

THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY
JEWISH STUDIES PROGRAM

cordially invites you to a lecture by

Judit Frigyesi

The “estranged I” in Mendelssohn’s (Jewish?) music

Felix Mendelssohn’s music is thought to depict a balanced and comfortable world. Mendelssohn, or so the scholarly criticism and popular wisdom goes, followed in the footsteps of the classical composers but his music lacks the depth and drama of the great classical works. Wagner attributed the lack of depth and dramatic content in Mendelssohn’s music to the fact that he was Jewish. In response, Mendelssohn’s defenders argued that there is nothing Jewish in his music and, in any case, the lack of dramatic content does not necessarily disqualify a musical work. Even the leading Mendelssohn scholar Larry Todd agrees that Mendelssohn’s strength was not drama but rather “the painterly attributes of music” (Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn*, xxvii).

In musicological studies, there had been much debate about Mendelssohn’s “Jewishness” but the Wagnerian criticism had not yet been seriously considered. What is there in Mendelssohn’s music that musicians and listeners find somehow “shallow”?

I argue that Mendelssohn uses aspects of Classical style precisely in order to call into question their validity. The dramatic narrative of his compositions evolves from struggle against the very language he uses to express this struggle. In his works, classical musical style is shown to repress and tyrannize the intimate personal voice. I will argue that Mendelssohn’s music has a subtext: behind the seemingly smooth surface, it recounts the drama of a protagonist who, although attached to his home and native language, feels, at the same time, completely alien to it. In a different era and medium, Mendelssohn was searching for what Paul Celan called “the place where a person was able to set himself free as an — estranged — I.”

Tuesday, February 19 at 6 p.m.
Gellner Room
Budapest, 1051 Nádor utca 9.

Judit Frigyesi is a musicologist, ethnomusicologist and writer, associate professor at Bar Ilan University and visiting professor at Tel-Aviv University. She wrote extensively on the music of the twentieth century (*Béla Bartók and turn-of-the-century Budapest*, California University Press), the prayer chant of the Eastern European Jews, and various topics of music and cultural history. She has been active also as a writer and poet in English and Hungarian, and created projects of mixed media (poetry, film, audio, photograph).



A reception will follow