

Should ethics ever override aesthetics in appreciation of music? Discuss.

When discussing ethics and aesthetics in music, one immediately considers the performance ban on Wagner's music, "the father of anti-Semitic ideology in music and in art in general", (Davar, 1952) in Israel. Musicians, even Jewish musicians such as Barenboim and Mehta, aimed to perform works by these anti-Semitic giants of classical music in Israel, arguing that aesthetics should override ethics even in a country of Holocaust survivors, and they have been silenced. Here we see a decisive example of ethics overriding aesthetics, but the eternal argument remains: is music separate from its composer, as many musicians believe, or should we instead see it within a social context, as victims of such discrimination often believe?

As there is no music with overt Nazi symbolism (Levi, 1925-1945), this essay focuses on the ethics of performing anti-Semitic composers' works and listening to racist conductor's recordings. It gives reasons for the ban on Wagner's music in Israel, discusses the extent to which accused musicians were anti-Semitic and explains functional and ethical reasons not to ban music by anti-Semitic composers. It highlights issues in arguments to let ethics override aesthetics by banning the Wagner's music and demonstrate that music facilitates our learning from mistakes, not dwell in them.

Since Kristallnacht in November 1938, when 30,000 Jews were sent to concentration camps and Nazi persecution against Jews (as well as communists and gypsies) deepened, Wagner's music is banned in Israel. Despite his death in 1883, two years before the birth of Hitler, he is associated with Nazism after Hitler repeatedly glorified his works. However, Wagner was also personally guilty of anti-Semitism: his essay "Das Judentum in der Musik" (Jewishness in Music) attacked Jewish composers, saying that "Judaism is the evil conscience of our modern civilisation" (Wagner, 1850). His music was adopted by Hitler and the Nazis as an anthem for their cause, played in concentration camps and Nazi state affairs, as well as at rallies where Hitler gave anti-Semitic speeches. The performance of his music in concentration camps was painful as it was used to re-educate political prisoners (Fackler, 2010), and despite its lack of success, it is now permanently associated with anti-Semitism and indoctrination amongst survivors of the camps. Guards also used Wagner's music to show their superiority, by demonstrating the perfection of German music (Fackler, 2010), again reminding survivors of the Nazi patriotism which caused such harm. His music still harms people: attempts by Barenboim to conduct Wagner in Israel caused full-scale riots. However, this harm is arguably simply an irrational response to the music, not caused by the music, implying music should not be banned because some people dislike it. An example of this irrational response is when a performance by Heifetz of music by Strauss in Israel prompted an attack which injured his arm as he protected his priceless Stradivarius violin, showing the controversy that a Jewish musician was attacked for playing Strauss, who was not so condemned for anti-Semitism as Wagner.

This ban is a triumph of the ethics of playing racist composers' music over the aesthetics of their music, yet ironically in the *Music and Nazism* journal it was argued that claims of Wagner's association with Nazis were exaggerated (Vaget). Bruen argues that the music of composers other than Wagner was more often heard in concentration camps (Bruen, 1993), suggesting his music does not affect survivors as greatly as suggested by Fackler (discussed above). Moreover, he was friendly with Jewish musicians (eg the Jewish conductor Hermann Levi who premiered Wagner's opera *Parsifal*) suggesting that, despite his unsavoury views, he did not discriminate personally against

Jews. However, it is arguable that this should not affect our views of Wagner, as he still attacked Jews in his essay, condemning the religion. Alternatively, it can also be argued that by accepting Jewish musicians he was simply following popular view to help his career, again painting him as a racist man whose music should be banned.

We see further suggestions of false accusations against Strauss as well: as President of the Nazi Kulturkammer he is often condemned, yet he was forced to take the role to avoid being labelled a political enemy. He was ordered to take this role, not invited, suggesting he was simply conforming, not sharing, Nazi views. Furtwangler, the conductor, also falls foul of these potentially false accusations: he “made it clear that it was his desire for beautiful music” that made him collaborate with the Nazis by continuing to perform his music, condemning the idea that the division between “good and bad art” was drawn only “between Jew and non-Jew” (Gilbert, Bloch, & Botwinik). He was also the only prominent German musician not to sign the brochure “We Stand and Fall with Adolf Hitler” in 1944, again suggesting his collaboration was more to fight the dictatorship than to promote it, as he claimed in his denazification trial (Gilbert, Bloch, & Botwinik), implying that we should not ban his recordings on charges of anti-Semitism which seem weak at best. This shows him as an example of a respected musician who chose not to let ethics override aesthetics. Perhaps a less known but more accurate example of an anti-Semitic conductor is von Karajan, who first attempted to join the Nazi party in 1933, formally joining in 1935. In this case, claims that he only joined to help music progress seem unfounded: that he joined so early in the regime shows that he must have agreed with key Nazi policies and thus should be far more criticised than Furtwangler. He might have denied his involvement, but, according to Potter, it was simple for musicians such as von Karajan to deny their Nazi affiliations, because “the world wanted to believe that musicians inhabited the elevated realm of art and would never descend into politics” (Potter, 2005), suggesting that the contemporaries of racist musicians were partially guilty for the forgiveness of their sins (indeed, for their sins to be entirely forgotten), implying that to be respected somehow exonerates one from racism and anti-Semitism, adding weight to the argument that the ethics of performing music should override aesthetics.

There are, however, further reasons for the triumph of ethics over aesthetics. In the words of Bruen, “art does not occur in a vacuum” and must be seen within context (Bruen, 1993), suggesting ethics must at least be considered and discussed when performing the music of controversial composers, particularly in countries like Israel where many have been affected by racism. Moreover, it is argued that after music is corrupted, it has permanent connotations that will always be harmful. We see a similar concept with the Swastika: a once spiritual symbol is, after corruption, eternally linked with painful events (Bruen, 1993). A further reason supporting Israel’s decision to ban Wagner’s music is that to celebrate the works of people with such toxic views could encourage people to believe that anti-Semitism is acceptable, particularly amongst respected people, thereby encouraging such views.

One example of the possible positives of ethics triumphing over aesthetics is the increasing influence of female composers in concerts today. It is arguable that this is positive discrimination, allowing women to feature in more concerts, with works such as Clara Schumann’s piano concerto becoming more common, as well as works by composers like Ruth Gipps (at the time of her death one of the most prolific composers in Britain, having written five symphonies, and yet ignored). Perhaps, however, this is simply long-overdue recognition of their music, acting as an example against ethics

overriding aesthetics: after all, it is only unusual to play works by female composers due to their obscurity caused by warped patriarchal ethics, which deprived the musical world of some incredible music. That this is seen as the triumph of ethics over aesthetics is in itself telling: centuries of misogyny have declared that women cannot write music, and thus the perceived aesthetic worth of their music has been diminished so much that it is believed their music must be programmed in an act of positive discrimination and not in their own right. Hence, this example is more of an argument against the flawed ethics which overrode the aesthetics of their music than the ethics of performing their music.

However, there are arguments that to ban the music of Wagner for ethical reasons only damages modern understanding of music. It has been argued that orchestras of the calibre of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra must play Wagner, in order to maintain a high standard of musical technique (Bruen, 1993), and thus Wagner is essential in an orchestra's repertoire. Yet this argument seems tenuous: there is much technically challenging, uncontroversial music, such as symphonies by Bruckner and Mahler. Bruen's argument seems particularly redundant considering Wagner was largely an operatic composer. Moreover, to play Wagner in rehearsals does not mean concerts with Wagner and Strauss must be performed. However, understanding Wagner's music is essential to understanding the history of music, particularly the development of opera as part of the German musical tradition of the late 19th century, and thus they must be performed. After all, if Jewish musicians such as violinists Vengerov and Zuckermann play Wagner, then surely others can perform his music. Yet it is arguably different when they play Wagner, as they cannot be accused of sympathising with his views. Nevertheless, the passage of time, now over 70 years since the end of the regime, means few people alive today were direct victims of the concentration camps and could be traumatised by listening to their music. If we wait 20 years more, there will be fewer people with strong connections and associations with the music, and we can listen without censorship: according to Motti Schmidt, leader of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, we should "respect the rights of the minority and not play Wagner." (Eylon)

There are also ethical reasons not to ban known anti-Semites' music. Arguably, to ban music is censorship, one of the worst aspects of the Nazi regime with burning of books by Jewish authors defining the 1930s in Germany. If we were to censor the works of all discriminators, we would also be guilty of such censorship. Therefore, we would lower ourselves to the levels of the Nazis and anti-Semites, further implying that to choose ethics over aesthetics paradoxically lowers our moral standards (Bruen, 1993). Moreover, it can hardly be seen as ethical to deprive the world of such music, suggesting that to prioritise so-called ethics by banning music acts only to punish people and is unethical.

Naturally, we must recognise that Wagner and Strauss were not the only musicians with serious immorality: Chopin, Lehar and Orff were also known anti-Semites, whilst Michael Jackson is accused of paedophilia (Reed, 2019) and R Kelly convicted of child pornography and sexual abuse (BBC World News, 2019). However, they are ignored in the greater scheme of music, despite suggestions that, for example, the crimes of Orff were worse than Furtwangler, as Orff actively participated in the regime through consenting to write new incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* after the ban of Jewish composer Mendelssohn's music (Rockwell, 2003), but Furtwangler arguably acted to fight the regime, not to promote it, as discussed above. It is essential that if we are to discriminate what composers we study, we must discriminate fairly and ban all discriminatory music: thus, the

best works of music and literature throughout history, Bach's great St John Passions (which arguably attacks Jews as the killers of Christ) and Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (in which the villain is a cruel Jewish money lender), should be banned, along with the music of Michael Jackson and the films produced by Harvey Weinstein, a recently convicted rapist. Moreover, as many musicians born before the turn of the century were likely guilty of some degree of racism or anti-Semitism, the argument follows that we should ban all music so as not to cause offense, as, awful as it now seems, this discrimination was a product of the time and, as with the slave trade, it was unusual not to participate in it. Moreover, if we are to ban all music at all associated with the Nazis, we would be forced to ban the works of Beethoven, arguably one of the best composers: there is, after all, video footage of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony being performed with Nazis in the audience and swastikas on the walls to celebrate Hitler's birthday in 1942, despite the fact that Beethoven arguably had no connection to the Nazis or anti-Semitism. There are undoubtedly other composers whose music has been similarly tainted and, according to this argument, ought to be banned, thus severely limiting classical music as a whole.

A further example against ethics overriding aesthetics is the sad case of Tchaikovsky. David Brown argues that his apparent suicide was murder: following an intercepted letter to the tsar about his relationship with the nephew of Duke Stenbok-Fermor, a jury of Tchaikovsky's former students demanded he commit suicide, and his cholera illness was simply "a very public demonstration of something happening, to give an explanation for something that was going to happen in due course" (Brown, 1993). The irony of this case is, however, palpable, as the ethics at play were undeniably false, and yet they caused the loss of more music from one of the greatest Romantic composers, thereby overriding aesthetics. This perhaps shows that saying ethics should override aesthetics is often simply a disguise for ignorance and maliciousness, highlighting the hypocrisy of the claim that ethics must override aesthetics.

Overall, it seems that to frequently prioritise ethics over aesthetics is harmful and lowers us to the levels of our enemies, like the Nazis. However, one thing is certain: it can never be right to announce an unplanned encore of Wagner, as Barenboim did in Israel in 2001 (Waterman, 2006), when many audience members will remember the horrific losses and discrimination of the Second World War and suffer. We must also be educated about the music to which we listen. If we celebrate a work we must be aware that it attacks Jewish people and Judaism, as otherwise we will revere people whose views hurt so many.

Music reflects society and allows us to observe the best and the worst of mankind. In the words of Hans Christian Andersen, "When words fail, music speaks" and thus should be open to analysis on every level and not censored, as it plays an important role through opening discussions of difficult issues. The fact that musicians and others are now talking about these issues, not overlooking them, is a demonstration of this. As in great works of literature and art, this enables one to reflect on human existence: we do not stop learning about WWII because it was wrong, but reflect on the bad to learn from our errors, and so it should be with music: as Shaw said, "great art can never be anything [but didactic]" (Shaw, 1916). It allows a deeper understanding of the human psyche and experience.

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