

## Politics and Music

"Give me the making of the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws." (Andrew Fletcher, 18th-century Scottish political philosopher.)

When I attended school in the Netherlands, we were taught not only to sing the psalms, but also national songs. Music is frequently used to accompany society's most important rituals, such as the celebration of the Queen's coronation or the commemoration services on Remembrance Day. In this way, music tends to reinforce the ideals of society – political, social, or religious. Music creates loyalties and galvanizes opposition in social and political struggles. It does it so well that in a closed society ruled by a dictatorship, it is widely censored, controlled, and surrounded with restrictions. If music would be politically neutral, musicians would not be so suspect, or often imprisoned, and so frequently silenced.

History reveals many examples of the political use of music. Music fostered the spirit of rebellion during the French revolution. From the first outbreak, people had sung rebellious or jubilant words to popular tunes or had made up new ones. The curious blend of politics, nation worship and music signalled the celebration of Bastille Day, on July 14, 1792. The provincial cities sent large delegations of National Guards to the festival. One such group from Marseille had marched 27 days, singing revolutionary songs to make the time pass more quickly.

### Social Darwinism

During the rise and fall of Nazism, music played a vital role, especially the music of Richard Wagner. But before we discuss the relation of Wagner and Hitler, the reigning philosophy of the times must be considered. The history of Nazism does not begin with Hitler's becoming German Chancellor in 1933, or even with the founding of the National Socialist German Worker's Party in Munich in 1919. The roots go deeper. At the turn of the 20th century the doctrines of race and of Social Darwinism was all the rage. According to Social Darwinians, all sorts of groups – nations, races, cultures – were subject to the same laws of natural selection as plants and animals, subject to the same perpetual struggle for existence, the same survival of the stronger, the same elimination of the less fit. Hitler was an ardent believer in this evil philosophy. Hitler said that his studies had proved conclusively to him "the fallacy of all religions", and led him to accept the laws of Social Darwinism as determining the life of individual men and races alike. In 1923, he declared, "It has ever been the right of the stronger, before God and man, to see his will prevail. History proves that he who lacks strength is not served in the slightest by 'pure laws.'...All of nature is one great struggle between strength and weakness, and eternal victory of the strong over the weak. If it were any different, nature would be in a state of putrefaction. The nation which would violate this elementary law would rot away." As a follower of Darwin, he was convinced that human society was moving blindly toward some ideal goal.

Racism and especially anti-Semitism became the Nazi official political philosophy. Alfred Rosenberg (1893-1946), editor of the official Nazi daily, and the man charged with the supervision of the "intellectual and ideological training of the National Socialist Party", wrote in

1920, "It is high time for the stories of Abraham and Jacob, of Laban, Joseph, Judah and of the other archcrooks to stop working their mischief in our churches and schools. It is an utter disgrace that these embodiments of a mendacious and deceitful spirit can be represented to us as religious models, and even as the intellectual ancestors of Jesus. The Christian spirit and the 'dirty Jewish' spirit must be separated. A sharp cut must be made to divide the Bible into what is Christian and what is anti-Christian."

## Hitler and the Arts

Among modern political movements concerned with culture, nationalism has been the most prominent. The military power of the German Nazi state expanded without bounds, attempting to break all opposition from the other cultural spheres. The Nazi leaders decided that the arts, literature, the press, radio, and the films must serve the propaganda purposes of the new regime and its evil philosophy exclusively. What Hitler believed was "good art" was permissible. What he regarded with disfavour was characterised alternatively as "Jewish", "cultural Bolshevik", or "degenerate". Dr. Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment, tried to put German culture into a Nazi straight jacket. On September 22, 1933, German culture became subject to Kulturpolitik, of which the Music Chamber headed by Dr. Joseph Goebbels was a member. "Non-Aryan" composers and those who were married to "Aryans" were weeded out. Every town had an official, a Local Commissar of Music, whose duty it was to pass on the merits of all artists and all works presented in that town. Many of the best composers left the country, while many of the less gifted remained. Many works by foreign composers were deemed "undesirable". The playing of Mendelssohn's music was banned because he was a Jew (the works of all Jewish composers were "verboten"). Jews were also quickly weeded out of the great symphony orchestras and the opera. Composer Paul Hindemith, who pioneered music for newsreels and community singing, was banned in 1934.

## Nazis and Music

Music played a vital role in the Nazi movement. The Nazi rallies used music and fanfare to rouse political passion. In 1938 the Nuremberg all-German-Party rally was attended by 950,000 people. It was a week-long "hymn" of jubilation, colours, lights, music and festivities. It was all devoted to Germany's Fuhrer. The Nazis also used childhood education to instill a "heroic view of the world and life." Children were taught that a "man's greatest honour lies in death before the enemy of his country." And Hitler Youth sang: "God is struggle and struggle is our blood, and that is why we were born." Baldur von Shirach, head of the Hitler Youth and "Youth Leader of the German Reich", published the "hymn", entitled *Profession of Faith in the Fuhrer*.

Oft have we hearkened to your voice's sound  
Listening quietly, folding our hands  
While every word did penetrate our souls.  
All of us know: the end must come  
That will bring liberation from our needs.

What does a year mean when an age is changing!

What does a law mean that would hold us back.  
What pulses through us, what provides direction  
To our young lives is the pure faith you gave us.  
You and none else, my Fuhrer, are way and end.

### **Richard Wagner (1813-1883)**

Wagner's role in music history is immense. Not only did he create works of great beauty and tremendous brilliance, but he generated an entirely new concept of the art of music. He selected in most of his operas figures that reflect his philosophical ideas. He was known for his self-centeredness, for pursuing outrageous love affairs, and befriending the philosopher Nietzsche, the self-styled "anti-christ" and Christian-hater. He was also influenced by German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), an early exponent of a philosophy of materialism. He was reading Feuerbach as early as 1848. Vegetarianism was one of Wagner's favourite hobby-horses. For instance, he claimed to have discovered that the Last Supper was an exhortation to vegetarianism, mistranslating Jesus' words: Taste alone, in memory of me."

Chief among his accomplishments is the monumental *Ring of the Nibelung* and the mammoth Wagner theatre in the small Bavarian town, Bayreuth, to stage it. The stupendous *Ring*, a series of four operas was inspired by the great German epic myth, *Nibelungenlied*, and on which the composer worked for the better part of twenty-five years. The text of *The Ring* was a social allegory that described how and why the existing order of things was doomed. The conflict in these operas often revolves around the theme of greed for gold, which the composer equated with the "tragedy of modern capitalism", and which he saw with horror, wiping out the old virtues which had come down from an earlier day. Despite all Wagner's pagan heroes, he did not entirely despair of Christianity, as Nietzsche did. It was also rumoured that young Wagner had been a revolutionary in Dresden and had barely escaped death in the upheaval of 1848. This endeared him to social reformers. He became the target of political contention during World War I when audiences in the Allied countries associated his works with German imperialism.

Wagner harboured a fanatical hatred for the Jews. He was convinced they were out to dominate the world with their money. Though he scorned parliaments and democracy and the materialism and mediocrity of the bourgeoisie, he also fervently hoped that the Germans, "with their special gifts", would "become not rulers, but ennoblers of the world." He utterly rejected the Old Testament, stating that the Christian God has been erroneously identified with the Jewish tribal god: the god of punishment and war, not the redeeming Saviour of the poor. He dismissed the Ten Commandments as lacking any trace of Christian love. In the *Ring* the Jew was "the devil incarnate of human decadence." The Jew had made a "Judaeo-barbaric jumble of the world", and only a blood purification rite would keep civilization going."

### **Hitler and Wagner**

"Whoever wants to understand National Socialist Germany must know Wagner", Hitler used to say. It was not Wagner's political writings, however, but his towering operas, recalling so vividly the world of German antiquity with its heroic myths, its fighting pagan gods and heroes,

its demons and dragons, its blood feuds and primitive tribal codes, which Hitler and the Nazis took over as their own worldview. Hitler was even idolized by Wagner as a prophet of the Third Reich. In the 1930's, the Nazis used music of Wagner to promote the political and sociological ideals of Hitler's philosophy. Certain concepts occur in Wagner which can be found again and again in the Nazi vocabulary. Das Reich, for instance, the realm, the medieval empire, a secular kingdom. Listening to the *Ring* cycle may do as much to illuminate Nazism's background as any academy study can. For example, Lohegrin said:

Let the Reich's enemy now appear  
We're well prepared to see him near.  
From his Eastern desert plain  
He'll never dare to stir again!  
The German sword for German land!  
Thus will the Reich in vigor stand!

But the Nazis did not embrace Wagner right from the beginning. After the triumph of the Nazi party, Hitler's adoration of Wagner was put in jeopardy by leading Nazis' suspicions that Ludwig Geyer, the second husband of Wagner's mother, might have been Jewish. The phantom of Wagner's possible contamination with Jewish haemoglobin struck horror into the hearts of Nazi biologists and archivists. They anxiously delved into Geyer's own ancestry, and much to the relief of Dr. Goebbels and other Nazi intellectuals, it was found that Geyer was the purest of Aryans.

From his earliest days Hitler worshipped Wagner, and even as his life neared a close, in the damp and dreary bunker at army headquarters on the Russian front, with his world and his dreams beginning to crack and crumble, he loved to reminisce about all the times he had heard the great Wagnerian works and of the inspiration he had derived from the Bayreuth Festival. "What a joy each of Wagner's works has given me!" Hitler exclaimed on the evening of January 24-25, 1942, soon after the first disastrous German defeats in Russia. It was not surprising, therefore, that Hitler tried to emulate Wotan when in 1945 he willed the destruction of Germany so that it might go down in flames with him.

### **Thomas Mann (1875-1955)**

Not all German intellectuals embraced Nazism. Thomas Mann, novelist and Nobel Prize for Literature winner (1929), responded warmly to Wagner's nationalism at first, and entered happily into Wagner's idealization of death. He wrote that he recalled the enormous influence which the equivocal magic of this art "had on my youth an influence which might even be called determining." He observed that the sinister side of this art had [not yet] been revealed by the role it played in the Nazi state. But Wagner's music, Mann would later say, was in some aspect a "reactionary narcotic" poisoning the soul of man with fantasies of love and death, and the soil of Germany with chauvinistic myths. Later he was alarmed that Hitler enthusiastically admired the *Ring*. Due to his strong disagreement with the Nazi regime, he left Germany for Switzerland in 1933.

### **Wagner in Israel**

Can music be separated from politics, particularly when politics become murderous? After World War II, Wagner's music was not everywhere welcomed because of his anti-Semitism and all the evil associated with it. For example, Jewish musicians in Tel Aviv refused to play the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde* when it was put on the program of symphony concert under the direction of an American director. They booed him for his intention to inflict Wagner on Wagner' philosophical victims.

## **Church Music and Politics**

Music can be used to arouse evil. It can also be played in praise of our sovereign God. In our age of privatization of faith, we seem to have forgotten the public and even the political role of church music. The psalter and hymnal had to do with much more than the private faith of worshippers. They had a purpose larger than fostering the relationship of the individual to God, or acting solely as a devotional guide (however important devotion was to the writers.) The psalms and hymns had the power to move people to act as disciples in all aspects of life.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Congregational/Independent churches in both England and New England, believers wove together their worship life, social life, and family life. A New England Election Day featured special worship services where ministers preached the annual "Election Sermon." The congregational prayer touched upon all the themes of daily life, including the social and political. But how could a tradition that allowed for only the singing of the Psalms in worship services integrate political or social issues into the liturgy? Rochelle A. Stackhouse, points out that the most obvious answer comes from the Psalms themselves which, in their original contexts are brimful of political references. She notes that the original writers and singers of the Psalms worshipped God who ruled every aspect of life and who was intimately involved in the political and social existence of the Hebrew people. It made perfect sense to them that sung prayers should communicate with God and one another about all of life's issues and events. The Psalter as it has come down to us reflects those concerns. We do well to remember the original intent of the Psalms when we sing them in church.

## **Conclusion**

Germany not only produced Wagner and Hitler with their evil philosophies; there was also a godly German who made music and wrote hymns. Martin Luther played the flute and the guitar, composing or adapting tunes to his own words. Some 40 hymns are attributed to him, including the superb "*A Mighty Fortress is our God.*" Contemporaries said that these hymns did as much for the cause of the Reformation as his books. Indeed, the place of music was for Luther "next to theology." He said that the Devil hates good music because it drives away temptation and evil thoughts. In the schools for boys and girls that Luther wanted to see established he would allow no man to teach who could not sing, "nor would I let him preach either."

Johan D. Tangelder  
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