

## IS THERE A LINK BETWEEN RICHARD WAGNER AND ADOLF HITLER?

Tim Cloudsley

At the start of this short essay I would like to confess immediately, that I am neither an expert historian on Hitler, nor a specialist musicologist concerning Wagner. Partly for these reasons, I have decided not to use close academic references on either persons; I do not in any case want to interrupt the flow of my thought processes about these themes with that kind of exactness. This essay is an outpouring from someone who has thought a great deal about the two men, over several decades, but it does not attempt a detailed, specialist kind of analysis.

I am a lover of Richard Wagner's music, and an utter hater of Adolf Hitler, in every serious sense I think. But Adolf Hitler loved Wagner's music, and was inspired by it, which is something that has disturbed me for much of my life. Why and how did he feel that way? And what does it mean? I would like to discuss some points about this.

While I was a lecturer in Sociology at Glasgow Caledonian University, I shared a room for a time with a fellow sociologist called Hugh McLachlan, who later wrote a number of books and articles on the Sociology of Health. He was very pithy in his remarks, and one day he said: "I like Wagner; I think Hitler was wrong." I absorbed this remark; though still feeling there was something profoundly problematic about Wagner's music. Over time, however, I came to feel differently. Although I never came to like Richard Wagner as a man, especially in respect of certain particular aspects of his personality and attitudes, I gradually came to feel that as an artist he was one of the greatest there has ever been, in any civilization, at least of which I am aware. Since then, I have not changed my opinion.

Part of the problem is that the two men – Wagner and Hitler – were both very "Germanic". But Wagner reached out, in his music, if not with his ideology, to a universality that is absolutely transcendent: one of the greatest singers of Wagner's female roles was Jessye Norman, a black American woman, who I think obviously or at least probably did not feel that every note was impregnated with ghastly feelings.

Theodor Adorno wrote a very interesting book just before the Second World War (in exile in London and New York), called "In Search of Wagner"; the trouble with the book is that he wanted to entangle Wagner's *music* with his weird personality, his worst ideas, and with his living being (rather than his creative genius) some of which were later liked by certain Nazis, especially Hitler. But I think Adorno made an essential mistake in doing this (relying rather too heavily on Nietzsche).

Joachim Fest, in his riveting biography of Hitler, argues that Wagner was *the* major influence on Hitler, in respect of ideas of triumph over adversity, success after deep failure, and in some curious way in respect of ultimately tragic, pessimistic achievement. And it is certainly true, according to good biographies, that Hitler saw Wagner's early opera "Rienzi" as a teenager and was desperately taken by it; its story is one in which the hero rises up and up, but then fails, in the face of the hopelessly inadequate populace, who are not finally up to the task set them by the hero.

It is also true that, apart from Hitler's attending Wagner's music-dramas many times in Vienna before the First World War, and his professions to his young friend and room-mate Kubizek at that time about how Wagner was greatly superior to Verdi, he was inclined to kneel down, decades later, in his Box at Bayreuth, in front of Winifred Wagner, the widow of Wagner's son Siegfried, at a crucial moment in Parsifal, and kiss her hand most emphatically. And then again, Fest narrates, euphoric after his "triumph" over the Rhineland in 1936, he said to his entourage in his special train, that "I have built up my religion out of Parsifal. Divine worship in solemn form....without pretences of humility....One can serve God only in the garb of the hero."

All this is enough to make one somewhat suspicious of Wagner. Or did Hitler get it wrong? Daniel Barenboim, the great Jewish musician and conductor, said that Wagner was a great and important composer, whilst anti-Semitism was widespread, and not uncommon, during his life-time.

I personally do not feel any inclination to excuse Wagner for his foul anti-Semitism. He wrote some horrible tracts on the subject – although he dithered around about exactly what his point or objective was, partly to avoid being criticised as anti-liberal, which he was – and was an advocate of the ridiculous ideology of "Aryanism". Friedrich Nietzsche,

Wagner's one-time friend, an absolutely anti-democratic elitist but *not* an anti-Semite, wrote that he could not feel more removed from certain of Wagner's ideas, referring in particular to a pamphlet that Wagner wrote recommending that Germans should form a perfect "Aryan" community in a remote part of Paraguay, concerning which idea Nietzsche's own sister Elizabeth was very taken, and became involved in. Nietzsche said something like: "I have never had problems with Jews; Germans yes! but not Jews." At the first Bayreuth Festival he went "Ugh.... Wagner has been taken over by the Wagnerites! *German Art!* The *German Master!* *German Beer!*" He became sick at the cult around Wagner, and came at his end to declare that Europe was desperate for the Mediterraneanisation of culture, rather foolishly perhaps, but in the light of his newly-found liking for Bizet's "Carmen".

What is there then, deeply, in common between Richard Wagner and Adolf Hitler, beyond their racist philosophies? (Probably an even partially satisfactory treatment of this would require not only a close sociological and political history and psychology, but a large smattering of moral philosophy, and I am not sure if this has yet been undertaken in the senses I have in mind here - it would certainly require consideration of a large number of perspectives and theories in each area, involving a vast undertaking.)

One thing of course, is their intensity, though intensity in itself is not necessarily either a bad or a good thing. Baudelaire described Wagner as "this most despotic composer," but he was meaning that Wagner's music riveted one to one's seat, which is not a negative thought about an artist. (Nietzsche called it a "tyrannical urge to the colossal", and mentioned Wagner's insistence on loyalty to his artistic existence, which is mirrored in the theme of loyalty in his music dramas.) Another French critic in the nineteenth century said about parts of Parsifal: "*on ne touche pas la!*" in respect of some new, terrifying, and extraordinarily intense emotions that Wagner managed to arouse. The truth is, of course, that Parsifal rises to the most absolute emotional and spiritual heights, regardless of the plot of the opera, and whatever one thinks about that.

Michael Tanner, the Wagner scholar, wrote that Wagner demonstrated perfect artistic integrity, no matter what his ideas were outside of his art. I think this does indeed approach the truth concerning these paradoxes. If you "listen around corners" as the Jewish philosopher of music Ernst Bloch wrote that one should, about Wagner, you realize that this music is supremely beautiful, true, complex, and ineffable. You can never penetrate it entirely, it is so profound and miraculous. Language can never reach it, except perhaps to a certain extent, in poetry. It is "divine", "sublime", and "extraordinary".

But Hitler was none of these things, on any level (though he was "extraordinary" in the most incredibly horrible way). Why then did he love Wagner's music? I suppose one of the relevant aspects is the sense of indefatigable determination, over immense stretches of time, that Wagner's music evinces. Another is the power, strength, and uncompromising pressure that Wagner's music expresses, absolutely to the ultimate conclusion, often resolved only in death. (All this is reinforced by the constant accompaniment of Wagner's music to the archive film or recreations of Hitler and Nazism.) Then there is the sense, in Parsifal especially, of sorrow, tortured hopelessness, 'the wound', like the crippled deadness of the sea after the albatross is slain in *The Ancient Mariner*, that must be burst open, turbulently. There is weariness, a sense of living within disaster. This must have entered into Hitler's disturbed mind. There is a pained thirst longing for redemption, a change in the order of things. But again, these need not be barbaric, nor negative urges: like so much about Hitler, some elements of his being, if taken in isolation and laid into a different context, may not have needed to be associated with the vileness that they were. (Consider his vegetarianism, or his teetotalism). Determination is not necessarily terrible or murderous, nor is ambition, though when they reach a certain pitch of fanaticism, they can indeed be. (And as for death at the climax of tragic drama, well: that has been common from the ancient Greeks onwards, through Shakespeare, and even more in nineteenth century opera. It is hardly something unique to Wagner.)

One facet of similarity between Wagner's and Hitler's ultimately unbridled ambitions, is the way both were rather quiescent when younger; they both bided their time, were not "pushy" young men. It was only after the age of thirty that either of them found in themselves an immense lust for power in the one case, and a lust for immense artistic achievement in the other. Both seem to have been doubtful about themselves when they were not merely "young", but also when "young men".

And what about cruelty? George Steiner once recounted in a television interview, that Wagner had said about a fire in a theatre in Vienna, which killed many Jews, that this was a fine solution for them. I have never subsequently managed

to verify this; but it does not seem out of character for Richard. How could he think this way? Was that kind of dreadful thought mingled into his art? These are perennial questions.

Of course, there are certain characters, especially in the “Ring” (Alberich and Mime, for example), who can be thought of as nastily stereotyped, Jewish caricatures, but they do not have to be thought of that way. Did Wagner want them to be taken that way? I think the answer must be ambivalent: they do not have to be, but one can do so if one is so disposed. Why should grasping, greedy characters be taken as somehow “Jewish”? The idea is preposterous, no matter what was going in Wagner’s strange mind.

There are those who have suggested that Kundry, in Parsifal, that witchy, magically charged, seductive, passionate, delicious woman, is supposed to represent a Jewess who tries to deflect the pure knight Parsifal from his spiritual quest. If so, what man, what fool, could resist her! Kundry’s music is as great as that ever written – so intense, beautiful, excruciatingly human.

One can take Parsifal as a drama of the human psyche, or a dream. Are Wagner’s characters “mythical”, in Parsifal or in The Ring, or were they merely invented in his deep subconscious mind, like people who sometimes emerge in one’s dreams, hitherto unknown, so that when you awake you wonder: “Who was he, or she?” – Klingsor! Kundry! Susan Sontag wrote that “Few puzzle anymore about what Wagner’s operas *mean*.” Kundry might just as well represent Parsifal’s (reincarnated) mother. Whilst the knights, with their insecurities and confusions, seem less courageous than the gorgeous, difficult, over-sensitive, interfering Kundry. The knights in some senses are a bunch of neurotics; Kundry is braver than them, though she spends a great deal of time spread-eagled on the ground in apparent despair, and is no paragon of virtue either. How could Hitler have extracted from this a paradigm of heroism! The glorious music of Parsifal is about the human condition, as is Mozart’s “Cosi Fan Tutte.” Perhaps, on some level, Hitler realized that he and his fellow Nazi crooks were a bit like these bizarre “knights”.

Nietzsche *said* (he was quite as cracked, in spite of his supreme genius, as Wagner) that he disliked “Parsifal” because of its supposed Christian theme, though of course Parsifal is nothing of the kind: it is pure Wagner fantasy. Wagner defined drama as “music made visible”, by which he made clear he meant it creates a somnambulant dream image. “What music sounds you can see there on the stage,” he wrote, just as the essence of religion is made palpable through “scenic allegory”, as “a mother demonstrates the mysteries of religion to her children by telling them stories from the legends”. It is for these reasons that Wagner’s music-dramas exist outside of precise time or place, are universal, and subject to infinite interpretation, as is “absolute music”, yet he eschewed the latter in theory (though in his last year he appears to have been changing his mind, and said to his wife Cosima that now he would like an invisible stage as well as an invisible orchestra, and might next write a “symphony”).

It is also true that Adolf Hitler liked the music of Anton Bruckner. It was the second movement of Bruckner’s Eighth Symphony, the Adagio, that was played on German radio after Hitler’s pathetically absurd suicide in his bunker on the last day of April, in 1945. I certainly find it difficult to implicate Bruckner’s magnificent music into Hitler’s evil, psychopathic, hateful visions and murderous behaviour. It is true that Bruckner was an Austrian nationalist, and a political and religious conservative, but hardly evil either in thought or deed.

But to return to Wagner (though Bruckner was very self-consciously influenced by him, although he is actually utterly distinct, and one of the greatest composers of all time in his own, remarkable right): Wagner was, according to Nietzsche, a superlatively cosmopolitan artist, by which I think he meant he was not narrowly “Germanic”, but absolutely universal, and in this, Nietzsche was surely correct. Quite early on he reproached “ideological” Wagnerians for seeing “the progress of music in things which Wagner’s extraordinary, unique nature blew up here and there like bubbles”. He was always an admirer of Wagner, in spite of his increasingly hateful criticisms. Wagner “had created the most lonely music that there is”, wrote Nietzsche later, though at the same time striving for the effects of a “grand style”. But in reality he is the “Orpheus of all secret misery, our greatest miniaturist in music”.

It seems that within this man, Wagner, there were two decidedly different parts: in modern parlance his “left hemisphere” was full of absurd, resentful and hateful thoughts – but also many very interesting ideas about the origins of art (George Steiner described him as a titanic genius, in both his music and in his far-reaching intellectual speculations). He seems to have preempted many ideas about the shamanistic sources of all art (especially that of tragic

drama), in ancient civilizations; in ritual, myth, and primordial magic. He actually anticipated many of the ideas that Nietzsche presented in "The Birth of Tragedy", Nietzsche's first and in some ways his greatest book. But in his "right hemisphere" – this is the realm of intuition, artistic fantasy and imagination, unabashed creativity, unbelievable and glorious, Wagner was a different being. His is music that often rises to the stars. His grasp of human drama, human emotions and drives, is equalled only by Shakespeare and Mozart; it is infinitely extraordinary, and teaches us something about who we are. Was there anything even remotely paralleling this in Adolf Hitler?

I suppose on some horrible level, that there was. Hitler was not a complete fool intellectually, as is obvious from his understanding, though warped and perverse, of German history; his wily and cunning grasp of how to seize political power, and in fact many other things. Intuitively, also, he evidently sensed the way to make a Religion of Light within the Dark – those sculptures of light, or "cathedrals of light" as Albert Speer's designs of upwardly pointing electric search-lights at the Nuremberg rallies came to be called, as also those torches at night, with the raucous singing and the howling noise of brass instruments; and what has often been described generally as a (pseudo) aestheticization of politics. And he certainly knew intuitively how to get people to believe and follow him, how to create a myth around himself, appearing from out of the blue mists like something resurrected, at the top of a building; then later with those ever-present delicate gloves that he liked to hold, preciously flopping them over from one hand to the other, but never actually putting them on his hands (towards the end he used this to hide the nervous twitch in his left arm); as well as the cleverly-intentional counter-directional, "sinister" swastika that he invented, made evermore terrifying by the sirens of his wonderful dive-bombing *stukas*, murdering civilians, peasants, old people or poor, wherever he delighted to see such carnage. All this is not to mention his ranting, screeching, rambling speeches, accompanied by his ugly, writhing bodily movements, that succeeded in casting a spell around both idiots and clever people (such as the philosopher Heidegger).

But I think all this is really to make a very superficial kind of parallel between Wagner and Hitler. Wagner's intensity on the stage, with nineteenth-century "limelight", was to focus on and intensify an individual's being, life, agony; or happiness. Not so with Hitler: his will was to submerge the individual into the mass, the noise; even he himself was not a real being (an "Unperson" as Fest so brilliantly terms him). There was no such thing as a real individual for Hitler: all was role, mirage, pose, grandiose sacrifice, pseudo-heroism, mass death, collective struggle and collective nightmare. The egotism of Wagner is quite different from that of Hitler, and nor does it seem valid to me to connect Wagner's often-alleged never-ending over-loud and over-blown, "stirring" over-theatricality – just listen and look at it closely! – with Hitler's pyro-fanatical bombasticism, which included twisting certain "fanfare" elements from Wagner from their artistic significances into a hellish, nightmarish part of the Nazi "state of being". A large part of Wagner's music is quite quiet – exquisitely so for those who so thus feel, like Stephen Fry, and I – in soft sensitivity – many claim it is boringly so! Try in particular the Wesendonck songs, and the Siegfried Idyll; and let us remember that apart from Beethoven, especially the Ninth symphony, the score of which Wagner took everywhere he went, and Mozart ("music's genius of love and light") Wagner learnt from Johann Sebastian Bach's sublime polyphony – though irritatingly referring to the latter as "holy German music". Whilst Wagner's brilliant characterizations of individuals in his music-dramas is quite different from Hitler's absolute disregard even for the people he was supposed most to respect (such as his "special" S.S. fighting troops).

In any case is it not strange to condemn a composer who succeeds in bewitching us, with fire, passion, and beauty, in music, of some kind of crime; or of boring us with music that goes on and on for hours. What better things might people do? Eat lunch, gossip, put the children to bed, get the groceries, watch television. Wagner is Art, which wakes us up.

It is extraordinary to relate that although Hitler was an undoubted pan-German fanatic before the First World War, and had already absorbed a good deal of "Aryanism" and that belief in a superior "race" that formed the basis of the horrible Nazi religion, he did not indicate, according to serious biographies, a clear anti-Semitism then. (It is not even clear to what extent he was aware, at that time, of Wagner's anti-Semitism – he apparently did not yet know the latter's "Judaism in Music.") Apart from the lack of anti-Semitic diatribes reported by those who knew him at that time, and who survived, three examples of this fact come to mind: firstly as a teenager in Linz he was apparently infatuated with a young Jewish girl, towards whom he never found the courage to approach or talk to; secondly, the Hitlers' family doctor was a Jew, to whom Hitler wrote a very warm and grateful letter after his mother died (to whom latter he seems to have been genuinely devoted) thanking this doctor for his sympathetic treatment of his mother.

Thirdly, his landlady in Munich was a Jewish lady, who amazingly survived, later to say the young Hitler never showed anything but pleasant politeness to her. So what then was his problem: pure propagandistic political scapegoating opportunism after the First World War, or a vicious directing of all his pent-up maniacal hatred – stemming from his aloof, violent and autocratic father, his own failures, or the defeat of Germany in the First World War – onto Jews, or what? (He certainly did not want sex from the women, he didn't want that even from Eva Braun. Wagner also had a puritanical streak: he joined, as a student, in a disruptive assault upon a brothel, for all his music being thought of by many as ultimately erotic. But there is no evidence that either he nor Hitler were homosexually inclined either, though some argue that Hitler was, at least, latently so.)

What a shame, it always seems to me, that after meeting some escaped Jews from concentration camps, Churchill was moved to send a memo to Bomber Harris, suggesting British bombers might knock the hell out of one or more of these "camps". Harris declined, thinking it would be a waste of planes and crew, the objective was to win the war: well, yes, one can understand that, but how good it would have been to hold up the murder for just a little bit of time, 15,000 a day in Birkenau (*not* Auschwitz as is constantly repeated) and to let the murderers know we knew what they were doing (as well as kill them; Jews would have died too in such raids, but as they told Churchill, that would be small in comparison with the organized killing going on day by day).

The first alternative as suggested above about Hitler's motives concerning the extermination of the Jews, is difficult to square completely with his "Final Solution", since he already knew, by 1942, deep down, that he had lost the war (and perhaps had known so from the moment Britain and France declared war after his invasion of Poland, given that he knew that when he attacked the Soviet Union, which was his greatest ambition, he would have a fatal "war on two fronts"); and anyway he wanted his Holocaust to remain secret! (Had he now actually come to believe the religion that Heinrich Himmler had been inventing for him – his "Ignacio de Loyola", as Hitler termed him?) Perhaps it was mere demented fury at knowing he was defeated. It is all too bizarre and ghastly. Anyway, not only did he command the murder of millions of people, but he all but destroyed European Jewry, to the detriment of us all. Both the geniuses, and the ordinary Jewish folk. As well as helping to create the terrible problem of the Middle East today.

But let us be quite clear now that the Jews, after their diaspora following the Roman expulsion of them from their land, and the destruction of their temple in Jerusalem in AD 71, went to live in various other lands, and did no harm. Partly because they were precluded from social acceptance, and partly because they chose to keep their culture and religion within their communities, they persisted for two millennia as a distinct "people". They stuck to their own beliefs, and their own ways of doing things. The historical "problem" of anti-Semitism arose from intolerance within the dominant surrounding majority societies within which they subsisted.

Someone with Wagner's intellect, let alone aesthetic sophistication, should have known better than he did, quite apart from his having been influenced by Mendelssohn amongst other Jewish composers. In any case, what was the point in using such negative stereotypes as he did in "Judaism in Music", about complex and subtle developments and influences within music? It defies understanding that such a genius, writing such miraculous music, an immaculate, vast, and perfect musician, could descend into such banality. He concludes his essay with the thought that the Jew can only "become human together with us" by his active participation in the revolutionary process of self-annihilation and redemption, to which the whole of humanity must submit to break out of our alienation from our true humanity. (There is a bit of pseudo-Marx from "The Jewish Question" here, as well as the millenarianism of earlier centuries, especially the sixteenth, in which Martin Luther as well as others saw in one way or another the need for a "total reformation" of "Christian Society", which should include the conversion or suppression of the Jews. Luther followed the Book of the Apocalypse in believing that by refusing to convert to the true Christianity they were impeding the coming of the millennium. Echoes of all this are obviously present also in the ideas of Hitler and the Nazis.) Well, at least it doesn't suggest that the Jews must all die, unless he means "all of us" must also. But of course Wagner meant it all "metaphorically", just as at the end of Tristan he wrote "Death and Transfiguration" over the score. Such cowardly nastiness, picking on a minority, intertwined with his own insecurity and emotional confusion, does rather contradict however the essential holy dream and idea of his drama-in-music, that selfless love redeems all. Wagner once said, concerning his virulent anti-Semitism, that "I need my grudge", and informed commentators have agreed that he needed some kind of controversial disturbance around him, but why such a miserable, cowardly one! Surely there were better grudges to voice, more apt points about society to make a hullabaloo about.

But all this nightmarish stuff does not excuse today the policies of Israel, which repeat some of the vilest aspects of the very persecution the Jews suffered for so many centuries, now visiting them upon others, who were not responsible for the Jews' historical suffering. Though their oppression of Palestinians cannot be compared in its horrible intensity with the Nazi Holocaust, the Shoah; yet it would be to dishonour the best and finest traditions of Jewish civilization to suggest that this provides any kind of justification for the suffering that has been imposed, including death and torture, upon the unfortunate Palestinian people (though neither does this excuse certain actions on the part of some of the divided and confused Palestinian Resistance either – such as shooting missiles into Israeli civilian areas: would it not be better to try and win over more Israeli hearts and minds – many are already deeply sympathetic to the plight of the Palestinians – though that involves yet another level of argument). I think Spinoza, Walter Benjamin, and Albert Einstein would have agreed with this diagnosis, let alone Marx and Engels, amongst the greatest thinkers all told, of the modern era, though so ever utterly perverted by others; and also, I would guess, Anne Frank. For the answer to the Holocaust, as Anthony Rudolf says, is that all people deserve the same respect, and if possible love, from all others, without distinction. Because finally, the murder or mistreatment of anyone, is something that the rest of humanity must and should suffer from, if they feel themselves to be human, in the deepest moral sense.

It is of course pointless to speculate about what Wagner himself would have thought about Hitler and Nazism; Wagner was the product of a different historical epoch, and it is impossible to conjecture rationally about what this nineteenth-century figure would have thought about such a twentieth-century phenomenon as Nazism (he would have had to live to the age of 120 to see Hitler in power!). My own hunch however – though it can be nothing more than that – is that Richard Wagner would not have liked it for several reasons. Firstly because he was a fantasist (“a mere dreamer”, as one fellow “revolutionary” described him, during the 1848 revolution in Dresden), and could not have taken on board something so dreadfully real. Secondly, because he would have found Hitler intolerably vulgar – at some point his “romantic soul” would have objected to Nazism. But also, though I hesitate to say this, I think his human sympathies might have come into play – though it must be clearly remembered that he thought the Jews were a menace (and “instinctively repugnant” to the non-Jew), and that it was not merely their religion and culture, but their very being that was the problem (the idea of “race” was rather vague and contradictory in Wagner’s time, by comparison with the situation a few decades later – not that it became any more rational or valid either then or later, because it is ultimately a false, unhelpful concept). Nevertheless, Wagner among others helped to build up, through his propaganda, but not I would argue, his music, the anti-Semitism that has so disfigured, morally and humanly, the Europe which we know today. (*His* anti-Semitism was apparently helped along by a resentment he held towards the Jewish composer Mayerbeer, who tried to help Wagner in difficult times while in Paris, but was much more successful at that time than Wagner.)

Wagner’s anti-Semitism was disgusting, not merely a critical reaction to what many nineteenth-century thinkers, such as Proudhon for example, considered (ridiculously) to be a money-grubbing mentality. However I don’t think ultimately that mass murder would have been “up his street”. (It is not simply a matter of what he actually said or wrote – even Hitler never explicitly wrote or (reportedly) said that he wanted to murder six million Jews).

*Les Fanatiques* is what Magritte called his fiery painting which was reproduced in colour in the programme of one performance of Wagner I saw, and taken to allow reference to his music. But I think this is still within the range of artistic fantasy and intensity. I am certainly one of those who for many years could sit up all night, in the dark, listening to Tristan and Isolde, The Ring, and especially Parsifal, in what could well be described as a fanatical, obsessive, extreme state of mind and feelings, utterly taken into a unique dream-realm of wonder and beauty.

In Israel, it is proscribed by their Constitution to perform Wagner (although Barenboim defied the ban by nevertheless doing so). One can sympathize with this proscription originally, on the associational, emotional level; after all Hitler did try to turn Wagner’s music into a kind of holy, triumphal anthem to Nazism. But I think the Israelis actually make a mistake. Music is music; let every individual hearer think what he or she will in response to it. But anyway by now I think it is reasonable to protest that this kind of attitude has for a long time become absurdly ideological on the part of the Israeli Establishment: a refusal to move on, a desire to use every aspect of the past to help maintain, among other negative things, an uncompromising and frequently brutal position in relation to the Palestinians.

One of the big tests for this issue concerning the unacceptability or otherwise of Wagner, is to consider what people of very different cultures make of Wagner’s music, especially people who are not closely involved in memory or

association with the Second World War, or the Holocaust. On the whole it seems, people either like it or do not; but do not normally nor automatically find anything either evil or murderous about it. (It must be rather different, for that minority of European Jews who survived the Holocaust, or their children, than it is for “us” however, no matter how badly our lives and those of our families were affected by Hitler. It drives one almost insane, in grief and rage, to consider closely the fate of the victims of the Holocaust.)

I have seen photographs of Wagner in which he has an unpleasant upturned eye-direction, rather as in some photos and film of Hitler – that phony “very serious” look. Is that significant? I don’t really know. It certainly does not seem like the deep gaze of a “great genius” – that of Mozart or Shelley in certain of their portraits, for example.

But these conjectures are all clutching at straws; it cannot be disputed, at least to me, that both men were deeply dislikable, though one much more so than the other, yet were also capable of inspiring enormous, adoring followings (though again, in one case much larger than in the other). Only in Germany? Not really: there were many fanatical followers of both Wagner and Hitler in other countries. They both had the capacity, in very different ways, to hold a magnetic influence over other people.

Both of course, were iconoclasts. One for the Art-Work of the Future, the Total Work of Art, the other for a New Order, Jew-free, in which brutal Germanic-Aryan supremacy would rule for a Thousand Years. But beyond that the analogy does not hold up well; Wagner’s original artistic vision – gradually turning to disillusionment in the light of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic philosophy, through which he came to see the world as essentially evil – was brought into being during and after the failed 1848 revolutions – a vague sort of “socialist” vision, whilst Hitler’s was ultra-reactionary right from the beginning. Both however experienced kinds of “exile”: Wagner actually being banished from Germany, Hitler spending a few comfortable months in Landsberg Prison, dictating “Mein Kampf” to Rudolf Hess. (But let us not only blame “the Germans” for letting Hitler move ahead: the leaders of other major nations were also responsible and guilty for allowing the Nazi monstrosity to grow and reach power, just as today they allow massacre and genocide to occur, if that is to their convenience. And even today, to switch ground, Britain and the United States never admit that a lion’s share of the defeat of Hitler was performed by the Soviets – even though, as Winston Churchill wrote, the Red Army “tore the guts out of the Wehrmacht”.)

Europe, in general, with certain notable, honourable and heroic exceptions, did precious little to help, rescue, or save the Jews from the Nazi Holocaust.

Yet it was not right that some of the founders of Israel considered the British troops stationed there as being Nazi-British, when the latter usually thought they were helping Jews, disgusted at the Holocaust, believing they were doing something good; but they often found themselves being blown up by the very people they thought they were helping. (Of course, Britain had never had the right to proclaim about the future of Palestine in the first place. It was an opportunist, presumptuous, hypocritical colonial buy-off, in the Balfour Declaration of 1915, to gain support of the Zionist movement, in the mess of the First World War.) But, as usual, the perpetrators of this terrorism in the early days of Israel were not they who had suffered and died in the “camps”, but they who used that immense misery in order to justify their political ambitions for power. Therein lies much of the misery of Israel and the Middle East today.

Perhaps in the endless cycles of greed, dishonesty, lust for power, wealth and something very horrible that Wagner grasped in *The Ring*, there is something to learn from here.

Both Wagner and Hitler were able to mythicise their experience, Wagner looking closely at a ship in a Norwegian harbour after sailing himself through a terrific storm – a journey made to escape creditors in Riga – and then fantasizing the idea of the Flying Dutchman, destined to sail the seas forever unless saved by a woman’s love; Hitler imagining himself as a lost, forlorn, searching, misunderstood young genius, “hunger always then my faithful bodyguard”, until he found his true destiny as the Fuhrer of the Third Reich. Both were capable of feeling very sorry for themselves, and also believed their final destinies were ordained by “Providence” – literally in the case of Hitler, metaphorically in the case of Wagner (for him it was more a matter of the “World Spirit”).

But here we are deviating more and more into the personalities and biographies of the two men: my central purpose was to discuss the reasons behind Hitler's adoration of Wagner's *music*. But that leads one forever into paradox and enigma, I have to admit.

I have a friend, a poet, called Alistair Paterson, who once in Glasgow suggested to me that perhaps in some weird way Hitler had buried within himself some kind of "spiritual potential," which is the only way to explain his love for Wagner's sublime music (Alistair was at that time a theosophist). Who can say: that's as good an answer as any. It reminds me of the story I once heard on Radio Three of a Russian pianist, a woman who was congratulated for her superb performance of a Mozart sonata or concerto by none other than Joseph Stalin: she replied that in spite of his wickedness he must have some kind of soul (Stalin had in fact been a significant poet before becoming a Bolshevik). She was not arrested or executed.

It is certainly true, that as a young man Hitler was a kind of wandering, yearning, lost soul; many are those who have suggested that if one of the various Viennese Academies that he applied to had admitted him as a student of art or architecture before the First World War, the world might have been spared the horrors of the Second World War and the Holocaust. That really does seem a possible and realistic speculation, as he would not then have gone to Germany in 1914, thus to become enlisted in the German Army, if he had now instead been busy in Vienna. He would not have been able as an ex-soldier of a Bavarian regiment to become involved so entirely with the whole proto-fascist movement in Munich after the First World War, when he had nothing better to do. For, although modern historiography has greatly diminished the idea that individuals can change the course of history, rather than history being the result of deep social, economic, political, intellectual etc. currents, even the Marxist Plekhanov wrote a book called "The Role of the Individual in History", in which he argued that under certain conditions and circumstances, particular individuals can indeed greatly affect the direction of history; his book was written several decades before Hitler.

Likewise, if Wagner had been more feted in Dresden early on, and had not become fatuously involved in the 1848 abortive revolution, perhaps we would never have received his greatest music, which followed on from his disillusionment and bitterness, and his sense of being the "exiled genius". Again, who can say? It is like suggesting that if Percy Bysshe Shelley had not been thrown out of Oxford University at the age of 19, for writing a pamphlet called "On the Necessity of Atheism", and had not subsequently been vilified by his father and all and sundry, perhaps he would never have escaped to Italy – "Thou Paradise of Exiles", to become the great poet he did become. The poet who wrote:

"To love, and bear; to hope till Hope creates  
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;  
Neither to change nor falter, nor repent.....  
This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory."