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Hermann Levi's shame and *Parsifal*'s guilt: A critique of essentialism in biography and criticism

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Two dissimilar subjects – Hermann Levi (1839–1900), a Jewish Wagnerian who conducted the Bayreuth première of *Parsifal*, and *Parsifal* itself – can be seen in a critical discourse that binds them together in a paradoxical relationship. In accounts of both Levi and the opera he conducted, certain historians and critics have made a point of stripping away a supposed veneer of aesthetic deception in order to expose the raw underbelly of historical truth. In these revisionist readings, Levi's enthusiasm for Wagner and his music amounts to a shameful form of Jewish 'self-hatred', while *Parsifal*, far from espousing a message of compassion and redemption, propagates ideas of Aryan solidarity and racial supremacy. To advance these arguments is tantamount to claiming that moral and psychological categories such as shame and guilt are appropriate ways to describe a musician's life or the historical legacy of an opera; and these are views I find difficult to share. The slogan in my title should thus be understood as an ironic commentary, as well as a call to formulate the questions in a new way. Although I can only sketch the outlines of an alternative approach, I will suggest that critical accounts shaming Hermann Levi for his Wagnerism, and damning *Parsifal* for its anti-Semitism, are cut from the same cloth; they need to be revalued by a musicology that traffics in both an aesthetic understanding of art works and a critical assessment of the cultural framework in which this understanding is produced.

What is remarkable in the accounts with which I take issue is the sneering tone with which writers often censure – from dubious moral high ground – what they take to be objectionable. Their basic flaw is essentialism, by which I mean the tendency to reduce and confine cultural and aesthetic representations to manifestations of a single identification, to one stylised essence. In the first case, the Munich court conductor Hermann Levi, son of the chief rabbi of Gießen and the conductor of *Parsifal* at the Bayreuth Festival from 1882 to 1894, is filtered exclusively through the prism of his Jewish identity and then judged a shameful self-hater for having capitulated to one of Europe's most vocal anti-Semites. In the second case, the opera *Parsifal* is reduced to a shadow-play for Wagner's racialist theories of regeneration, in which a de-Judaised Christian Brotherhood is called upon to cleanse its blood and to celebrate the symbolic annihilation of the Jews. The essence in this reading of *Parsifal* is ideology, a category understood as lying at the deepest layer of the work, assumed to provide the props and pull the strings. In both cases, a naive essentialism causes partial truths to eclipse the larger picture. Levi's life, in fact, was far too varied and productive to be reduced to whatever ambivalence he felt as a

Jew, just as *Parsifal* is far too complex an opera to be whittled down to its putative political essence.

The chief irony of this essentialism – quite apart from its suspicion of musical experience and its misunderstanding of what draws people to music – is that it mimics Richard Wagner's own, noxious essentialising of 'Jewish-ness' and 'German-ness'. Instead of repudiating a vulgar nineteenth-century anthropology in which political or social identities provide the key to the 'true story' or 'deep structure' of human experience, our neo-essentialists reinvent it. So, instead of Wagner the ideologue holding forth on what is morally objectionable in the Jewish influence on art, historians and critics in the late twentieth century pronounce on the morally objectionable in Wagner and his music. What is curiously covered up in this ideological shuffle is the moralistic claim that we know how a proper German Jew ought to have behaved or how an opera free from social prejudices ought to have been composed, claims that seem especially pointless once they have been exposed to the light.

I am certainly not suggesting that issues of ideology or cultural identity need to be in any way neglected: they are far too important. But if one begins with an aesthetic sympathy for great works of art – rather than with a moralising ideological agenda – one can live both with plumbing their musical depths and with taking stock of their inevitable cultural and psychological baggage. Taking Hermann Levi and Wagner's *Parsifal* as a paired case study, I mean to suggest that biography and criticism stand to gain when they weave together a number of narrative threads – even ideologically incompatible ones – without necessarily producing a unified fabric. Among the writers I am grouping together are Hartmut Zelinsky and Rolf Schneider in Germany, Peter Gay in the United States and Paul Lawrence Rose in Israel.[1] By and large these are historians and critics rather than musicologists; but their views have a certain resonance within musical scholarship today.[2]

[1] Hartmut Zelinsky, 'Hermann Levi und Bayreuth oder Der Tod als Gralsgebiet', *Beiheft 6 zum Jahrbuch des Instituts für Deutsche Geschichte der Universität Tel Aviv* (Tel Aviv, 1984); Zelinsky, 'Der verschwiegene Gehalt des *Parsifal*: Zu Martin Gregor-Dellins Wagner-Biographie', and 'Richard Wagners letzte Karte: Anmerkungen zum Gehalt des Bühnenweihspiels *Parsifal*', in *Richard Wagner: Parsifal: Texte, Materialien, Kommentare*, ed. A. Csampi and D. Holland (Hamburg, 1984), 244–56; Zelinsky, 'Der Dirigent Hermann Levi: Anmerkungen zur verdrängten Geschichte des jüdischen Wagnerianers', *Geschichte und Kultur der Juden in Bayern*, ed. N. Treml and J. Kirmew (Munich, 1988), 411–30; Zelinsky, 'Die "Feuerkur" des Richard Wagner oder die "neue religion" der "Erlösung" durch "Vernichtung" ', in *Richard Wagner: Wie antisemitisch darf ein Künstler sein?*, ed. Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn, *Musik-Konzepte*, 5 (1981), 79–112; Peter Gay, 'Hermann Levi: A Study in Service and Self-Hatred', in *Freud, Jews, and other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (Oxford, 1978), 189–230; Rolf Schneider, *Die Reise zu Richard Wagner: Ein Roman* (Vienna, 1989); Paul Lawrence Rose, *Revolutionary Antisemitism in Germany: From Kant to Wagner* (Princeton, 1990), 31–2, 358–80; and Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (New Haven, 1992).

[2] Barry Millington, for example, sums up the influence of this work when he writes in *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music* (London, 1992), 164, that, as a result of their 'self-hatred', the 'guilt-obsessed Jews came to Wagner for something resembling redemption'. 'What attracted such people', he continues, was 'the sense of not belonging, of alienation ... seasoned ... with more than a hint of "blood and soil" '. See also Barry Millington, 'Parsifal: Facing the Contradictions', *Musical Times*, 124 (1983), 97–8, and Millington, ' "Parsifal": A Wound Reopened', *Wagner*, 8 (1987), 114–20.

I begin with Hermann Levi, about whom one story in particular figures in every account of the conductor's relationship with Wagner. Despite the importance of the event and its consequences, it is interesting to see how the story is used again and again as an emblem that collapses a complex human relationship into an exaggerated portrayal of Wagner's proto-fascistic sadism as well as Levi's ultimate capitulation to 'service and self-hatred'.[3]

The incident took place on 29 June 1881, the summer before the première of *Parsifal*, when a letter arrived at Wahnfried demanding that Wagner 'keep his work pure and not allow a Jew to conduct it'. According to Levi's personal notes, as well as Cosima Wagner's diaries and correspondence, the letter – which does not survive – also raised suspicions of an amorous relationship between Levi and Cosima. Wagner asked Levi to read the letter, and queried him insensitively about his silence; Levi left Bayreuth for Bamberg, apparently both insulted by Wagner's behaviour and troubled that the issue of his directorship should be questioned. In a note sent from Bamberg, Levi asked Wagner to relieve him of his conducting assignment. There followed a telegram from Wahnfried in which Wagner, without really apologising for his behaviour, assured Levi that 'you are my *Parsifal* conductor' while at the same time alluding obliquely to his hope that Levi might still want to consider converting to Christianity, that *Parsifal*, as Wagner put it, might 'perhaps . . . be a great turning point in your life'.

Levi gives his own account of the story in a notebook he provided to the editor of the *Bayreuther Blätter* shortly before his death, in connection with a planned publication of the Wagner–Levi correspondence. A copy (not in Levi's hand) of these notes is in the manuscript collection of the Nationalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung at Bayreuth.[4] The editor of the correspondence, perhaps Hans von Wolzogen or possibly even Cosima Wagner herself, excised a number of important passages from the letters and printed only those remarks by Levi that were relevant to the printed passages in the letters. The editor also took the opportunity to contradict certain of Levi's reminiscences that he or she found inconvenient or

[3] The quotation is from Peter Gay's subtitle to his essay on Levi. The most recent work on Jewish self-hatred (which does not, however, mention Levi) is Sander L. Gilman's *Jewish Self-hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore, 1986). Earlier works treating this subject, such as Theodor Lessing's *Der jüdische Selbsthaß* (Berlin, 1930; Munich, 1984) and Kurt Lewin's 'Self-Hatred among Jews', *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*, ed. Lewin (New York, 1941), though much cited in the literature, are patently tendentious studies that now need to be treated as historical documents rather than as theoretical authorities.

[4] 'Bemerkungen von Hermann Levi zu den an ihn gerichteten 40 Briefen Richard Wagners enthalten in der von seiner Hand abgeschriebenen Briefsammlung (im Besitz seiner Familie)'. Translations from the German that follow are my own unless otherwise cited.

I am grateful to the director of the Archive, Dr Manfred Eger, and to its librarian, Herr Günter Fischer, for their help in locating these and other letters and materials, and in making them freely accessible to me. I also wish to express my gratitude to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which provided me with a Travel Grant in 1990 to visit the Bayreuth archives, and to Mr Elliott Brill (New York) whom I consulted about Jewish religious observances. Finally, I would like to offer my warmest thanks to Ms Irene Auerbach of the Music Department at King's College London, who provided me with transcriptions of Levi's correspondence from photocopies of the originals and helped me with the translations.

implausible. For example, Levi's account of the Bayreuth episode ends with Wagner saying, 'When you return to Munich, give Herr . . . a slap in the face and tell him it comes from me. And thereafter the matter will be settled once and for all.' ('Wenn Sie nach München zurückkommen, geben Sie Herrn . . . eine Ohrfeige und sagen ihm sie komme von mir. Und danach sei die Sache ein für alle Male abgethan.') From this it seems that, even though the letter was not signed and hence was correctly termed 'anonymous', both Wagner and Levi guessed the identity of a man in Munich who had sent it. Neither Cosima nor Richard Wagner seem to have believed that the letter would make such a disturbing impression on Levi, and completely missed the fact that it was largely Wagner's humiliating behaviour in showing Levi the letter and connecting it with his intimations of disloyalty that so disconcerted the Capellmeister.

Cosima's diaries report the incident in this way:

> Around lunchtime [Richard] comes to me in a state of some excitement: 'Here's a nice letter.' I: 'Something bad?' 'Ph, you'll see.' I read it, am at first astonished, but then join in R.'s lively merriment. But when the letter is shown to the poor conductor, he cannot master his feelings, it seems that such instances of baseness are something new to him!

The next day's entries mention 'poor friend Levi – who cannot recover his composure' and the fact that Wagner had sent the telegram to 'friend Levi', after which Cosima comments: 'Life, and people who expect something from it!' On 2 July, following Levi's return to Wahnfried, everyone is seemingly restored to good spirits, and when Levi recounted his inspirational visit to the Bamberg Cathedral, Wagner, according to Cosima, 'indicates to Levi that he has been thinking of having him baptised and of accompanying him to Holy Communion'.[5]

I might also note that an added appeal in this story of humiliation was that Wagner is quoted as having used an obscenity which – despite the fact that it seemed to indicate he was on Levi's side – added yet another distasteful element to the narrative. However, whereas all references in the literature quote Wagner as saying that 'we are entirely at one in thinking that the whole world must be told about this shit', everyone had merely guessed that the German abbreviation 'Sch. . .' found in the edited letters printed in the *Bayreuther Blätter* referred to 'Scheiße'.[6] In fact, Wagner had written 'Schweinerei', which the priggish editor had struck out with an ellipsis. 'Schweinerei' in this context means something akin to a colloquial form of 'gross insult', an elocution by which Wagner meant to assure Levi that he (Wagner) gave no serious thought either to the rumour of Cosima's sexual impropriety with Levi or to the objection that *Parsifal* should not be conducted by a Jew. Whereas the former was true, we know that Wagner in fact took the second 'insult' seriously, as evidenced not only by his writings on the Jewish question but by his numerous attempts to persuade Levi to give up his Jewishness by a conversion of some kind.

[5] *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton, 2 vols (London, 1977), II, 681–2.

[6] *Bayreuther Blätter*, 24 (1901), 32; an English version is in *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, trans. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1987), 918.

Without going into the further details of this telling incident, it is important to note that, while various critics take pains to paint Wagner's sadism and manipulative personality – which are certainly in evidence here – they neglect to read the story from Levi's vantage point. They are happier, in fact, to see Levi as a passive victim of monstrous aggression, and can only read his return to Bayreuth following such a 'debasement' as a 'frightening psychological abyss' (the words of Peter Gay) without conceding to him the possibility that he might have known where his own best interests lay. For these critics, Levi can be read only as a Jew – not, for example, as an artist and musician – and in their eyes a Jew can have only one relation to Wagner, that is, to repudiate him categorically.

The subtext of the incident was Wagner's preoccupation during the period 1878–81 that Levi be baptised or that 'some formula be found' so that Wagner's 'most Christian work' would not have to be directed by a Jew.[7] It is easy, however, to over-generalise from individual anecdotes about Wagner's behaviour towards Jews in his circle. Anna Ettlinger (1841– 1934), a Jewish writer and Levi's close friend from his days in Karlsruhe, is certainly correct in noting that while the Wagnerians were consistent in their anti-Semitism, Wagner, given his inability to dispense with Levi, Porges and Rubinstein as supporters of his work, was highly inconsistent.[8] One could add to this group Angelo Neumann, Lilli Lehmann, Judith Gautier and Catulle Mendès. In Wagner's own ambivalent words (in a letter to Ludwig II from November 1881), 'I simply cannot get rid of them [i.e., the Jews devoted to him], but simply have to put up with energetic Jewish patronage, however curious I feel in doing so'.[9]

It cannot have pleased Wagner that the chief conductor of the Munich orchestra – contractually obligated to perform in Bayreuth – was a Jew. The usual story (repeated since the time of Glasenapp's biography) is that Wagner was forced against his will to take on Levi as his conductor for *Parsifal* because he would not otherwise have obtained the services of the Munich court orchestra. However, as John Deathridge has pointed out to me, there is no document suggesting that the King threatened to withdraw the services of the orchestra if Wagner did not agree to allow Levi to conduct *Parsifal*. The story is reported in some detail in Julie Kniese's rabidly anti-Semitic collection of letters and diaries of her father Julius Kniese (who directed the Bayreuth chorus).[10] The book is essentially the story of the decline and degeneration of the Bayreuth Festival under Levi, and of the personal indignities suffered at the hands of Levi by Julius Kniese, whom Levi dismissed as chorus-master. The introduction to the book, written by Reinhold von Lichtenberg in 1927, recounts that Alexander Ritter, married to a niece of Wagner's, told Lichtenberg that:

[7] A letter from Levi received on 28 April 1880 'evokes the remark from Wagner: "I cannot allow him to conduct *Parsifal* unbaptised." ' *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, II, 471.

[8] Anna Ettlinger, *Lebenserinnerungen für ihre Familie verfaßt* (Leipzig, [*c.* 1920]), 123.

[9] Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 918.

[10] *Der Kampf zweier Welten um das Bayreuther Erbe: Julius Knieses Tagebuchblätter aus dem Jahre 1883* (Leipzig, 1931). The conductor Felix Weingartner, a protégé of Levi's and someone who genuinely venerated his artistic legacy, also reports this story, in his *Lebens-Erinnerungen* of 1928, although Weingartner did not begin to assist at Bayreuth until 1886, several years after the event in question.

In 1882 it was not yet possible to put together an orchestra made up of the best artists from all the German theatres. For this reason the Master turned to the Munich Intendant with the request that the court orchestra be seconded to him. He soon received word that this orchestra would arrive in Bayreuth on a certain day with Levi as conductor. Wagner wrote in his reply that he did not wish to have Levi, but would rather choose the conductor himself. The decision then reached him from Munich that the orchestra would be made available to him with Levi or not at all. Ritter was present when Wagner received this letter. The Master, in the greatest agitation, stood silent at first for quite a while, then drummed his fingers on the window pane, then turned around and burst out; 'So, now I open my lovely festival house to the Jews!' [He said this] despite the fact that [he] had for many years been corresponding with Levi – a musician whom he valued and who was an ardent devotee of the Master – and would have allowed him to have taken part in his work.

The only documentary evidence for any agreement that obliged Levi to conduct *Parsifal* is the contract that Wagner negotiated with the court in March 1878, in which Wagner agreed with the Intendantz that the first performance of his *Parsifal* in Bayreuth 'shall be given with the orchestra, the singers and the artistic personnel of the Court Theatre'.[11] However, the story of Levi being forced on Wagner is implausible on several grounds. First, such an incident or a recollection of it would surely have found its way into Cosima's diaries, even if obliquely, yet no trace of it survives. Neither is there any indication in the diaries that Alexander Ritter even visited the Wagners in the years preceding 1881. Writing to the King on 19 September 1881, Wagner stated that:

Notwithstanding the many amazing complaints that reach me as to this most Christian of works being conducted by a Jewish Capellmeister and that Levi himself is embarrassed and perplexed by it all, I hold firmly to this one fact, that my gracious King has generously and magnanimously granted me his orchestra and chorus as the only effective way of achieving an exceptional production of an unusual work, and consequently, I accept gratefully the heads of this musical organisation . . . without asking whether this man is a Jew, this other a Christian.[12]

Surely had there been some open dispute with the court authorities regarding Levi's directorship of the orchestra, Wagner would have made some oblique reference to it here. Already in November 1878, he mentioned to Cosima that a contributor to the *Bayreuther Blätter* had 'asked whether he might attack Levi, which was hardly possible', implying at a relatively early date that Levi's support for Bayreuth was a subject that could not be broached publicly.[13] Wagner first officially informed Levi that he was to conduct *Parsifal* on 19 January 1881. The announcement is recorded in Cosima's diaries as follows:

Friend Levi arrives toward evening, and music is played . . . Then [R.] announces to Herr Levi, to his astonishment, that he is to conduct *Parsifal*: 'Beforehand, we shall go through a ceremonial act with you. I hope I shall succeed in finding a formula which will make you feel completely one of us'. – The veiled expression on our friend's face induces R. to change

[11] Ernest Newman, *The Life of Wagner*, 4 vols (1946; rpt. Cambridge, 1976), IV, 578.
[12] Newman, IV, 637.
[13] *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, II, 205.

the subject, but when we are alone, we discuss this question further. I tell R. that what seems to me to be the difficulty here is that the community into which the Israelite would be accepted has itself abandoned Christ. . . . R. says he himself has certainly remained true to him, and in his last essay ['Erkenne dich selbst'(1881)] he more or less outlined what the formula would be.[14]

Levi knew that Wagner considered him one of the leading interpreters of his works for over a decade. In fact, once Wagner had come to terms with the fact of Levi's participation in *Parsifal*, he also seems – surprisingly – to have become intrigued with the idea of Levi as his plenipotentiary or 'alter ego', a form of address he used in a letter written from Venice in the spring of 1882.[15] (In the Levi correspondence at the Bayreuth archives, one can see how the heading of the letter addressed 'Dear alter Ego', along with many personal asides from other letters dealing with the Wagner family, had been bracketed by the editor so that the printer would omit them from the only published edition of the letters, which appeared in the *Bayreuther Blätter* shortly after Levi's death in 1900.)[16] The appellation 'alter ego' is particularly striking, since Wagner used this locution infrequently. Two instances I know of are the dedication to Franz Liszt on the score to *Lohengrin* used at Weimar in 1850, and a reference in 1879 to Hans von Wolzogen: 'I can count on him to serve as my alter ego when it comes to maintaining the purity of my ideas'.[17] At the

[14] *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, II, 601–2. On 14 April 1881 Levi wrote to his father: 'That I am to direct the work is no longer a secret' (Daß ich das Werk leite, ist nun kein Geheimniss mehr). A selection of Levi's correspondence with his father was published as 'Hermann Levi an seinen Vater', in ' "Parsifal" Programm', *Bayreuther Festspiele* 1959 (Bayreuth, 1959), 6–23, 56.

[15] The letter, dated 20 April 1882, begins: 'Dear alter Ego! So: I don't know whether my wife has already written to you: in any case – even if this is a repeat performance – I am writing you as well' (Liebes alter Ego! Also! Ich weiß nicht, ob Ihnen meine Frau schon geschrieben hat: jedenfalls – selbst zum Überfluß! – schreibe ich Ihnen auch). This part of the letter was excised from the published correspondence in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, 24 (1901).

[16] An example of the excisions is the opening of the following letter from Wagner to Levi on 27 February 1879: 'Dear Friend! My wife will not stop recounting your charming behaviour towards her, so I must resort to giving you an autograph, which you can then copy for your collection. What I have to say to you with this [gift] will not amount to much unless you value this expression of my great joy in you.' (Lieber Freund! Meine Frau wird nicht fertig damit, von Ihrem liebenswürdigen Benehmen gegen sie zu erzählen, so daß ich zu einem Autographen für Sie greifen muß, welchen Sie sich ja dann für Ihre Sammlung kopiren können. Was ich Ihnen darin zu sagen habe, wird nicht viel heißen, es wäre denn, daß Ihnen der Ausdruck meiner großen Freude über Sie für etwas gelten könnte.) The autograph snippet was entitled 'Field- and Meadow-Music' and was a composing sketch for music from the Good Friday Spell.

[17] Letter dated 9 February 1879, published in *König Ludwig II und Richard Wagner: Briefwechsel*, ed. Otto Strobel, 4 vols (Karlsruhe, 1936–9), cited in Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution*, 225; trans. in Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 890. Wolzogen, the long-standing editor of the *Bayreuther Blätter*, was certainly aware of his own conferred status as 'alter ego' and is possibly responsible for excising the texts of Wagner's letters to Levi. Josef Stern, 'Hermann Levi und seine jüdische Welt', *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden*, 7 (1970), 20, reports a plausible anecdote which I have thus far been unable to confirm. Stern describes a scene with Levi standing with his father at a reception after the *Parsifal* performance where he received the thanks of the society members. 'Wagner understood this gesture [Anspielung] very well, but nonetheless shook the rabbi's hand with great cordiality and after some humorous formalities said to Dr Levi: As my alter ego, your Hermann should

very same time, then, that Wagner and Cosima were having daily acrimonious words about 'the Jews' and Wagner had deputised Wolzogen as his *ideological* plenipotentiary, Wagner was also entertaining thoughts about a Jewish alter ego deputising for him in the mystical abyss of the *Festspielhaus*. However, I am more interested for the moment in Levi than in Wagner, and it is easy to see, I think, that even given the slights that Levi had to endure in the Wagner household, he surely felt more than compensated by the extreme signs of confidence and intimacy that Wagner also gave him, not to mention Levi's own view that *Parsifal* was a crowning moment in the history of German art, an event in which he dearly wished to take part.[18]

Peter Gay's acclaimed essay on Hermann Levi, despite the prodigious research that went into it, depends on proclaiming as a cultural type the self-hating Jew who, victimised by centuries of oppression, turns justified anger towards his oppressor on himself, and in so doing identifies with the oppressor. How does Gay reach this diagnosis? Apparently any 'temptation' to 'reject [one's] heritage and deny [one's identity]' are grounds for a 'case of self-hatred' that, in the person of Hermann Levi, 'is classic in its ravages and its persistence'.[19] What is so distressingly crude about this model is, first, that it is based on one extreme psychiatric condition and, second, that it reduces the complex responses of Jews to German anti-Semitism to a single psychopathology. In fact, there was a whole panoply of responses to German anti-Semitism and to representations of Jewish identity. In the case of those secular artists and intellectuals who managed to join the German elite, it is fair to say that the vast majority turned their backs on mainstream Jewish society, feeling they had outgrown the narrowness of its cultural focus. This should not be seen as especially surprising, as these kinds of social realignments occur regularly in any society where a relatively impoverished cultural group encounters a successful and elite national culture. The situation with German-speaking Jews is further complicated by the fact that since the time of Moses Mendelssohn – who had suggested that one 'be a Jew inside one's house and a man outside' – mainstream Jewish society had assigned an

actually go by the name Wagner.' If the anecdote has some basis in fact, the allusion would be to Levi's Jewishness and his pride in it, even given that he had just directed a performance of Wagner's Christian drama of redemption. The story is not all that implausible, given Dr Levi's ecumenical propensities. A Protestant minister in Gießen had spoken at the funeral of Hermann's mother, and two Christian clergymen addressed the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Dr Levi's ascent to the rabbinate in Gießen (see Schneider [n. 1], 40 and 42).

[18] Another, less serious reference to a Jewish alter ego occurs three months before the letter to Levi, in connection with Angelo Neumann, a leading opera producer and impresario who took the *Ring* on tour around Europe. In a conversation with Wagner reported in *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, II, 597–8 (12 January 1881), Cosima writes: 'In the evening [Richard says], "I am glad that I shall not need to go to America, *Ich-Neumann* will be going." "Your alter ego," I cry, and we laugh heartily over R's notion.' The following sentence makes clear that what the Wagners found funny in the idea was not only the pun pointed out by the editors of the diaries ('ichneumon' is the generic name for 'wasplike insects') but that Neumann was a Jew: 'A pamphlet against the Jews by Prof. Dühring is truly dreadful on account of its style'.

[19] Gay (see n. 1), 201–2. On pp. 194–5, Gay defines this 'generic word' as 'the frantic urge to escape the burden of one's Jewishness not merely by renouncing but by denouncing Judaism'.

inestimable value to German arts and letters, and the chase was on from the early decades of the nineteenth century to obtain a serious German education, to acquire what was referred to as *Bildung*. It was not therefore the desperate and forlorn who deserted camp but the young and the talented who were pushed in the direction of cultivated secular careers with the covert – or often overt – blessing of parents and peers.

Levi's remarkable career as a Jewish Wagnerian actually provides an object lesson in how a Jew of this period could take his father's traditional advice on how to get ahead, to the extent of becoming a key figure in the German musical scene of the late nineteenth century. While contemporaries like Houston Stewart Chamberlain claimed that Levi's life bore a tragic mark as a result of his Jewishness, those far closer to him saw his character as ennobled by his Jewish background – a key, perhaps, to his creative and artistic sensibilities.[20] We should, I think, resist imposing the conclusion – dependent perhaps on wishful thinking about latter-day 'multiculturalism' – that there was some facile solution to the 'Jewish Question' in Germany, that if only Levi had followed a path true to his 'ethnicity' he would have found happiness as well as fame and fortune.

For Jewish musicians, writers and intellectuals, moreover, another powerful allegiance competed with the claims of ethnic background: German *Kultur* beckoned, together with its great universalist models of Goethe, Schiller, Mozart and Beethoven, and it became easy for the Hermann Levis of this world to substitute its aspirations as a far more powerful version of the traditional 'wisdom of the fathers'. The fathers themselves were of two minds on what stance to take towards the dominant culture, and Levi surely profited greatly from intense parental pride about his artistic achievements. And of course the ideal of German art was itself a kind of religion *par excellence*, perhaps more so for its secular Jewish adherents than for almost anyone else. Remarking on the absence of any denominational ceremony at Levi's funeral, his friend Possart cites Schiller: 'Which religion do I believe in? – None that you can name. – Why none? – Because of religion'. Possart continues: 'Filled with this spirit for his entire life, Levi had obeyed with the warmest humanity the most ethical commands of his creed: unswerving goodness towards every creature'.[21]

It is certainly true, as Gay points out, that from his earliest days Levi's inner life had been marked by a personal anguish and turmoil, but it is unfair to ascribe this solely to the issue of his Jewishness or his dealings with Wagner. Long before his acquaintance with Wagner, he wrote to Clara Schumann that his inner being was 'a screeching dissonance that I am incapable of resolving; inner harmony remains an unattainable ideal'.[22] Yet in this kind of intimate revelation Levi speaks of himself as a person, not as a Jew. In fact, there are several indications that Levi does not seem to have borne his Jewish identity as some curse of Ahasverus at all, but rather

[20] According to Anna Ettlinger, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 123–4, Brahms used to go so far as to joke with Levi that he 'boasted' of his Jewishness.

[21] Ernst von Possart, *Erinnerungen an Hermann Levi* (1900; Munich, 1901).

[22] Letter of 9 November 1865, cited in Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann: Ein Künstlerleben nach Tagebüchern und Briefen*, 3 vols (Leipzig, 1923), III, 184.

found some private place for it that has eluded Wagner researchers seeking either a Jewish victim or a Wagnerian die-hard. There were, for example, Hermann's nourishing involvements with other Jews from privileged backgrounds, such as Anna Ettlinger, the literary historian Michael Bernays and the art historian Conrad Fiedler, all of whom shared Levi's passion for Wagner.

There is also the warm relationship between Levi and his father. Benedikt Samuel Levi, the chief rabbi of Gießen, who lived until 1899, was someone the younger Levi could call on to send a condolence note to Cosima upon the Master's death in Venice, and for whom he arranged to have kosher food provided when the rabbi visited the Bayreuth Festival. Levi also routinely called on the rabbi of the 'Israelite Community' in Bayreuth, reported on his visits to his father, and even provided the rabbi and his wife with tickets to *Parsifal*, as can be read in the letters of 7 August 1883, 7 August 1884, 26 July 1886 and 4 July 1889. In the last of these, Hermann writes to Dr Levi:

> Do as in previous years – stay near me and eat in the soup kitchen, or arrange for food from there to be brought to your lodgings, in which case I will eat with you.
> [Mache es, wie in früheren Jahren – wohne in der Nähe von mir, und iß in der Garküche, oder lasse Dir das Essen von dort nach Hause holen, in welchem Falle ich mit Dir essen würde.]

In another letter to his father written on 3 October 1881, which fell on the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), Levi admits to a sentimental wistfulness far removed from Jewish self-hatred:

> Just now I saw the people leaving the synagogue, and I really did wish to be at your side. I hope you had a good fast and that the afternoon prayer [i.e., the lengthy extra Nilah service that follows the usual afternoon prayer on the Day of Atonement] did not become strenuous. Send me news soon!
> [Eben sah ich die Leute aus der Synagoge gehen, da wünschte ich mich recht sehnlich zu Dir hin. Hoffentlich hast Du gut gefastet, und ist Dir das Nachmittagsgebet nicht schwer geworden! Gieb mir bald Nachricht!]

Perhaps most interesting in this network of relationships was the fact that Levi, despite his public association with Wagner and Bayreuth, served as a musical advisor for the official Jewish Community in Munich. One learns about this unlikely association both in a letter from Levi to his father and in the memoirs of Emanuel Kirschner, the chief cantor at the main Munich synagogue, who was instructed by the Jewish authorities to sing for Levi in advance of his formal audition for the post:

> A man, small in stature with a nobly formed head betraying the oriental type, whose face was enlivened by intelligent and fiery eyes, welcomed me with heart-warming amiability that hid any signs of self-consciousness. After a short greeting he sat himself at the piano and asked: 'What would you like to sing?' Without thinking and without consciously wanting to boast, I answered: 'Whatever you would like to set before me'. Astounded he looked at me and after a long, drawn out 'soooo?' opened up a thick volume of Lieder by Brahms. After I had sight-read a song, Levi jumped up from the piano-stool, congratulated me with shining eyes, and said laughing, 'I will, after all, make a point of hearing you on Saturday morning

at the service in the synagogue'. The cantorial functions on both Friday evening and on Saturday brought me substantially closer to my desired goals, the latter through the fact that the court conductor Levi hurried towards me after the end of the Sabbath service, making his way through the mass of those standing up in the house of God, and congratulated me most warmly, shaking my hands before the still assembled congregation.[23]

Thus impressed with the musical qualities of Kirschner's fine baritone, Levi not only recommended him for the Munich post (which he held until 1938), but apparently helped Kirschner to obtain a teaching position at the Munich Conservatory a decade later. Levi may also have arranged an introduction to Heinrich Porges, another secular Wagnerian of Jewish extraction, at whose home during the 1880s the Munich *chazzan* (cantor) could be heard singing Wolfram's 'Todesahnung' from *Tannhäuser* or Hans Sachs's 'Schusterlied' from *Die Meistersinger*.[24] Levi's visit on 12 June 1881 to the Munich synagogue occurred only two weeks before the scandalous letter at Wahnfried led to his attempted withdrawal from *Parsifal*; it sheds a very different light on the matter from that suggested by Peter Gay's reading, in which a sadistic aggression is visited upon a hapless and self-hating victim.[25]

Significantly, I think, the notion that Levi was complicit in the matter of Wagner's anti-Semitism was never raised in the nineteenth century. Jews, whether religious or not, were only too happy to celebrate the fame of leading Jewish artists and intellectuals and claim them as their own, often irrespective even of the question of conversion, to judge from the numerous Jewish biographical lexicons of the day in which Levi occupies a prominent position.[26] Even Levi's close friends, people like Brahms, Julius Allgeyer and Clara Schumann, who observed first-hand his gradual move into the Wagnerian orbit during the early 1870s, never suggested that Levi was in danger of cavorting with a dangerous anti-Semite. Schumann, for example, objected to Wagner as a modernist and a libertine, indeed someone who shamelessly brought sexuality into the artistic arena. Her views on Wagner in this regard are well known and her reaction on hearing *Tristan* in 1875 was typical: 'the most disgusting thing I have ever seen or heard in my life . . . in which every feeling of decency is violated'.[27] It is this sense of 'Wagnerism' that she refers to in a letter to Levi as 'a severe illness which you have succumbed to with body and soul'.[28] For Brahms, whom Levi as late as 1871 had thought was uniquely 'called upon to show us the

[23] Emanuel Kirschner, 'Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben, Streben und Wirken', Leo Baeck Institute, Ms. M. E. 361 (1933–1938), pp. 48–50. I am grateful to the librarians at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York for making these memoirs available to me. Levi's letter to his father of 14 June reports on his visit to the synagogue and notes, amusingly, how his 'walls reverberate with *l'cho dodi* [the Friday evening song welcoming the Sabbath]' from the visits of the prospective cantorial candidates.

[24] Kirschner, 76.

[25] Gay, 222.

[26] Examples of such citations are Adolph Kohut's *Berühmte israelitische Männer und Frauen in der Kulturgeschichte der Menschheit* (Leipzig-Reudnitz, 1901), I, 141; or S. Wininger's *Große Jüdische National-Biographie* (Czernowitz, 1925).

[27] Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 217.

[28] Letter of 4 June 1880, quoted in Litzmann, III, 409n.

right path for operatic composition',[29] Levi's conversion to Wagner was more than anything else an unforgivable betrayal of an intimate, even romantic, friendship that would have to be terminated.[30]

Levi, on the other hand, like so many other Wagnerians, ultimately parted from the *mores* of the Schumann–Brahms circle and subscribed to the new Wagnerian futurism in which the idea of a redemptive music drama played a leading role.[31] In fact Levi had been an inveterate modernist from his earliest student years, as when Julius Rietz at the Leipzig Conservatory wrote to Levi's father in 1857 complaining of Hermann's attraction only to the most modern art, by which he meant the works of Robert Schumann.[32] It was Levi, moreover, who repeatedly pressed his friend Brahms in the 1860s to consider composing an opera – to no avail of course – and it is again no coincidence that Levi came to view Wagner's works of the 1850s and 1860s as a solution to the problem of dramatic music that Brahms was unable to reach in his own way.[33]

[29] Cited in a letter from Levi to Clara Schumann from 27 December 1871, quoted in Litzmann, III, 267. The intimate relation with the Schumann family of the 1860s is chronicled in charming detail in Eugenie Schumann, *Erinnerungen* (1925; rpt. Stuttgart, 1948), translated as Eugenie Schumann, *The Memoirs of Eugenie Schumann* (1927; rpt. London, 1985).

[30] Brahms's own inability to respect Levi's move to Wagner was probably based on his unresolved envy of Wagner as much as his jealous conviction – not far from the truth – that Hermann had transferred his affections. The intimate, passionate friendship between Levi and Brahms had contained more than a passing moment of erotic attraction, as shown in the lines Levi wrote to Brahms on a lonely Christmas Eve in 1874; 'I wished that you once again lay in my bed and I sat before you and could stroke your forehead – I have an awful yearning [abscheuliche Sehnsucht] to see you again . . . I think of you in tender love'. *Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Hermann Levi, Friedrich Gernsheim, sowie den Familien Hecht und Fellinger* (1910; rpt. Tutzing, 1974): *Brahms-Briefwechsel*, VII, 178–9, cited in Frithjof Haas, 'Johannes Brahms und Hermann Levi', *Johannes Brahms in Baden-Baden und Karlsruhe, Ausstellungskatalog* (Karlsruhe, 1983), 78. See also Haas, pp. 79–81. The break-up of this friendship was painful for both men, and, according to Anna Ettlinger – a mutual friend – in her *Lebenserinnerungen*, 110, Levi continued to hope for many years that Brahms would eventually come to respect (if not to sanction) his new-found enthusiasm and would renew their friendship. A recently discovered 'picture-book' by the Ettlinger sisters (referred to by Anna in her memoirs), which sheds further light on the Brahms–Levi relationship, is discussed by Karl Geiringer in 'Das Bilderbuch der Geschwister Ettlinger: Zur Jugendgeschichte Hermann Levis und seiner Freunde Johannes Brahms und Julius Allgeyer', *Musik in Bayern*, 37 (1988), 41–68. My thanks to David Brodbeck for supplying me with this reference.

[31] Levi did not believe, however, in futurism at all costs, since he never overcame his antipathy to the music of Liszt, which he considered sloppy, poorly wrought and self-indulgent. In the very same letter to his father from 13 April 1882, he juxtaposes his view of Wagner with that of Liszt: 'The most beautiful thing that I have experienced in my life is that is was granted to me to come close to such a man, and I thank God daily for this. So you go ahead and like him too! [Also sei nun auch Du ihm von Herzen gut.] But I will not defend Liszt. He is an old chatterbox and comedian and Wagner himself feels nothing for him, only owes him thanks for having been the first to recognise his (Wagner's) importance.'

[32] Haas, 59.

[33] When Anna Ettlinger – whom Levi had proposed in the 1860s as a possible librettist for Brahms – asked Brahms why he had never composed an opera, he responded 'After Wagner this is impossible' ('Neben Wagner ist dies unmöglich'); Anna Ettlinger, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 67.

None of this really has anything to do with the question of Levi's Jewishness, and I raise these considerations to show the confining nature of accounts that essentialise Levi's Jewish identity. It is, moreover, somewhat strange to talk about essential or fixed identities in a performing musician, who after all is an artist concerned with feigning a changing configuration of identities. This was in fact Hermann Levi's talent and what ultimately brought both Cosima and Richard Wagner to recognise him as ideally suited to conduct *Parsifal*. Ernst von Possart, Levi's Intendant at the Munich court theatre, described him this way:

> What characterises most precisely the art of the actor? The capability to assume and render effortlessly the being of another person. And precisely this talent proper to great actors was possessed by Hermann Levi as a conductor: he was the empathetic bearer of the musical dramas . . . he did not match the work to his individuality but fitted his individuality to the work.[34]

It is also a mistaken late twentieth-century preoccupation, I think, to deal with the question of identity exclusively within the politicised context of power relations – for the simple reason that, alongside the facts of exclusion there often come unrecognised privileges, not to mention a wit possessed so often by 'outsiders'. Levi also seemed to be able to take advantage even of his 'oriental' and 'noble' Jewish-looking face, remarked on by everyone from the Wagners to Eugenie Schumann and Emanuel Kirschner. He allowed himself, for example, to be repeatedly photographed and painted by his friend Franz von Lenbach in guises such as John the Baptist, as an Arab, and of course in his official pose as *Generalmusikdirektor*, all of which impute to him a kind of patriarchal wisdom and strength of character from which he surely derived great pleasure. Lenbach's depiction of him as John the Baptist apparently hung in Levi's Munich apartment.[35]

The pathetic portrait drawn by Gay, Zelinsky and Schneider of an elderly Levi beset by debilitating illness and anxious to withdraw from public life as a result of his sycophantic Wagnerism is strangely paternalistic in its assumption that this poor Jew, unable to stand up for himself, crumbled under the accumulated pressures of years of humiliation and self-flagellation.[36] Ironically, this portrait nearly mirrors Houston Stewart Chamberlain's 'official' Wagnerian tribute in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, in which he writes of Levi's tragic suffering as resulting from the 'unbridgeableness of racial laws' and of the 'curse visited on Jews'. Certainly Levi did not see the last decade of his life this way, nor did his close friends. Ettlinger notes in an obituary that Levi's last years 'bear the stamp of a deep harmony, despite illness and suffering'.[37] If anyone, it was the young and arrogant Richard Strauss, Levi's successor at Munich – someone whose music and conducting Levi had championed – who made his last years as *Generalmusikdirektor* especially awkward. Strauss had dedicated his early Overture in C minor (1883) to Levi, but developed an irrational

[34] Possart (see n. 21), 47.
[35] See Haas, 80.
[36] Gay, 223 and 230, claims that 'Levi's suffering was not assuaged by the triumph of *Parsifal*', that 'he left the best of himself' in Richard Wagner's grave.
[37] *Biographisches Jahrbuch und Deutscher Nekrolog*, ed. Anton Bettelheim (Berlin, 1903), V, 117.

distaste for Levi from his father Franz, the (anti-Wagnerian) horn player in the Munich court orchestra, whom Levi forced to take early 'retirement' after years of insubordination. The younger Strauss also cultivated his growing anti-Semitism at the feet of such mentors as Alexander Ritter and Cosima Wagner.[38]

Though he did not enjoy particularly good health during this period,[39] the 1890s were personally not unrewarding years for Levi. His letters to his father detail an immense pride in his accomplishments: this was a decade in which Levi was promoted from court-composer to *Generalmusikdirektor* (one of a handful of such posts in Germany), received honours from the Prussian Kaiser, was invited repeatedly to the estate of the retired Otto von Bismarck, found himself in a comfortable marriage,[40] was able to retire to a lavish country home in Partenkirchen newly designed by the leading Munich architect Adolph Hildebrandt, completed his German translations of Mozart's Italian operas and his edition of Goethe's tales and fables, and compiled his calendar of aphorisms by Goethe for Cosima Wagner. Sydney Whitman, an English writer and journalist, after attending a dinner reception during the late 1890s at Levi's Munich apartment following the première of Siegfried Wagner's *Bärenhäuter*, could describe Hermann Levi without the slightest hint of irony as 'one of the finest Germans I ever met', a statement indicative of the complexities of identity in *fin-de-siècle* Germany.

I turn now to the ideological reading of *Parsifal* in the recent work of Paul Lawrence Rose. Rose demonstrates convincingly that Wagner's thinking about *Parsifal* from the 1850s until its completion in the early 1880s was bound up with a range of racial themes in which his obsession with the Jews must be seen as more or less constant.[41] Given the wealth of evidence Rose collects, there can be no sense in returning to views of the opera which sweep under the carpet the idea that *Parsifal* has as one of its sources a strong dose of anti-Semitism.[42] What now seems more than plausible is that Wagner's notion of redemption cannot be separated from the idea of freedom from a corrupt Judaised modernity. The question remains, though, what one ultimately makes of these ideological underpinnings, what role they play in the reading of the opera as a whole. For Rose this is not a problem: in an exceptionally naive bit of reasoning, he writes that 'there remains in the

[38] See Willi Schuh, *Richard Strauss: A Chronicle of the Early Years, 1864–1898* (Cambridge, 1982).

[39] Ettlinger, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 161, notes that 'one thing [Levi] never understood' was how to take care of his health.

[40] In 1896 Levi married Mary Fiedler, whose father was Jewish. Mary, the widow of Conrad Fiedler, a Wagnerian and art historian, was herself an avid Wagnerian. Apparently Rabbi Levi had no objection to this marriage and speaks warmly of Mary in his letters to Hermann from 1898. After Hermann's death in 1900, Mary ended up marrying another Bayreuth conductor of *Parsifal*, Michael Balling, who, it seems, was brought to her attention by Cosima Wagner.

[41] Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution*, 223.

[42] See, however, L. J. Rather's *Reading Wagner* (Baton Rouge, 1990), 275–89 and 304–15, which rejects Hitlerian readings of *Parsifal* and dwells, for example, on the fundamental distinctions between Wagner's notions of race and the subsequent Hitlerian version of racial supremacy and purity.

music a distillate of Wagner's own personality, above all, his violent hatreds'.[43] 'Honest listeners', Rose suggests – presumably those free from violent hatreds – should not 'pay the price of emotional shame to hear such music' and instead can substitute the music of Beethoven, where one 'has the same magnificence, but without the shameful cruelty and hatred which permeate Wagner's work'. What Rose is finally unable to demonstrate – though this surely is his chief claim – is that 'more than anyone else Wagner established the Jew in German popular consciousness as a new secularised symbol of absolute evil'. By misunderstanding that this is exactly where Wagner permitted himself to fail, Rose allows the kind of crass reduction of art to demonised ideas that is fundamentally unacceptable to those who see art and life as a more interesting and complex tissue of relations.

In an essay on Bertolt Brecht that appeared in 1965, the philosopher and critic Hannah Arendt dealt with the question of art and politics in the case of a poet whose life and work, like Richard Wagner's, had been similarly entwined with the world of politics. Expressing her boundless admiration for Brecht's poetic achievement, she cites Goethe's dictum: 'Dichter sünd'gen nicht schwer' – 'Poets don't sin gravely'. She takes this to mean not that artists are above ethical judgement, but rather that they 'do not shoulder such a heavy burden of guilt when they misbehave – one shouldn't take their sins altogether seriously'. Poets, in Arendt's view, are to be judged by their poetry, and the greatest sin they can commit is to forfeit their poetic voice either through squandering their gifts or enslaving themselves to a debased ideology.[44]

Despite any reservations about the aesthetic merits of *Parsifal*, it is clear that Wagner's gifts are fully in evidence there, that he cannot be said to have lost his poetic voice. Even the claim of debased ideological sources underlying the text cannot erase the fact that *Parsifal* evokes an experiential world utterly without parallel in nineteenth-century music. One can call Nietzsche here as witness, someone who was the first to attack publicly what he took to be the dreaded ideology of *Parsifal*, and yet did a famous about-face in private in 1878, when he first heard the music to the Prelude. 'Purely from an aesthetic standpoint, has Wagner ever written anything better?', Nietzsche enthuses:

> the subtlest psychological explicitness . . . in regard to that which it is his intention to . . . *impart*, through the medium of this music; . . . a degree of knowledge and perception that cuts through the soul like a knife, and of compassion, for that which is here viewed and judged. Only in Dante do we find anything comparable to it.[45]

[43] Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution*, 191.

[44] Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York, 1965), 211–18. For this reason, Arendt, 218, writes that 'there is no surer way to make a fool of oneself than to draw up a code of behaviour for poets, though quite a number of serious and respectable men have done it. Luckily for us and for the poets, we don't have to go to this absurd trouble, nor do we have to rely on our everyday standards of judgement. A poet is to be judged by his poetry, and while much is permitted him . . . the worst that can happen to a poet is that he should cease to be a poet'.

[45] From a letter to Peter Gast dated 21 January 1878, quoted in *The Nietzsche–Wagner Correspondence*, ed. Elizabeth Foerster-Nietzsche (New York, 1949), 304–5.

The question, then, is whether we must give in to a logocentric hegemony in which music is traditionally judged in a supporting role to concepts. For just as music (especially in opera) is so often called upon to play a passive, feminine and decorative role supporting a masculinised bearer of meaning in the form of the verbal concept, so too one can also imagine without much difficulty the realm of political ideas, despite all their discursive weight and seeming logic, as mere decoration supporting the emotive and ideational world produced by the music. I suggest this reversal not to essentialise musical experience and thereby to eclipse the uncomfortable world of ideas and actions that threaten musical autonomy, but rather to make room for an aesthetic still shared by many, in which music is the primal force in shaping an aesthetic experience in which it takes part. The point then is not to forget that ideologies exist but rather to view them much as shadows, subordinate to the far more powerful, if less discursive, insights provided by this troubling and insightful music.[46]

John Deathridge has recently written that 'a lasting faith in aesthetics, as opposed to a critical view of history, has never looked more problematic than it does with Wagner'.[47] Couched in such a binary opposition, it is easy to see why this eminent Wagner scholar would be led to what he calls his 'doubtless unhealthily overskeptical view of the Bayreuth Master'. But is a dichotomous choice between a 'faith in aesthetics' and a 'critical view of history' the only way to construct the problem of Wagner? Is the dichotomy itself not perhaps also in tow to the essentialist fear of Wagner's dangerous ideas against which critical historians need to be eternally vigilant and where the aesthetic appreciation of Wagner's music amounts, at best, to dangerous self-delusion? The essentialist readings of Wagner make this claim explicitly and urge us to distance ourselves from Wagner's music. Rose has, for example, supported the continued ban of Wagner on Israeli radio and at the Philharmonic as 'sustaining the memory of the Holocaust itself'. In these kinds of formulations, authors urge on us a puritanical view of art in which we are ordered to steer clear of a demon composer whose 'self-righteous ravings' – Rose's words – 'sublimated into his music, were one of the potent elements in creating the mentality that made ... the enormity [of the Holocaust] thinkable – and performable'.[48]

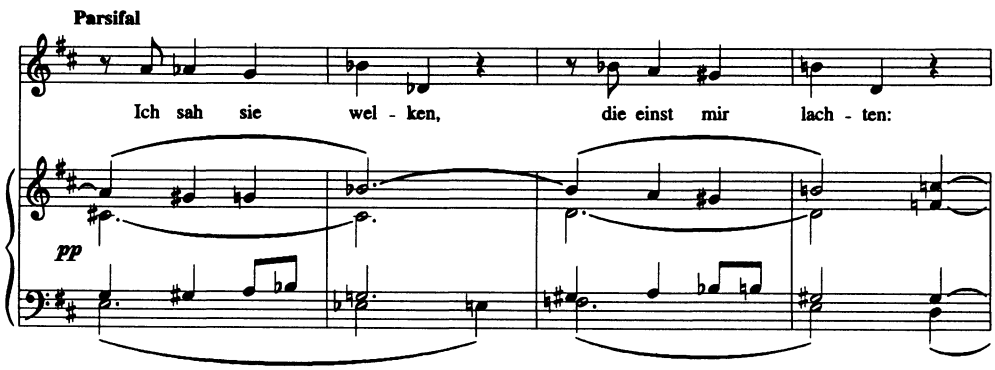
Only if one breaks with the dichotomy between 'inspiring music' and the narrative of a political programme to eliminate the Jews do many other issues explored by *Parsifal* come to the fore. To take one slender example, consider the apparent contradiction of Kundry both as Wandering Jew and also as a personification of seductive femininity. Why should Wagner go out of his way to eroticise

[46] I am aware that this position is fraught with dangers and can be taken to extremes, as exemplified by the comic indifference to the stage action displayed by Anton Bruckner, who was seen to have kept his eyes shut tightly during a Bayreuth performance of the *Ring* and later asked, 'Why do they burn Brünnhilde at the end of *Walküre*?' See Robert Hartford, *Bayreuth: The Early Years* (Cambridge, 1980), 175.

[47] *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski; English trans. ed. John Deathridge (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), xiii.

[48] Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution*, 192.

the supposedly Judaised world of Klingsor's magic garden which he so despises – an affect that earned his own raucous applause at the first peformance – creating therefore an object of sexual desire to be spurned by a saintly Parsifal? Here is a clear example in which an explanation of race-hatred makes little sense. If anything, Wagner submits to an expressly anti-political tendency, one unable to resist sexualising the Other. That is, the political programme of cleansing Germany and Christianity of Jewishness is compromised the moment that one gives heed to Wagner's musical voice, which luxuriates in the fantasy of feminine charms embodied in the Flower-maidens as well as in the Oedipal, sexualised maternality of Kundry herself.[49]

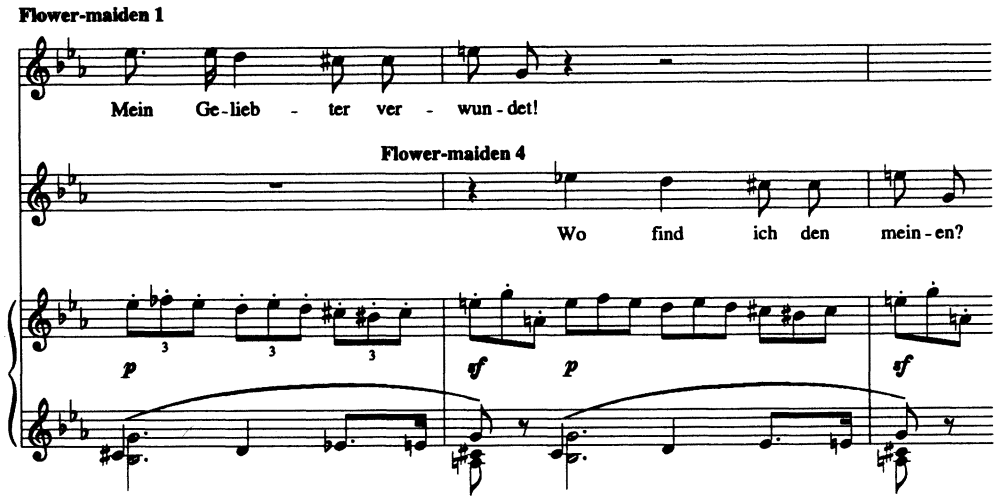


Ex. 1

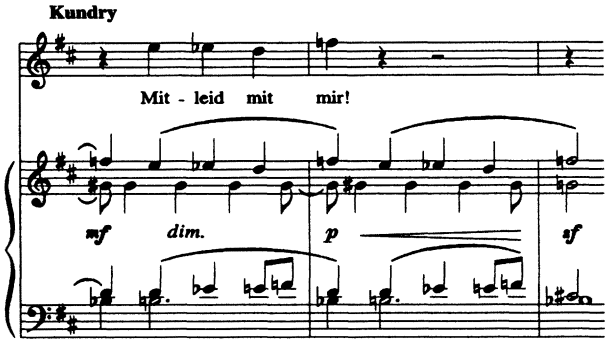
In the Good Friday Spell, moreover, Wagner takes the opportunity to have Parsifal conjure up once again this repudiated world of feminine desire, this time to connect with these women in compassionate tears of joy. Emblematic here is the music from Act III to 'Ich sah sie welken, die einst mir lachten' ('I saw them wither, they who laughed at me'; see Ex. 1).[50] The musical references refer back both to the disorientated shock of the Flower-maidens in Act II upon seeing their wounded lovers ('Mein Geliebter verwundet!'; see Ex. 2), as well as to Kundry's desperate final plea to Parsifal for compassion, 'Mitleid! Mitleid mit mir' (see Ex. 3). This was also the motif – in a menacing formulation stripped of its chromatic counterpoint in contrary motion – with which Klingsor's illusory garden self-destructs at the end of the Act II (see Ex. 4), as well as figuring in the music near the beginning of Act III that Gurnemanz associates with Kundry's 'groaning' just before she is roused to her final bout of living torment (see Ex. 5). While a unitary verbal label is clearly unable to embrace the fascinating range of occurrences of the motif in the opera,

[49] In an interesting note in *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, II, 910, there is mention of the Wagnerites' supposed preference for *Tristan und Isolde*, even over *Parsifal*. 'Richard says: "Oh what do they know? One might say that Kundry already experienced Isolde's *Liebestod* a hundred times in her various incarnations" '. This statement suggests that Wagner's representation of Kundry as pure femininity was in certain respects wholly detached from the Jewish question.

[50] The musical motif is sometimes called the 'maidens' lament' or 'Mädchenklage'.



Ex. 2

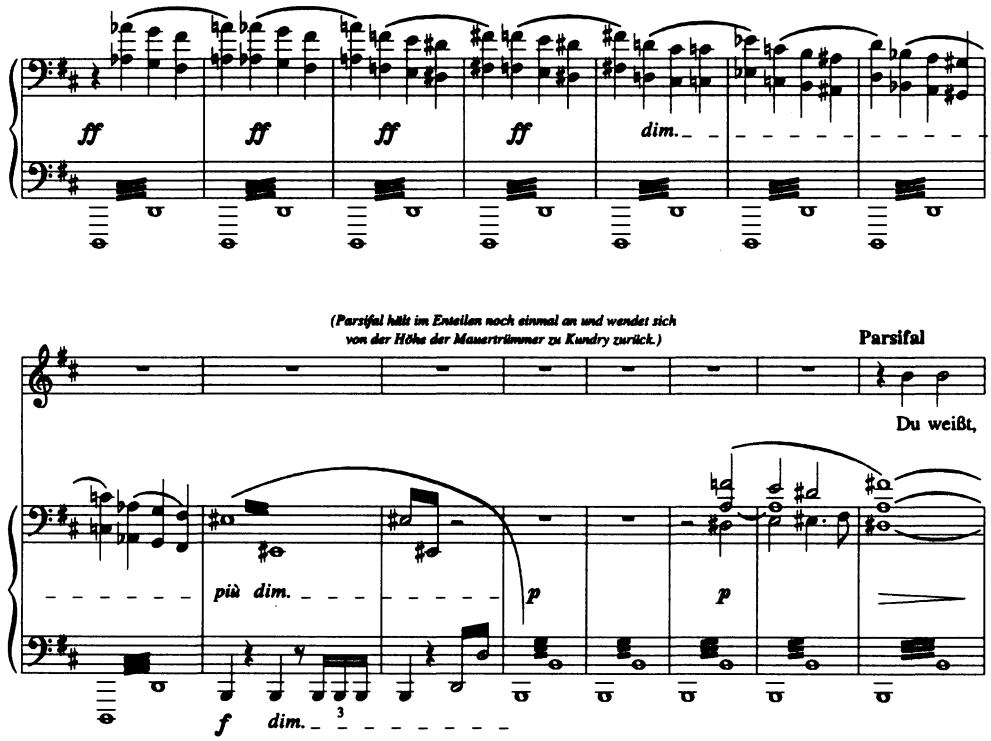


Ex. 3

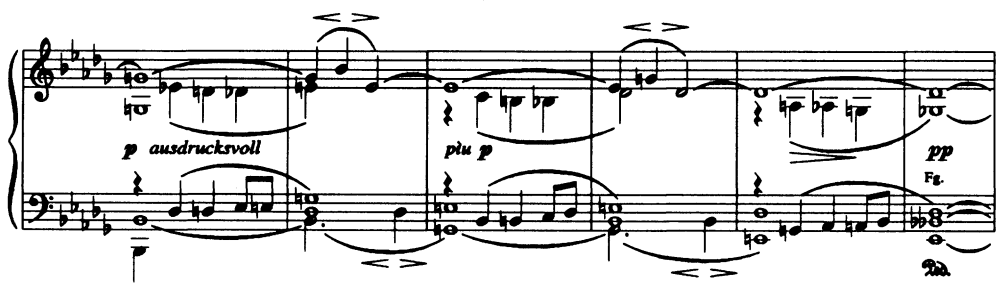
it is clear that this music cannot be reduced to the explicit politics of Wagner's essay on 'Religion and Art'.[51] Instead, the deeply touching musical insights into the experience of remorse, memory, feminine pain and forgiveness are more than adequate compensation for the fact of knowing even that one might personally have been excluded from just such a moment of Wagnerian compassion. To revel in musical and affective marvels such as these is to see that no dose of 'critical history' can serve to replace aesthetic perceptions and that scepticism about aesthetic value, heathy or otherwise, can inhibit musical understanding more than it can liberate it. Instead, one must revise the ideological reading of *Parsifal* to include, as Deathridge rightly points out in another context, 'the deeper, more subjective motives at the root of Wagner's antisemitism'.[52] And in exploring these roots, I might add, one

[51] Ettlinger, *Lebenserinnerungen*, 124, writes: 'Levi knew himself to be in agreement with Richard Wagner in viewing *Parsifal* not as a denominationally Christian drama but as a supra-denominational human drama in which both the Christian and the Indian traditions serve artistic purposes'.

[52] *The Wagner Handbook*, 223.


ff
ff
ff
ff
dim.
(Parsifal hält im Enteilen noch einmal an und wendet sich von der Höhe der Mauertrümmer zu Kundry zurück.)
Parsifal
Du weißt,
più dim.
p
p
f
dim.
3
P.
wo du mich wie - - der - fin - den kannst!
rall.
accel.
pp

Ex. 4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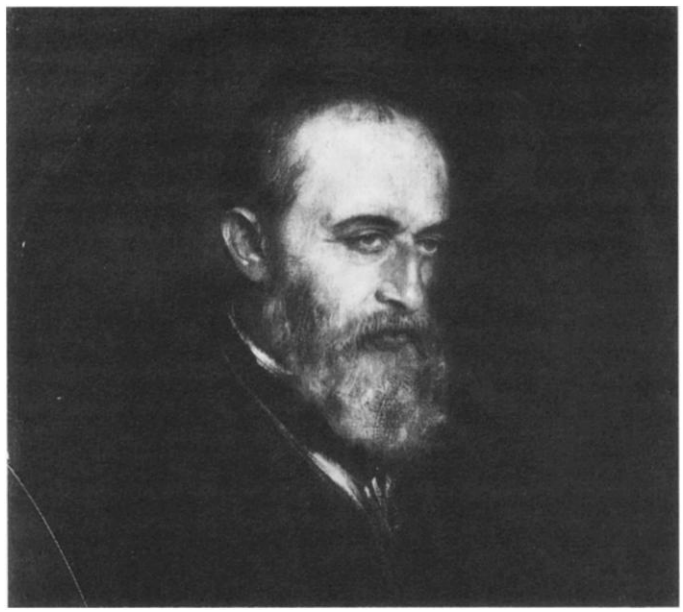
Ex. 5



Franz von Lenbach, "Hermann Levi," (Munich: Städtische Galerie im Lenbach-Haus L230, 1896). Lenbach was a close friend of Levi's during his many years in Munich (1872–1900) and was commissioned to paint Levi after his promotion to Generalmusikdirector in Munich in 1894.

Franz von Lenbach, "Hermann Levi dressed as an Arab," (Munich: Städtische Galerie im Lenbach-Haus L97, 1880s). Lenbach and Levi were both members of the Munich artistic fraternity 'Allotria' which sponsored annual costumed festivals in which Levi probably took part and from which this depiction is drawn.

discovers not the ravings of a nineteenth-century madman, but rather a reflection of our own very human condition.

Wagner himself was of many minds when it came to expounding the relation between his explicitly political ideas and his music. Commenting to Cosima while working on *Parsifal* in 1878 about the Prussian Kaiser's naive view of 'how deeply Wagner must have been in love at that time' when he composed *Tristan*, Wagner notes:

> Yes, people have no idea how divorced from experience and reality these things happen, and how long one is nourished by one's youth! . . . It is really ridiculous – if that were so, I should now be writing *Parsifal* on account of my connections with the Christian Church and you would be Kundry! No, I just felt the need to go to the very limit musically, as if I had been writing a symphony.[53]

At other times, while composing the music for the first act, Wagner became depressed about the coherence of *Parsifal*. As Cosima's diaries report, 'In the evening R. says to me regarding *Parsifal*: "I sometimes have my doubts about the whole thing, whether it is not nonsense, a complete failure" '.[54] There are doubtless many ways to read these equivocations, but it is compelling to understand them as elements in the highly overdetermined process called 'thinking in music', one in which autonomous musical concerns have to compete with a nearly inexhaustible supply of ideational and personal constraints.

A final point one can make near the close of the twentieth century about Wagner and the Wagnerians is that they force us to 'grow up', to live with the fact that artists are not saints, to admit to the troubled cauldron of ideas and affects that conditions the art work, and to suggest at the same time that these inspired distillations of humanity are indispensable to an enriched and examined life. Perhaps it is time to assert anew the words of that shrewd Wagnerian Thomas Mann, who put it this way:

> Art is no power, only a consolation. And yet – a game of the deepest seriousness, a paradigm of every aspiration toward perfection, it has been given from the very beginning as a companion to humanity, which will never quite be able to avert its guilt-darkened eye from art's innocence.[55]

[53] *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, II, 158.
[54] *Ibid.*, II, 131.
[55] Thomas Mann, 'Der Künstler und die Gesellschaft' (1952), *Altes und Neues* (Frankfurt am Main, 1953), cited in *Deutscher Geist: Ein Lesebuch aus zwei Jahrhunderten*, ed. Oskar Loerhe and Peter Suhrkamp (Frankfurt am Main, 1969), II, 711.