

**Cultural History and Politics:
From Richard Wagner to Adolf Hitler
A Critical Appreciation of the 2007 Annual Andrew
Vella Memorial Lecture**

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Hosted at the University of Malta's Aula Magna in Valletta, the Malta University Historical Society's 2007 Andrew Vella Memorial Lecture lecture was delivered on 1st December by Dr. Gottfried Wagner. The theme, as agreed, was: Cultural History and Politics with the title "From Richard Wagner to Adolf Hitler". In this very well attended event, Dr. Wagner, an anti-Nazi musicologist and historian who is a direct descendent of Richard Wagner, spoke on the connection between the operas composed by Richard Wagner and the political developments in Germany after its unification and more markedly with the rise of the National Socialist regime.

Wagner: the ideas behind the Artist

Though Wagner is known as a composer, he was also involved in political affairs and in the revolutionary activity for German Unification. His works were also permeated by his ideas. In fact all the works from the music itself to the libretto, from the set's decoration to the performers' acting on stage, were totally directed by Richard Wagner. This obsession with dealing himself with his own work also related to the meaning and explanation of his play. Unlike other composers, Wagner did not discuss his works either with the librettist or any other person. This is fundamental because many of his compositions were also propagating his outlook on race.

Even theatre décor was touched by his ideas, artistic and political. Dr. Wagner explained that Richard Wagner's plays had a three pointed message. The three points were: the liberation of mankind from greed which was identified with the Jews, which would then lead to the regeneration of the German people and purification. With these ideas the artist is presented as the awakener of consciousness and thus the saviour against what was alien and inimical to the German people.

The Bayreuth Festspielhaus was to be the new temple for German musical

identity, built in the form of a Greek theatre, while the musicians are hidden to focus concentration of the spectators and to enhance musical projection¹ with great artistic effects, the words being devised by Wagner in line with his composer's message. Thus Wagner the artist puts himself and his influences at the centre of his works, identifying himself with the heroes of the play as saviours of their people.

Wagner's Jewish Connection and Anti-Semitism

Wagner's aversion to the Jews was partly on the level of his own perceived or real connection with the Jewish community itself. After he had lost his father at young age, he lived with his mother and step father Ludwig Geyer, a Jew in Dresden's Jewish quarter. This was to be a source of attack from his rivals especially in the world of composers. This lack of a father is a constant theme which persists in Wagner's opera: heroes and paladins of his plays such as Parsifal, Siegfried or Lohengrin all do not know their father – or the father died at their birth – which leads to a search for identity.

On the musical field, in his initial works Wagner took a lot from the influences of Jewish composers such as Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn, especially during his years in exile. However in his later years from the 1850s onwards, particularly in his writings on "Judaism and Music", Wagner launches an attack on their music. Distancing himself from such composers, in an increasingly vitriolic way he attacks the Jews, their music and their art. In one such letter he says:

"Very naturally, in Song – the most vivid and most indisputable expression of the personal emotional-being – the peculiarity of the Jewish nature attains for us its climax of distastefulness; and on any natural hypothesis, we might hold the Jew adapted for every sphere of art, excepting that whose basis lies in Song".²

In another tirade, he adds: "*so that Judaic works of music often produce on us the impression as though a poem of Goethe's, for instance, were being rendered in the Jewish jargon*".³

Dr. Wagner explained that in Wagner's operas, the heroes' antagonists were meant to be caricatures of the Jews, greedy and spiteful against the pure heroes, which represent the German nation as the notes by Richard Wagner. One such case arises in the opera 'Parsifal', which tells the story of a young and pure knight searching for the Grail to heal Amfortas the head of the Grail Knights. One such character in this play is a temptress sent by

Parsifal's arch-enemy, Kundrie, who finds redemption. In the opera Parsifal, after she had tempted the young Knight to go against his vows, and repented of her malevolent action, she had to die as she personified a concept which embodied something alien, evil to Wagner's world which had to be disposed of.

Wagner's first anti-Semitic writing dates back to 1850 but he was not alone. He corresponded, hosted and had intellectual exchanges with the British Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who also had connections with the German Imperial Family as cultural advisor and wrote books were part of the German educational system. Richard Wagner also published attacks against the Jews in the newspaper *Bayreuther Blätter*. He met Count de Gobineau, the French Aryanist ideologue. In some of his articles published in the *Bayreuther* he praised Arthur de Gobineau's book *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*⁴. As in the opera, Wagner was always aware of what he was writing. The impact of this newspaper was not only restricted to monarchical circles. It came out of a cultural centre, the soul of the Reich; it was widely read by the bourgeoisie of the German Reich. Thus not only was there the impact of Wagner the artist but also of the opinionist, who elucidated and propagated his ideas, speaking through the Language of the Opera and the language of politics.

The Bayreuth Festival, Hitler and the relationship with the Wagners

The town of Bayreuth was to be for Wagner the centre of his operatic activity, especially as an alternative to what he saw the Jewish-dominated Paris. Its theatre, the Bayreuther Festspielhaus, had been built a couple of years after the creation of the German Empire in 1876. In its artistic expression Bayreuth was to be the new temple of the German people. The Bayreuth festival was an important event which not only attracted important leaders such as the Kaiser and Dom Pedro of Brazil but also learned men of culture.

After the death of Richard Wagner, his work and thought was further developed and radicalised by his wife Cosima, who was also daughter of Franz List, a composer who like her husband harboured anti-semitic views. This legacy was thus propagated by the Wagner family into the later years of the Second German Empire and into the Weimar Republic.

Adolf Hitler was impressed in his youth by the operas, the opulence and strength of the work of Richard Wagner. In fact Dr. Wagner quoted Hitler

saying: "My religion is Wagner". Moreover, despite Hitler's genuine fondness of Wagner's music, arias from Wagnerian operas were used as an instrument of propaganda and party pageantry⁵. As already noted, Wagner's opera puts the artist as the saviour of the race. In Hitler's case, the artist who as Wagner imagined in his operas becomes the leader of the Reich, as a Messiah which will purify the German people, manifesting itself in legislation such as the Nuremberg Laws.

Winifred Wagner, an Englishwoman married to Wagner's son Siegfried, after the latter's death in 1930 organised the Bayreuth Festival – she was the connection between the Wagner family and Adolf Hitler. Hitler regularly went to Bayreuth, and supported the Wagner family in the running of the Bayreuth festival even giving slave labour from the neighbouring concentration camp of Flossenburg. In peace and during the war, Bayreuth and its festival remained a pilgrimage site of the Reich with thousands of soldiers who visited it annually.

Thus there was a conscious cooperation between the Wagners and Adolf Hitler, in fact Hitler visited regularly Bayreuth, and from the memoirs of Albert Speer, it emerges that, "someone whose dearest wish would have been to live in Bayreuth presumably as general manager of the festival⁶" Bayreuth was the soul of Germanism which Hitler haunted and took as his own, embodied and used for his "renewal" and "purification" of the German people.

Conclusion

Richard Wagner was a formative influence on the formation of a German soul searching during the political unification in giving a cultural coherence to the idea of Germany and afterwards as an expression of the greatness of national soul, moulding and popularising aspects of German identity through operas like *Rienzi*, *Der Nibelungenslied*, *Lohengrin* or *Parsifal*.

In Wagner, culture and politics merge, mutually influencing one another. This manifests itself in the sense that the pre-1870 political need or ideal of German unity led Wagner to use motifs from German folk tales and myth in order to create operas which recreated an imagined community or a semblance of past unity. After the fall of the German Empire in 1918 and through the crises which eventually drove Hitler and the National Socialist Party, Wagner's opera was not only a source of inspiration or nostalgia of a past glory that could be

attained, but also a blueprint as to what was to be done to attain redemption and give new vigour to a Germany traumatised by defeat in the First World War – a Germany in search of her soul and ready to assert itself against the order imposed upon it by the treaty of Versailles.

NOTES

- ¹ Frederic Spotts; *Bayreuth: A History of The Wagner Festival*, (London, 1994), 9
- ² Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music, Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen : Volume V*, (Germany, 1850), 66-85
- ³ R.Wagner, *Judaism in Music*, 66-85
- ⁴ Joachim Bergfeld; *The Diary of Richard Wagner – the Brown Book 1865-1882*, (London, 1980), 203
- ⁵ F.Spotts; *Bayreuth: A History of The Wagner Festival*, 165
- ⁶ F.Spotts; *Bayreuth: A History of The Wagner Festival*, 103