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Marc A. Weiner. *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination.* Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. xii + 439 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4775-8.

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Jewish Dwarfs and Teutonic Gods

Marc A. Weiner's *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* is an important study, accessible not only to musicologists but also to scholars in a variety of fields related to cultural and intellectual history. It has long been known that Wagner was an extreme anti-Semite, but what to do with this knowledge has consternated scholars for years. In his Introduction, Weiner posits that Wagner did not confine the expression of his anti-Semitism and dream of a racially "pure" Germany to his sociological (or even aesthetic) essays, as many have claimed. In the music dramas themselves, Weiner believes, Wagner also put his ugly views into bodily form through word, gesture and even the music. This is one of the focal points of Weiner's study. More broadly, he endeavors to illuminate nineteenth-century German anti-Semitism, thereby providing a context for Wagner's "Judeophobia" and, perhaps more importantly, indicating how his negative representations would have been understood by the contemporary audience.

Weiner makes a substantial contribution to Wagner studies through his exposure of how the composer's anti-Semitism pervaded his performative as well as his theoretical oeuvre. His treatment of Wagner's characters' bodies as metaphors is often impressive and contributes to the growing–pardon me–corpus on perceptions and manipulations of the body in culture and history. Above all, however, Weiner wants to establish the cultural context for Wagner's production. He states, "it is only with the cultural context of that age in mind that the anti-Semitic implications of [Wagner's] music can be demonstrated–indeed, only through consideration of such a context can such a discussion make sense at all" (p. 21). Unfortunately this is the least developed aspect of his book.

In his Introduction Weiner establishes well the importance of his undertaking by impressively tracing the historiography of how the composer's anti-Semitism has been handled. He believes that past writers have employed one of several "strategies": to "minimize" it, to "disavow" any relation between his personal racism and his public works, and "above all ... [to refuse] to acknowledge any 'evidence' of racism 'in' Wagner's music" (p. 14). Weiner indicates that prominent scholars had a deliberate agenda to suppress Wagner's repugnant views with the above-stated tactics. While this may be true in part, this reviewer became downright uncomfortable when Weiner slapped Wagner's apologists collectively by asking rhetorically if they "continue to respond to the nineteenth-century ideology associated with [Wagner's works] ...?" (p. 30). He implies that anyone who has not dealt with Wagner's anti-Semitism in the correct fashion is himself an anti-Semite.

Weiner shows that Wagner deliberately used his characters to promote his sociological theories of a "pure" Germany purged of foreign/Jewish influence. To organize his investigation, Weiner devotes chapters to the Eye, Voice, Smell, Feet and "Degeneration and Sexual Deviance." It soon becomes clear that Wagner's Teutonic heroes are invariably clear-eyed, deep-voiced, straight-featured and sure-footed. The anti-heroes have dripping eyes, high voices, bent, crooked bodies and a hobbling, awkward step–qualities Weiner insists were Jewish stereotypes in Wagner's age. If they were commonly understood, these embodied metaphors became real to viewers, thus reinforcing the ideology of racism.

In the first chapter devoted to Vision, Weiner explains Wagner's fundamentally polarized perception of the world in terms of Self and Other, and "recognition"–knowledge through identification–as the basis for creating a homogeneous society by excluding that which is recognized as foreign (dissimilar from the Self). Just as Wagner's protagonists do, the ideal (German) audience would recognize the heroic as Germanic and reject the villainous as Jewish, and so, Weiner asserts, the music dramas would contribute to the creation of Wagner's ideal Germany. Weiner reveals the integral vision

of Wagner's theories and his artworks, and this is what makes the book so compelling, since it refutes the traditional distinction that has been made between Wagner's racist sociological theories and his works for the stage. Despite the fact that none of Wagner's characters was ever labeled a Jew, Weiner does offer substantial evidence that the characters embody Wagner's notions of Jewishness and Teutonicness. Weiner's treatment of racism in Wagner's music is especially fascinating, as for example in his explanation in the "Voices" chapter of the vocal and instrumental shifts that reflect the "Jewish" speech of Alberich and Mime in *Siegfried* (pp.135-40).

In each chapter, however, the evidence for anti-Semitic cultural codes in nineteenth-century Germany is uneven. Although there are exceptions (such as Jewish protests against premiers of *Die Meistersinger* [p. 123]), often Weiner's claims that the physical aberrations of Wagner's allegedly Jewish characters were commonly understood by the public is supported by evidence that is scant, secondary or unexplained. With frequently weak evidence as each body area is treated, one increasingly questions if Weiner could not find better primary substantiation. The whole cultural context he seeks to establish becomes undermined.

A greater distinction needs to be made between European/Germanic anti-Semitism and Wagner's own. His neurotic preoccupation with his paternity and fears of being half Jewish himself are presented in the Introduction, which gives the reader some inkling of the composer's idiosyncratic psyche. However, not until Chapter Two (and long after Weiner's position has been well established) does Weiner raise the fact that Wagner's anti-Semitism notably increased upon his professional failures in Paris in the early 1840s. With his towering ego and psychological hang-ups about his father, Wagner could never have accepted responsibility for his own failure, and instead he blamed successful Jewish composers and the publisher Schlesinger. Secondly, Wagner's severe reactions to criticism and desires for revenge are not really raised. The most obvious example of this is the composer's caricature of the purportedly half-Jewish Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick as Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*. This was publicly known in Wagner's own day, yet it is not discussed in this book. Another unmentioned demonstration of Wagner's habit of becoming vicious toward those who had hurt him, as the Parisians had done again in 1861, is Wagner's *Eine Kapitulation*, a cruel and tasteless parody of Parisian sufferings during the Prussian siege of 1871. Could Weiner have wished to bypass such facts because they demonstrate the personal, psychological sources of Wagner's racial hatreds, and thus downplay the effect of cultural racism on the composer?

The fact that largely due to the biological theories of race published by Count Gobineau, a Frenchman, Wagner's anti-Semitism became even more ominous in the later years of his life (seen in his later essays), is barely raised either (see p. 225). Cosima Wagner's diaries are riddled with references to Wagner's enthusiasm for Gobineau's ideas, Gobineau was their house-guest, and Cosima even wrote an obituary for him, but Weiner mentions the Frenchman only three times, and his nationality is never even stated. It is almost as if Weiner wants to confine anti-Semitism within German borders and not acknowledge its pervasiveness throughout Europe.

There is no question that Wagner's homeland, like essentially all of Europe, was anti-Semitic, but Wagner wasn't typical of Germany or any nation. How much did his views reflect his culture and how much did they reflect his oddity? Of course this can never be answered with any certainty, but perhaps the issue could have been addressed through a different organizational strategy. A possibility here might be to present in the first chapter a systematic account of anti-Semitic ideology and its attendant stereotypes in Germany. To convey a fuller picture of nineteenth-century German notions of race, some consideration of its unique relationship to nationalism (given that Germany became a nation only in 1871) would also be beneficial. A second chapter dealing with Wagner's peculiar psyche (including his bizarre treatment of incest and race) would enable the reader to see connections as well as distinctions between the composer's racism and that of his culture. If the author had established these first and then addressed Wagner's characterizations of different components of the body, the reader would find very compelling evidence concerning not only how Wagner used the body, but also how his metaphors would have resonated with his audience.

Weiner's use of sources makes or breaks his assertions. His extensive knowledge of Wagner's voluminous writings and music dramas allows him to inter-weave deftly these two bodies of work and to demonstrate the consistency between Wagner's statements on Jews and his characterizations of his anti-heroes. Weiner, however, sometimes manipulates the evidence to bolster his claims. The most prominent example of this is his treatment of Wagner's pairing of vocal depth with the heroic and height with the flawed. He presents solid evidence from Wagner's work to support this, but he undermines himself when he twists his translations of Wagner's usage of "hoch," a word with a variety of meanings. For

example, as in English, in German a voice of "highest quality" does not mean the one with the highest register, but through his translations Weiner asserts the opposite and thus misrepresents Wagner (pp.111-12, 152-3, 175). Sometimes, as in his discussion of Wagner's "Pilgerfahrt zu Beethoven," his quotations simply do not substantiate his interpretations (pp. 153-63).

At times Weiner substantiates himself well with primary sources, especially in his last chapter on nineteenth-century perceptions of sexual "deviancy" and physical abnormalities (pp. 326, 334, for example). Weiner also presents solid evidence of a cultural stereotype associating Jews with foul smells (pp. 211-12; 215-22), but Wagner linked his antagonists with unpleasant odors only seldom. Overall, however, Weiner presents weak evidence of culturally encoded racism. For example, he periodically relies on medieval German superstitions to establish nineteenth-century attitudes, citing a 9-volume *Handbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens* as evidence, but we have no information on this book. Its publication date is 1927-41. Was it a new edition of a guide that had been published continuously in Germany, a republication, or even a new publication created during the Nazi era? Weiner doesn't tell us, and so we cannot know whether these superstitions persisted through the nineteenth century or not.

Rather than present evidence from the bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century Germany, Weiner at times refers to a few composers to substantiate his assertions, then declares them to be representative. However, most of these figures are rather irrelevant in considering the nature of Wagner's contemporaries. Rossini (early/mid-nineteenth century) had little to do with the German audience, and Strauss and Schoenberg obviously post-date Wagner's reception in Germany in his lifetime. Weiner's references to Mahler are problematic too. He quotes Mahler's private remark in 1898 that Wagner's Mime was "intended to ridicule the Jews (with all of their characteristic traits ...) ...," but Weiner does not point out that in 1897, the Jewish-born Mahler converted to Catholicism, and so his own relationship to Judaism and anti-Semitism was singular and at a critical stage. Can Weiner then really claim that "Mahler stated what I believe must have been obvious to Wagner's contemporaries ..." (p. 143)? Where are representative statements from the broader spectrum of opera-going society to corroborate this?

As visual evidence for his ideas, Weiner reproduces a number of Arthur Rackham's illustrations of the *Ring*. Some of Rackham's English viewers may have thought of them as "German," but why Weiner chose to use English art dating from 1910 as evidence of German anti-Semitism, rather than selections of German art of Wagner's own era (such as that by Hans Thoma, Hans Mackart or any variety of illustrators for journals) raises more doubts. Are Rackham's the only illustrations that represent the physical descriptions of Wagner's allegedly Jewish characters? How does this show that Wagner's ant-Semitic presentations were so understood by his contemporary German audience? A far richer repository of such evidence could surely be found in articles and illustrations of contemporary periodicals with broad circulation.

The paucity of Weiner's primary evidence is especially frustrating because his theses are probably right. Even his secondary evidence is slim, since he relies mainly on the work of Sander Gilman and a handful of others, usually only with a skeletal bibliographical footnote. Many readers will not be familiar with these studies; Weiner needs to sketch out their findings in his own work for credibility's sake. Most regrettable are the numerous instances in which Weiner does not at all substantiate his insistence that Wagner's embodiments of anti-Semitism reflect "a web of iconic traditions within German culture" (examples, pp. 193, 249, 319). This is speculation, not scholarship.

Ultimately, after many claims that nineteenth-century Germans were "schooled" in "culturally encoded" anti-Semitic icons (p. 193), Weiner neither explains who Wagner's audience was nor provides solid evidence as to their attitudes, assumptions and prejudices. Given the explosive nature of the subject of German anti-Semitism for post-Holocaust readers, this is irresponsible. It is especially unfortunate because solid evidence for this extremely important topic probably does exist in the verbal and visual representations of Jews in nineteenth-century German mass culture. Thus, while Weiner has contributed a great deal to Wagner scholarship, vital questions concerning the nature of Wagner's audience and its reception of his anti-Semitic encodings remain unanswered.

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