**Introduction**

When I first sat down to write what would eventually become this book, several conflicting thoughts came to my mind, all of them charged with great emotion. First, I recognized the difficulty and great responsibility that I took upon myself in writing it. The name Richard Wagner evokes many contrasting and extreme connotations for every person in the cultural milieu, music lovers in particular, and all the more so in Israel. On the one hand, he is one of the most researched composers who has ever lived; on the other hand, he remains shrouded in mystery and enigma. Wagnerian research literature is comprehensive and spans many fields, including historical, biographical, philosophical, artistic, and musical studies. His name appears or is mentioned directly or indirectly in a variety of books, and the dominance of his character, his charismatic personality, his controversial views, and his revolutionary art remain an abundant spring of inquiry, discussion, and debate.

Few figures have elicited such waves of adoration and at the same time such fierce opposition. A complex and undeniably contrary personality, Wagner seems to have courted this kind of controversy in his lifetime, and even today, some 140 years after his death, he continues to arouse interest and debate among scholars and culture and music enthusiasts throughout the world. Ardent admirers alongside fierce opponents have written and debated about him from every possible angle, in different countries, and at different times. With some irony, it can be said that, more than any other composer, Wagner did researchers a “favor” by surrounding himself with such ambiguity and obfuscation that left endless room for intricate and contradictory interpretations. One of the reasons for the abundance of research about him is the difficulty of drawing any unequivocal conclusions regarding his character and work, compounded by the fact that he wrote his theoretical works and librettos in very dense German replete with impenetrable allegories.

Wagner’s wish was to be a Renaissance man, the creator of a “total work of art,” (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) whose hand touches every field and influences it in a decisive manner. Indeed, he succeeded in bringing this vision to life: enthusiastic admirers and fierce opponents from around the world have written and argued about him from every possible perspective for almost two centuries now. Wagner’s influence on his contemporaries and those who came after him was so immense as to divide the cultural milieu into two divergent camps: the admirers, who continued his legacy, and the opponents, who chose to follow radically different paths in reaction against him. This is why, among other reasons, Wagner is considered a harbinger of the twentieth century: having brought extended tonality to its pinnacle and explored its very outer limits, composers who followed had no choice but to seek out new, sometimes non-Western avenues of musical creativity. Examples of this include the influence of Gamelan and far-eastern music on Debussy and the impressionists, Bartok’s return to the modal motifs of folk music, and the advent of the twelve-tone dodecaphony, which was supposed to be a modern successor to the tonal system that had dominated European music for over three hundred years.

A few amusing, well-known quotations may elucidate the attitudes of fans and opponents to Wagner’s music:

* Wagner’s music is really much better than it sounds. (Attributed to Mark Twain, but most likely quoted by Twain from American humorist Bill Nye)
* Wagner has lovely moments but awful quarters of an hour. (Gioachino Rossini)
* One cannot judge Wagner’s opera *Lohengrin* after a first hearing, and I certainly don’t intend to hear it a second time. (Gioachino Rossini)
* I tried playing it with the right notes, but it did not sound any better. (Rossini, after hearing a student playing the overture to *Tannhäuser* with mistakes)
* I was invited to a Wagner opera. It began at eight. Two hours later I glanced at my watch; it was eight-fifteen. (Unknown source, probably Billy Wilder)
* Wagner is an old poisoner who never did anything for music and never did anything for Germany. (Claude Debussy)
* The world is full of people who borrow money and never return it, who steal other men’s wives, daughters, and mistresses. But only one of them wrote *Tristan and Isolde*. (A Jewish acquaintance of Wagner’s who claimed that his ancestors had lent Wagner money that was never returned)
* I like Wagner’s music better than anybody’s. It is so loud that one can talk the whole time without other people hearing what one says. (Lady Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde)
* I can’t listen to that much Wagner, you know? I start to get the urge to conquer Poland. (Larry Lipton in Woody Allen’s *Manhattan Murder Mystery*)

As well as a few quotes by Wagner himself:

* My life is a sea of contradictions, which I can only hope to escape by way of death. (Letter to Otto Wesendonck, September 10, 1856)
* The world has my work, let it cope with my indiscretions. (Letter to Dr. Josef Standhartner, April 12, 1864)

Wagner has always fascinated me, first and foremost as a musical genius but also as a writer, poet, playwright, thinker, and philosopher who was in many ways ahead of his time and whose ideas are more relevant than ever in the present day and age. When I speak of relevant ideas, I mean, of course, the galvanizing sociopolitical message Wagner communicated in his theoretical writings as well as, as I shall show further on, in his artistic output. As I grew intimately familiar with Wagner, through his biography, his theoretical writings, and above all his musical dramas, countless ideas came to my mind, and the more I delved into him, the more they expanded and multiplied. Even today, I still get flashes of new insight when I consider his profound, intricate, and ingenious art, which I view as a treasure trove of information and messages.

The present book will delve into Richard Wagner’s views on Jewishness and Germanness from a broader perspective and one that, at the time of writing, has not yet been explored. Specifically, I will attempt to show how Wagner’s ideological stance toward the Jewish people expresses itself in his operas and how ideas that remain relatively vague in his theoretical writings find themselves clarified and reinforced through plot, text, and above all, music. I will do so by examining the works on two levels. First, on the content-ideological level, based on the details of Wagner’s life, which show his personal and public attitude towards the Jews and the many vicissitudes they went through from the time of his youth until his death. Second, on the musical level, since, for Wagner, music, text, and content are one—dependent on, serving, and complementing each other. This analysis will serve to demonstrate that the musical element played a decisive role in determining the meaning of his written work, to the point that without taking it into consideration, it is not possible to fully understand Wagner’s oeuvre and the messages it contains. To put it succinctly, the book shows how Wagner’s artistic output sheds light on his writings and ideology.

Wagner’s attitude toward the Jews depended to a large extent on his attitude towards the Germans, and as he distinguished between Jews and Jewishness, so he distinguished between Germans and Germanness. It would appear, however, that his almost paranoid obsession with Jews and Jewishness occupied his thoughts throughout his life, becoming a veritable persecutory delusion. After the Second World War and the Holocaust, controversy arose over Wagner’s anti-Semitism and German nationalism, especially in Israel, although there were those who interpreted his work as racist and nationalist even earlier, including the philosopher Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Since then, the consensus about Wagner has become so entrenched that, for many, his name is intrinsically (albeit unreasonably) linked to the Nazi regime. If you ask who Wagner is in Israel, you will most likely get the answer “the Nazi composer who supported Hitler,” despite the fact that Wagner lived and worked during the nineteenth century and died six years before Hitler was born—fifty years before the Nazis’ rise to power. The link to Nazism is therefore an outright anachronism. In fact, it was only in 1879, toward the end of Wagner’s life, that the term “anti-Semitism” was even coined by the German journalist and politician Wilhelm Marr, who was, ironically, himself a converted Jew. Although Wagner was aware of the anti-Semitic movement founded by Marr and the theologian Adolf Stoecker, he refused to take part in it or sign the petition for the restriction of Jewish rights under the Second Reich.

The first boycott of Wagner’s work, however, is directly linked with Nazism. Officially, the boycott began in November 1938 when, upon receiving word of the horrors of *Kristallnacht*, the conductor Arturo Toscanini refused to play the overture to *Die* *Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, which was part of the program of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra that evening. This shows the extent to which Wagner was identified with the Nazi regime by this time. Hitler expressed overt admiration for the composer and Wagner’s music was featured in numerous Nazi conventions. The overture of *Die* *Meistersinger* was a particular Nazi favorite as it depicts German art as divine (Litvin and Shelach, 1984: 290). Yet, ironically, the Nazis themselves ended up banning a large portion of Wagner’s work. When they finally understood his actual ideology, the operas *Parsifal* and *The Ring Cycle* ceased to be performed in Bayreuth[[1]](#footnote-1) as a signal for a boycott across Germany. *Parsifal* was considered an overly Christian and pacifist work, while the fall of Valhalla at the end of *The Ring* foreshadowed the fall of the Third Reich and expressed scorn toward dictatorial and oppressive regimes (Hacohen-Finchover, 1997: 475–496).

It is my claim in this book, however, that in order to truly understand Wagner, one has to set aside such anachronistic details and examine him in the context of his own era. The book will clarify how Wagner's ideology regarding Jews and Germans was artistically expressed in the musical dramas he wrote. Not only did he express ideas from his theoretical writings in his musical compositions, but concepts that remained ambiguous in his writings are reinforced and clarified in the dramas through the plot and text, and above all, through the music. The thread guiding our analysis is the hidden subtext of the relationship between Germanness and Jewishness in Wagner’s operas. Key characters in his operas represent social, ethnic, ideological, and aesthetic concepts related to Germans and Jews, and these representations reveal the dramatic meaning of the operas. To make matters more complex, the characters are multifaceted figures, embodying both positive and negative aspects of these concepts. Thus, in *The Ring*, for example, each character contributes to the fall of Valhalla in some manner. The German characters are relatively easily identifiable because they borrow from Germanic mythology and German history (for instance, Hans Sachs or Wolfram von Eschenbach). The geographic context in which the operas are set is also explicitly defined as Germanic (the Rhine, Nuremberg, Wartburg, and so on).

The problem arises when we try to identify characters as Jewish, since in this instance, Wagner refrains from calling the thing by its name. The tradition of Wagnerian studies recognizes certain characters, such as Sixtus Beckmesser from *Die Meistersinger*, Kundry from *Parsifal*, and Aberich, Mime, and Hagen from *The Ring,* as possessing Jewish characteristics. Critics who interpreted Wagner’s work in this manner include Theodor Adorno (1952), Hartmut Zelinsky, who produced the most comprehensive analyses of the abovementioned characters, Paul Lawrence Rose (1992), and Mark Weiner (1995). Barry Millington and David Levin built on Adorno’s thesis that Wagner’s operas contain elements of anti-Semitism, and the composer’s great-grandson, Gottfried Wagner, even went so far as to claim that he predicted the Final Solution. These researchers, with the exception of Weiner, made their claims based on the librettos alone, while discussing the music briefly and in words only, without a detailed analysis of or examples from the scores. All of these scholars belong to the post-WWII period, and their interpretations—consciously or unconsciously— are influenced by the horrific events that took place many years after Wagner’s death.

As mentioned, one of the characters that has been identified as markedly Jewish is Kundry from *Parsifal*, whom Wagner himself described as “the wandering Jew” (Rose, 1992: 172). In the libretto of the second act of *Parsifal*, Klingsor reminds Kundry that in her previous life, she was Herodias—a princess descendant from the Herod dynasty in the Second Temple period. Another character who has regularly been acknowledged as Jewish is Sixtus Beckmesser from *Die Meistersinger*—a parodic representation of the Austrian music critic Eduard Hanslick.[[2]](#footnote-2) A fierce critic of Wagner, Hanslick was of Jewish heritage, as Wagner mentioned repeatedly (Zuckerman, 2002: 34). Both of these characters have a unique singing style, which is accompanied by stylistically marked orchestration that separates them from the rest of the cast (such as the music of Parsifal, Amphortes, and others).[[3]](#footnote-3) The musical arrangement is in line with Wagner’s description of Jewish speech and singing in his article “Das Judenthum in der Musik” (“Judaism in Music”).[[4]](#footnote-4) Wagner meticulously differentiated the musical language of each of his dramas from one another; yet, when it came to characters who had Jewish connotations, he used similar musical motifs that are very easily recognizable and retain common elements across the different operas.

It should be borne in mind that Wagner’s musical dramas were not created in a vacuum but in a very specific cultural environment and that modern stagings of Wagner’s operas tend to overlook, if not outright erase the author’s original intentions. Thus, every stereotype he reproduced on stage, whether through music, text, or outward appearance, would have been much more familiar to his nineteenth-century German audience than they are to us today. Wagner was well aware of these stereotypes and was not the first to use them. It is a well-known fact that he admired Shakespeare from a young age and was surely familiar with plays like *The Merchant of Venice* or *Nathan the Wise* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, for all that this implies.

This leads one to wonder why Wagner chose not to represent explicitly Jewish figures, but hint at Jewishness through implicit attributes. To my mind, the answer lies in the fact that his operas were not about Jews. His intention was to create works that discussed German society while delivering a universal message. In a sense, most of the characters in his operas are not just German—they are conceptual, the personification of a web of perceptions and ideas. “Jewishness” and “Germanness” are thus concepts that are developed through the subtext of the drama, in the background, and without the explicit representation of Jews as an ethnic type. Although I take into account that Wagner himself saw in some characters representations of certain Jewish stereotypes, the relevance of this matter is secondary to my argument. Thus, when I use the adjectives “Jewish” and “German,” it is not in reference to any ethnic groups, since my intention is not to prove whether any specific figure embodies a Jew or a German.

Wagner’s operas contain dramatic, textual, and musical parameters, some of which are identified with one world, while others are identified with another. The interaction between the two worlds creates a hidden subtext that runs as an invisible thread between the various works. Let us take, for example, the transition between the end of the first scene and the beginning of the second scene in *Das Rheingold*. Studies have shown that the musical motif of Valhalla is a variation on the motif of the ring, which is linked to Alberich. It is interesting to note that Wotan and Alberich do not have their own leitmotifs, yet the motifs identified with them are those linked to the larger objects with which they have some degree of connection: Wotan is represented by the motif of the Valhalla fortress, while Alberich is represented by the motif of the ring. Alberich’s world is associatively linked with the traditional interpretation of the sins of greed and lust, and in general, the dark side of human nature, while the world of Wotan and the gods is that of the supreme rulers of light. However, Wagner’s heroes are never entirely good, and as mentioned, both worlds are implicit in the fall of Valhalla. My goal is not to demonstrate a hierarchy between the two but to show the fragile lines of morality that traverse both worlds and the interactions between them. For instance, Weiner claims that the words “light,” linked with Wotan, and “black,” linked with Alberich, point to racial differentiation. And yet, the world of Alberich (the ostensibly “Jewish” character) has many positive layers, while the world of the Gods and heroes (the ostensibly “German” characters) has many negative layers, although these may not be immediately apparent.

It is also important to note that I will refrain from dividing the characters in Wagner’s dramas into two opposing camps of “good” and “bad” characters. Such a distinction would be simplistic and crude, and lead to a possible misinterpretation of Wagner’s message. The Jewish-German subtext in the operas does not aim to determine a “winner” in some kind of morality contest, but rather to examine the social and psychological forces activated in different dramatic situations. The division into “good” and “bad” is not only simplistic but also leads to a misinterpretation of Wagner’s message. Wagner created a wide and complex spectrum of ethical ideas in his works, and my goal here is to show that the messages hidden in them are ambivalent, especially regarding the ideas of Germanness and Jewishness as social constructs.

This brings me to another important subject: the perception of Richard Wagner in Israeli society. By examining the subtext in Wagner’s operas, I aim to show that both Jewishness and Germanness are presented in a mixed light that is at times positive and at times negative and that both come under harsh criticism on the part of the author, a fact that injects ambivalence into his attitudes toward the two groups. Such a perspective would allow a reexamination of the widespread notions about Wagner that dominate Israeli discourse on the subject today, specifically that he was an anti-Semite and a German nationalist. Some even point to Wagner as one of the first modern anti-Semites to root the hatred of Jews in ethnicity rather than religion. This view is based on his theoretical writing and public remarks on the subject of Jews, chief among them, the article “Judaism in Music,” which was first published in 1850 under the pseudonym Karl Freigedank while in exile, and later in 1869 under his real name with notes and appendices. As for the anti-Semitic content of his operas, however, opinions are divided. Some researchers—Adorno, Zelinsky, Rose, and Weiner among them—have tried to demonstrate the existence of such content, while others have claimed that, despite his publicly expressed opinions, no conclusive evidence of anti-Semitism can be found in his dramatic works.

We must keep in mind that Wagner’s attitude toward the Jewish People underwent many fluctuations from his youth to his death. An in-depth study of his works and writings has led me to the conclusion that his brand of anti-Semitism was unique and differed significantly from that of other anti-Semites, be they contemporary or historical. His views on Jews and Judaism were complex and ambivalent and were linked to his views on Germans and Germany. To begin with, no other composer in history has had as many close-knit relationships with Jews from the day he was born (in the Jewish quarter of Leipzig) to the day he died.

The claim that Wagner inspired many of the ideas espoused by Hitler, who said that “those who wish to understand National Socialism should first get to know Wagner,” is a subject for a separate discussion. Thomas Mann’s remark that “there is a lot of Hitler in Wagner” also expresses an anachronism that shows only how Wagner was interpreted by those looking at him retrospectively following the rise of Nazi Germany. It must be noted that, elsewhere, Mann admitted that he remained ambivalent about Wagner. In general, the attempt to attribute to Wagner political influence has at times reached completely fantastical and unreasonable proportions. Thus, for example, the poet and historian Peter Viereck identified Wagner in 1939 as “perhaps the most important source of Nazi ideology” and described him as a “proto-Nazi” in his book *Metapolitics*. Similarly, Joachim Köhler, in his 1997 book *Wagner’s Hitler: The Prophet and His Student*, claimed that “Hitler’s campaign to exterminate the Jews was part of his love for Wagner.” Surely, however, Hitler had his own rich anti-Semitic ideology and did not need Wagner to enrich it. Accordingly, Richard Jay Evans, in his book *The Third Reich in Power*, argues that claims about Wagner’s influence on Hitler are often exaggerated, and Joachim Fest’s biography of Hitler concludes that statements such as Köhler’s are an example of an author confusing the content of facts with their reception history. Köhler later accepted the criticism and retracted his thesis.

Winifred Wagner, the wife of Richard’s son Siegfried, once wrote that Hitler would be “the man who will pull the sword out of the tree of Germany’s ashes,” just as Siegmund pulls the sword out of the tree in *The Valkyrie*. Hitler himself used this image when he wrote to Siegfried from Landsberg Prison: “The spiritual sword with which we fight today was forged first through the Master and second through Chamberlain.” The forging of the sword in *Siegfried* also became a parable when, in August 1914, the magazine *Kladderadatsch* presented *Siegfried* with the text: “Now the great German soul / has forged the sword anew” (Ross, 2020: 405). Later, there would be others who would see in Hitler the same hero who reforged the broken sword of his people, after their humiliation and defeat in the First World War. Romain Rolland wrote in 1944 that Hitler had “composed his Wagnerian epic”—a tragedy at the end of which he intended to die.

And yet, when we speak of influence, we must also mention that Theodor Herzl claimed to have been greatly inspired by Wagner, saying that the latter’s music always bolstered his belief in his ideas at times of uncertainty and doubt. In his autobiography, Herzl stated that *The Jewish State*, the book that changed the face of Jewish history, was directly influenced by Wagner. According to him, when he was writing the book in Paris, he went to see a Wagner opera every night, and when no such opera was on offer, he found himself unable to write the next day. Music from *Tannhäuser* was played at a concert in honor of the Second Zionist Congress in Basel in 1898.

In Israel, the controversy came to a head mainly due to the demand that Wagner’s works should be performed in public like those of any other composer. Opponents claim that the racist, anti-Semitic Wagner was an inspiration and icon for Hitler, who worshiped the man and his work, while supporters argue that although Wagner may have been anti-Semitic, one cannot blame him for having been appropriated as a symbol of the Nazi regime fifty years after his death. Above all, the latter maintain that his musical works do not include any anti-Semitic content, and therefore his private life and beliefs must be regarded as distinct from his musical work.

Both sides appear problematic to me. As far as I am concerned, it is not possible to separate between the man and the artist, since the artist for Wagner was a whole that contained the entirety of the man, just as his operas were a whole that incorporated all of the arts. The total work of art was Wagner’s highest ideal, and thus the basic notion of separating one element from the rest is inapplicable. In general, I am convinced that no artist’s work can be viewed as entirely separate from their biography. This is all the more so in Wagner’s case since the notion of the total work of art, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, must contain not just all the arts put together but also implications about the outside world. An opera is, therefore, not only a musical and artistic creation, but also a philosophical, psychological, and sociopolitical work. In many ways, the extra-musical messages are his dramas’ raisons d’être. Through them, he wished to convey his positive and negative views not only of the Jews but of the Germans as well.

I will try to illustrate this ambivalent attitude toward both groups through an analysis of Wagner’s works, with reference to his theoretical writings, and show how music plays a very decisive role in the messages that concern the Jews and Jewishness vis-a-vis Germans and Germanness. I will also address the question of which of Wagner’s dramas have sociopolitical content and which do not, since not all of them deal with the German-Jewish issue.

1. A small town in Bavaria where the festival hall was built for the performance of Wagner’s works exclusively. It was here that *The Ring of the Nibelung* (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*) premiered in 1876 and continues to be performed to this day. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From Wagner’s writings, including his correspondence with Liszt, we know that he even initially considered naming the character Hanslick. (reference?) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on the characters of Kundry and Beckmesser, see Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Das Judenthum in der Musik” (1850), *Wagner Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*/V/66–85. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)