

Richard Wagner's 'Mendelssohn Obsession'

In 1869, Wagner republished his "Judenthum," this time under his own name. Cosima, Liszt's daughter, began her diary about this time, as she has just taken up residence with Wagner. (Cosima had left her husband, the conductor Hans von Bülow, in November 1868, being two months' pregnant with Wagner's child, Siegfried.) Her diary provides some insight into their discussions, at the time of the release of the second edition:

Jan. 19: "He continues to insist that the emancipation of the Jews has stifled all German impulses. Then we discuss the difference between the former rough and robust German musicians and the present Jewish, elegant, educated ones."

Jan. 27: "R. [Richard] has ordered Devrient's book about Mendelssohn—it looks somewhat comical, and the fact that Devrient is an uneducated play-actor and Mendelssohn a Jew emerges clearly." Eduard Devrient came from a family of actors, specializing in Shakespeare and Schiller. He worked with Mendelssohn to organize the famous revival of the "St. Matthews' Passion," and sang the role of Christ.

Jan. 28: "...Devrient's book.... Much impatience with it, but much enlightenment, this account is like a confirmation of what R. wrote about Mendelssohn in his essay." So, despite Wagner's pretense, the essay was always about Mendelssohn.

However, Wagner is haunted by Mendelssohn's death, and Cosima constructs an elaborate rationalization for him. On Feb. 14, he asks Cosima to go through that rationalization again for him: "At lunch R. asked me to develop the thought I had expressed in relation to Weber and Mendelssohn. He had observed that, when he had Weber's ashes moved to Dresden,

only eighteen years had elapsed since the composer's death, whereas it was now 22 years since Mendelssohn died; yet at the time [of moving Weber's ashes] it had seemed to him an eternity since the tragic news [of his death] was received, while now it seemed to him as if M.'s death had been reported only yesterday."

Wagner is bothered that Mendelssohn's death seems so much more real and present, but Cosima is non-plussed: "I said that ... it seemed to me that a genius such as Weber would very soon be imbued with the nimbus and halo of the past, whereas a personality such as Mendelssohn's would be preserved in remembrance only because very many people who once knew him are still alive, and they keep the memory of him green. Such a shadow does not grow, it can only disappear; the genius, however, is bound to become a legend immediately after his death; one can hardly believe that one knew him...." She continues in this vein.

Wagner is intrigued with Cosima's inverted theory, but needs repetition to get the proper steps. This discussion does not cease here, as Cosima later goes back to insert additional argumentation into this day's entry: "The sorrow that mankind feels at the loss of a genius also adds to the illusion. Every time it is called to mind it produces pain, and that is doubled and tripled by Time. The passing 'What a shame' that a loss like that of Mendelssohn evokes from us does not engrave on our minds the sense of his being dead, and we must then always ask ourselves when he did in fact die." Another cogent argument from Cosima as to why the unimportance of Mendelssohn makes the event of his death stay fresh in our minds.

As ugly as Wagner is, he suffered for his ugliness. His biggest sin might well have been his proclivity for sophisticated handlers like Liszt and Cosima, whose casuistry aided and abetted his beast-man proclivities.