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Ring Festival LA should expose composer's views.

By Carol Jean Delmar

RING Festival LA will be the largest arts festival to hit Los Angeles since the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival. From April 15 to June 30, more than 100 events will act as an umbrella for LA Opera's three, four-opera "Ring" cycles.

The journey to the "Ring" has already begun with a lecture at the Hammer Museum earlier this month on Richard Wagner and his anti-Semitism.

As an opera critic, I would never deprive Wagner the credit due him for being one of the world's greatest composers and influences on 20th century music. I am willing to "explore" his life, but I do not want to celebrate Wagner's life. He was a despicable anti-Semite who documented his philosophies in his librettos, characterizations and writings.

When I first heard about Ring Festival LA, I contacted numerous city, county and religious leaders with hopes that the festival might be expanded. County Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich attempted to diversify the festival but failed. So I resigned myself to the fact that Ring Festival LA was a done deal. Fortunately, various religious leaders succeeded in ensuring that the real Wagner would be exposed.

Many scholars believe that you can celebrate Wagner, the composer, without celebrating Wagner, the man. Yet scholars like musicologist Gottfried Wagner, the great-grandson of the composer, and Paul Lawrence Rose, a professor of Jewish Studies at Penn State University, believe, as do I, that the man and his music are one.

Another common comment has been that it wasn't Wagner's fault that Adolf Hitler turned his music into the de facto soundtrack of the Holocaust. He died in 1883 well before Hitler came to power.

But Wagner's writings and operas influenced Hitler to develop the "Final Solution." Wagner called for the destruction of the Jewish people in his essay "Judaism in Music" – although some scholars believe that he meant what he wrote only figuratively. His wife Cosima clarified the controversy when she wrote in her "Diaries" that her husband was "in favor of expelling them entirely."

Whether Wagner would have become a Nazi or not has been under debate. I can only surmise that he would have. After all, his family welcomed Hitler to Bayreuth; his daughter-in-law had a relationship with Hitler; his daughter's husband, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, was linked to fascism; and one of his grandsons headed a concentration camp.

Los Angeles is going to have an arts festival. My problem is that, with all that we now know about Wagner, why are we calling it a “celebration of all things Wagnerian” – as one journalist wrote? On the Ring Festival LA Web site, festival leader Barry Sanders has written: “We intend this to be a celebration. ... Please come to the party!”

Granted, it took Hitler to carry out Wagner’s philosophies, and it took countless others to implement his edicts; yet many living survivors remember hearing Wagner’s music in the death camps. The associations are unbearable for them.

Conductor Daniel Barenboim described such an incident on his Web site. A lady confronted him in Tel Aviv and said, “How can you want to play that? I saw my family taken to the gas chambers to the sound of the ‘Meistersinger’ overture. Why should I listen to that?”

The festival should be a serious exploration of Wagner. The goal should be to sell Ring Festival LA as a festival of enlightenment that will explore and teach us about the “Ring” and its creator with the expectation of creating a dialogue and debate. That would be my message.

Carol Jean Delmar is an author and opera critic for OperaOnline.us.