

Only Time Will Cover the Taint

The fact that pork is not kosher is no reflection on the pigs. Orthodox Jews avoid pig meat not because it tastes bad (how would they know?), or because it is bad for you (just look at the Cossacks), or even because pigs live in pigsties. They avoid it because unlike, for example, the meat of grasshoppers, it is forbidden, taboo, “tref”—the reverse of holy. The ban sanctifies its observers.

Similarly, the fact that many Israelis do not want to hear Wagner’s music in their concert halls does not merely reflect on Wagner or his ugly personal beliefs. If an artist’s anti-Semitism were enough to render his work tref, there would be precious little art in Israel. Among Russian composers, for example, only two famous ones seem *not* to have been anti-Semites. Rimsky-Korsakov gave classical proof of his tolerance for Jews by not only allowing, but practically insisting that his daughter marry one (the composer Maximilian Steinberg); and Shostakovich, as a creative artist in Stalin’s Russia, made common cause with other victims of oppression by working Jewish themes into several compositions.

Otherwise, take your pick of bigots. Chaikovsky? “Lots of filthy Yids”—in Russian, *zhidy*—“and the revolting atmosphere they take with them everywhere” spoiled train travel for him, he casually informed his adoring patroness. Stravinsky? A recently auctioned letter of his complains about a 1919 New York production of *Petrushka* by a trio of unauthorized “Israelites” (one of them Pierre Monteux, to whose efforts Stravinsky owed a large part of his early fame), heaping special scorn on the “horrible Jew-kraut sets” (“des horribles décors judéo-boches”).

First published in the *New York Times*, 26 January 1992. Copyright © 2008 The New York Times Company. Reprinted by permission.

Musorgsky's anti-Semitism inhabits not only his letters but also his works. His suite *Pictures at an Exhibition* contains a well-known portrayal of "Two Jews, Rich and Poor." That, however, was not Musorgsky's title (it was invented after his death by his biographer, Vladimir Stasov), and his portrait was of one Jew, not two. The unsanitized title is known but rarely if ever transcribed correctly. Here it is, right off a photograph of the composer's manuscript: " 'Samuel' Goldenberg und 'Schmuyle.'" Note the quotation marks: they point up the repetition of the given name, first in Germanized form, then in the original Yiddish. The contrast embedded in title and music alike is thus a brazen insult: No matter how dignified or sophisticated or Europeanized a zhid's exterior, Musorgsky is telling us, winking, on the inside he is a jabbering, pestering little "Schmuyle."

I'm sure the Israel Philharmonic has played *Pictures at an Exhibition* (in the philo-Semite Ravel's orchestration), and will continue to do so. And even if someone should notice this column and lodge a protest, nobody is going to call for a moratorium on *Boris Godunov* or *Khovanshchina*. And that is simply because Musorgsky is dead. It is his works that live and continue to affect our lives.

That is why defending Wagner against the unforeseen consequences of his anti-Semitism completely misses the point in our current fraught debates. We cannot punish the man now, nor can we earn his gratitude. To be sure, he was not responsible for the Nazis any more than Musorgsky was responsible for the tsar's pogroms. But if tsar or commissar had made Musorgsky the rallying point of a chauvinist campaign, and used his *Pictures* to justify the extermination of "Christ-killers," we might feel differently—not only about the *Pictures*, but about the operas as well.

Wagner's music was used by the Nazis in this way, and that is why it is tref to Holocaust survivors. Their objection to it is a symbolic act, sanctifying the memory of something that, in the opinion of many, it is not yet time to forget. Such an act deserves respect. And none of this would be in any way changed if Wagner the man should turn out to have been a secret lover of Jews, or even a Jew himself.

It does no good to argue that the music itself is inherently nonpolitical and nonracist. The music does not now exist, nor has it ever existed, in a social vacuum. Its meanings are not self-contained. They are inscribed not only by its creator, but by its users, Nazi and Jew alike. Leonard Bernstein has written that "the 'Horst Wessel Lied' may have been a Nazi hymn, but divorced from its words it's just a pretty song." Can we divorce it from its words? No more than we can follow the friendly sorcerer's recipe for turning lead into gold (melt and stir for three hours without thinking of the word *rhinoceros*). To say we should try is like asking, "But aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the show?"

It does no honor to Wagner's music to reduce it all to the level of "just a pretty song," which is the only way it can be rid of its taint before time and memory have done their slow, inevitable work. As long as some music somewhere is considered tref, we have not forgotten that music is a powerful form of persuasion that does work in the world, a serious art that possesses ethical force and exacts ethical responsibilities. (Nor have all musicians given in to the careerism that argues, with Daniel Barenboim, in favor of Wagner merely for the sake of a credential.) Let Wagner remain tref in Israel, and let the controversies rage. Far better that than curtailing moral controversy in the specious name of "the music itself" and letting Wagner become, in Israel's concert life as everywhere else, just another mild narcotic.

POSTSCRIPT, 2008

Even Shostakovich, it seems, may have been susceptible to the "taint." (Nu, who isn't?) Later in 1992, *Muzikal' naya akademiya*, the post-Soviet successor journal to *Sovetskaya muzika*, the organ of the Union of Soviet Composers, carried an interview with Solomon Volkov, author of *Testimony*, the faked memoirs of Shostakovich published in 1979.¹ Volkov told his interlocutor that before emigrating in 1976, while he was still an editor at *Sovetskaya muzika*, he participated in an inspection of the literary remains of Valerian Mikhailovich Bogdanov-Berezovsky (1903–71), a minor composer but an important Leningrad critic, with whom Shostakovich had been close in the 1920s. In one of Bogdanov-Berezovsky's diaries, Volkov recalled finding an account of a visit by the sixteen-year-old "Mitya" Shostakovich during which the two of them complained about *zasil'ye zhidov*, "Jew dominance," in the arts.

Volkov has been caught in so many lies that it may be hard to accept anything from him as true. Even here, it could be argued, he might have had an ulterior motive—proving that he was not a hagiographer, for example—that could have tempted him to fabricate such a story. But it might be useful to admit it as true so as to test our response to the knowledge. Is there any point in holding it against a composer who later performed so many acts of risky solidarity with his Jewish colleagues? Surely not. But at the same time we are cautioned by such knowledge against thinking that all humanity can be sorted into two boxes in this way, any more than in any other, or that any such act of sorting gives us the right to an absolute moral judgment.

As to the matter of performing Wagner in Israel, it is important to keep it in mind that there is no legal ban against it. One can hear Wagner on Israeli radio, one can find Wagner in record stores, one is free to program the "Ride of the Valkyries" as a ring tone on one's cell phone. The "ban" is a voluntary

abstinence on the part of the Israel Philharmonic in deference to members of its audience, who insist vocally on their right to a Wagner-free existence when other orchestras or musicians perform in front of them. There will be more to say about this, and about Daniel Barenboim's attempts to overcome the informal interdiction, in chapter 26.

NOTE

1. Galina Drubachevskaya, "Zdes' chelovek sgorel" (Here a Man Burned Up), *Muzikal' naya akademiya*, no. 3 (1992): 3-14.