

## **COMMENTARY: Carol Jean Delmar sounds off on LA's 'Ring' Festival.**

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“Los Angeles will celebrate Wagner as no other city in the world can.” That’s what the Los Angeles Opera website forecasts for Ring Festival LA. But that is a bad idea.

Richard Wagner remains one of the greatest composers the world has ever known. But he was a rabid anti-Semite.

I think that people should listen to and appreciate his music. He was a genius. But I do not want to be a part of any celebration that will glorify the man.

Los Angeles Opera is in the midst of performing the first two installments of Wagner’s “Ring” cycle – the grand tetralogy of four operas that explores the strife between mythological gods and mortals as they vie for the ownership of a powerful ring. “Das Rheingold” opened and closed to mixed reviews; “Die Walküre” continues the saga at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion through April; and “Siegfried” and “Götterdämmerung” are set for next season. Then Los Angeles Opera will perform three complete “Ring” cycles in May and June 2010.

But there is more to the story: The three complete “Ring” cycles will coincide with Ring Festival LA, which is being touted as the largest arts festival to hit Los Angeles since the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival. Ring Festival LA is scheduled for April, May and June 2010. The festival is an admirable idea, but the focus of the festival is wrong. There is still time to lobby for changes.

I am the daughter of Viennese Jewish parents who were forced to flee from Austria in 1938. My father was an opera singer. He lost his voice and profession due to the climatic changes and emotional trauma that affected his voice while he and my mother were detained in an internment camp in Havana, Cuba awaiting visas to enter the United States. Many of his family members perished. For him, America was a safe haven, far away from the anti-Semitism he’d experienced in Austria.

It is one thing to listen to Wagner’s music. It is quite another matter to celebrate his life. He was a despicable human being. Performances of his works have been unofficially banned in Israel. Los Angeles has a large Jewish population. There have been many great composers, musicians, artists, poets, writers and playwrights who are worthy of being included in an arts festival. How can the city of Los Angeles devote an entire festival in honor of such an outspoken anti-Semite?

The list of supporters and participants is immense: fifty arts and educational organizations, and civic and arts leaders including Los Angeles Opera’s general director

Plácido Domingo, Music Director James Conlon, Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, County Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Gloria Molina, and business leader-philanthropist Eli Broad, to name a few. Plus Domingo is hoping for funding from the city and county.

There will be films, documentaries and radio shows about Wagner; a light show orchestrated to the “Ride of the Valkyries”; a seminar on the parallels between Wagner’s “Ring” and JRR Tolkien’s “Lord of the Rings”; a seminar at UCLA on Wagner’s contributions to the history of film music, direction and set design; lectures and discussions at USC; a Wagner choral program; a country-western parody of the “Ring” cycle; a reception for people to share the reasons they love all things Wagner -- Well, you get the idea.

My father sang the role of Alberich in the “Ring” and Beckmesser in “Die Meistersinger.” “Die Meistersinger” is one of Wagner’s most anti-Semitic operas. In the final act, the cobbler Hans Sachs sings an aria praising German art and the need to keep it free from foreign influence. Some scholars argue that the text of the opera is simply nationalistic while others believe that German-speaking audiences understood Wagner’s anti-Semitic intent, racism and belief in German supremacy.

Wagner wrote an essay titled, “Judaism in Music.” In a version translated by William Ashton Ellis, Wagner wrote: “Judaism is the evil conscience of our modern civilization. . . . We have to explain to ourselves the involuntary repulsion possessed for us by the nature and personality of the Jews. . . . The Jew . . . strikes us primarily by his outward appearance, which, no matter to what European nationality we belong, has something disagreeably foreign to that nationality. . . . The Jew . . . is innately incapable of enouncing himself to us artistically through either his outward appearance or his speech, and least of all through his singing. . . . The Jew . . . has no true passion, and least of all a passion that might thrust him on to art-creation.”

It is therefore quite evident that Hans Sachs’s plea for Germanic purity excludes Jews and is racist in intent.

In addition, it is a known fact that Beckmesser was patterned after the music critic Eduard Hanslick who criticized Wagner’s works. Some scholars surmise that Beckmesser is a Jewish caricature created by an anti-Semitic composer. There have been extensive writings on the subject by Paul Lawrence Rose, Barry Millington, Alex Ross and most recently, The Wall Street Journal drama critic, Terry Teachout.

Beckmesser was conceived to sing in a jerky, whining manner with broken, uneven phrasing. My dad actually changed the quality of his voice to create the Beckmesser sound.

But does that mean that Wagner intentionally created Beckmesser to fit his Jewish stereotype? After reading the following phrases from his essay, I am convinced that he did. He wrote: “The first thing that strikes our ear as quite outlandish and unpleasant, in

the Jew's production of the voice-sounds, is a creaking, squeaking, buzzing snuffle . . . and an arbitrary twisting of the structure of our phrases, and this mode of speaking acquires at once the character of an intolerably jumbled blabber."

Such vocal phraseology also applies to the Nibelung dwarfs in the "Ring" – particularly Alberich and Mime – whose unappealing traits have linked them to Jews described in Wagner's essay as "a swarming colony of insect-life."

At least one lecture during the festival at the American Jewish University will explore Wagner's views on Judaism and how the Nazis utilized his music. He died a few years before Adolf Hitler was born, but the two men seem to have had a similar mindset. Hitler loved Wagner's music and played it at Nazi events. He was also friendly with Wagner's family. I shudder to think what role Wagner would have played during the Nazi era had he been alive then.

The General Settlement Fund for Victims of National Socialism is just now paying restitution to Austrian Holocaust victims and their heirs. The horrendous crimes against humanity that took place during the Nazi era can never be erased or forgotten. Adolf Hitler would have never succeeded with his maniacal scheme without the support of thousands and thousands of like-minded citizens. Wagner may not have been a Nazi, but his writings reveal a prejudicial man with abhorrent beliefs that the Nazis could tap into, thus making his music appealing to them. We've come so far in combating racism in the United States. A citywide arts festival that celebrates Wagner's life is a bad idea.

I beseech the organizers of Ring Festival LA to rethink the festival's programming. James Conlon's "Recovered Voices" project has exposed us to the music of composers who were persecuted by the Nazis. Why not honor some of them? Why not include Mozart, Puccini, Verdi and others? And what about Schubert, Schumann and Mendelssohn? Do not make this all about Wagner. Include him, but broaden the scope. Involve the little theaters in Los Angeles. Present plays like "The Diary of Anne Frank." Long Beach Opera recently performed an opera on the subject. Revive it. Present Shakespeare. A Noise Within and the Will Geer Theatrum Botanicum perform classical theater. Involve them. Make this a "real" arts festival that is representative of all of the arts in LA.

Wagner's morbid vision of Germanic supremacy was smashed in a devastating war in which millions died. Awakened troublesome memories and associations will only alienate the Jewish population and drive tourists away. The city of Los Angeles has no business turning this tumultuous genius into an American cult hero. Los Angeles is not Bayreuth, Germany where Wagnerian festivals abound. Ring Festival LA is the WRONG Festival LA, so make it right!