

Excerpts from writings by Richard Wagner (1813-83)

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Richard Wagner, *The Art of Tone* (1849)

What inimitable art did Beethoven employ in his “C-minor Symphony,” [No. 5], in order to steer his ship from the ocean of infinite yearning to the haven of fulfillment! He was able to raise the utterance of his music *almost* to a moral resolve, but not speak aloud that final word; and after every onset of the will, without a moral handhold, we feel tormented by the equal possibility of falling back again to suffering, as of being led to lasting victory. Nay, this falling-back must almost seem to us more “necessary” than the morally ungrounded triumph, which therefore—not being a necessary consummation, but a mere arbitrary gift of grace—has not the power to lift us up and yield to us that “ethical” satisfaction which we demand as outcome of the yearning of the heart...

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Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III Liebestod (1859, prem. 1865)

Language: German

Text: Richard Wagner

This entire passage is sung by Isolde.

[Stage direction: Isolde, aware of nothing round about her, fixes her gaze with mounting ecstasy upon Tristan’s body.]

Mild und leise  
wie er lächelt,  
wie das Auge  
hold er öffnet ---  
seht ihr's Freunde?  
Seht ihr's nicht?

Immer lichter  
wie er leuchtet,  
stern-umstrahlet  
hoch sich hebt?  
Seht ihr's nicht?

Wie das Herz ihm  
mutig schwillt,  
voll und hehr  
im Busen ihm quillt?  
Wie den Lippen,  
wonnig mild,  
süßer Atem  
sanft entweht ---  
Freunde! Seht!

How gently and quietly  
he smiles,  
how fondly  
he opens his eyes!  
Do you see, friends?  
Do you not see?

How he shines  
ever brighter,  
soaring on high,  
stars sparkling around him?  
Do you not see?

How his heart  
proudly swells  
and, brave and full,  
pulses in his breast?  
How softly and gently  
from his lips  
sweet breath  
flutters –

Fühlt und seht ihr's nicht?

Hör ich nur  
diese Weise,  
die so wunder-  
voll und leise,  
Wonne klagend,  
alles sagend,  
mild versöhnend  
aus ihm tönend,  
in mich dringet,  
auf sich schwinget,  
hold erhallend  
um mich klinget?

Heller schallend,  
mich umwallend,  
sind es Wellen  
sanfter Lüfte?  
Sind es Wogen  
wonniger Düfte?  
Wie sie schwellen,  
mich umrauschen,  
soll ich atmen,  
soll ich lauschen?  
Soll ich schlürfen,  
untertauchen?  
Süß in Düften  
mich verhauchen?  
In dem wogenden Schwall,  
in dem tönenden Schall,  
in des Welt-Atems  
wehendem All ---  
ertrinken,  
versinken ---  
unbewußt ---  
höchste Lust!

see, friends!  
Do you not feel and see it?

Do I alone  
hear this melody  
which, so wondrous  
and tender  
in its blissful lament,  
all-revealing,  
gently pardoning,  
sounding from him,  
pierces me through,  
rises above,  
blessedly echoing  
and ringing round me?

Resounding yet more clearly,  
wafting about me,  
are they waves  
of refreshing breezes?  
Are they clouds  
of heavenly fragrance?  
As they swell  
and roar round me,  
shall I breathe them,  
shall I listen to them?  
Shall I sip them,  
plunge beneath them,  
Expire  
in sweet perfume?  
In the surging swell,  
in the ringing sound,  
in the vast wave  
of the world's breath –  
to drown,  
to sink  
unconscious –  
supreme bliss!

[Stage direction: Isolde sinks gently, as if transfigured, in Brangaene's arms, on to Tristan's body. Those standing around are awed and deeply moved. Mark blesses the bodies. –The curtain falls slowly.]

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Richard Wagner, *Jewishness in Music* (1860)

...that involuntary feeling of ours which utters itself as an instinctive repugnance against the Jew's prime essence...

The Jew — who, as everyone knows, has a God all to himself — in ordinary life strikes us primarily by his outward appearance, which, no matter to what European nationality we belong, has something disagreeably foreign to that nationality: instinctively we wish to have nothing in common with a man who looks like that... Passing over the moral side, in the effect of this in itself unpleasant freak of Nature, and coming to its bearings upon Art, we here will merely observe that to us this exterior can never be thinkable as a subject for the art of representation... We can conceive no representation of an antique or modern stage-character by a Jew, be it as hero or lover, without feeling instinctively the incongruity of such a notion. This is of great weight: a man whose appearance we must hold unfitted for artistic treatment — not merely in this or that personality, but according to his kind in general — neither can we hold him capable of any sort of artistic utterance of his [inner] essence...

The true poet, no matter in what branch of art, still gains his stimulus from nothing but a faithful, loving contemplation of instinctive Life, of that life which only greets his sight amid the Folk... The Jew has never had an Art of his own, hence never a Life of art-enabling import: an import, a universally applicable, a human import, not even to-day does it offer to the searcher, but merely a peculiar method of expression...

...the Jew, already characterized by us in this regard, has no true passion, and least of all a passion that might thrust him on to art-creation. But where this passion is not forthcoming, there neither is any calm: true, noble Calm is nothing else than Passion mollified through Resignation. Where the calm has not been ushered in by passion, we perceive naught but sluggishness: the opposite of sluggishness, however, is nothing but that prickling unrest which we observe in Jewish music-works from one end to the other, saving where it makes place for that soulless, feelingless inertia. What issues from the Jews' attempts at making Art, must necessarily therefore bear the attributes of coldness and indifference, even to triviality and absurdity; and in the history of Modern Music we can but class the Judaic period as that of final unproductivity, of stability gone to ruin.

Additional notes:

There are several Jewish caricatures in Wagner's operas, and they are all unlikable figures, unattractive, and possessing a single-minded obsession with money or gold: Mime in *Siegfried* (1852-71), a dwarf obsessed with mining for gold; Klingsor in *Parsifal* (1882), a magician who schemes to steal the Holy Grail for himself but who is ultimately stopped by Parsifal's Christian faith; and Sixtus Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1845-68), a Jewish singer who is unable to sing the correct words or sing beautifully in a singing contest and loses to a handsome German singer.

Other anti-Semitic writings (the world in which Wagner's thoughts were born and were not alone):

- Martin Luther "On the Jews and their Lies" (1543, 65,000-word essay, available at: [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/Luther\\_on\\_Jews.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/Luther_on_Jews.html)) – calls for the destruction of synagogues, the burning of Jewish prayer books, and forced labor positions for young Jewish men
- 19<sup>th</sup>-century pamphlets that disparage all members of the Jewish faith or other groups considered to be not "real" Europeans: Antoine de Gobineau, *An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* (1853-55; Gobineau and Wagner were friends, and Wagner admired this work); Wilhelm Marr, *The Way to Victory of Germanism over Judaism* (1879); and Heinrich von Treitschke, *A Word About Our Jews* (1881)
- Musicians wrote texts that championed the "advanced" culture of Europe over the barbarism, coarseness, and ugliness of non-European music and using these differences in musical taste as proof of the inferiority of an entire group of people, as in Johann Nikolaus Forkel's *A General History of Music* (two volumes, 1788 and 1801).