim, it was the Beethoven-Haus in Bonn, which touted itself as a site of pilgrimage. Meanwhile, the Jewish poet Ludwig August Frankl was known, and by many disdained, for his active role in Vienna's artist monument projects some decades before the non-Jewish Nikolaus Dumba took the reins, to considerably more public acclaim. Frankl's contribution to the so-called “monument fever,” or Denkmalwut, was the source of antisemitic pushback from those who worried about Jewish financiers seizing control of Bildung.\textsuperscript{51} And one of Europe’s most prominent cultural arbiters was as assimilated as they come: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the prolific Austrian writer who disdained his Jewish grandparentage. In fin-de-siècle Vienna, being of mixed heritage (a Mischling) was thought to severely inhibit intellectual acumen, making pure-blooded Jewish intelligence into a form of contamination; this is why Mischlinge like Hofmannsthal and Eduard Hanslick so vehemently distanced themselves from their Jewish roots.\textsuperscript{52} But in 1918, Hofmannsthal channeled his lack of belonging into a new utopia. He was among the most active founders of the Salzburg Festival, which he positioned as the new artistic crossroads of Europe, a neutral space that he promoted with all the utopian fervor of a Zionist.\textsuperscript{53} Meanwhile, the Zionist leader
Theodor Herzl was, perhaps surprisingly, a passionate Wagnerian. He wrote in his diary that Wagner’s *Ring* would form the ideal cultural center for Israel because this music had the unearthly power to unify diasporic peoples in communal feeling. Even in the musical spaces that Jews built, they could find themselves unwelcome. The non-Jewish Hans Pfitzner was proud to have his 1917 biofictional opera *Palestrina* premiered by the Jewish conductor Bruno Walter, but two years later, Pfitzner penned an antisemitic diatribe against the critic Paul Bekker, whose biography of Beethoven was another alleged example of the “impotence” of the “international Jewish movement in art.” And Hermann Levi conducted the premiere of *Parsifal* in spite of Wagner’s abuse; he was so strongly drawn into the space of this art that it was worth being reminded of his Jewish difference. Those who saw themselves as assimilated were baffled when their Jewish difference was noted in a musical space they thought neutral: David Brodbeck has shown how Eduard Hanslick and Karl Goldmark were incredulous when critics persistently associated their works with a Jewish inflection.

In some cases, Jews with assimilated identities found cleverly indirect ways to critique the spaces that made them unwelcome, rather than rebuke antisemitism head-on. Kevin Karnes has shown how Guido Adler, who founded the formal discipline of musicology at the University of Vienna, pushed back against what he saw as irrational approaches to Richard Wagner by the Bayreuth circle of Wagnerites. Adler called for a level-headed methodology that would discuss Wagner’s music “calmly” and “circumspectly” rather than succumbing to “those passions that have been so pathologically aroused in our time.” In conjunction with other assimilated Jewish scholars like Otto Erich Deutsch, whose work with rare historical documents brought a new rigor to the discipline, Adler’s systematic approach reflected a deep concern that was shaped by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche: that history, and notably the fetishization of the past that informs heritage preservation projects, can never be a neutral science free from institutional corruption. Just as Zilsel later articulated in his *Geniereligion*, Adler worried that cultural heritage could be used or abused.

For other Austrian Jews who found themselves unwelcome, it made more sense to accept Jewish difference and respond with self-criticism and disgust. Alexander Zemlinsky took the idea of Jewish impotence to heart with expressions of self-loathing; in his opera *The Dwarf* (1921), the title character discovers his own ugliness just as Zemlinsky did in his diaries. One might think of Zionists as the opposite extreme, but even those with proud Jewish identities could assimilate to racialist patterns of thinking. In his early writings, Max Nordau diagnosed Wagnerian art-religion as degeneration, a subtle rebellion against antisemitism; but when it came to his vision of Zion, he advocated “muscular Judaism,” where participation in sports would strengthen the impotent Jewish body. (Freud’s position was similar: he held that the weak bodies of Jews led them to overcompensate with strength of intellect.) And the composer Ernest Bloch absorbed antisemitic language to position his music as racially Jewish, as Klára Móricz has shown.

Bloch’s thinking was also indicative of a new assimilationist logic shared by writers like Berthold Auerbach, Max Brod, and
Edmond Fleg. These authors maintained that, as an ancient religion, Judaism holds the key to universal humanism. In Bloch’s letters to his friend Fleg, which Móricz has excavated from the archives, he established Jewishness as its very own neutral space independent from German art-religion: “We have to be more Jewish, not in order to separate ourselves from the ‘others,’ but to be more human. In searching for our roots we will also find those of the others for they plunge into the same ground.” It is telling that even those who resisted assimilation wanted the same liberal humanism that was promised (if not delivered) by the “new real church.”

With this tapestry of approaches to assimilation, historians must read between the lines to detect traces of Jewish identity. This is certainly the case with Zilsel, whose Jewishness was largely subsumed by his Marxism. But even as Zilsel did not discuss his heritage openly, the context of his treatise, in conjunction with his rebuttal of prominent antisemites, encourages a new reading. If the canon had not served as an enticing neutral space for Jews, if Austria had not made the figureheads of its Kulturnation into deities, and if Jews did not have such a robust historical relationship with secularism, Zilsel’s Geniereligion would seem quite disconnected from Jewish concerns. But given the growing self-consciousness about Jews’ place in cultural pantheons, especially among Judeo-Marxists, Die Geniereligion emerges as a subtle expression of Jewish alarm at art-religion gone awry.

**Jewish Genius: Reacting Between the Lines**

Zilsel has a special prominence in histories of the genius concept because he systematically explored the ideology and psychology of practices that his contemporaries took for granted. Historian Darrin McMahon has noted how the Geniereligion Zilsel theorized was fully realized later by Hitler and Stalin, who manipulated the psychology of the masses when they commissioned their networks of influential “genius priests” (in Zilsel’s words). For the cultural historian Julia Barbara Köhne, who offers the most comprehensive survey of German-language discourse on genius around 1900, Zilsel was disturbed by the recent masculinization of the genius cult. For Köhne, Zilsel’s text was a reaction to a reaction: in the wake of French and Italian arguments that linked genius with effeminate pathology and degeneration, some German and Austrian writers remasculinized genius as virile, and these same authors were (not surprisingly) hostile antisemites. Throughout his book, Zilsel’s main targets are the “genius enthusiasts” Thomas Carlyle, Otto Weininger, Richard Wagner, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who were all driving forces in popular antisemitism. Given that Zilsel was among the most vociferous critics of a genius cult led largely by antisemites, his reaction might, Köhne speculates, be attributed in part to his Jewish heritage.

To acknowledge that Zilsel rebutted antisemites can oversimplify the matter because antisemitism was not a unified ideology. In their pioneering studies of Jewish Vienna, Marsha L. Rozenblit and Steven Beller articulated a useful distinction between national and racial antisemitism which can allow for a more nuanced reading of Zilsel’s position. National antisemitism sees Jews as lacking deep history, as wandering nomads without place, language, or nation (the antonym, in other words, of Zionism); this ideology was a driving force for Jews who endeavored to assimilate, compensating for a perceived dearth of
cultural roots. Racial antisemitism, in contrast, was a roadblock to assimilation. When they were accused of being different in body, not only in nation—of having criminal physiognomies, muddied dialect, and shuffling gait—Jews felt helpless to assimilate without conversion (a feeling perhaps best articulated by Arnold Schoenberg in 1935, when he recounted how young Jewish artists felt paralyzed by racialist accusations). Both racial and national antisemitism drew upon the stereotype of the Jew as intellectually derivative, a trait that could be attributed to their lack of artistic heritage (national) or to their inborn degeneration (racial).

Zilsel's targets were not all antisemitic in the same way. Carlyle's disdain for the Jewish wealth of London's West End formed the implicit counterweight to his adulation of great men in On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (1841). Richard Wagner's son-in-law Chamberlain, in comparison, might be assumed to have focused on racial antisemitism given that his Foundations of the Nineteenth Century (1899) is now infamous as a road map for Nazi ideology; but a closer reading reveals this book to indulge in national antisemitism in equal measure, following in Wagner's footsteps. Wagner's Jewishness in Music (1850) articulated, in inflammatory fashion, what Carlyle left implicit, and his angry rant indulged in both racial and national antisemitism. Granted, Wagner's words were not universally accepted—they met with criticism by Jews and non-Jews alike, who derided the facile scapegoating that mistook cosmopolitan progress for Jewish corruption—but his essay did leave its mark in musicology. Not only did German (and even German-Jewish) musicologists neglect Jewish music when the discipline was formed in the late nineteenth century, as Pamela Potter has shown, but Wagner's essay erected a lasting opposition between progressivism and conservatism, which led classic texts in music history to disparage Mendelssohn's backward-looking Bach revival, and especially Meyerbeer's shallow cosmopolitanism, until well into the twentieth century.

Among the texts that Zilsel rebutted, the most brutally racist outlook emerged in Weininger's Sex and Character (1903), a slim volume that was discussed with great fervor after the author's ritualistic suicide in Beethoven's death-house that same year, which affirmed his adulation of Germanic genius that promised to purge his Jewishness. While Weininger's book was debated by his contemporaries, such as Wittgenstein, Freud, Kafka, and Joyce, it is today best known as a favorite of the Nazis, for obvious reasons: he marshaled the disgust that fueled racial antisemitism to portray Jews as weak, effeminate, and derivative. Exactly how Zilsel reacted to these authors shows us which shades of antisemitism were the latent foundations of Geniereligion.

Zilsel concentrated his vitriol on Chamberlain, whose sensationalist text spread what could fairly be called alternative facts. Zilsel was disturbed by how Chamberlain, in his Preface, acknowledged his untruths but defended these as the “living truth” (lebendiger Wahrheit) of his readers. Zilsel was astounded that these acknowledged falsehoods could meet with “such glee and full-blooded support” from even the most educated readers, and he felt this indicated “a malicious danger for our time.” In the appendix to Die Geniereligion, a short passage that debunks Chamberlain's mistreatment of Spinoza in
his book *Immanuel Kant*, Zilsel was defiant at the national antisemitism that was latent in Chamberlain’s cult of personality. The passage to which Zilsel objected made Spinoza into the stereotypically uncreative Jew, the “glasses-wiper” (in Zilsel’s sardonic words) who sat from birth to death in his back office and recombined the work of others into a tapestry of syllogisms. Zilsel rebuked Chamberlain for stumbling in like a schoolmaster, ruler in hand, ready to send Spinoza to the back of the philosophical schoolroom; yet Chamberlain, as Zilsel noted, did nothing to earn his position of authority because his engagement with Spinoza’s writings was shallow and inaccurate. What Zilsel found particularly ironic about Chamberlain’s stance was how it ran counter to Kant’s own philosophy of human worth, the central preoccupation of Chamberlain’s book. Zilsel was disturbed not only by this denigration of Jewish creativity and invention, but by the success of a book that spread the false idols of the “genius priest” to an eager reading public.

Zilsel’s appendix participated in an ongoing Jewish reaction against Chamberlain that has been traced by Slezkine, and that ran parallel to the response to Otto Weininger, whose treatise became an emblem of self-hatred. A number of Jewish authors – such as Berthold Auerbach (a friend-turned-enemy of Wagner), the folklorist Joseph Jacobs, and the author Alfred Schnitzler – observed a special brand of “Jewish genius” that offered a counterpart to German great men. But even Jewish authors absorbed the antisemitic idea that Jewish genius was reproductive rather than productive; smart Jews outnumbered smart Germans but failed to innovate. Or as Joseph Jacobs put it, German Jews are “at the present moment quantitatively (not necessarily qualitatively) at the head of European intellect,” but whether these geniuses are “inventive” he could not say.

This was the central paradox of “Jewish genius” traced by Sander Gilman in his book *Smart Jews*, and I would suggest that this paradox informed, if subtly, Zilsel’s revisionist history of scientific achievement. Zilsel’s writings were concurrent with texts that questioned why Jewish progress was limited to less innovative spheres: the Viennese philosopher Theodor Gomperz, for instance, asked why Jews have failed to excel in science, being competent only in the “reproductive arts” like music and theater. Meanwhile, Zilsel’s history of science recentered intellectual achievement around a surplus of smart individuals rather than a pantheon of geniuses. By decentralizing genius, Zilsel implicitly promoted the smart Jews (like himself) who worked on the sidelines, innovating out of the spotlight of celebrity. And when these smart Jews began to disappear in 1933, ousted from university positions and censored from libraries, Zilsel could not stand silent. In the workers’ paper *Der Kampf*, hiding behind a pseudonym, he voiced his alarm at the new regime of censorship. Without its smart Jews, he wrote, German science would atrophy.

Zilsel’s reactions to Chamberlain, Weininger, and Carlyle revolved largely around national antisemitism, which cultivated the stereotype of the wandering Jew: crafty, adaptable, but lacking spiritual or intellectual depth. Zilsel’s unease with racial antisemitism was more subtle, and emerges only when read in cultural context. This ideology became increasingly robust in music culture of the late nineteenth century, when composers were exhumed and reburied in Walhalla-like groves,
which allowed doctors and anthropologists to situate musical genius in the bones using the outdated cranioscopic methods of Franz Joseph Gall. The skulls of Haydn, Schubert, Beethoven, Bach, and (allegedly) Mozart were endowed with features of Teutonic superiority that were extended into dilettantish analyses of their music. Even Jewish composers like Mendelssohn who converted to the Christian faith could never fully assimilate when they faced this biological yardstick of Germanness. Despite Mendelssohn’s leading role in Protestant musical heritage in Leipzig through his Bach revival and his oratorio Paulus, his facial features were still critiqued as prototypically Jewish with increasing frequency in the late nineteenth century. Detractors of Mahler in Vienna were likewise drawn to visible markers of difference, which manifested in caricatures and music criticism. In this context, then, it comes as no surprise that Zilsel argued against the use of biology to measure worth. He argued that it is folly to trace artists’ heredity and to apply biological sciences to the realm of culture. Geniuses are made, not born.

Zilsel offers another subtle reaction to racialized antisemitism. The second part of his book revolves around Abfärbung, or the “rubbing-off” of geniuses on their devotees (or as Zilsel put it, the halo of a candle in the fog). Here, Zilsel connects the mechanism of the Geniereligion with its origins in material saineté—that is, in sacred sites, relic cults, and priests as human mediators. Most striking is how Zilsel defines Abfärbung through psychological studies of disgust and fetishism, then offers an example paraphrased from an aphorism by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: that one feels great unease when using a razor to spread butter on bread. Readers might have recognized that this psychology of revulsion lay at the core of racial antisemitism. Wagner, for instance, began his essay with a declaration of instinctive repugnance, and the remainder of his rant spins out the “living truth” of that disgust. Zilsel does not openly discuss antisemitism when he defines Abfärbung; but perhaps it is no coincidence that his paragraph on revulsion transitions immediately to Wagner, whose leitmotives (Zilsel explains) have taught the public what Abfärbung means by offering subtle suggestions beneath the surface of the plot. Zilsel offers this example without rebuking Wagner. He does, however, rebuke Abfärbung as a dangerous social problem. Meanwhile, Max Nordau and his interlocutors were engaged in a heated debate about Wagner’s power over the masses, which Nordau framed as a societal pathology. In the context of that concurrent discourse, Zilsel’s Abfärbung emerges as a hidden mechanism for social control, and Wagner as its mouthpiece.

Given that Zilsel combined philosophy with cultural history, it comes as no surprise that he reacted to both shades of antisemitism. His philosophical argument, by decentralizing genius, made an intervention in the myth of the derivative Jew. And his cultural argument about Abfärbung revealed the seedy apparatus by which dangerous philosophies spread, in the same period when instinctive revulsion widened the reach of antisemitism.

**Priests of the Geniereligion**

Zilsel focused not only on how philosophies spread, but also on the individuals who spread them: the connoisseurs who disseminate Geniereligion to the masses by acting as
priests in a metaphysical brotherhood. My own work on pilgrimages to composers’ houses supports Zilsel’s idea. Museums justified themselves with holier-than-thou piety, and self-proclaimed pilgrims were keen to differentiate themselves from tourists. Material sainteté like relics and pilgrimage distinguished insiders from outsiders, true from false devotees.

It was an easy jump from this culture of exclusion in German Bildung to related expressions of racial exclusion. A regular pilgrim to Beethoven’s house named Margarete Koelman wrote a series of poems that positioned herself as a connoisseur, deriding other museum visitors as shallow dilettantes. Not long after she penned these poems, Koelman published a short story under her pseudonym, Irene Wild, called “Dschang und Dschau,” which narrates the cultural clash of two Chinese men, one of whom has been assimilated into European society, the other of whom is a grotesque caricature fresh off the boat. At first it may seem that Koelman’s exclusionary thinking in one area—positioning herself as heir apparent to Beethoven’s spirit—may have extended freely to her judgments about racial others. But this picture is substantially complicated by the possibility that Koelman may have herself been Jewish; her maiden name, Friedländer, was a common Jewish surname. If so, Koelman appears to have enacted her assimilation in three ways: by marrying into a family of Prussian bureaucrats, partaking in Catholic-inflected forms of composer devotion, and publishing a story that derides racial others who fail to assimilate.

Koelman’s case was emblematic of an ambition among some Jews to become the priests of the Geniereligion. Her forgotten odes to Beethoven mirror the far more visible writings of Heinrich Schenker, whose perturbing philosophy of German cultural superiority seems at odds with his own active participation in Vienna’s Jewish community. In his article on Schenker’s identity, Leon Botstein has described this apparent contradiction as the product of assimilation, “in which marginal populations that achieve some legitimacy and a foothold in a culture and world after a history of exclusion become energetic opponents of the very patterns of entrance they themselves exploited.” But for Schenker, this energetic opposition did not undermine his participation in Jewish spaces. While he championed German musical superiority as a surrogate for religion, enacting his transformation from provincial Galician Jew to Viennese urbanite (as both Nicholas Cook and Martin Eybl have shown), Schenker saw a spiritual affinity between assimilated Jewry and German genius, which he felt were equally threatened by a growing culture of dilettantism.

If we read Botstein’s assessment of Schenker through Zilsel’s lens, we see two types of genius priests reign over the neutral space of Bildung: the proponents of writers like Chamberlain who stirred up a naïve and populist fondness for genius, and whose behavior Zilsel found dangerous in 1918, alongside an elitist ideology like that of Schenker, which saw cultural insiders as protectors of the true Geniereligion, and whose dangers have only begun to be understood in recent discourse about music theory’s white racial frame.

For Jews immersed in the arts, like Schenker, Bildung was their bread and butter. But when antisemitic authors began to note Jews’ biological differences, Bildung became the razor that Jews used as a butter knife. Their facility in the arts was seen as wrong, and that wrongness
elicited a passive form of disgust from their detractors, a mere “rubbing off” of feeling with a chilling lack of individual agency. Zilsel’s response, in the final words of his treatise, is to do away with Abfärbung and to concentrate on the thing itself, or what he called “the ideal of the thing” (die Ideal der Sache), a phrase reminiscent of Kant’s “thing-in-itself” (Ding an sich) that bespeaks Zilsel’s participation in the logical positivism of Schlick’s Vienna Circle. When Zilsel entreated his readers “not to disdain, venerate, and romanticize but to learn, to search for the truth and abide by it,” it is hard not to see religious reform in this last passage, an echo of sola scriptura.90 Zilsel emerges here not only as a skeptic of secularity, and not only as a Jewish Marxist, but as the Luther of Geniereligion (ironically, perhaps, given Luther’s famed antisemitism). When Zilsel revealed how ostensibly secular institutions failed to abide by their own tenets, he sought to rescue Bildung and reshape the neutral spaces of culture. His vision was one of intellectual equity and, above all, a Marxist appreciation for the collectivity of human achievement by Jews and non-Jews alike.

**Epilogue**

It is a truism that historians find traces of themselves in the past—such a powerful truism, in fact, that our motivations for pursuing our research tend to remain veiled. I find it important here to lift the veil in ways that Zilsel did not, and to admit that there is a strong resonance between Zilsel’s project and my own story of assimilation as a Jewish Germanist (and, no less, a descendant of a Jewish-Polish bibliophile in exile who continued to appreciate German literature after his narrow escape). I first discovered Die Geniereligion many years ago while researching the material practices of art-religion that led composers to be venerated like saints. A closer reading of Zilsel’s text led me to the striking realization that my research interests—which so closely align with Zilsel’s interests a century ago—have been motivated in part by my own Jewish response to the politics of secularity that has continued into the twenty-first century.

In light of the fraught year 2020, there are more reasons than ever to lift the veil. Zilsel grabbed me not only because of my own story, but because Geniereligion continues to shape the story of Western art music. Granted, Catholic-inflected practices of relic-fetishism and pilgrimage have moved to the fringe, and it is increasingly rare to hear voices in the academy utter words as extreme as Schenker’s (“of all the nations living on the earth today, the German nation alone possesses true Genius” 91). But Eurocentric music curricula and concert programming continue to position themselves as neutral spaces of Bildung, of liberal enrichment, that strive to elevate while masking their own structures of exclusion. To move forward, musicology and related institutions should recognize that canons were built in part through the politics of assimilation, and that many who seek out European musical traditions have wrestled with layered identities, with a dynamic and complex sense of belonging.
NOTES

I wish to thank my anonymous reviewers for their incisive feedback, Roy Chan for his comments on an early draft, and August Sheehy and Margarethe Adams for organizing the symposium that was the impetus for this project.


3 Zilsel admitted that die-hard followers of Geniereligion would remain immune to his criticisms, but hoped to persuade those less committed to its tenets; Zilsel, Geniereligion, 55.

4 His last project was left unfinished upon his death and was finally published in 1976: Edgar Zilsel, Die sozialen Ursprünge der nezeitlichen Wissenschaft (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976).


7 On the failure of Zilsel's Habilitation, see Johann Dvořák's Introduction to Die Geniereligion, 7–40.


9 For a rich account of Zilsel's Marxist activism, both in his writings and in the reading group that he led at the Volkshochschule, see chapter 4 of Janek Wasserman, Black Vienna: The Radical Right in the Red City, 1918–1938 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 106–31.


12 Friedrich Nietzsche, Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003; orig. 1874).


15 Following in the footsteps of literary scholars, musicologists have taken a substantial interest in the politics of canon formation since the 1990s. Starting with the essays in Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman, eds., Disciplining Music (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), scholars such as Marcia J. Citron and William Weber unearthed how canons formed and whom they excluded; see Citron, Gender and the Musical Canon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Weber, The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The discourse surrounding canon formation

16 On Jews as agents of secularity and cosmopolitanism in Germany and Austria, see Michael P. Steinberg, Judaism Musical and Unmusical (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).


25 The term “holy music” first appeared in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s Lectures on Religion from 1799, whence it was picked up by Johann Ludwig Tieck and Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder in Fantasies on Art for Friends of Art (1799). See the comprehensive two-volume collection that traces the intellectual history of art-religion: Albert Meier et al., Kunstreligion (Göttingen: De Gruyter, 2011). For the theological history of the concept, see Bernd Auerchs, Die Entstehung der Kunstreligion (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006). For its manifestations in music discourse of the early Romantics, see Elizabeth Kramer, “The Idea of Kunstreligion in German Musical Aesthetics of the Early Nineteenth Century” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2005).

26 Nicole Heinikel, Religiöse Kunst, Kunstreligion und die Überwindung der Säkularisierung: Frühromantik als Sehnsucht und Suche nach der verlorenen Religion (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2004).


30 Asad, Formations of the Secular, 32.

31 Fine, “Beethoven’s Mask.”


33 Zilsel, Geniereligion, 52 and fn. 1. The early biopic to which he alludes was Der Märtyrer seines Herzens, also called Beethoven und die Frauen, a 1917 silent film directed by Emil Justiz.

34 Zilsel’s approach, not coincidentally, mirrors that of Marx and Engels in the premises of their materialist method, which demystified the idealist dogmas of their rivals: “The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.” Marx and Engels, The German Ideology (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998; orig. 1845), 36. I am indebted to Roy Chan for teasing out this connection.


38 My remarks in this passage represent but a few key developments of a much richer history of Bildung traced by Rebekka Horlacher in The Educated Subject and the German Concept of Bildung: A Comparative Cultural History (New York, London: Routledge, 2016).


40 Yuri Slezkine, The Jewish Century (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 67. The passage about a search for neutral society reads in full: “‘Jewish emancipation’ was, among other things, a search by individual Jews for a neutral (or at least ‘semineutral,’ in Jacob Katz’s terms) society where neutral actors could share a neutral secular culture.” Ibid., 51.

41 Ernest Gellner, Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski, and the Habsburg Dilemma


43 Enzo Traverso has argued against the widespread idea of a German-Jewish symbiosis; instead, he shows how Jewish intellectuals operated as pariahs, pushing against the continued resistance of German colleagues. Enzo Traverso, The Jews and Germany: From the ‘Judeo-German Symbiosis’ to the Memory of Auschwitz (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). On the Jews’ position as cultural arbiters in Vienna, see Steven Heller, Vienna and the Jews.


45 On the many shades of assimilation beyond Germany and Austria, see the collected essays in Jonathan Frankel and Steven J. Zipperstein, eds., Assimilation and Community: The Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).


48 On the composition of Vienna’s Jewish population in Zilsel’s time, see David Rechter, Jews of Vienna and the First World War (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000), 16–18; on Siegmund Kaznelson’s Congress movement, which explored political autonomy and Jewish unity during the war, see Rechter’s chapter 4, pp. 129–60. On the musical manifestations of this divide between the recent immigrant wave and the more acculturated Jew in popular broadsides, see chapter 7 of Philip V. Bohlman, Jewish Music and Modernity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 147–80.

49 Marsha L. Rozenblit, Reconstructing a National Identity; Silverman, Becoming Austrians.

50 On how Jewish identity was shaped in spaces of leisure, see Shachar M. Pinsker, A Rich Brew: How Cafés Created Modern Jewish Culture (New York: New York University Press, 2018);


51 The debate was particularly heated in 1868 at the start of the project to erect a Friedrich Schiller monument, with Frankl serving as vice president of the committee; see Herlinde Achner, “Ludwig August Frankl — Politiker der Erinnerung,” in Ludwig August Frankl (1810–1894): Eine jüdische Biographie zwischen Okzident und Orient, ed. Louise Hecht (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2016), 275–89.


53 Hofmannsthal’s utopian language appears in his essays on the Salzburg Festival in Bernd Schoeller, ed., Gesammelte Werke, vol. 8: Reden und Aufsätze I (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1979). Lisa Silverman has shown how Hofmannsthal’s collaborator, Max Reinhardt, negotiated his identity quite differently: he worked with Hofmannsthal on the annual production of Jedermann at the Salzburg cathedral, which couched the Salzburg Festival as a Catholic-Baroque endeavor, while also directing Yiddish theater in Vienna; see chapter 4 in Lisa Silverman, Becoming Austrians, 141–71. Meanwhile, this same performance met with antisemitic protest during its premiere in 1920; see Michael P. Steinberg, The Meaning of the Salzburg Festival: Austria as Theater and Ideology, 1890–1938 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 169.

54 On Herzl the Wagnerite, see Leah Garrett, A Knight at the Opera: Heine, Wagner, Herzl, Perez, and the Legacy of Der Tannahäuser (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2011); see also Jacques Kornberg, Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

55 Paul Bekker and Hans Pfitzner had already sparred publicly about Ferruccio Busoni, but the debate turned to the topic of antisemitism in 1919 when Pfitzner issued his polemical essay in the Süddeutsche Monatshefte in Munich, “Neue Ästhetik der musikalischen Impotenz” (reprinted in his Gesammelte Schriften, 2nd ed., vol. 2 [Augsburg: Benno Filser Verlag, 1926], 99–282). The target of
Pfitzner’s multipart diatribe was Bekker’s biography Beethoven (Berlin: Schuster and Loeffler, 1912); Bekker felt compelled to respond with his essay “Impotenz – oder Potenz?” Frankfurter Zeitung (Jan. 15 and 16, 1920; repr. in Anbruch 2 [1920]: 133–41). In the 1926 second edition of his collected writings, Pfitzner penned a Foreword in response to Bekker that only deepened his antisemitic paranoia about the Jewish “war on Deutschum” (Pfitzner, Gesammelte Schriften, 113). On this and similar debates among music critics, see Karen Painter, “Jewish Identity and Anti-Semitic Critique in the Austro-German Reception of Mahler, 1900–1945,” in Jeremy Barham, ed., Perspectives on Gustav Mahler (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 175–94.

56 Brodbeck, Defining Deutschum.

57 Adler wrote that “those passions that have been so pathologically aroused in our time may play no role. Instead, they must be confronted in a candid, manly fashion and calmly discussed, and all points of disagreement must be considered circumspectly.” Adler, Richard Wagner: Vorlesungen gehalten an der Universität zu Wien (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1904), 189–90; translated by Kevin Karnes in Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History: Shaping Musical Thought in Late Nineteenth-Century Vienna (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 187.

58 See chapter 5 of Karnes, Music, Criticism, and the Challenge of History, 133–59.


63 Bloch to Fleg, Jan. 30, 1913; translated and cited by Móricz, Jewish Identities, 114.


67 “. . . and so we had to learn from men like Chamberlain not only that there is a racial difference between Jews and Germans; not only that the Aryan race is a very contemplative race and is thus meant to rule the world; not only that the Jewish race is an inferior one and should be despised; but also that we possess no artistic capabilities. . . . One must understand the effect of these assertions on young artists.” Arnold Schoenberg, “Two Speeches on the Jewish Situation,” in Style and Idea, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 503 (my revised translation).

68 Richard Taruskin has discussed the response by the non-Jewish Eduard Bernsdorf, which reveals a latent late nineteenth-century tension between industrial progress and antimodern Romanticism, with Jews caught in the ideological crossfire; Taruskin, The Oxford History of Western Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3: 228. While Jewish intellectuals such as Heinrich Berl, J. E. de Sinoja, and Salli Levi reviled Wagner’s polemics, they shared a tendency to associate Jewish music with liturgical song, which tied its sound to the Jewish body and barred it from access to absolute music; see Bohlman, Jewish Music and Modernity, 189–202.

the changes in the music industry that allowed Jews to thrive, and that incited Wagner's reactionary text, see Conway, Jewry in Music, 257–66.


71 In Chamberlain's Preface to Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts, he writes that “there is something higher and holier than knowledge: that is life itself. That which I have written here has been experienced. Should some factual declarations be an exaggerated error, some judgments a prejudice, some conclusions an error of judgment, nothing is entirely untrue: for isolated reason often lies, while real life never does . . . a deep feeling runs beneath, beyond the individual, and even as prejudice and ignorance may distort interpretation, a kernel of living truth must lie therein” (my translation). “. . . er mußte sich sagen, daß es etwas gibt, höher und heiliger als alles Wissen: das ist das Leben selbst. Was hier geschrieben steht, ist erlebt. Manche tatsächliche Angabe mag ein überkommener Irrtum, manches Urteil ein Vorurteil, manche Schlußfolgerung ein Denkfehler sein, ganz unwahr ist nichts; deen die verwaiste Vernunft lügt nicht . . .” (my translation).

72 Zilsel, Geniereligion, 192 and 234, respectively.

73 The quote by Chamberlain, to which Zilsel objects, reads: “In contrast, ‘dear Baruch’ sat from birth until death in his little chamber and thought about work that he had read by Descartes and Bruno and recombined it (with incomparable skill) to make a texture of syllogisms.” Zilsel was further disturbed that this quotation was the only mention of Spinoza in the entire text. Zilsel, Geniereligion, 232; citing a passage from Chamberlain, Immanuel Kant (Munich: Bruckmann, 1905), 346.

74 On reactions to Chamberlain, see Slezkine, The Jewish Century, 52–60.


77 It should be noted that Gomperz’s essay, written in 1904 and discussed at length by Sander Gilman, was both unpublished and untitled; but his sentiments, however private, were echoed by other Viennese thinkers of his time, notably those who debated Marx's “Jewish Question.” See Gilman, Smart Jews, 107.


81 K. M. Knittel, Seeing Mahler: Music and the Language of Antisemitism in Fin-de-siècle Vienna (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

82 Zilsel, Geniereligion, 114.

83 Ibid., 105. Lichtenberg wrote: “How much depends on the way things are presented in this world can be seen from the very fact that coffee drunk out of wine glasses is really miserable stuff, as is meat cut at the table with a pair of scissors. Worst of all, as I once actually saw, is butter spread on a piece of bread with an old though very clean razor.” Lichtenberg, The Lichtenberg Reader: Selected Writings of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, trans. and ed. Franz H. Mautner and Henry Hatfield (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 99–100.


85 Fine, “Objects of Veneration.”


88 Cook argues that traces of Talmudic thinking lurk between the lines of Schenker’s ambition to assimilate; see Cook, “The Politics of Assimilation” in The Schenker Project (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 199–229. Martin Eybl explores the tensions in Schenker’s identity, which was divided among Polish, Galician, Jewish, Viennese, and overarching “German”: see Eybl, “Heinrich Schenker’s Identities as a German and a Jew,” Musicologica Austriaca (Sept. 21, 2018), http://www.musau.org/parts/neue-article-page/view/54 (accessed Nov. 21, 2019).


90 Zilsel, Geniereligion, 229.