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“Music in the ‘Cult of Art’ of Nazi Germany” for the “Epistemic Transitions and Social Change in the German Humanities: Aesthetics, Ideology, Culture and Memory” session

David B. Dennis
Loyola University Chicago, dennis@luc.edu

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Music in the “Cult of Art” of Nazi Germany

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David B. Dennis
Professor of History
Loyola University Chicago

In his book on aesthetics and Nazi politics, translated as *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, Eric Michaud wrote that the National Socialist attention to the arts was intended “to present the broken Volk with an image of its ‘eternal *Geist*’ and to hold up to it a mirror capable of restoring to it the strength to love itself.”¹

In preparing the conceptual framework for my own book, just released by Cambridge University Press, I came upon this, among other ideas of Michaud, who is Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, somewhat late in the game. His book was originally published by Gallimard in 1996, and then translated into English in 2004. Considering it last year, I found a number of his concepts very intriguing, but was only able to make general references to them in my Introduction and Conclusion. Many of these ideas will be familiar to readers of George L. Mosse, whom Michaud should have cited more vigorously. However, I found that Michaud put some of the key concepts of the History of Nazi Culture more strongly than I have read elsewhere, and also that they seemed to resonate with much of the material I uncovered in my research.

Above all, Michaud insisted that Nazi cultural politics was not just a matter of “propagandizing” the party platform in cultural terms. Instead, he insisted that it was a central component of the National Socialist world view, with an active, not merely reflective, role in the life and actions of the Nazi party and regime. As Michaud put it, we cannot “account for this phenomenon by simply resorting to the term propaganda” and just assuming that Nazism was just “making art serve its political ends.”² To see what Mosse termed “Nazi culture” as mere propaganda is an underestimation of its seminal function in the history of National Socialism. In Michaud’s words, again, through Nazi interpretations and presentations of cultural history—what is generally meant by the German term “*Kultur*,” which very roughly translates into what we call the “Humanities” – “the *Geist*, the internal or spiritual Reich, was phenomenalized. . . Hitler was convinced that German art contained the power that. . . could save the sick

¹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 35-36.

²Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 35.

Germans. In answer to party militants who queried the need to ‘sacrifice so much to art,’ . . . he retorted confidently that what had to be achieved was no less than the ‘strengthening of the protective moral armor of the nation.’”³

Thus did references to the History of Western Humanities—as constructed according to a fairly longstanding “Germanic” point of view—have an formative function in the Nazi program. Through them, the Volk would “fabricate its own ideal image . . . that would constitute the model and guide capable of propelling [it] toward its own salvation. Neither the state, said Hitler, nor propaganda, said Goebbels, were goals: they were . . . means [to a broader end]. [Nor] was art ever a goal in itself. The ultimate goal was not [even] the production of the Reich as a work of art, but the formation of a people composed of new men.”⁴ Cultural history, then—perceived in these politicized terms—was a literal remedy for the symptoms of decline that Nazis feared.

Having set forth these ideas, along with many others, Michaud’s book was generally well received. But it was criticized somewhat for a lack of grounding in primary source research: For instance, James van Dyke wrote in the *Journal of Modern History* that “this is an intriguing book that will undoubtedly fascinate many who are interested in theories about images and their potential power. But readers who want historical accounts of the roles of art and artists in the legitimation and implementation of National Socialist policies. . . have to look elsewhere.”⁵ Similarly, Benjamin Martin wrote for *H-Soz-u-Kult* that “Michaud’s contribution to this project is likely not to satisfy many historians. . . For instance, his effort to contextualize Nazi ideas, while erudite and stimulating, remains somewhat impressionistic.”⁶

While I found his examples to be fresh and well-chosen, I will not quibble with these assessments of the extent to which Michaud grounded his observations in primary source research. Instead, I would like to take this opportunity to compare some of his basic points with the detailed information my book has revealed about Nazi cultural politics as manifested in the arts and literature coverage of the main Nazi newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*. Thus, this presentation constitutes a sort of synthesis of his analysis and some of the material that appears in my book.

Let me begin by providing a quick overview of *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture*. My new book analyzes how the primary propaganda outlet of the Nazi party presented the History of Western art, literature, music, and thought according to the National Socialist “world view.” It is an analysis of every major article the *Völkischer Beobachter* published about the leading artists, composers, writers and their works, including Germans like Luther, Dürer, Mozart, Schiller, Goethe, Beethoven, Schopenhauer, Wagner, and Nietzsche,

³Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 35-36.

⁴Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 140.

⁵[James van Dyke, “Review of *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*,” *Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 2 (2006): 526]

⁶[Benjamin G. Martin, “Sammelrez: Art in Nazi Germany,” *H-Soz-u-Kult* (August, 2006).]

non-Germans such as Socrates, Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Byron, Rimbaud, Picasso and Stravinsky, and minor figures they preferred over “enemies” such as Heinrich Heine and Thomas Mann. Based on this research, it demonstrates how Nazi Germany attempted to appropriate not only the “Other Germany” of “Poets and Thinkers,” but History of Western Humanities as a whole. Nazi leaders viewed their movement as the culmination of “Western Civilization,” and this book leads readers through their cultural self-justification.

As this “blurb” indicates, moving from my early work on music reception, in *Inhumanities* I have traced Nazi interpretations of literature, the visual arts, philosophy, and other genres as well. But for the purposes of this paper, I will again concentrate on examples drawn from the paper’s invocations of the classical music tradition, while recognizing that a similar “test” of Michaud’s views could be undertaken with any of the material in the book. This focus on Nazi *Musikpolitik* in particular remains fully legitimate, because music reception was absolutely central to the History of *Kultur* as promulgated in the Nazi newspaper. I will let a some statistics from my findings stand as verification of the centrality of music reception in Nazi culture. First, of the 1600 articles I gathered and studied, more than 1000 were dedicated to the subject of music and its composers. Secondly: overall, an average of 40 articles per year were devoted to “classical” music issues, while only an average of about 14 each year dealt with the “masters” of the other arts altogether. Therefore, it is statistically as well as conceptually clear that the German music tradition was the cultural legacy that the Nazi cultural operatives most wanted to claim as “theirs.” Throughout the pages of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, music was unquestionably deemed, as Pamela Potter—along with others—has demonstrated, “The Most German of Arts.”

With all this said, let me now outline a few of Michaud’s more specific points about Nazi culture before then turning to an assessment of how material from the *Völkischer Beobachter* treatment of music serves to validate his positions. As we have already seen, a primary point that Michaud made was that Nazi cultural politics evolved in ways that served to increase German self-confidence through an idealized self-image based on interpretations of the supposed German place in Western cultural traditions. Or, in his words, “To make the genius of the race visible to that race [and thereby] restore its faith in itself by making it conscious of its historic mission.”⁷

A second major concept Michaud posited was that of the “Führer as Artist.” Michaud identified Hitler’s public persona as a culmination of the Romantic exaltation of the artist as spiritual leader. In his words: “Hitler presented himself not only as a ‘man of the people’ and a soldier with frontline experience, but also and above all as a man whose artistic experience constituted the best guarantee of his ability to mediate the *Volksgeist* and turn it in to the ‘perfect Third Reich.’”⁸

⁷Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 74.

⁸Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 29.

Clearly also, Michaud contended, the construction of the Ideal simultaneously constituted the construction of the Other, with all that this opposition implied. Again, in his words: “The appearance of Hitler always entailed, as its corollary, the progressive disappearance of all enemies who were rejected by the Volk Community.”⁹

Returning to the supposedly positive implications of these cultural-political constructs, Michaud then contended that insistence by Nazi ideologues that followers remember past creative leaders was much more about the present and future of the **German-becoming-“Nazi” nation**, than the past. As Michaud wrote, “The task of each work of art [or interpretation of an existing part of art history] was not [just] to represent, but. . . to prepare for the realization of the ideal Reich.”¹⁰ . . .

Finally, as the last chapter of my book traces, the culmination of Nazi cultural evolution was, with catastrophic consequences, war. Michaud too identified the ultimate implications of the Nazi mobilization of culture for party/national purposes: “When it became a matter of ‘defending the . . . community,’ Goebbels stressed the identity of the struggle of the soldier, that of the worker, and that of ‘the creator of culture’: ‘Art’ he pontificated, ‘is not a distraction for times of peace; rather, it too is a spiritual and trenchant weapon for war.’”¹¹

Again, I do not feel that Michaud presented these points without sufficient evidence. However, I think it will be a useful exercise to assess these points with reference to some of the materials that I have just presented in *Inhumanities*. In order to make this manageable, I have elected to concentrate mainly on material—with just a few exceptions—from *Völkischer Beobachter* reception of Mozart, Beethoven, and Wagner, as representative of its music reception as a whole.

Regarding the first of these themes, and indeed Michaud’s pivotal point—that Nazi cultural politics had the intention of increasing German self-confidence by constructing idealized self-image based on interpretations of the German place in Western cultural traditions—, considering the material in my book, it is clear that this truly was the message of virtually every *Völkischer Beobachter* article covered there. All of the paper’s cultural-historical commemorations contributed to this effort to bolster faith in the creative Volk community. This was indeed their main function.

And this is powerfully evident in the newspaper’s relentless insistence on, and never-ending celebration of, the perceived notion that all the great composers of the Western music tradition were “German”—or alternatively, “Germanic,” “Aryan,” or “Nordic.” For instance, for the editors of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, an immediate concern regarding the case of Mozart was to evaluate his “blood heritage.” In this vein, the paper argued that the main factors behind Mozart’s

⁹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 41.

¹⁰Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 98.

¹¹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 197.

creativity were “determined by blood.” Mozart’s father was born of a marriage between a grandfather from Augsburg and a grandmother from Baden, the paper emphasized: and this “blood mixture” led to a “uniquely harmonious balance” in Mozart himself, which determined the symmetrical nature of his creativity¹²

Nazi critics were naturally united in the opinion that Mozart was a “German-Germanic” composer. They did, however, consider it necessary to defend this point, owing to Mozart’s closeness to the Italian music tradition and his reputation as a “European” artist. References to Mozart as the “ultimate Rococo musician,” the *Völkischer Beobachter* argued, did not take into account that Mozart was a “heroic-demonic fighter” and a “profound source of the ultimate wisdom,” which were purely German attributes. Despite his “Italianate endeavors,” said the paper, Mozart conceived himself as a “German musician, in the best sense of the word.”¹³ Thus it was “a German” who raised Italian opera to its perfect, ideal state and then “brought it to his own people.”¹⁴

Even more so than in the case of Mozart, the NSDAP injected race issues into its Beethoven reception.¹⁵ Indeed, dictates of racial anthropology nearly nullified the composer’s value as a party hero. While portraits and observations of Beethoven by his contemporaries differ tremendously, all reveal that he had few of the physical characteristics associated with Aryan stereotypes.¹⁶ Noticing this, a handful of pseudoscientists concluded that Beethoven was of impure blood.¹⁷ Even so, most National Socialist propagandists were not willing to accept that Beethoven had been of impure racial stock. The *Völkischer Beobachter* therefore vouched for the composer’s racial purity in a number of articles produced with the obvious intention of cleansing Beethoven of his apparent physical flaws.

One of these, entitled “His Outward Appearance,” drew from Anton Schindler’s contemporary depiction of Beethoven. But Nazi propagandists used only those portions of Schindler’s recollections that served their immediate purposes. In a telling annotation, following Schindler’s statement that Beethoven’s “forehead

¹²Uwe Lars Nobbe, “Mozarts Bluterbe,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 October 1941. On Nazi interpretations of Mozart, see also Dennis, “Honor Your German Masters: The Use and Abuse of ‘Classical’ Composers in Nazi Propaganda” and Erik Levi, *Mozart and the Nazis: How the Third Reich Abused a Cultural Icon* (Yale University Press, 2010).

¹³Nobbe, “Mozarts Bluterbe.”

¹⁴Eduard A. Mayr, “Vom Genius der Musik: Rhythmus und Harmonie in Freiheit des Geistes,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 27 January 1931.

¹⁵For more on Beethoven reception, see Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics*; and David B. Dennis, “Beethoven At Large: Reception in Literature, the Arts, Philosophy, and Politics” in Glenn Stanley, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Beethoven* (Cambridge University Press, May 2000) 292-305.

¹⁶See Alessandra Comini, *The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) for detailed discussion of the iconography of Beethoven reception in the visual arts.

¹⁷Hans F. K. Günther, *Rasse und Stil* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1926), 30; Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß, *Rasse und Seele* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1926), 60. See further discussion of these sources in Heribert Schröder, *Beethoven im Dritten Reich: Eine Materialsammlung in Helmet Loos, ed., Beethoven und die Nachwelt: Materialien zur Wirkungsgeschichte Beethovens* (Bonn: Beethovenhaus, 1986), 205.

was high and wide, his brown eyes small,” the *Völkischer Beobachter* added in parentheses the question, “blue?” In this way the paper insinuated that Schindler, Beethoven’s reverent secretary, had inaccurately described his hero’s eye color. The *Völkischer Beobachter* then denounced racial scholars who had raised questions about Beethoven’s genetic purity: “Dr. Hans Günther errs decidedly when...he characterizes Beethoven as predominantly Eastern.”¹⁸ Thus did the paper try to eradicate evidence of aspects of Beethoven’s appearance that failed to meet the physical standards of the racially pure Volk it fantasized. Not only by birth, but “by virtue of his whole essence,” Ludwig van Beethoven was a “pureblooded German,” the paper concluded: he was the “spiritual possession of all Aryan mankind.”¹⁹

Surprisingly, efforts to ensure that a cultural figure was of certifiably pure German origins were even necessary in the case of Richard Wagner. From time to time, the paper related, the “old swindle kept arising,” that “one of the greatest German geniuses of all, Richard Wagner, had Jewish blood in his veins.” These claims were based on rumors that Wagner’s mother had been the lover of Ludwig Geyer (whom she married after her first husband died) at the time when the composer was conceived. 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 relations between Geyer and Wagner’s mother were innocent until they married—and that Richard was born before this happened; then by insisting that, in any case, Geyer was not Jewish. As the paper had it, it was absolutely certain, “according to the portraits we have,” that Geyer had a “completely German head without the slightest indication of alien blood.”²⁰ So, like the “whole house of lies built up by Jewish wiles,” this “mendacious construction would ultimately fall apart—to the shame and disgrace of Judah.”²¹

Returning to Michaud: in his words, “A declared aim to turn German art into a promise of German happiness... became a rallying cry for all the nationalists of both the Second and the Third Reich. Hitler could not fail to win their support when he wrote as follows in *Mein Kampf*: ‘How many people are aware of the infinite number of separate memories of the greatness of our natural Fatherland in all the fields of cultural and artistic life?’”²² It is clear that *Völkischer*

¹⁸“Erscheinungsbild Beethovens,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 March 1927.

¹⁹“Beethoven und die österreich. Landschaft,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 29 March 1927.

²⁰Josef Stolzing, “Der alte Schwindel von Richard Wagners Blutbeimischung,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 12 December 1929. For my own assessments of some of the mass of literature on the issues of Wagner and Nazism, see David B. Dennis, “Review Essay on Recent Literature about Music and German Politics,” *German Studies Review* (October 1997) 429-432; David B. Dennis, “Crying ‘Wolf’? A Review Essay on Recent Wagner Literature,” *German Studies Review* (February 2001) 145-158; and David B. Dennis, “The Most German of all German Operas: *Die Meistersinger* Through the Lens of the Third Reich” in Nicholas Vazsonyi, ed. *Wagner’s Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation* (University of Rochester Press, 2003) 98-119.

²¹F. v. Leoprechting, “Richard Wagner: Das Judentum in der Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 14 November 1920.

²²Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 29.

Beobachter coverage of the Western music tradition insisted that this was indeed the greatest field of *German* cultural prowess.

Moving to Michaud's second major theme, the concept of the *Führer Artist*: as he put it, more completely, "The fact that the Führer . . . was also called the artist of all artists, the only one capable of restoring to his people a Germany believed to be defunct, placed him immediately at the heart of the Western tradition that assigned to art that most decisive of functions . . ." ²³. In the case of the reception of music in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the correlate to Michaud's assertions about Hitler as **Führer-Artist** is the paper's constant insistence that great creators, including writers, artists, and composers, were simultaneously political—each, in their own way, **Artist-Führer**. And indeed, my research shows that Nazi propagandists also promoted the view that the primary creative impulse was as much political—especially patriotic and nationalistic—as artistic. ²⁴.

For example, according to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, Mozart was strongly driven by nationalistic impulse. Mozart's "patriotic mission was to replace Italian fashion with a "genuinely German" opera tradition. According to the paper, conditions in Viennese theaters drew from him "a cry of distress": "I don't believe that Italian opera can hold out for long, and I side with the Germans. Every nation has its opera, why shouldn't we Germans have ours?" ²⁵ Thus, according to the paper, did Mozart's "Germanness break out completely in Vienna." ²⁶

Some selective political biography was necessary in the case of Beethoven, for the composer's politics remained problematic for the Party. Though he could, with some reservations, be counted as a member of the German race, Beethoven had exhibited some enthusiasm about the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. National Socialists countered that although Beethoven had been exposed to French revolutionary ideals, he was "always a Rhineland at heart." When it came to defending his nation against French rule, the *Völkischer Beobachter* held, Beethoven had "always sided with Germany"; and though he "temporarily suffered from revolutionary fever, his heart remained with his German *Heimat*." ²⁷ Thus, in articles like "The Words of Beethoven," National Socialist journalists pulled citations out of context—including Beethoven's jest that power was his

²³Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 175.

²⁴Once again, this emphasis on art for state's or party's sake had earlier roots in German cultural discourse: "The artistic and the political had fused German nationalism. Having defined itself as truly-creative; the artistic became political. Artistic creativity for the German nationalist movement was not merely an expression of man's inner nature, but helped also to give form to the shapeless mass through symbols and public festivals. . . . Politics and life must penetrate each other, and this means that all forms of life become politicized. Literature, art, architecture, and even our environment are seen as symbolic of political attitudes" (Mosse, *Nationalization of the Masses*, 15, 215). More recently, Huener and Nicosia have written that "Hitler and his followers came to understand German Culture and the role of the arts primarily in political terms. Specifically, they believed that it was the responsibility of the party and the state to rescue" (Huener and Nicosia, *The Arts in Nazi Germany*, 2).

²⁵Grunsky, "Mozart der Deutsche: Zu seinem 150. Todestag."

²⁶Grunsky, "Mozart der Deutsche: Zu seinem 150. Todestag."

²⁷Ludwig Schiedermaier, "Beethoven und die Politik," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 March 1927.

morality and his angry wish that he could meet Napoleon on the battlefield—and presented them as evidence that the composer had been a “fierce enemy of the French.”²⁸

But of all the creators that the *Völkischer Beobachter* extolled as politically motivated, Richard Wagner was its ideal. Given the composer’s engagement with nineteenth-century German political culture, this was not a stretch. Still, it is remarkable how intensively the *Völkischer Beobachter* emphasized Wagner’s political writings—as much or even more so than they concentrated on his musical productivity. As the paper put it, the writings were “essential, not marginal” to understanding the composer: “as an . . . extension of his artistic works, they testified [to the] sureness of his political perception and political will.”²⁹

Under the title, “Richard Wagner’s Battle for the Volkish Ideal,” the paper held that the composer felt himself “ever strengthened by his German-Germanic thoughts, and constantly sought to realize this spirit.” Besides Treitschke, de Lagarde, and “Wolzogen, who were “more comprehensively volkish” than most, it was Wagner who “fought hardest for the volkish idea with pen and word.” Therefore, all of his writings were the “worthiest weapons for the final battle that approached.”³⁰ His ideas were so similar to those of National Socialism, said the paper, that “in the speeches of young Germany” it “seemed like one was hearing Richard Wagner speaking to the Volk.” This was a sign that in the “Third Reich of Richard Wagner,” the “Führer principle of genius would prevail more than ever.”³¹

Thus did the music-historical material that appeared in the *Völkischer Beobachter* resonate with the **Führer/Artist-Artist/Führer** theme that Michaud identified throughout Nazi cultural politics: At a time “when the world came to be deserted by the certainty of a salvation”³² Nazi *Kulturpolitik* would “render visible the protector god who would make it possible for the body of the German race to live eternally.”³³

This leads us to Michaud’s point about the simultaneous construction of the “opponent” in contrast to the Germanic ideal posited in Nazi culture. In his terms, “correlatively, Nazism deployed . . . violence . . . against all those who were likely to place in doubt that the lost object could be resurrected in the race and in art. . . . National Socialist terror was thus employed against all those who, in reality as well as in the Nazi imaginary representations, opposed its [world view], its compulsion to realize the Idea, that is, the artistic erection of a figure embodying the lost object.”³⁴ Ultimately, according to Michaud, it

²⁸“Wörter Beethovens,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 March 1927.

²⁹Erich Valentin, “Richard Wagner und seine Zeit,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 31 March 1937.

³⁰Wagner, *Judaism in Music*.

³¹Walter Lange, “Bayreuth - ein sinnvoller Wahlspruch,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 16 June 1934.

³²Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 179.

³³Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, [page #?]

³⁴Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 175.

was this cultural thrust that led to the policies of extermination. “Whatever the physical criteria for their elimination may have been, he wrote, Jews, Gypsies, ‘degenerates,’ and homosexuals were shut away and exterminated for the same reasons as were the strictly political opponents of Nazism: because of [they] might say that was . . . (unfamiliar and disturbing) to Nazism.”³⁵

Thus did Michaud intensify the notion, which George Mosse originally postulated, that even anti-Semitism was predicated on cultural criticism. Art versions of these arguments toward eliminationist policies were not just added on subsequently as a tool to provide cultural historical justification for them. *Kultur* was the key and determinate factor in identifying the Other, based on Hitler’s clearly stated standards of judgment: do you make it, imitate it, or destroy it? According to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, especially Heinrich Heine, but also the composers Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn, Mahler, and Schoenberg supposedly did the latter two things, so they and their “kind” had to be eradicated.

In treating this point as manifested in music-historical terms throughout the pages of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, it is necessary first to address the place of Richard Wagner’s Anti-Semitism in Nazi ideology. From its earliest days, the paper’s coverage emphasized Wagner’s treatment of the “Jewish issue.” As early as 1920, the paper gathered and presented extracts from Wagner’s *Judaism in Music*, which the paper subsequently relied upon more so than anything else the composer produced.³⁶ According to the paper, *Judaism in Music* was “more relevant than ever before, seeming as if it had been written yesterday, not a half-century ago”—the only difference being that in the meantime, “everything that Wagner prophesied had become true..”³⁷

Above all, it added, Wagner found—like the Nazi leadership—“the main cause of the decline of humanity in the deterioration of the blood, in the ‘decay of race’—i.e., in the mixing of noble races with lower ones.” It was because he sensed these things that Wagner was a “German prophet.”³⁸ Therefore, the *Völkischer Beobachter* continued, he gave Nazis “beautiful words for their difficult path out of the harsh present to a better and purer future.”³⁹ In his opinion, which the paper shared, “the only hope for liberation from the demon of decay was through the application of brutal force.”⁴⁰ Thus did the *Völkischer Beobachter* invoke Wagner’s writings as early as 1923 in order to raise decisive notions of eliminationist anti-Semitism.

This said, in this material we also learn what the paper’s contributors said about specific cultural figures who were actually Jewish, and as such, embodied the worst Nazi fears. Directly in line with arguments Wagner made in his infamous

³⁵Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 24-25.

³⁶For the full text, see Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music and Other Essays*, William Ashton Ellis, ed. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1995).

³⁷Hans Buchner, “Richard Wagner und das Judentum in der Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 April 1922.

³⁸Seeliger, “Der deutsche Seher.”

³⁹“Der Dichter und Politiker.”

⁴⁰“Richard Wagner über ‘Das Judentum in der Musik’”

article, the *Völkischer Beobachter* presented these creators as Jews who had insinuated themselves into German culture and then worked to undermine it.⁴¹ To counter this “problem,” the *Völkischer Beobachter* vilified a number of the leading lights of the German Jewish intellectual tradition along these lines, including composers—essentially branding them as first imitators and ultimately destroyers of the existing cultural tradition.⁴²

For instance, aping Wagner’s personal attacks on him, the *Völkischer Beobachter* asserted that Meyerbeer was “little more than a plagiarist” who “did not shrink at all from making obvious borrowings.” As for the plots of Meyerbeer’s operas, the paper held that their “combination of unrestrained eroticism with insatiable lust for murder had to be understood as particularly consistent with the Jewish nature.”⁴³ In the case of Felix Mendelssohn’s music, the paper complained that while “the Jews had worked hard for a century to present it as outstanding,” in truth Mendelssohn had “absolutely no creative gifts of his own.” He just borrowed from his great German predecessors and “fiddled around until he produced things that weren’t immediately recognizable and therefore seemed to be products of his own,” for instance, the main melody of the Overture to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.⁴⁴

In dealing with Mahler, the paper reprised many of the themes that Wagner had directed against Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer, stating that he “appropriated the means and techniques, not the essence of our music because music for him is not the language of a soul, an inner need, but just a means to an end.” Mahler’s “musical. . . bric-a-brac” embodied the “racial corruption among Jews and their unprofessional, self-centered, and fundamentally neurotic inclination to falsify sensuousness into debauchery, eroticism into frivolity, aesthetics into a cult of ugliness, abstraction into inner emptiness, and ecstasy into physical titillation.”⁴⁵ Works such as the *Songs of a Wayfarer* were “typical.” In them, he revealed the “inner insecurity and uprootedness of the casually civilized Western Jew in all of his tragedy.” Mahler was a “hopeless case and, frighteningly, music like the

⁴¹“Here was the real, tangible enemy of the Germanic faith; not a vague entity, but an actual historical people whose philosophy was inimical to German life. The supposedly fossilized Judaism was linked with materialism and thus to modernity. Correspondingly, to oppose the Jews meant to struggle against the champions of the materialistic world view as well as against the evils of modern society. The Jew, the incarnation of dishonesty, ruthless in his quest for power, egoism exemplified, was contrasted with the genial German, who longed for an end to the dissonances of modern, urban life” (Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, 69).

⁴²“Nazism thus set up an extremely conventional opposition between the two poles of the sacred: on the one hand, the exhibitions of ‘degenerate art’ encompassed all that Nazism believed to stem from the forces of death and destruction; on the other hand, the Great Exhibitions of German Art brought together all the positive powers that were supposed to ensure the continuity of the German-Nordic Kultur. This fantasy of a possible clear-cut division between the pure and the impure naturally enough created for the Nazi authorities as many problems pertaining to art objects as to ‘human material’ (Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 153).

⁴³Lore Reinmoeller, “Judentum und Musik: Zu einem Buche von Karl Blessinger,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 2 September 1944.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Otto Repp, “Der musikalische Kramladen,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 20 November 1938.

Songs of a Wayfarer flowed directly out of this *psychopathia musikalis*.⁴⁶

But for all the attention they devoted to Mahler and earlier Jewish composers, even more infuriating to Nazi critics was what Arnold Schoenberg conceived as polytonality. Already in 1920, the paper complained about the growing presence of the Second Vienna School. Especially after the collapse of the Second Reich, such developments “constituted a significant threat to volkish consciousness and weakened hope for the future.”⁴⁷ The paper subsequently intensified its rhetoric by arguing that Schoenberg’s “Jewish-Viennese clique” was committing “musical exorcisms and rapes that were beyond the pale.”⁴⁸ In the face of Schoenberg’s modernist art of “doom” and “nihilism,” ostensibly so emblematic of the Weimar era as a whole, the *Völkischer Beobachter* insisted that a great change in German cultural history was occurring with the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party.

While confirming that *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural criticism formulated the image of the racial enemy through music-historical references, in keeping with Michaud’s assertions, these quotes return us to what was fundamentally “positive” about National Socialist *Kulturpolitik*, that is, (again Michaud) “leading every individual back to the natural reflex of love for his or her own racial type” and directing them toward a redemptive future.

Above all, Michaud postulated that National Socialist invocations of past creative leaders were intended as symbolic indications of what the New Germany would become, not just validations of present Nazi policies and ideas with references to the past. As he put it, “The awakening into the myth was . . . generally conceived as an awakening to the present— . . . a recapitulation of the past directed toward the future. As Baldur von Schirach declared, ‘The perfect artists Michelangelo and Rembrandt, and Beethoven and Goethe, do not represent an appeal to return to the past, but show us the future that is ours and to which we belong.’”⁴⁹ This last line says it very succinctly. The *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural section was clearly designed for the same reasons.

The most famous and often repeated version of this point in the context of *Völkischer Beobachter* music reception was reference to the “*Wach auf!* [Awaken] Chorus of Wagner’s *Mastersinger*. Michaud argues specifically that “this injunction to Germany, which urged it to awaken, was thus primarily an injunction to remember its past and to construct its future on the ideal model of that past.”⁵⁰ But throughout the *Völkischer Beobachter*’s music coverage, we can find examples of direct associations of composers and their works with the Nazi party and its plans for the future.

Nazi cultural operatives considered Mozart’s music a powerful tool for the party and state on the rise. Writers for the *Völkischer Beobachter* insisted that it

⁴⁶Hans Buchner, “Gustav Mahler in der Akademie,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 January 1929.

⁴⁷Buchner, “Von zwei Welten in der Musik.”

⁴⁸Hans Buchner, “Elektra,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 24 August 1923.

⁴⁹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 101.

⁵⁰Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 86.

constituted a “political symbol and source of hope”: just as in the acts of a great politician or military leader, “expression of volkish fate” in the works of Mozart was what made them “invaluable to Nazis and their time.”⁵¹ Party interpretations of Beethoven also revealed an effort to associate the composer and his music with the very identity of the Nazi movement itself. Alfred Rosenberg reminded all Germans that. “Whoever had a notion of what sort of nature operated in their movement knew that an impulse similar to that which Beethoven embodied in the highest degree lived in all of them”: the “desire to storm over the ruins of a crumbling world, the hope for the will to reshape the world, the strong sense of joy that comes from overcoming passionate sorrow.” When Nazis triumphed in Germany and throughout Europe, Rosenberg implied, they would recognize that Beethoven had passed on to them the ability and the will of German creation.⁵²

Most conveniently for the Nazis, the 50th anniversary of Wagner’s death coincided with their accession to power in 1933. In that year, the Party promoted direct associations between Wagner with the new regime in many ways. Ceremonies for the Day of Potsdam in May, for example, peaked in a performance of *Die Meistersinger* at Berlin’s Staatsoper. Having attended a torchlight parade along Unter den Linden, Hitler and the rest of his government arrived for the third act of the opera.⁵³ The *Völkischer Beobachter* covered this event rhapsodically. Whoever witnessed how . . . , the Volk of Nürnberg “instinctively turned toward the Führer,” sitting in the royal seats, and then how the eternally beautiful *Wach auf* Chorus emerged from the choir “to touch each and every heart,” knew that “the moment of Germany’s transformation had arrived.”⁵⁴ Another important linkage of Wagner’s music with the development of Nazi cultural policy occurred at the September 1933 inaugural ceremony of the Reich Culture Chamber in the Berlin Philharmonic. Immediately after Goebbels’ inaugural speech, the *Wach auf* chorus sounded again. The *Völkischer Beobachter* described the moment as a “hopeful awakening” with, “as Dr. Goebbels so perfectly put it, music for marching into the shining future of German culture.”⁵⁵

But the event at which Hitler himself most publicly expressed his personal engagement with Wagner occurred during the second year of the Third Reich. On March 6, 1934, Hitler dedicated a monument to Wagner in Leipzig, sanctifying it 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 miraculous world of this mighty tone poet.” Given that he was evidently invoking the poet and Meistersinger Hans Sachs on this occasion, it should come as no surprise that the foundation stone bore the words: “Honor your German Masters,”⁵⁶ in reference not only to

⁵¹Buchner, “Zum Münchner Mozartfest.”

⁵²Alfred Rosenberg, “Beethoven,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 March 1927.

⁵³“Der Festablauf am 21. März,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 March 1933.

⁵⁴Hugo Rasch, “Die Festvorstellung in der Staatsoper,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 23 March 1933.

⁵⁵“Die Reichs-Kultur-Kammer eröffnet: Der Führer bei der Feier in der Berliner Philharmonie.”

⁵⁶“Der Führer legt den Grundstein zum Nationaldenkmal Richard Wagners,” *Völkischer*

Wagner, but to the future of newly Nazified German culture as a whole.

While highlighting the Nazi obsession with Wagner's *Meistersinger* exhortation, Michaud made it clear that this was indeed not a retrogressive "move" in Nazi culture, but a forward looking call for future action. In his words, "As Baldur von Schirach said, 'In Germany, there is nothing more alive than our dead.' The immense effort of realization that was sweeping a whole people toward its ideal Third Reich was certainly quite the reverse of the work of mourning. It was the work of [reminiscence] that asserted itself as faith in one's own power to reawaken the lost object"⁵⁷ —that is, to "produce the New Man"⁵⁸

Ultimately, however, this process involved going to war. And from a popular perspective, it is natural to assume that the Second World War itself was the primary "goal" of the Nazi regime. But Michaud helps us to remember that the war itself was not the goal. It was a means to an end. As he phrased it, "National Socialism. . . never directly identified the state of war with the realization of the eternal Reich. . . . Like the 'battle for art,' 'the battle on the birth front,' and the 'battle for production,' it was part and parcel of 'the battle for life' that was to lead to the realization of the essence of the German people. . . . For, over and above all its tumults, the war was primarily intended to restore the calm and radiant vision of the eternal Reich that lay as a dream in the heart of the Volk spirit."⁵⁹

There is no doubt that Nazi propagandists enlisted the whole of the Western cultural tradition, as perceived in National Socialist terms, to serve in their belligerent cause. Just when German armies were invading Poland, Joseph Goebbels addressed the Reich Cultural Chamber with a speech that made the cultural dimension of the conflict clear. Nazis, he proclaimed, had "never reserved art for peacetime alone: for us, the notion that when the call to arms sounds, the muses go silent, has no validity." To the contrary, "we have always held the position that it is precisely in such a moment" that the muses "need to deploy their powers." Under Hitler's leadership, the Nazis had placed this "spiritual weapon into the hand of our Volk" to wield as the "German nation was lining up to battle for its very existence."⁶⁰

One of the best wartime opportunities for cultural politicians of the Third Reich to exploit Mozart came with the 150th anniversary of the composer's death in 1941. Goebbels attended the main commemorative ceremony at the Vienna Staatsoper. There, he gave a speech which the *Völkischer Beobachter* published in full under the title, "The German Soldier Is Also Protecting Mozart's Music." Goebbels recognized that one might wonder whether an official function

Beobachter, 7 March 1934.

⁵⁷Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 173.

⁵⁸Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 180.

⁵⁹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 206-7.

⁶⁰Joseph Goebbels, "Das Kulturleben im Kriege," Rede zur Jahrestagung der Reichskulturkammer und der NS-Gemeinschaft "Kraft durch Freude" November 27, 1939, in Goebbels, *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel: Reden und Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1939/40/41* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Franz Eher Nachf., 1944) 219-223.

marking Mozart's *Todestag* was appropriate, in light of the "brutal events of the day." But he responded in the affirmative, for Mozart's music "belonged among all those things which German soldiers were defending against assault." Mozart's music served as a symbol for the spiritual and cultural creativity of the German Volk. Therefore, there was no contradiction between "the world of sound in which he lived and worked, and the hard and threatening world Germans were experiencing—the chaos of which they wanted to transform into discipline and order."⁶¹ Thus, said the paper, "did the Volk greet Mozart." The Mozart celebrations of 1941, its report concluded, "once again proved the timeless significance of Mozart's work, even in the middle of war."⁶² Elsewhere, the paper wrote that Mozart should be celebrated not only as a musician of European-wide validity, but also as a reminder that Germany, "then fighting a battle for Europe, had to take up a leading and organizing role in the cultural world." In the "great struggle for the preservation of Europe and for the preservation of European culture," this day would be marked in a quiet and profound way that "nevertheless strengthened the resolve for battle, since Mozart reminded them of the values of life and culture for which they were fighting."⁶³

A confirmed enemy of France, according to Nazi interpretations, Beethoven appeared throughout *Völkischer Beobachter* propaganda as a "fighter of great willpower."⁶⁴ I will let just one strong example stand for the whole of wartime Beethoven reception. Throughout the war, the party continued its tradition of marking Hitler's birthday with broadcasts of Beethoven's music and on 19 April 1942, just after Hitler personally assumed direct command of forces in the East, Goebbels arranged a special celebration. Its culmination was a performance of the Ninth Symphony and in his accompanying speech Goebbels dictated what he expected listeners to draw from the event, and the *Völkischer Beobachter* reprinted his statement.

When, at the end of our celebration, the voices and instruments strike the tremendous closing chord of the Ninth Symphony, when the exhilarating Chorale sounds joy and carries a feeling for the greatness of these times into each and every German cabin, when [Beethoven's] hymn resounds over all distant countries where German regiments stand guard, then we want everyone, whether man, woman, child, soldier, farmer, worker, or civil servant, to be equally aware of the seriousness of the hour and to experience the tremendous happiness of being able to witness and take part in this, the greatest historical epoch of our Volk.⁶⁵

⁶¹Joseph Goebbels, "Auch Mozarts Musik verteidigt der deutsche Soldat," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 6 December 1941.

⁶²"Ein Kranz des Führers zum Gedenken Mozarts," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7 December 1941.

⁶³"Gauleiter Dr. Scheel bei den Salzburger Mozart-Feiern," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7 December 1941.

⁶⁴Ludwig Schiedermaier, "Beethoven und das 'Schicksal'," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 October 1925.

⁶⁵"In Dankbarkeit und Treue: Ansprache von Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels in der Feierstunde der NSDAP am Vorabend des Geburtstages Adolf Hitlers," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 20 April 1942.

However, as it had done in service of so much of its cultural coverage, to exemplify the alignment between artistic creation and the Nazi war effort, the paper placed its strongest emphasis on Richard Wagner. Again, I will just present a minimum from the manifold examples of wartime Wagner reception that appeared. in the *Völkischer Beobachter*. In the summer of 1941, just eight days after German forces invaded the Soviet Union, the paper made direct associations between his music dramas and the new front. According to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, his *Twilight of the Gods*, the last of the Ring Cycle, could be interpreted as presaging the positive outcome of the Barbarossa campaign: “the stormy tempo and powerful events of the conflict were bringing the German Volk closer than ever to recognition of the deepest meanings of the Ring—of the connections between great art and the Volkish war of liberation.” In the Ring Cycle, Wagner “shaped the inevitable historical progression of an old, rotten world toward self-immolation into a gigantic cultural symbol: the fall of the Walhalla gods wasn’t a catastrophe, but a great process of purification—relieving the world of enormous guilt.”⁶⁶

Still, the most extreme and infamous use of Wagner culture for the propagandistic aims of Nazi Germany at war was manifested in the series of wartime festivals at Bayreuth. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the *Völkischer Beobachter* related, once said that the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth was “a battle sign—a standard—around which those who remained true would gather, armed for war,” and this “prophecy” was being realized at the wartime festival.⁶⁷ In another article, placed on the front page directly beneath photos of fighting at the Eastern front, the Nazi newspaper published an extended statement about the significance of continuing cultural life, especially the Bayreuth Festival, as the war raged on. It was clear that only with the “dramatic progress of most recent German history under Adolf Hitler, and only with the war, that they had . . . once again developed a “sense for Siegfried, a sense for Wotan, a sense for Richard Wagner’s magical world—only then had they become real Germans.” When out of the “uncanny quiet of the great space,” in which you couldn’t even hear a pin drop, the “redeeming sounds rose up the pillars and the walls fell away in a sensation of dreaming, it seemed like Germans had been standing there for a thousand years as a race that—like Siegfried—knew no fear because they wielded *Nothung*, the sword they forged themselves on the anvil of world envy and the darkest enmity.” To provide soldiers and workers with this “unforgettable pleasure” was an achievement that could only have occurred in “Adolf Hitler’s Reich.” From this spectacle the Führer guests at the Festival “learned to know Greater Germany: the Germany that not only fought for its existence and its global validity with weapons, but which, as in earlier centuries and millennia, was called forth to spread its cultural heritage across borders and stand as a model for other peoples.”⁶⁸

Knowing of the utter devastation it wreaked, we reject the National Socialist

⁶⁶Heinrich Stahl, “Die neue Götterdämmerung,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 1 July 1941.

⁶⁷Herzog, “Von Bayreuth nach Salzburg.”

⁶⁸“Schau vom Festspielhügel,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 23 July 1941.

promotion of the war as leading to a future of German cultural advancement.⁶⁹ Still, we must recognize that Nazi propaganda did not present the war as an end in itself, but as a means toward re-establishing Germany as *Kulturnation*—revived in the aesthetic forms suggested by the *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural section, among other propaganda sources.⁷⁰ In this endeavor, they failed. The final result was instead the reduction of their country to a state of ruin far more hideous than those Albert Speer had projected in plans for the structures he and his master imagined⁷¹—not after thousands of years, but after just twelve years of terror and six years of carnage. Ultimately, the culmination of “Nazi culture,” was the war itself—indeed, this was its hollow “masterpiece.” But Michaud’s arguments, combined with the evidence compiled from the *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural section, in particular its treatment of the Western music tradition, help us to understand better what impelled these destructive forces: the ironic realization is that, however distorted, they were originally conceived in “creative” terms.

⁶⁹In Saul Friedländer’s powerful words, “The important thing is the constant identification of Nazism and death; not real death in its everyday horror and tragic banality, but a ritualized, stylized, and aestheticized death, a death that wills itself the carrier of horror, decrepitude, and monstrosity, but which ultimately and definitely appears as a poisonous apotheosis.” Nazism, he continued, was a force that “ended in nothing, after having accumulated an extraordinary power, unleashed a war without parallel, committed crimes heretofore beyond imagination—a force that hacked the world to pieces in order to founder in nothingness” (Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 43, 58).

⁷⁰“War was not an end in itself; for National Socialism, war remained, in the same way as propaganda, art, and politics, ‘a means to an end.’ Warfare was far more directly identified with the process that led to the ‘realization of the Idea,’ so that in the Nazi Weltanschauung it had the same function as all its other ‘battles.’ Like the ‘battle for art,’ ‘the battle on the birth front,’ and the ‘battle for production,’ it was part and parcel of ‘the battle for life’ that was to lead to the realization of the essence of the German people” (Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 206-7).

⁷¹Michaud reproduces Speer’s explanation of the “theory of ruin value” as follows: “By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures that even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years, would more or less resemble Roman models. To illustrate my ideas I had a romantic drawing prepared. It showed what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelin Field would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines were still clearly recognizable.’ Delighted by the ‘luminous logic’ of this sketch, Hitler ordered that in the future the Reich’s most important buildings should be constructed according to the ‘law of ruins.’ Speer had hit the bull’s eye by responding ‘to the Führer’s desire’ in this way and, on his behalf, anticipating the moment when ‘men fell silent.’ That moment would come long after the movements of the community’s fighters had been frozen and immobilized in stone, and when history would at last recognize them as a people of artists and founders of culture who had constructed their own monument” (Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 212).