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TITLE INFORMATION

ON THE FUTURE OF WAGNERISM

ART, INTOXICATION, ADDICTION, CODEPENDENCE AND RECOVERY

Lawrence D. Mass

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BOOK REVIEW

A repentant former acolyte of the composer Richard Wagner takes aim at his cult of adulation in this sprawling essay collection.

In his *Confessions of a Jewish Wagnerite* (2019), the author plumbed the contradictions of being a gay, Jewish man who adored and then repudiated the operas of Richard Wagner, the 19th-century maestro whose strident antisemitism and musical settings of Germanic mythology made him Hitler's favorite composer. Here Mass collects more essays and interviews not so much on Wagner as on "Wagnerism," the school of criticism and fandom that considers his music an artistic pinnacle. Challenging latter-day Wagnerites, especially Jewish Wagnerites, like the critics Joseph Horowitz and Alex Ross, the author attacks the "great art, bad man" thesis that the music can be appreciated separately from the man's vile beliefs. Instead, he argues, Wagnerites should stop revering the music and see it as vulgar, sentimental kitsch irredeemably corrupted by antisemitic caricatures and themes. Mass, a retired psychiatrist who specialized in addiction, approaches Wagnerism as a kind of drug addiction—marked by intoxication, codependency, denial, and rationalization—which perhaps warrants its own 12-step program. ("If we were to incorporate the word 'Wagner' in place of 'alcohol' for 'Wagnerism Anonymous' or 'Wagnerites Anonymous,' the first step would read as follows: We admitted we were powerless over Wagner, that our lives had become unmanageable.") Some of the dozens of essays visit other topics, including alleged antisemitic motifs in the operas *Nixon in China* and *The Death of Klinghoffer*; gay sensibility in opera; homophobia in the psychiatric establishment; Mass' fraught relationships with his siblings; and the perniciousness of Donald Trump. ("Stripped of its high art trappings, what Wagner does to the Jews in *Parsifal* is what Trump and QAnon have done to Hillary Clinton and the Democrats, without the 'compassion' but with comparable malevolence.")

Mass' writings offer a stinging rebuke of Wagner worship, rooted in a deep, erudite knowledge of Wagner's works and opera in general. His vigorous pronouncements—"Wagner was...an egomaniacal, contemptuous exploiter with pathologically narcissistic levels of self-importance and entitlement"—will resonate with scholars of the composer as well as non-Wagnerites who have had to sit through one of the operas. Unfortunately, the book is a meandering, ill-edited grab bag of pieces that rehash points over and over when they don't veer off on obscure tangents. Mass' arguments are not always incisive or consistent: He doesn't really explain why it's "psychologically and morally troubled" for Wagnerites to like the music but reject the ideology—Wagner's "Here Comes the Bride" tune is played ubiquitously at weddings without causing much moral derangement—and while he disavows any intent to "censor" Wagner's music, he also supports Israel's informal ban on the operas along with protests elsewhere that aim to cancel productions. Worse, Mass' Freudian bent focuses his writing on his own psychological complexes—"I no longer want to drink, do drugs, act out sexually or with food, or have a love-hate relationship with Wagner"—and belabors even the most trivial issue with wordy, convoluted prose that's weighed down by navel-gazing rumination. (When a friend casually opines that mezzo-soprano Christa Ludwig's voice is "irritating," Mass muses, "was this a more psychological reaction—to me as a man or gay man and/or otherwise veering too close or skirmishing for hegemony in our relationship, with its ultimate prize of credibility about Wagner? Alternatively and psychoanalytically speaking, to what extent was this disharmony transference?") Readers may find the book all too Wagnerian—massive, long-winded, and self-indulgent.

A mishmash of sometimes tiresome, sometimes insightful *pensées* on Wagner, Jewishness, gayness, and more.

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