Don Harrán, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (dharran@mscc.huji.ac.il)

The Levi Dynasty: Three Generations of Jewish Musicians in Sixteenth-Century Mantua

A full version of this paper will appear, under the same title and with the five figures to which reference is made below, in *"Uomo sagace": Judah Moscato and Jewish Culture in the Renaissance*, ed. Gianfranco Miletto, Adam Shear, and Giuseppe Veltri (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2010).

The name Levi resonates, for Jews, with widespread historical and musical associations. Its roots are in biblical Israel, where it links with the Levites, who, beyond being responsible for the maintenance of the Temple, were singers and instrumentalists in its services. My remarks today concern three musicians from three successive generations of *mishpaḥat Levi*, "the Levi family," in later sixteenth-century Mantua. The three, Abramo, Daniel, and Abramino, are not foreign to the literature, but, except for short references, nowhere has the rather fragmentary archival information on them been summarized and evaluated. The three are important for numbering among the few Jewish musicians known by name from Renaissance Italy and for raising larger questions, not least of which the relation of the Mantuan Levis, if at all, to an extensive sermon on music, published in 1589, by their most illustrious contemporary, the Mantuan Rabbi Judah Moscato—I shall return to this question at the end.

Abramo Levi, otherwise known as Abramo dall'Arpa (or dell'Arpa), "Abraham the harpist," first appears in records of the Mantuan court in 1542, where

he is said to have played the part of Pan, the god of shepherds, in a court spectacle. Abramo appears to have engaged in moneylending in the 1540s, though, losing capital, was forced to sell his loanbank in 1545. There are various notations for him in records of both the Jewish community in Mantua and the Mantuan court for the 1540s and 50s.

Abramo turns up, around 1549, in Vienna, where, in the accounts of the imperial court chapel under Charles V, he is inscribed as "Abraham the Jew, a harp player." He was paid not for his playing, though, but for teaching Italian dance to the sons of Charles's brother Ferdinand (later to become Emperor Ferdinand I). How long this service lasted is not easily determined.

In 1561 Abramo, back in Mantua, obtained a permit to "cut animals," that is, run a slaughterhouse in compliance with Jewish law. Abramo died in 1566.

In the same year the poet and playwright Luigi Groto wrote a sonnet to commemorate the death of "an outstanding Jewish musician"—no name is mentioned —at the behest of the musician's sister Signora Rosa Levi. Rosa Levi, who herself wrote some poetry, converted to Christianity, as an adolescent, in Adria (some thirty miles south of Venice), in 1565. The only contemporary Levi of any musical renown would have been Abramo. But does the sonnet substantiate his identity? Here are a few excerpts:

> Behold the one who, in singing and playing, receives the palm:
>
> No equal did he have on sea, on earth, in air, in the heavens; …
>
> At royal banquets, on lofty stages
>
> He vividly showed his unusual talent …

If this Jewish musician *were* Rosa's brother, he obviously did not convert. The sonnet tells us, in short, that he was both a singer and an instrumentalist ("in singing and playing") and that he won great acclaim ("outstanding," "receives the palm," "showed his unusual talent") and that he appeared "at royal banquets" (i.e., various court entertainments) and "on lofty stages" (i.e., theatrical presentations). But serious questions prevent a positive identification with Rosa's brother: why, for example, was Abramo in Mantua and his sister in the Veneto? Could he originally have been called to Mantua after achieving a name for himself as a juvenile harpist? Since Rosa converted as a young girl, and Abramo must have been her elder by at least twenty or more years (remember: he was first mentioned in 1542), is it possible for the two of them to have been separated by such an age discrepancy?

So much for Abramo. His son, to pass on to the second generation of the Levi musicians in Mantua, was Daniel. In 1557 Daniel was given permission to run a loanbank, together with a Jewish partner, in Volta (about thirteen miles northwest of Mantua). There are writings, from the years 1567–1572, that relate him to Innsbruck, at the court of Archduke Ferdinand II, and to Vienna, at the court of Emperor Maximilian II, as a Jewish harpist and dance teacher. Inbetween, Daniel returned to Mantua, where he was apprehended for forging a signature on two monetary notes, yet soon released because, as we read, his services were needed for a production, at court, of the Jewish theater.

Except for a few other details here and there, these few remarks are about the sum of what we know of Daniel. One last point: Daniel died in 1572.

Better known, to pass on to the third generation, is Daniel's son, Abramino, a musician for whom there are a number of documents—letters, notations, listings—from 1566 to 1593. In 1566 he was incarcerated by order of the duke (Guglielmo), yet

released because his services were required as a musician. He appears to have "inherited" his grandfather's slaughterhouse as one source of income, yet obtained additional funds from the Mantuan court, where he is listed on payrolls in the 1570s and 80s.

Abramino's skills as a harpist were widely recognized. Writing in 1585, the poet and painter Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo referred to him, along with his grandfather Abramo and the non-Jew Giovanni Leonardo dall'Arpa (from Naples), as the three most prominent harp players of their time. Yet his praise of the two Jews for their playing did not prevent him from condemning Jews *qua* Jews elsewhere, in a sonnet "against the Jews" ("Contro gl'Hebrei"). There he says: "May the cruel people that killed the pure lamb … forever feel the harsh bite of grief in its defiant heart."

Abramino's Judaism was ever a problem, which the authorities hoped to solve by his conversion. In 1582 he was summoned to meet with a "master of theology," and the efforts to break his will are clear from nine documents from 1587, two of them already known and seven new ones recently uncovered (in connection with Judah Moscato) by Gianfranco Miletto. I will refer to the first of the nine only: it is a report, from June 28 June, 1587, on the interrogation of Giovanni Andrea Robbiato, a singer at the court under Duke Guglielmo, and of Francesco di Brasoli, the duke's barber and archer. Both were questioned under oath for their knowledge of Abramino's inclination toward Christianity.

Figure 1. Inquiry (28 July 1587). Mantua, Archivio Storico, Archivio Gonzaga, 2639 (page 1 of six).

We learn from the report that Robbiato, on his way from Goito to Mantua, about ten miles away (Goito had a country *palazzo* that appears to have been

Guglielmo's favorite), traveled together with Abramino, to whom he explained the advantages of Christianity over Judaism: Abramino listened, but seemed to disagree. After arriving in Mantua, Robbiato took Abramino to the ducal church of Santa Barbara to witness, from the organ loft, the baptism of the duke's grandson (Ferdinando). Abramino feigned interest in the ceremonial, yet, when a monk clarified to him the difference between Holy Baptism and circumcision, remained silent. Rumors of the incident immediately spread to the Jewish community, and that same evening Abramino's uncle Samson (Sansone) together with Rabbi Judah (Leone) Moscato, fearing that Abramino might be persuaded to convert, rushed to him to make sure he would not. When Abramino was asked, on the following day, whether he would convert, he evaded the question, saying, yes, he had a certain impulse to do so, but still had not decided. We learn that Abramino, ever since childhood, had been under pressure to convert; and that he hesitated to dine at court (where he would have been unable to observe Jewish dietary laws), yet even so he did, eating "cooked fish … macaroni with milk, cheese, and butter, pancakes … and fruit pie," all of which seemed to indicate one thing to those being interrogated: Abramino wanted to become a Christian. We learn further that Duke Guglielmo took a personal interest in converting him; and that Abramino, without committing himself, employed a strategy whereby he awakened expectations: "he appeared" to listen, so we are told; "he appeared" to be pleased with the baptismal ceremonies. But he said nothing to commit himself, rather he spoke in ambiguities, for example, "he would have done whatever God had inspired him to do."

The letters that follow the report of the interrogation reveal the unrelenting pressure brought on Abramino to convert. I will not go into them here. To make a long story short: in the end, after words no longer helped, the *fratelli* (monks) resorted

to torture, and Abramino finally broke down and declared his wish to be baptized, as in fact he was, five days later, on the 13th of July, in the commune of San Benedetto (some thirteen miles southeast of Mantua), in the presence and upon the request of the of the duke. The sacrament was administered in contravention of the customary indoctrination of prospective converts, over a forty-day period, in a Casa dei Catecumeni (or House of the Catechumens), from which regulation the duke made sure that a certified exemption be duly obtained. Guglielmo was clearly in a hurry to savor his victory over Abramino, who even promised the duke to be "as much a [stubborn] Christian as he was a stubborn Jew."

One reads, in the secondary literature, that Abramino was called to Goito to play for Duke Guglielmo "in his dying hours." The allegation, to all appearances, can be traced to the late nineteenth-century archivist Pietro Canal: he read that portion of Robbiato's report, already mentioned, in which Robbiato was asked about "whether Abramino was *with* His Highness" (in Goito) to mean that he *was*. But Guglielmo died a month and a half later, on 14 August 1587, and if Abramino did in fact play for him at the time, it would have been after his conversion and under a new name. As clear from one of several new letters for 1587, the duke requested that Abramino, once baptized, be renamed Bernardino. The information is precious, for it enables one to identify, as I long suspected one could, the harpist called Bernardino in various court notations for the years 1588 and 1589 as the former Abramino *ebreo*. In February 1588, six months after the duke's decease, Mr. Bernardino San Benedetto Renato is said to have received a payment of seventy *lire* "for his services in singing for the Most Serene Lord, Duke Guglielmo, of blessed memory." The payment is likely to have been made in remuneration for his singing (and playing the harp) to the duke in what Canal described as "his dying hours."

But that is not the end of the story. Four years later, in 1593, the last date we have for Abramino, he is addressed, again, as *ebreo*, in a letter by Annibale Chieppio, secretary to the new duke, Vincenzo I.

Figure 2. Letter written by Annibale Chieppio to Duke Vincenzo I. Mantua, Archivio Storico, Archivio Gonzaga, 1259 (22 November 1593).

Chieppio writes to the duke, and I quote: "after having arrived here at Ponte di Lago Scuro"— not far from Ferrara—"I found Abramino *ebreo* who, coming from Mantua, disembarked from the boat [on the river Po]. He gave me letters that I now send to Your Highness," etc. It is not as if Bernardino alias Abramino returned to Judaism—the Inquisition would have made it almost impossible for him to do so. Rather it shows either that people who knew Abramino under his old name continued to call him so or, more likely, that, for Christians, Jewish converts were always suspect of being Jews, hence Abramino *ebreo* (once a Jew, always a Jew).

So much for the fragmentary account of the activities of three Jewish harpists from three generations of the Levi family in Mantua. To conclude: I will ask the question that I asked at the beginning. How do the Levis relate to the Mantua rabbi Judah Moscato's sermon on music? The sermon is based on the talmudic *midrash* (from *Massekhet Berakhot*) about a *kinnor* hanging over the bed of David. "When midnight came," the *midrash* reads, "a North Wind blew upon it and it would play of itself, and David would sit and busy himself with Torah until the break of day." What is a *kinnor*? The late fifteenth- to early seventeenth-century Hebrew dictionaries—*Makrei dardekei*, *Tsemaḥ David*, *Galut Yehudah*—describe it as a lute (*liuto*). Though the lute existed in ancient Israel, it was better known from the later Middle Ages in its

modern variety, after the Arabic *'ud*. The lute, moreover, has a rounded wooden body with strings stretched across it and, therefore, could *not* have played of itself, as the *midrash* said it did, for the same body prevented any air blown on its strings from producing a sound.

Figure 3. Lute, here as an 'ud with nine strings. Miniature from the Cantigas de Santa Maria *(1250–1280). El Escorial, MS b. I.2, fol. 162r.*

The *midrash*, to all appearances, referred to a lyre, of the type known in classical Greece—it was relatively small, could have been hung over a bed, had an open body, and its strings were exposed to the air.

Figure 4. Linus teaches Iphicles (twin brother of Hercules) how to play the lyre. Painting on a skyphos by the Pistoxenos Painter (early fifth century B.C.E.). Schwerin, Staatliches Museum, Kunstsammlungen Schlösser und Gärten, KG 708.

But the Greek lyre disappeared after Roman times. So, practically speaking, the only string instrument with an open body capable of producing a sound (or at least a faint sound) when air blew on its strings would, in Moscato's time, have been a harp. Abraham ben David Portaleone writes as follows in *Shiltei ha-gibborim* ("Shields of Heroes," 1612): "in the vernacular the *kinnor* is called *arpa*." He refers to the aforementioned *midrash* and notes that of all instruments, the *kinnor* alias *arpa* "would be able to play of itself from the blowing of wind." It is no wonder, he writes, that "all nations on earth, in painting King David (may he rest in peace!), did so with an *arpa* in his hand and not with another instrument." David was so depicted not only in works by Christians, but also in Jewish publications, among them, in Italy, Jacob Uziel's epic poem about him and various *haggadot* for Pesaḥ.

Figure 5. King David with harp. Woodcut from Seder haggadah shel Pesaḥ *(Ceremonial of the* Haggadah *for Pesaḥ). Venice: Ioanne de Gara, 1609, fol. 4a.*

In the context of the talmudic *midrash*, *kinnor* translates as "lyre." But Moscato, in his sermon, would have understood it as "harp," in conformity to the music practice of his time, which raises the question, the "big question," how does the harp playing of Abramino Levi relate, if at all, to his sermon entitled "Contemplating the sounds of a *kinnor*" (*Higgayon be-khinnor*)?

One wonders: could one of the reasons for Moscato's writing the sermon have been the fame and skills of Abramino Levi as a harp player? Abramino may have been to Moscato—metaphorically—as the *menaggen*, or "player," was to Elisha ("Bring me a player, and when the player played, the hand of the Lord came upon him [Elisha]"; 2 Kings 3:15), namely, a stimulus to the mind, which, to quote Moscato from his sermon, "becomes strengthened [after hearing the sounds of the lyre] to sail forth upon lofty speculations."

The sermon might best be adjudged against the new vogue for harp music and its performance not only in later sixteenth-century Mantua, where the Levi family held a near monopoly, but elsewhere. The renaissance of harp music in the late sixteenth century is a fascinating story in itself. Since David was the major protagonist in Moscato's sermon and, as just said, appeared as a model figure for harp playing in European art, one might ask: to what extent was the renewal of harp music in the later sixteenth century inspired by biblical David? And to what extent did Abramo and Abramino identify with biblical David as a harpist? and not just any harpist, but one whose ability, so Moscato said of David, was to use his instrument as a vehicle for spirituality—*higgayon be-khinnor* means both to play the *kinnor* and, as

the verb *le-hagot* implies, “to contemplate” its sounds. If, in fact, Moscato equated Abramino’s harp with David’s *kinnor*, he may have been saying that it is not enough for Abramino to play his instrument: he must do it after immersing himself in Torah, Torah being a safeguard against the dangers of the outside world. By studying it, Moscato declared (after Psalm 119), [God’s] “laws became songs” (*zemirot hayu li ḥukekha*) to maintain the Jews, whether they be Abramino or any others, in their faith. We will never really know what inspired Moscato to write his sermon. But that the harp plays a prominent role in it automatically leads us to the Levi family and, more generally, to the welter of questions that surround the popularity of harp music in the later sixteenth century. The questions are of relevance not only to Moscato’s sermon and Jewish musicians in the Renaissance but to the history of music at large.

Key words:

Abramino dall’Arpa. *See* Levi, Abramino

Abramo dall’Arpa. *See* Levi, Abramo

arpa (harp)

baptism of Jews

conversion, pressure exerted on Jews for their

Daniel dall’Arpa. *See* Levi, Daniel

Galut Yehudah (Hebrew dictionary compiled by Leon Modena)

Goito

Gonzaga court, musicians in

harp players in sixteenth-century Italy

“Higgayon be-khinnor” (title of Judah Moscato’s sermon on music)

kinnor as harp

kinnor as lyre

Levi, Abramino (alias Abramino dall’Arpa)

Levi, Abramo (alias Abramo dall’Arpa)

Levi, Daniel (alias Daniel dall’Arpa)

lyre

Makrei dardekei (Hebrew dictionary)

Mantua

Moscato, Judah

musicians, Jewish, in Mantua

San Benedetto

Santa Barbara (church), Mantua

Tsemaḥ David (Hebrew dictionary compiled by David de Pomis)

‘ud (Arabic lute)

Vienna