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Judaism In Music And Other Essays



Synopsis

Musical genius, polemicist, explosive personality—that was the nineteenth-century German composer Richard Wagner, who paid as much attention to his reputation as to his genius. Often maddening, and sometimes called mad, Wagner wrote with the same intensity that characterized his music. The letters and essays collected in *Judaism in Music and Other Essays* were published during the 1850s and 1860s, the period when he was chiefly occupied with the creation of *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Highlighting this collection is the notorious 1850 article “Judaism in Music,” which caused such a firestorm that nearly twenty years later Wagner published an unapologetic appendix. Other prose pieces include “On the Performing of Tannhauser,” written while he was in political exile; “On Musical Criticism,” an appeal for a more vital approach to art undivorced from life; and “Music of the Future.” This volume concludes with letters to friends about the intent and performance of his great operas; estimations of Liszt, Beethoven, Mozart, Gluck, Berlioz, and others; and suggestions for the reform of opera houses in Vienna, Paris, and Zurich. The Bison Book edition includes the full text of volume 3 of William Ashton Ellis’s 1894 translation commissioned by the London Wagner Society.

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Customer Reviews

The German word "Erdball" means "world". It takes a weird translator to want to render it into English as "Earthball". H Ashton Ellis is that translator, a man who, in learning German, forgot all his English. Ellis translates German compound words not with plain English but with strange Germanic

formulations, eg "leg-dancers", or "tone-arranger" for a German word that simply means "composer". So while it's good to have these Wagner texts available in English, it's a shame that the re-appearance of these awful translations in a modern edition will publishers from commissioning a new, competent, plain-English translation discourage. Ellis also makes Wagner's "Das Judentum in Musik" harder to evaluate by introducing antisemitic overtones (perhaps of his own) where the Wagner text doesn't justify it. For example, the Ellis text describes Mendelsohn as "a Jew composer", which has a hostile, sneering, sound to it. But Wagner's text has "Judaische"; the correct translation is the merely descriptive "a Jewish composer". There are other, similar examples. As for Wagner, "Das Judentum in Musik"'s argument is that because [in mod-19th Century Europe] Jews are partly involved in the cultures amongst which they live, and are partly separate and aloof from them, their music and poetry don't have the warmth, depth and humanity that come from having strong folk roots; Jewish art, while Jews remain apart and not assimilated into the mainstream "folk", is likely to be imitative, clever, ironical, and so on, but not deep or passionate. The essay brings no comfort to Wagner-lovers, but not quite as much comfort to Wagner-haters as is sometimes claimed.

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