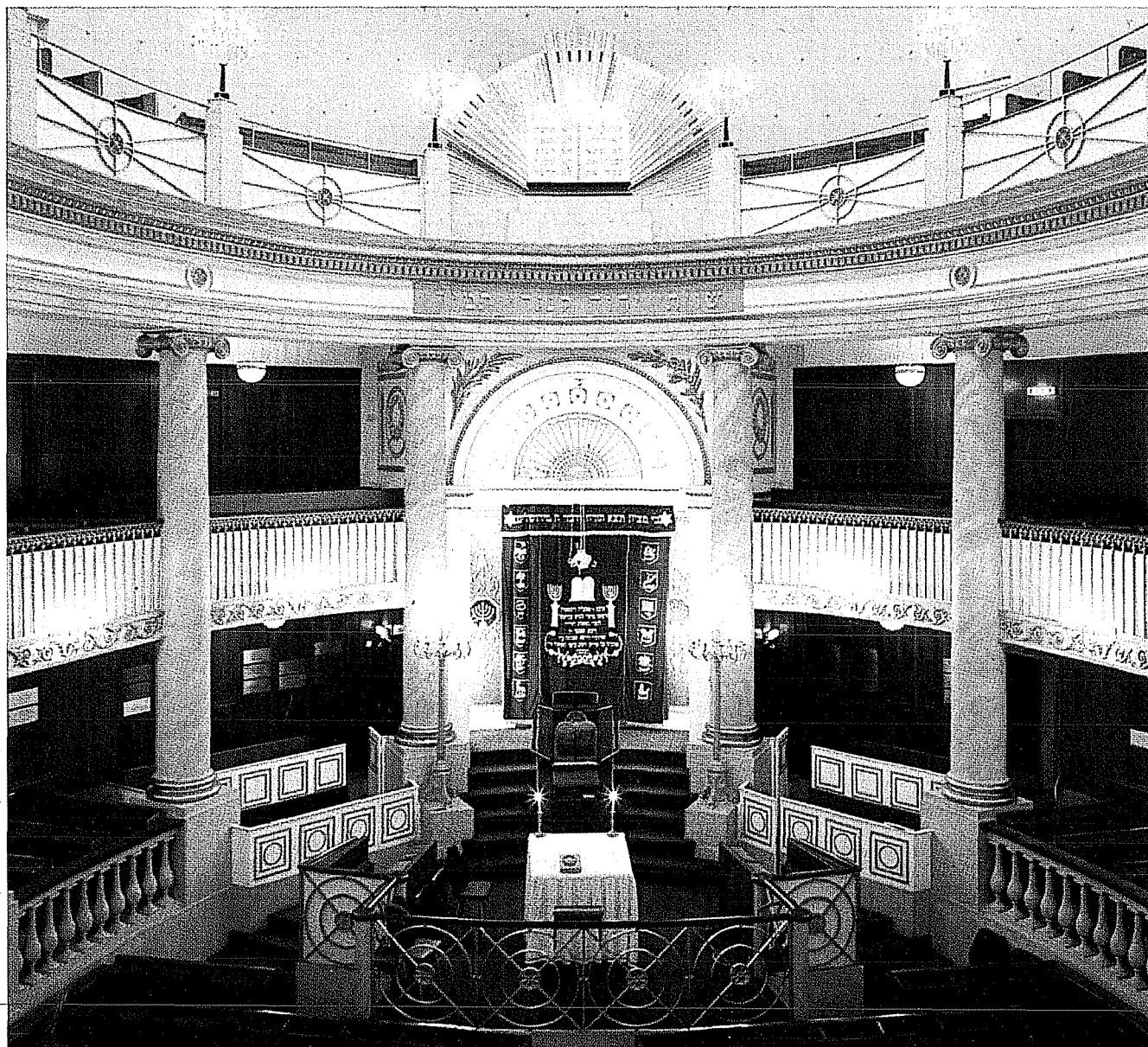


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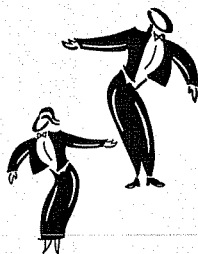
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Cover art design by David Sebald shows interior of Seitenstettengasse Synagogue, Vienna. Photo courtesy of the Austrian Cultural Institute, New York City.

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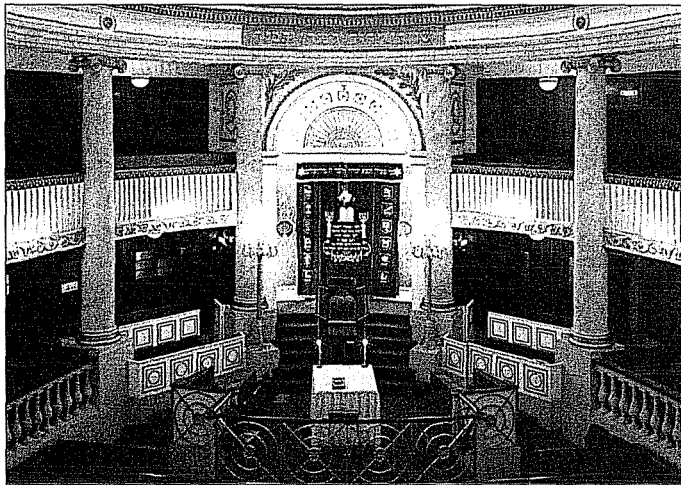
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# Franz Schubert and the Vienna Synagogue

by Joshua R. Jacobson



*Seitenstettengasse Synagogue, Vienna*

Franz Schubert is the only great composer before the twentieth century to compose a setting in Hebrew of the liturgy for the synagogue.<sup>1</sup> This article examines Schubert's unique composition and places it in the context of Vienna's social, cultural, and religious life in the early nineteenth century.

## Jews in Nineteenth-century Vienna

Two hundred years ago Vienna was the cultural capital of Europe. It functioned as the political and commercial gateway between East and West and served as the seat of the Hapsburg dynasty and the Holy Roman Empire. It was the capital of Austria-Hungary and the home of Mozart, Salieri, Haydn, and Beethoven. The city boasted magnificent palaces, idyllic parks, splendid theaters, concert halls, and, of course, the beautiful blue Danube. In 1810 writer Johann Friedrich Reichardt raved about Vienna's cultural life:

Surely, for everyone who can enjoy the good things of life, especially for the musical artist, Vienna is the richest, happiest, and most agreeable residence in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The predominant religion in Vienna at that time was Roman Catholicism. Prior to the nineteenth century, Jews were either denied entry or barely tolerated in Vienna and most other European cities. During the reign of Empress Maria Theresa (1740–80), Jews were required to wear identifying yellow badges,

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could not own land, and were refused permission to build a synagogue. As late as 1820 only 118 Jewish families had been given permission to live in Vienna. Conditions improved somewhat during the next ten years under the brief reign of Maria Theresa's son, Joseph II (1780–90). In 1782 he issued an "Edict of Tolerance" that included the following proclamation:

Since the beginning of our reign, we have made it one of our most important goals that all our subjects, whatever their nationality or religion, since they are accepted and tolerated in our state, should share in the public welfare which we are endeavoring to nurture, enjoy liberty in accordance with the law, and encounter no hindrance in obtaining their livelihood and increasing their general industry by all honorable means.<sup>3</sup>

This very liberal policy reinforced Joseph II's reputation as an "enlightened despot." The seeds for this liberal humanism had been planted by the Industrial Revolution and then spread throughout Europe by Napoleon in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1808, Napoleon declared:

Under the influence of various measures undertaken with regard to the Jews, there will no longer be any difference between them and other citizens of our empire.<sup>4</sup>

In Vienna, and throughout Western Europe, Jews were beginning to leave the confines of ghetto life to participate for the first time in the cultural activities of the surrounding community.<sup>5</sup> They joined their middle-class neighbors at soirées of chamber music in private homes and attended concerts and operas in the new public theaters.

These Jews began to lose their connection to the ancient homeland in the Middle East, an emotional tie they had maintained ever since they were sent into exile by the Roman conquerors in the first century of the Common Era. The Jews of Vienna no longer considered themselves temporary residents of Austria as had their parents and grandparents, biding their time until the advent of the Messiah who would rescue them and return them to the Holy Land. They began to feel more like permanent citizens. They began to feel very comfortable in Vienna and wanted to blend in with their neighbors. They changed their names, their mode of dress, their residences, their system of education, and the language they spoke. They were not prepared, however, to renounce all their religious practices as many other Jews had done. In Germany, some Jews had reformed the synagogue service to make it resemble, as much as possible, a Lutheran service. Some families had even converted to Christianity—an option taken by Heinrich Heine, the family of Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn, and others.

### Music in Synagogues and Cathedrals

The Jews of Vienna wanted to remove the barriers that separated them from their Catholic neighbors. Having been introduced to the operas, symphonies, and chamber music of Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven, many Jews began to won-

der why the music of their synagogue sounded so different. Some Jews must have been embarrassed by the negative impression that their synagogue music made on many non-Jewish visitors. Composer Christian Friedrich Schubart wrote in 1806:

Who could possibly believe that the Jews, in times when they still had good taste, sang as horribly as the cantors in the synagogue today! They distort the sound so horribly, and their faces become often so red and blue—that one is sometimes inclined to fear for their very lives.<sup>6</sup>

Synagogue music was chanted by a male soloist called a *hazzan*. He sang the ancient monophonic chants without instrumental or choral accompaniment. In some synagogues he was assisted by two *meshorerim*—a bass and a boy soprano who created a primitive vocal accompaniment. The chant was in Hebrew and was improvised by the soloist based on ancient melodies that had been transmitted in the oral tradition for generations. The rhythms were free, lacking a regular metric beat, and the soloist was expected to add a good deal of embellishment to the melodic line. The congregation was rarely silent; rather, they chanted the prayers aloud, not usually in unison with the soloist, creating a richly textured, uncoordinated heterophony. Before the nineteenth century, music by the great Western composers would have been glar-

ingly out of place in the synagogue. There were no singers capable of performing music in Western notation. Furthermore, the rabbis had imposed strict guidelines on the music of the synagogue, intended to preserve the ancient, monophonic Middle Eastern chant from alien acculturation. There were, from time to time, isolated and remarkable exceptions to this rule, but, for the most part, the synagogue did not admit European art music.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, music in the Catholic churches of Vienna was splendid. After the passing of Haydn, Beethoven, and Schubert, however, the situation deteriorated. Eduard Hanslick wrote that one could hear only “the musical bric-a-brac typical of a period of intellectual inactivity and the greatest possible degeneration in Austria.”<sup>7</sup>

Another contemporary critic, Joseph Mainzer, decried the terrible quality of church music, chiding church musicians for their “unholy devotion to operatic fare,” for “changing everything into a waltz,” and berating church “organists who make their pedals growl” for special effects.<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, the same authors who wrote about the sorry state of music in Vienna’s churches during the 1820s found its only redemption in the exotic music of the synagogue. Mainzer, a German composer who had studied for the priesthood, found it ironic that the *a cappella* ideal of church music that had disappeared from most churches could be found in the Jewish service. He frequently went to hear the music at Vienna’s synagogue:

The synagogue was the only place where a stranger could find, artistically speaking, a source of enjoyment that was as solid as it was dignified. . . . Never, except for the Sistine Chapel, has art given me higher joy than in the synagogue. . . . In seven months I did not miss a single service. One has to attend no more than once, however, in order to find oneself instantly freed, as if by some sudden reaction, of all the odious prejudices against the Jews instilled in us with baptism in early childhood. . . . What makes the singing of the . . . Jews so attractive

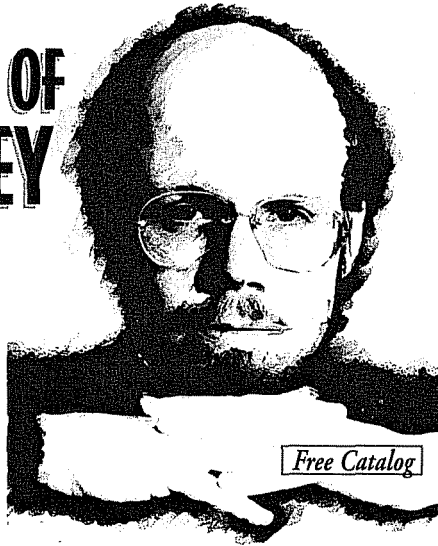
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is precisely that it is not a simple play of the imagination, a cold calculation, like that of the Christian. . . . The [Jew] follows the inspiration of his religious fervor, an irresistible need, an enthusiasm carried to the point of ecstasy; his singing is moving because it comes from a heart pulsating with sacred emotions.<sup>9</sup>

The English writer Frances Trollope also praised the Vienna synagogue's music:

There is in truth so wild and strange a harmony in the songs of Israel as performed in the synagogue in this city, that it would be difficult to render full justice to the splendid excellence of the performance, without falling into the language of enthusiasm. A voice to which that of Braham in his best days was not superior, performs the solo parts of these extraordinary *cantiques*; while about a dozen voices or more, some of them being boys, fill up the glorious chorus. The volume of vocal sound exceeds anything of the kind I have ever heard; and being unaccompanied by any instrument, it produces an effect equally singular and delightful. Some passages of these majestic chants are so full of pathos that the whole history of the nation's captivity rushes upon the memory as we listen; and the eyes fill with tears at the suffering of God's people.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Oberkantor* Salomon Sulzer**

The person responsible for this musical wonder was Salomon Sulzer (Figure 1), who served from 1826 to 1881 as *Oberkantor*—soloist, composer, music director, and conductor—at the Vienna synagogue. He was the first Jewish *hazzan* to call himself "Kantor." Sulzer was born in 1804 in the Austrian town of Hohenems, near the Swiss border. As a child he displayed a prodigious talent in music and a proclivity to serve as *hazzan*. Perhaps this talent was a genetic trait. For more than one thousand years in ancient Israel, all the musicians who sang and played instruments in the great Temple

in Jerusalem were drawn from one clan exclusively—the tribe of Levi. Sulzer was a Levite; in the late eighteenth century, his family's name was Levy. When they left the village of Sulz to resettle in the town of Hohenems, they became known as the Levys from Sulz, or the Sulzers, to distinguish them from all the other Levys in Hohenems.<sup>11</sup>

Young Sulzer's musical talent was so great that the Jewish community of Hohenems decided to appoint the thirteen-year-old boy as the *hazzan* of their synagogue. That appointment had to be approved by the government. Emperor Joseph II decreed that the boy could serve, but only after he had completed his education. So for the next three years, Sulzer learned his trade. He apprenticed himself to a master *hazzan* in nearby Switzerland to learn the traditional Jewish chants. He also went to Karlsruhe to study European secular music. At the age of sixteen, he returned to his home town and became the musical leader of the synagogue.

The fame of this young prodigy spread quickly. After only five years in Hohenems, an invitation came from Vienna to audition for the post of *hazzan* at the beautiful new synagogue built in 1824 on Seitenstettengasse. The liberal rabbi at the synagogue, Noah Mannheimer, adapted the ancient liturgy to suit the cultivated tastes

of the Viennese Jewish bourgeoisie. When Sulzer arrived in Vienna, he found a beautiful building, a sophisticated community, a liberal and well-educated rabbi, and a liturgical music that was in wretched condition. Sulzer wrote in his memoirs, "I encountered chaos [when I arrived] in Vienna, and I was unable to discover any logic in this maze of opposing opinions."<sup>12</sup>



Figure 1. Painting of Oberkantor Salomon Sulzer.



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Solo

Hash - ki - vei - nu A - do - noi e - lo - hei - nu le - shaw - lom  
ve - ha - a - mi - dei - nu mal - kei - nu le - cha - yim.

Figure 2. Sulzer, *Hashkiveynu*

Sulzer set out to revitalize the music of the synagogue. He felt that he could modernize the ancient chant without sacrificing its unique identity.

To me it appeared that the confusion of the synagogue service resulted from a need for a restoration which should remain on historical ground. . . . Jewish liturgy must satisfy the musical demands while remaining Jewish, and it should not be necessary to sacrifice the Jewish characteristics to artistic forms. . . . Our enterprise was visibly blessed by the Lord. It found favor with the most intelligent Jewish communities, recognition and emulation throughout the world. The Vienna ritual became a model and standard, our melodies were kindly received and recognized even beyond the ocean.<sup>13</sup>

He reexamined the ancient chants and altered them to suit the sophisticated tastes of the Viennese community.

The old tunes and singing modes which have become traditional should be improved, selected and adjusted to the rules of art. I set it as my duty to review, as far as possible, the traditional tunes bequeathed to us, to cleanse the ancient and dignified type from the later accretions of tasteless embellishments, to bring them back to their original purity, and to reconstruct them in accordance with the rules of harmony.<sup>14</sup>

For example, using the traditional chanting modes, Sulzer produced his own version of the Friday-evening nocturnal prayer for peace, *Hashkiveynu* (Figure 2). Sulzer also created four-part choral arrangements of traditional melodies. This departed drastically from the traditional practice of two *meshorerim* improvising simple harmonies to accompany the *hazzan*. Sulzer created carefully thought-out arrangements using an early nineteenth-century harmonic idiom. A simple example is his setting of *Mi Chomócho* from the Rosh Hashanah evening service (Figure 3).

*Andante religioso*

S  
A  
T  
B

Mí cho - mó - choh bo - é - lím a - dó - noy, mí ko - mó - choh ne - e - dor ba -  
Mí cho - mó - choh bo - é - lím a - dó - noy, mí ko - mó - choh ne - e - dor ba -  
kó - desh, nó - ro s'hí - lós ó - se fe - le.  
kó - desh, nó - ro s'hí - lós ó - se fe - le.

Figure 3. Sulzer, *Mi Chomócho*



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Schubert knew no Hebrew, so he must have spent some time reviewing the pronunciation and the translation with the cantor. He did not employ any of the modal or rhythmic characteristics of traditional Jewish music. Rather, the writing is typical of Schubert's part-songs—homophonic texture, simple harmonies, and balanced phrases.

Figure 4. Sulzer, *VeNislach*

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Bar solo *ff* *cresc.* *ff*

kú mach-she-vo - sé - chaw. Ish bá-ar lo yey - dāw, u-chi- síl lo yaw-vín es zos.  
Thy med-i - ta - tions. The wick-ed know it not, nor does the fool un-der - stand.

S vo - sé - chaw. Ish bá - ar lo yey - dāw, u-chi- síl lo yaw - vín es zos.  
med - i - ta - tions. The wick - ed know it not, nor does the fool un - der - stand.

A vo - sé - chaw. Ish bá - ar lo yey - dāw, u-chi- síl lo yaw - vín es zos.  
med - i - ta - tions. The wick - ed know it not, nor does the fool un - der - stand.

T vo - sé - chaw. Ish bá - ar lo yey - dāw, u-chi- síl lo yaw - vín es zos.  
med - i - ta - tions. The wick - ed know it not, nor does the fool un - der - stand.

B vo - sé - chaw. Ish bá - ar lo yey - dāw, u-chi- síl lo yaw - vín es zos.  
med - i - ta - tions. The wick - ed know it not, nor does the fool un - der - stand.

Figure 6. Schubert, *Tov LeHodos*

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In the opening and closing sections of the work, Schubert creates an antiphonal texture, alternating between the solo quartet and the choir in the manner of responsorial psalmody (Figure 5). In the

middle section of the work, Schubert writes his most daring modulations and indulges in tone-painting. For example, when the text speaks of the fool, the music shifts suddenly and dramatically from B<sup>b</sup> major to D<sup>b</sup> major to B<sup>b</sup> minor (Figure 6).

Schubert repeats words in only two places for rhetorical emphasis. The first is for the text "to destroy them [the evildoers] forever," which is repeated four times over ten measures. The other is the final word of the composition, *le'olam* (for eternity), which is stretched out to suggest its meaning (Figure 7).

Schubert set only the second through ninth verses of the psalm. Yet the liturgy demanded that the entire psalm be performed at the Friday evening Sabbath service. Sulzer must have chanted verse one and verses ten through sixteen in the more traditional manner.<sup>15</sup>

Schubert composed this work in July 1828, and it was performed shortly thereafter in Sulzer's synagogue.<sup>16</sup> Though we have no written account of that performance, the juxtaposition of Sulzer's renowned singing, which music critic Eduard Hanslick described as combining "the charm of the exotic with the persuasiveness of a glowing faith,"<sup>17</sup> against Schubert's elegant choral setting must have been memorable. In this bicentennial year of Schubert's birth, conductors might consider reviving this one-of-a-kind work in the Viennese master's choral output.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A few lesser masters contributed to the music of the synagogue. Among them are the Christian composers Carlo Grossi, Louis Saladin, and Joseph Drechsler, and the Jewish composers Salamone Rossi and Jacques Halévy. Several Christian composers, including Max Bruch, Maurice Ravel, and Modest Moussorgsky, made use of traditional Hebrew material in their secular compositions. A number of nineteenth-century Jewish cantors composed choral music for the synagogue, most notably Salomon Sulzer in Vienna, Louis Lewandowski in Berlin, Samuel Naumbourg in Paris, and David Nowakowski in Odessa.

<sup>2</sup> J. F. Reichardt, *Briefe geschrieben auf einer Reise nach Wien* (Amsterdam, 1810); translated in Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History—The Classic Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 154.

<sup>3</sup> H. H. Ben-Sasson, *A History of the Jewish People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 756.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 762.

<sup>5</sup> One can point to only a few examples of Jewish participation in the general culture prior to the nineteenth century, the most brilliant of which was in sixteenth-century Italy, the era that produced the Jewish composer Salamone Rossi. The nineteenth century, however, witnessed the first ongoing and widespread exodus of Jews from the ghettos of Western and Central Europe.

<sup>6</sup> Schubert's *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der*

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*Tonkunst*; quoted in Alexander Ringer, "Salomon Sulzer, Joseph Mainzer and the Romantic a cappella Movement," *Studia Musicologica* 11 (1969): 362.

<sup>7</sup> Eduard Hanslik, *Geschichte des Concertwesens in Wien* (Vienna, 1869); 364, quoted in Ringer, 355.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Mainzer, "Vienna et la Synagogue Juive pendant les années 1826, 1827 et 1828," *Gazette Musicale de Paris* 1 (1834): 126; quoted in Ringer, 361–62.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 359–60.

<sup>10</sup> Frances Trollope, *Vienna and the Austrians* (London 1838), 373; quoted in Ringer, 356.

<sup>11</sup> Elaine Brody, "Schubert and Sulzer Revisited," in Eva Badura-Skoda and Peter Branscombe, eds., *Schubert Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 53.

<sup>12</sup> Salomon Sulzer, *Denkschrift an die Wiener israelitische Kultusgemeinde* (Vienna 1886), 9; quoted in Eric Werner, *A Voice Still Heard: The Sacred Songs of the Ashkenazic Jews* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 211.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Salomon Sulzer, *Schir Zion* (Vienna 1845), preface; quoted in Abraham Z. Idelsohn, *Jewish Music in Its Historical Development* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1929; reprint ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Dover, 1992), 249–50.

<sup>15</sup> Sulzer's setting of the missing verses is available in an edition by the author: Salomon Sulzer, *Mizmor Shir LeYom HaShabbos* (Newton, MA: HaZamir Publications, 1997 [distributed by Transcontinental Music Publications, New York, NY]). The score of Schubert's *Tov LeHodos*, with both the original Hebrew and an alternative English text, is available from Broude Brothers Publications. A recording of the work is available from the Zamir Chorale of Boston, P.O. Box 126, Newton, Massachusetts 02159; website: [www.zamir.org](http://www.zamir.org).

<sup>16</sup> Brody, 57.

<sup>17</sup> Eduard Hanslick, "Salomon Sulzer," *Die neue freie Presse*, No. 551 (Vienna 1866); quoted in Werner, 216.

—CJ—

Figure 7. Schubert, *Tov LeHodos*

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