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# An Art Corrupted: Classical Music and Musicians in the Third Reich

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**Abstract** – This article examines the importance of classical music to the nationalism of the Third Reich, the policies and attitudes the regime adopted regarding classical music, and the subsequent effect on the lives of musicians living in the Reich. To this end, the experiences of several individual musicians are detailed, including those who were oppressed by the regime, used it to their advantage, and, in rare cases, openly opposed it. The enduring climate of anti-Semitism in both German and global society as a result of Nazi Germany's legacy is also discussed, including the unresolved issue of harassment and bigotry that musicians of Jewish heritage face in Germany's classical music scene to this day.

## I. Introduction

Underneath the Austrian town of Altaussee lies an enormous salt mine, featuring a vast network of tunnels and shafts. On May 21, 1945, George Stout, an American “Monuments Man” tasked with protecting culturally significant items such as paintings and sculptures from the ravages of war, arrived at the mine to discover its miles-long tunnels crammed with hordes of priceless artwork, all of which the Nazis stole from museums, churches, and private citizens across Europe. Stout counted 6,577 paintings, 2,300 watercolors, 137 sculptures, and a massive amount of other art.<sup>1</sup> This was to be Adolf Hitler’s art collection, intended for display at his planned Führermuseum. As one might infer, Hitler was an avid art enthusiast, and believed that German art should reflect notions of Aryan and Germanic supremacy, free of Jewish influence.<sup>2</sup> This went for all forms of art, including music, which historians tend to neglect when examining the artistic priorities of Nazi Germany. Although the Nazi’s predilection for physical artwork is more obvious, music was equally important to their sense of nationalism. Indeed, in one of the Nazi’s

underground art stashes in Siegen, Germany, the Monuments Men discovered the manuscript to Ludwig van Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony.<sup>3</sup> Musicians were equally as susceptible to oppression for being out of lockstep with the regime as other artists were.

This article shows that the Third Reich, considering classical music to be essential to its sense of national and racial superiority, adopted attitudes and policies which profoundly affected the lives of musicians in Germany. Those effects will be demonstrated by describing the experiences of individual musicians who found themselves among either the avowed racial and political enemies of the state, or the beneficiaries of its good graces. In the wake of Nazi Germany’s legacy, the issue of anti-Semitism in the German classical music scene has yet to be resolved, and warrants a deeper conversation regarding the challenges faced by musicians of Jewish heritage in Germany today.

## II. Nationalism in German Music: Origins and Nazi Policies

In 1850, famed German composer Richard Wagner published an essay called *Das Judentum in der Musik*, or *Judaism in Music*.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the essay, Wagner lambasts Jewish musicians, arguing that their culture will never assimilate into German culture, and consequently, they will never learn to compose proper “German” music. Wagner singles out German Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn in particular, claiming that, even though a gifted composer, Mendelssohn cannot divorce himself from mimicking the style of long-past German composers such as J.S. Bach, and is incapable of composing complex music such as opera. Wagner criticizes Jews in other forms of art as well. He attacks poet Heinrich

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Morrison, “The True Story of the Monuments Men.” *Smithsonian*, February 7, 2014. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-monuments-men-180949569/>

<sup>2</sup> “Nazi Approved Art.” *University of South Florida*, last modified 2013. <https://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/arts/ARTREICH.HTM>

<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Edsel, *The Monuments Men*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Haas, *Forbidden Music: Jewish Composers Banned By the Nazis* (Yale University Press, 2013), 28-31.

Heine, describing him as “the conscience of Judaism, just as Judaism is the evil conscience of our modern Civilization.”<sup>5</sup> In his concluding paragraph, Wagner states that “to become Man at once with us... means firstly for the Jew as much as ceasing to be a Jew.”

In Nazi Germany, Wagner was held up as a national hero. In 1933, the fiftieth anniversary of Wagner’s death, an association known as the Richard Wagner Society made a public call for Germans to uphold “the national Germanic spirit of Richard Wagner,” and Adolf Hitler was named the executor of Wagner’s will.<sup>6</sup> That same year, Wagner’s opera *Der Meistersinger von Nurnberg* was named the official state opera of Nazi Germany by propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, who described it as the “most German” of Wagner’s operas.<sup>7</sup> Adolf Hitler, for his part, had found in Wagner a prominent historical figure who completely matched both his artistic and social ideals. As a young man, Hitler’s aspirations for an art career were dashed when he was repeatedly denied admission to Berlin’s art academies, his skills “unsatisfactory” and his tastes too conservative. Now, after rising to power by riding the wave of resentment towards the perceived threat of the Jewish bourgeoisie in interwar Berlin, Hitler was poised to mold the Third Reich in his artistic image.<sup>8</sup> Richard Wagner, with his grand, epic operatic style, combined with his staunch anti-Semitic rhetoric, was irresistible to Hitler, who made Wagner the heart and soul of music in the Third Reich. This would greatly influence state attitudes and policies that suppressed the work of Jewish musicians, including those of past generations.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Felix Mendelssohn’s music was banned in the Third Reich, and his statue in front of the Leipzig Conservatory was destroyed.<sup>10</sup>

Wagner’s effect on Nazism was profound. The *Völkischer Beobachter*, the official newspaper of the Nazi Party, cited Wagner’s expressed opinions on nearly every matter important to Nazi Germany, including racism towards Jews. According to David B. Dennis, throughout the newspaper’s run, Richard Wagner was the subject of 243 articles, more than any other composer.<sup>11</sup> The Nazis also hailed legendary composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as a German icon, but attacked Lorenzo Da Ponte, a Jewish librettist<sup>12</sup> who collaborated with Mozart on such famous operas as *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*. Instead of acknowledging the highly successful artistic collaboration between the two, the *Völkischer* claimed that Mozart managed to write his great operas in spite of Da Ponte, whom they categorized as one of the “crummy bunch of Jews who write too much.” Dennis further writes that such concerns led to the founding of the office *Reichsstelle für Musikbearbeitung*, which was tasked with, among other things, taking “German masterworks” and replacing any text within them that was written by anyone of Jewish descent.<sup>13</sup> All of this set the stage for the regime’s persecution of Jews, and the oppressive environment it created for artists of any “undesirable” ethnic background.

### III. Jewish Musicians in the Third Reich

The mysterious Reichstag fire of February 27, 1933, provided Hitler and the Nazis, who had only recently come to power, all the excuse they needed to establish a police state aimed at oppressing their declared political and racial enemies. While their immediate reaction was to round up political enemies such as Communists, on April 7, they passed the Civil Service Law, which targeted Jews in public employment.<sup>14</sup> This law banned “non-Aryan” people from serving in state-sponsored positions, and its

<sup>5</sup> Richard Wagner, “Judaism in Music,” trans. William Ashton Ellis. University of California-Santa Cruz, accessed 21 Mar. 2018. <https://artstream.ucsc.edu/music80y/Articles/For%20Paper%20%231/Das%20Judenthum%20in%20der%20Musik.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Albrecht Dümmling, “The Target of Racial Purity: The ‘Degenerate’ Art Exhibition in Düsseldorf, 1938.” In *Art, Culture, and Media Under the Third Reich*, edited by Richard A. Etlin (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas S. Grey, “Wagner’s *Der Meistersinger von Nurnberg* as National Opera (1868-1945).” In *Music and German National Identity*, edited by Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Schjeldal, “Hitler as Artist.” *The New Yorker*, last modified August 19, 2002. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2002/08/19/hitler-as-artist>

<sup>9</sup> Haas, *Forbidden Music*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> R. Larry Todd, “Felix Mendelssohn.” *Grove Music Online*, 2001.

<sup>11</sup> David B. Dennis, “‘Honor Your German Masters’: The Use and Abuse of Classical Composers in Nazi Propaganda.” *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 30 no. 2 (2002), 276-277.

<sup>12</sup> A librettist writes the text, or *libretto*, for an opera.

<sup>13</sup> Dennis, “Honor Your German Masters,” 288-289.

<sup>14</sup> “Holocaust Timeline: The Nazification of Germany.” University of South Florida, 2005. Accessed 31 March 2018.

<https://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/timeline/nazifica.htm>

effects were immediately felt in Germany's musical establishments. State-run academies for art, music, and theater saw Jewish faculty members stripped of their positions, and orchestras and opera companies lost large amounts of personnel.<sup>15</sup> One of Berlin's premiere opera companies, the Städtische Oper, was forced to fire its founding music director, Ignaz Waghalter, its principal conductor, Fritz Stiedry, assistant conductors Berthold Goldschmidt and Kurt Sanderling, and chief administrator Rudolf Bing. Where orchestras are concerned, the Berlin Philharmonic's resultant loss in manpower prompted a letter of complaint from conductor Wilhelm Fürtwangler to Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels which implored Goebbels to judge musicians on the quality of their art instead of their "confessional persuasions." The appeal was ultimately in vain.<sup>16</sup>

As the Nazi era went on, the oppression of Jewish musicians in Germany continued, and became an avowed goal of the state. Goebbels himself delivered a speech on May 28, 1938, entitled "Ten Principles of German Music Creativity." In this speech, Goebbels declared: "The struggle against Judaism in German music, which Richard Wagner once carried out on his own, has therefore today become the great task of our time."<sup>17</sup> This not only confirmed the state's admiration of Richard Wagner, reflecting Hitler's own beliefs, but established Jews as an enemy to German music.

It was not only Jews, however, that the Nazis suppressed, nor solely German musicians. A list of musical works banned from performance or distribution, entitled "First List of Undesired Musical Works," appears in the April 4, 1939, edition of the *Völkischer Beobachter* newspaper.<sup>18</sup> The list, published at the behest of the Reich Music Examination Office, included works by African-Americans. The spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is included, as is the jazz standard "Caravan" by Duke Ellington. Still, Jewish musicians figure prominently in the list. Notable composers with works on the list include composer/violinist Fritz Kreisler, as well as

American songwriters Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, all of whom were Jewish.

To be a Jewish musician living in Germany was difficult and frightening, and many were forced to flee the country while time allowed. One of these musicians was Kurt Weill, a German Jewish composer who had, by the time of the Nazi takeover, already established himself as a leading composer of operas and musicals, most notably *Die Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), which premiered in Berlin to wide acclaim in 1928.<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> But by 1932, the rising Nazi Party was already making his life difficult. That year, his opera *Die Bürgschaft* was premiered in Berlin by the Städtische Oper, but was berated by the Nazi press, and was only staged three more times in Berlin before being shut down. The following year, performances of his new musical *Der Silbersee* were disrupted by the Nazis, and it, too, was harshly attacked in the press. In March of 1933, Weill learned that he had been blacklisted for arrest by the Nazi government, which hastened his decision to leave Germany. That month, he fled to Paris, where he stayed until moving to the United States in 1935.<sup>21</sup>

Other musicians were not so lucky. Many were rounded up and forced into concentration camps, where they almost always perished. One such concentration camp, Terezin, became home to many Jewish composers, including Viktor Ullmann, Gideon Klein, and Pavel Haas. These composers wrote choral, piano, and even orchestral works while in Terezin, composed specifically for musicians imprisoned at the camp, and the instruments at their disposal. It did not last forever, however, as most of the musicians were shipped off to Auschwitz in 1944, which spelled certain doom.<sup>22</sup>

Life could be equally dangerous if one was a political enemy of the Nazi regime. It was relatively rare to find anyone who openly opposed the Third Reich due to the obvious dangers of doing so. But after the aforementioned Reichstag Fire of 1933, anyone who held political beliefs opposed to fascism,

<sup>15</sup> Alan E. Steinweis, *Art, Ideology, and Economics in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 106.

<sup>16</sup> Haas, *Forbidden Music*, 222-224.

<sup>17</sup> Dümling, 54-55.

<sup>18</sup> "First Listing of Undesired Musical Works." *Völkischer Beobachter*, 1939. From Calvin College: German Propaganda Archive, accessed April 3, 2018. <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/banned.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Michael Kater, *Composers of the Nazi Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 58.

<sup>20</sup> Although it is conventional to keep opera names in their original language, I have translated this one due to its popularity.

<sup>21</sup> Kater, *Composers of the Nazi Era*, 59-62.

<sup>22</sup> Jascha Nemtsov and Beate Schroder-Nauenberg, "Music in the Inferno of the Nazi Terror: Jewish Composers in the Third Reich," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 18 no. 4 (2000), 79-100.

especially Communists, walked a thin line while living in Germany. The Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff, for example, ran into trouble with the Nazi government by espousing Communist sentiment and applying for Soviet citizenship. He developed these views in reaction to Germany's growing intolerance for Jews and political dissidents, and even wrote music to a libretto based on Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* in 1932.<sup>23</sup> Schulhoff was accepted as a Soviet citizen in 1941, but before he could leave, Hitler launched Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. Schulhoff was then arrested and thrown into the Wülzburg concentration camp, dying there of tuberculosis the following year.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV. Using the Reich as Leverage

Hitler's reign was not a death sentence for everyone, however. Some musicians used the regime to their advantage. One of the most controversial musical figures of the twentieth century was Austrian conductor Herbert von Karajan, known for his long tenure as conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. He joined the Nazi party in 1935, and his big break came in 1938, when the Berlin State Opera was still searching for a replacement for one of its conductors, Leo Blech, who was forced to flee Germany the previous year due to his Jewish heritage.<sup>25</sup> The upstart Herbert von Karajan, only thirty years old and already gaining recognition in concerts with the Berlin Philharmonic, was afforded the opportunity to conduct Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde* with the Berlin State Opera. The performance was a huge success, audience and press alike hailing von Karajan as a "prodigy." He was officially given the job as a Berlin State Opera conductor in April 1939, this being listed among the "Führer's Birthday Honors" for that year. Von Karajan's reputation rapidly spread. The Vienna Philharmonic sought him out for guest appearances, and he took on a profitable recording contract with German record company *Deutsche Grammophon*.<sup>26</sup>

After World War II, Herbert von Karajan was forced to defend himself in front of a "de-Nazification" committee set up by the Austrian government, his right to conduct at stake.<sup>27</sup> On March 18, 1946, he delivered a deposition in front of the committee, arguing that he was not in fact in favor with the Nazi government. He pointed to an actual incident that occurred in 1939, when he conducted a poorly-received performance of the official state opera, *Der Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, in Hitler's presence.<sup>28</sup> In Karajan's words: "Afterwards Hitler spoke disparagingly of me and said he would never attend another performance with myself as conductor; I was not a representative 'German conductor.'" He further stated that his marriage in 1942 to his second wife, who was part Jewish, forced him to resign from the Nazi Party after he was sent before the Party Court.<sup>29</sup> Although the Austrian board ruled in his favor, von Karajan had all but admitted that he used the Nazi regime to further his career. Indeed, in 1938, his performance of Wagner, of all composers, catapulted him into the spotlight, from which his fame only increased. One of the wealthiest and most famous conductors in history, he enjoyed a long and lucrative association with the Berlin Philharmonic, remaining affiliated with the orchestra until his death in 1989.<sup>30</sup>

#### V. Modern-Day Impact

In the modern day, Herbert von Karajan's legacy continues to spark controversy. Oliver Rathkolb of Vienna University claims to have found evidence that von Karajan was more anti-Semitic than is commonly believed; he allegedly was part of a pre-Nazi German nationalist organization in his youth.<sup>31</sup> Claims such as these are merely a symptom of a greater problem facing modern-day Germany's classical music scene. Anti-Semitism did not die with Nazi Germany, and over the years, it has continued to affect the very same institutions that struggled with it during the Nazi era. In 2000, the Berlin State Opera's then-director, Daniel Barenboim, had been trying to raise support for a merger with the Deutsche Oper,

<sup>23</sup> "Erwin Schulhoff," Music and the Holocaust, accessed 4 April 2018.

<http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/places/camps/central-europe/wulzburg/schulhofferwin/>

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Osborne, *Herbert von Karajan: A Life in Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 110.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 113-120; "Herbert von Karajan," Music and the Holocaust, accessed 4 April 2018.

<http://holocaustmusic.ort.org/politics-and-propaganda/third-reich/karajan-herbert-von/>

<sup>27</sup> Osborne, *Herbert von Karajan*, 200.

<sup>28</sup> "Herbert von Karajan," Music and the Holocaust.

<sup>29</sup> Karajan, Herbert von. "Deposition to the Austrian denazification examining board, 18 March 1946," published in Richard Osborne, "Herbert von Karajan: A Life in Music," 748-749.

<sup>30</sup> "Herbert von Karajan," Music and the Holocaust.

<sup>31</sup> Rachel Hirshfeld, "Historian Probes Conductor Von Karajan's Nazi Past." *Israel National News*, last modified December 17, 2012.

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/163206>

another Berlin opera company directed by rising star Christian Thielemann.<sup>32</sup> Klaus Landowsky, a city politician from the Christian Democrat party, controversially described the conflict as between “the young von Karajan in Thielemann” and “the Jew Barenboim.”<sup>33</sup>

More recently, controversy brewed in 2015 when the Berlin Philharmonic’s newly appointed conductor, Kirill Petrenko, was met with strong anti-Semitism in the German media after earning the position over several candidates including Christian Thielemann. Northern German Radio (NDR) described Thielemann as an expert in German orchestral sound, and Petrenko as “the tiny gnome, the Jewish caricature” often found in Richard Wagner’s operas.<sup>34</sup> These issues are indicative of the legacy of the Nazi era. It is time for German society to begin a more widespread conversation dedicated to solving this issue and securing for musicians the safe environment they deserve. The lack of such a conversation has compelled many German musicians, including those of non-classical genres, to start demanding one. Israeli-born rapper Ben Salomo, who grew up in Berlin, has said that he faced violence and discrimination during his childhood as a result of his Jewish heritage, and as an adult has stopped displaying any Jewish symbols in public for fear of retribution. Recently, he told German news organization *Deutsche Welle* that “enough is enough,” and decried the unwillingness of German society to confront anti-Semitism. Russian-German pianist Igor Levit has also demanded a “difficult discussion” about the issue, criticizing German society for allowing anti-Semitism to become “consensus.”<sup>35</sup>

Beyond music, it is time for society as a whole to discuss the problem of anti-Semitism, which pervades Western society. The United Kingdom

reported an all-time high of 1,382 anti-Semitic incidents in 2017, including a 36% increase in violent assaults.<sup>36</sup> In the United States, the statistics are every bit as disturbing. In 2017, the Anti-Defamation League reported 1,986 incidents, a record 57% increase from the previous year.<sup>37</sup> These statistics should motivate global society to address the issue of anti-Semitism, and ensure that people of all occupations, including musicians, do not have to face bigotry. Some work is already being done in this regard. The U.S.-based Anti-Defamation League has been working since 1913 to fight anti-Semitic hate crimes throughout the world, and, since World War II, has been promoting education regarding the Holocaust.<sup>38</sup> By supporting organizations such as these, global society can make a positive difference towards ending anti-Semitism.

## VI. Conclusion

The Nazis were all too eager to imitate their leader Adolf Hitler, from his affinity for the music and writings of Richard Wagner to his desire to purge Judaism from society. The musical environment this created was dangerous for the racial and political enemies of Nazi Germany, but also afforded ample opportunities for career-minded musicians such as Herbert von Karajan, who leveraged his way to success using the notoriety he earned under the regime. Unfortunately, there are lasting negative effects from this era. Jewish musicians are still subject to bigotry in Germany, and anti-Semitism runs rampant beyond Germany as well. Now, more than seven decades after the collapse of the Nazi regime, society in Germany and beyond must intensify its efforts to deal with this issue. No one should be inhibited from practicing the art of music, or any artistic endeavor, due to religious or ethnic discrimination.

<sup>32</sup> Roger Cohen, “Berlin Operas Are Feuding, with Anti-Semitic Overtones.” *New York Times*, last modified October 21, 2000.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/21/arts/berlin-operas-are-feuding-with-anti-semitic-overtones.html>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “Berlin’s New Jewish Conductor Met By Anti-Semitism in German Press.” *Times of Israel*, last modified June 28, 2015.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/berlins-new-jewish-conductor-faces-anti-semitic-german-press/>

<sup>35</sup> Katharina Abel and Philipp Jedicke, “Enough is enough! Artists on anti-Semitism in Germany.” *Deutsche Welle*, last modified April 25, 2018.

<https://www.dw.com/en/enough-is-enough-artists-on-anti-semitism-in-germany/a-43507012>

<sup>36</sup> Nadia Khomami, “Antisemitic Incidents in UK at All-time High.” *The Guardian*, last modified January 31, 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/01/antisemitic-incidents-in-uk-at-all-time-high>

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Mathias, “Report: Anti-Semitic Incidents in U.S. Rose Nearly 60 Percent in 2017.” *The Huffington Post*, last modified February 27, 2018. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/anti-semitic-incidents-united-states-2017\\_us\\_5a956390e4b0699553cc77cb](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/anti-semitic-incidents-united-states-2017_us_5a956390e4b0699553cc77cb)

<sup>38</sup> Cynthia Golembeski, “Anti-Defamation League.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Anti-Defamation-League>.

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