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Antisemitism in Classical Music: from Wagner to Shostakovich

Christopher Clarke

Throughout history, fine arts – specifically music – have played an important social, economic, and cultural role in forming and altering Western civilization. As described in Joseph Auner’s *Music in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries*, most revolutions, rebellions, and major shifts in politics, economics, or sociology have used music as a prime accelerant for change, primarily to communicate propaganda to people quickly, efficiently, and often subconsciously (Auner 2013). The 19th and 20th centuries proved to be some of the most turbulent and rapidly shifting eras in modern history, and these shifts in mentality stemmed from some of the most influential leaders of the 20th century (Zarycki 2003, 852). Throughout this paper, the usage of music as antisemitic propaganda by leaders such as Hitler and Stalin will be examined critically, while also being compared to the usage of music as pro-Jewish propaganda by various composers such as Gustav Mahler and Dmitri Shostakovich. Furthermore, a comparative will also be drawn between the way music was used to oppress Jewish people and Black people within a twenty-year time frame.

Two of the most infamous leaders to emerge during World War II are Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Their rise to power was no accident – as educated men in politics and sociology, they skillfully used everything in their power to not only conquer multiple countries throughout Europe, but disseminate racist – primarily antisemitic – ideologies (Prager and Telushkin 2003, 140; Auner 2013, 181). As an enthusiast of the fine arts (Spotts 2003), Hitler understood the power music had on the public, as many European and North American cultures had music as a prominent cultural aspect. Hitler skillfully used music – as well as composers and their cultural influence – to propagate his ideology and sway many people to believe in his cause.

One major composer Hitler turned his attention towards was already a German icon – Richard Wagner (Botstein 2009, 97). Wagner had been celebrated as one of the most important influential and innovative composers in Germany’s history, being compared to people such as Mozart and Beethoven (Auner 2013, 195). Wagner, despite predating Hitler by 50 years, maintained antisemitic ideologies as outlined in his major essay, *Das Judenthum in der Musik* (roughly translated to Judaism in Music or Jewishness in Music). In this essay, Wagner attacks Judaism and specifically Jewish composer Felix Mendelssohn for “not allowing the expansion of pure [German] music” (Wagner 1850). Wagner before this essay never demonstrated antisemitic notions, however further musicological study has shown that many of his characters resemble racist perceptions of Jewish people (Auner 2013, 183). For example, in the second instalment of his most popular set of operas *Der Ring des Nibelungen* or *The Ring Cycle*, Wagner creates an unnamed character that plays pentatonic music slightly out of key and sings about his need for money. Pentatonic scales at the time were heavily associated with Eastern Europe and Asia for their exotic departure from the traditional Western major/minor scale sets (Burkholder et al. 2019, 1134), and capitalist ideologies were still being associated with Jewish peoples due to their systemic means of reducing poverty within their own communities (Prager and Telushkin 2003, 36-37).

Although in the 21st century, the association of Wagner's music with antisemitism is being questioned by musicologists, Hitler proceeded to use the works and popularity of Wagner's music to sway Germans to put good faith in a 'purer' Germany, referencing Wagner's antisemitic condemnation of Jewish music and in turn, Jewish people (Botstein 2009, 97). Hitler, in a demonstration of power and committal to the erasure of Jewish culture in the Third Reich, had all Jewish composers' (including Mendelssohn) music burned, and forbade the performance of Jewish music within the Third Reich (Auner 2013, 187). Furthermore, Hitler encouraged the playing of "pure" German music on all radios and in concert halls, with special features placed on antisemitic composers like Wagner (Burkholder et al. 2019, 1145).

It is important to note that with any cultural or political change, there is always an opposition. Although Hitler used composers such as Wagner to propagate his ideas, many leaders and composers would use music as a form of rebellion and protest, which can be prominently found in the Soviet Union (Auner 2013, 172) with the rise of communism and the fall of the Tzars. Antisemitism became a poignant public discussion as Hitler and Joseph Stalin became aligned in communist beliefs, and many composers such as Dmitri Shostakovich used their platform to express sympathy for Jewish peoples throughout Europe. Shostakovich was not a Jewish man; however, he was known to express sympathy as he considered himself an outsider in Soviet Russia (Forney and Hickman 2011, 492). Although being considered one of the most influential composers in Soviet Russia by both Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin (Auner 2013, 200), Shostakovich did not agree with the treatment Jewish people were suffering throughout Europe. In an act of rebellion, Shostakovich published multiple pieces of what was considered "pro-Soviet" music, basing his themes around Jewish melodies and rhythmic patterns (Auner 2013, 185). One of his most popular pieces can be found in *Symphony No. 7* (1942). After its premiere, Stalin demanded an immediate encore and it became one of the most popular pieces in Soviet Russia during WWII. Many Russians did not understand the Jewish undertones in the piece; however, for many Jewish escapees in Russia, the piece and Shostakovich himself became emblems of hope and the ability to maintain culture in foreign territory (Brown 2006, 83).

As previously mentioned, the treatment of Jewish peoples and subsequently their music as political and social objects are comparable with the usage of music against Black people earlier in the 20th century. With the exploration of musical *exoticism* and *primitivism* directly following the European colonization of Africa, many composers exploited Black peoples and their culture (music, dance, and art) to popularize themselves (Leighten 1990, 4). Primitivism by definition was a movement in the fine arts that explored the "uncivilized" in response to the rapid colonization and Westernization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas (Auner 2013, 140). This placed significant interest towards the music of African tribes, as well as the exploration into African rituals and ceremonies. Composers such as Claude Debussy and Darius Milhaud (Burkholder et al. 2019, 1133) took musical ideas from Black cultures and made them 'accessible' to white audiences across Europe and North America, bolstering the composers' popularity on the backs of then unknown Black cultures (Leighten 1990, 7). The most popular example of this would be Debussy's *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*. The cakewalk was a dance developed by African slaves to poke fun at their white masters and is referenced as a precursor to early jazz (Burkholder et al. 2019, 1038), while a golliwogg was a popular children's doll in 1910s France, depicting a small black girl in slave clothing. By

pairing these two in one piece, Debussy in turn made the cakewalk accessible to White audiences (Auner 2013, 141).

This trend is also evident in the works of Darius Milhaud, who went so far as to deem his works *l'art negre*, or Negro Art. Milhaud's compositions would take tribal music of the African colonies and appropriate them for French White audiences as a means of profiting from the enticement of the unknown (Auner 2013, 146). The works of Debussy and Milhaud profited from the existent divide between White and Black peoples across Europe and aided in further dividing the two (Crawford 1972, 10). By objectifying the arts in Africa as their own, Debussy and Milhaud took attention away from existing cultures in Africa and justified the colonization of African culture as European.

Music has been used for centuries as a tool to aid in political and social reform. It is evident now that the methods by which Hitler used Wagner as a bolster for his antisemitic propaganda were highly successful. Wagner became one of the most popular composers in Germany throughout the mid-1930s and 40s, overshadowing some of the most popular living creators of the time including Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Dmitri Shostakovich (Auner 2013, 192). Wagner is still seen to be a problematic composer in the 21st century due to his posthumous involvement with the Holocaust, but it is important to note that one of the most performed composers by the New Israel Opera Company to date is Wagner (Botstein 2009, 98) as a method of teaching audiences about reconciliation. Milhaud and Debussy – similarly to Wagner – are performed by many Black composers to date as not only a form of reconciliation, but also a method of reclaiming music stolen from their ancestors (Crawford 1972, 10).

Shostakovich used his compositions and platform to bring light to Jewish issues internationally, an act that proved nearly fatal. When Lenin received word that Shostakovich was attempting to encourage Jewish sympathy throughout the Soviet Union in his pieces, Lenin set out to have Shostakovich killed, but died shortly before signing the permission forms (Auner 2013, 167). Shostakovich did not confirm or deny his Jewish sympathy for nearly 15 years until composing his famous *String Quartet No.8* in 1960, where he recycled Jewish themes from *Symphony No. 7* as a tribute to those who died in the Holocaust. Through these composers, leaders, and communities, we are able to demonstrate the power music has in politics, sociology, and belief.

Statement of Commitment

When first signing up for this course, I thought I had a decent understanding of what antisemitism was. I had done a lot of work within Jewish Community Centres in Windsor, and a large portion of my high school volunteer experience was focused around studying and educating others about the Holocaust and the lasting impacts made on the international Jewish community. However, from day one in this course, I realized how narrow my perception of antisemitism truly was, even in my understanding of the term antisemitism as a whole (Prager and Telushkin 2003, 199). I am thrilled that I have had the opportunity to expand my understanding of antisemitism, no matter how difficult it might have been at times.

This course helped me to expand my knowledge of the history of antisemitism as well as its survival in the twenty-first century, but also pushed me to look at my understanding of other aspects of my own life and the correlations I did not know I already had to it. For example, Christianity, specifically Protestantism and Martin Luther and the strong history of

antisemitism the Christian churches put out in the world (Prager and Telushkin 2003, 90-93); the strong relationship between the oppressive acts of racism towards people-of-colour and antisemitism; and the involvement of Martin Luther King Jr. in the fight against antisemitism; as well as the importance of each one of us continuing the conversation internationally.

Furthermore, I have learned more about oppression as a concept in its entirety. The lessons taught to us as children, such as the negative impacts of bullying or hate speech and the importance of critical thinking, play major parts in understanding racism and bigotry in all of its forms.

As a person-of-colour, I have always been told the importance of education and conversation as methods of disabling oppressors. This being said, as the fight for Black Rights (Matters) persists in North America, it is very easy to forget that other people are fighting their own fights across the world as well (Prager and Telushkin 2003, 94).

I would like to commit to continue learning about the effects of racism and bigotry, and to be more aware of how antisemitism is still at large in the twenty-first century, even if it not always directly visible. As a non-Jew, I will no longer dismiss antisemitism as somebody else's fight (Prager and Telushkin 2003, 198), and I promise to be more aware of the people, comments, and community around me.

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