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WAGNER CONTRA MUNDUM
Wagner versus the World

Caitlin Thom
Foundations 102: Community and Faith
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Richard Wagner had an extraordinary influence on the world, both musically and historically. The sheer amount of Wagnerian controversy which persists to this day is evidence of the magnitude of Wagner's impact. Wagner is as relevant today as he was during the peak of his career, and examining the reasons for Wagner's significance can shed some light on the world around him. In this case, the responses to Wagner in Nazi Germany and modern-day Israel will be examined. Although Nazi Germany made him a national emblem and Israel essentially banned him, both responses exhibit disturbing similarities—primarily the separation of races. After illuminating the dangers within in these responses to Wagner, I will suggest a more democratic response to controversial figures such as Wagner: rejecting all censorship and granting individuals the responsibility of not patronizing works they consider offensive.

Understanding Wagner. In the world today, Wagner is remembered primarily for his compositions. But Wagner's influence as an anti-Semitic political writer leading up to and during the reign of the Third Reich should not be underestimated. In reality, Wagner's actions would often contradict what he had written, but the Nazis ignored this and rallied behind the ideals of Wagner. After addressing the controversy which continues to surround Wagner to this day and discussing Wagner himself, I will present Wagner's writings about what is Jewish in contrast to what is German, and evaluate whether or not his anti-Semitism has permanently tainted musical works.

The fact that Wagner still creates controversy is unsurprising considering his persona, as described by Ernest Newman in *Wagner as Man and Artist*: "So he goes through life, luxuriant, petulant, egoistic, improvident, in everything extreme, roaring, shrieking, weeping, laughing, never doubting himself, never doubting that whoever opposed him, or did not do all for him that he expected, was a monster of iniquity—*Wagner contra mundum*, he always right, the world

always wrong.”¹ Although this description of Wagner is in alignment with the claims of other scholars, Newman at times displays a clear bias towards the composer. Although it is undeniable that Wagner was an outspoken anti-Semite, scholars such as Newman attempt to downplay this undesirable trait. Nicholas Vazsonyi, another Wagnerian scholar, confirms that, “By necessity, everyone is compelled to create his or her own particular Wagner, a Wagner who then becomes an object to become defended or attacked relentlessly.”² These musicologists invent their own images of Wagner to suit their needs just as Wagner had invented images of the Jews to suit his own needs. This is something to bear in mind when evaluating claims made about Wagner today.

Wagner was a genius, but his brilliance was limited to the realm of musical composition. He was not a great writer or philosopher. Believing otherwise, Wagner left behind a long trail of letters, stories, and essays. His writings are by no means brilliant or original, but they do bring his own thoughts and character into clarity. Some musicologists say that these anti-Semitic musings should not be taken seriously, and that sensible people do not take these writings into consideration.³ From a post-Holocaust perspective, it seems obvious that these were merely hateful documents that should have been ignored. However, within the proper historical context, these decrees made by Wagner were dangerously relevant. These works contributed to the growing animosity towards the Jews, and called the German people to action to revive the German spirit. Many Germans who encountered these works were stirred by his passionate language and agreed with his sentiments. This included Adolf Hitler. As Michael Haas explains, “... Hitler was able to quote, almost word for word, much of Wagner’s musings as being the foundation of his own political ideas. Indeed, Wagner was cited by Hitler as his favorite

¹ Ernest Newman, *Wagner as Man and Artist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 175.

² Nicholas Vazsonyi, *Wagner’s Meistersinger Performance, History, Representation* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press 2002), 4.

³ Newman, 323.

‘political’ writer.”⁴ Knowing this, it is impossible to deny that Wagner’s writings played an important role in German history.

In Wagner’s eyes, passion and innovation were essential elements of the German spirit. It is important to note that “German” in this context does not correlate directly with our the modern understanding that “German” simply means anyone born in Germany. In the time of Wagner and the Nazis, “German” had very little to do with whether or not one was actually born in Germany.⁵ The emphasis Wagner placed on passion and innovation is why he saw Judaism as problematic. Wagner stated that Jews were neither passionate nor innovative. In his essay, “Judaism in Music,” Wagner described Jews as sub-human, so aesthetically displeasing and emotionally cold that they are utterly incapable of artistic expression: the dreadful and unemotional sound of a Jew speaking is evidence enough that it is impossible for him or her to make beautiful music. Two of Wagner’s strongest assertions in this essay are that, “Song is, after all, speech heightened by passion: music is the language of passion,” and, “A form which is not subject to continual renewal must disintegrate.”⁶ Because Jews were devoid of passion and stagnant as a race, being a Jew made composition of German music impossible, according to Wagner.

Wagner argues that Jewish composers are not creators, but merely imitators of the great German composers who preceded them. Despite Wagner’s condemnation of the Jews for mimicking great German composers, and his insistence that constant innovation is vital, Wagner also demands that Germans respect the ways of the old. In his essay, “What is German?” Wagner contrarily states, “The German is conservative: his treasure bears the stamp of past ages. He

⁴ Michael Haas, *Forbidden Music The Jewish Composers Banned by the Nazis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 40.

⁵ Haas, 11.

⁶ Richard Wagner, “Judaism in Music,” trans. Charles Osborne (La Salle: Open Court), 27-29, 32.

hoards the old, and knows how to use it.”⁷ Wagner provides this definition of what it is to be German, yet he thinks it is an embarrassing display of incompetence when the Jewish composers evoke the great composers of the past. Wagner’s idea of hoarding the old seems dissonant with his usual claims that clinging to the ways of the past is lazy and conceited, that change must occur constantly in order to further the excellence of what it is to be German.⁸ This is just one of many inconsistencies found within the prolific writings of Wagner.

The most unsettling idea in “What is German?” is the notion that, “In the realm of aesthetics and philosophical criticism it may be clearly demonstrated, that it was predestined for the German spirit to assimilate the foreign....”⁹ In the years following his death, Germany went a step further than assimilation, and attempted to eliminate the foreign—the Jews. Whereas Wagner himself was actually very inconsistent in the application his prejudices, frequently preferring to work with Jewish musicians, Adolf Hitler and the Nazis who were inspired by his work would, unfortunately, not be guilty of the same inconsistencies.

Wagner’s writings were extremely relevant within his own time and throughout the reign of the Third Reich, but long-term, Wagner is considered more influential as a composer of music than as a political writer. While the anti-Semitism present in his written works is undeniable, musicologists debate whether or not Wagner’s anti-Semitism is actually observable in his musical work. Ernest Newman insists that it is not. According to Newman, “And like the true dramatist, Wagner has no moral prejudices; for the time being he puts himself into the skin of each of his characters and looks at the world solely through his eyes. Nowhere is the author to be

⁷ Richard Wagner, “What is German?,” trans. Charles Osborne (La Salle: Open Court 1991), 49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44.

detected in the work...”¹⁰ Additionally, Newman claims that, “Had he not left us voluminous prose works and letters, indeed, we should never have suspected the hundredth part of the portentous meanings that he and his disciples have read into his operatic libretti.”¹¹ However, it is worth wondering if Newman’s view on the composer is more or less romanticized. Newman frequently uses dotting language to describe Wagner and makes bold claims such as: “His was the last truly great mind to find expression in music,” and that the musical mind of Wagner was greater than that of Claude Debussy and Richard Strauss combined.¹² This is unlikely to ever be proven in such a way that deems a dramatic proclamation like this appropriate, which gives legitimate reason to doubt Newman’s ability to present Wagner as an artist in an unbiased way. This is true of both musicologists and societies—they overlook the sins of their most adored composers in order to preserve the purity of great art, thus saving themselves from a guilty conscience of enjoying potentially politically-tainted works.

Musicologists like Newman ignore the facts present in Wagner’s writings: Wagner saw aesthetics and the German spirit as a unified ideal. By Wagner’s own logic, his music—the epitome of passion and innovation—must be political. As James Treadwell aptly observes, “The ‘German spirit’ is the spirit of the aesthetic, of art. ... Needless to say, this provides the theoretical ground for Wagner’s consistent assertions that the political revival of the German spirit can only happen in the form of a regeneration of German art. Equally obviously, Wagner has his own art in mind.”¹³ Though Treadwell is arguably closer to reality than Newman, neither position should be taken as the whole truth. It is untruthful to claim that Wagner’s works were entirely free from politics, yet it would be an overreaction to claim that Wagner’s works were

¹⁰ Newman, 361.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹² *Ibid.*, 363.

¹³ James Treadwell, *Interpreting Wagner* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 194.

entirely for political purposes. Strong arguments about Wagner's music can be made for either side, political or pure, but there is no way to prove either side entirely true or false. It is more likely that his musical works were composed with a combination of both political intent and pure creative imagination. Bearing this in mind, the idea that music may have the ability to transcend its own composer should also be considered—especially when deciding in modern times whether or not certain controversial music should still be performed, studied, and enjoyed.

Now that a foundation for understanding Wagner has been established, the validity of Nazi Germany and modern-day Israel's responses can be evaluated. Though Israel and Germany fell on opposite sides of the spectrum when it comes to the treatment of Wagner, they demonstrate alarming similarities. Both societies displayed a lack of critical thought when it came to the facts of Wagner and his works. Each society also possessed the deeper motivation of rallying nationalistic feelings, feelings which would ultimately turn people of different races and cultures against one another.

Misuse of Wagner in Nazi Germany. Wagner was an essential element to the story of Hitler's rise to power. It is reported that, upon experiencing a performance of Wagner's *Rienzi*, Hitler stated: "In that hour, it all began." As Hans Rudolf Vaegt astutely observes: "More likely, what began was the elaboration of a particular fantasy triggered by Wagner's *Rienzi*, namely, of becoming the leader of the Germans and restoring Germany's greatness, just as *Rienzi*, the last tribune in medieval Rome, had attempted to do for the Romans. Tellingly, in the aftermath of his *Rienzi* experience, Hitler declared, "I want to become a people's tribune." The significance of this youthful experience of the fifteen-year-old Hitler at the Linz Landestheater can hardly be

exaggerated.”¹⁴ The impact of this opera, combined with the implications of Wagner’s writings, and the obvious outcomes of Hitler’s actions inspired by them, demonstrate that Hitler’s obsession with Wagner was anything but inconsequential.

Attempts to eliminate Jewish musicians started quickly after Hitler assumed power. Jewish conductors and musicians were instructed not to conduct or perform in public for public safety reasons. This was a temporary fix until they could be eliminated entirely, which happened in 1933, when the Nazis issued the law for the Restoration of Tenure for the Civil Service, costing almost every Jewish musician his or her job. Classifying which musicians were Jewish could be difficult, and if the lines were blurred, it was considerably more difficult to be classified as an Aryan than a Jew. Once labeled Jewish, a composer or musician would have done well to flee to another country, but those who were unable to flee were likely to suffer and die in a concentration camp.

Composers, as well as other artists, were targeted specifically because the Nazis decided that the removal of “Degenerate Art” was imperative. Degenerate music, much of which was Jewish, was deemed harmful to Germans. The emphasis of German revival through the creation of art—or removal of the Degenerate art, in this case—can be traced back to Wagner. However, degenerate music was a nonsensical concept. The spectrum of music defined as “Degenerate” was so broad that it was impossible to identify exactly which aspects of this music was markedly un-German.¹⁵ Wagner was not entirely wrong in his assertion that the Jewish composers were imitators. It was a crime to compose music which could be construed as anything but German, so

¹⁴ Hans Rudolf Vaget, “Wagnerian Self-Fashioning: The Case of Adolf Hitler,” *New German Critique* 101 (2007).

¹⁵ Pamela Potter, “Defining “Degenerate Music” in Nazi Germany,” *The OREL Foundation*, accessed February 14, 2015, http://orelfoundation.org/index.php/journal/journalArticle/defining_8220degenerate_music8221_in_nazi_germany/.

their lives depended on following the style of cherished German composers. The atmosphere which came to fruition under Nazi rule confirms that these “mimicking” composers were correct to assume that they would be in grave danger if they did not compose in the German style. The “German” quality in music was such an important standard that Nazis even mistakenly cancelled works that were actually German, for fear that they might have Jewish qualities.

The Nazis sought to become associated with Wagner—not the other way around. Wagner’s most adamant critics speak as though he was the Nazis’ greatest supporter, but Wagner was dead before the Nazis rose to power. Wagner’s greatest similarity with the Nazis was his anti-Semitism, but Wagner’s actions were inconsistent with his anti-Semitic writings. If he truly thought the Jews were incapable of accomplishing anything aesthetically beautiful, why entrust his works—which he valued above all else—to Jewish musicians? Wagner was such an egotist that if he and the Nazis had existed at the same time, his greatest reason to identify with them probably would have been their obsession with his music. It is almost comical that the Nazis chose Wagner as their musical and ideological emblem, because Wagner did not simply advocate for the destruction of one specific group of people. He did call for an assimilation of the foreign, but this had more to do with assuring that German values would not be weakened by the presence of lesser cultures. His operatic works clearly demonstrated that he advocated for the complete destruction of society, in order for a new, perfect, society to arise. Interestingly, the apparently sinless hero of a Wagnerian opera is often revealed as having “...lied, sinned, or become corrupt, and are punished by a bitter end.”¹⁶ Considering that Hitler modeled himself after the typical hero found within Wagner’s operas, this is one connection that is actually harmonious.

¹⁶Na’ama Sheffi, “The Ring of Myths The Israelis, Wagner and the Nazis,” trans. Martha Grenzeback (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2001), vii, 34, 13, 36-37.

The use of Wagner by the Nazis was enthusiastic, yet misinformed. The entire Nazi regime either misread or ignored the deeper meaning to Wagner's works and ultimately politicized him for their own purposes. More than anything, Wagner did not hate the Jews—Wagner simply hated anything that was not as good as himself. As aptly observed by Eduard Hanslick, one of Wagner's contemporaries, "... a Jew happens to be any- and everyone who doesn't choose to worship at the shrine of Richard Wagner."¹⁷ Wagner was merely a dramatic and hateful narcissist who should have never been taken seriously for his political writings in the first place.

Israel's Defensive Response. The connection established between the Nazis and Wagner during the reign of the Third Reich provided Israel with reasons to ban performances of Wagner at the conclusion of World War II. Israel can't officially ban Wagner, but the prohibition of Wagner was at least a strong social contract to say the least, and any attempts to perform Wagner resulted in outrage. This unofficial ban was placed out of self-defense and sensitivity—rejecting the culture which sought to destroy the Jews, and protecting the Jews who had experienced the music of Wagner used as propaganda in Nazi Germany. However, the underlying reality is that this ban separates cultures, furthers misunderstandings, and continues the dangerous pattern of censorship—just like the actions of Nazi Germany.

Israel's ban on Wagner can't be dismissed as an act of self-defense against the horrors of the Third Reich—especially because what initially appeared to be an act of self-defense soon escalated into an attack on German art, frighteningly similar to the German's attack on Jewish "degenerate" art. As Na'ama Sheffi explains in the book *The Ring of Myths*: "The main tendency in the translation sphere at that time was a very calculated, ostentatious discrimination in favor of

¹⁷ Haas, 39.

writers whose works the Nazis sought to eliminate—Jews and other opponents of the Nazi regime—and a complete disregard of literature admired by the Third Reich.”¹⁸ I do not suggest that providing extra support to Jewish works is not a noble cause. In fact, today, the OREL Foundation exists to continue the performances of composers oppressed by the Third Reich. The OREL Foundation states the following on its website: “By keeping alive their music and that of other victims of totalitarianism, we deny those past regimes a posthumous victory. The revival of this music can serve as a reminder for us to resist any contemporary or future impulse to define artistic standards on the basis of racist, political, sectarian or exclusionary ideologies.”¹⁹ By this definition, if Israel is stifling the works of any kind in the process of reviving Jewish works, they are ultimately being counterproductive. By suppressing art of any kind—German or not—the Israelis are furthering the work of groups like the Nazis, and counteracting the work of organizations like the OREL Foundation. It is important that an attitude of toleration is assumed, so that hatred against a certain culture does not have a place to manifest.

Israel’s ban on Wagner and suppression of German art also demonstrates lack of critical thought. Sheffi explains, “The main argument against these composers’ music, and the one that kept recurring for several decades, was the absolute impossibility of accepting anyone who had served the Satanic regime that had cut short the lives of millions of Jews.”²⁰ This notion appealed to the outrage of the people, despite the reality that Wagner was dead before the Nazis gained power. This blatantly false notion of Wagner’s decision to become figurehead of the Nazis gave the Israelis something to unite under—their collective, somewhat misinformed, hatred of

¹⁸ Sheffi, 2.

¹⁹ James Conlon, “Recovering a Musical Heritage: The Music Suppressed by the Third Reich,” *The OREL Foundation*, 2007, accessed January 25, 2015, http://orelfoundation.org/index.php/journal/journalArticle/recovering_a_musical_heritage_the_music_suppressed_by_the_third_reich/.

²⁰ Sheffi, 3.

Wagner. Over the years, this response became less of a retaliation to the horrors of the Holocaust and more of a code of conduct, a cultural norm blindly accepted by the people. This is another trait reminiscent of Nazi Germany.

The remaining argument for the ban of Wagner is that there is no reason to subject a group of innocent listeners to music that brings back painful memories when all they want is to enjoy a performance.²¹ This suggestion of sensitivity, though well-meaning, is misguided. Even if it seems that the ban has a noble purpose, the actions of Israel must be viewed critically. The Nazis also genuinely believed that it was for the good of society to censor degenerate art, but this decision has since been proven false. If Nazi Germany is held accountable for the acts of censorship, Israel must also be held accountable for acts of censorship. Given enough time, any act of censorship will appear morally wrong. For this reason, societies must fight against any impulses to eliminate painful works of art, and avoid making decisions based upon emotions or hurt national pride.

An Alternate Response. As the case of Richard Wagner demonstrates, music is so powerful that no one, not even the composer, can control the repercussions of it. Though music can be dangerous, the greater danger is censorship. If we allow anyone to dictate our thoughts for us, we are bound to fall into the stupor of Nazi Germany or Israel—blindly accepting what has become standard because we can no longer access other ideas we could use to question it. People decide for themselves what music best represents their spirit based on what they choose to patronize. Allow orchestras to increase their virtuosity by playing the works of genius composers.²² Let the people realize that they are offended. Create the opportunity for people to

²¹ Richard Taruskin, “The Danger of Music and the Case for Control,” in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 171.

²² Sheffi, vii.

realize that frightening, racist ideas still exist, so that they can remain vigilant—assuring that something like the Holocaust does not happen again.

Music is dangerous. Letting the influence of passionate works run amok in the ears and hearts of the people can have grave consequences, as in the case of Hitler. But alternately, it can inspire people to do truly great things, help people recover from tragedy, and expose existing issues. It is up to each individual to determine which music he or she finds to be hateful and reject it. Then, each individual must determine which music best represents his or her values, and support it wholeheartedly. In this way, society can engage with music in a way that is neither repressive nor offensive. Protecting the right to compose, perform, and listen to music is the only way that any society can ever truly be free.

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