

Wagner and the Jews – conclusions:

Part one:

Please allow me to present a quotation by Wagner. I would very much like to hear your reactions. It is from the 1869 comment to “Das Judenthum in der Musik”, when Wagner’s essay is reissued. In English it goes like this (German original below):

“In the older essay with which I began, I wound up by showing that it was the weakness and incapacity which marked the period of the German musical production since Beethoven which allowed of the Jew putting an appearance at all, I indicated all those of our musicians who found in the obliteration of the great plastic style of Beethoven the ingredients for the constitution of the newer manner, with its lack of form and depth and with its feeble semblance of solidity produced by an over-plastering. This was the style in which, without either life or strife, they now, with drowsy comfort went on composing; and all such writers were comprised by me in my definition of musical-Jewdom, **NO MATTER TO WHAT PARTICULAR NATIONALITY THEY MIGHT HAPPEN TO BELONG** (my italics).”

“In meinem voranstehenden älteren Aufsätze zeigte ich schließlich, daß es die Schwäche und Unfähigkeit der nachbeethovenschen Periode unsrer deutschen Musikproduktion war, welche die Einmischung der Juden in dieselbe zuließ: ich bezeichnete alle diejenigen unsrer Musiker, welche in der Verwischung des großen plastischen Styles Beethovens die Ingredienzien für die Zubereitung der neueren gestaltungslosen, seichten, mit dem Anscheine der Solidität matt sich übertünchenden Manier fanden, und in dieser nun ohne Leben und Streben mit duseligem Behagen so weiter hin componirten, als in dem von mir geschilderten Musikjudenthum durchaus mitinbegriffen, **möchten sie einer Nationalität angehören, welcher sie wollten.**“

One interpretation of this claims that Wagner here plays the role of God, and this means that he is able to tell a person, that he is a Jew, despite the fact that he is not.

The other interpretation is my own: What Wagner says here is, that by “Jew” he means AN ATTITUDE (like: a person who is more interested in immediate success than in depths of expression in art – or an investor who cares more about fast money than about art), and he is NOT talking about the Jewish culture, religion or race.

It should be clear that this quotation might change the ideas of Wagners alleged antisemitism completely.

Part two:

I have for some time emerged myself in careful studies of Wagner’s writings in order to find out what he meant by the word and term “Jews”. To read a text you have to be very careful not to let yourself be influenced by already existing interpretations. One must listen to the words as if they were music. They have a meaning. By doing this I have reached results which are different from those of scholars who state that Wagner hated the Jews and was one of the main factors behind holocaust. He was not – is the unavoidable result.

The question is: is this subject too sensitive - which as a subject in itself might be interesting to study? Are we allowed to try to analyze Wagner's use of the word "Jew" in a situation where Israel has been attacked by Hamas, or are these subjects not really connected? If Wagner **did not** hate or despise the Jewish people, race or religion (it is actually possible to read him in this way) then the influence of the Nazis has prevented Israel from experiencing the wonderful insight and music in the world of Wagner. This is a tragedy.

A few quotations and a question:

In an interview with Pinchas Zukerman <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vg5tkxNOnYo&t=1s> (bonus-material from the documentary *We Want the Light*) we hear the following exchange of words:

“Zukerman: the significance of some music – particularly Wagner – is tough for other people, and I don’t think it will ever go away – I don’t think it will ever go away.

Interviewer (possibly Christopher Nupen): *because the music actually expresses some of that antisemitic hatred that he had, and some of that side of his personality that is so aggressive?* [...]

Zukerman: I don’t know I didn’t ask him [Wagner] I cannot answer that, I wasn’t there... “

I really appreciate Zukerman’s carefulness in what he says, and I am likewise always deeply frustrated to realize that the idea of Wagner as a hateful and aggressive person is so well established that you almost do not dare contradict it. As I wrote earlier, Wagners writings about the Jews can be read as if he is describing *an anticultural money-focused attitude* among *some* Jews – and he is not in any way attacking the Jewish culture, race or religion. He clearly states this himself as well, and you just have to “read around the Nazis” to get it. I have heard all the music of Wagner, and there is absolutely nothing aggressive or hateful there. I have also read almost all Wagner’s writings and there isn’t any hatred or aggression there either. Wagner is very straight forward and outspoken, but that is not a problem. He is simply eager to express his ideas.

According to people who knew Wagner, he was a delightful person to meet. One example is a letter from the Jewish conductor Herman Levi, who conducted the premiere of *Parsifal*:

Levi’s father Benedict was a rabbi and just before the *Parsifal* premiere Levi received a letter from him in which Benedict expressed satisfaction and pride that his son is a part of something so special and also added „I wish I could like Wagner as well“. To which Levi wrote in reply:

„You certainly could, and you should like Wagner. He is the best and noblest of men. Of course, our contemporaries misunderstand and slander him. It is the duty of the world to darken those who shine. Goethe did not fare any better. That he bears no petty antisemitism like a country squire, or a protestant bigot is seen by the way he treats me, [Joseph] Rubinstein, the late [Carl] Tausig whom he loved dearly...Even his fight against what he calls „Jewishness“ in music and modern literature springs from the noblest of motives. I am convinced that posterity will learn what we who are close to him know already: that in him we had just as great a man as a musician. I consider myself very lucky to be working with such a man and I thank God for it every day.“

My question is this: can we do anything to awaken an interest in the world to find out what Wagner was *actually* saying – instead of clinging to ideas about, what the Nazis meant? Monte Stone has done a great job with his book “*Hitler’s Wagner*, a very thin book” (Steinberg Press, Cross River, New York 2019).

Zuckerman is extremely diplomatic, and I salute that (please watch all eight minutes). As I stated earlier: there are tragedies here - for Israel and for the Jews - and if the problem with Wagner has come about because of a misinterpretation of the word "Jew", this is even more tragic. There is a world of difference between the two variations of Wagner's expression "the Jewish influence" where I read Wagner as if he is pointing at "**investors with money**" who often happened to be Jews - and **not to the Jewish race, culture or religion (and men, women and children)**. And what Wagner wanted the world to be free of was not the Jewish race but **culture blocking investors and self-made "judges of taste"**. That he chooses the word "Jew" is very, very unfortunate indeed, but

in those days this word was used for moneylenders etc. according to vocabularies such as Grimms 'Deutsches Wörterbuch' (1854) where it says: "*auch, abgesehen von der Religion, der, welcher gewinnsüchtig und wucherisch verfährt, wird ein Jude genannt*" (apart from the religion, everyone who acts usuriously in order to gain easy money, is called a Jew). We have the same definition in a Danish encyclopedia from 1929. So, the challenge for the researcher is not really to see Wagner in the light of the antisemitism of later but to read **what he is actually saying**.

Part three:

There is especially two of Wagner's orchestral gems which have been misused in films and in documentaries about The Third Reich, or when really powerful "aggressive attack music is required". I am talking about Siegfried's funeral march from *Götterdämmerung* and The Ride of the Valkyries from *Die Walküre*.

When you use such music, you might at least try to understand what it is describing instead of just using "heavy brass" as a description of "slaughter on the battlefield". In the funeral march the buildup in volume of two close chords, which occur throughout the march "of course accompanies Knut Hamsun, when he is going to visit Hitler etc." What the filmmakers do not understand is that these two chords are descriptions of *despair* because of the loss of Siegfried, and when they reach their truly unbearable culmination, they illustrate the horror you may experience, if you are suddenly confronted with the fact that your son has committed suicide or has been killed in a car accident. This is a scream beyond a scream – like the two culminating double chords "Wehe, Wehe" in the beginning of the Third Act of *Siegfried*.

The Ride of the Valkyries has nothing to do with death-happy girls bombing a Vietnamese village as in the film *Apocalypse Now*. What Wagner describes is *joy, exaltation and cheering* because it now seems to be possible for the forces of Light to conquer the forces of Darkness. Heroes who have had the courage to face the dark army but have succumbed are picked up by the Valkyries, so that a strong army of heroes can be built up in Walhalla. When they ride on their flying horses, you can – in the music – imagine them jumping from mountain peak to mountain peak as if we were talking about jumps from the highest peak in Caucasus to Kebnekaise to Galhøpiggen – or in Nepal: from Cho Oyu to Everest to Lhotse and to Makalu – and then they all meet on some celestial meadow.

So: filmmakers – please listen to the music and try to understand what it is all about. Don't misuse great art. Please.