

## ***Celebrating Richard Wagner, the Anti-Semite***

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A large spread appeared in the *Williamsport Sun-Gazette* extolling the new season of the Williamsport Symphony. A large measure of the printed space was devoted to a discussion of the works of Richard Wagner.

Wagner, as the erudite and incredibly talented Gerardo Edelstein fully knows, was one of the great anti-Semites of history. He was one of the first among German intellectuals and academics to suggest the death and destruction of the Jewish people in Germany. So controversial was Wagner that the Israeli Symphony Orchestra debated whether it should play his works. Ultimately, the Israeli Philharmonic did go ahead and, very occasionally, performs Richard Wagner pieces. If any orchestra has a right to do that, it would be the Israeli Philharmonic, which was made up of Holocaust survivors and today still has members who are the descendants of Holocaust survivors.

The question is not whether an orchestra should perform Richard Wagner, but rather any performance of his work should be an opportunity for public education.

One of the great tenors of all times was Placido Domingo. Domingo will never again appear on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera of New York, and is unlikely to perform anywhere in the United States because of accusations by several women that, several decades ago, the great opera star touched them inappropriately. Domingo denies the allegations, and of course has been convicted of nothing. Yet, in the United States Placido Domingo is washed up. In Europe, the invitations still pour in for the great Spanish tenor. James Levine, the Conductor of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, likewise ended a long career in disgrace because of allegations of misconduct. Both men have suffered along with others who have been accused, either fairly or not.

It is very troubling that those who are accused, but have been convicted of nothing, may never perform again, while a horrendous, savagely hateful personality like that of Richard Wagner will have his works played as though there is no stigma attached to them. There is no suggestion that Domingo or Levine should be forgiven, should it be demonstrated that they are guilty of misconduct. However, there is a strange forgetfulness when it comes to crimes against the Jewish people.

One would suspect that the average attendee of the Williamsport Symphony will know little or nothing about Wagner. He, of course, was not the only anti-Semite of his time. Nevertheless, he was one of the worst and his thinking helped set the stage for the extermination of European Jewry. We must never forget this, and the public should know that they are listening to the work of an absolute monster. The views of Wagner, notwithstanding the depth of his musical ability, should be understood by all who listen to his work.

When I was a child, my Aunt Ethel sang in the chorus of the Metropolitan Opera. My parents went to the opera every Saturday night. My mother, whose family was from a small town outside of Krakow, Poland, were all murdered in the Holocaust. My mother would never attend a performance of a Wagnerian opera. My father, the offspring of Swiss German Jews who came to this country in the early 1800s, had no problem going to listen to Wagner because of the beauty of his music. I, as a young child, was dragged along on my mother's ticket. Most of the time, the music was so overwhelmingly boring to me and the singing sounded almost like screaming, that if I was fortunate, sleep overcame me before the second Act.

Notwithstanding my father's willingness, even enthusiasm, to listen to Wagnerian operas (although he would never buy an LP of one), I was taught at an early age about the horrific views of the composer and the effect they had on a hateful European culture ripe to commit crimes against the Jewish people. If the board, officers, conductors and musicians of the Williamsport Symphony Orchestra do decide to go through with their performance of Wagner, perhaps they will pass out a copy of this op-ed to all the patrons, or put it in the Playbill. At the beginning of the concerts, there are usually some short remarks concerning the sponsorship of the performance or some other lighthearted, encouraging commentary. This would be an ideal opportunity for the speaker to state clearly that the musicians, conductor and board of the Symphony, as well as all the sponsors, abhor and totally reject the views promulgated by Richard Wagner, but nevertheless will perform his music as part of the symphonic experience. Just what that experience is, is something of a mystery to me; but its value should be explained to the audience in writing and orally.

Unmistakably, Mr. Edelstein, the board, the college, and those who attend the concerts are people of goodwill whose motives are not impure. Nevertheless, there is a responsibility to the attending public, the Jewish people and Western Civilization in general to call out the crimes of Richard Wagner every bit as strongly as we condemn sexism, racism, and the inappropriate conduct of opera greats like Placido Domingo and James Levine.

My family is a long-time supporter of Gerardo Edelstein, the Williamsport Symphony and the Community Arts Center, which serves a valuable function to this community.

Let us not forget the Shakespeare quote from *The Tempest*, "What is past is prolog." For us to avoid the past, we should take advantage of all educational opportunities. The performance of any Wagnerian music is an excellent opportunity to remind the public that discrimination, racism and hatred knows no bounds. It has been promoted and spread like a virus not only among the Brownshirt followers of Adolf Hitler, who was much enamored with Richard Wagner, but also among the white shirt, tuxedo-garbed gentlemen and ladies who graced the fine opera and symphony halls of many continents.

Hopefully, Conductor Edelstein, the Symphony, the Board and the attending public will make known its views. A public display rejecting the message of Wagner is a

necessary anecdote to pervasive attitudes of anti-Semitism which have infected our national motif.

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