Halevy's *La juive*

The Opera

La juive premiered in the same year as Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835) and was even more successful in its time than its Italian contemporary, with close to 600 performances in its first 100 years. It was a favorite of Enrico Caruso.

Then, it disappeared from the repertoire, for two reasons. First, Halévy was Jewish; his librettist Scribe gave him a drama in which Jewish characters are hunted to their deaths by the Christian majority; and the Third Reich did the odiously predictable thing and swept the work from German stages. It has never entirely recovered the ground. There have been periodic rescue attempts in Vienna, Zurich and elsewhere which have kept it visible rather than secure.



Cornélie Falcon as Rachel, the title role, portrait by A. Colin (1835)

Secondly, in the words of Dominic Hartley writing for Music web international, "the case for grand opera is hard to make these days.... The scale defeats most houses: five acts, a vast chorus, a significant running time, and a tenor role of such sustained demands that casting it is a problem before rehearsals even begin. Only a company with deep resources and real programming nerve can mount the thing at all." https://musicwebinternational.com/2026/06/halevy-la-juive-naxos/. *Dominic Hartley, June 14, 2026*

The Composer

Fromental Halévy (c. 1860–62), by Étienne Carjat

Jacques-François-Fromental-Élie Halévy (1799 –1862), was widely regarded in his lifetime as one of the central figures of 19th-century French music. (Another Halévy, the librettist Ludovic, was his nephew.)



A student of Luigi Cherubini, he achieved his first major triumph with La juive (1835), a cornerstone of the grand opéra repertoire, which Gustav Mahler considered one of the greatest operas ever written. Many of his works were mainstays of the Opéra and Opéra-Comique for decades. While he had his critics, he was widely praised, one writer stating that he was "the most original genius of all French opera composers, combining erudition with heartfelt expression."

Halévy was born in Paris, son of a French Jewish mother and the cantor Élie Halfon Halévy, who was the secretary of the Jewish community of Paris and a writer and teacher of Hebrew. The name Fromental, by which he was generally known, reflects that he was born on the-day of that name, 7 Prairial, in the French Revolutionary calendar, which was still operative at that time.

He entered the Paris conservatory at the age of nine or ten in 1809, becoming a pupil and later protégé of Cherubini and won the Prix de Rome in 1819. He became chorus master at the Théâtre Italien, while he struggled to get an opera performed, and then moved on to be chorus master at the Opéra. The same year he became professor of harmony and accompaniment at the Conservatoire de Paris, where he was later also professor of counterpoint, fugue and composition.

He was an esteemed teacher, counting among his pupils Bizet and Gounod; even Wagner, putting aside his anti-Semitism for a moment, admired him.

The Tenor



Neil Shicoff was born in Brooklyn, New York. He studied at the Juilliard School of Music and with his father, the celebrated cantor Sidney Shicoff. He made his professional debut as the title hero in Verdi's *Ernani* conducted by James Levine in Cinncinnati in 1975. As early as 1976, he made his debut at the Metropolitan Opera as Rinuccio in *Gianni Schicchi* also conducted by James Levine. Internationally recognized as the pre-eminent American tenor of his generation, Neil Shicoff has appeared at all of the world's most important opera houses. He is now retired and devotes much of his time to teaching.

He was instrumental in a later production of *La juive* and was of the opinion that the opera is continually relevant with its message of the dangers of extremism; he had a strong conviction of the necessity of diplomacy to solve global conflict.

Back Story

The following is a summary of events which took place before the first act of the opera, some of which are only revealed in the course of the action.

When he was young, the Jew Eléazar had lived in Italy near Rome and witnessed the condemnation and executions of his sons as heretics by Count Brogni. Eléazar himself was banished and forced to flee to Switzerland.

During his journey, Eléazar found a baby near death, abandoned inside a burnt-out house which turned out to be the home of the Count Brogni. Bandits had set fire to the house, attempting to kill Brogni and his entire family but unaware that the Count himself was in Rome at the time.

Eléazar took the child, a girl, and raised her as his own daughter, naming her Rachel. Brogni discovered the ruins of his house and the bodies of his family upon his return. He subsequently became a priest and later a cardinal.

At the beginning of the opera, in 1414, Rachel (now a young woman) is living with her adopted father in the city of Constance. Prince Leopold has distinguished himself in battle with the forces of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund, which have defeated the Hussites. The Council of Constance, has been convened to resolve Church matters. Pope John XXII is represented there by Cardinal Brogni, who was an historical personage, although his part in the story of the opera is entirely fictional.

Accusations of Anti-Semitism

The following analysis is taken, aside from editorial parentheticals, from https://grokipedia.com/page/Lajuive

Critics have accused *La juive* of perpetuating anti-Semitic stereotypes through its depiction of the Jewish characters Eleazar and Rachel, particularly Eléazar's vengeful refusal to disclose Rachel's true parentage, which leads to her execution. This refusal has been interpreted as embodying the trope of the spiteful, unassimilable Jew who prioritizes ethnic grudges over human life or mercy. [I have a problem with the execution of your two sons for working on the Christian sabbath being called a "grudge."]

Such portrayals, including Eléazar's portrayal as a goldsmith amid accusations of ritual poisoning, echo 19th century European stereotypes of Jews as cunning artisans involved in usury or desecration, reinforcing narratives of inherent Jewish malice toward Christians. Jewish commentators have highlighted these elements as especially problematic in performances, arguing that the opera's focus on Jewish-Christian antagonism [although actually a fact] and the graphic punishment of Jewish protagonists -boiled alive for heresy- can fuel contemporary prejudices, even if unintended by the Jewish composer, Fromental Halévy.

[other] Contemporary scholarly analyses, such as those examining the libretto's politics, contend that *La juive* taps into liberal-era anxieties about Jewish integration, where anti-Semitism is portrayed not merely as Christian fanaticism but as exacerbated by Jewish intransigence, thus subtly endorsing assimilationist pressures over cultural preservation. Despite Halévy's Jewish heritage and the opera's success in 1835 Paris, these critics maintain that the narrative's resolution – Rachel's futile love for a Christian prince and the Jews' self-inflicted doom – aligns with broader 19th century French biases against Jewish separation, complicating claims of the work as a pure condemnation of intolerance. [For more about the opera's contemporary performance history and reception, see the above site.]

This criticism does complicate the perhaps oversimplified claim of the work to be purely about fanaticism. But this is opera! Opera is nothing if not a history lesson. Which minority or foreign group, Jews, Arabs, Roma, Muslims, Chinese, Blacks, has not been subject to stereotyping, cultural bias, and caricature at the hands of European composers? The entire feminine sex is mostly portrayed in an unflattering light for most of opera history. This is not to say that such treatment should not be pointed out, for it still exists, and

tolerance unfortunately waxes and wanes. But to the extent that opera reminds us of these perpetual human problems and can inspire contemporary discussion, it has use. And it reminds us that these problems happened to real people with real human emotions.

A further note: There is not a lot of scholarly research available about Fromental Halévy, for such research is not motivated when a composer is out of the repertoire for so long. I consulted what is apparently the only text, Halévy, His life and Music, by Ruth Jordan (Limelight Editions, 1996, New York) to see if Halévy had, indeed, become an "assimilated" Jew, suppressing his religious and cultural roots in order to pursue his career in music. The facts provided by this author surprised me. Although the Jews had been expelled from France several times in the past, In France at the time they enjoyed full religious and civil rights. The music at Halévy's synagogue was so appreciated that French Gentiles often attended services. He had an influential Jewish mentor in the music community, and when the Duc du Berry was assassinated, he was asked to provide music in memoriam which was performed at the synagogue and very well received by Jews and Gentiles alike. He was not prevented from receiving the prestigious Prix de Rome, and, in fact, when his father died and the family needed his financial support, the program schedule was altered especially for him, which was unprecedented at the time. When he was in Rome, he was lost in the Campo dei fiori, and asked a stranger where he was. When told, he was apparently unfamiliar with the concept of the "ghetto," a place where Jews were confined by curfews, walls, and other restrictions.

This is not to say that things were perfect: his brother Leon felt it necessary to convert to Catholicism in order to have a successful academic career. But at least in music, it seems that Halévy was not disadvantaged by his Jewish identity and Eugene Scribe's libretto, its story set in the 14th century, reflected that historical period, not the time and place in which the composer lived.

The Composer's Struggle

Here is a description from the book about Halévy's experience composing it:

> The labor pains of La Juive had been severe; not because Halévy was awed by the grandiose project, but because the story had fired his imagination as no story ever had. It was as if he had seen a revelation; he was coming face to face with his heritage, his people, their martyrdom through the ages. Like the prophet Jeremiah he carried the word in his heart, it was like a burning fire in his bones. Ideas teemed in his head, his source of creativity was inexhaustible, gushing out, overflowing. He worked at home, in his studio at the Opera, at friends' houses in the country. He was in a trance: his sisters and brother anxiously watched him neglect himself, succumb to stress, drive himself ill. He had started working on the score sometime in the late summer of 1833; by the first week in October 1834 the opera was in rehearsal.
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> (Opus cited, p. 59)

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