

MUSEUM OF INTOLERANCE:

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT THE WIESENTHALCENTER: A HOLOCAUST REMINDER

Not long ago, acclaimed novelist Tova Reich published a novel, *My Holocaust*, which satirizes the exploitation and trivializing of the Holocaust by the very institutions created to honor and memorialize it. The NY Times excoriated Reich for poor taste and overkill in lampooning a taboo subject. What happened at the Museum of Tolerance exactly one year ago proves the Times wrong and makes Reich's satire look tame.

Thursday evening, April 15 (Yom HaShoah—Holocaust Remembrance Day), 2010, James Conlon, Music Director of the Los Angeles Opera Company, appeared at the Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance in connection with a County-wide "festival" promoting the Opera Company's production of Wagner's Ring Cycle. As the event was billed, Conlon was to speak on behalf of the music of Richard Wagner. Instead, the largely Jewish audience was treated to a blatantly revisionist defense of the man who inspired Hitler and incited Germany to the annihilation of the Jewish People.

When one outraged member of the audience stood up to challenge Conlon on the stream of preposterous spins, distortions and misrepresentations issuing from the podium, he was threatened and physically assaulted by none other than Zev Yaroslavsky, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors of Los Angeles County, and set upon by a security guard who attempted to physically eject the man and have him arrested.

This shocking spectacle was eye-witnessed by many people in the audience,

including myself. I was that lone protester. The next day an article appeared in the LATimes, branding me a “heckler”, omitting the assaults on my person, and falsely suggesting that I was forcibly removed (that last misrepresentation, for what it's worth, was subsequently corrected in the Times on-line version). That article was inaccurate as to those and other details. The following is my account of what happened. It is accurate and truthful to the best of my recollection.

Conlon's appearance at the MOT was listed as part of the already notorious “Ring Festival LA,” and the public was invited free of charge. I attended because I wanted to see whether the Festival directors were honoring their promise that the celebration was going to be “about the music, and not about the man,” and Yaroslavsky's promise that the Festival would be “balanced”. (It must be noted here that Yaroslavsky bears full responsibility for getting LA County on board with the Festival, using every political trick in the book to bulldoze the necessary resolutions over the vehement objections of Supervisor Mike Antonovich. For a video and transcript of appearances--including mine--before the Board of Supervisors on this issue, go to http://bosvideoap.co.la.ca.us/mgasp/LACounty/VideoPlayer_NS.asp?VideoID=1440&ClipID=12988

) I wanted to see how Conlon was going to address a subject that had already received revisionist treatment by a PR campaign that, because of its expert use of the “Big Lie” technique and its near total co-optation of the news media, was worthy of Goebbels himself -- the man who, as Hitler's Propaganda Minister, developed and applied to perfection the principle that a lie, if audacious enough and repeated often enough, will eventually be believed. I wanted to see how the Wiesenthal Center—which solicits millions of dollars every year for standing against Nazism, historical revisionism, and anti-Semitism—would justify hosting an event that was calculated to make a mockery of everything that the Wiesenthal Center says it stands for. This at a time when Nazi-racism and the “New Anti-Semitism” is everywhere on the rise!

Entering by a door in the front of the hall at the side of the stage, I found the last remaining seat in the back row, just in time to hear the final encomium of Museum Director Liebe Geft as she introduced the Maestro to a full house of two or three hundred people.

Mr. Conlon has acquired a name for himself in the larger Jewish Community for his laudable program of “Recovered Voices,” in which he has resuscitated the music of various composers whose compositions, and often whose lives—were suppressed by the Nazis. So after a few gracious remarks about conductors not being used to show their front to the audience and Wagner being a sensitive subject, Conlon, who is not Jewish, emphasized that just as his interest in the “Recovered Voices” is genuine, based solely on the quality of the compositions, and not on any ulterior motive, so is his interest in Wagner.

Having settled us on the question of his sincerity, Conlon then did exactly what the Wagner Festival has been doing from the start: under the pretence of justifying the performance of Wagner’s music *in spite of his character*, Conlon actually went out of his way to justify

Wagner the man

. How did he manage that? Here are the main points argued by Conlon, followed by my comments:

1.

CONLON: Music is not ideological. Music is music. Therefore it is absurd to say that Wagner’s music is anti-Semitic.

COMMENT: What a specious argument! Even if Conlon were right about music

not being ideological, Wagner's operas are not just "music". They are music plus words, scenery, characters, costume, voice direction and stage direction—and all of these are capable of conveying messages, whether express or implied. Wagner's operas—and certainly the "Ring Cycle"—are clear expressions of a nationalistic, chauvinist world view which was intolerant of the presence of Jews and other "inferior races." As for the statement that music is not ideological, Conlon subsequently contradicted himself, naming Chopin, Tchaikowsky and Rimsky-Korsakov as composers who, besides Wagner, composed music of intense nationalistic fervor—in other words, pure music with ideological content.

1.

CONLON: Wagner died years before Hitler was born or the Nazi Party existed. Therefore he could not have been responsible for the Nazis' rise to power. Hitler fell in love with Wagner's music as a teenager and "hijacked" it for his own ends.

COMMENT: This is a lame old canard founded on the false, anti-historical, amoral and ignorant premise that people are not accountable for what they say and do, that their sayings and doings have no consequences beyond their death, that artistic genius outweighs even crimes against humanity, and that history is nothing but a bunch of unrelated names and dates. Hitler was born six years after Wagner's death, and he joined the Nazi party 30 years later. If Hitler "hijacked" Wagner, it was because they were both travelling in the same direction. In fact, Wagner passed the torch to Hitler and pointed him on the way.

1.

CONLON: Wagner would not have been sympathetic to the Nazis, because from his youth he was influenced by Bakunin and other anarchists and social-revolutionaries. In other words, he was a “leftist”, a free spirit and anti-authoritarian. Moreover, as a sensitive artist and poet he would have been horrified by violence and bloodshed.

COMMENT: Conlon conveniently left out that Wagner shifted to the right after his early political activities got him into serious trouble with the authorities. That is undisputed historical fact. Mussolini, too, started out as a Socialist, but that did not prevent him from turning coat and joining the Fascists. Regarding Wagner’s attitude toward bloodshed, “sensitive” sociopaths are often squeamishly happy to leave the dirty work to others. Hitler was fully aware that the Germans had a “sentimental” streak: that is why most of the death camps were built outside Germany proper! Wagner’s proposed solution for the “Jewish problem” was “the redemption of Ahasuerus”—an unmistakable allusion to Haman’s planned annihilation of the Jews described in the Book of Esther!

1.

CONLON: Wagner’s anti-Semitism arose from his early difficulties in Paris, which he blamed on Jewish machinations.

COMMENT: So what? What difference does it make what motivated Wagner to become a Jew-hater? In the Biblical Book of Esther, Haman plotted to annihilate the Jewish People because once, when he crossed paths with Mordechai the Jew, Mordechai did not bow down to him! Wagner was a worthy emulator of Haman. Anyway, as Conlon himself noted, Wagner owed his first major successes to the Jewish composer Meyerbeer, who went out of his way to boost Wagner's Paris career. So in that respect, Wagner was even worse than Haman!

1.

CONLON: There is nothing anti-Semitic about Wagner's operas, and the notion that certain characters in his operas are caricatures of Jews is a complete "misunderstanding."

COMMENT: This is blatant intellectual dishonesty: it flies in the face of common knowledge and the accumulated work of serious scholars and musicologists, whom Conlon was not ashamed to ignore. It is obvious that the abstract concepts represented by the Dwarf King, Alberich (physical repulsiveness, crass materialism, unbridled capitalism, bestial lust, low craftiness, and vengefulness) were Jewish stereotypes in the imaginative repertory of German anti-Semitism.

Wagnerites often parry this observation by pointing to Cosima Wagner's infamous diary notation that her husband conceived Alberich as a "Mongol"—not a Jew! Well, what kind of a defense is that? (Read what Wagner thought of the "Black-and Yellow-Skinned races" in the passage excerpted from his essay, "Hero-dom & Christendom," at the end of this article!)

1.

CONLON: Yes, Wagner had some glaring character defects, but he was human, after all. Other great composers and artists also had character defects, such as Mozart, Bach, Beethoven ("not one of his relationships was successful!"), and Michelangelo (?!). "Chopin was an anti-Semite, and we don't shun *his* music."

COMMENT: Here Conlon, who must know something about the lives of the great composers, is at his most disingenuous. He is throwing names at his audience, and hoping they will sit there quietly like sheep and lap it up—and they did. The very idea of comparing Wagner's character—acknowledged by virtually everyone to be the most despicable of any notable composer who ever lived—with *Bach* (devoted husband and father, family man, sober, peaceful, genuinely pious, indefatigably industrious, honest, loyal, and universally respected and admired)!

Or with Beethoven (whose whole life was blessed with the devotion of countless friends and admirers)! Or Mozart (what were his character defects? An empty purse? That he used bawdy word-play in his private correspondence?), or Michelangelo (how did his name even come up? And what “character defect” was Conlon alluding to: his alleged homosexuality?), or Chopin—admittedly an eccentric and a bigot, but a retiring introvert who shunned controversy and disharmony—when did he ever incite against the Jewish People?

1.

CONLON: Yes, Wagner did write political pamphlets against the Jews, but his struggle was cultural, not racial. He felt that the spirit of German art and culture was unduly affected by foreign influences. This consciousness of nationhood was typical of all European countries of that time. Chopin, Tchaikowsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, were all influenced by the spirit of nationalism and tried to express it in their music. Wagner was only doing the same.

COMMENT: This is outright historical revisionism. Wagner expressly attributed the objectionable cultural attributes of the Jews to their “nature”—their racial constitution. His solution to this “cultural contamination” was “the redemption of Ahashuerus”—the ethnic cleansing of the German-speaking peoples—to make

Germanity *Judenrein*. Wagner deliberately used his fame and celebrity to incite the Germans—who were by nature too bourgeois to be more than *theoretically*

anti-Semitic--to translate theory into practice. As an aside point, notice Conlon's glaring self-contradiction with his earlier assertion that "music is not ideological" (see Point 1, above).

1.

CONLON: "And of course Nietzsche needed to separate from Wagner."

COMMENT: By "needed to," Conlon was implying that Nietzsche's break with Wagner had more to do with Nietzsche's personal need to emerge from under Wagner's shadow than with Nietzsche's emerging realization that Wagner and his music stood for everything that was intellectually and morally repugnant to Nietzsche—including Wagner's anti-Semitism, as Nietzsche expressly writes! What a chutzpah for a minor shiner like James Conlon to make such an incredibly patronizing statement about Nietzsche--one of the most original scholars, thinkers and writers produced by the German nation!

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Conlon's defense of Wagner, as outlined above, amounts to a wholesale whitewash of Wagner and a trivialization of his agenda—in other words, to an ill-considered attempt to foist revisionist propaganda on an unsuspecting and unsophisticated audience. Above all, his arguments deliberately ignore the documents, testimonies, and conclusions accumulated over decades of careful, serious scholarship. What “Ring Festival LA” and its promoters and collaborators have done by reopening “the Wagner question” is essentially no different from what Achmadinejad did in convening a conference on “whether the Holocaust actually happened!”

And lest you think that the Wiesenthal Center was blindsided by Mr. Conlon's speech, Ms Geft, in defending Conlon's claim that Hitler “hijacked” an innocent Wagner, was pleased to reach into her intellectual purse and contribute her own two cents, adding , “. . . just as the swastika, which was originally a harmless symbol found in the Hindu religion, was hijacked by the Nazis.” So, for Ms Geft, at least, when it comes to the Holocaust, Wagner was as innocent as an ancient Hindu swastika! In this connection, Ms Geft also condescended to note (and what a breathtaking gaffe it was!), “We understand that it is hard for the Survivors to accept this.”

Well, Ms Geft, they do not accept this. We do not accept this. Mr. Conlon's message, and yours, was insulting not only to the Survivors, but to all the victims of the Nazi horrors, to every victim of persecution and discrimination, to every minority or “ethnic” resident of our State, to every serious musician who honors the artistic legacy of Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and others (including Michelangelo!), to the historical record, to human decency—and certainly to me, who remember well my father's life-long and never resolved grief over the murders of his mother and father, uncles, aunts, cousins and friends. *How dare you!*

Yes, I was outraged. I was outraged not only by the fatuous sophistries coming from the podium, but by the utter passivity of a supposedly educated and cultured audience that was so overawed by the presence of a media celebrity (Conlon) and

a representative of the County Government (Yaroslavsky), that it did not have the sense or the guts to realize it was being insulted and provoked in its own house by someone who had been invited as a friend. Yes, because it is an outrage and an insult and a provocation when someone comes into the Wiesenthal center and attempts to persuade an audience of Jews that they were wrong to hold Wagner responsible for the horrendous crimes that he inspired and incited and hoped for. This was tantamount to Nazi propaganda, because the innocence of Wagner would be the innocence of every hate-filled fanatic who till this very day calls for the annihilation of the Jews. "Character defects" indeed!

Thus, when Conlon dared compare Wagner's "character defects" to Bach et al., I stood up and shouted, "This is an outrage." And a minute later, when Conlon observed that "Chopin was also an anti-Semite, and yet nobody shuns his music," I stood up again and shouted, "How can you compare Wagner to Chopin? This is so outrageous, I can hardly contain myself!" At that point, Ms. Geft pleaded with me to sit down and wait until the question and answer period at the end. Since she promised me that I would have an opportunity to speak, I complied.

Well she did hand me the microphone, and after introducing myself I tried to explain that I was not objecting to the performance of Wagner's operas, but to the Festival's publicity campaign which, I said, was worthy of Goebbels himself (see my article "Why we Oppose Ring Festival LA," posted this site on my Literary Blog), and had provided an inviting context for the Neo-Nazi rallies under way or being planned in our City and County at that very moment.



I said my objections were directed at the cynicism of those who had conceived and orchestrated such a campaign—“including that person with the bowtie who styles himself “the Leader”—*der Fuehrer*--of the Festival, and who invited us all to “join the party.” (Yes: this was in the LA Times: Barry Sanders, the “Leader” of the Festival, actually invited the people of Los Angeles County to “join the party!”)

Hardly were the words out of my mouth when pandemonium broke loose. I was shouted down by the people on the stage, and Supervisor Yaroslavsky got up from his seat in the audience, and tried to wrest the microphone from my hand. When I resisted, he grabbed my arm, and tried to pull me into the aisle, shouting in my face, “Give me the microphone or I’ll personally eject you physically from the hall.” I answered, “Oh, you mean like the Nazis used to do when they didn’t agree with you?” He then let go, saying “I’m calling security,” and left the hall. Conlon then stated that he was only there as a conductor and was not responsible for the publicity. But when I challenged Conlon to dissociate himself from the Festival, he refused to do so. I tried to point out that recently in Germany, the citizens of Dresden had come out by the thousands to prevent a neo-Nazi conference from entering the city, while Los Angeles was catering to the very same neo-Nazis with their County-wide Ring Festival. I was shouted down. I tried to point out that in Greifswald, Germany, the students of a University named after a known anti-Semite were agitating to get its name changed, while our own UCLA and USC were participating in a Festival whose goal was to transform Wagner into a cultural hero. I was shouted down. Seeing that I would not be allowed to speak coherently, I shouted back, “You are dancing on the graves of my grandparents! You are dancing on the graves of the ancestors of the Jewish People!”

At this point, Yaroslavsky returned with a security guard. Ms Geft walked up to me and took the microphone out of my hand. The guard then attempted to put me in an arm lock, which to my amazement he was unable to do. He then said, I’m calling the police, took out his cell phone and either really did call the police or pretended to (the police never arrived). I then sat down in my seat, intending to hear as much as I could of the ensuing questions and answers. However, the guard sat down next to me, unnecessarily gripped my arm and for the next several minutes prevented me from following the proceedings by constantly repeating into my ear, “You’re going to jail. I’m having you arrested.” I asked him quietly if he

was Jewish. “I’m a security guard. You’re going to jail.” After a few more minutes of harassment by the guard and inconsequential questions and answers between the audience and Conlon, I had enough, told the guard I was leaving, got up, and walked down the aisle, the guard scrambling to follow me. As I passed the stage on the way out, I turned to Conlon and shouted, “This is historical revisionism,” and exited the hall.

The guard grabbed my arm again as I headed toward the garage. “Why are you holding on to my arm?” “I’m escorting you out.” “Am I resisting?” He finally let go. At some point we were joined by an usherette. As I got into my car, the guard told me, “If you ever come back to the Wiesenthal Center, you’ll be arrested.”

Six months went by before I was able to write coherently about what happened, although I did make notes while my memory was fresh. I had pain in my arm for three weeks, and bruises where Yaroslavsky and the guard had gripped me (respectively the lower and upper right arm – see photos).





Richard Wagner's *Religion and Art*:
Translated by
William Ashton Ellis)

Religion and Art

Richard Wagner's Prose Works

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“The first point will be, to examine the special attributes of those noblest races, through whose enfeeblement they lost themselves among ignoble races. The more definitely has recent science inclined us to accept the natural descent of man's lower races from the animal species most resembling them, the harder is it to assent to a derivation of the so-called white race from those black and yellow: as to the explanation of the white tint itself our physiologists are still at variance. Whilst yellow races have viewed themselves as sprung from monkeys, the white traced back their origin to gods, and deemed themselves marked out for rulership. It has been made quite clear that we should have no History of Man at all, had there been no movements, creations and achievements of the white men; and we

may fitly take world-history as the consequence of these white men mixing with the black and yellow, and bringing them in so far into history as that mixture altered them and made them less unlike the white. Incomparably fewer in individual numbers than the lower races, the ruin of the white races may be referred to their having been obliged to mix with them; whereby, as remarked already, they suffered more from the loss of their purity than the others could gain by the ennobling of their blood.”

Thank you, James Conlon!

Thank you, LAOpera Company!

Thank you, Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky!

Thank you, Wiesenthal Center!

Thank you, Museum of Tolerance!

And thank you, Liebe Geft!

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