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Judaism In Music And Other Essays



Synopsis

Musical genius, polemicist, explosive personality—that was the nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner, who paid as much attention to his reputation as to his genius. Often maddening, and sometimes called mad, Wagner wrote with the same intensity that characterized his music. The letters and essays collected in *Judaism in Music and Other Essays* were published during the 1850s and 1860s, the period when he was chiefly occupied with the creation of *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Highlighting this collection is the notorious 1850 article “Judaism in Music,” which caused such a firestorm that nearly twenty years later Wagner published an unapologetic appendix. Other prose pieces include “On the Performing of Tannhauser,” written while he was in political exile; “On Musical Criticism,” an appeal for a more vital approach to art undivorced from life; and “Music of the Future.” This volume concludes with letters to friends about the intent and performance of his great operas; estimations of Liszt, Beethoven, Mozart, Gluck, Berlioz, and others; and suggestions for the reform of opera houses in Vienna, Paris, and Zurich. The Bison Book edition includes the full text of volume 3 of William Ashton Ellis’s 1894 translation commissioned by the London Wagner Society.

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Customer Reviews

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composer Richard Wagner, who paid as much attention to his reputation as to his genius. Often maddening, and sometimes called mad, Wagner wrote with the same intensity that characterized his music. The letters and essays collected in *Judaism in Music and Other Essays* were published during the 1850s and 1860s, the period when he was chiefly occupied with the creation of *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Highlighting this collection is the notorious 1850 article "Judaism in Music", which caused such a firestorm that nearly twenty years later Wagner published an unapologetic appendix. Other prose pieces include "On the Performing of *Tannhauser*", written while he was in political exile; "On Musical Criticism", an appeal for a more vital approach to art undivorced from life; and "Music of the Future". This volume concludes with letters to friends about the intent and performance of his great operas; estimations of Liszt, Beethoven, Mozart, Gluck, Berlioz, and others; and suggestions for the reform of opera houses in Vienna, Paris, and Zurich. The Bison Book edition includes the full text of volume 3 of William Ashton Ellis's 1894 translation commissioned by the London Wagner Society.

The German word "Erdball" means "world". It takes a weird translator to want to render it into English as "Earthball". H Ashton Ellis is that translator, a man who, in learning German, forgot all his English. Ellis translates German compound words not with plain English but with strange Germanic formulations, eg "leg-dancers", or "tone-arranger" for a German word that simply means "composer". So while it's good to have these Wagner texts available in English, it's a shame that the re-appearance of these awful translations in a modern edition will publishers from commissioning a new, competent, plain-English translation discourage. Ellis also makes Wagner's "Das Judentum in Musik" harder to evaluate by introducing antisemitic overtones (perhaps of his own) where the Wagner text doesn't justify it. For example, the Ellis text describes Mendelsohn as "a Jew composer", which has a hostile, sneering, sound to it. But Wagner's text has "Judaische"; the correct translation is the merely descriptive "a Jewish composer". There are other, similar examples. As for Wagner, "Das Judentum in Musik"'s argument is that because [in mod-19th Century Europe] Jews are partly involved in the cultures amongst which they live, and are partly separate and aloof from them, their music and poetry don't have the warmth, depth and humanity that come from having strong folk roots; Jewish art, while Jews remain apart and not assimilated into the mainstream "folk", is likely to be imitative, clever, ironical, and so on, but not deep or passionate. The essay brings no comfort to Wagner-lovers, but not quite as much comfort to Wagner-haters as is sometimes claimed. Some people, by no means antisemitic, eg Patrick Magee, defend Wagner's analysis (stripped of its few paragraphs of merely racist writing). The essay makes

an argument about the need for art to have folk roots if it is to be great. Me, I'd say it's too easy to find counter-examples, for Wagner's analysis to stand. Personally, if I were to defend any part of the essay it would be Wagner's valuing of sincere emotional expression in art over irony. We're starting to hear the phrase "post-irony", but it's not yet a reality. I'd welcome a trend back to having the courage to express emotion, in life as well as art, without always hiding behind quote marks. One of Wagner's merits is as supreme non-ironist. But, point out the detractors, rightly, there's a strong thread of antisemitism in amongst Wagner's discussion of culture and of art in this essay. There is a tone of "balance" in most of Wagner's paragraphs, an assumption of the mask of mere intellectual curiosity over the odd position of Jewish musicians and poets in the mid-19th Century. But in some paragraphs animosity shows through undisguised. On the other hand, the essay is not the same thing as the political antisemitism that had its horrifying culmination under the Nazis. Wagner's subject was the arts. And his proposed "remedy" was for Jews to assimilate into the mainstream population and lose their separate identity. That's a despicably racist idea (why should they, if they don't want to?), but it's diametrically the opposite of what the Nazis called for - racial segregation followed by mass murder. Reading it, you'll find that the essay contains specific offensive passages, and is permeated by ideas we now find offensive, but that it is not simply a screed of racial or religious bigotry; mostly the text argues about art and music. In sum, anyone who loves Wagner's music will wish he'd never written or published "Das Judentum in Musik". It disfigures the man's posthumous reputation. But nor is it quite the screed of racial vilification it is sometimes made out to be. Wagner was a bigot and a crank, but not a monster. The book gets three stars, because though it is an appalling translation of a bad essay, it does at least make this infamous essay available for people to judge it for themselves. Laon

THIS TRANSLATION FROM THE GERMAN IS ABSOLUTELY AWFUL. BUT THEN, SO IS THE BOOK IN THE ORIGINAL.

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