

“Richard Wagner und die Juden” [‘Wagner’s Jews’] on ARTE

They called him the Rabbi of Bayreuth

The New York filmmaker Hilan Warshaw has undertaken a new approach to the topic of “Richard Wagner and the Jews”: His documentary works polyphonically and is filled with precisely modulated barbs.

By ELEONORE BÜNING

Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, May 19, 2013

The story begins on the beach of Tel Aviv, and it ends on the beach of Tel Aviv. It could be a tourism advertisement: it is the weekend, there is a parasol, our gaze sweeps over sailboats and stretches past rows of houses, and the appropriate film soundtrack winds its way around these images like a shimmering ribbon, accompanied by the happy sounds of the horn section. The music is taken from the Prelude to Act III of *Lohengrin*; it fits perfectly.

Less than twenty seconds later, this idyll is burst. Uri Chanoch, a survivor of the Holocaust, starts to speak. “As long as I live”, Chanoch says, “I will make sure that Wagner will not be performed in Israel.” Basta.

And yet this sweet love-music from Elsa’s bridal night is still lurking in the background, between the cracks of Chanoch’s strong words. He cannot stop the young New York filmmaker Hilan Warshaw from showing him in precisely that moment – eternally condemning Wagner’s music, while being plied with this immortally beautiful and positive music. You can call this either perfidious or clever. In any case, it makes the topic interesting again – all of a sudden.

Certain symbols are sacred

It is these precisely modulated barbs and hidden comments that elevate Warshaw’s film *Wagner’s Jews* beyond an ordinary feature film. There have already been several documentaries on this topic in recent years, some of them within the context of Daniel Barenboim’s promotion of musical understanding between nations in the Middle East.

All of these films took a relatively clear stance, but we cannot remember any author who has given both sides such a fair and equal chance to speak. The historian Dina Porat, who is definitely a member of the anti-Wagner faction, states that every nation that respects itself has certain symbols which they regard as sacred: “Why shouldn’t we?” – and suddenly she herself stumbles upon the word “sacred”, which she had just uttered, and which seems to her to be too strong a word, too irrational, too close to the Wagnerian world.

The American musicologist and conductor Leon Botstein, permanent guest conductor of the Jerusalem Symphony Orchestra, believes that Wagner's music needs to be performed in Israel, as do the other interviewed musicians: the conductors Zubin Mehta and Asher Fisch, and the composer Tzvi Avni.

***Lohengrin* – actually a Jewish fantasy**

None of them downplay Wagner's anti-Semitism. But they want to rescue the music for themselves and from that "curse," as Avni puts it. Botstein goes a provocative step further. He remembers the over-identification of those Jews who rallied around Wagner during his lifetime as Wagnerians themselves.

According to him, *Lohengrin* in particular is actually a classic Jewish fantasy: "I -- without having my name or my race known -- am going to rescue this country. That is the fantasy of the outsider coming into the center, in triumph. And that's the fantasy of *Lohengrin*. It appealed to every aspiring young Jew."

Wagner himself had long believed that he was of Jewish descent. There are contemporary cartoons depicting him as the "rabbi of Bayreuth," which are shown in the film. Aided by archival material from Bayreuth, the film also tells of the fate of Hermann Levi, the conductor of the *Parsifal* premiere, who could not be forced into baptism despite Wagner's attempts to blackmail him; the singer and theater director Angelo Neumann, who energetically helped to disseminate the Wagnerian oeuvre; and the pianists Carl Tausig and Joseph Rubinstein, who devoted their lives to Wagner. The film also, by the way, integrates performances of short excerpts from their compositions.

Evening atmosphere above the beach of Tel Aviv

So this film brings to light new insights into this topic, and manages to be— for all its laconic brevity— incredibly complex. Hilan Warshaw is a musician, a violinist. Perhaps that is why he possesses this ability to work virtually polyphonically, pursuing many different voices and balancing contradictions, without once taking the floor himself at all.

At the end of the film, evening descends on the beach of Tel Aviv and a time-lapse shot alters the image, to the sensual sounds of *Parsifal*. It's all a matter of time, that's the bottom line: at the earliest, the next generation of Israelis might be able to deal with Wagner differently. And Tzvi Avni, who fled with his parents from Germany in 1935, offers a conciliatory tone: this curse, too, will not last forever. There will be a day when Wagner will be simply a "legitimate composer," just like any other composer.