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VIEWPOINT JANE BIRAN

## The Wagner Syndrome

**A RECENT** visit to the Gauguin Portraits exhibition at the National Gallery in London brought to mind a question in one of my English literature exams when I was an undergraduate at Liverpool University: "Can the work be greater than the man?"

In other words, is it possible to admire a work of art at the same time as deploring what one knows about its creator? I believe my examiners at the time had in mind John Milton or Charles Dickens, but in the National Gallery I was thinking about Paul Gauguin.

He was not a nice man. By all the evidence, he was an alpha narcissist, putting himself at the center of his work as testified by the exhaustive number of self-portraits he produced, perhaps forgivable as this absorption is shared by many prominent artists. More reprehensible was his personal lifestyle. He fathered many children with underage girls while he was enjoying the brilliant colors of Tahiti or Hiva Oa. This was exploitation long before the #MeToo age, and there is no evidence of anything approaching love being involved.

Yet does all this detract from his art? In my case, it does cause me to view his paintings with a slightly caustic eye. But it does not lead me to deny the beauty of the best of them, nor to ignore the skill of the artist. Knowing that Charles Dickens was a disaster as a husband and stereotypically portrayed Fagin, the corrupter of little children, as "the Jew," does not prevent me from enjoying *Oliver Twist*.

What about Roald Dahl, the creator of *Matilda* and a host of hugely popular children's books, who was a thoroughly unpleasant man and an unashamed antisemite? Interviewed by the *New Statesman* in 1983, he suggested that Hitler's reasons for exterminating the Jews were based on "a trait in the Jewish character that does provoke animosity... even a stinker like Hitler didn't just pick on them for no reason." So should one put that aside and give in to demands to read to one's child *Charlie in the Chocolate Factory*?

Which brings me to the Wagner question. Many Israelis have a problem with Richard Wagner. I know why and I don't blame them. As a result, many will not listen to his music. I am not one of them. This unlikeable man, with his despicable views, a user and betrayer of women, wrote some of the world's most divine music. Some of it, such as *Ride of the Valkyries*, is recognized by everyone.

Most importantly, as a composer of music, he had an immense effect on its later development and so many 20th century composers



Richard Wagner (1813-83) in 1871

FRANZ HANFSTAENGL/WIKIPEDIA

owe a good deal to his tonal innovations.

He died in 1883, six years before Hitler was born. So he could not have been a Nazi, as many have claimed. But there is absolutely no doubt that he was virulently antisemitic. His infamous article, "Jewishness in Music," first published under a pseudonym in a German magazine but later proudly republished under his own name, included, among many others, a sentence which translates as "Jewish musicians are only capable of producing music that is shallow and artificial because they have no connection with the genuine spirit of the German people."

His other writings show clear resentment and disparagement of his contemporary musicians, Felix Mendelssohn and Giacomo Meyerbeer, both of course Jewish, possibly because he was jealous of their success at a time when he was struggling. And there are scholars who maintain that the operas, particularly *Parsifal*, include ugly Jewish characters, though

none is specifically identified as such.

On top of Wagner's open antisemitism comes Hitler's worship of him and the Nazis' use of his work to promote their ideology. No wonder, then, that Wagner's work is rarely included in orchestral concerts in Israel. Occasional attempts to break the taboo have resulted in vigorous protests. Daniel Barenboim, a devoted Wagner practitioner, has twice included excerpts from one of the operas as an encore in a concert, hoping to retain most of the audience but still receiving catcalls and exits from some. And a Wagner concert scheduled in Tel Aviv in 2012 had to be canceled following a barrage of complaints.

So is it possible to listen to Wagner's music and forget the kind of man he was? Theodor Herzl did, and he was the founder of Zionism. It is a tougher question than whether one can enjoy Dickens or admire Gauguin's work. Perhaps it is easier all round to know nothing about an artist's biography but simply to read, look, listen and appreciate.

My own answer to that question, put to me in different words all those years ago, is the same now as it was then. I want to be open to and to experience what great artists have left to the world at the same time as remembering what that artist actually believed and how they behaved to those around them. ■

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