

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederic Spotts. *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994. x + 334 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-05777-5.

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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For musicologists, music critics, composers, and theorists, Wagner has long been a center of attention for his revolutionary successes in redefining the opera aesthetic in the nineteenth century and for wielding enough influence to realize his theatrical visions in the building of the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth. In the postwar period, Wagner and Bayreuth have attracted the attention of a wider circle of scholars for their symbolic representation of the corruption of German intellectual life. Part of the reason Wagner has never ceased to be an object of fascination is the sheer eccentricity, not only of Richard himself but also of those members of his clan who have dedicated their lives to perpetuating the Wagner mystique. But special “Wagner problems” have come to the fore in the post-Holocaust world, most notably the question of whether Wagner’s anti-Semitism can be detected in his works for the stage and the implied question of Wagner’s own responsibility for disseminating anti-Jewish feelings that would culminate in the virtual eradication of European Jewry. The two works under discussion are a testimony to Wagner’s continued hold on our imaginations and the unending search for answers to the “Wagner problem.”

The first book under review, Marc Weiner’s *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, is an ambitious study of Wagner’s prose and music dramas that focuses on representations of the body and the senses. As the title implies, the author’s primary interest is to link these gestures and metaphors with contemporary perceptions of the Jew. The book divides into five chapters dedicated to vision, voice, smell, feet, and degeneration, although the author covers many more issues within these chapters, often giving the impression of digressing from the

subject implied by the chapter heading.

The thorough research and close readings of Wagner’s texts makes this an admirable accomplishment, drawing on some fascinating observations on Wagner’s concerns with physical phenomena and their recurrence in the music dramas. Particularly convincing is the evidence the author has unearthed to show Wagner’s frequent portrayal of polarities in his texts and music. Nevertheless, this reviewer felt overburdened by the author’s insistence that each representation of a physical phenomenon must imply anti-Semitism, which often requires the reader to take large leaps of faith in accepting the proposed connections. Such connections could have been strengthened considerably had the author ventured beyond Wagner’s admittedly vast output and considered documented evidence of contemporary impressions that concur with the anti-Semitic interpretation. In one stunning instance (143), the author cites Gustav Mahler’s reaction to the *Ring*: “No doubt with Mime, Wagner intended to ridicule the Jews (with all their characteristic traits—petty intelligence and greed—the jargon is textually and musically so cleverly suggested).” This is the kind of contextual evidence that could bring us closer to understanding the anti-Semitism encoded in Wagner’s music dramas, if indeed it does exist, and more of this type of supporting evidence would have been welcome.

The greatest value of this work is its investigation of Wagner’s conceptions of the Other, but as the author himself has demonstrated, the Other takes different forms at different stages of Wagner’s career: the Other can be the Jews, but it can also be the Italians and the

French. Indeed, one of the most significant polarities in *Die Meistersinger* is that of the old versus the new. In the chapter on the voice, the author deduces the Jewishness of Beckmesser from his high voice and melismatic (i.e. melodically intricate) passages, referring to a contemporary association between such musical gestures and synagogue chant. However, other interpretations cannot be excluded: for instance Walther, the hero, is also a tenor, yet his solos are far more lyrical, indeed far more “Italian,” than any other vocal writing in the preceding works. Beckmesser’s melismatic style could just as easily be interpreted as an attack on the intellectual austerity of the German compositional tradition (usually represented by fugal writing) which Wagner the revolutionary was also attacking in his music. Otherness is nevertheless important, and in the conclusions Weiner reiterates his most thought-provoking question: why is Wagner’s work so timeless? Is it possible that Wagner’s powerful portrayal of Otherness still speaks to our own desires to feel superior to an “alien” group?

The other book under review, Frederic Spotts’s *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*, should not be designated as a Wagner study but rather as one more tribute to the Wagner mystique by a dedicated audience member. The author makes some bold assertions in his introduction, leading the reader to believe that he will present a history of the institution, the family, and, most important, the role of the festival in the history of the German nation, concluding with his “fatal equation: Wagner equals Bayreuth equals fascism” (viii). However, the bulk of what follows is taken up with descriptions of some of the more noteworthy productions in the history of the festival. The broader implications of Wagner

and Bayreuth are drawn from a limited assortment of secondary writings, a laxity in scholarship that is aggravated by a paucity of footnotes. The author ignores, for example, the important research of Hubert Kolland that has painted a completely new picture of Wagner reception in the twentieth century, and which shows specifically that the Wagner cult lost momentum in the 1920s and, largely due to Hitler’s financial support, managed to survive through the Second World War.

Spotts, too, is fascinated with the “Wagner problem” in terms of its contribution to German nationalism but expresses his observations in such ahistorical utterances as: “here lay the serpent’s eggs that, generations later, hatched to release ideological monsters” (77). Elsewhere, reacting to a particularly xenophobic statement of 1911, he observes: “What is surprising is not that war broke out in 1914 but that Germany did not self-combust before then” (135). In terms of a treatment of the historical context, this book offers nothing more than a compendium of familiar truisms, such as the overgeneralization that early in 1933 “opera houses and concert halls were taken over by party louts who fired, harried or drove out Jews, leftists and other ‘cultural bolshevists’” (163) or: “No longer was opera an art form but a plaything of party leaders, to reflect their preferences, ideology and taste—or lack of it” (164). In the end, this volume offers little to the serious historian, serving at best as an introduction to someone embarking on a pilgrimage to Bayreuth.

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