

Wagner and the Jews 2

I have just reread Wagner's essay about Judaism in music. An English version comprising the original essay as well as Wagner's reprint with commentaries published approximately 18 years later (I had not read this one) may be found online at https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7019739M/Judaism_in_music. Several interesting footnotes have been added to this translation from 1910.

A stone falls from my heart upon reading this extremely intelligent and carefully worded essay that does not contain anything at all to resemble any kind of hateful feelings towards the Jews as a people, nor indeed as a culture or a race. We have at our hands a description of **an attitude with men**, who basically taunt their own culture by placing money above feelings, musical structure above emotional content, and stubborn conservatism as far as evolution is concerned above curiosity-driven innovation. Here, we find nothing whatsoever that may be labelled racism or antisemitism, and the fact that Wagner thought that, for instance, Jewish singing in synagogues apparently has not evolved in centuries, is merely a musical point of view which may well hold some truth. On the other hand, we may take off our hat to the respect of tradition represented by the very same synagogue music. However, Wagner is concerned that this "lack of evolution" may then be transferred to German culture which should be blocked if no money can be gained from it.

If Wagner chooses the denomination "Der Jude", this would be due exclusively to his personal meetings with Jews who, apparently, as members of boards and councils, controlled everything concerned with art. He expressly says that in no way is his essay concerned with religion or politics but with art exclusively, and he builds on an already existing debate in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, which apparently maintains that it is quite common to be disgusted by the Fagin-like money hoarder, who, as "a minor king" of sorts, knows what is to be taken seriously and what not – an outsider who tries to interfere with the culture of a nation that is not his by birth, which means that he knows nothing about its values and merits. Everything is concerned with blocking any evolution within German culture – especially music culture. Seen from this perspective, everything clicks – even down to the detail that, as a financial dealer of art, you are incapable of expressing your inner thoughts and feelings in music – you cannot but imitate. This is common sense and the problem here is, of course, that Wagner then goes on to use the denomination "Jews" about something which is really a universal issue that might easily be called something else. To-day we may choose the term "dinosaurs" or the like because this is what Wagner means.

Actually, Wagner goes as far as saying that "**no matter your nationality or race** – if you maintain that whatever is dead and blocking of all evolution is more important than those initiatives that encourage growth and life, then you are **a Jew** (a dinosaur)". Wagner might just as well write or say, "Stop being a Jew, be a human being!". I might add, "Stop being so Danish – use your imagination" – or "Don't be so British – **feel** something" (and on and on, citing any nationality that comes to mind).

I have found a few passages:

Page 2: *This popular dislike of the Jewish character is here desirable to be explained only in reference to the Arts generally, and that of Music in particular, for which reason its presentment, in the respective fields of religion and politics, will be completely disregarded. In that of religion, indeed, the Jews have long ceased to be regarded as deserving of any hatred—thanks to those who, within the Christian religion itself, have so much attracted the feeling of hatred to them-selves! whilst in pure politics we have never had occasion to drift into conflict with them.*

Page 5: *In the present state of things, the Jew is more than free, for he dominates; and, as long as money continues the power before which all our doings and strivings are as naught, he will continue to do so. Nor can it be necessary in this place to go over the historical ground, and to show that it was the period of misery of the Jews and the plundering savagery of Christian-German despots which ultimately led this power into the hands of the sons of Israel.*

Page 6: *That which the lords of the Roman and mediaeval world extracted from their bondmen in torment and suffering – that, nowadays, the Jew converts from day to day into gold. Who is there to recognize the strips of paper of innocent appearance as having the blood of numberless generations sticking to them? That which the heroes of Art, during two thousand unblest years, and with untold efforts, as exhaustive to life as destructive of human joy, succeeded in wringing from the demon Art-foe that, nowadays, the Jew converts into a mere article of exchange. And who is there to perceive, from the manner in which these things are presented, that they are really cemented by the holy sweat of Genius for these two thousand years?*

Some passages I have read several times, because their almost revelation-like details describe the circumstances of Wagner's time. Later, he writes that in no way whatsoever had he intended to offend anyone – he only tried to analyse what was constantly obstructing any expression of artistic creativity. Also, we come to understand, especially from his later addition to the essay, that attacks on him were massive. Someone even claimed that Wagner had created a cult to do away with Christianity and make the theatre the only true church, Wagner writes, puzzled.

The text may be really difficult to read because of what follows in the upcoming century. However, if you listen – and I certainly do – there is no mistaking it: Wagner describes the ravaging and influence of a truly destructive attitude, which we all know to this day, although it is often difficult to trace its origin. The tragedy is, that Wagner happened to use the denomination “Jews” for something that has nothing to do with Jews whatsoever.

But wow, how insightful is this?