

Wagner: A Genius in Music, but a Disappointment in Character

For many years, Richard Wagner has been taught in schools as a keystone in the music history timeline. He is the man who created “Gesamtkunstwerk” (Music Dramas). He was the inventor of the leitmotif, which we hear in film scores every day. He was the man for whom the Festspielhaus was built, but along with these musical developments, he had a darker political stance. Richard Wagner was extremely Anti-Semitic throughout his lifetime and wrote papers about how Jewish people should not be in the performance of music. These papers were highly racist and were not produced once but many times by this composer. So even though Richard Wagner made huge musical developments that we use in the vernacular of today’s sound, should school’s continue to teach and perform Wagner’s works? To this question, I say, “How can we learn if we do not take in the bad with the good?” My position on this topic is to teach Wagner to his full extent. I believe schools should teach all his significant musical developments and his political and biographical history to show students that you can accept important concepts from evil people and appreciate the past while not glorifying the historical figure.

Although born in Leipzig, Richard Wagner grew up in Dresden, Germany, with eight siblings and a middle social class financial situation. His stepfather, Ludwig Geyer, worked as a painter, actor, and poet.¹ His closeness with the arts is why Richard Wagner had become so encompassed by theatre. Richard Wagner lived from 1813-1883 at a time when passion and art, and literature were highly valued. This was during the Romantic period of music, which was classified by its rich tones, intricate harmonies, and focus on emotion rather than structure and form. The beginning of Wagner’s career as a composer started at Leipzig University, where he

¹ Walter Schlesinger, Derek Watson, Carl Dahlhaus, and Mary Whittall, “Richard Wagner: A Biography.” Notes, Music Library Association, (1980) <https://doi.org/10.2307/940262>.

produced his first opera, *Die Feen*. This opera had musical styles based on the current trends at the time, specifically the trend of Weber's classical style.² This can be seen in its overture, which includes many of the opera's principal themes, just as Weber had done. His early career also included symphonies, although he did not grow as attached to this medium. As his career started to take off, Richard Wagner began the creation of his more complex works. Wagner believed that all art should be combined to create the perfect piece, and therefore he formed the Music Drama. These Music Dramas became his most famous works and were the works that we are debating whether to perform or not. Living such a full life at a time where we can have physical evidence of the art he created, we have multiple sources that we can study in order to understand his musical ideas in a better context, but does his personal life make it immoral to perform these works?

One of the most important musical developments that the public adores Wagner is the leitmotif. A leitmotif is a short musical passage used to express an idea or character, and this passage reoccurs each time the idea is restated in the piece as a whole.³ We can see this being used in modern-day film scores. For example, each time that the Avengers all line up for a battle, the Avenger's iconic theme is played throughout the entire franchise, or whenever Darth Vader is marching, the Imperial March plays within the Star Wars Franchise. This idea of the leitmotif was first created in Richard Wagner's most famous work *The Ring Cycle*. This tetralogy included four movements based on Norse Mythology and the idea of the Rhine River and its tempting Rhinegold.⁴ In order to excite the audience, before characters would enter the stage, the

² Steven Vande Moortele, "The Sorcerer as Apprentice: Trial, Error, and Chord Magic in Wagner's Overture to 'Die Feen.'" *Music & Letters* 100, no. 1 (2019): 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcz022>.

³ Jonathan Kregor, "Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music By Matthew Britzter-Stull (review)." *Notes (Music Library Association)* 73, no. 3 (2017): 547–50. <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.2017.0017>.

⁴ Bernard Shaw, and Fernandez Julio, *The Perfect Wagnerite; a Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring*, Time-Life Records special ed. (New York: Time, 1972).

instrumental would play the leitmotif attached to them. Whenever Wotan, Brunhilde, or the Ring would enter the stage the audience would react with excitement and because it had such a positive reaction to teasing the characters, it has become an extremely popular device that we use even today.

Another idea that has been a point of historical importance was the invention of the Music Drama. Before Wagner's idea of the Music Drama, within opera, the orchestration was not as emphasized because it was only there to provide accompaniment to the singers on stage. Wagner believed that you had to combine all aspects of the theatre in order to create true art, so he focused not only on the vocal parts, but also on the intricacy of the orchestration, the fantastical stage mechanics, and also the lighting of the stage.⁵ An example of these extreme dramatic representations within shows is Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Richard Wagner not only created fantastic voice lines but also added to the scenes as a whole using orchestration, in specific the Tristan Chord. This chord was played throughout the piece and was the specific musical device that held the entire piece together.⁶ This chord was played within the orchestra and creates a very dissonant atmosphere that represents the unresolved love within the opera. So rather than focusing on the operatic lines, Richard Wagner went out of the regular emphasis and made the orchestra a significant part of the piece as a whole. Along with this emphasis on orchestration was the use of unique and unbelievable props during the productions. This was not only within *Tristan und Isolde* but also translated to all of his operas. These operas were so popular in their time that Wagner was able to obtain funding to create his own Opera house.

⁵ Martin Knust, "Music, Drama, and Sprechgesang: About Richard Wagner's Creative Process." *19th Century Music* 38, no. 3 (2015): 219–42. <https://doi.org/10.1525/nem.2015.38.3.219>.

⁶ H. F. Frost. "Some Remarks on Richard Wagner's Music Drama 'Tristan Und Isolde.'" *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 8, no. 1 (1881): 147–67. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrma/8.1.147>.

Important Operas that Wagner composed included *Das Ring Des Nibelungen*, *Götterdämmerung*, and *Der Fliegende Holländer*. These were performed at the Festspielhaus, a building that had also created musical advancements. This building was located in Bayreuth, Germany, and was funded by King Ludwig II of Bavaria. This building was constructed with Wagner's specific musical needs in mind. The orchestral pit within this building was sunken below the stage to mix sounds of singers above and instruments below so perfectly that it creates the uniform combination of sounds. This was used to make his Music Drama dreams come true, and it was not only this orchestral pit that helped with this dream. Above the stage was a very large hidden room that allowed for hanging props so that the works could become even more fantastical. An example of this room being used is during the first production of the Ring Cycle, the Rhinemaidens were suspended in the air with flowing fabrics in order to create the illusion of mermaid women swimming in the river. Wagner was a man who wanted to create true art, and he did not let his unreasonable expectations stop him; instead, he found a way to obtain the art he wanted.

As we can see from the copious amounts of musical advancements and achievements that Richard Wagner has obtained, he is a significant part of music history. However, Wagner is still controversial because of his political views, which are seen as taboo nowadays.

It was during the Nazi Era that Wagner started producing his works of Antisemitism, specifically his piece called *Jewishness in Music*. Within this work, Wagner attacks Jewish music, suggests that Jewish voices sound unpleasant due to the Hebrew language, and also states that Jewish people are incapable of creating artistic enunciation to the feeling and emotions of a piece of music.⁷ It can clearly be seen that Wagner was creating blatant racist propaganda, and

⁷ Henrik Rosengren, "A Wagner for the Jews': Moses Pergament, Richard Wagner and Anti-Semitism in Swedish Cultural Life in the Interwar Period," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 38, no. 2 (2013): 245–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2013.783505>.

this type of behavior and opinion should never be tolerated. Therefore, I do not believe that Wagner should be performed anymore due to the antisemitic feelings associated with his artistry. Currently, the piece “Jingle Bells” is no longer being performed due to the song having connections to minstrel shows, which contained blatant racism, including blackface during the original performance. Although no longer being performed, we can appreciate the musical significance of the piece of music within holiday times without glorifying minstrel shows. This idea can also be transferred over to Richard Wagner’s musical developments.

Throughout history classes in regular general education, terrible political figures are taught regularly to show examples of major historical events to study their war tactics on an intellectual level. However, we do not glorify the technique used to kill a vast majority of people. An example evil historical figure very close to Wagner is Hitler. If we were not taught about Hitler in history classes, we would not be able to understand our diversity and equity within the world today. When it comes to Wagner, if we are not taught about his musical advances along with his political views, we would not understand how he had evolved music into what it is today.

If we were to remove Wagner from music history classes altogether, key developments within music history would not be learned by future generations. Therefore we would not understand music to its full extent. We need to know about the leitmotif to understand music's importance in modern-day film scores fully. We need to learn about Music Dramas to give as much attention to all aspects of shows to develop them to their truest potential. We need to know about the Festspielhaus to consider the importance of musical centers and the extremity that composers will go to search for the sound they desire. Also, along with all of the promising developments, we need to learn from Wagner's bad deeds. Without knowing about Wagner’s

antisemitism, we may have a preconceived notion that critical musical figures all came from positive outlooks and should always be celebrated.

In conclusion, whether we should admire Wagner or not, the opinion should be a clear no due to his corrupted political ideas. However, it is entirely appropriate to appreciate Wagner's musical ideas on an intellectual level to continue our development within the musical world. Without critical figures in history, a person cannot appreciate the ideas of the present. An important thing to note, however, is that a key figure is not always a person who presents role-model behavior; in fact, they can be someone you should stray from becoming. Richard Wagner is the perfect example of a keystone in history with a less desirable background, and it is not only Wagner that this relates to. Music history classes should strive to include more background on the crucial figures we talk about and learn from throughout our studies because it will surprise you the number of people that fit into the category, just like Wagner.

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