

Books

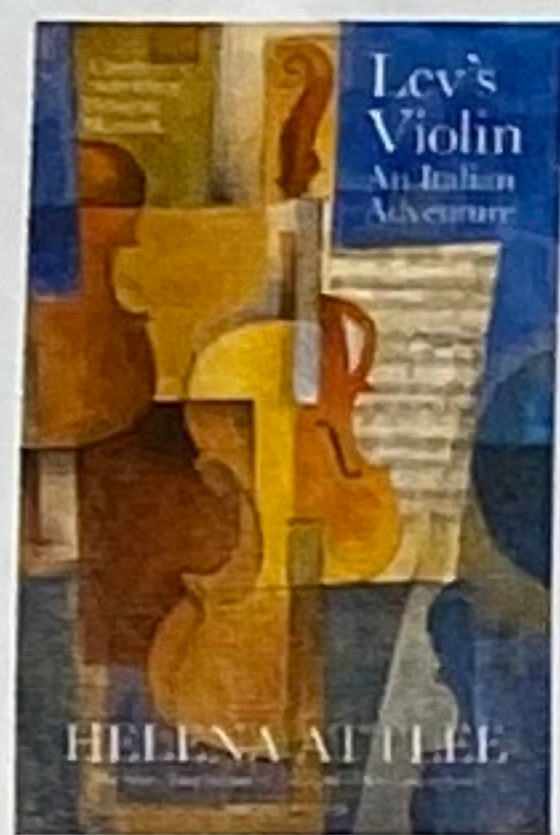
Our critics cast their eyes over this month's selection of books on classical music

Lev's Violin – An Italian Adventure

Helena Attlee

Particular Books 224pp (hb) £20

The moment Helena Attlee heard the sound of Lev's violin at a Klezmer gig in Wales she was bewitched: the



instrument spoke to her 'with a voice powerful enough to open pores and unbuckle joints.' Yet the backstory of this violin, its 'mongrel history', was a mystery

even to the instrument's owner, and so Attlee is prompted to embark on something of a historical treasure hunt. A celebrated travel writer and noted Italophile, Attlee begins by delving into the history of Cremona's luthiers' workshops before her sleuthing takes her on across Italy and beyond. In many ways, the book is a non-fiction counterpart to Annie Proulx's wonderful *Accordion Crimes*, using the adventures of a single instrument as a device to explore snapshots of history, which here includes the dazzle of the Medici courts to music-making in Nazi concentration camps and a deft smuggling operation out of the then USSR. Attlee writes with rare beauty and sensitivity about music, and her love of Italian culture positively sings from the pages, making this a deeply absorbing 'violin-shaped version of Italian history'.

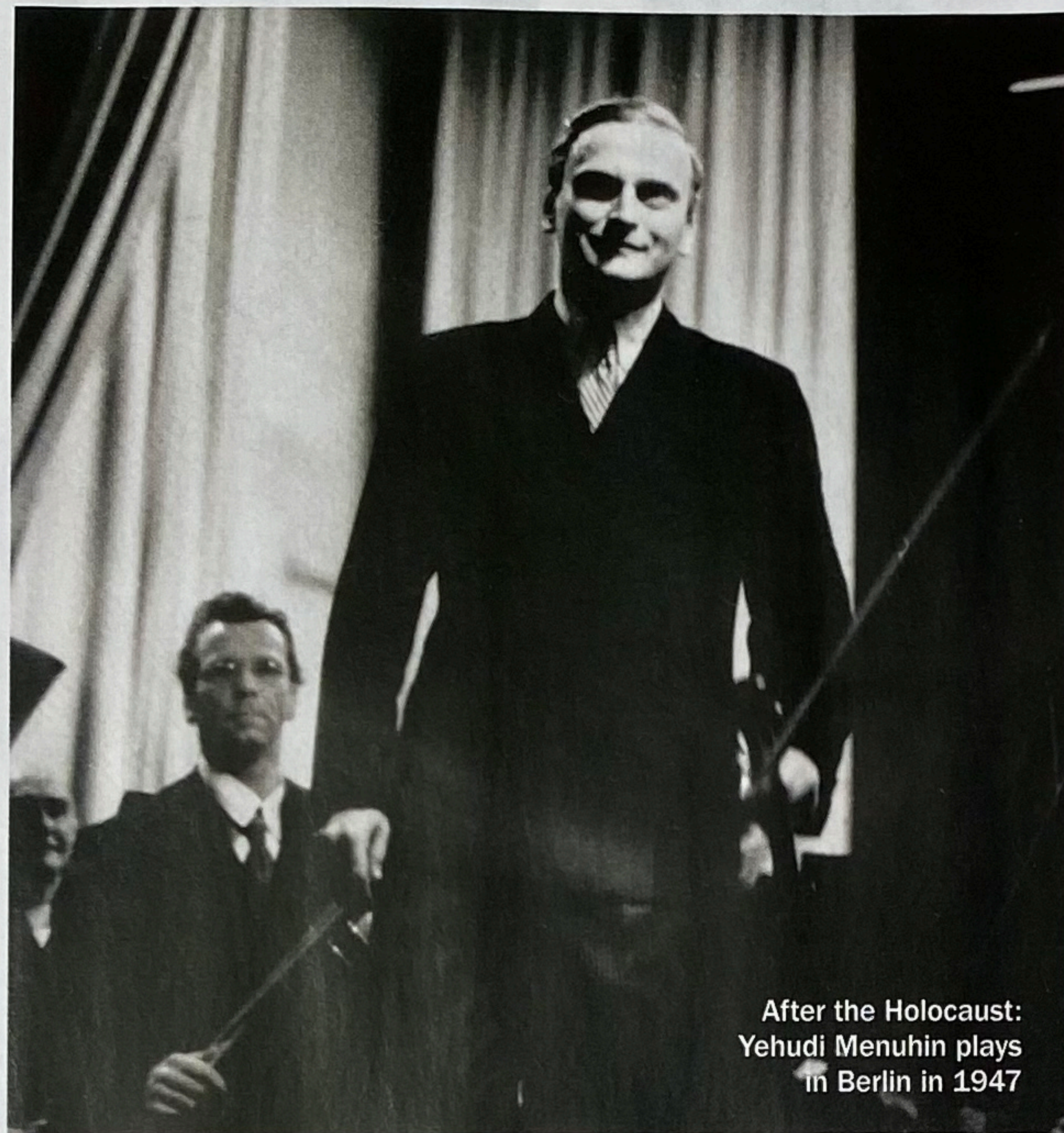
Kate Wakeling ★★★★★

The Musical Human – A History of Life on Earth

Michael Spitzer

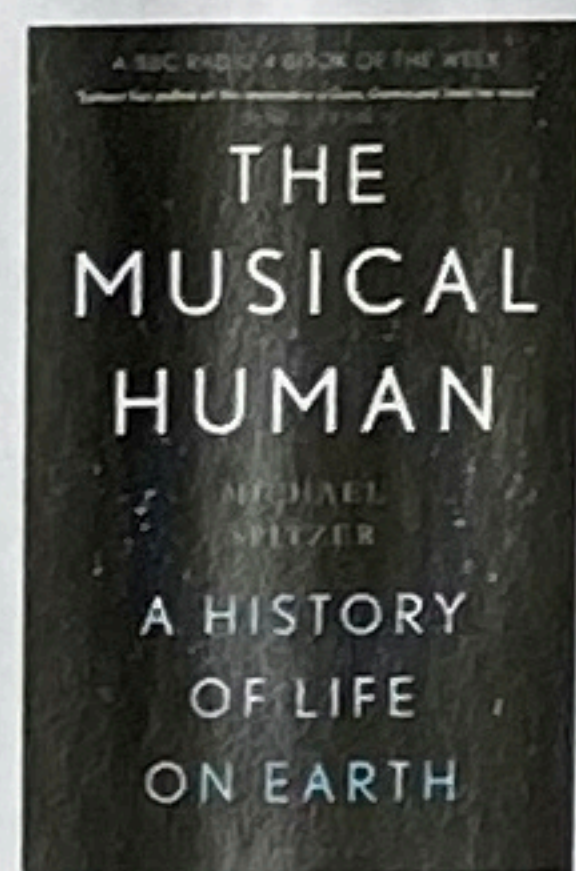
Bloomsbury 496pp (hb) £30

From sounding stones to symphony orchestras, humans have used music to warn, hunt, educate, comfort, entertain and sustain for millions of years. Michael Spitzer's book traces this gradual development, analysing how *homo sapien* sound diverged from mimicry of the natural world to become an artifact in its own right. This isn't just a history of music, though – Spitzer's survey has a deeper agenda: to uncover how music became central to human life and why, in certain cultures, it has



After the Holocaust: Yehudi Menuhin plays in Berlin in 1947

moved from being a participatory activity to a passive one. Spitzer, a professor of music at the University of Liverpool, packs in an impressive range of musical examples from



different timespans across the world, and ensures that Western classical music is given appropriate context. Examples vary, from whale

song to Monteverdi to Pygmy polyphony. The structure is tight, the text split into three timelines – a human lifespan, world history and evolution. That and its engaging, occasionally humorous style (there's an extended Douglas Adams reference) help to harness the book's enormous scope and scholarly ambition. Claire Jackson ★★★★★

Organ Works

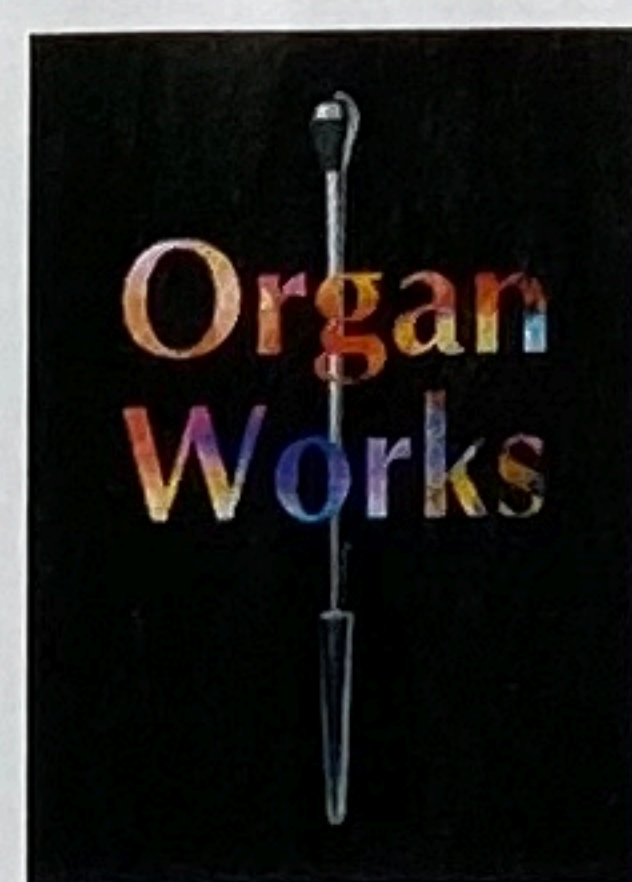
John Norman

British Institute of Organ Studies

274pp (hb) £49.50

Reeds and rollerboards, rather than repertoire, are the focus

of *Organ Works*, and there's nothing wrong with that. The complicated workings of 'the king of instruments' cry out for demystification, and John Norman is well placed to report from inside the organ chamber, coming as he does from an organ-building family (of Norman & Beard fame). But while he offers a solid history of the mechanisms, he shows little feeling for the visceral thrill of the sound, still less for how – despite observing that the organ is invariably 'the largest piece of furniture in a building' – the instrument's aesthetics might intersect with



wider architectural movements. Those on the trainspotting end of things will relish all the technicalities of organ design, from the shape of consoles to voicing, tuning and air pressure. The approach, however, is almost entirely Anglo-centric (not to say Anglican-centric), especially

in the list of organ builders; the glossary of organ stops is more cosmopolitan. But the book's design (with a profusion of diagrams) has all the charm of a 1990s textbook and won't do much to widen the organ's appeal. John Allison ★★

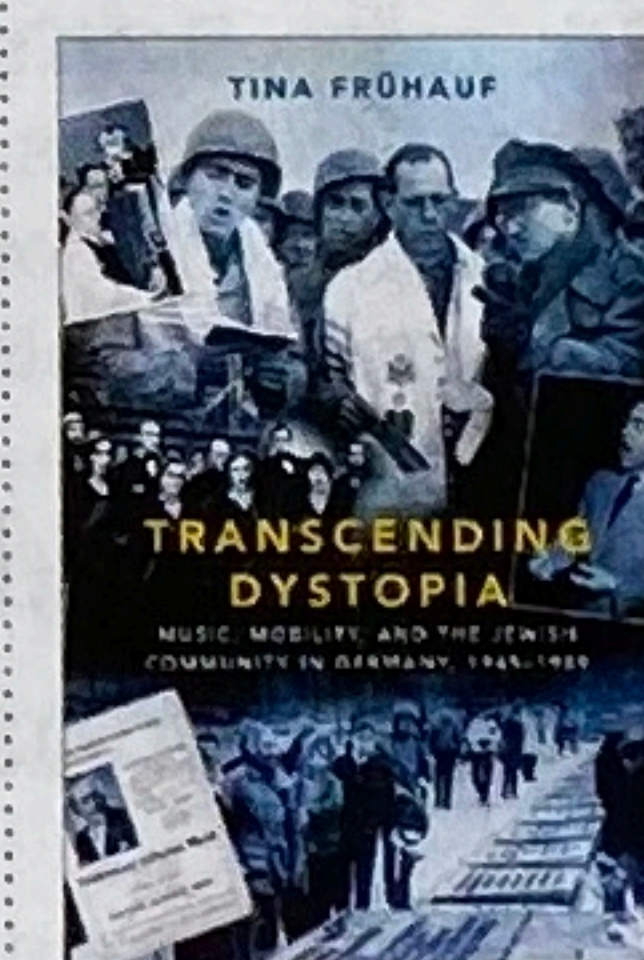
Transcending Dystopia – Music, Mobility and the Jewish Community in Germany, 1945-1989

Tina Frühauf

Oxford University Press

616pp (hb) £41.99

The devastation wreaked by the Holocaust on Jewish musical life in Germany has attracted much scholarship. Subsequent years, however, have previously drawn rather less attention. In *Transcending Dystopia* Tina Frühauf fills in the missing links, brick by painstaking brick. In 1945, what remained of the country's Jewish communities were reclaiming their existence. Music, liturgical and otherwise, was a crucial means through which they could reassert their identity,



not as victims, but survivors. New heroes emerged as the era's pioneers, some of them cantors whose involvement straddled

worship and art; certain of these figures seem worth a book in their own right.

Little went without disagreements and controversies: for instance, views diverged radically on whether Yehudi Menuhin was right to play in Germany so soon. Gradually political fate raised the stakes: we follow the mobility (or lack of) entailed by the rise and ultimate fall of the Berlin Wall and the spreading of diaspora life in the US and Israel. Frühauf builds a detailed picture of the issues facing this confusing era and music's vital role in it. For those concerned with this area of history, this fact-filled book is essential reading.

Jessica Duchon ★★★★★