

Antisemitism & Music

What was the Holocaust?

The Holocaust (1933–1945) was the state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews (and other targeted groups including African-Europeans, Romani peoples, so-called “sexual deviants” including gay men, lesbians and trans people, and people with physical and mental disabilities) by the Nazi German regime and its allies. The Holocaust was the systematic culmination of already pervasive antisemitism in Europe.

What is antisemitism?

Antisemitism is the historical and modern, institutional and individual phenomenon of prejudice and hatred toward Jews. Modern examples of antisemitism include bomb threats and violent attacks on Jewish people and places, diatribes by celebrities like Mel Gibson and Kanye West, hashtags like *#JewishPrivilege* trending on social media, graffitied swastikas on city walls, and the presence of harmful and reductive tropes in art and media.

According to Statistics Canada and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), antisemitic hate crimes make up 55% of religious hate crimes in Canada and 60% in the US. This is a growing concern-- in New York, Antisemitic hate crimes rose 125% in November 2022 when compared to the previous year.

According to PBS, antisemitic incidents across the US are at their highest levels in forty years and have more than doubled in the past ten.

Examples of Antisemitic Tropes in Classical Music

“The Greedy Jew”

According to The Louis D. Brandeis Center, Jews have been depicted since medieval times as “wealthy, powerful, menacing and controlling collectively, demanding the sacrifice of others to their own greed.”

In Music...

Aptly summarized in an essay by Peter Brach: “Jews, as Wagner perceived them, are morally inferior to their German neighbors, as the Nibelheim dwarves are inferior to the races beneath whom they live. [Wagner’s] disapproval of Jewish prominence in banking institutions is incorporated into the Nibelung’s inferior stature as a race [which must] create a monetary method of gaining power.” This can be seen especially in the *Ring’s* Alberich, who is “cold and greedy, incapable of love beyond that for possession and power.”

“Christ-Killers”

In the Middle Ages, prejudices against Jews were primarily based in early Christian belief and thought, particularly the myth that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus. Suspicion and discrimination rooted in religious prejudices continued in early modern Europe (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

In Music...

Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* sets the New Testament lines in which a Jewish crowd invites responsibility for Jesus’ death, saying: “His blood be upon us and upon our children.” In the *St. John Passion*, Jews are further demonized as a mob yelling “Kreuzige, kreuzige!” (“Crucify, crucify!”) in a rabid, bloodthirsty fugue.

“The Sexual & Artistic Deviant”

“A core tenet of far-right ideology is the belief that Jews are orchestrating a sado-sexual plot to weaken Christian people. This bizarre conspiracy theory has a surprisingly long history in Western civilization. Going back to the Middle Ages, European art and literature have depicted the Jews as perverse, predatory, pornographic...” (Jonah Cohen, Fathom Journal.)

In Music...

Intellectual historian Sander Gilman argued that the exotic sexualization of Salome is “designed to conjure an unflattering picture of a degenerate society. That the setting is also Jewish—one notorious section of the score consists of five Jews arguing with one another—suggests that Strauss’s intention was rooted in antisemitic assumptions about Jewish sexuality.” This “dissonant quintet of five quarrelling Jews” also furthers the Germanic idea that Jewish musicians create “substanceless music” and have “misplaced values in the arts as a whole.” (Britannica)

*“Just as insects
eat only dead
flesh, the Jews
swarm over the
corpse of dead
Music, destroying
it as surely as
worms destroy a
carcass”*

(Richard Wagner,
“On Judaism in
Music,” 1869)

Learning Resources

The Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law: Fact Sheet on the Elements of Anti-Semitic Discourse

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Introduction to the Holocaust

ADL: New Guide to Antisemitic Tropes

Britannica: Wagner's Anti-Semitism

The New Yorker: The Endless, Grisly Fascination of Richard Strauss' "Salome"

Sander Gilman: Strauss, the Pervert, and Avant Garde Opera of the Fin de Siècle

Commentary: Wagner and the Anti-Semitism of 'the Ring'

Chorus America: Why the Bach Passions Are Problematic

ADL: Antisemitic Attitudes in America: Topline Findings

PBS: Antisemitic incidents hit a record high in 2021. What's behind the rise in hate?

Peter Brach: The Anti-Semitic Intention of The Ring of the Nibelung

"Wagner's anti-semitism is integral to an understanding of his mature music dramas," writes Indiana University's Marc Weiner. "I have analysed the corporeal images in his dramatic works against the background of 19th-century racist imagery. By examining such bodily images as the elevated, nasal voice, the 'foetor judaicus' (Jewish stench), the hobbling gait, the ashen skin colour, and deviant sexuality associated with Jews in the 19th century, it's become clear to me that the images of Alberich, Mime, and Hagen [in the *Ring* cycle], Beckmesser [in *Die Meistersinger*], and Klingsor [in *Parsifal*], were drawn from stock anti-semitic cliches of Wagner's time."