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SONGS OF THE JEWISH ENLIGHTENMENT:
VOCAL MUSIC IN THE CIRCLE OF SARA LEVY (1761–1854)

Sponsored by the AMS Jewish Studies and Music Study Group

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It is by now well known that the Jewish patron, collector, and keyboardist Sara Levy, née Itzig (1761–1854), played an essential role in the cultivation and preservation of German music in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—especially the music of the Bach family (Wolff, 2005; Wollny, 2010). Less understood, however, is the role that music played in her life and in the lives of other women in her family and social circle. Given their active participation in the transformative social and intellectual currents of the Jewish Enlightenment (Heb. Haskalah), exploration of this issue elucidates crucial questions related to the interaction among religion, aesthetics, and the arts at the outset of European modernity.

The collections of music assembled by Sara Levy and her sisters favored instrumental works over vocal pieces—a circumstance that has led some scholars to believe that vocal music played little or no role in Levy's musical practices, perhaps because these women wished to avoid theological problems related to the singing of religious (Christian) poetry. Yet the collections of scores kept by Levy and her sisters did include a number of vocal works, and some of the poetry clearly expressed religious themes. For example, a cantata by Justin Heinrich Knecht, set to an excerpt of the epic *Der Messias* by Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock, portrayed the (notably female) biblical characters of Miriam and Deborah as they lament the crucifixion and express sympathy with Mary. Far from avoiding religious issues, this work placed religious dialogue at the forefront of the minds of the performers and listeners. Knecht's cantata offered a model for Jewish women to negotiate the religious boundary separating them from the broader, predominantly Christian, community. Indeed, Klopstock himself was an advocate of Jewish emancipation and religious tolerance.

Other vocal works in the Itzig daughters' collections likewise invite allegorical interpretations, in which the meanings of the poetry and the musical styles adopted by the composers presented models of enlightened thought, sentiment, and social belonging that resonated with the cultural and intellectual themes of the Jewish Enlightenment. Through performances and discussion of vocal works from the 1780s and '90s in the collections of the Itzig daughters, this session will argue for the importance of song in shaping their intellectual and artistic personae.