

Richard Wagner, “Jewry in Music” (1850/1869)

Abstract

Can a nineteenth-century composer be held responsible, even in part, for a twentieth-century genocide? The case of Richard Wagner and his essay “Jewry in Music” has raised exactly this question among scholars for decades, because Hitler and the Nazis were ardent admirers of Wagner’s oeuvre. The essay excerpted here was first published in 1850 under the pseudonym “K. Freigedenk” (K. Free-Thinker) in the journal *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. It was reissued in a greatly expanded edition in 1869 under Wagner’s own name. Wagner dedicated the essay to the noblewoman Marie Muchanoff (née Countess Maria von Nesselrode-Ehreshoven), a pianist, patron of the arts, and salonnière, whose paternal grandmother happened to have been Jewish. It is Muchanoff to whom Wagner appeals in those instances when he writes “most esteemed madam” [*hochverehrte Frau*]. The essay attacks the composers Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn, in particular, and the Jewish influence in German music more generally. Wagner claims that the Jews’ dubious facility with the German language and their artificial virtuosity represent an evil influence on German culture, which can no longer be tolerated. Many other antisemitic tropes can be found in Wagner’s text, for instance, the depiction of Jews as insidious outsiders. In the last paragraph of the essay, Wagner considers whether a “violent expulsion of the destructive, foreign [Jewish] element” can save German culture. Scholars continue to debate Wagner’s motives for publishing an essay that embarrassed his friends almost as much as it outraged his enemies. So do Israelis. His music was not performed in Israel, by consensus, until 2001, when the Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde* was played in Tel Aviv—to a very mixed reception—in a concert conducted by Daniel Barenboim. Tellingly, on that occasion it was performed as an unprogrammed encore.

Source

[...]

We do not need, first of all, to confirm the Jewification of modern art; it is plain to see and is confirmed through the senses. Also, we would have to digress too much if we wanted to attempt a documented explanation of this phenomenon from the nature of our art history. If, however, our deliverance from the burden of Jewry appears of the greatest necessity, then we must consider it important, above all, to test our strength for this battle of liberation. We do not derive this strength from an abstract definition of the phenomenon itself; but rather, from becoming precisely aware of the nature of the involuntary sensation inherent in us, which manifests itself as an instinctive aversion to Jewishness. Through this irrepressible sensation, if we admit it openly, what we hate about Jewishness becomes clear; what we recognize with certainty, we can then make the target of our attack. Indeed, already through its naked discovery we may hope to drive the demon from the field, where it can keep itself only in the shelter of a dim semi-darkness, a darkness that we good-natured humanists threw over it, so that its appearance would be less repulsive to us.

[...]

A language, its expression and its further development, is not the work of individuals, but of a historical community: only those who have grown up unconsciously in this community participate in its creations. But the Jew stood outside such community, alone with his Jehovah in a fragmented, landless tribe, to which any evolution within itself had to remain denied, just as the peculiar (Hebrew) language of this tribe was preserved for its members only as a dead one. Truly to create poetry in a foreign language has hitherto been impossible even for the greatest geniuses. But our entire European civilization and art have

remained a foreign language to the Jew, since, as with the development of European languages, he did not take part in the development of European civilization and art; the unlucky homeless one at most observed this development with coldness, indeed animosity. In this language and this art, the Jew can only echo and imitate, but cannot really speak poetry or create.

In particular, the purely sensory manifestation of the Jewish language disgusts us. Culture has failed to break the peculiar obstinacy of the Jewish temperament with respect to peculiarities of Semitic utterance, through the two-thousand-year intercourse with European nations. As it first reaches our ears, the Jewish language sounds strange and unpleasant, a hissing, shrill, buzzing, and blundering sound. An utterly improper use of our national language, an arbitrary twisting of words and phrase construction, imparts to this manner of speaking the character of an unbearably confused babble, at the hearing of which our attention involuntarily lingers more on the repellant “how” of Jewish speech, than on the “what” contained within it. How extraordinarily important this circumstance is to explaining the impression that the musical works of modern Jews have upon us must above all be recognized and recorded. If we listen to a Jew speak, we are unconsciously pained by the complete lack of purely human expression in his speech: the cold indifference of its peculiar “blabber” does not under any circumstances give rise to the excitement of higher, heart-felt passions. If, on the other hand, we find ourselves pressed to a more animated form of expression when in conversation with a Jew, he will always avoid us, because he is incapable of replying. The Jew never grows excited when sharing his sentiments with us in conversation, but only in the very specific egotistical interest of his vanity or his advantage, which always gives his excitement—conveyed through the disfiguring expression of his speech—the character of the ridiculous, so that it can arouse anything in us apart from sympathy with the speaker’s interest. Although it must be conceivable that in community situations among one another, and especially in family affairs where purely human sentiment emerges, Jews as well are able to give an expression to their feelings that moves everyone present in an appropriate way, this is not relevant here, in cases where we must listen to a Jew speaking directly to us in matters of life and art.

If the characteristic manner of speaking described here makes the Jew nearly incapable of expressing his feelings and views artistically through speech, then so much the less must be his capacity for such expression through song. Singing is speech excited to the highest passion; music is the language of passion. If the Jew elevates his speech—in which he expresses himself only with ridiculous-seeming fervor, but never with passion that arouses our sympathy—to the point of song, he becomes downright intolerable. Everything that offends us in his external appearance and his language, in his song effect to drive us away, as long as we do not become fascinated by the perfect ridiculousness of this phenomenon. Very naturally, in song, as the most vital and irrefutably true expression of personal sensitivity, the most displeasing peculiarity of the Jewish nature is intensified. According to a natural assumption, we ought to be able to consider the Jew capable of art in any discipline *except* the one for which singing comprises the foundation.

The Jews’ endowment with the sense of sight has never been substantial enough to allow visual artists to emerge from their ranks: their eyes have always been concerned with much more practical things than the locations of beauty and spiritual content in the world of material appearance. To my knowledge, we know nothing of a Jewish architect or sculptor in our times. I leave it to specialists in this field to decide whether more recent painters of Jewish heritage have created real art. It is, however, very probable that these artists have no other place in the visual arts than that of modern Jewish composers in relation to music, to the more precise illumination of which we now turn.

The Jew, who is intrinsically incapable of manifesting himself to us artistically through his outward appearance or through his language, and least of all through his song, has nonetheless succeeded in mastering the public taste in the most popular of modern art forms, that is, in music. To explain this phenomenon let us first of all consider how it was possible for the Jew to become a musician.

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The possibility of speaking without saying anything real presents itself in no artistic discipline with such blossoming fullness as it does in music, because in music, the greatest geniuses have already said what could be said as absolutely unique art. Once this was expressed, it could only be parroted back, with painstaking precision and deceptive similarity, just as parrots mimic human words and speech, but with no expression and no real feeling, as is typical of these foolish birds. But in this language of mimicry of our Jewish music makers, a certain peculiarity is evident, namely, that of the Jewish language, which we have characterized in more detail above.

[...]

Who has not had the opportunity to convince himself of the grotesquery of religious singing in an actual public synagogue? Who has not been struck by the most repugnant sensation, a mixture of the horrific and the ridiculous, in listening to that bewildering gurgling, yodeling, and blabbering, which no deliberate caricature could disfigure more hideously than is presented here with complete, naïve seriousness? In more recent times, the spirit of reform has also shown itself to be active in the attempted restoration of the older purity in these songs. What happened here among the higher, more deeply thinking Jewish intelligentsia, however, is just a fruitless effort from above that can never take root below. The well-educated Jew, who seeks to satisfy his aesthetic needs in the true source of the life of common people, can never see the mirror of his intelligent efforts spring forth as this source. He seeks something that is spontaneous, not something that is the product of thought, which is precisely *his* product. And as this spontaneous thing, only that distorted musical expression offers itself.

[...]

Just as, in his jargon, words and constructions are thrown together with an amazing lack of expression, so the Jewish musician throws together the different forms and styles of all masters and all eras. We encounter the formal characteristics of all the schools crowded side by side in the most dazzling chaos. Because in these productions, the objective is simply to say something, without finding an object about which it is worthwhile to speak, this babble of sounds can somehow be made stimulating to the ear only by changing the mode of external expression,, so that a new stimulus offers itself to our attention at each moment. Internal excitement, true passion, finds its distinctive language at the moment when, struggling to be understood, it brings itself to communicate. The Jew, who in this respect has already been characterized by us in more detail, has no true passion, least of all a passion that would, in its urgency, impel him to create art. But where this passion is lacking, there is also no peace to be found: true, noble peace is nothing other than passion allayed by resignation. Where peace has not been preceded by passion, we see only lethargy. The opposite of lethargy, however, is simply that needling unrest that we perceive in Jewish musical works from beginning to end, except where it gives way to mindless and apathetic lethargy. What thus issues from the Jews' attempt to make art must necessarily be characterized by coldness, indifference, even triviality and ridiculousness, and we must classify the Jewish period in modern music, historically, as one of complete unproductivity and declining stability.

[...]

I have recently stated on a few occasions that the persecution I have suffered at the hands of the Jews has not yet been able to alienate the public, which has received me everywhere with warmth. This is rightly so. However, I must now add that this persecution is certainly sufficient, if not to close off my access to the public, then indeed to hinder it, such that the success of these hostile efforts promises to become complete. You are already experiencing the situation that, after my earlier operas were produced almost everywhere in German theaters and were performed there with constant success, every one of my newer works is met with a halting, even hostile rejection from these same theaters. In other

words, my earlier works had already reached the stage before the Jews' agitation, and the success of these works was reasonably secure. Now, however, it is said that my new works were written according to the "nonsensical" theories I published subsequently; that I have lost my former innocence; and that no one can stand listening to my music anymore. Just as Jewry was able to take root among us only by utilizing the weaknesses and shortcomings of our circumstances, this agitation likewise very easily found a base here, upon which—ingloriously enough for us!—everything is prefigured for its eventual success. In whose hands is the direction of our theaters, and what trend are these theaters following? I have often and sufficiently expressed myself on this topic. Most recently also in my larger essay on "German Art and German Politics," I described in more detail the widely ramified reasons for the decline of our theatrical arts. Do you think that in doing so, I made myself popular in the relevant spheres? Only with the greatest reluctance, as they have attested, are theater administrators now attending the performance of a new work of mine.^[1] However, they could have been forced to do this by the public's generally favorable attitude toward my operas. How welcome, then, must be the pretext that can be derived from the fact that my newer works have been so widely criticized in the press, and moreover, in its most influential sectors?

[...]

The affliction of all German associations had to reveal itself all the more readily in this case. Here, an association of German musicians—like other free associations condemned to ineffectiveness—not only was confronting the powerful spheres of national organizations run by governments, but also, the interests of the most powerful organization of our time, that of Jewry. Obviously, a large association of musicians could only execute a successful introduction of important works in a practical way, by staging the most exemplary model performances for the development of the German musical style. These performances required funds, but the German musician is poor. Who will help him? It is certainly no use to talk and argue about artistic interests, which in large groups can never have any purpose, and easily leads to the ridiculous.

The power we lacked, however, belonged to Jewry. The theaters were under the control of the Junkers and stage cliques, the concert institutions were in the hands of the music-Jews. What was left for us? Perhaps, a small musical publication that reported on the cancellation of its biannual gatherings.

[...]

As you see, most esteemed madam, I hereby attest to you the complete victory of Jewry on all fronts; and if I proclaim it loudly now yet again, this is certainly not in the belief that I could in some way mar the totality of this victory. On the other hand, since my account of the course of this peculiar cultural affair of the German spirit seems to imply that it is the result of the agitation incited among the Jews by my previous article, perhaps the new, mystified question might already be forming in your thoughts: why, by that challenge, did I provoke this agitation as a reaction?

I could excuse myself for this by explaining that I was moved to undertake this attack not by consideration of the "causa finalis," but solely by the impulse of the "causa efficiens" (as the philosopher would say). To be sure, I had nothing less in mind when writing and publishing the essay than to continue to combat, with the prospect of success, the influence of the Jews on our music. The reasons for their previous success were already so clear to me at that time, that now, after more than eighteen years, it gives me a certain degree of satisfaction to be able to prove this by republishing the essay. Therefore, I cannot clearly describe what I wanted to achieve then; I can only offer that my insight into the inevitable decay of the state of our music made it an inner necessity to name the causes of it. Perhaps my feelings moved me after all to connect this with a hopeful assumption: this is revealed to you in the essay's final apostrophe, with which I turn to the Jews themselves.

Just as compassionate friends of the church have imagined making possible a salutary reform of the institution by appealing to the oppressed lower clergy, so too did I take into view the great emotional and intellectual talents emanating from the sphere of Jewish society, which even I received as a genuine revival. To be sure, I am also of the opinion that everything about Jewishness that weighs upon the true German nature is a much more terrible burden upon the sensitive and intellectually gifted Jew himself. It seems to me now that at that time, I perceived signs that my appeal had elicited understanding and great excitement. If dependence is a great evil and obstacle to free development in every situation, then the dependence of the Jews among themselves seems to be a slavish misery of the utmost severity. For the quick-witted Jew, since they have decided not only to live *with* us, but to live *in* us, much may be permitted and overlooked by the more enlightened community of his tribe. The best, the most amusing Jewish anecdotes are told to us by Jews themselves; and likewise, we know of very unbiased utterances of Jews about us—as about themselves—which appear in any case to be allowed. But to defend someone who is cast out by their tribe must in any case be regarded as no less than a capital crime.

[...]

For one thing is clear to me: just as the influence that the Jews have achieved upon our intellectual life—and as is revealed in the co-opting and falsification of our highest cultural aims— is no mere, possibly physiological accident, this influence must also be recognized as undeniable and decisive. Whether the decay of our culture can be stopped by a violent expulsion of the destructive, foreign element, I am not equipped to judge, because forces would be required whose availability is unknown to me. If, on the other hand, this element is to be assimilated into our culture in such a way that it matures with us toward the higher development of our more noble human faculties, it is apparent that not the concealment of the difficulties of this assimilation, but rather, only their clearest exposure can be conducive. If a significant inducement toward this end should have been provided by me, from the harmlessly pleasant realm of music (according to our modern aesthetic), this would perhaps not seem unfavorable to my position on music's significant purpose. At any rate, you, most esteemed madam, may discern in this an excuse for my having distracted you for so long with this seemingly abstruse subject.

Tribschen near Lucerne, New Year (1869)
Richard Wagner

NOTES

[1] It would not be uninformative, and would, at any rate, be indicative of our artistic condition, if I were to hold forth to you in greater detail about the proceedings with which I recently had to become acquainted, to my true astonishment, regarding the reaction of the two largest theaters of Berlin and Vienna to my *Meistersinger*. It took some time in my negotiations with the directors of these court theaters before I learned, from the ruses they employed, that they sought not only not to offer my work, but also, to prevent other theaters from offering it as well. Clearly you will see from this that we are dealing here with a distinct trend, and that the idea of the appearance of a new work of mine was received with horror. Perhaps it would amuse you to hear something more about this from the realm of my experiences. [Wagner's original note.]

Source: Richard Wagner, *Das Judentum in der Musik*. Leipzig: Verlagsbuchhandlung von J.J. Weber, 1869, pp. 12–13, 14–17, 19–20, 22, 24, 43–45, 53–57. Available online at:
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