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“The Most German of all
German Operas”¹:
Die Meistersinger through the Lens
of the Third Reich

DAVID B. DENNIS

The music of the Nazis is not the Prelude to Die Meistersinger, but rather the Horst-Wessel-Lied; they deserve credit for nothing else, and no more can or should be given to them.

—Ernst Bloch²

In college classrooms across the United States, a common feature of many courses covering modern German history is a screening of Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film promoting the 1934 Nazi Party rally at Nürnberg. Usually *Triumph des Willens* (Triumph of the Will), which includes no narration, is presented with commentary by instructors or explanatory notes. These explications often include assertions that the music accompanying Riefenstahl's opening imagery comes from Richard Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: “For 68 seconds the screen remains dark. From this cinematic ‘void’ there gradually emerges the solemn, swelling sound of the overture from Wagner's *Mastersingers of Nuremberg*,” reads one guide to the movie. “Herbert Windt, a classical composer, created the Wagnerian-style orchestral scores which provide a background to the film,”

1. “Richard Wagner und das Kunstempfinden unserer Zeit: Rundfunkrede von Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 8 August 1933.

2. Ernst Bloch, “Über Wurzeln des Nazismus” (1939), in *Politische Messungen, Pestzeit, Vormärz*, vol. 11, *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 320.

this summary continues. “The Wagnerian motif was apparently suggested by Riefenstahl but was a natural and appropriate choice.”³

Such claims are generally taken for granted: students, general readers, and even scholars have little difficulty accepting associations between Wagner's nationalistic music drama and National Socialist self-promotion in film. However, the main premise of this contention is simply not true: while *Triumph des Willens* later refers to *Die Meistersinger*,⁴ the film does not open with music from Wagner's opera. As a forbidding Nazi eagle appears on the screen, swastika in its talons, and the camera pans to title and credits styled as if carved in stone, the music climaxes in a potent, martial theme—apparently of Windt's own design.

Riefenstahl did decide on nonoriginal music to accompany the famous sequence showing sublime cloud banks surrounding Hitler's plane. Woven into contrapuntal texture and performed by full orchestra, the identity of this theme remains obscure for several bars, but it gradually reveals itself as the haunting and ultimately cursed tune of *Die Fahne hoch!*—better known as the *Horst-Wessel-Lied*. It is with full statement of this party *Kampflied* that Hitler's plane breaks through the clouds to a spectacular aerial view of the towers, ramparts, and pitched roofs of Dürer's city in its prewar glory. No matter how appropriate melodies from Wagner's tribute to *Alt-Nürnberg* might have been for this cinematic moment, Riefenstahl did not employ them. Confirming the gist of the above observation by philosopher Ernst Bloch, the premier Nazi propaganda film—which has strongly influenced perceptions of Hitler and his movement, especially in American universities—opens and closes with rousing versions of the *Horst-Wessel-Lied*.

Debunking this particular myth about the function of Wagner's most popular opera in Nazi propaganda should not be taken as an effort to disassociate *Die Meistersinger* from National Socialist culture. The case, however, serves as a warning against accepting assumptions about the reception of musical works without careful consideration of relevant sources. Contrary to Bloch's admonition, scholars have frequently insisted that Hitler's personal interest in and Goebbels' manipulation of *Die Meistersinger* “turned the entire opera into a Nazi anthem.”⁵ As the present chapter will demonstrate, evidence in the record of *Die Meistersinger*'s reception by Nazis does support such claims; but some inferences about the opera's meaning within National Socialist discourse do not hold up under closer scrutiny.

3. Linda Deutschmann, *Triumph of the Will: The Image of the Third Reich* (Wakefield, N.H.: Longwood Academic, 1991), 28–30.

4. The third scene—from 0:12:42 to 0:14:27 on the Connoisseur Video Collection cut of the film (The Film Preserver, Ltd., 1992)—consists of a series of shots of Nürnberg at daybreak, backed by the *Wach auf* melody from the prelude to Act III.

5. Frederic Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 165.

Central to Wagner scholarship in recent years has been an intense debate over the extent to which the composer's well-documented hatred for Jews colored his dramas and music. Interpretations of *Die Meistersinger* as one of the "most blatantly anti-Semitic"⁶ of Wagner's creative works focus on the character of the *Merker*, Sixtus Beckmesser. Anti-Jewish symbolism is "woven into the ideological fabric" of *Die Meistersinger* as its characterization of Beckmesser "incorporates unmistakable anti-Semitic stereotypes."⁷ The broader implication of such assessments of Beckmesser, his singing,⁸ and the treatment he receives is that Wagner communicated via *Die Meistersinger* coded instructions that Germans first physically abuse (for comic relief, as in the "Riot Scene" of Act II), and ultimately eliminate Jews from their community (since, in the original version, Beckmesser flees the stage in disgrace).

Most essential to arguments about the anti-Semitic significance of Beckmesser is the assertion that whereas persons considering the opera today may not recognize the character's implicit Jewishness, pre-1945 audiences immediately grasped its references to "a common stock of anti-Semitic stereotypes."⁹ Since the end of the Second World War, "such ideological implications in Wagner's writings and music dramas have been increasingly denied or repressed, as the cultural vocabulary of the world in which he is read and performed has changed." As a result, "an obvious dimension of the Wagnerian artwork" became "an issue of open debate" after the defeat of Nazism.¹⁰ Shifting expectations have "led to a widespread disavowal of precisely the racist and exclusionary dimension of his essays and music dramas that would have been so obvious to a nineteenth-century audience."¹¹

6. Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 84.

7. Barry Millington, "Nuremberg Trial: Is There Anti-Semitism in *Die Meistersinger*?" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3.3 (1991): 247–60, here 247. Millington explains further: "The characterization of Beckmesser draws directly on a common fund of nineteenth-century anti-Semitic stereotypes, specifically on the description of Jews in Wagner's pamphlet, *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1850). [. . .] From the start, he is represented as the outsider, the Other, and is made painfully and cruelly aware of his Otherness in the course of the opera. [. . .] Beckmesser is shallow and one-dimensional: he has no redeeming features. Wagner's hatred for everything he represents is so total that for once he loses his sure dramatic touch" (Ibid., 249).

8. Beyond his physical and dramatic representation, Millington and others perceive in the very music of Beckmesser's part "a parody of the Jewish cantorial style" (Ibid., 249–57).

9. Ibid., 255.

10. Weiner, *Anti-Semitic Imagination*, 2.

11. Ibid., 13.

Unfortunately for this argument, however, no one has yet supported it with direct reference to records proving that this dimension of *Die Meistersinger* was part of the "cultural vocabulary" of nineteenth-century Germans, or—more to the point—was articulated by the anti-Semitic radical right that ultimately dominated German politics and targeted Jews for extermination. Setting aside, for a moment, the separate matter of Wagner's intentions: did German audiences address the Beckmesser character as obviously anti-Jewish in the years leading up to the Holocaust? "The question demands a study of its own," admits a supporter of this view.¹² But thus far, none has appeared.¹³

Assessing the interpretation of Wagner's operas as anti-Semitic, one reviewer declared that "it will never be possible to calculate the precise degree of Wagner's complicity in the crimes of twentieth-century fascism."¹⁴ This may be true, because we probably cannot verify whether Germans who perpetrated genocide were motivated by experiences of Wagner's operas—via wartime productions at Bayreuth, for instance. But by directing our attention to records of their cultural politics, we can evaluate the extent to which the volkish right and the Nazi Party employed his works as high-cultural propaganda instruments for spurring a generation of "willing executioners." In the end, I suggest, the crucial question is not whether Hitler and his immediate followers perceived Wagner's opera as anti-Jewish, but whether the music and text of *Die Meistersinger* were effectively implemented to indoctrinate Germans with anti-Semitic ideology. Is there proof that the opera itself was explicitly used to motivate actions against Jews, or, more broadly, to create a cultural atmosphere that encouraged people to do so?

To determine if specific characters of *Die Meistersinger* inhabited the "anti-Semitic imagination" of Germans in and around the Nazi movement, I have studied a wide array of sources. These include all the material collected in secondary assessments of Wagner's place in German political culture, especially that of the right wing, including Hartmut Zelinsky's *Richard Wagner: ein deutsches Thema* (1976) and Berndt Wessling's *Bayreuth im dritten Reich* (1983). I have also examined every article on *Die Meistersinger* that appeared in the *Bayreuther Blätter* from 1878 through 1938 (its last edition); in the *Zeitschrift für Musik* from 1933 to 1943; in *Die Musik* from 1933 to 1943; and in the *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* from 1918 through 1935.¹⁵ Outside music scholarship, I have checked journals such as the *National-*

12. Millington, "Nuremberg Trial," 260.

13. Millington does "no more than suggest a few pointers for future research" (Ibid.).

14. Thomas Grey, "Bodies of Evidence," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8.2 (1996): 185–97, here 196.

15. These sources include articles with telling titles like "Richard Wagner als Kunder der Arischen Welt," "Richard Wagners Regenerationslehre und ihre Bedeutung fur die Gegenwart," "Richard Wagner in unserer Zeit," and "Richard Wagner—nationalsozialistisch gesehen."

sozialistische Monatshefte (1935–41), *Volk im Werden* (1933–35), *Volk und Rasse* (1929–38), the *Zeitschrift für deutsche Bildung* (1925), and the *Zeitschrift für deutsche Geistesgeschichte* (1935–38). Besides serials, I have assessed publications devoted to linking Wagner with anti-Semitic, volkish, and then Nazi culture, including Paulus Cassel, *Der Judengott und Richard Wagner* (1881); Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Richard Wagner* (1896); Karl Grunsky, *Richard Wagner und die Juden* (n.d.); Curt von Westernhagen, *Richard Wagners Kampf gegen seelische Fremdherrschaft* (1935); Peter Raabe, "Wagners Meistersinger und unsere Zeit" (1935); Karl Ganzer, *Richard Wagner und das Judentum* (1938); Richard Stock, *Richard Wagner und die Stadt der Meistersinger* (1938); and Johannes Bertram, *Der Seher von Bayreuth* (1943). Moreover, I have surveyed a wide range of literature considered central to German racist culture as a whole: Houston Stewart Chamberlain's *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (1899) and his correspondence with the intensely anti-Semitic Cosima Wagner;¹⁶ the works of Richard Benz;¹⁷ the racist theories of Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss¹⁸ and Hans F. K. Günther;¹⁹ Richard Eichenauer's *Musik und Rasse* (1937); the collected articles and speeches of Joseph Goebbels;²⁰ Alfred Rosenberg's *Der Mythos des 20.*

16. Paul Pretzsch, ed., *Cosima Wagner und Houston Stewart Chamberlain im Briefwechsel 1888–1908* (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam Verlag, 1934).

17. Richard Benz, *Blätter für deutsche Art und Kunst* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1915); Richard Benz, *Die deutsche Romantik: Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung* (Leipzig: Philipp Reclam, 1937); Richard Benz and Arthur von Schneider, *Die Kunst der deutschen Romantik* (München: R. Piper, 1939); Richard Benz, *Die Welt der Dichter und die Musik*, 2nd ed. (Düsseldorf: Diederich, 1949); Richard Benz, *Geist und Reich: Um die Bestimmung des Deutschen*, 3rd ed. (Jena: E. Diederichs, 1933); Richard Benz, *Märchen-Dichtung der Romantiker: Mit einer Vorgeschichte* (Gotha: F. A. Perthes, 1908).

18. Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, *Die nordische Seele: Artung, Prägung, Ausdruck* (Halle: 1923); Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, *Rasse und Seele: Eine Einführung in die Gegenwart* (München: J. F. Lehmann, 1926); Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, *Die nordische Seele: Eine Einführung in die Rassenseelenkunde* (München: J. F. Lehmann, 1934); Ludwig Ferdinand Clauss, *Rasse und Seele: Eine Einführung in den Sinn der leiblichen Gestalt*, 3rd ed. (München: Lehmann, 1934).

19. Hans F. K. Günther, *Rassenkunde des deutschen Volkes*, 2nd ed. (München: J. F. Lehmann, 1923); Hans F. K. Günther, *Rasse und Stil: Gedanken über ihre Beziehungen im Leben und in der Geistesgeschichte der europäischen Völker, insbesondere des deutschen Volkes* (München: J. F. Lehmann, 1926); Hans F. K. Günther and G. C. Wheeler, *The Racial Elements of European History*, trans. G. C. Wheeler (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1928).

20. Joseph Goebbels, *Goebbels-Reden*, ed. Helmut Heiber (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1971); Joseph Goebbels, *Signale der neuen Zeit: 25 ausgewählte Reden* (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1934); Joseph Goebbels, *Der Angriff: Aufsätze aus der Kampfzeit*, ed. Hans Schwarz van Berk, 5th ed. (München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1936); Joseph Goebbels, *Das eiserne Herz: Reden und Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1941/42* (München: F. Eher, 1943).

Jahrhunderts (1930) and his collected essays.²¹ Finally, I have inspected every major article on Wagner in general (numbering almost three hundred) and on *Die Meistersinger* in particular (over thirty) that appeared in both of the major Nazi newspapers, the *Völkischer Beobachter* (1920–45) and *Der Angriff* (1927–33).

This investigation has uncovered no evidence that Nazi cultural politicians, or their volkish forbears and associates, referred in public discourse to the character of Sixtus Beckmesser as Jewish, or to his fate in *Die Meistersinger* as foreshadowing National Socialist policies against Jews. Observing that the extreme German right did not openly discuss Beckmesser's features as Jewish is striking when one considers that its spokesmen otherwise had no reservations about launching anti-Semitic diatribes within their treatments of Wagner. Brutish attacks on Jews do appear throughout Nazi writings about this composer and his works, including *Die Meistersinger*. For instance, in its section about this opera, Curt von Westernhagen's 1935 book, *Richard Wagners Kampf gegen seelische Fremdherrschaft*, directly addressed the composer's hatred for Jews. When in 1869 Wagner reprinted the notorious essay, *Das Judentum in der Musik*—where, according to Westernhagen, he first started to "track down, or rather, ferret out the race problem"—the composer jeopardized the success of *Die Meistersinger*, which had premiered only a year earlier: "As [Wagner] put it, 7000 Jews declared war on him, but 70,000 or 700,000 Jews would be more like it—because all Jewry recognized right away the danger it faced if the race question were seriously raised." The "blood question," Westernhagen insisted, was an "undertone" in Wagner's thinking that gradually became louder and more distinct until it "sounded as the notion of regeneration, of racial rebirth."²²

Consistent in National Socialist reception of *Die Meistersinger* was the assumption that a Jewish-led conspiracy had tried to block performance of the work and, where that failed, undermine its popularity through sharp criticism—until the Nazi "seizure of power" that is. Richard Stock stated this theory bluntly in *Richard Wagner und die Stadt der Meistersinger*, a publication inspired by performance of the opera at the 1935 Nazi Party rally in Nürnberg. Stock harped on the fact that Wagner had wished to premiere the opera in Nürnberg, believing that the home of Hans Sachs

21. Alfred Rosenberg, *Kampf um die Macht: Aufsätze von 1921–1932*, ed. Thilo von Trotha (München: F. Eher nachf., 1937); Alfred Rosenberg, *Gestaltung der Idee: Reden und Aufsätze von 1933–1935*, ed. Thilo von Trotha (München: F. Eher nachf., 1943); Alfred Rosenberg, *Das politische Tagebuch Alfred Rosenbergs aus den Jahren 1934–35 und 1939–40*, ed. Hans-Günther Seraphim (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1956); Alfred Rosenberg, *Letzte Aufzeichnungen: Nürnberg 1945–46* (Uelzen: Jomsburg Verlag, 1996).

22. Curt von Westernhagen, *Richard Wagners Kampf gegen seelische Fremdherrschaft* (München: J. F. Lehmann, 1935), 25. All translations are the author's.

and Albrecht Dürer was a "sanctuary of Germanness," and that this city of medieval handworkers and world-renowned German tradesmen was a "mighty bulwark against Jewish sponging and wheeling-dealing." But in Wagner's time, the responsible officials were "infected and weakened by the anti-German spirit of Jews" who had become more and more powerful since the revolutions of 1848. So the "honorable wish of the master—hated as an enemy of the Jews—was denied."²³

Spouting a view common among Nazi Wagnerians, Stock insisted that the plot operated beyond the city of Nürnberg, throughout German lands, from Wagner's lifetime until Hitler finally "made good on this terrible injustice to the great German genius." *Die Meistersinger* had come into being "in a state of spiritual, or cultural-political banishment" imposed by Jews and other "enemies of German unity and traditional German culture." Leading the cabal, Jewish critics and literati—who were "popping out of the ground like poisonous mushrooms" during Wagner's era—attacked his most "deeply German" opera in the "bitterest and dirtiest ways," driven by the "undying hatred that this rootless race holds against volkish originality and creativity." In their view, the "Great Antisemite"—as this composer "bravely" revealed himself to be, by ruthlessly "tearing the mask from the face of this parasite on the cultural life of the Volk"—had to be "exterminated."²⁴

Besides treatment of *Die Meistersinger* at the hands of critics, Nazi supporters claimed that the "Pan-Jewish (*Alljudas*) battle" against Wagner also took the form of insinuations that the composer was not of pure "nordic" stock. "From time to time," the *Völkischer Beobachter* complained, "there arises some humbug suggesting that the greatest of all German geniuses, Richard Wagner, had some Jewish blood in his veins."²⁵ These claims were based on rumors that Wagner's mother had been the lover of Ludwig Geyer (whom she married after her first husband, Carl Friedrich Wagner, died) at the time of the composer's conception. The *Völkischer Beobachter* strove to "overcome this filth and break through these lies once and for all" with a two-pronged argument: first by demonstrating that

23. Richard Wilhelm Stock, *Richard Wagner und die Stadt der Meistersinger: Den Grossen von Bayreuth Richard und Cosima Wagner zum Gedächtnis in ihrem 125. und 100. Geburtsjahr* (Nuremberg: Verlag Karl Ulrich & Co., 1938), 7. To prove his assertions about the critical attack on Wagner, Stock provided extensive extracts from the so-called *Schmähartikeln* that Jews and their supposed coconspirators launched against *Die Meistersinger*. In none of these examples did there appear any criticism of the opera as containing anti-Semitic imagery, although Stock insisted that the authors hated Wagner primarily for his anti-Jewish views (Ibid., 138 ff.).

24. Stock, *Wagner und die Stadt*, 7, 71, 138.

25. J. St-g, "Der alte Schwindel von Richard Wagners Blutbeimischung," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 12 December 1929.

relations between Ludwig Geyer and Wagner's mother were "innocent until they married"; second, by insisting that, in any case, Geyer was not Jewish.²⁶ But ultimate proof that Richard Wagner was a "German of Nordic stamp" resided in his music, particularly that of *Die Meistersinger*. According to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, there was only one correct answer to these accusations and it was best stated by Wagner's son, Siegfried: "All one has to do is listen to the first three beats of the *Meistersinger* Prelude to know that my father was not of Jewish descent."²⁷

Clearly, Nazis and their supporters had no qualms about fomenting anti-Semitism via articles and statements about *Die Meistersinger*. But nowhere in these writings appeared insinuations about the Jewishness of Beckmesser. As we will see below, the focus in most Nazi reception of *Die Meistersinger* was on the character of Hans Sachs, but the few references made to the *Merker* treated him as an irritating but nonetheless respectable member of Nürnberg society—indeed a figure of undeniable aesthetic authority derived from long-standing traditions within the singers guild, and therefore a formidable opponent to Walther and his youthful, free-wheeling ways. In his 1935 essay, "Wagners *Meistersinger* in unserer Zeit," Peter Raabe, then president of the Reichsmusikkammer, insisted that Beckmesser was "conceived as a high-ranking civil servant."²⁸ Elsewhere, the incorrigibly volkish *Bayreuther Blätter* discussed the *Merker* as the leader of an influential group within the guild which included other mastersingers such as Kothner and Zorn, together comprising a conservative "party."²⁹ These Hitlerites, therefore, did not openly discuss Beckmesser as an Outsider, but rather as a highly influential Insider whose main sin was that of artistic pedantry.

With regard to Beckmesser's singing, Nazi interpreters tended to explain his "difficulties" on the basis of increasing anger and confusion as his plans go awry. Describing the second act, a 1943 summary of the operas by Johannes Bertram—notorious for his nazified Wagnerism³⁰—averred that "as the hammer-blows of the shoemaker acting as *Merker* begin to sound in the summer night, Beckmesser sings ever louder and more breathlessly, trying to drown out the hammering; ultimately he completely loses his senses,

26. Ibid.

27. Miss., "Alljudas Kampf gegen Richard Wagner," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 29 December 1927.

28. Peter Raabe, "Wagners *Meistersinger* in unserer Zeit," in *Die Musik im dritten Reich: Kulturpolitische Reden und Aufsätze* (Regensburg: G. Bosse, 1935), 68–72, here 69.

29. Gustav Roell, "Neue Beiträge zu alten Problemen: 3. Die Prügelzene in den *Meistersingern von Nürnberg*: Eine Würdigung des Dramatikers Richard Wagner," *Bayreuther Blätter* 56 (1933): 141–43, here 142.

30. Mork, *Richard Wagner als politischer Schriftsteller*, 221–22.

and all control over himself and his song."³¹ No suggestion was made here, or in other Nazi-era explications, that Beckmesser's performances are representative of an inherent, "racially determined" incapacity to sing. The Riot Scene, moreover, was addressed as the point when "everything crazy, one-sided, cranky, and overdone is once again put into healthy order—driven with inexorable irony and, when necessary, kicks and punches."³² Violent imposition of *Ordnung*, yes: but not explicitly a strike against Jewishness. Rather, the "battle" was being waged against the supposed "objectification and desecration of music."³³

Even if such phrases might be interpreted as coded references to aesthetic tendencies perceived by Nazis as Jewish, the question arises as to whether there would have been reason in Hitler's Germany to use code for readings of *Die Meistersinger* as an anti-Semitic artwork anytime after January 31, 1933—let alone in 1943, as the Shoah raged. If they so perceived him, what restrained proto-Nazis, Nazis, and their fellow travelers from publicly identifying the opera's antagonist as a Jew? Obsessed with conspiracy theory, Wagner's immediate circle might have worried about Jewish responses to blatantly anti-Semitic stereotypes in his works. Wagnerians on the anti-Semitic right continued to complain that Jewish-led interests were out to harm Bayreuth throughout the Weimar era. But if Nazi cultural leaders considered Beckmesser a cipher for the "Jewish problem," why did they not popularize this view once their party ruled artistic and political life in Germany, when it would have so clearly served the propaganda aims of the Third Reich? Since National Socialist cultural politicians and their supporting "experts" sought every opportunity to link other aspects of Wagner's life and work with anti-Semitic ideology, could their failure to do so in the case of *Die Meistersinger* have been a simple omission? That they did so neither before nor after 1933 suggests that whatever their personal views about the opera might have been, Nazi leaders did not regard Beckmesser as a useful symbol for representing Jewry, its supposed treachery against the German *Volk*, and the need for its elimination.

Nonetheless, though Beckmesser was not featured in National Socialist culture, *Die Meistersinger* was. From the early stages of the movement, performances of the opera received special attention in the main Nazi newspapers. In August 1923, the *Völkischer Beobachter* complained that too many foreign visitors were taking advantage of low exchange rates for German currency and, by their attendance, marring productions of *Die*

31. Johannes Bertram, *Der Seher von Bayreuth: Deutung des Lebens und Werkes Richard Wagners* (Berlin: Buchmeister Verlag, 1943), 317.

32. *Ibid.*, 317.

33. Wilhelm Zentner, "Richard Wagner und die Volksbildung: Ansprache gehalten bei der 26. Hauptversammlung des Bayerischen Volksbildungsverband," *Zeitschrift für Musik* 100.7 (1933): 699–701, here 700.

Meistersinger at the Munich Festival. The paper even proposed that foreigners be forbidden entrance to the Munich theater during the festival. "No one, except perhaps hopelessly stupid Marxists, will deny that this is a matter of national interest" since "of all our rich possessions, practically nothing is left to us but our holy German art."³⁴ As their resources expanded, however, Nazis were able to arrange concerts by and for their own kind, and music from *Die Meistersinger* was prominent in the programs. A favorite high-cultural propaganda initiative of the Nazis during their *Kampfzeit* was a "Richard Wagner Morning Festival": sunrise performances highlighting *Am stillen Herd* and Walther's *Preislied*.³⁵ Moreover, the very first concert of the *NS Symphonieorchester* (also known as the *Orchester des Führers*) in January 1932 included the prelude to *Die Meistersinger* along with works of Carl Maria von Weber and Anton Bruckner.³⁶

Once in power, Nazis treated themselves to a *Meistersinger* binge. Their so-called seizure of power coincided, significantly, with the fiftieth anniversary of Wagner's death, and Hitler marked both events by attending a "Richard Wagner Celebration" in the Leipzig Gewandhaus just two weeks after assuming the office of Reich Chancellor. The program included the *Meistersinger* prelude, which the Mayor of Leipzig described in his commemorative address as a work that "represents this son of Leipzig in the finest light of his Germanness—a Germanness that is once again striving to become self-aware, and conscious of its strength."³⁷ Only a month later occurred the most notorious example of *Meistersinger* nazification. On 21 March 1933, ceremonies arranged for the Day of Potsdam culminated in a performance of *Die Meistersinger* at Berlin's Staatsoper. Having attended the torchlight parade along Unter den Linden, Hitler and the rest of his government arrived for the third act of the opera.³⁸ The *Völkischer Beobachter* reviewer, Hugo Rasch, covered the evening rhapsodically. In his eyes, this was a scene of "German worthiness," unforgettable for one like him, who "never lost his feeling for the German *Gemeinschaft*, even during the last few decades of confusion." German women "dressed taste-

34. St-g, "Wagners Blutbeimischung." This problem later took care of itself, to a degree: treating the Munich production of *Die Meistersinger* in 1932, the same reviewer remarked that fewer Americans were in the audience because of the bad economic conditions in the United States (J. St-g, "Beginn der Wagner- und Mozart-Festspiele in München: Auftakt: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 July 1932).

35. Advertisement, "Richard Wagner Morgenfeier," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 25 February 1932.

36. "Das nationalsozialistische Reichs-Symphonie-Orchester," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 March 1932.

37. "Richard-Wagner-Gedächtnisfeier in Anwesenheit des Reichskanzlers," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 14 February 1933.

38. "Der Festablauf am 21. März," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 March 1933.

fully—not decorated with jewels or erotic makeup”; men wore tuxedos or “dress brown uniforms.” The spirit of a “great community of fate, always present in even the least meeting of our storm troopers, lived just as much here,” despite social differences among the audience members. Gratitude rose from formerly heavy hearts toward their “savior,” who followed the opera “with that unique light in his eyes and his penetrating comprehension of the performance.” Whoever noticed how, during the third act, “the *Volk* of Nürnberg instinctively turned toward the Führer, sitting in the royal seats,” and then how “the eternally beautiful *Wach auf, es nahet gen den Tag* emerged from the choir to touch each and every heart,” sensed that the “moment of Germany’s transformation” had arrived. A worthier conclusion to the symbolic festivities of the day was “inconceivable” to this enthusiast.³⁹

Curt von Westernhagen was similarly overwhelmed by the Day of Potsdam experience, writing that this synthesis of politics and culture was symbolic of the “German essence which, at its best, combines will to action with deep reflection.” It was likewise indicative of Wagner’s contemporaneity, requiring that

we consider what the master had to say to the German *Volk* about issues that shake us to the core: about the notion of a German Revolution and the rebirth of myth; about the eternal significance of classical Greece and the universal artwork; about folk festivals and the genius as spokesman for the *Volk*; about religious revival out of the spirit of German myth and German mysticism; and about the heroic wise men of German history.⁴⁰

“Thus was the birthday of the Third Reich solemnly observed, in the spirit of Potsdam and Bayreuth’s Wagnerian tones,” editorialized the newly “synchronized” *Zeitschrift für Musik*.⁴¹ But the Day of Potsdam ritual was not the last time that *Die Meistersinger* would sound at the “altar of the nation” in the fateful year of 1933. With August came the first Bayreuth Festival in the Third Reich, and it likewise opened with a production of *Die Meistersinger* “in the presence of the Reich Chancellor.” Curbing a tradition initiated at the first postwar Bayreuth production in 1924, Hitler insisted that the audience not rise at the end of the opera to sing national or party anthems. On his command, each person who entered the Festspielhaus received a card reading, “The Führer requests that guests refrain from sing-

39. Hugo Rasch, “Die Festvorstellung in der Staatsoper,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 23 March 1933. See also Westernhagen, *Wagners Kampf*, 96.

40. Westernhagen, *Wagners Kampf*, 7.

41. Paul Bülow, “Adolf Hitler und der Bayreuther Geistesbezirk,” *Zeitschrift für Musik* 100.7 (1933): 677–80, here 677.

ing the *Deutschland-* or *Horst-Wessel-Lieder*, or making any similar demonstrations at the end of the performance. There is no more splendid expression of the German spirit than the immortal work of the master himself.”⁴² This directive earned Hitler respect among Nazi Wagnerians as a true aficionado: “When I sat,” wrote Paul Bülow, “in that memorable opening performance of *Die Meistersinger*, right in front of the seats for government officials, and saw the serious face of the Führer transfixed by the powerful third act, I knew that he had come not only as our leading politician, but as a plain and simple listener, ready—just like the rest of us—to give himself wholly over to the eternal magic of the music.”⁴³

But by exploiting Wagner’s opera it was not just privileged Bayreuth audiences that the new regime wanted to impress. That evening the performance was broadcast throughout Germany, and Joseph Goebbels took advantage of the occasion to make an extended radio address. Printed in full by both Alfred Rosenberg’s *Völkischer Beobachter*⁴⁴ and his own newspaper, *Der Angriff*,⁴⁵ the propaganda czar’s speech verified the prominence of *Die Meistersinger* in Nazi culture. “There is certainly no work in all the music literature of the German *Volk* that so closely relates to our times and our spiritual condition,” Goebbels opened. “How often in recent years,” he asked rhetorically, has the *Wach auf* chorus been heard by “faithful Germans” as a tangible symbol of the “reawakening of the German *Volk* out of the deep political and spiritual narcosis that it entered in November of 1918?” Towering over all Wagner’s other music dramas as “the most German of all,” *Die Meistersinger* is the “incarnation of our *Volkstum*,” representing “everything that marks and fills the German soul.”

Goebbels continued by extolling the pro-Wagner spirit of the new regime: “Richard Wagner’s heirs can today rest assured that the master and his work are safe and secure” in the care of a regime whose head personally visited “sites of Wagnerian creativity during the very first year of the German Revolution, paying humble homage to the greatest musical genius of all time.” He concluded this *Meistersinger* radio address with an extended reference to the opera’s finale as a manifesto of National Socialist cultural policy. “May the German people never lose this spirit of respect for the great men of the nation!” Only then would the new Reich “do justice” to the demand that Richard Wagner made via Hans Sachs in the close of “the most

42. H. H. Stuckenschmidt, “Bayreuther *Meistersinger*: Die Eröffnung der Festspiele,” *BZ am Mittag*, 22 July 1933.

43. Paul Bülow, “Der Führer und das Haus Wahnfried,” *Zeitschrift für Musik* (April 1939) 362–65, here 362.

44. “Richard Wagner und das Kunstempfinden unserer Zeit: Rundfunkrede von Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 8 August 1933.

45. “Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels huldigt Richard Wagner,” *Der Angriff*, 7 August 1933.

German of all German operas": "Therefore I say to you: honor your German masters! Then you will conjure up good spirits; even should the Holy Roman Empire dissolve in mist, for us there would yet remain holy German art!"

Though lengthy (included here are only his direct references to the opera), this transmission was not Goebbels' last word on *Die Meistersinger*, even during the first year of the government. On 15 November 1933, he presided over the opening of the *Reichskulturkammer*, the institution he designed to dominate cultural life in the Third Reich, and this event also included propagandistic use of *Die Meistersinger*. Immediately after Goebbels' inaugural speech, the *Völkischer Beobachter* reported, amid "stormy applause for the Reichsminister," sounded the *Wach auf!* chorus: "A hopeful awakening! Music for—as Dr. Goebbels so perfectly put it—marching into the shining future of German culture."⁴⁶ On top of this glut of *Meistersinger* performances associated with the new state in 1933, linkage between the opera and National Socialism was formalized two years later, when Hitler ordered that the opera be staged during each *Reichsparteitag* in Nürnberg. Nazi Wagnerians were ecstatic. By deeming this the "official" opera of the N.S.D.A.P. rallies, Richard Stock gushed, the "political genius, Adolf Hitler, has established in the city of *Die Meistersinger* an eternal monument to the artistic genius, Richard Wagner."⁴⁷

Through 1935, National Socialist statements about Wagner's Nürnberg opera mainly addressed its significance for the existing German nation. However, with the first stages of Hitler's march toward war, *Großdeutsch* aspects of Nazism gradually became more apparent in the discourse of *Meistersinger* reception. Within months of the *Anschluß*, the *Völkischer Beobachter* reviewed a production of the opera at the Salzburg Festival—Nazi luminaries, including Goebbels, in attendance—and therein hinted at a pan-Germanic reading of *Die Meistersinger*'s nationalistic implications. The *Völkischer Beobachter* interpreted performance of *Die Meistersinger* for the festival's opening as "a symbol, a program, and a promise in one": a symbol because "once sounded, these cheerful notes will henceforth influence how the Salzburger Festival will proceed"; a program because this was "a sublime expression" of what a "German music festival" must do, namely, provide a "communal experience" designed to "eliminate prejudices based on wealth, class, and education"; finally, a promise because "whoever just heard this 'honor your German masters!'" will "never forget" the promises made by this regime vis-à-vis pan-German cultural traditions.⁴⁸ Thus were confirmed fears from abroad about the future

46. "Die Reichs-Kultur-Kammer eröffnet: Der Führer bei der Feier in der Berliner Philharmonie," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 16 November 1933.

47. Stock, *Richard Wagner und die Stadt*, 7, 28.

48. Dr. Antropp, "Festlicher Auftakt in Salzburg: *Die Meistersinger* unter Furtwängler in Anwesenheit von Dr. Goebbels," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 25 July 1938.

Germanification of the "international" music festival in Mozart's birthplace.⁴⁹

Two years later, in November 1940, *Völkischer Beobachter* coverage of a *Meistersinger* performance in Strasbourg—the heart of newly reclaimed Alsace-Lorraine—proposed a revanchist reading of the opera. "The first *Meistersinger* production in liberated Alsace moved the heart as powerfully as the experience of a storm." In the present political atmosphere, the opera seemed to represent "recent events," especially when the singer playing Hans Sachs delivered the "powerful warning" contained in his closing address "with stirring emotional effect, while turning directly toward the Alsatian audience." This was a moment that "allowed everyone to relive in their deepest hearts what has taken place in the last few months, and a reminder that they have every right to celebrate in this hour." The concluding chorus seemed an expression of "unbounded joy in response to these developments"; Alsatian listeners took part in this finale "as if they were themselves the *Volk* of the *Festwiese*, giving thanks for all these feelings of happiness to a German master who has become a symbol of the richest and most worthy aspects of German existence."⁵⁰

Even after Germans began to experience the whirlwind reaped by such expansionist attitudes, *Die Meistersinger* remained at the center of wartime cultural life. Partly as a propaganda measure, and partly as a way of channeling funds into Hitler's beloved Bayreuth, the government "rewarded" armaments workers and wounded soldiers with trips to Wagner's Festspielhaus for entertainment and edification. To reduce costs, the 1943 festival—"enhanced" with participation of choruses from the Hitler Jugend, the Bund Deutscher Mädel, and the SS Standarte Wiking—was limited to a single Wagner opera: *Die Meistersinger*. "Thirty thousand front soldiers and armaments workers experienced sixteen performances of the *Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as guests of the Führer at the Fourth Wartime Festival in Bayreuth," wrote an enthusiastic Richard Stock. "To these brave front-fighters and their faithful comrades from the forges of German arms," he explained, no other work could have been more symbolic of the "profound goals" being furthered by their "heroic actions" than this "hymn to the honor of German masters." Hitler's invitations to the wartime festivals repaid a "debt of thanks that we owe to the best of the nation for risking their lives to protect the eternal treasure of German culture."⁵¹ The

49. Pierre-Jean Jouve, "In Memoriam Salzburg," *La Nouvelle Revue Française* 51.299 (1938): 177–86; J.-C. Boutroux, "Souvenirs de Salzburg," *Le monde musical* 49.5 (1938): 118–19.

50. Erwin Bauer, "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 18 November 1940.

51. Richard Wilhelm Stock, *Richard Wagner und seine Meistersinger: Eine Erinnerungsgabe zu den Bayreuther Kriegsfestspielen 1943* (Nürnberg: Verlag Karl Ulrich, 1943), 157.

Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte also extolled this terrible scene, complete with bandaged soldiers marching up Bayreuth's famous Green Hill, as a triumph of Nazi culture. "Even amid the hardest of military exertions," Erwin Völsung bragged in this Nazi journal, the German people "astonishes the rest of the world" by "pausing" to honor a genius who provided an "inexhaustible source of strength for overcoming the pain and suffering of our battle with fate." Greeted with great enthusiasm, *Die Meistersinger* seemed to Völsung a "particularly appropriate choice for fulfilling the special wartime mission of this festival."⁵² Equally fervent about the motivational value of the *Kriegsfestspiel*, Robert Ley, head of the German Labor Front (DAF) and its *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy) movement, proclaimed at a press conference that it "conspicuously demonstrates holy faith in our Fatherland and uncompromising will to defend the life of our Volk." Even in the fourth year of war, Ley continued, relying on the "indestructibility of its highest qualities and the protection of the German sword," the "most worthy representatives" of the German Volk had once again gathered at "one of the holiest of sites consecrated to German art" in order to pledge themselves to the "eternal values of its artistic genius," as called for by Hans Sachs: "Honor your German masters, then you will conjure up good spirits!"⁵³

Whatever divisions may have existed within the leadership of National Socialist cultural politics, the principals were consistent in their efforts to associate the words, music, storyline, and imagery of *Die Meistersinger* with what they perceived as the progressive tenets of the National Socialist world view. Besides Goebbels, his fierce competitor, Alfred Rosenberg, made regular references to the opera in his theoretical works and his journalism. In his best-known publication, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Rosenberg made an extended reference to Wagnerian characters, including Hans Sachs, as models for the "Nordic soul." The "essential message of all Western art," Rosenberg held, is manifested in Richard Wagner's: that the "nordic soul is not contemplative, that it does not lose itself in individual psychology, but willfully determines cosmic-soulful laws." This "ideal of inner beauty" is realized in Wotan, in King Mark, and in Hans Sachs. The "power of heroic will" (*des Heroisch-Willenhaften*) is the "secret medium which links together all of our thinkers, researchers, and artists: this is the substance of the greatest works of the Western world, from Graf Rüdiger to the *Eroica*, to *Faust*, to Hans Sachs; it is the force that forms everything."⁵⁴

52. Erwin Völsung, "Bayreuther Kriegsfestspiele 1943: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*," *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte* 14.157 (1943): 405-7, here 405.

53. Cited in *ibid.*, 405.

54. Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts: Eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (Munich: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1940), 433. Rosenberg was apparently referring to Ernst Rüdiger, Graf von

Coming from the self-proclaimed philosopher of the movement, these pseudo-intellectual concepts were often reproduced by Rosenberg's sycophantic underlings writing about *Die Meistersinger* for the *Völkischer Beobachter* and elsewhere.⁵⁵

Peter Raabe, who assumed the *Reichsmusikkammer* presidency after Richard Strauss vacated the position, likewise chimed in with an article on the significance of *Die Meistersinger* "in our times." Subsequently published in his collection, *Die Musik im dritten Reich*, this might be taken as one of the clearer efforts to establish an "official" line for Nazi reception of the opera. In Raabe's view, *Die Meistersinger* was not merely the "most German artwork of our operatic stage," but beyond this, the Nazi movement had "absorbed" this music drama as a "very special expression of itself," as an "affirmation of its principles, wishes, and demands." Each member of the party "finds himself and his plans confirmed" in *Die Meistersinger*. For them, it symbolizes the dawning of a new age: "the spirit of youth marching forward over decaying formalism; victory of progressives over those stuck in sterile old ways." In this struggle, Wagner's *Meistersinger* constituted a "battle cry" that emboldened those "taking the field against stagnation and prejudice." At the same time, however, it was a Hymn of Reverence for achievements realized long before. In Raabe's view, the modern era "lacks reverence" to a shocking degree: "greenhorns" who haven't yet achieved a thing "deny the value of previous German accomplishments," even though these earned for the country a worldwide reputation as the "land of thinkers and poets." People must be "forced to comply with the dictum, 'Do not scorn the masters.'"⁵⁶

Though much of their reception took the form of references to *Die Meistersinger* as a general indicator of broad concepts they intended to impose on Germany, Nazi *Kulturpolitiker* stressed some particular themes as most resonant with their ideology. Volkish ideologues were deeply attracted to the image of Nürnberg they perceived in Wagner's work. Although Leni Riefenstahl did not use music from *Die Meistersinger* to accompany her opening shots of the city, they were inextricably associated in

Starhemberg, 1638-1701, an Austrian field marshal who served against the Ottomans in Hungary and was made military commander of Vienna in 1680. He defended Vienna with a small garrison against a large Ottoman army in the summer of 1683 (*The Columbia Encyclopedia*, [New York: Columbia University Press, 1995]).

55. For example, Bertram, *Seher von Bayreuth*, 327; Bülow, "Adolf Hitler und der Bayreuther Geistesbezirk"; and "Das grosse Hassen: Marxistische Hetze zum Wagner-Jahr," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 1 February 1933. Note also that while Rosenberg treated Sachs as a model "nordic" type, he made no mention of Beckmesser.

56. Raabe, "Wagners *Meistersinger*," 71-72.

National Socialist reception. Thoughts of *Die Meistersinger* generally triggered two related but separate concepts of Nürnberg. Foremost were notions of the *Altstadt* as a symbol of unified German culture reaching back to the Reformation. Encompassing the creative spirit of Dürer, Sachs, and Wagner alike, the medieval outline of the city served in the National Socialist imagination as a bastion of “stable German art.”⁵⁷ Particularly the image of the *Festwiese*, as Wagner represented it in the opera’s final scene, provided Nazi propagandists with a symbol of timeless cultural stability extending from the Middle Ages. “As we can see in the history of medieval Nürnberg,” wrote Richard Stock, “the Hallerwiese was long a symbol of German unity and amity.” In the fifteenth century, it was an important meeting place for German princes and clans; thereafter, the Hallerwiese was commonly referred to as the “Allerwiese” (the meadow for all), which “best proves its volkishness.” But it was in *Die Meistersinger*, that “Richard Wagner afforded this site its eternal significance.”⁵⁸

As Kurt Hoffmann, a self-described “apprentice musician,” avowed in pages of the *Bayreuther Blätter* (using the third-person voice), Nazi Wagnerians made pilgrimages to the “City of *Die Meistersinger*” to wander its streets with sounds and images from Wagner’s opera resonating in their thoughts. “In the heart of the wanderer, the nighttime city—with silhouettes of its buildings and towers gleaming in moonlight, with its secret nooks and crannies, fairy-tale wells, and dark gates—became a veritable reincarnation of the music by Wagner he had experienced the previous day.” In the otherwise quiet little alley of Hans Sachs, this volkish fantasy continued, “did there not suddenly appear right in front of his quaint old shoe shop—in a fantastic, visionary way—a riotous bustle of people swearing, screaming, and punching at each other: an uproarious *Johannisnacht* tumult that seemed almost real?” The next morning, he received an even more powerful vision. Beneath the pitched roofs and towers “raged the ‘Überall Wahn’ of the bustling citizenry,” but up above, as if emerging from the rays of the sun, he perceived an image of the mastersingers parading with their ancient guild flags “in honor of the most genuine representatives of the creative German *Volk*.” Hans Sachs also came forth, and at that very moment the “magnificent *Meistersinger* theme resounded in the spirit of the enchanted dreamer, as if played by a thousand-member orchestra—while a powerful choir entered with its unforgettable injunction: Honor your German masters! Then you will conjure up good spirits!” Thoughts intertwining Reformation-era Nürnberg and *Die Meistersinger* coordinated perfectly with the antimodernist strain of the National Socialist outlook. Even amid the “desert of degenerate postwar culture,” *Die Meistersinger*

57. Emma von Sichard, “Feste deutscher Kunst,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 22 May 1930.

58. Stock, *Richard Wagner und die Stadt*, 163.

triggered in this “seeker” thoughts of “the most enriching German essence,” contemplation of which spared him from spiritual ruin until the “strengthened Germanness” of the new era finally “broke through to liberate his thoughts and actions.”⁵⁹

But it was not the *Altstadt* alone that fascinated and inspired fanatics, for the “City of *Die Meistersinger*” was no longer just an “important old” but “once again a new epicenter of our German cultural will.”⁶⁰ Hitler and his followers had ostensibly saved the city from “Jewish-democratic spirit,” first by “forever” linking Nürnberg and Wagner’s opera with the annual Nazi *Parteitage*, and then via even more troubling measures. Richard Stock found it a satisfying coincidence that Wagner, the great “anti-Semite” so “viciously attacked by Jews and their collaborators,” was so honored in Nürnberg, the “very city from which Julius Streicher launched his war against worldwide Jewry,” and where, during the *Reichsparteitag* of 1935, “our Führer proclaimed the Laws for the Protection of German Blood—the Nürnberg Laws.”⁶¹ It was on the basis of this wide range of associations, drawing together Wagner, Hitler, Streicher, and the Nürnberg Laws, that *Die Meistersinger* was ultimately linked to the darkest aspects of Nazi policy.

Nevertheless, the main political connotations that National Socialist reception drew from the opera had to do with social relations within the volkish *Gemeinschaft*, not treatment of those whom Nazis considered outsiders. Fundamental to Nazi interpretations of *Die Meistersinger* was the active role played in it by the German *Volk*, particularly in the last scene. As a contemporary critic put it, it was the “extraordinary volkishness” perceived in the work that made it the “official opera of the jubilee year 1933”⁶² and—as others have subsequently said—into the operatic “anthem” of the Third Reich as a whole. But while exalting Wagner’s representation of the *Volksggeist*, Nazis had to be careful not to slip into democratic terms of reception. Concentrating on volkish and National Socialist implementation of Wagner, it is easy to forget that parallel traditions associating him with democratic and socialist politics did exist within European culture.⁶³ Until 1933, at any rate, Nazi Wagnerians had to compete with interpretations of *Die Meistersinger* forwarded by German republicans and leftists who, as a contemporary observed, proclaimed *Die Meistersinger* a “democratic pageant.” In the opinion of National Socialism’s opposition,

59. Kurt Hoffmann, “Meistersinger-Erlebnis: Ein Bayreuther Stimmungsbild,” *Bayreuther Blätter* 60 (1937): 151–52.

60. Stock, *Richard Wagner und die Stadt*, 9.

61. *Ibid.*, 9.

62. Stuckenschmidt, “Bayreuther Meistersinger.”

63. David Large and William Weber, eds., *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984).

"nowhere in all theatrical art is the sovereignty of the German people so beautifully affirmed as in this ringing celebration of democracy." From perspectives to the left of the N.S.D.A.P., even if Wagner's political acumen "became undone during his middle age," the "black-red-and-gold principles of 1848, for which he had sacrificed so much, remain triumphant in the ingenious *Meistersinger*."⁶⁴

To offset these competing claims, *Reichsmusikkammer* President Raabe sharply distinguished Nazi opinions of the *Volk* represented in Wagner's opera from the *demos* construed by the Left. "The *Festwiese* scene is particularly misunderstood," he held, since it is often perceived as an endorsement for the (in his opinion) "unfortunate notion that at such festive events, persons of every class, every professional rank, and every level of education should interact with each other in brotherly fashion," just as when strangers mingle during *Karneval*. "In jest," Raabe continued, such things are occasionally possible and somewhat entertaining; but they will always have something "forced and unnatural about them." When they see the "joyous cavorting" in the *Festwiese* scene of the *Meistersinger*, some think that Wagner offered a "model for general fraternization of this sort." But this view is unfounded: did Wagner not quite clearly mandate that the scene represents "no more and no less than a festival celebrated by burghers?" One should not overlook, Raabe insisted, that "Wagner depicts neither farmers, nor soldiers, neither the mayor, nor councilmen mixing with the *Volk*." Throughout *Die Meistersinger*, Wagner "sang a rapturous 'hallelujah' to the burgher—or rather, to the *modest* lower middle class (as separate from Philistines)." Therefore, the composer "would have had a fit if he learned that today the word 'burgher' is often treated with the disrespect that the Socialists heap on the word 'bourgeois,' thereby ingratiating themselves with the proletariat they coddle so much." In the end, Wagner was no egalitarian; he "championed the honor of German burghers and considered that class strong enough to stand up for itself."⁶⁵

However defined, Wagner's representation of the *Volk* was fundamental to Nazi reception of *Die Meistersinger*, but uppermost in their considerations of the opera was Hans Sachs's relationship with it—as a leader who emerged from the people to herald a German future grounded in a stable past. "It is the *Volksggeist* itself," insisted Johannes Bertram, that reveals itself in the "monumental *Gestalt* of Hans Sachs." Opposing the "sterile artistic tradition" personified in Beckmesser—whose "inflexible rules atrophy the pulse of the soul"—the cobbler "places himself immediately on

64. Bernhard Diebold, "Der Fall Wagner: Eine Revision," in *Richard Wagner: Ein deutsches Thema: Eine Dokumentation zur Wirkungsgeschichte Richard Wagners 1876–1976*, ed. Hartmut Zelinsky (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1976), 190–92.

65. Raabe, "Wagners *Meistersinger*," 69–71.

the side of Eva, that of naive *Volk* spirit." In the voice of her "virginal soul" he senses "the will of the *Volk*," and therefore demands: "Let the *Volk* judge; it will surely agree with the child."⁶⁶ Benno von Arent, Reich Theatrical Designer who staged performances at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin,⁶⁷ underscored the "popular" origins of Sachs in explications of his designs. "Today we no longer consider it an incidental fact, and certainly not a deficiency, that this poet Hans Sachs was a shoemaker." "To the contrary," wrote Arent, "we admire him and his poetry all the more" because of his craftsman status. For this reason Arent placed tools "clearly in the foreground" of the workroom in his productions, as signs of Sachs's "dual mastery," conveying the sentiment: "Honor the work; respect the worker!"⁶⁸ But Nazi perceptions of Sachs did not identify him merely as a man of the people, but as a man of the people fated to lead it. "From the very start of the opera," opined Johannes Bertram, Hans Sachs is the "leading force at the center of the proceedings—or better, *over* the proceedings," which he "steers skillfully" by virtue of his "deep comprehension of seemingly superficial events." Indeed, the shoemaker acts as the "transcendent director of the whole drama."⁶⁹ Parallels between Nazi assessments of Sachs and the *Führer-Prinzip* that underlay both ideology and bureaucracy of the Third Reich should not be overstated, but are undeniable. The volkish genius embodied in Sachs "is comparable to the focus of a lens," reads the *Official Bayreuth Festival Guide* for 1927. At that point, or in that person:

a thousand individual rays are gathered and then radiated back into life—with unimaginable strength. There is no other way to grasp the achievements of Bismarck, or the works of Wagner. The genius can reveal himself to the world as both proud and modest: "I am not the small 'I' of this single person with my incidental name; I am the *Volk*. I am the will, energy, unity, belief, love, hope, present, and future of my people." This individual is no dictator, but one willed [*Gewollter*]; no despot, but a force of nature. He is both the messiah [*Berufene*] and the elected one [*Auserwählte*].⁷⁰

Anticipating the longed-for genius-leader, Hans Sachs's words preoccupied Nazi interpreters. Mediating, it seemed, between Richard Wagner and Adolf Hitler, Sachs's warnings and directives were studied for every modicum of contemporary relevance. Placing themselves in the shoes of Walther

66. Bertram, *Seher von Bayreuth*, 312.

67. Spotts, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*, 185–86.

68. Cited in Stock, *Richard Wagner und die Stadt*, 26.

69. Bertram, *Seher von Bayreuth*, 312.

70. Walter Lange, "Richard Wagner Verkünder deutschen Niederganges und Aufstieges," in *Offizieller Bayreuther Festspielführer*, ed. Karl Grunsky (Bayreuth: Verlag der Hofbuchhandlung Georg Niehrenheim, 1927).

von Stolzing, eager to learn from "the master," Nazi cultural-politicians derived from Sachs's teachings material that was vital to a volkish onslaught against modernist tendencies in German art. "Hans Sachs instructs the young master" and by association, the nation as a whole, that "while the spirit of his song must be derived from the heart of the Volk, its form must grow out of the experience of long-standing mastery." It is to communicate this tenet that *Die Meistersinger* ends with Hans Sachs's admonition, repeated by all who are present, "with raised hands acknowledging Sachs as the leading spirit of the Volk, the avowed representative of German art: 'Honor your German masters! Then you will conjure up good spirits; even should the Holy Roman Empire dissolve in mist, for us there would yet remain holy German art!'"

Sachs's *Schlusswörter* were fundamental to National Socialist interpretations of *Die Meistersinger*: repeated in virtually every analysis of the opera, and many other contexts besides, they became a mantra of Nazi cultural politicians. Primary use of the slogan was directed, naturally, against cultural modernism: "Besides Wagner's charge: 'Children, build anew!' [*Kinder, schafft Neues!*] let us not forget his reminder: 'Honor your German masters.' We are mindful of the still unredeemed artistic revolutionaries of the past."⁷¹ But Nazi propagandists also identified and highlighted broader implications in the finale: "When, in his closing speech, Hans Sachs exalts German style and German art, calling for battle against the enemy both within and without, against Latin [*welschen*] smoke and Latin mirrors, it goes straight to the heart of every German."⁷²

This example brings us full circle: it is undeniable that, as here, a significant strain of Nazi *Meistersinger* interpretations invoked the finale of Wagner's opera as a summons to "battle." However, even very close attention to reception records does not clarify precisely at whom they perceived Sachs to have taken aim: "modernists," "enemies within and without," "Latins," "Philistines," or Jews? Explicitly targeted are the former; only implicitly—and never directly mentioned—are the latter. The main thrust of National Socialist politicization of *Die Meistersinger* was not to motivate action against enemies, but to inspire praise for traditional cultural heroes, however defined. For confirmation let us turn to Hitler himself. In February 1933, on the fiftieth anniversary of Wagner's death and just days after assuming the position of Reich Chancellor, Hitler promised to erect a monument to "the master" in Leipzig, the city of Wagner's birth. Conforming to notions about German nationalist "sacred sites,"⁷³ plans called

71. Westernhagen, *Wagners Kampf*, 26.

72. Max von Millenkovich-Morold, "Richard Wagner in unserer Zeit," *Zeitschrift für Musik* (May 1938): 469–73; here 470.

73. George L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (New York: H. Fertig, 1975), 47–72.

for a memorial amid a grove of oaks. The altar (*Gedenkblock*) would be fashioned of a piece of marble ten square meters around and five meters high, with relief carvings communicating the "fundamental motifs" ascribed to Wagnerian creativity: "Myth, Fate, Love, and Redemption." On 6 March 1934, Hitler dedicated the foundation stone for this never completed monument:

Today's German generation [. . .] draws from the eternal forces of our Volk because it strives to emulate its best spirits. Thus has it found its way to this city already in the second year of national revival, in order—through me as Chancellor of the Reich—to place the deepest thanks of the nation at the feet of [Leipzig's] great son. As a testament of solemn promises to live up to the wish and will of the master, to continue maintaining his everlasting works in ever-lively beauty, and to draw coming generations of our Volk into the miracle world of this mighty tone poet, I lay the cornerstone of this national monument to Richard Wagner.⁷⁴

Given that Hitler was transparently invoking, even imitating Hans Sachs on this occasion for saluting his deepest personal hero, it should come as no surprise that on the keystone he dedicated that day—explicitly for the Wagner monument, but implicitly for National Socialist culture as a whole—were carved the words: *Ehrt eure deutschen Meister!*

Whether or not Hitler also conceived Auschwitz as a tribute to his master is a question that remains open. Debate on this issue rages, since opinions range from angry certainty that Wagner begot Hitler to staunch disbelief in Wagner's moral responsibility for the crimes of his fans. This inquiry does not judge whether German anti-Semites might have wielded features of *Die Meistersinger*—particularly the character of Sixtus Beckmesser—as ideological weapons against the Jewish people; it only attempts to determine if there is proof that they did so. The public record of volkish and Nazi cultural politics indicates that this opera was primarily utilized as an icon of cultural conservatism, rather than as propaganda for fomenting racist hatred. Focusing on Hans Sachs, Nazis highlighted principles of discipline and tradition, largely overlooking the character who could combine these strictures with free expression to produce "art of the future": Walther von Stolzing. It was partly by de-emphasizing Walther—or rather, his symbolic role in the aesthetics of the future—that Nazis minimized Wagner's modernist tendencies and reputation, and consequently undermined formulation of a "progressive" National Socialist culture to which they paid little more than lip service.

74. "Der Führer legt den Grundstein zum Nationaldenkmal Richard Wagners," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7 March 1934.