

WAGNER AND ISRAEL

The bicentenary of Wagner's birth also marks another anniversary, the ban on the playing of the composer's work in Israel. MALCOLM MILLER traces the history of the ban, analyses the reasons behind it and makes a case for it to be lifted



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Above: The audience stands for the Hatikva prior to a performance of Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* by the Israel Chamber Orchestra at Bayreuth in 2012
Right: Protesters against this performance in Tel Aviv



Photo: Karolyn Koorsh

Blogging about the 680-plus Wagner productions being performed globally during the Wagner bicentenary year, a CBC journalist concluded, "If you need a shelter from the storm, Wagner's still banned in Israel".

Yet the ban in Israel is no joke. Whilst Wagner is increasingly accessible in Israel through TV, radio, CD and internet, as well as courses in academies and universities, public performance is still not tolerated. The Israeli Philharmonic does not include Wagner in its repertoire, nor does the New Israeli Opera mount productions. Two recent incidents in the ongoing Wagner saga prove that the issues are still as raw as they were in 1950s.

In 2012 the Israel Chamber Orchestra and its conductor Roberto Paternostro received the prestigious ECHO Klassik award in Berlin for "bridge-building and crossing boundaries" for the first ever performance by an Israeli orchestra of Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* in the Bayreuth Stadthalle during the Wagner opera festival. The concert attracted a Knesset debate and accusations from Holocaust survivor groups that it was an act of "moral failure".

In June 2012 internationally acclaimed Barenboim protégé Asher Fisch was to conduct orchestral extracts from Wagner's operas at a private concert of the recently formed Israeli Wagner Society organised by its president, Jonathan Livni. Both Livni and Fisch, children of refugees from Nazi Germany, were keen to break the Wagner taboo, but their attempt was thwarted by Tel Aviv University and

subsequently by the Hilton Hotel, who refused to allow the performance on their premises.

Remarkably, the arguments raised in the public debate surrounding these recent events are the same as those raised 60 years ago, when, in 1952, the first Wagner-Strauss performance in modern Israel was attempted. The main argument to reappear is the accusation that Wagner performance is a "desecration of the memory of the victims of the Holocaust", and one of the bodies still pursuing that argument is the Holocaust Survivors' Association. Indeed,

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as the Israeli academic Na'ama Sheffi has argued in her thought-provoking study of the history of the debate *The Ring of Myths* (2001), Wagner performance, far from being a musical or artistic question, touches far deeper into Israeli society, on issues of national identity, international

relations with Germany and, most importantly, Holocaust memorialisation.

The 200th anniversary of Wagner's birth offers a timely opportunity to revisit the question and speculate on a path forward. 2013 is also the 75th anniversary of the 'ban' itself. It began on 12 November 1938, when, just three days after Kristallnacht, Toscanini famously removed Wagner's overture to *Die Meistersinger* from his concert with the Palestine Orchestra, formed in 1936 from refugees from Nazi Europe and later renamed the Israel Philharmonic (IPO).

Yet what is often ignored is that this was intended as a gesture of protest against Germany to attract international media attention. For both before and after that concert, despite awareness of Wagner's antisemitism and of Nazi appropriation of his music, the orchestra played Wagner without any objections. Their second season in 1938 included extracts from *Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser* and *Der Fliegende Holländer* in concerts in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa and Ramat Gan, and Wagner again featured in the third season in February 1939, in Cairo and Alexandria.

Yet although the Wagner 'ban' was intended as a one-off political gesture, it then became extended during WWII. Any hopes that Wagner's music would again form part of the repertoire once hostilities had ceased were dashed when, in 1952, the first attempt to play Wagner in modern Israel was immediately stifled.

In the 1950s Richard Strauss was also perceived as symbolising Nazism. The



CHALLENGERS OF THE WAGNER BAN from left: Jascha Heifetz, Daniel Barenboim

Asher Fisch

backdrop was the recent reparations treaty with Germany which was accompanied by much anti-German feeling. When the great violinist Jascha Heifetz insisted on playing Strauss in his Israel tour against the objections of Israeli organisations, the performances were greeted by silence and after his Jerusalem concert he was attacked by a camp survivor. The outcry in the international press was countered by Israeli opinion that he had behaved in a provocative way.

The fiercest battle was in 1966, when Zubin Mehta attempted to perform *Tristan* and he did not give up until a public debate had lasted for several months. This was the time when the Eichmann trials were reawakening the raw wounds of the Shoah and the first diplomatic ties with West Germany were also stirring anti-German feeling.

It was the 'wrong time' and indeed every subsequent attempt was similarly the 'wrong time'. In 1974 a programme to play Strauss elicited a strike by Mann Auditorium workers. Now it was the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War and again it was argued that it would stain the memory of the Shoah. Public figures and survivor organisations mounted pressure campaigns.

It is striking that the musicians themselves (notably players of the IPO), as well as some arts administrators, writers and editors, were against the ban. There were clear musical reasons, including the need to raise standards by rising to the challenge of Wagner's music. Moral issues were also debated: the hypocrisy of allowing German products yet denying German culture, the need for artistic freedom and the civil liberty of being able to choose what one listened to. However, whilst there was no 'legal' ban, the government recommendation was not to perform Wagner and Strauss until the public was 'ready for it'.

The next debacle ensued in 1981, when Zubin Mehta gave a surprise Wagner encore which drew severe criticism. Mehta was

censured as an 'outsider', to which the IPO's response was to make him Musical Director for Life.

Clearly it needed an Israeli to 'break the taboo', and this was in part proved in 1990, when the esteemed Israeli conductor-composer Noam Sheriff played Strauss with the Rishon Lezion Orchestra. This resulted in a reappraisal of Strauss's true 'collaboration' with the Third Reich, and increasing Strauss performances throughout the 1990s. Similarly a Wagner concert in 2000 by the distinguished conductor Mendi Rodan, a survivor, again with the Rishon Lezion orchestra, and recitals of Wagner-Liszt transcriptions by the pianist Gilead Mishori, encouraged more tolerant attitudes.

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To have Wagner played again in Israel is a fervent mission of Daniel Barenboim. Before a second encore of his concert with the Berlin Philharmonic in 2001, he announced: "Despite what the Israel festival believes, there are people sitting in the audience for whom Wagner does not spark Nazi associations. I respect those for whom these associations are oppressive. It will be democratic to play a Wagner encore for those who wish to hear it. I am turning to you now and asking whether I can play Wagner." There ensued a 30-minute debate with dozens walking out, banging doors behind them. However, unreported by the press, the majority stayed and applauded the performance enthusiastically. More recently, while working with the West-East Divan Orchestra, Barenboim has confused the

issue by equating the Wagner ban with attitudes to Palestinians. Yet there is a point in his identifying both issues as political rather than musical, and to his plea that it is time to relinquish myths and taboos.

The Wagner bicentenary seems therefore a timely opportunity to look more deeply into why Wagner has become a symbol of the evils of Nazism in the public consciousness, and how this symbolism might, in the light of historical research, be recast for the future.

There is no doubt of Wagner's antisemitism in both his writing and, as latest research has shown, in his music dramas. Whilst other artists and composers have been antisemitic, Wagner is unique in having published his opinions, most strongly in the notorious essay *Judaism in Music* (first published anonymously in 1850, then revised in 1869 under Wagner's own name) which argues, in rather offensive language, that Jews are necessarily incapable of creativity on account of being foreign and alienated from their own language and culture, in contrast to the German artists' direct relationship with their 'Volk'. As a corrupting influence on German culture, Wagner concludes that the only solution is 'Untergang', which literally is to 'go under', a term which has been construed as total assimilation.

As objectionable as this is, the essay was a vehicle whereby Wagner, drawing on earlier philosophers such as Herder, could develop his ideas about the role of art and the artist in society. Indeed the 'Jewish composer' par excellence, Ernest Bloch, ardent admirer of Wagner's music, paradoxically contradicted yet also vindicated Wagner by immersing himself in what he perceived as the culture of his Jewish 'race' to produce universal music. Wagner's later writings in the *Bayreuther Blätter* were even more potently virulent, capped only by those of his wife Cosima (Liszt's daughter), whose extensive diaries are filled with almost daily antisemitic comments.



Photo: Franco Lanni

Roberto Paternostro (who has just retired as director of ICO)

Yet Wagner's personality was complex, and despite his opinions he kept the company of Jewish patrons and colleagues, most notably Herman Levi, the eminent conductor who premiered *Parsifal* at Bayreuth. He did not sign up to the Antisemite Party, to which many of his contemporaries allied themselves. One of Wagner's best-loved operas was Halevy's *La Juive*.

As for the music, scholars like Barry Millington and Paul Rose have shown beyond doubt that characters in the *Ring Cycle* such as Alberich are cast from negative Jewish traits described in Wagner's writings. The distorted prize song sung by Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*, known to have been intended as a caricature of Hanslick, the anti-Wagner critic of Jewish descent, has been shown to be based on contemporary musical caricatures of Jewish synagogue music. Some writers go so far as to claim that underlying works like *Parsifal* and *Tristan* are antisemitic racist ideologies.

Even if inspired by antisemitism, the music dramas do not overtly cast any characters as Jews nor do they focus on antisemitic themes. On the contrary, in the context of German Romanticism, Wagner's operas cover such universal topics as love and renunciation, friendship, loyalty and betrayal, and particularly artistic tradition and progress. Only in the post-Holocaust era have productions addressed themes such as the destructive forces of nationalism, Nazism and antisemitism, whilst also bringing out an over-arching emphasis on love and human relationships.

The charge against Wagner that sees his oeuvre as part of a causal chain leading to the Holocaust, voiced often in the Israeli public debate, appears to ignore the 50-year gap between Wagner's death in 1883 and Hitler's rise to power. The link between those two events is the writing of Wagner's son-in-law Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose *Foundations of the 19th Century* (1899), an influential book based on racist theories, was adopted by Nazi ideologues

for its promotion of German racial superiority. Wagner could not be held responsible for Hitler's friendship with Winifred Wagner and her family from the 1920s at Bayreuth, and the (mis-)use of Wagner's music at Nazi rallies. The idea expressed in the title of a book by Joachim Köhler that Wagner and Hitler were 'Prophet and Disciple' is untenable.

That Wagner was a prophet is true – he was a musical prophet, anticipating, as Beethoven had done in his brinkmanship from Classic to Romantic eras, the seismic shock waves that shook musical style in 20th-century modernism. And it was his greatness which led the Nazis to manipulate his art for their purposes, to create a Wagner of their own symbolism.

Frequently voiced statements such as "Wagner was Hitler's favourite composer" and that Wagner wrote "the sound track to the Holocaust", while emotive, are flawed. Bruckner was Hitler's favourite composer along with Franz Lehar. Carl Orff was a Nazi. Yet none of those were ever 'banned' in Israel. And there is more evidence of Viennese classics and waltzes being performed in the camps than Wagner. Yet truth is not the issue in a debate that clings to the notion that Wagner symbolises the evil of Nazism, laid the seeds for Nazi ideas, and was in some degree responsible for the Holocaust.

That symbolism, however, is also a key argument for those who support Wagner performance, such as the conductor Asher Fisch, who hold that it is only by freeing Israeli society of the perception of Wagner as a Nazi symbol that Israel can take ownership of Wagner and thus deal a victorious blow against the Nazi appropriation of one of the most important composers in the history of Western music.

As Asher Fisch has also remarked, the main opponents of Wagner are no longer the survivors themselves but the second or third generations aiming to 'honour' their antecedents. Certainly one of the main reasons for avoiding Wagner performance has been, and still is, to avoid offending the sensitivities of survivors. But it is interesting to note that among the members of Livni's Wagner Society are several Holocaust survivors, who clearly do not agree that Wagner's music should not be played.

Underlying the debate is a fear that playing Wagner will result in forgetting the evil of the Holocaust. Yet, equally, a change of attitude to Wagner performance could bring those issues into sharper focus. At the heart of the matter is the need to confront the contradictions in Wagner's personality:

Malcolm Miller will be chairing a discussion on **WAGNER AND ISRAEL** on 31 May with a panel including Noam Ben-Ze'ev, Dr Margaret Brearley, Roberto Paternostro, Dr Paul Rose and Na'ama Sheffi. This is part of the conference **RICHARD WAGNER'S IMPACT ON HIS WORLD AND OURS**, 30 May - 2 June at Leeds University. For more information see **WHAT'S HAPPENING** page 32

namely his ability to produce great works of art which have qualities and positive values whilst at the same time expressing unpalatable socio-political ideas. It is also necessary to confront the historical facts of how the Wagner symbol was manipulated both by the Nazis, and, subsequently, as Na'ama Sheffi demonstrates, in the public debate within Israel.

Are there signs of any changes in attitude in the near future? Perhaps. Certainly over 60 years there has been a change in the balance of arguments, for if in the 1950s and 60s the case was clearly contra, from the 1980s-90s onwards there has been a marked shift to more open attitudes and initiatives. In the context of recent cultural boycotts experienced by Israeli society it seems apt to seize this moment to show that artistic expression, while connected to social and political circumstances, can also transcend and transform them.

Towards the goal of a full lifting of the Wagner ban, there are various paths that might bring about a 'de-demonisation' of Wagner, for instance inviting visiting artists and ensembles to perform Wagner in Israel, allowing private performances and encouraging educational events. Such a celebration of artistic freedom and the potential it brings will enrich Israeli society.

An exciting possibility for progressive Wagner productions would be to confront problematic issues in original, specifically Israeli stagings, as certain German post-war productions have done. Such appropriation would attract global attention, impel a new era in the evolution of Israeli cultural identity, and contribute to a process of demythologising to benefit both operatic appreciation as well as the process of Holocaust memorialisation in a climate of social and political freedom.