

‘How to React in France Against Hitlerian Pseudo-Wagnerism’: The Reception of Richard Wagner in Paris, 1933 *

Rachel Orzech

On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power promising to overturn the Treaty of Versailles and the humiliation it was imposing on the German people, and to rebuild a strong and powerful German nation. Two weeks after Hitler’s nomination as Chancellor of Germany was the fiftieth anniversary of Richard Wagner’s death, a highly convenient celebration for the new regime. It is no surprise that the Nazi Party milked the occasion for all its propagandistic potential. What is surprising, however, is the enthusiasm surrounding Wagner’s music and ideas in Paris in 1933, a time when the Franco-German relationship was becoming increasingly tense and difficult. It was a year in which Parisian musical life was saturated with Wagner in every format. There were at least fifty performances of Wagner operas at the Paris Opéra that year, which included productions of *Lohengrin*, *Parsifal*, *Tristan et Isolde*, and *Les Maîtres chanteurs de Nuremberg* (*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*), *L’Or du Rhin* (*Das Rheingold*), *La Valkyrie* (*Die Walküre*), *Siegfried*, and *Le Crépuscule des dieux* (*Götterdämmerung*),¹ including one full *Ring* cycle in April and May. These performances together made up 26% of repertoire played at the Opéra that year, a figure that represented part of a three-year peak since Wagner’s work had first reappeared at the Opéra following the ban on Wagner during the First World War.²

* I wish to thank Kerry Murphy, Yannick Simon, Sue Cole, Claire Dumans and the anonymous readers for their advice and assistance in the preparation of this article.

¹ The titles have been given here in their French translations because they were performed in French (except for performances by visiting German companies) and were advertised with their French titles.

² The 26% represents the number of *performances* of Wagner works at the Opéra taken as a percentage of the number of operatic performances at the Opéra, rather than the number of works performed. I have chosen to calculate the figures in this way because it provides a better understanding of the audience popularity of the works, and the level of exposure that Parisians had to Wagner’s works. The peak took place between 1930 and 1933, before which the percentages of Wagner on the Opéra stage were significantly lower. The period studied was 1921–1944.

There were also at least fifteen all-Wagner orchestral concerts over the course of the year, and many more that included Wagner works in their programs.³ Some of these productions and concerts involved prestigious German conductors and singers such as Wilhelm Furtwängler and Lotte Lehmann. There was also an exhibition mounted at the Opéra library displaying documents relating to the 1861 *Tannhäuser* affair, as well as a controversial lecture given by Thomas Mann in relation to his recently published book on Wagner. At least five books devoted solely to Wagner or his works were published in French in 1933,⁴ as well as approximately two hundred Wagner-related articles and reviews published in periodicals. Although there were few official commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of his death, in 1933 Wagner was inescapable for any Parisian involved in musical life.

Why was Paris saturated with Wagner-related celebrations, performances and press commentary during a time when France was pervaded by an atmosphere of fear, insecurity and unease in response to rising German aggression and hostility? Why did Parisians enthusiastically celebrate Wagner and his music in the face of the Third Reich's attempts to claim Wagner as its own? Why did the French not resort to a rejection of Wagner as they had done periodically from the 1850s onwards? I argue that the history of Wagner reception in France had accorded Wagner a unique place in the French musical imagination, whereby he had become an essential tool for the French to articulate aspects of their own musical national identity. To understand why the French chose to defend 'their' Wagner from 'Hitler's' Wagner, rather than rejecting the composer altogether as they had in the past, an understanding of the historical place of Wagner and his music in French culture is indispensable.

From the time that Wagner became known in France in the 1840s and 1850s, his personality, music and ideas sparked controversy and divided French society. His reception was marked by a series of scandals, or affairs, each of which served to both polarise the French and raise Wagner's profile, even if they prevented his music from being heard in Parisian theatres. In 1861 the infamous *Tannhäuser* scandal—which involved rioting by members of the Jockey Club, as well as heavy criticism in the musical press—caused the cancellation of the season.⁵ In 1870, just as the French were licking their wounds after a humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, a French translation of Wagner's anti-French farce *Eine Kapitulation* was published. The play predictably resulted in outrage and caused lasting damage to Wagner's image in France, including several failed attempts to stage *Lohengrin* in the 1870s and 1880s.⁶ Then, just as his works had finally come to occupy a stable place in operatic repertoire in France, World War I

³ These included concerts in all the well-known Paris concert series: Concerts Colonne, Lamoureux, Padeloup, Poulet, Siohan, and Toscanini, as well as concerts by the touring Berlin Philharmonic.

⁴ Gabriel Bernard, *Richard Wagner. Son œuvre, sa vie romanesque et aventureuse* (Paris: Jules Tallandier, 1933); Pierre Lalo, *Richard Wagner ou le Nibelung* (Paris: Flammarion, 1933); Thomas Mann, *Souffrances et Grandeur de Richard Wagner*, trans. Félix Bertaux (Paris: Fayard, 1933); Henri Rebois, *La Renaissance de Bayreuth. De Richard Wagner à son fils Siegfried* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1933); Bernard Shaw, *Le Parfait wagnérien*, trans. Augustin Hamon and Henriette Hamon (Paris: Montaigne, 1933).

⁵ Annegret Fauser, 'Debauché at the Paris Opéra: *Tannhäuser* and the French Critics, 1861,' *Richard Wagner and his World*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 347–8; Fauser, 'Cette musique sans tradition: *Tannhäuser* and its French Critics,' *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 228–55.

⁶ Thomas S. Grey, 'Eine Kapitulation: Aristophanic Operetta as Cultural Warfare in 1870,' *Richard Wagner and His World*, 87–122; Steven Huebner, 'Introduction,' *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–22; Huebner, 'Lohengrin in Paris,' *History Today* 31.11 (November 1981): 40–5.

broke out and with it, a vicious anti-Wagner press campaign.⁷ As with the previous scandals, French musical life was polarised: one had to be pro- or anti-Wagner.

Although these French Wagner battles may have at times appeared to be hysterical and exaggerated, they were actually the result of significant underlying aesthetic and ideological concerns about French music, culture and national identity. Responding to Wagner was a way of expressing anxieties about the future of French music, and reacting either for or against Wagner was a means of constructing identity and attempting to shape the direction of French music. At times this dependence on Wagner even resulted in opposing political sides using his music and writings to support conflicting arguments.⁸

In 1933 the atmosphere in France was one of insecurity: the country was unstable economically, socially, and politically, and this contributed to a sense of unease about national identity.⁹ The situation was inevitably reflected in the cultural sphere where, as Jane Fulcher has argued, the question 'Which cultural values are French?' became a way of politicising culture in an attempt to resolve the issue of national identity. Fulcher has shown that the resolution of the Dreyfus Affair at the beginning of the twentieth century had delivered a sound political defeat to the French Right, which caused it to turn to culture as an arena for contesting political values.¹⁰ Thus the interwar period was witness to a battle over the definition of French national identity through art, and music played a crucial role in this process.

As had been the case throughout the history of French Wagner reception, there were some French commentators who stuck to old French habits and concluded that Wagner's music was fundamentally and inescapably German. For example, in an article entitled 'The Titan of Bayreuth,' published in the influential moderate paper *L'Ordre*, Philippe Amiguet wrote:

Wagner will always be, before everything else, the musician of a race and of a fragment of humanity. Certainly, in Paris, London and Rome people will appreciate the themes of his operas, they will drink with conviction the beverage of *Tristan*; but the real depth of his works will only be truly understood by those who possess the Germanic *Slimmung* [sic] ... Yes, one must be German in order to perfectly grasp this frenzy of power followed by destruction, which springs out of the Wagnerian temple.¹¹

⁷ Marion Schmid, 'À bas Wagner! The French Press Campaign Against Wagner During World War I,' *French Music, Culture and National Identity, 1870–1939*, ed. Barbara L. Kelly (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 77–91.

⁸ These aspects of Wagner reception in France are variously discussed in: Fauser, 'Debate at the Paris Opéra; Jane F. Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics and Music: From the Dreyfus Affair to the First World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Jane F. Fulcher, 'Wagnerism in the Cultural Politics of the French Right and Left before World War I,' *Von Wagner Zum Wagnérisme: Musik, Literatur, Kunst, Politik*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Manuela Schwartz (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1999), 137–54.

⁹ Dominique Borne and Henri Dubief, *La Crise des années 30. 1929-1938* (Paris: Seuil, 1976; 1989).

¹⁰ Fulcher, *French Cultural Politics*, 16. See also Annegret Fauser, 'Gendering the Nations: The Ideology of French Discourse on Music (1870–1914),' *Musical Constructions of Nationalism: Essays on the History and Ideology of European Musical Culture 1800–1945*, ed. Harry White and Michael Murphy (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 73.

¹¹ 'Wagner sera toujours, avant tout, le musicien d'une race et d'un fragment d'humanité. Certes à Paris, à Londres, à Rome, on appréciera les thèmes de ses opéras, on boira à pleine bouche le breuvage de *Tristan*: mais le fond même de ses œuvres ne sera vraiment compris que par ceux qui possèdent la *Slimmung* [sic] germanique ... Oui, il faut être Allemand pour saisir parfaitement cette frénésie de puissance, puis d'anéantissement qui jaillissent du temple wagnérien.' Philippe Amiguet, 'Le Titan de Bayreuth,' *L'Ordre*, 13 Feb. 1933, 1. Translations in this article are those of the present author.

An article in the Centre Left paper *La République*, signed by P.P., explained without regret:

Richard Wagner is, for the great German people, an integral part of the German genius. If music is amongst the most immaterial of arts and thus also the most international, in so far as it possesses a fatherland, we can maintain that Wagner's work is essentially German.¹²

Comments such as these conform neatly to what we may expect from the French at a time of domestic insecurity and political and military threats from Germany. These kinds of judgements, however, were in the minority and there were very few articles to be found that expressed similar sentiments. As we shall see, the majority of commentary was dominated by writers who depicted Wagner as anything but German.

Many of the Wagner-related articles published in periodicals began by declaring that although France had had its fair share of Wagner affairs, the debate was now over and it was time for a more objective, less impassioned approach. In the Catholic daily *L'Aube*, for example, a journalist encouraged readers to make the most of the fiftieth anniversary commemorations now that Wagner was no longer controversial: 'Now that the sky is no longer clogged up with the smoke of shellfire, let us, without fear, pay tribute to the glory of Wagner ... and let us participate in the celebrations of this fiftieth anniversary.'¹³ Another writer declared in the music periodical *Le Ménestrel* that, 'today we have escaped the Wagnerian obsession which, although it encouraged the dissemination and popularity of his work, also falsified its character for a time.'¹⁴ And in the *Journal des débats*, Henri Curzon described current French attitudes: 'in fact, [Wagner's work] appears to us today to be crystal clear; it seems pure and healthy. We enjoy it without reservation.'¹⁵ Curzon's 1920 book on Wagner had described the composer's music in similar terms: classic, clear and healthy, as opposed to pretentious, deformed and unhealthy.¹⁶ This kind of language is rarely found in French descriptions of Wagner's music, and it is all the more surprising for its similarity to descriptions of *French* music. The discourse in France surrounding the return to Classicism that took place during the interwar period tended to use language that emphasised purity, order, clarity, balance, and proportion, differentiated from the supposedly heavier, decadent and overly emotional German style. However, French commentators' attempts to locate 'French' characteristics in Wagner's music might be explained by a more general desire to downplay earlier tensions and debates, and to establish a sense of ownership over the music, in reaction against what they considered to be Hitler's misappropriation of it.

¹² 'Richard Wagner est pour le grand peuple allemand partie intégrante du génie germanique. Si la musique est parmi les arts le plus immatériel et, partant, le plus international, dans toute la mesure encore large où elle possède une patrie, on peut soutenir que l'œuvre de Wagner est essentiellement allemande.' P. P., 'Il y a cinquante ans mourait Wagner,' *La République*, 16 Feb. 1933, 2.

¹³ 'Aujourd'hui que le ciel n'est plus obstrué par la fumée des obus, saluons donc sans crainte la gloire de Wagner ... et participons aux fêtes de son cinquantenaire.' *L'Aube*, Feb. 1933. BnF BMO, Fonds Paul Franz v. 21.

¹⁴ 'nous sommes aujourd'hui sortis de l'obsession wagnérienne qui, si elle a favorisé la diffusion et la popularité de son œuvre, en a pour un temps faussé le caractère.' Jean Chantavoine, 'Le Cinquantenaire de Wagner,' *Le Ménestrel*, 10 Feb. 1933, 53.

¹⁵ 'de fait, elle nous paraît aujourd'hui claire comme eau de roche; elle nous paraît pure et saine. Nous en jouissons sans arrière-pensée.' Henri Curzon, 'A propos du cinquantenaire de la mort de Richard Wagner,' *Journal des débats*, 24 Feb. 1933, 4.

¹⁶ Henri Curzon, *L'Œuvre de Richard Wagner à Paris et ses interprètes (1850–1914)* (Paris: Maurice Senart, 1930).

From the time Hitler came to power, the Nazi Party began a systematic policy of using Wagner's music to accompany political events, and financially supporting the Bayreuth Festival during a time when it would otherwise have been forced to close. Although a number of scholars have stressed the fact that Hitler never referred to Wagner's antisemitism to justify Nazi antisemitic policy,¹⁷ recent research has shown that the Nazi Party regarded Wagner as central to the evolution and justification of its violently nationalist, xenophobic and antisemitic worldview.¹⁸ Moreover, Hitler had been captivated by Wagner's music from a young age, which led him to develop close ties with the Wagner family (particularly Winifred Wagner)¹⁹ and the Bayreuth Festival from the 1920s onwards. This obviously close relationship with Bayreuth and the Wagners, coupled with the use of Richard Wagner's music at pivotal political events (such as the elections that brought the Nazi Party to power and the Day of Potsdam in March 1933),²⁰ immediately made a striking impression on French writers.

French descriptions of Hitler's visit to the Bayreuth Festival were vivid and often tinged with irony. One critic described his recent visit to the festival, where Hitler was received:

like Siegfried himself resuscitated, entering the theatre between two lines of hands lifted towards the sky, bowing down before Winifred Wagner as if he were a messenger from God, and taking his place in the midst of the crowd ... On seeing, after the show, the entire theatre rise in a climax of enthusiasm as they had at Potsdam in 1914 and, arms outstretched, sing 'Deutschland über alles,' one may note that the Third Reich has taken on Wagner as its own.²¹

Guy de Pourtalès, a journalist whose book on Wagner had received rave reviews in the French press when it was released the previous year in 1932,²² noted in the moderate Left paper *Marianne* that:

It is Wagner's politics and 'racism' that shape the new-style Wagnerians much more than his music. Previously a musical religion, Wagnerism has now become the State religion ... [The new Germany] wants to ignore Wagner's sceptical and troubled soul, deeply uncertain and uneasy, in a constant search for an imperturbable god, in order to hear only the ardent prophet of a future of which it believes it is the embodiment

¹⁷ Hans Rudolf Vaaget, "'Du varst mein Feind von je": The Beckmesser Controversy Revisited,' *Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation*, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Rochester: Rochester University Press, 2003), 194; Michel Poizat, 'Richard Wagner et les enjeux de la musique: aspects du rapport du nazisme à la musique de Wagner,' *Richard Wagner: Points de départ et aboutissements. Anfangs- und Endpunkte*, eds. Danielle Buschinger et al. (Amiens: Presses du Centre d'Études Médiévales de l'Université de Picardie-Jules Verne, 2002), 371; Luke Berryman, 'Wagner's Anti-Semitism in the Third Reich,' (paper presented at Wagner and Us International Symposium, Melbourne, Australia, December 2013).

¹⁸ Pierre-André Taguieff, *Wagner contre les Juifs: Aux origines de l'antisémitisme culturel moderne* (Paris: Berg International, 2012), 194–208.

¹⁹ Brigitte Hamann, *Winifred Wagner: A Life at the Heart of Hitler's Bayreuth*, trans. Alan Bance (London: Granta 2005).

²⁰ Hamann, *Winifred Wagner*, 208–9.

²¹ 'En voyant Adolf Hitler reçu à Bayreuth ainsi que Siegfried lui-même ressuscité, gagnant le théâtre entre une double haie de mains levées vers le ciel, s'inclinant devant Winifred Wagner comme s'il était un envoyé de Dieu le Père et gagnant sa place ... en voyant, après la représentation, toute la salle, à bout d'enthousiasme, se lever comme à Potsdam en 1914 et, le bras tendu, chanter le *Deutschland über alles*, on constate que le Troisième Reich a pris Wagner à son compte.' Paul Achard, 'Impressions de Bayreuth: le culte de Wagner en 1933,' *Comœdia*, 28 Aug. 1933, 1–2.

²² Guy de Pourtalès, *Wagner. Histoire d'un artiste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1932).

... In Wagner's works, it sees nothing but a 'regeneration by the people,' of which the People's Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, is the immaculate Parsifal.²³

Pourtalès's alarm at this misunderstanding and misuse of Wagner is palpable. Another critic, Maurice Bouvier-Ajam, shared this sentiment. Bouvier-Ajam was not a music specialist but was nevertheless deeply interested in Wagner. He devoted a significant three-part article in the prominent music journal *Le Ménestrel* to an examination of contemporary understandings of Wagner and Wagnerism in France and Germany. He begins the first instalment of the article by summarising National Socialism's interpretation of Wagner's moral doctrine in four points:

1. affirmation of the superiority of the German race;
2. affirmation of the validity of entitlement by force;
3. affirmation of the primacy of the *Übermensch*; and
4. affirmation of the sacredness of victory by force.²⁴

Bouvier-Ajam then takes these four points and attempts to disprove them in detail, drawing on information about Wagner's political involvement, quotations from his writings and examples from his operas. His alarm stems from his observation that 'racist Germans' are seizing hold of the figure of Wagner with the intention of promoting him as a forerunner of Hitlerism. He complains, in strong and colourful language, that 'a crowd of unscrupulous hacks, each one more Aryan than the next, have scrawled and are still scrawling interminable columns to prove that Wagnerism has become, in some way, a State religion.'²⁵ The author's concern seems to escalate as the article advances; he goes so far as to state that, 'All in all, we are witnessing the most astounding error that a group of wage-earning intellectuals has ever spread around the world.'²⁶

The last instalment of the long article is titled 'How to respond in France to Hitlerian pseudo-Wagnerism?.'²⁷ Bouvier-Ajam clearly views Hitler's appropriation of Wagner's music as highly dangerous, not just to French or European musical culture but to France itself. The appropriation of Wagner, he argues, goes hand in hand with attacks on French music and the brainwashing of young Germans about the superiority of German art over all others. He calls for France to support the education of young French people in their own 'ancestral art' so that they will one day be strong enough to make a stand against what he refers to as 'Hitlerland.' 'It is absolutely imperative,' he declares, 'that friends of music are committed to spreading

²³ 'c'est la politique et le « Racisme » de Wagner qui modèlent les wagnériens nouveau style, bien plus que sa musique. Autrefois religion musicale, le wagnérisme est devenu à présent religion d'Etat ... [L'Allemagne nouvelle] veut même ignorer de Wagner l'âme sceptique et trouble, jusqu'au bout incertaine, inquiète, et à la recherche d'un dieu impassible, pour n'écouter que l'ardent prophète d'un futur qu'elle croit incarner ... Dans l'œuvre wagnérienne, elle ne voit plus qu'une « régénération par le peuple », dont le Chancelier-du-Peuple, Adolf Hitler, est l'immaculé Parsifal.' Guy de Pourtalès, 'La Saison de Bayreuth (II),' *Marianne*, 30 Aug. 1933, 15.

²⁴ Maurice Bouvier-Ajam, 'Une Religion: Le wagnérisme,' *Le Ménestrel*, 8 Dec. 1933, 474.

²⁵ 'une foule de folliculaires, tous plus aryens les uns que les autres, a scribouillés et scribouille encore d'interminables colonnes pour prouver que le wagnérisme est devenu, en quelque sorte, la religion d'état.' Bouvier-Ajam, *Le Ménestrel* 1 Dec. 1933, 461.

²⁶ 'En définitive, nous sommes en présence de la plus formidable erreur qu'un groupe d'intellectuels salariés ait jamais répandue sur le monde entier.' Bouvier-Ajam, *Le Ménestrel*, 8 Dec. 1933, 475.

²⁷ 'Comment réagir en France contre le pseudo-wagnérisme hitlérien?.' Bouvier-Ajam, *Le Ménestrel*, 15 Dec. 1933, 485.

the truth about Wagner and to destroying the harmful effects of the Hitlerian campaign.²⁸ It is a slightly curious argument that seems to suggest that Germany has only been successful at appropriating Wagner because France has not been effective enough at strengthening its own national culture.

Bouvier-Ajam's attitude reflects that of many French commentators at the time—although few spelt it out so clearly and vehemently—who viewed Nazism's understanding of what Wagner stood for as far more than misguided, but rather a real and dangerous threat to France. He devotes the last part of his article to suggesting possible ways of combatting the threat that German 'pseudo-Wagnerism' poses in France: that is, the possibility that the false view of Wagner promoted by the Nazis will come to be accepted outside of Germany and that it will be used as a weapon to attack French art and French artists, who have not been trained in the kind of ultra-nationalism with which German youth are currently being inculcated. These fears may seem perplexing, but when considered in the context of insecurities about national culture and identity they become more comprehensible: if France proves incapable of constructing an assertive national musical identity, it is in danger of being swamped by the aggressive cultural nationalism of Germany.

One of the ways in which the French defended Wagner against Hitlerian appropriation was to accuse Germany of hypocrisy and opportunism while suggesting that France's appreciation of Wagner was more genuine and longstanding. As mentioned above, Wagner's music did not reach French stages until relatively late compared to many other European countries and its passage into the repertoire was a very difficult one, creating the impression that France only recognised Wagner's genius reluctantly. This was a matter of some embarrassment for the French once Wagner's music became well known and popular throughout Europe. In response to this slightly shameful history, a counter-narrative emerged that exaggerated the role of Wagner's early French admirers and claimed that France in fact appreciated and supported Wagner while he was still being rejected by his own compatriots in Germany. This myth was alive and well in 1933 and used frequently in the press to stake a claim on Wagner's music. It was strengthened by references to how badly Germany had treated Wagner during his lifetime and suggestions that Hitler's sudden championing of the composer was deeply hypocritical. Paul Achard, for example, reported on his recent visit to Bayreuth:

Today, what was once made into a laughing stock is now acclaimed ... the German princes, the public and the critics almost seem to have imagined that they invented and wrote the Ring cycle themselves. Never has the irony of this turnaround appeared as glaringly as today, when the new Germany, shaken by Adolf Hitler and raised by a wave of perhaps unprecedented patriotism, has seized the pure masterpiece and brandishes it like a sword forged on the anvil of German ancestors.²⁹

²⁸ 'il faut absolument que les amis de la musique aient à cœur de répandre la vérité sur Wagner et de détruire ainsi les effets nocifs de la campagne hitlérienne.' Bouvier-Ajam, *Le Ménestrel*, 15 Dec. 1933, 485.

²⁹ 'Aujourd'hui, on acclame ce qu'on a couvert de risées à cette époque et peu s'en fait ... que les princes allemands, le public et la critique ne s'imaginent avoir inventé et écrit la Tétralogie. Jamais l'ironie de ce revirement n'est apparue de façon aussi éclatante qu'aujourd'hui, lorsque la nouvelle Allemagne, secouée par Adolph Hitler et soulevée par une vague de patriotisme peut-être sans précédent, s'est emparée du pur chef-d'œuvre et le brandit comme une épée forgée sur l'enclume des ancêtres germains.' Paul Achard, 'Quand on joue la Tétralogie dans le temple wagnérien,' *Comœdia*, 1 Sep. 1933, 1–2.

In one of a collection of articles on Wagner in *L'Alsace française*, Gustave Cohen emphasised the French contribution to Wagner's output:

When we speak of Wagner and of France, of which he spoke so unfairly and unjustly after 1870, it seems that there is only antinomy, battle, and contradiction; however, he is nowhere more passionately loved than in France. No great concert without Wagner—that seems to be our slogan ... without France, a great part of his work—and not least *Lohengrin*, *Tristan*, *Parsifal*—would never have existed, as they are inventions of the French literary genius, orchestrated by German musical genius.³⁰

The argument that some of Wagner's libretti were inspired by French sources and stories was not a new one: French critics had made the case for this since the late nineteenth century—particularly in relation to *Lohengrin*—and it was a subject that continued to be raised in the press from time to time and contributed to the widespread perception that Wagner owed at least a part of his success to France and the French. Henri Curzon reminded his readers that:

If [the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary] has taken the form of new exaltation in Germany, it is because a vague and subconscious feeling must have manifested itself in the need for a kind of compensation. Yes, let us not doubt that this is how Wagner would understand these demonstrations if he witnessed them. How disappointed was he in his lifetime by the incomprehension of his compatriots, how sickened by their hostility? Did he not write that the Bayreuth festivals were judged by the French 'with more fairness and intelligence than by the great majority of the German press'? Did he not declare: 'I am not worried about the French; they will end up understanding me better than the Germans'?³¹

The French clearly felt a sense of ownership when it came to Wagner's music, with authors such as Pourtalès claiming that 'Wagner, so fundamentally German, really is a little French',³² and others boasting that Wagner was currently performed more frequently in France than in Germany. It is little surprise, then, that Hitler's attempt to appropriate Wagner's music for the cause of pan-Germanist propaganda was met with alarm in France.

Portalès's remark about Wagner being 'a little French' should not be dismissed as flippant or inconsequential. In fact, it emerges as one of the most significant questions posed by French Wagner reception since the nineteenth century: does Wagner's music belong to the Germans, the French, or is it universal? The practice of adopting music by composers of another

³⁰ 'Quand on parle de Wagner et de la France, dont il a si mal et si injustement parlé après 1870, il semble qu'il n'y ait qu'antinomie, lutte, contradiction: cependant, il n'est nulle part plus passionnément aimé que chez nous. Pas de beau concert sans Wagner, telle semble être notre formule ... sans la France, une immense partie de son œuvre et non la moindre, *Lohengrin*, *Tristan*, *Parsifal*, n'existerait point, car ce sont des inventions du génie littéraire français, orchestré par le génie musical allemand.' Gustave Cohen, 'Richard Wagner et le moyen âge français,' *L'Alsace française*, 12 Feb. 1933, 125.

³¹ 'Si [le cinquantenaire] a pris, en Allemagne, cette forme d'exaltation nouvelle, c'est qu'un sentiment obscur et inconscient y a du faire sentir le besoin d'une sorte de réparation. Oui, c'est ainsi, n'en doutons pas, que Wagner, s'il en était témoin, comprendrait ces manifestations. Combien n'a-t-il pas été déçu, de son vivant, de l'incompréhension de ses compatriotes, ulcéré de leur hostilité? N'a-t-il pas écrit que les festivals de Bayreuth ont été jugés par les Français avec « plus de justesse et d'intelligence que par la grande majorité de la presse allemande » (1876)? N'a-t-il pas déclaré: « Je ne suis pas inquiet avec les Français; ils finiront par m'interpréter mieux que les Allemands »?' Henri Curzon, 'Wagneriana: A propos du cinquantenaire de la mort de Wagner,' *Journal des débats*, 4 Aug. 1933, 3.

³² 'Wagner si foncièrement allemand est réellement un peu français.' Pourtalès, 'Souvenir à Wagner,' *Marianne*, 15 Feb. 1933, 15.

nationality seems to have been common. For instance, in the 1830s the French had adopted Meyerbeer—a German Jew—as an honorary Frenchman and a composer they considered as having contributed to the French tradition of grand opera.³³ Conversely, during the German occupation of France in the Second World War, the Nazis actively promoted the music of Berlioz and presented him as a sort of honorary German: a composer who belonged in the German Romantic tradition and who had described himself as ‘three-quarters German.’³⁴ In this context, the depiction of a ‘French’ Wagner is less ridiculous than it may seem from a twenty-first-century perspective; for the French it was certainly a conceptual possibility.

The invocation of the universal, international, or human aspects of Wagner’s work was common in the French press. Jean Delaincourt, for example, wrote in his article titled ‘Where are we with Wagner?’ that the German composer’s greatest achievement was to have created ‘A universal art, an art for all.’³⁵ Another critic called for ‘a human and universal Wagner, not a Nazi Wagner!’³⁶ Henri Rebois, who had a personal relationship with Wagner’s son Siegfried, explained that while the composer’s genius was ‘Germanic in its roots, it [was] profoundly human in its flourishing and thus should not be the subject of monopolisation.’³⁷ Similarly, a critic in *L’Ami du peuple* who gave his article the lengthy title: ‘The Germans who are going to celebrate Wagner’s fiftieth anniversary with pomp seem to forget that for thirty years they despised his music and left him almost without resources,’ lamented the fact that ‘fifty years after his passing ... Wagner, universal genius, is an instrument of pan-Germanist propaganda.’³⁸

Thomas Mann’s Paris lecture, given on February 18, was a significant influence on much of the French discourse surrounding Wagner in 1933. Mann gave the lecture in two versions: in French at the Théâtre des Ambassadeurs, and in German in the Foyer de la Nouvelle Europe. It originated from his recent book entitled *Leiden und Grösse Richard Wagners* (The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner), which had been commissioned by the Goethe Society to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Wagner’s death, and was first presented as a lecture in Munich on February 10. Mann was to return to the subject of Wagner throughout his life and he wrote often of his contradictory responses of deep attraction to the music and intellectual criticism of the ideology behind it. In spite of, or perhaps because of, his lifelong veneration for the music, he never shied away from the repulsiveness of some of Wagner’s ideological beliefs. Nevertheless, he immediately identified Hitler’s use of the music as misguided and dangerous, and the lecture was an unapologetic warning against appropriating the music

³³ Kerry Murphy, ‘Berlioz, Meyerbeer and the Place of Jewishness in Criticism,’ *Berlioz: Past, Present, Future: Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Peter Bloom (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 90–104.

³⁴ Yannick Simon, ‘Hector Berlioz, compositeur français « aux trois quarts Allemand »,’ *La Musique à Paris sous l’Occupation*, eds. Myriam Chimènes and Yannick Simon (Paris: Fayard/Cité de la Musique, 2013), 83–95.

³⁵ ‘un art universel, un art pour tous.’ Jean Delaincourt, ‘Où en sommes-nous avec Wagner?’, *L’Ami du peuple*, 30 Jan. 1933, 5.

³⁶ ‘Un Wagner humain et universel, non point un Wagner nazi!’ Francis Ambrière, ‘Parentés de Wagner,’ c1933. BnF BMO: Fonds Paul Franz v. 22, 101.

³⁷ ‘germanique dans ses racines, il est profondément humain dans son épanouissement et, partant, ne doit pas être sujet à d’accaparement.’ Henri Rebois, ‘Des souvenirs sur Siegfried Wagner,’ *Comœdia*, 24 Apr. 1933, 1–2.

³⁸ ‘Cinquante ans après qu’il s’est éteint ... Wagner, génie universel, est un instrument de propagande pangermanique.’ Marcel Espiau, ‘Les Allemands qui vont célébrer avec éclat le cinquantième de Wagner semblent oublier que pendant trente ans ils méprisèrent sa musique et le laissèrent presque sans ressources.’ *L’Ami du peuple*, 6 Feb. 1933.

for contemporary political purposes. 'It is thoroughly inadmissible,' he wrote, 'to ascribe a contemporary meaning to Wagner's nationalist gestures and speeches—the meaning that they would have today. To do so is to falsify and abuse them, to sully their romantic purity.'³⁹ While Hitler and the Nazi Party are never specifically mentioned in the essay, it is clearly an attack on Nazi appropriation:

It is nothing but demagoguery when today the 'German sword' lines—or indeed that key statement at the end of *Die Meistersinger*: 'Zergering' in Dunst das Heil'ge Röm'sche Reich, uns bliebe gleich die heil'ge deutsche Kunst' [And were the Holy Roman Empire to fade away, Holy German Art is here to stay!]⁴⁰—are thundered tendentiously into the auditorium by the basses, in order to achieve an added patriotic effect. It is these very lines ... that prove how totally intellectual and apolitical Wagner's nationalism was: for they speak of a downright anarchic indifference to political structures.⁴⁰

Mann stresses the fact that while Wagner's Germanness was 'profound, potent and beyond all doubt,' his music was nevertheless 'made for the larger world, and accessible to the larger world.'⁴¹ He emphasises the cosmopolitan nature of Wagner's art without denying its fundamental Germanness and its contribution to German nationalism. The essay ends thus: 'Let us be content to honour Wagner's work as a powerful and complex phenomenon of German and Western European life, that will ever continue to serve as a profound stimulus to art and knowledge.'⁴²

The lecture events were widely reported in the Parisian press and Mann's position resonated strongly with all those critics who offered an opinion on the matter. The combination of his evident passion for the music and his objections to its political appropriation was a winning formula in Paris, and some French critics used his arguments to support their own cases, particularly following the publication of the full essay in French translation later that year. The lecture given at the Foyer de la Nouvelle Europe was followed by a response by André Maurois, a prominent French writer who later helped Mann to immigrate to the United States.⁴³ In this response, subsequently published in *Le Quotidien*, Maurois praises Mann's lecture and approves of the German writer's argument that Wagner's music is fundamentally German while also being universal. In support of Mann's speech, he adds two comments:

The first is that by truthfully depicting the men of his country, the great novelist, whether he wishes to or not, helps other people to understand them. Through works of art we can penetrate a common source of human passions that, beneath differences in custom and language, remain identical amongst the nations, fixed in space, unchanging in time.

My second remark relates to what we were saying the other day about these myths as old as humanity, deeply buried in the collective soul and to which every writer, every musician must appeal if he wants to touch what is most strong and secret in man.

³⁹ Thomas Mann, 'The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner,' *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. Allan Blunden, ed. Patrick Carnegey (London: Fischer Verlag, 1985), 140.

⁴⁰ Mann, 'Sorrows and Grandeur,' 141.

⁴¹ Mann, 'Sorrows and Grandeur,' 144.

⁴² Mann, 'Sorrows and Grandeur,' 148.

⁴³ Jack Kolbert, *The Worlds of André Maurois* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1985), 50.

But perhaps there is indeed some hope for unfortunate Europe in the fact that many of the myths that we live are common to all Westerners. Knighthood, Tristan's potion, the mystery of the Grail belong to a European civilisation. Europe is not without collective memories. Unity, which today she seeks in vain, she has known before.

But alas, how quickly diminishes the number of those whose great voice can be heard beyond the limits of their native country.⁴⁴

By appealing to a collective cultural history and memories shared by all Western Europeans, Maurois uses Mann's lecture to support his own, typically French, opposition to the Nazi appropriation of Wagner, and to suggest that Europe can be saved only through recognition of these common values and history. He draws attention to the current atmosphere of insecurity and turmoil in Europe, and he sees universalism (or at least Europeanism) as a solution. Although he avoids open criticism of the Nazi regime, he clearly aligns himself with Mann's position on the universality of Wagner's music, claiming that the stories of Wagner's operas belong to a European civilisation, not a German one. A significant number of other critics mentioned Mann's book in their articles on Wagner, and several wrote about his ideas in some detail.⁴⁵ His comments about the profound Germanness of Wagner were skipped over, but his opposition to the political misuse of the music in Germany and his emphasis on its universality were applauded and reiterated.

Hitler's appropriation of Wagner was deeply upsetting and unsettling for Parisian critics who, as I have shown, responded to the situation with a mixture of regret, anger, alarm, and fear. Not only was Wagner's music deeply cherished in France, but the composer and his music had also become a means for the French to work out who they were and who they wanted to be, both musically and nationally. Hitler's vision of Wagner as exclusively German left no room for 'other Wagners'—French or otherwise—and this posed a threat to French musical identity. The Parisian press had no intention of surrendering Wagner to Hitler's 'new Germany' because they had absorbed him into their musical history, musical discourse, and musical life. Their solution, then, was to promote a universal, human Wagner who could be worshipped by all.

⁴⁴ 'La première, c'est qu'en peignant avec vérité les hommes de son pays le grand romancier, qu'il le souhaite ou non, aide d'autres peuples à les comprendre. A travers les œuvres d'art, nous pouvons pénétrer jusqu'à ce fonds commun des passions humaines qui, au-dessous des différences de mœurs et de langage, demeure identique parmi les nations, immobile dans l'espace, immuable dans le temps.

Ma seconde remarque se rattache à ce que vous nous disiez l'autre jour de ces mythes aussi vieux que l'humanité, profondément ensevelis dans l'âme collective et auxquels tout écrivain, tout musicien doit faire appel s'il veut émouvoir ce qu'il y a en l'homme de plus secret et de plus fort.

Mais peut-être y a-t-il justement, pour la malheureuse Europe, quelque espoir en ce fait que beaucoup des mythes dont nous vivons sont communs à tous les Occidentaux. La chevalerie, le philtre de Tristan, le mystère du Graal appartiennent à une civilisation européenne. L'Europe n'est pas sans souvenirs collectifs. L'unité, qu'aujourd'hui elle cherche en vain, elle l'a connue autrefois.

Mais, hélas! qu'il diminue rapidement le nombre de ceux dont la grande voix peut être entendue au delà des limites de leur pays natal.' André Maurois, 'Discours,' *Le Quotidien*, 1933. BnF BMO: Fonds Paul Franz v. 21.

⁴⁵ For example, Bouvier-Ajam, 'Une religion,' *Le Ménestrel*, 15 Dec. 1933, 485; 'Wagner jugé par un écrivain allemand.' BnF BMO: Fonds Paul Franz v. 22, 91; Ambrière, 'Parentés de Wagner.'