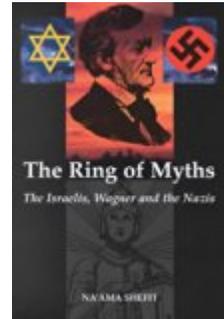


Na'ama Sheffi. *The Ring of Myths: The Israelis, Wagner and the Nazis*. Trans Martha Grenzeback. Brighton and Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2001. x + 188 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-902210-52-0.

Reviewed by Tracey J. Kinney (Department of History, Kwantlen University College)
Published on H-Genocide (June, 2001)



Myth and Memory: Israel and Richard Wagner

“Myth and Memory: Israel and Richard Wagner”

On May 5, 2001 the Berlin *Morningpost* reported that a planned performance of Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* by the Berlin Staatskapelle under the direction of Daniel Barenboim and featuring tenor Plácido Domingo had been banned from the Israel-Festival, a summer concert series in Jerusalem.[1] A week later CNN clarified that the piece had not in actual fact been banned, but rather, the Israeli-born conductor had been asked to consider playing the music of other composers instead.[2] Barenboim, in turn, refused to remove the Wagner piece from the Festival. The brewing controversy highlights the depth of anti-Wagner sentiment in Israel; thus, the appearance of this new study by Na'ama Sheffi on Israel, the Nazis and the Wagner phenomenon comes at a very appropriate time.

Na'ama Sheffi is currently the editor of *Zmanim: The Hebrew Historical Quarterly*, the historical quarterly of the School of History, Tel Aviv University, and works at the Democracy Project of the Yitzhak Rabin Centre of Israel Studies. She has also researched and written extensively on issues related to the reception of German culture in Israel, the evolution of holocaust memory, and political symbolism in Israel; all of these issues figure prominently in this work. She is currently working on the German translation of her 1998 work *German in Hebrew: Translation from German into Hebrew in Jewish Palestine, 1882-1948* (*Deutsch auf Hebraeisch. Uebersetzungen aus dem Deutschen ins Hebraeische im juedischen*

Palaestina 1882-1948, Bleicher Verlag, forthcoming).

In *The Ring of Myths: The Israelis, Wagner and the Nazis*, Sheffi delves into a debate which has raged for more than sixty years, ever since a 1938 performance of *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg* in Palestine was cancelled in the aftermath of *Kristallnacht*. However, the Wagner debate itself forms only a part of this ambitious project. Sheffi sets out to use the Wagner controversy as a tool in order to gain an understanding of collective memory, political consciousness, and contemporary ideological divisions in Israel. As the author notes in the preface, “I see the polemic raging around the Wagner issue as a microcosm of the profound discord that rends Israeli society” (p. viii).

In constructing this study Sheffi has drawn heavily upon newspaper and periodical sources, in addition to the archives of the Knesset, the BBC, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Wagner Institute in Bayreuth. The book also contains an excellent bibliography of secondary sources, in English, German, and Hebrew, related to Wagner, Wagner-reception, and contemporary debates on Wagner's place in history. Sheffi's thesis is that “The conflict over the supposedly musical issue was nothing other than another battle over the shaping of modern Israeli culture, a battle that largely reflected the development of Israeli society itself and the formation of its identity and political concepts. This intersection of music, society and state reflected the struggles of a society under construction, and its uphill efforts to accept

its past and form a collective national memory for itself” (p. 10).

In order to demonstrate the role played by the Wagner debate in the shaping of Israeli culture, Sheffi traces the controversy over five decades, from the 1950s to the 1990s. The book, however, begins with a very brief introduction to Richard Wagner, his artistic contributions (in particular, the “Tristan Chord”), and his anti-Semitism. This overview concludes with the important caution that, no matter how anti-Semitic Wagner may have been (and, Sheffi argues, that he was no more anti-Semitic than many other artists of his time), he “should not be turned into the classic symbol of German anti-Semitism” (p. 26). Pursuing this theme further, Sheffi next analyzes the “Nazification of Wagner,” arguing that men such as Houston Stewart Chamberlain (Wagner’s son-in-law), aided by Cosima Wagner, the artist’s widow, reinterpreted Wagner’s social and political views in such a way as to give them a more racist and xenophobic appearance. Finally, Sheffi concludes her introduction to Wagner with an examination of Hitler’s personal appreciation of the artist and his connections, largely through Winifred Wagner (Richard Wagner’s daughter-in-law), to the Wagner family. In addition, the public association of National Socialism with Wagner is explored briefly, as is the postwar attempt by intellectuals to disassociate Wagner from Nazi propaganda.

The remainder of Sheffi’s book comprises a chronological examination of the Wagner controversy in Israel, beginning in the years before the creation of the State of Israel, and continuing through the 1990s. In the process Sheffi’s concern is to illustrate the so-called “Ring of Myths” which has grown up around Richard Wagner in the State of Israel. Sheffi argues that the early reception of Wagner in the Hebrew *Yishuv* in Palestine was overwhelmingly positive. Wagner was celebrated as one of the ‘geniuses’ of German culture and cultural life in the *Yishuv* was consciously modeled on European, especially German, cultural life. Even the appropriation of Wagner by the National Socialist Party, evoked only minor concern until 1938 and the events of *Kristallnacht*. In protest to the events of November 9, the Palestine Symphony Orchestra cancelled a performance of *Die Meistersinger von Nuernberg*, and would never again play Wagner pieces in Palestine. Likewise, the works of Richard Strauss, who worked briefly in Goebbels’ propaganda department, were no longer performed in Palestine, as knowledge of Nazi pogroms broadened. From this point on Wagner and Strauss would function as symbolic reminders of the degeneracy of the Nazi regime.

Following the creation of the State of Israel, Sheffi argues that public reactions to Wagner (and to Strauss and other ‘co-opted’ artists) underwent a series of transformations. In the 1950s the government of Israel was seeking to normalize relations with West Germany. Thus cultural opposition to Wagner provided an essential outlet for anti-German sentiments. In addition, the details of the Holocaust were too raw to discuss openly in the immediate aftermath of the creation of the State of Israel; nor were Israelis able to define an appropriate form of Holocaust commemoration at this time. Therefore, the identification of Wagner with the evils of the Holocaust allowed a form of public protest and public commemoration to take shape. By opposing any public performance of Wagner, Israelis could satisfy themselves that they were honouring the memory of the victims and the wishes of survivors.

This process of identification and symbolization continued in the 1960s and 1970s, aided and abetted by various political parties which saw in the Wagner controversy an opportunity to rally public support. During this era “Wagner and Strauss were transformed from real people to embodiments of all the Nazis’ iniquity and injustice towards Jews” (p. 87). Moreover, the 1960s saw a complete separation of the political attitude of the state of Israel towards the state of West Germany, and the public attitude towards the banned composers. Economic and political ties with West Germany were necessary, German commercial products were even desirable, but through culture Israelis could maintain their opposition to the symbols of the Holocaust which they had created.

By the 1980s and 1990s the Wagner controversy had reached such a level that Wagner had been completely disassociated from his historical context. Indeed, proponents of Wagner performances frequently had to remind their readers that Wagner was not actually alive during the Nazi era, such was the level of knowledge concerning the real Richard Wagner. Nonetheless the myths surrounding Wagner which had been so carefully constructed, had, by the 1990s, become an integral part of Israeli popular and political culture. “From a man of culture and learning, problematic though his views were, he became a man identified with the Holocaust; whereas the real threats of the past—not only extremist nationalism, racism, and systematic murder, but the enormous inherent danger to democracy—all became slogans, at best” (p. 141). Sheffi concludes with a warning that Israelis have placed themselves in a dangerous position culturally, since the very factor that unifies them depends on hatred and censorship—key elements of National Socialist

Germany—for its continuation.

Sheffi's analysis of the Wagner controversy covers a substantial number of issues, all within a relatively brief one hundred and eighty-eight pages. Thus, while the main argument is presented in a clear and convincing manner, peripheral points need to be expanded in order to flesh out the supporting details. For example, on several occasions Sheffi mentions a current of xenophobia that has developed in Israeli culture, evidenced by comments directed towards the Indian-born conductor Zubin Mehta, who was one of the first conductors of the Israel Symphony Orchestra to attempt to defy the Wagner ban. This theme, however, is never fully explored. Similarly, Sheffi argues that the anti-Semitic comments expressed in Wagner's most virulently racist treatise, "Judaism in Music," should in fact be read as a product of simple personal rivalries and jealousies. This assertion, though plausible, would benefit from more detailed analysis and additional evidence. Finally, the book refers on a number of occasions to the lack of basic rights, civil liberties and protections afforded the citizens of Israel, most importantly freedom of speech. These points might have been better integrated into the analysis.

Nonetheless, Sheffi has done a commendable job of making the Wagner controversy accessible to a broad audience, despite dealing with the complex issues of culture- and identity-formation. At its most basic level the book does an excellent job of showing the historical evolution of the debate, and linking this to the political and ideological evolution of the state of Israel. Clearly the Wagner phenomenon has taken on a life of its own. Contemporary opponents repeat party lines verbatim, with little or no awareness of any of the real issues related to Richard Wagner's music or his anti-Semitism. In the process they often fall victim to the very crimes committed by the Nazi regime—censorship and political interference in culture. As well, any scholar interested in

issues of historical memory and the process of cultural identification would find this a valuable contribution to the field.

As Na'ama Sheffi's book went to press, the Wagner debate appeared to be waning. In October 2000, the Israel Symphony Orchestra Rishon Lezion, performed Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* in public, after obtaining Supreme Court permission. Only fifty protesters demonstrated outside the Concert Hall, and several Holocaust survivors applauded the decision to perform Wagner as a positive step[3]. However, the subsequent shift to the right in Israeli politics under the government of Ariel Sharon appears to have revitalized the anti-Wagner movement. The recent interference with the Barenboim performance of *Die Walkure* at the Israel-Festival was accompanied by the observation that any performance of Wagner is "a slap in the face of Holocaust survivors and an offence against the memory of the victims of Nazism." [4] Thus, the "Ring of Myths" identified by Na'ama Sheffi appears to be alive and well in Israel.

[1]. "Klage gegen Barenboim-Konzert in Jerusalem wegen Wagner," *Berliner Morgenpost*, 4 May 2001.

[2]. "Israel Festival to Reconsider Wagner Concert," CNN.com/world, 11 May 2001.

[3]. "Israeli Orchestra Breaks Wagner Taboo," BBC News Online, 27 October 2000.

[4]. "Klage gegen Barenboim-Konzert," translation mine.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-genocide>

Citation: Tracey J. Kinney. Review of Sheffi, Na'ama, *The Ring of Myths: The Israelis, Wagner and the Nazis*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5225>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication,

originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.