

# Are we actually bothered by Wagner's anti-semitism?

I am not here to talk about Wagner's antisemitism, decide which operas show what degree of German nationalism, or which passages are examples of a supposed genius that transcends racial tribalism. I begin from the position that Wagner *and his music* are inextricably enmeshed with the wider anti-Semitic swell in Europe at the end of the 19th century that was eventually concretized by movements such as Karl Lueger's Austrian Christian Social Party and national identity crises like the Dreyfus Affair in France, to say nothing of what followed. Today, as a society that on the surface openly decries anti-Semitism and also continues to consume Wagnerism in heaps, we either have intellectually rationalized and sequestered which aspects of Wagnerism are acceptable to engage with, or, we just aren't that bothered by his anti-Semitism. Despite the massive literature and cultural debate devoted to the former, I suspect that Wagner's enduring position at the center of classical music culture has more to do with moral ambivalence than intellectual rigor.

What role does morality play in how we listen to music in 2022? Do we listen to music just as a pastime or does it have a deeper significance for us? Questions such as these are currently attracting attention from various sources. The 2021 study by Preniqi, Kalimeri, and Saitis titled "Modeling Moral Traits with Music Listening Preferences and Demographics" explores the importance of music in predicting a person's moral values. In its modeling, this study used two basic moral foundations. **Individualizing** is based on "fairness and care ... the basic constructs of society are the individuals and hence focuses on their protection and fair treatment." The other broad category, **Binding**, is founded on the values of "purity, authority and loyalty and is based on the respect of leadership and traditions." Fascinatingly, the researchers found that a taste for classical music is more predictive of the Binding moral foundation than the Individualizing foundation.<sup>1</sup>

One obvious problem with this study for the purposes of the present essay is the term "classical music." As we know, this genre category contains anyone from Wagner or C.P.E. Bach to the early microtonalist Ivan Wyschnegradsky. In this essay, the discussion revolves around whether we should separate Wagner from other composers *within* "classical music." The main idea we will grab from Preniqi, Kalimeri, and Saitis is that on some level, yes, taste in music and moral values are still intertwined in the make up of who we are. This isn't particularly surprising. If the act of listening can

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<sup>1</sup> This being said, the AUROC scores, which tests the effectiveness of a prediction model, were not especially strong in this study. This suggests that their findings were not as definitive as one might think on first glance.

inspire us, make us sad, or soothe us, then it seems reasonable that this experience would be tied to our values and beliefs. There are some other loose ends in what this study covers, however ...

What exactly are we talking about when we say “music” and “listening” in the context of concert music or pieces that are considered “works of art?” We can take from the postmodern school of Northrop Frye and consider nothing but the work on its own material terms or we can go the route of Lydia Goehr who sees music as a social phenomenon that is inextricably tied to the cultural time and place in which it is written/performed/heard.

For Antoine Hennion, music “is everything on which it relies.” (Hennion, *Taste* page 6). He wants to understand music as a mediation between individuals and the world they inhabit. This means that when we say “music” or “classical music” or “Der Meistersinger” we are also talking about “all the details of the gestures, bodies, habits, materials, spaces, languages, and institutions that it inhabits.” (*Music and mediation* 251) Preniqi, Kalimeri, and Saitis might suggest adding morality to that list. This view suggests that “what music is,” is nothing more than the value given to it by the customs, habits, beliefs, and spaces that surround it. So, the value of music is mutable.

That means that since Wagner died 130 years ago and we all agree anti-semitism is bad, we can re-pot his music into our morally sound and politically correct present and get back to singing along to Walter’s “Prize Song” guilt free. Furthermore, in a world where Larry David has reclaimed Jewish stereotypes and transformed them into a certain type of cynical empowerment, the “Jewish” attributes of the aesthetically impotent Beckmesser, Walter’s rival, which served as a dog-whistle for 1860’s audiences fall on largely non-dog ears in 2022.

If, as Hennion says, music only has the meaning we give it, we should be able to safely enjoy Wagner, right? That should mean that we *can* clean Wagner’s music of the traits which have brought him such popularity among racist, xenophobic, and often violent groups. This, I believe, this is exactly the claim made by the vast majority of those who keep Wagner in such a central position within classical music culture. I am not so convinced however that the nobility and intellectual due diligence of that claim are as legitimate as many purport them to be. The answer lies somewhere between Hennion and Frye: the context of a work can and does change over time but its material qualities are fixed and concretely discernible. No matter how you cut it, the last 30 minutes of *Der Meistersinger* firmly cement the work in the realm of nationalist, xenophobic propaganda. No matter how a modern production might reframe its portrayal of Mime, it will always be a *re-framing* of what was initially a Jewish caricature in Wagner’s eyes.

Through one way or another, we create a distance between ourselves and the aspects of his music that we find distasteful while we treat the parts we enjoy with warm familiarity. We are told and we know that Wagner and his music are anti-Semitic

but do we, as individuals in 2022, actually recognize it and *experience* it as anti-semitic?

A couple summers ago, my American family was visiting some Dutch family friends of ours. While at the dinner table my family was being made more and more squeamish by the apparently broken faucet of curse-words that was our friend's mouth. After about 20 minutes, my father explained, "listen, just you know, in the US, in this sort of company, no one uses the language you are using." After laughing about it together, the lesson was learned but it remains fascinating, and hilarious, to see the differences in how people curse in different anglophone communities. In its most basic sense, the speaker's experience of his words, which is conditional on his own context, was wholly different from the listener's, who belongs to a different context.

The situation with Wagner's anti-semitism is not dissimilar to this situation except that instead of geography, the primary metric of our cultural separation is time. For instance, if we take Mel Gibson as precedent, Wagner would have been cancelled *immediately* if we transplanted today's political-moral sensibility to 1850, the year *Jewishness in Music* was published. If we take things in the other direction and an anti-semitic artist wanted Sixtus Beckmesser to be genuinely offensive and have racially provocative traits that today's audience would recognize, the artist would probably make reference to Israel or Williamsburg and Borough Park in New York City. The point being, discrimination has a context and the context of Wagner's anti-semitism, as he lived it, has faded.

The farther back we go in history, the less we register the moral discrepancy between our world today and the cherished cultural artifacts of the past. We ridicule the opulence and inconceivable wealth of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk but Versailles is a gorgeous example of taste and architecture. Putin is a war criminal and tyrant but we have fully assimilated Julius Caesar into western poetic and philosophical cultural heritage while blatantly ignoring the imperial, proto-colonialist, and bellicose foundation of the Roman Empire.

All of this to say that, I just don't think we are that bothered by Wagner's anti-semitism. We talk about it a lot but what effect does it actually have? If the machinations of today's cancel culture are devastating enough to inflict irreversible consequences in less than twenty-four hours with the surfacing of a single accusation, shouldn't it follow that, if Wagner's anti-semitism registered in any meaningful way today, he would already be long gone?

Here we stand. Wagner was anti-semitic. After a reading of Hennion (and I strongly suggest reading his work), we can say that his music is anti-semitic. Following Preniqi, Kalimeri, and Saitis, we understand that there is a measurable contemporary link between our moral values and the music we enjoy. Does this mean we, as classical music lovers, are all probably anti-semitic? If we answer no, then one of two things must be true. Either we don't actually see Wagner as anti-semitic or we just aren't really that bothered.

To my eyes, the problem with Wagner is not whether or not he was anti-Semitic. The problem with Wagner is that his anti-Semitism doesn't mean anything to us today. Whereas the power of his music continues to move people and attract new listeners, the language and context of his anti-Semitism are distant enough that they hardly make an impact on us. But that doesn't mean it isn't there.

The most recent Wagner scandal happened in Israel in the various episodes where Daniel Barenboim and Zubin Mehta performed Wagner there. The controversy surrounding these concerts originates in the fact a huge number of European immigrants resettled in Israel after World War II. These individuals *experienced* the anti-semitism associated with Wagner's music. As Barenboim himself points out, the brand of anti-semitism that was at the root of the scandal in Israel had little to do with Wagner's own context, but nonetheless, it constituted a real and lived experience of this music for millions of listeners. This experience of Wagner, however, forged in the Europe of 1930-45, is but a slice of the populations that encounter his music.

The work incumbent on the 2022 Wagnerian is to bring Wagner's anti-semitism to the present day not as an intellectual or historical fact but to lay it bare for all its human repugnance and absurdity. If the quandary of Wagner's anti-Semitism is going to have any meaningful participation in his future reception, it needs to be talked about from an *experiential* perspective just like his music is. If we intellectualize, identify, and explain it, the hate inherent in this aspect of Wagnerism loses its teeth and this is the first step towards it becoming accepted or ignored. This does not mean that we are required to mention Nazism every time we talk about Wagner. Their appropriation of his music was their own prerogative and the victims of Nazism are well with their rights to refuse cutting ties between Wagner and the Third Reich. Rather, if we are to engage with Wagner in good conscience, we need to treat the man and his ideas with the same immediacy that we want to get out of a performance of his music.

There can be multiple strategies in the effort to make Wagner's ugliness palpable and presently real for today's audiences. Our own solution in *Wagner's Nightmare* is to us humor and the laugh as one of the most evident expressions of the present moment. By no means does this angle intend to diminish the significance of the issues at hand. In fact, we intend quite the opposite. The worst that could happen would be if the racially charged polemics of Wagner's art and thought became nothing more than a footnote to his legacy. Through our use of the eternally contemporary devices of ridicule and humor alongside our performances of his compositions, our aim is to bring the uglier sides Wagnerism to the present with the same immediacy as his music so that audiences might genuinely engage with the full picture of this repulsive and genuinely inspired individual.