

Wouldn't You Just *Die* Without Mahler¹

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Seeing Mahler: Music and the Language of Antisemitism in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, by K.M. Knittel. Burlington, VT: Ashland Publishing, 2010. 201 pp.

Introduction

This short, scholarly, but important, imposing, and thorough book is neither a Mahler biography nor an assessment of his skill as a composer. Rather, it is a discussion of a dark side of the German/Austrian music scene contemporary with Mahler's mature years, focusing on reactions to Mahler's music in the antisemitic atmosphere of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, much of it initiated, amplified, and perpetuated by the antisemitism of Richard Wagner. It was this period that played an important role in the reaction to Mahler's music, though "rejection of" may be a more suitable description.

Dr. Knittel's book deals with six perspectives of the Austrian/German music scene. Because the core messages vary significantly, each perspective is treated individually. The author's prose, while elegant, is dense; this book is not an easy read. Any scholar who writes about the details—or, more importantly, the impact of antisemitism in *fin-de-siècle* Austria and Germany—is likely to create a thoughtful study, but one that is not necessarily easy to read. It comes with the territory.

Mahler's Metamorphoses

Knittel's first perspective on the era in which Mahler lived and worked begins with an analysis of a specific critical assault on the composer, an attack that will occur frequently during his brief but impressive life as a musician. The criticism asserts that he was a musical copycat; i.e. that his music presents elements from different historical styles, which, so it was suggested, resulted in something that lacked creativity or originality. In effect, it was said that his compositions were largely imitative.

However, the criticism is not as simple as it might seem. Many composers have been accused of being unoriginal, but, in Mahler's case, the difficulty arose from the fact that, though born a Jew, he converted to Catholicism on 23 February 1887 in order to obtain the post of director of the Vienna *Hofoper*. He was thought to be inherently incapable of creating anything original, since that was the nature of Jews, and even conversion could not cure this assumed genetic defect.

In both Austria and Germany, some thirty years before Mahler's time, the most influential antisemite in Europe was Richard Wagner, who posited the lack of originality as a singularly Jewish characteristic. It was in Wagner's 1850 essay, "Das

¹ These are the first words spoken by the self-destructive fictional character, Trish (played by Maureen Lipman), in the 1983 film, *Educating Rita*. See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0085478/quotes?qt=qt0213729>.

Judenthum in der Musik,”² that he detailed the characteristics that were exclusively Jewish, all of which, he asserted, were destructive to music.³

Antisemitism was a permanent feature of Viennese life. Karl Luger, the mayor of Vienna in 1897 (the year of Mahler's conversion) headed an openly antisemitic government, while a leading newspaper advertised itself as the only antisemitic newspaper in Vienna. There was also a rabid Pan-German league, but its extremism was so great that it became too much even for the Viennese.

Mahler's tenureship at the Vienna *Hofoper* was made as unpleasant as possible by the antisemitic press. One newspaper wondered if the “Jews' Press” would support Mahler, once his “Jew-boy antics” began on the podium. And reviews of Mahler's conducting by the Pan-German nationalists—the party whose Jew-hatred was part of the continuum of loathing from the early Catholic Church, through Martin Luther, to Wagner, to Hitler, to World War II, and to the Shoah—were fiercely negative.

The Portraits of Gustav Mahler

Knittel's second perspective deals with an important clue to the reception of Mahler's music, and was related to the supposed biologically-based and unalterable nature of certain specific aspects of a Jew's body. An unknown number of these nineteenth-century specifics are still found in contemporary use, occasionally self-directed by Jews in the form of wry humor; i.e. “These clothes makes me look too Jewish!”

The first information connecting the issue of Mahler's body to the antisemitic *milieu* of Vienna is found in a 1922 book of Mahler photographs by Alfred Roller, who collaborated with the composer/conductor for several productions at the *Hofoper* between 1904 and 1907. The volume also contained an essay that described various and often unrelated details of Mahler's person. Roller was a friend of Mahler as well as a guest who stayed at his country home during the summer months, which was the time that Mahler set aside for composing. In his essay, Roller dismissed a number of the stereotypical features—“unattractive, ugly, puny, a fidgeting bundle of nerves,” all of which were said to be traditional Jewish features—while, in his description of some of Mahler's real features, Roller appeared unable to realize that he was a prisoner of Vienna's antisemitic culture, even though he was sympathetic to Mahler as his friend.

The perspective continues with Oskar Panizza's 1893 short story, *The Council of Love*. Though the tale was not intended to document the alleged Jewish features of Mahler's body, it is useful because it is a handbook of antisemitic boilerplate.

The third perspective comes from Mahler's wife (and widow), Alma Mahler,

² Richard Wagner's “Das Judenthum in der Musik,” was published under the pseudonym K. Friedgedank in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, in Leipzig, in September 1850. The essay attacks Jews in general and the composers Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn in particular. The work was reissued in an expanded version under Wagner's name in 1869, and is a landmark in the history of German antisemitism. The title is often translated as “Judaism in Music,” or “Jewishness in Music,” but because the word “Jew” was a racial designation, “Judaism in Music” doesn't work—and “Jewishness in Music” is not ugly enough. Any English translation should have a bad smell to it, one that reflects the ideas the author wished to convey. I think that “Jewry” carries the right tone since it appears to reflect the characteristic that Wagner was attempting to ascribe to Jews; i.e. it was their Jewry that was responsible for the racial difference, which, in turn, was responsible for the Jew's inability to be creative.

³ Wagner was 47 when Mahler was born. Mahler was 23 when Wagner died.

whose writings are full of explicit comments about racial stereotypes and Jewish differences. More to the point is the vague sense of uneasiness that gives the impression that her books, one of which is a diary, center on her husband's Jewishness; i.e. her husband's racial inheritance. Alma's relationship with her husband is so special that the interested reader will have to explore Knittel's material more thoroughly than has been commented on here.

Jewry in Music⁴

Wagner held negative opinions about Jews in general, but perhaps reserved his most severe criticism when discussing the complete lack of creative abilities of the Jewish composers. His views on this subject were given in the same way that one might define Euclidean postulates; things stated as being factual because their truth is self-evident.

Wagner's basic assertion about Jewish composers, as found in his essay, "Jewry in Music," was that their compositions lacked depth, that the inferiority of the Jews' music was immediately apparent, and that all musical offerings composed by Jews lacked feelings and were characterized by emptiness, imitation, and excessive orchestration. All of this resulted in music that was banal, trivial, and incomprehensible.

So, when Wagner said, "In this language and this art the Jew can produce only imitative sounds and counterfeit goods—he cannot write truly eloquent poetry or create works of true art," it seems reasonable to conclude that Wagner had himself in mind as someone who *was* capable of creating works of true art.⁵

To this, I add that Wagner's Jew-hatred went way beyond music composed by Jews. He was even disgusted by the way Jews spoke German, calling it *Mauscheln*, or in free translation, "Mosesprattle" (speaking like Moses), possibly referring to a Yiddish accent, which he found to be "a creaking, squeaking, buzzing snuffle" that was "entirely jumbled blather."⁶

Knittel, whose comments on the matter I quote in full, neatly captures how this collection of distasteful Wagnerian assertions about Jewish composers impacted the thinking of music critics with respect to Mahler's compositions.

The language of the early critics, with its...invocation of categories such as banality, triviality, incomprehensibility, eclecticism, and overwhelming orchestration may not have been antisemitic in itself. But when their discussions imply that Mahler's music was all surface, that it lacked depth and thus true feeling; that he was incapable of true creativity and tried to hide that lack with elaborate orchestration; that he had to steal from other composers; or that his melodies themselves revealed their inadequateness with their forced naïveté or simplicity, then the critics were indeed

⁴ On the matter of the antisemitic content of Wagner's operas, focusing specifically on *The Ring* and *Meistersinger*, see Daniel N. Leeson, "Antisemitism in Wagnerian Opera," *The Journal for the Study of Antisemitism*, 3 (1) 2011: 243-61, available on line at http://jsantisemitism.org/pdf/jsa_3-1.pdf

⁵ Wagner employs the word "true," as in "true art," at every possible opportunity. Further, the term implies the existence of "false art." It is bad enough when Wagner employs the term, but when one sees it used repeatedly in reviews submitted by professional critics, the emptiness of the term as well as its Wagnerian origin becomes clear.

⁶ I thank Michael Miller of Budapest for correcting my inaccurate early translation of *Mauscheln*.

reacting—consciously or unconsciously—to the idea of Mahler's Jewishness. And those beliefs—that Jewish music lacks depth; that Jewish composers cannot be creative; that they do not have a true voice and cannot express true feelings; that they must attempt to hide their insufficiencies; that they can only mimic the music or styles of others—are very clearly articulated in Wagner's essay *Das Judentum in der Musik*. (p. 67)

The Viennese Critics

Knittel presents a broad picture of the language used by critics reviewing the initial performances of Mahler's first six symphonies. She also examines five basic arguments relating to Mahler's music, the purpose of which is to show that Wagner's language and ideas were absorbed directly into the vocabulary of the critics.

These five basic issues are: 1) program music vs. absolute music; 2) the alleged incomprehensibility of Mahler's compositions; 3) how Mahler's compositions show his penchant for stealing melodies—and/or additional compositional details—from other composers; 4) the quality of Mahler's thematic material; and 5) Mahler's orchestration.

1) Program Music vs. Absolute Music

The creation of music that was *about* something resulted in a conflict between those who felt that programmatic music was inferior, and those who felt it to be the mainstay of a new German symphonic movement. With Mahler's entry into the world of composers who wrote symphonies, he soon found himself at the center of the conflict. His first symphony was so programmatic that he gave it the subtitle *Titan*, and originally provided program notes. He then made the situation worse by withdrawing the notes, causing critic Eduard Hanslick to say, "Mahler's new symphony belongs to a genre, which to me, is no genre at all."

But these comments, superficially at least, do not appear to have any antisemitic content. Anyone can align themselves with programmatic music on one hand, and absolute music on the other, without becoming involved in the snake pit of Wagner's antisemitism. Unfortunately, that conclusion would be premature. By eliminating the program notes of the *Titan* symphony, Mahler reinforced the not uncommon belief that Jews were deceitful, conniving liars.

2) Incomprehensibility, Eclecticism, and Formal Problems

The existence of this topic derives from Wagner's assertions about what Jewish composers could not do, namely to write good music; to speak musically. Wagner asserted that Jewish art was characterized by a complete lack of feeling, suggesting that, "in his speech, the Jew will betray himself by the entire want of human expression." It therefore follows that anything musical created by a Jew was, at best, without musical worth, and, at worst, entirely incomprehensible. Because this idea had been elevated to a universal musical truth—in Germany and Austria at least—music written by Mahler, i.e. his speech, had to be considered as *Mauscheln*, or "Mouseprattle."

This reduced the essential criticisms of Mahler's music to something far beyond a dislike of his compositions. Instead, these condemnations centered on the broadest possible issue, namely that Mahler had become a composer in the first place. Echoing Wagner's views, it really did not matter what Mahler wrote, because, as a Jew, art and civilization "remained...a foreign tongue" to him. His musical speech would always betray him "by the entire want of human expression." In Wagner's opinion, "it [was] the lack of true feeling that characterizes Jewish art," suggesting that, as in his speech "the Jew will betray himself by the entire want of human expression."

3) Thematic Theft

Generally, Wagner was not explicit in his racism. Instead, he was vague and imprecise in his antisemitic accusations—saying, for example, "the Jew cannot create true art," whatever that means. However, when it came to Jewish composers allegedly stealing from the music of others, he was unequivocal, saying, "...having no community to draw upon for inspiration, the Jew has no choice but to imitate what he hears." He was joined in this irrationality by the Jewish critic Robert Hirschfeld, who suggested that since Mahler was incapable of writing cheerful music, he must depend on quotations from other composers to get the idea across. And even when Mahler did not quote exactly—which implied the copying both of pitch and rhythm in the stolen material—finding supposed fragments from the works of other composers in Mahler's compositions denied him any creativity at all. I have a good deal to say about this accusation in my critique of this book.

4) The Quality of Mahler's Thematic Material

As pointed out in item 3) above, Mahler was accused of being a sometime tune thief. Here, the accusation is made that his tunes were trivial and absurd. The following quote from Wagner's "Judenthum," says it all: "[The artworks produced by Jews] bear the attributes of coldness and indifference, even to triviality and absurdity."

What this statement may mean—or at least how Mahler's critics may have taken it to mean—is that Mahler produced the kind of music that is the least culturally significant that can be produced, the kind that presents pretty little waltzes and fetching little polkas; i.e. Salon Music (though today, it might be called "Muzak" or "Elevator Music"). Typical Salon Music included character pieces, which were central to the Romantic Movement's interest in the evocation of a particular mood or moment.

5) Orchestration

Given Wagner's penchant for assuming that everything Jews did in the arts was fundamentally worthless, it is not surprising that he directed additional accusations regarding "the Jew's orchestration, [revealing] itself in its dishonesty or subterfuge, attempting to hide, ornament, or make enticing its utter lack of true expressive power." However, when Hirschfeld, one of the better Viennese music critics, and a Jew to boot, accused Mahler of mustering huge orchestral resources for a small fussy effect that didn't sound very pleasant, it becomes a bit much. When reviewing the first

performance of Mahler 1, he wrote, “[In the opening of the first movement,] [t]he whole string orchestra, with the cellos and contrabasses, themselves triply divided, must hold an A harmonic in all achievable octaves for 50 bars, ultimately in order to achieve the effect of a creaking door.” With criticism such as this, who needs enemies?

The fact that Mahler was able to sustain himself in the face of such constant disparagement—so much of it based on Richard Wagner’s xenophobic assertions about Jews—and still feel that someday his time would come (as he asserted during his lifetime), is a testament to his strength of character and the self-realization of his own worth.

The Problem of Richard Strauss

In my opinion, this is the most revealing illustration of the uncomplimentary treatment offered to Gustav Mahler, the Jew and, therefore, an outsider. The case examined is a very interesting comparison between how the Viennese critics treated the music of Strauss when contrasted with Mahler’s music.

The two men were almost exact contemporaries, with Mahler being four years older than Strauss. On the surface, there does not appear to be any significant difference in the treatment of the two individuals; both were criticized in much the same way, with particular emphasis being given to the overwhelming size of the requested orchestral resources. From the beginning, however, the two men worked in different spheres, with Strauss’s popularity coming from his early tone poems, which were obviously programmatic music, while Mahler, who had his own scrape with program music, published his major orchestral works as symphonies.

By the sheerest of coincidences, however, both men had their music performed in Vienna in 1904, between Wednesday, 23 November and Thursday, 22 December. The Strauss pieces were the *Sinfonia domestica*, *Don Quixote* (twice), and *Ein heldenleben*, while two performances of Mahler 3 took place on other days. Many of the critics compared both composers over the 30-day period, and, in these criticisms, Mahler came off as the outsider while Strauss was the good old German boy. The use of a large orchestra appears to have been understood as rational for Strauss, while Mahler’s symphonies were said not to justify the resources needed to produce them.

This topic is treated at length in Knittel’s book, 47 pages to be exact. The arguments are detailed and extensive, which means that the interested reader is going to have to deal personally with the comprehensive text.

A Musical Physiognomy

In a summary, Knittel tries to present Mahler’s status in today’s classical music scene, considering that the critics of his time leveled some very withering disapproval of his symphonic contributions.

Henri-Louis de La Grange created a “what might have been” scenario at the conclusion of Mahler’s musical life, saying, in *Music about Music in Mahler: Reminiscences, Allusions, or Quotations?*

If music critics could consign to oblivion music they considered unworthy of survival, Mahler's music would have been finally forgotten long ago, for the "informed judges" of his time were almost unanimous in finding him guilty of unforgivable faults. Their verdict was delivered in tones ranging from the most sarcastic irony to violent indignation, but the substance was always the same: such "Kapellmeistermusik," consisting exclusively of "banalities" and "reminiscences" of the past was clearly fated to be soon forgotten, since its author revealed in it nothing so much as a total lack of melodic imagination. The severest judges went so far as to call Mahler's symphonies *gigantic pot-pourris*. (p. 161)

And La Grange, too much of a distinguished French aristocrat, could have added—but did not—that "on top of his other almost insurmountable problems (which were caused more by what he was than what he wrote), he had the unlucky misfortune of being a former Jew taking part in the national sport of classical music in *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna*."⁷ It is to Knittel's credit that she researched this additional—if very well hidden—perspective, which was just another mountain for Mahler to climb.

It is Deryck Cooke, who put together a performance edition of movements one and three of Mahler's incomplete and final symphony, number 10, who isolates what Mahler was and what his most important qualities were, saying, in *Gustav Mahler: An Introduction to His Music*:

... there is the astounding originality of the purely Mahlerian elements: ... "distortion" music, the elemental voices of nature, mysterious and lonely, or brutally ferocious; the cosmic power of the funeral march; the sheer horror of some of the scherzos; the bounding ebullience of some of the Ländler, the exultant stride of the triumphal marches; the ecstatic outburst of jubilation. These unique conceptions stamp Mahler as a highly original genius. (p. 162)

And so, I conclude this portion of my review with a reprise of the comments of the self-destructive Trish, saying, perhaps for many of us who find Mahler's music overwhelmingly stirring and just plain awe-inspiring, "Wouldn't you just *die* without Mahler!"

Critique

Knittel is to be warmly congratulated on her excellent book. It is not an easy read, not because she does not write well—far from it—but rather because the material is so dense. There are only two constructive criticisms that I might offer: firstly, the type font is too small, and I found myself reading with a magnifying glass at times;

⁷ For centuries, Jews who converted for social reasons found that they were no more accepted into Christian society after their conversion than they were before that act. In Spain, after the expulsion in 1492, two classes of Christians were created: "New Christians" (meaning "Jews") and "Old Christians" (meaning "real Christians"). Perhaps the most telling story of the futility of trying to escape one's Jewishness has to do with the treatment of converted Jews (even as far back as several generations) by the Nazi government. Many of them found themselves in Auschwitz. Once, Moses Mendelssohn met a former Jew who had converted, and who told Mendelssohn, "I used to be a Jew." Mendelssohn, who was deformed by a hunchback, responded, "I used to be a cripple."

secondly, she does not engineer the flow of text as a storyteller might. Mahler's story has everything a storyteller could want: poor but extremely talented Jewish boy tries to succeed in a life mostly closed to him because of his religion, makes good and overcomes a ferociously hostile environment, marries a young promiscuous beauty, sires children and dies young.

My comments here should not be interpreted as being in agreement with all aspects of Knittel's perspective. That would be impossible. But a few things caused me to bristle—in a congenial fashion, of course—the most important being the claim that Mahler was a tune thief. My comments on these items now follow.

Personal Issues

Not until I was in my thirties did I participate as an orchestral performer in the presentation of a Mahler symphony. His works were not often performed in the American classical music scene of the 1960s. But, since that first eye-opening experience, I have played a great deal of Mahler, including all the symphonies, on multiple occasions—except for Mahler 8—as well as many of his other large-scale works, the most memorable of which, in my mind at least, is the blockbuster, *Das Lied von der Erde*. So, as I read Dr. Knittel's material, I did so with the perspective of a professional performer who has been paid to play Mahler's works. Performances of Mahler's music are generally expensive due to the need for large orchestral, choral, and solo vocal resources. What this means is that the costs of production are incompatible with a single performance. So, when one is engaged to play a large-scale Mahler work, it generally results in a number of rehearsals plus several performances that generate the income to cover administrative costs. However, the additional performances are also mandated by the fact that, today, Mahler's music is treated as a *happening*, and every performing venue is generally well attended, if not sold out.

Comments on “Mahler's Metamorphoses”

Considering the volume and style of the baseless, and entirely irrational, antisemitic fervor that centered on Mahler during his adult years, it is amazing that his music did not disappear entirely from the concert scene. Because Richard Wagner was the most influential voice in damning Jews as composers—and it would not have mattered to him one whit that Mahler had become a Catholic—I offer another viewpoint on Wagner, his music, his rancid opinions on Jews in general, and his most revered work, the four-opera, twenty-hour blockbuster, *The Ring of the Niebelung*.

The Ring is a pagan tale of sorcery and incest that presents an incomprehensible mythology as a rational philosophy for the world, but is strong enough stuff to allow the modern listener to become drunk in its embrace. Rarely has the art-loving world been presented with such a deceit as this attempt at a complete work of art. It is a tangle of falsehoods and pathetic arrogance run amok, where trivial opinions are fashioned into ponderous utterances, and bankrupt personal pursuits are elevated to matters of universal significance. Like every other written utterance of Wagner, *The Ring* is largely egocentric. But here it is of such proportions as to be a stage work, on which Wagner's fantasies were transformed into the future of the German people.

I have always found it difficult to understand how Wagner's malevolent opinions about Jews were accepted as universally understood truths. Though no objective evidence was ever offered to sustain these malignant assertions, no bigot is prepared to accept an opinion that differs from his.⁸ It was as if there was no one in Germany or Austria courageous enough to contradict Wagner's allegation that being Jewish carried with it an inherent incapacity for creativity. Was there no one capable of asserting that, "Wagner opines on these matters, but where is the proof that these assertions about race—whatever that word means—are true?" It is a tragedy that this kind of behavior (i.e. inventing or propagating irrational "truths" about Jews) is so similar to the reckless comments heard today from certain political and religious leaders in the Middle East. These people support, as true, a variety of ugly anti-Jewish accusations, such as the details of the infamous 1903 antisemitic Russian forgery, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—on public sale in Arabic translation throughout the Middle East—and even worse things, such as accusations of cannibalistic Jewish practices associated with blood libel.

Published condemnations of Mahler by some of the Viennese music critics who were Jews (or of Jewish descent) argued that his music was uncreative. This group included Julius Korngold, Robert Hirschfeld, and Max Graf (whose father was Jewish).⁹ None of these men and few of the non-Jewish critics showed any identifiably open bias in their reviews. They simply used the Wagnerian language that had become an accepted truth when writing about Jewish composers.

Comments on "The Portraits of Gustav Mahler"

In reading the material about the photographs of Mahler in Alfred Roller's 1922 book, I came across an item that I found to be possibly ambiguous. Either I have misinterpreted what Knittel wrote, or she has not expressed herself well on the matter of one of Wagner's greatest fears, namely that he might have been of Jewish descent. In

⁸ This is not a surprising phenomenon. In today's world, many of the same and even worse antisemitic accusations come from the Muslim world, and elsewhere, without much of a response from the supposedly enlightened world community. It is not called "the oldest hatred" for nothing.

⁹ 1) Korngold, who succeeded the so-called "Bismarck of Critics," Eduard Hanslick, at the *Neue Freie Presse*, left Germany and spent the war years in Los Angeles, where his also exiled son, composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold, wrote thrilling film scores for a number of productions, including Errol Flynn's *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Sea Hawk* (1940), and at least 19 other films, two of which—*Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938)—won Academy Awards. His last film score, *Magic Fire* (1958), was for a biography of Richard Wagner, a work that he chose not to leave in less devoted hands. Both father and son, along with their wives, are buried in the Hollywood Forever Cemetery in Los Angeles, section 8, lot 102 (father and mother) and section 8, lot 15 (son and wife), respectively. 2) Hirschfeld, then perhaps the most respected music critic in Vienna, died on 2 April 1914, in Velké Meziříčí in the Czech Republic—the same city in which he was born—and far too early to have seen where the impact of Wagner's brand of thinking eventually led. At one time, Velké Meziříčí had two synagogues and a Jewish cemetery, but no records are currently available to determine if Hirschfeld is buried there. 3) Max Graf spent the years 1938 to 1945 in New York, where he taught at the New School for Social Research. He created there the first seminar in music criticism. Graf died in Vienna on 24 June 1958, and is buried in an *Ehrengrab* ("Honorary Grave") in the Jewish section of Vienna's Zentral Friedhof, door 4, group 2, row 4, tomb 16. Being unwilling or unable to publicly reject these absurd ideas about Jewish inadequacy in the arts, these men appear to have been brainwashed and perhaps overwhelmed by Wagner's reputation and his racist nonsense about Jewish composers, a behavior that may have been not uncommon among Vienna's Jews. Alternatively, there is the possibility that some measure of Jewish self-hatred might have been involved.

examining a caricature entitled *Darwinian Evolution* on p. 19, a four-panel cartoon shows the physical transformation of a man who begins as a stereotypical Jew (scraggly beard, large nose, skullcap) to a clearly identifiable caricature of Richard Wagner. Knittel writes, "... the artist has depicted Wagner as a Jew—ironic in the face of Wagner's vehement ... antisemitism...." Since Knittel is surely aware that Wagner had a neurotic phobia that he was of Jewish descent through his father, and possibly also through his mother, a subject that frequently appeared in the press, then the use of the word "ironic" may not have been the correct one to describe the situation.¹⁰ I am unable to find any irony in this.

In focusing attention on the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century interpretation of these ugly specifics, allegedly associated with various parts of the Jew's body, the description, in my opinion, is insufficiently detailed. For the contemporary average reader, who has little or no knowledge of these cruel accusations, the matter of how vicious they are is not clear. I think that their descriptions do not depict the incredible medieval savageness inherent in the accusations. While specialists deal with these issues and their origin on a daily basis and understand these claims in the much greater historical panorama, the average reader is not going to grasp the degenerate nature of some of the beliefs about the Jew's body. I give two examples that, in my opinion, have insufficient background explanation to allow the average reader to comprehend how these ideas began, and how, over time, they have become transformed and made to appear gentler than they really are. They may be many things, but "gentle" is not one of them.

I am uncertain about Knittel's perspective on her audience. If she believed that the readership for this well researched and pathbreaking book was limited to people at her considerable level of expertise, then she did the right thing by not presenting information about which her audience is already well informed. However, her work is sufficiently important that the non-specialist reader is also to be considered. Because so many Jews have lost all remembrance of the origin of these medieval insults, their horrors should not be presented in such a gentle fashion. Wagner, in several of his operas, subtly presents these understandings of the Jew's body as part of his stage works. It is only recently—and with a better understanding of the origins of these hateful tales—that their presence in Wagner's music dramas has been identified in the scholarly literature. In effect, these matters are—or certainly should be—at the center of the current ongoing Wagner controversy in Israel, though most involved in the argument are unaware of the details, presuming that the

¹⁰ Wagner was uncertain of his father's identity, and one possibility was that the actor, poet, and painter, Ludwig Geyer, a man who Wagner thought was of Jewish descent, sired him. No proof is available to resolve the question, nor does it matter, the overriding consideration being not whose son he was, but who and what Wagner thought his father might have been. So consumed was he by the question of his own heritage that he may have held suspicions of a possible Jewish ancestry for his mother, too. Thus, Wagner may have become the most influential antisemite in Europe as a means of focusing attention away from his own possible ethnicity. The idea of Wagner's possible Jewish descent was exploited by his detractors, often in caricatures that appeared in the press, where he is shown with an excessively large nose designed to resemble the stereotypical "distinctive physiognomy" that Jews were accused of possessing. Such caricatures also burlesqued other Wagner physical features. He was short, large of head, and had an excitable nature. In Theodore Adorno's *In Search of Wagner* (1981), Wagner's early depiction of the gnome, Mime, an important character in *The Ring*, was so physically and psychologically self-descriptive that he removed it and replaced it as soon as he realized what he had done—namely, that he had described some of his own physical characteristics. How shocked Wagner must have been to see himself in his own description of the prototypical subhuman.

controversy is directed only at Wagner's obvious antisemitism. I give two examples to clarify why some readers, new to this aspect of Jew hatred, will find Knittel's lack of detail troublesome.

Consider the assertions about the allegedly weak feet of the Jews. On the face of it, this does not appear to be a horrific accusation. "So what? The Jews have bad feet. What is so terrible about that?" But when the origin of the allegation is understood, it becomes clear how this indictment motivated the Christian communities of Europe to become so focused on it, and how it created such evil accusations. The notion that the feet of the Jews reflected their malevolent nature is derived from the medieval superstition that Jews had goats' feet. In the Middle Ages, the goat represented a symbol of satanic lechery, and was the devil's customary disguise. The Jews, argued to be Satan's minions, were said to have that same attribute. The fact that the Jews' feet were shod in public was interpreted as using the cloak of civilization to disguise their corruption. This acceptance of Jewish devilry gave rise to the concept that the Jewish foot did not function properly; i.e. the Jew stumbled and staggered. In Sander Gilman's book, *The Jew's Body*,¹¹ additional significance is given to the feet of the Jews. They became a source of disease, and the pace at which Jews walked was perceived as a sign of their affliction. The seventeenth-century Orientalist, John Schudt, commented that the crooked feet of the Jews made them physically inferior. The general belief about the Jews' feet ultimately influenced liberal efforts to include them in the modern state. This is particularly true with respect to serving in the military, where it was believed that Jews would be worthless as soldiers. In Austria, for example, weak feet were said to be the main reason why Jews inducted into the military were subsequently detached. And, in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, the stumbling and staggering of the gnomes is a clear example of how this anti-Jewish characteristic is made part of the drama. It is also present in *Meistersinger*, when the clumsy stumbling of Sixtus Beckmesser is contrasted with the sure step of the townspeople.

A second example has to do with the alleged unpleasant Jewish odor, the *foetor Judaicus*.¹² The assertion that the Jew had a distinctive and unpleasant odor is a particularly grave accusation, firstly because of the origin alleged to be the cause of the stench, and secondly because of the ways Jews were said to act in order to eliminate it. Common belief during the Middle Ages associated good spirits with emitting a pleasant fragrance while evil spirits, particularly Satan and his minions, gave forth an obnoxious stench. In the case of the Jews, the stink was said to be a punishment for their alleged crimes, which included accusations of host desecration and deicide. The Jews were said to have two methods of eliminating the smell, one of which involved both murder and cannibalism. It was widely believed that Jews killed Christian children to obtain blood required for their rites, one of which was said to occur during the Passover Seder. It was alleged that Jews consumed cups of this blood as a remedy for the Jewish stench. The other choice was acceptance of baptism. A direct quote from the time stated that "the water of baptism carried off the Jews' odor," and that this left them with a fragrance "sweeter than that of ambrosia floating

¹¹ Sander L. Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991); Gilman's book is a collection of essays on the evolution of hatred toward Jews in Western culture based on the physical images of the prototypical Jew.

¹² That some Viennese Jews may have believed it necessary to avoid any body odors that might generate the *foetor Judaicus* accusation is suggested by comments made to me by several Viennese Holocaust survivors, who said that their mothers and grandmothers never used garlic in cooking and, despite repeated inquiries, would not explain why.

upon the heads touched by the sanctified oil.” This accusation went beyond those expressed in the extreme anti-Jewish rhetoric of Martin Luther, causing him to say, “So long as we use violence and slander, saying that [the Jews] use the blood of Christians to get rid of their stench...what can we expect of them?”¹³

Moving on, Knittel presents two additional examples, one of which comments specifically on the matter of Mahler's physical appearance, as well as the general perspective on Jewish stereotypes.

The second example centers on the German writer, Oskar Panizza, who was jailed for blasphemy as a result of one of his plays. Panizza wrote a short story in which the lead character, a Jewish student, chooses to become a German. What Panizza produced was a handbook of antisemitic stereotypes designed to show that the Jew was more than simply “the other.” He was visibly and physically different, with those differences inscribed in and on his body so that all could see them. The central character in Panizza's story speaks of physical distinctions that are often hard to visualize much less understand, such as having “an antelope's eye with a subdued cherry-like glow [that] swam in the apertures of the smooth, velvet, slightly yellow skin of his temples and cheeks.” While Panizza's short story is not an attempt to depict Mahlerian physical characteristics, it is useful to have an example so full of the alleged Jewish stereotypes.

One final point on the subject of the portraits of Gustav Mahler is the subject of race. The term “Jew,” at least during the period covered by Knittel's book, did not refer to a religious-based belief system, but rather to race. This tolerated the interpretation that the Jews were a people united by certain ill-defined characteristics, the vast preponderance of which were entirely invented, and made to be unassailably different from all other peoples.

The concept of race has changed over time and varies across cultures. It is, to say the least, a topic of considerable controversy that has been used with negative moral and human consequences. Until the nineteenth century, race was thought to describe indisputably distinct species, which shared particular racial characteristics, such as mental and intellectual capacities.¹⁴ Today it is argued increasingly that the historically offered concepts of race are ill understood and have been arbitrarily applied; i.e. placing a person into a distinct racial group is a scientifically meaningless act.

Comments on “Jewry in Music”

Defenders of Wagner frequently assert that his antisemitism is exaggerated, citing his relationship with Jews such as conductor Hermann Levi, pianists Karl Tausig and Joseph Rubenstein as evidence of Wagner's liberality. However, his dealings with these men can be characterized only as something akin to keeping pets in one's home. It is also argued that Wagner's liberality toward Jews is demonstrated by the fact that he had an affair with Judith Gautier, whose mother allegedly was a Jew. This

¹³ The statement appears in Martin Luther's pamphlet, *Dass Jesus ein Geborner Jude Sei*, and is contained in the online *Jewish Encyclopedia* article on Martin Luther under the pamphlet's title.

¹⁴ A recent claim by the German central bank executive, Thilo Sarrazin, asserts, “All Jews share a particular gene, which makes them different from other peoples.”

totally irrational statement suggests that sex between an antisemite and a person who may have had Jewish forebears is evidence that the non-Jew is a philosemite.

Wagner's objective in this respect was to establish, by way of pontification, that Jews could not possibly be good composers—which leads to the question of a “goodness” hierarchy. It is a topic that comes up frequently, and the most recent effort (as of the time of writing this review) to establish a hierarchy of the ten best composers of classical music was accomplished by Anthony Tommasini of *The New York Times*.¹⁵ The problem of establishing greatness in music—which is what Wagner presumed himself competent to do, placing the Jews at the bottom—is that such conclusions represent opinions, are entirely unscientific, and may present a winning array that agrees with no one else in the world. Such conclusions are based on taste and cannot be measured, which means that such a ranking represents only an arbitrary attitudinal perspective.

Several years ago, I wrote a tongue-in-cheek essay to stick my finger in the eye of this “betterness” belief, which was later used in music appreciation classes at Harvard University. The essay asked the following question: “Which is the better composition, Beethoven 9, or the 1923 popular song, *Yes, We Have No Bananas*”? The objective of the essay was to show that by deliberate distortion of the facts and judiciously selecting the criteria, *Bananas* easily turns out to be the indisputable winner of the better composition contest.¹⁶

In my opinion, this section is the best-written one in Knittel's book, and it tells this ugly story quite well. For myself, however, I prefer not to dwell in the detritus of Wagner's corrupt opinions any longer than I have to.

Comments on “The Viennese Critics” (Incomprehensibility, Eclecticism, and Formal Problems)

From my perspective, the single most self-damning statement in this subsection, devoted to the comments of Viennese critics, comes from reviewer Julius Korngold. While certain aspects of Mahler's works troubled him, he fails to give much detail about what it is that bothered him. Instead he falls back on an invented German equivalent of “*Je ne sais quoi*,” as one might say, “She has that certain *Je ne sais quoi* of mystery about her.” Critics should not comment on something about which they do not know, or cannot identify and explain, the specific source of their discomfort. To be

¹⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/arts/music/23composers.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁶ For example: 1) From a practical point of view, the Beethoven is enormously expensive to perform, with 85 instrumentalists, a conductor, a chorus of 100 singers, and four vocal soloists, while *Bananas* can be executed very inexpensively by a one-man band, yielding an incredible cost-effectiveness improvement. 2) *Bananas* made a fortune both for the composer and for those who made the first recordings. One recording by entertainer Eddie Cantor resulted in a hit, then a mega-hit, and, finally, a sales phenomenon. 3) In England alone, more than a half a million copies of the sheet music were sold in the first month of its availability. 4) On the only known occasion in the history of London's musical halls, every one of the city's theaters had at least one act in which a performer sang *Bananas*. 5) The melody has never faded from popularity, and is still one of the few songs that almost everyone knows. 6) Beethoven 9 is not performed very frequently; even professional orchestras will mount performances of the work only once or twice in a decade. 7) As for audience participation, should the spirit move the audience during a performance of *Bananas*, they can join in and sing and clap without getting ugly stares. Try that with Beethoven 9. *Quod erat demonstrandum!!*

of use, a critic must be precise in his criticisms, otherwise why invite criticism in the first place?

Comments on “The Viennese Critics” (Thematic Theft)

The argument that a similar or identical tune found in two different compositions by two different composers constitutes a deliberate act on the part of one of them must be challenged immediately. In my opinion, such allegations are almost always false. Apart from the most unusual situations, duplicated or similar themes derive from the workings of the laws of probability, not from a conscious effort to steal some other composer's melodies. Were it not for Mahler's typical anti-Jewish bad press, I could argue, on this subject, that he genuinely and undeservedly was being badmouthed.

The argument that Mahler was a theme thief turns out to be a very common accusation laid against many other composers. That the initial theme of the overture to Mozart's opera *Bastien et Bastienne* is cited as having been used by Beethoven for the opening motif of the *Eroica* Symphony is irrational, because it asks us to accept that one of the most fertile minds in music history needed to steal tunes. Another case speaks of a Mozart quotation taken from Johann Christian Bach's *La Calamita de' Cuori*. In this case, however, the statement is true. Bach, who was Mozart's friend and mentor for the period of the family's London stay during the great tour of 1763-66, died on 1 January 1782, and Mozart deliberately incorporated the melodic quote in memory of and to honor his friend and mentor, the so-called English Bach. I offer the opinion that, in the entire repertoire of classical music, there are probably fewer than 100 genuine examples of theme theft.

This accusation arises because there are not very many unique multi-note themes. Using a four-note tune as an example, each of the four notes used to construct a tonal melody from the notes of the 12-tone scale can take on any of twelve distinct pitches. This limits the maximum total number of unique four-note melodies to 12^4 , or $12 \times 12 \times 12 \times 12 = 20,736$ unique four-note combinations. C-D-E-F is one of them and there are 20,735 others. This may sound like a great many four-note tunes, but that analysis assumes that any two adjacent pitches are as likely to occur as any other two adjacent pitches, and that is a false assumption when dealing with tonal melodies. Because certain intervals, such as a major seventh or a tritone—the augmented fourth—are used far less frequently in tonal music, melodies containing those intervals are rare. This means that the actual number of unique four-tone tunes that are likely to appear in a composition is considerably less than the maximum 20,736 possible combinations stated above.

With numbers like these, and thousands of composers using the same twelve tones of the diatonic scale for their compositions over several centuries, the same four-note progression is almost certain to appear in any two unrelated compositions by any two composers. Some of these duplications are not in the foreground of the music because they occur in inner voices or in passagework and were never intended as a prominent melody. But every now and then, and by sheer chance, the same four-note pitch combination plays a prominent role in two unrelated works by two different composers. So, when it does occur, the belief that the duplication was deliberate is almost an automatic conclusion.

While I have used a melody length example of four notes, themes of any length follow the same basic principle. A five-note melody can have 12^5 or 248,832

combinations, a six-note melody 12^6 or 2,985,984 combinations. The longer the theme, the greater the number of pitch combinations, which makes it less likely to find a duplicate of that theme in a composition by another person, but they are there, too. As for any interval that goes outside the range of the octave, the pitches of the interval are treated as if they were within the same octave.

Once, in order to understand what might be the volume of tune duplications for two utterly unrelated compositions, I programmed a personal computer to find all duplications of every distinct five-note melody found in an orchestral minuet of Süssmayr when contrasted with the concert overture, *In the South*, by Sir Edward Elgar (the latter composition was chosen because it was the only tonal, full orchestral score by a contemporary composer that I owned at the time). One would expect to find no duplications between these two compositions, but, counter-intuitively, there were a great many of them, none of which rose to an important level and most of them occurring in inner voices. Their quantity was so great that one could accuse Elgar of stealing tunes found *In the South* as deriving from that particular Süssmayr orchestral minuet.¹⁷

Astonishingly, so frequently do different composers reproduce themes in separate compositions, that a Vaudeville act from the 1920s and '30s was based exactly on this phenomenon. The Vaudevillian was the musicologist, composer, and pianist Sigmund Spaeth (1885-1965). Seated at the piano, Spaeth solicited a song with a familiar melody from a member of the audience. He would then play a different work that had the same melody, suggesting that one of the tunes may have been copied from the other. Among his alleged tune theft discoveries were the first four notes of the *Hallelujah* chorus from Handel's *Messiah*, which were the same tune as *Yes, We Have No Bananas*. This discovery is a particularly fruitful one because not only are the first four pitches identical between the two tunes, but the rhythms are exactly alike as well. Spaeth would also find many other tune parallels to other parts of *Yes, We Have No Bananas*, such as *My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean*, *I Dreamt I Dwelled in Marble Halls*, *Aunt Dinah's Quilting Party*, and *An Old Fashioned Garden*.¹⁸ In 1932, Spaeth went on radio with a 15-minute program called *The Tune Detective*, which eventually took on the name, *The Song Sleuth*.

Another example of such alleged tune borrowings has been said to occur in the *Enigma* theme of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, appropriated from Mozart's *Haffner Symphony*. This was considered to be such an important discovery that it was reported in *The New York Times*.¹⁹ And then there is the contention that Süssmayr reused many of the themes found in that part of the Mozart *Requiem* actually composed by Mozart, and which Süssmayr recycled into those *Requiem* portions for which he claimed authorship.²⁰

This is a never-ending story, because it is possible to go on for some time showing the vast wealth of tunes that this or that composer allegedly borrowed or stole from this or that other composer. The late Marius Flothuis wrote an essay on the subject, which consisted of a theme of some 7 or 8 notes that appeared prominently in compositions by Mendelssohn, Wagner, Bizet, Tchaikowsky, Dvorak, Leoncavallo,

¹⁷ A discussion of that experiment is found in Daniel Leeson, *Franz Xaver Süßmayr and the Mozart Requiem*, *Mozart Jahrbuch* (1995): 111-53.

¹⁸ For further details on Spaeth, see:

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,769661,00.html>.

¹⁹ See Daniel N. Leeson, "The *Engima* Enigma," *International Journal of Musicology*, 7 (1998): 241-57.

²⁰ See Leeson, "Franz Xaver Süßmayr and the Mozart Requiem," op. cit.

Chausson, Schmitt, and Monteverdi.²¹ There certainly do exist a few genuine cases of deliberate reuse of another composer's tune, such as found in Ernő Dohnányi's *Variations On A Nursery Tune*, but I suggest that the vast preponderance of such claims are accidental duplications that are entirely a function of the laws of probability.

Comments on “The Viennese Critics” (The Quality of Mahler’s Thematic Material)

Since the assertion was that Mahler stole his themes from other composer's works, does this mean that the stolen tunes were of a higher quality than his authentic tunes? These *fin-de-siècle* opinions on thematic quality have little substance and are essentially meaningless.

Conclusion

The expression, “three times lucky,” is said to derive from British law, by which anyone surviving three attempts at hanging would be set free. This is probably taken from the story of John “Babbacombe” Lee, a sailor who was convicted of murder in 1885 and sentenced to hang. Three attempts to execute him failed. The British Home Secretary of the time, Sir William Harcourt, commuted the sentence to life imprisonment, though Lee was later set free. He was known thereafter as “the man they couldn't hang,” and he went on to live a long life, dying in the 1940s.

So, for the third, and final, time in this review, I conclude with the first words spoken by the self-destructive fictional character, Trish, in the 1983 film, *Educating Rita*:

“Wouldn't you just *die* without Mahler!”

²¹ Marius Flothuis, *Notes on Notes, Selected Essays* (Fritz Knuf, 1974), 173-75.