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Review Essay on Recent Literature about Music and German Politics

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Review Essay about Literature on German Music and Politics

German Studies Review

Paul Lawrence Rose. Wagner: Race and Revolution. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992. Pp. x, 246. Cloth \$25.00

Marc A. Weiner. Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination. Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Pp. vii, 439. Paper \$40.00

Frederic Spotts. Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994. Pp. x, 334. Cloth \$35.00

Michael Meyer. The Politics of Music in the Third Reich. New York: Peter Lang, 1991. Pp. xvi, 420. Cloth \$76.50

Erik Levi. Music in the Third Reich. New York: St. Martin's, 1994. Pp. xiv, 303. Cloth \$39.95

Scholars have recently been trying to bridge what they perceived to be gaps between the history of music and other areas of human endeavor. Owing to the abstract nature of music, most had hitherto shunned the challenge of identifying its place in social and political contexts; even links between music and the personal experiences of its creators were posited tentatively. In the main, music historians, music theorists, and musicologists insisted that scores be restricted to formal analysis with little or no regard to external associations. Academically entrenched by the late nineteenth, this formalist approach to music anticipated the structuralist codification of literary criticism by the middle of our century. Gradually the force of "pure" textual analysis caused dismay in the field of intellectual history, undermining the naive faith supposedly held by its practitioners that context and text inform each other freely.

This process seemed to secure the priority of formalism that held sway in music studies. However, the ironic result of the post-structuralist "crisis" in intellectual history was that it motivated scholars to overcome, or evade, the text/context gap -- if only to defend their areas of study from reproach as being obsolete! Consequently, alternative means of relating a work of art to society, or rather, of determining the social meanings of artworks, were posited more carefully.

Central to these revised methods is the notion that multiple steps occur in the life of a work of art, all of which influence any social significances it might obtain. First to consider is the phase of production, including the background of the artist, that person's intentions for the work, the conditions of creation, and the procedures of composition. Then stands the completed piece itself, subject to close scrutiny of its structural and emotive properties. Finally evolves the course of reception, whereby data about the production of the work and its inherent characteristics are received, combined, interpreted, and relayed by audience members.

Taken together, the books here under consideration represent increased recognition of the social meaning of an artwork in its various stages and the impact this has had on writing both intellectual and music history. The first two books on Wagner, by Paul Lawrence Rose and Marc A. Weiner, concentrate on the production side of the music/context issue. Both work strenuously to prove that information we have about the composer and the circumstances of creation are crucial to determining the correct meanings of Wagner's operas. The third Wagner-related book, Frederic Spotts' history of the Bayreuth Festival, and two surveys of music policy in the Third Reich, by Michael Meyer and Erik Levi, study music reception to show -- among other things -- how compositions gain political significance after leaving the desks, or piano stands, of their creators. It is important to note at the outset that despite some claims to the contrary, these books do not center on relating tones, passages, and structures of music to contextual issues, but instead emphasize the other phases of a composition's evolution.

Frustrated by what both consider a conspiracy to promote a "new" Wagner after the Second World War, cleansed of any indications that he intended to communicate antisemitism via his operas, Rose and Weiner have scrutinized the composer's personality and the conditions of his creativity to prove that he did include messages of hatred toward Jews in his works. In Rose's opinion it is essential that the social-revolutionary imagery many Wagnerians have spotlighted in the operas since 1945 was originally conceived with strong Germanic and antisemitic features. To prove this Rose delves into the essays Wagner wrote sometimes simultaneously with his music, and compares their language to the discourse of Jew-baiting, volkish revolutionism purveyed by the composer's contemporaries, including associates and friends. In doing so, Rose argues vehemently that we must give the personal and ideological circumstances of composition priority in fixing the meaning of Wagner's operas, even if the works themselves do not provide unmistakable signs of their ideological content.

Picking up where Rose left off, Weiner has drawn somewhat tighter connections between the antisemitic discourse of Wagner's essays and the operas themselves. To do so, Weiner analyzes the libretti of the Ring cycle to demonstrate that their character depictions contain allusions common to racist stereotyping in nineteenth-century German culture. By comparing Wagner's representations to ideological motifs that surrounded their production, Weiner wants to show that references to vision, voice, smell, gait, and sexual behavior are subtle but sure evidence that the composer intended his operas to express fears about the influence of Jews in German society, and hopes for "purifying" it.

In elucidating the iconography of Wagner's dramas, Weiner moves closer to showing that the works themselves communicate the meanings he and Rose perceive. But his argument stops short of proving that Wagner's music relates ideology incontrovertibly. Although this book does demonstrate how some passages may convey antisemitic corporal caricature, the bulk of its argument rests on interpreting libretti, a technique not applicable to instrumental music. Weiner wisely qualifies his argument by averring that while the antisemitic signs he discerns are not readily identifiable by modern listeners, they would have been understood by Wagner's contemporaries who had a different "horizon of expectations" than ours.

That Weiner must flourish this phrase forged in reception theory is not a sign of failure on his part. A valiant try to prove that the circumstances and terms in which Wagner conceived the operas brand them as antisemitic, the most effective aspect of Weiner's book is its contribution to the history of their interpretation. We may never be sure what Wagner intended each feature of his dramas to mean, but we can be quite certain what listeners have taken them to signify. While Weiner (and in many ways, Rose too) shows us how Wagner's immediate contemporaries may have apprehended the operas, Spotts follows the process further by tracing the performance practices and analyses developed in the Bayreuth circle through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Spotts details comprehensively the story of the Bayreuth Festival from Wagner's search for a site far from the madding herd, through Hitler's patronage, to Wieland Wagner's construction of a "new Bayreuth" after 1945. Methodologically, the most important facet of this book is its coverage of the reception given Wagner by his most fervent admirers. In this sense, Spotts' work marks the pros and cons of reception histories. His attention to formulations by Bayreuth Wagnerians from Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Hans von Wolzogen through Hitler's flunkies to the unrepentant Society of Friends of Bayreuth shows irrefutably how important they were in driving their master and his works into the ideological symbolism of Germany's furthest right wing. Particularly impressive is Spotts' reading of newspaper articles about Wagner, for it is via the wider press that meanings about music were planted in the modern public mind.

But Spotts errs on the reception side of the text/context issue. As we know from his and the two books on music in the Third Reich, Wagner along with almost all the "German masters" was made an icon of Nazi culture. In Meyer's survey, largely derived from German literature on the subject, and Levi's fresher overview, we learn the ultimate ends to which the reception process can reach: politicization of all music life directed at enforcing official interpretations by totalitarian means. As they describe these extremes, nevertheless, both Meyer and Levi are careful to acknowledge the extent to which German musicians, at least since the "Wars of Liberation," lent themselves to, or even collaborated with the nationalization of their art. These scholars recognize that the process of politicization -- even in the audacious case of National Socialist Musikpolitik -- is rarely a one-way procedure of projection, but rather a complicated one in which ideologues selectively scavenge music history for signs that great composers would share their world view. Although anachronistically, Nazis were able to find what they were looking for in most of the biographies of the German masters, including those of Beethoven and Schumann, and especially that of Wagner.

It is the two-way nature of this process that Spotts hesitates to admit: though he seems to know better, he consistently places the blame for Wagner's nazification at the feet of the Bayreuth interpreters, thereby simplifying the story. Yet the same can be said about Rose and Weiner, since they insist that the meanings of Wagner's operas were determined permanently by the conditions of their production. Considered from outside the furor, both views contain elements of truth: Wagner was nazified due to his own faults and due to the efforts of his fanatics. By combining both sides of this debate with close analysis of the works themselves, we may come close to achieving a Gesamtgeschichte of Wagner's works and all their diverse meanings. It is probably in this collaborative way -- even if impelled by passionate disagreements -- that we will find the means to close the music/context gap. Through the common effort of all, each gains the data necessary to decide how to listen to Wagner's music. This is important, for truths as well as beauties may ever lie in the eyes and ears of the beholders.

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