

Are we actually bothered by Wagner's antisemitism?

- Pierre-Nicolas Colombat

I am not here to talk about the ifs, ands, or buts of Wagner's antisemitism, decide which operas show what degree of German nationalism, or which passages are examples of a supposed genius that transcends his racial tribalism. I begin from the position that Wagner *and his music* are inextricably enmeshed with the wider antisemitic swell in Europe at the end of the 19th century and that this swell eventually was made concrete by movements such as Karl Lueger's Austrian Christian Social Party and crises like the Dreyfus Affair in France. All this to say nothing of what followed.

Today, as a society that on the surface openly decries antisemitism is it not contradictory that we also continue to consume Wagnerism in heaps? It seems we have either intellectually rationalized and selected which specific aspects of Wagnerism are acceptable to engage with, or, we just aren't that bothered by his antisemitism. Individually, we might have our own ways of judging or accepting this complicated figure. On the wider societal scale however I suspect that Wagner's enduring position at the center of classical music culture has more to do with moral ambivalence than intellectual rigor.

Can moral ambivalence on a large scale actually be curtailed? After all, mob mentality operates on simplistic reductionism and momentum. What role, if any, 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? There is no one answer to these questions but cases as grandiose as Wagner's show us that we need consider possible answers so that we might curtail the excesses of some of those who took Wagnerism as their flag. If we want to calculate the present-day weight of Wagner's antisemitism, we first need to consider the intersection between the individually relevant aspects of music with the wider societal currents in which it lives.

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. 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." The researchers found that a taste for classical music is more predictive of the Binding moral foundation than the Individ-

ualizing foundation.¹

From this rather generalized dichotomy, the main idea I want to borrow from Preniqi, Kalimeri, and Saitis is that on some level, yes, taste in music and moral values are intertwined in the make-up of who we are. 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?” Listening to music can be as passive as turning on the radio while driving but this listening to music also has entire careers and fields of study devoted to it from academic musicology to the record industry. With such a wide range of mutable roles, is it possible to identify anything that would serve as the “fundamental” qualities of what a piece of music is? We can borrow 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.²

For Antoine Hennion music is simply “everything on which it relies.”³ 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.”⁴ 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, Hennion’s view appears to be in opposition to Frye’s material-based approach. While I personally subscribe more to Hennion’s view, the question still stands as to whether this approach is possible for Wagner and his work since the German composer was so clear and outspoken about the specific things he and his oeuvre stood for.

Wagner died 130 years ago. We widely agree that antisemitism is something our society is trying to eradicate. Shouldn’t we then be able re-pot his music into the present day, snip off all the thorny racists and nationalistic bits and get back to singing along to Walter’s “Prize Song” guilt free? We could be persuaded to believe that since we live with a different ethos than Wagner that our enjoyment of his music is fully sep-

¹ 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. See Fig. 1 of their study.

Preniqi, Vjosa, Kyriaki Kalimeri, and Charalampos Saitis. “Modeling Moral Traits with Music Listening Preferences and Demographics.” 2021. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2107.00349>

² See:

- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957.
- Goehr, Lydia. *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

³ Hennion, Antoine. “Music Lovers: Taste as Performance.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 18, no. 5 (2001): 1-22.

⁴ Hennion, Antoine. “Music and Mediation, Toward a New Sociology of Music.” in *The Cultural Study of Music, A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition, edited by Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, 2. New York and London: Routledge, 2012.

arate from his ethos. We have several contemporary examples that back up this view in the Larry David mold who reclaim Jewish stereotypes and transformed them into a certain type of cynical empowerment. Woody Allen, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Jonah Hill are but a few. In this context the negative portrayals of stereotypical Jewish traits in Wagner's characters which served as a dog-whistle for 1860's audiences fall on deaf ears in 2022. But that doesn't mean they aren't there.

If, as Hennion says, music only has the meaning we give it, shouldn't we be able to safely enjoy Wagner? That should mean that we in fact *are* able to 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 we cut it, the last 30 minutes of *Der Meistersinger* firmly cement the work in the realm of nationalist nearly xenophobic propaganda. No matter how a modern production might reframe its portrayal of Mime, it will always be a re-framing of what was a caricature of Jewish traits 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 important parts of his music are antisemitic but do we, as individuals in 2022, actually recognize it and *experience* it as anti-semitic?

From Mel Gibson to Kyrie Irving, there are many examples that prove that today's culture reacts swiftly and strongly to antisemitic language. One would expect that Wagner would also be cancelled, Louie C.K.-style, if he and his writings were transplanted to today.⁵ The issue is that what stands as clear antisemitic caricatures for 1850 are largely unrecognizable now. If the character of Sixtus Beckmesser should provoke backlash today, the director would have to change his depiction so that it appears as anti-Jewish in *today's* signifiers. The point being, discrimination has a context and Wagner's brand of antisemitism and his context, 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

⁵ In fact, Wagner did receive backlash from certain quarters after the publication of his essay. The British audience, who venerated Mendelssohn, were particularly put off by Wagner's aggressions towards the Jewish composer. That being said, considering the lengths he and his vicious pamphlets went to, he still was widely performed and did not suffer consequences as severe as some "canceled" personalities today. The concurrent building/success of Bayreuth was not blocked by the negative response to his vicious pamphlets. See 234-236, Ross, Alex. *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*. New York, Picador. 2020, for a review of Wagner's motivation for writing *Jewishness in Music* and well as its reception history.

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 do these discussions actually have? If the machinations of today's cancel culture are devastating enough to inflict irreversible consequences in less than twenty-four hours with a single accusation, shouldn't it follow that if Wagner's antisemitism registered in any meaningful way today, he would already be long gone?

Here we stand. Wagner was antisemitic. Whether we read Frye or Hennion we can still say that in some cases, the music itself is antisemitic. Following Preniqi, Kalimeri, and Saitis, we understand that there is a measurable link between our moral values and the music we enjoy. Does this mean we, as classical music lovers, are all probably antisemitic? If we answer no, then one of two things must be true. Either we don't actually see Wagner as antisemitic or we just aren't really that bothered.

To my eyes, the problem with Wagner is not whether his music was antisemitic. The problem with Wagner is that his antisemitism 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 antisemitism 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 that a large number of European immigrants and Holocaust survivors resettled in Israel after World War II. These individuals *experienced* the antisemitism associated with Wagner's music. As Barenboim himself points out, the brand of antisemitism that was at the root of the scandal in Israel had little to do with Wagner's own context but it nonetheless constituted a real and lived experience of this music for millions of listeners. This experience of Wagner, however, is but a slice of the populations that encounter his music. The way in which it is real for that audience is just as valid as the love that someone like W.E.B. DuBois had for Wagner's music, despite being fully aware of the composer's racism and intolerance.

The work incumbent on the 2022 Wagnerian is to bring Wagner's antisemitism to the present day not only as an intellectual or historical fact but to lay it bare for all its human repugnance and absurdity. If the quandary of Wagner's antisemitism 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. On one hand, the Holocaust opened our eyes to what atrocities antisemitism can lead to, but on the other hand, not even the staunchest Wagner opponents would say that Richard, the man who died in 1883, was responsible for it. The appropriation of Wagner's music by the Nazis was their own prerogative and the victims of Nazism are well with their rights to refuse cutting ties between Wagner and the Third Reich. If we are to engage with Wagner in good conscience, we need to treat the man and his ideas with the same immedi-

acy 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 use humor and laughter as one of the most evident expressions of the present moment. If we intend to belittle the man and his oversized self-image, by no means does this angle intend to diminish the significance of the issues at hand. In fact, we intend quite the opposite. Our project is designed to antagonize the ghost of Wagner by bringing his least favorite subjects to fore. This includes performances of music by Mendelssohn in a project dedicated to Wagner but also more lighthearted jabs such as performing repertoire specifically written for the Wagner viola on a standard viola.

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 of 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.