

Hermann Levi, the Jewish Wagnerian

by Stephan Mösch

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(excerpts from the manuscript, the spoken word prevails)
as part of the matinee for the exhibition "HERMANN LEVI LAB"
by Renata Stih & Frieder Schnock

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me start by saying that it means a lot to me to be speaking about Hermann Levi here in Giessen, where he was born and grew up and where his father worked for almost four decades, his father, who was always a key contact for him. I will try to put together a few key aspects for this occasion here and now to give you an understanding of Hermann Levi. The focus corresponds to the theme of our matinee today: "Hermann Levi, the Jewish Wagnerian". It will therefore be about Levi's relationship to Wagner, his music and Bayreuth. This is only one part of Levi's life and his artistic career, albeit a significant one.

As far as the sources are concerned, Levi's letters have only been published in excerpts for a long time. Wieland Wagner had a few letters from Levi addressed to his father printed in a Bayreuth Festival program at the end of the 1950s. This was the time when Bayreuth was trying to attract another Jewish conductor, not so much for musical reasons but, as Wieland wrote to his brother Wolfgang, as a "propagandistic, moral, political, artistic" initiative. The artistic aspect came last. This man was Otto Klemperer. It was similar with Levi in that he too - from Wahnfried's point of view - was essentially concerned with other things than the conducting itself. But I don't want to get ahead of myself. Despite his influence and his prominence, research has devoted less attention to Levi than to his fellow generation member Hans von Bülow, for example. A biography of Levi was not published until 1995, the book by Frithjof Haas. By contrast, the first biography of Hans von Bülow appeared as early as 1921! Incidentally, with the help of Wahnfried and Cosima Wagner. Levi's letters to Brahms and Clara Schumann and those to Paul Heyse, who later won the Nobel Prize for Literature, are available in more recent editions. It is thanks to Dieter Steil that Levi's correspondence with Cosima Wagner and other letters are easily accessible today.

Let's start with a comeback. Hermann Levi returned to the Bayreuth Festival in 2017. Not in the orchestra pit, but on stage, in the spotlight, where he never wanted to be and was never allowed to be. Jewish director Barrie Kosky gave the Jewish conductor this comeback in 2017 - at a premiere of "Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg" of all things. Even the staged overture was full of virtuoso fades. The director did not simply relocate the piece to Haus Wahnfried in order to turn the life of the "Master" into a lively comedy. He showed Richard Wagner as Sachs, as Stolzing and as David. It was less about Wagner's biography than about his artistic aspirations and hypertrophic cult of the artist. Only against this background could Hermann Levi plausibly appear as Beckmesser. Wagner's anti-Semitism was not simply portrayed as a private obsession, but with all its consequences for the interplay between art and religion. This was the enormous claim of this fast-paced and cleverly entertaining evening. Ultimately, Barrie Kosky was not interpreting a work, but rather a keenly perceptive process of illumination, a play with contexts and subtexts. Without Johannes Martin Kränzle, who embodied this Beckmesser alias Hermann Levi, it would have been unthinkable: a quasi multi-perspective figure, unheard of, unforgettable.

I don't need to say much here about the biography of the historical Hermann Levi. Born in 1839, he did not even reach retirement age by today's standards. He was brought up in an extremely liberal spirit. His father reflected very carefully on the role of Judaism in Germany. He repeatedly tried to overcome mental boundaries. As the philosopher Theodor Lessing later wrote, it was about the delicate task of European rabbis "to teach Judaism as a confession among other German confessions". Hermann Levi studied in Leipzig at Germany's leading conservatory at the time. He spent his years as an apprentice conductor in Saarbrücken, Rotterdam and Mannheim before being appointed to the court theater in

Karlsruhe in 1864 by Eduard Devrient, who also played a role in Wagner's life. He was 24 years old when he was appointed to Karlsruhe. He stayed there for eight years and turned the city into a first-class music center. He repeatedly invited his friend Johannes Brahms and Clara Schumann to perform there. In general, Levi initially belonged to the circle around Brahms. When Levi said goodbye to Karlsruhe in 1872, Brahms heard his "Triumphlied" for the first time. Clara Schumann played her husband's piano concerto and Julius Stockhausen, the leading lied baritone of the time, sang Schubert. Brahms and Levi took turns conducting the "German Requiem". At the annual performances of the "St. Matthew Passion", Brahms occasionally played the organ, while Pauline Viardot-Garcia took on the alto part. We would have loved to have been there.

Anna Ettlinger, a contemporary friend of Levi's (born in 1841), who often met him during these years as a musician and private person, describes him as a highly educated, noble, modest, even selfless, shrewd, quick-witted and impulsive person - a characterization that is confirmed by his letters and many biographical details." He had always read everything and yet claimed that he never had enough time to read," notes Ettlinger. Levi worked around the clock. And: "He never understood how to manage his energy." Levi is unlikely to have had much of a private life. As a young man, he had been engaged. In old age - if you want to talk about old age for someone who only lived to be 60 - he married the widow of his friend, the art historian Konrad Fiedler.

However, the "Brahms phase" in Levi's life also included the fact that his friend advised him not to continue composing. This must have affected Levi deeply. Between 1868 and 1870, he says he burned the manuscripts of his compositions. Nevertheless, the conductor and musicologist Martin Wettges has been able to find some manuscripts in recent years, some in original manuscripts and some in copies. These include the orchestral parts of a piano concerto, believed to be lost, whose solo part (printed at the time) Levi himself took on at the premiere in Mannheim in 1860, as well as Sechs Lieder op. 2, which appeared in November 1861. When Levi turned more and more personally to Wagner in the mid-1870s and took on a key role in the preparations for the first Bayreuth Festival, it was Brahms who broke off the friendship. As his letters testify, Levi was also deeply affected by this. Paul Heyse also distanced himself. For all his appreciation of Wagner's "unusual gifts", Heyse felt "deep moral antipathy" towards his human nature. In his circle of friends, Levi tried to argue a separation between Wagner and his partisans, in which there is undoubtedly a moment of autosuggestion that will still concern us.

The last and longest station in Levi's professional life was the Court Opera in Munich. Despite the diversity of his repertoire and his commitment to Mozart, he remained a man of what a century later was called "New Music". Not only his commitment to Wagner, but also to Brahms was fiercely opposed. When he conducted Brahms' First Symphony in Munich (his successor in Karlsruhe, Otto Dessoff, had conducted the premiere in 1876), some members of the orchestra threatened to strike. Although he identified strongly with German culture and despite undeniable successes, he was met with anti-Semitism as music director in Munich. A letter from 1884, in which he explains to his father and brother why he did not want to apply for the title of General Music Director, even though he had long held the office de facto, illustrates just how delicate the situation was. The reason, writes Levi, is "that I am a Jew and as such have the obligation in today's times to hold back more than I would have to do in more favorable times. I feel so comfortable in my present position that I am afraid of any change. And that this change would cause me an abundance of unpleasantness, I have a feeling that cannot be banished."

Levi's letters are not only honest and often brilliantly worded, they also shed light on how the Jewish conductor was constantly caught between the poles of origin and belonging - and was torn apart by the conflicts associated with this. After Levi retired prematurely from professional life for health reasons in 1896, he was more concerned than ever with what he must have perceived as timeless values of German culture: Goethe and Mozart. His translations of the three Da Ponte operas are the best that exist in the German language because they combine singability, care for the original and linguistic conciseness. That's what I say today and I'm not alone in this judgment. Back then, the verdict was different. Oskar Merz, who was a music critic in Munich and assistant in Bayreuth, denied Levi an appropriate sense of language and music, including the ability to competently translate Mozart's "Don Giovanni" into German. However, as the translation was undoubtedly successful, Merz claimed that it

had been produced "with the support of experts", by which he meant Paul Heyse. It is true that Heyse, a Romanist with a doctorate, occasionally answered Levi's detailed questions. No more and no less. We see that even outside of Bayreuth, Levi's art, his skills and his Jewishness were directly associated with one another. This was the form of discrimination that was part of the reality of his life.

Another quote from Levi's time in Munich and a completely different aspect: a letter from 1899 shows what Levi understood by tolerance in practice. It was about the music of the young Richard Strauss, whom Levi had massively supported despite intrigues and anti-Semitic sentiments: "I am unable to grasp Strauss's combinations with my inner ear, neither rhythmically nor tonally. I feel like Zeltern [sic] with Beethoven and Weber, except that I don't criticize and scold, but rather regret my own inability. It is possible that music (...) is still in the process of development, and it would be presumptuous to prescribe where the limit of its expressive capacity lies; it is also possible that Strauss has once again pushed this limit forward significantly."

This finally brings me to the subject of Levi and Bayreuth, about which I can only hint at a few key aspects today. The problem with Wagner is always that he directly relates art and politics, society and art to each other. "Thus the poet's art has become politics: No one can write poetry without politicizing," Wagner already wrote in "Opera and Drama". Political scientist Udo Bermbach says that Wagner "brought politics and aesthetics into an indissoluble and constitutive connection and thus reacted to a central problem of modernity: the disintegration of a normative order that overarched the individual areas of life and the associated particularization of bourgeois life". Wagner was concerned with "aesthetically conveying the possibility of a holistic conception of life". Levi would probably even have agreed with this concern. The problem was that in this model, which was also a model for the future, Wagner worked with exclusion and inclusion, with clear enemy stereotypes, racial criteria and a monomaniacal belief in the German as a superior cultural nation. And that his widow Cosima was even more radical in all of this.

There is no question that, in relation to Levi, partial aspects of Wagner's idealism of regeneration and those of his not constant but increasingly racially fermented hatred of Jews interpenetrate. The complex and contradictory web of relationships that feeds action and reaction includes a hypostatization of German culture as well as the idea of a unity of all living things (enlivened by Schopenhauer and Brahmanic ideas). At the same time, Wahnfried's persistent efforts to baptize Levi can be understood in the sense of Paul de Lagarde: Spirit as overcoming race - on the condition that Jews cease to be Jews by converting. From this perspective, Wagner practiced "transformational anti-Semitism", which amounted to a negation of the Jewish component through baptism. The more this model of appropriation proved to be unrealistic, the more persistently Wagner emphasized the differences. What was initially intended to be socio-cultural, social and aesthetic could then quickly tip over into racism. In this sense, Wagner maintained that the "alien race can never be completely absorbed into us".

However, it would be wrong to imagine the relationship with Levi as superficially aggressive. Wagner's letters to the conductor are certainly characterized by a jovial tone and, as always when the "master" wanted something, they are even charming. This should not obscure the fact that Levi's Jewishness was perceived as a permanent provocation. Wagner tolerated Levi not only because he was effectively useful to him. He also tolerated him because he saw himself and his work ("Parsifal" and the writings) as an opportunity for Jews: as an offer to advance towards what he called "Know thyself". The treatment that resulted from this was exclusion as a prerequisite for integration.

It is significant that Levi's "Parsifal" conducting and his Judaism were directly linked according to Cosima Wagner after Levi's death: "What caused serious conflicts was what was given to his tribe as a curse: lack of faith, even where he had conviction, lack of devotion even where he worshipped." Terms such as "devotion" and "faith" were part of the substance of "Parsifal" for Wagner's widow. It is unlikely that a conductor who lacked both would achieve a satisfactory interpretation of the work according to Bayreuth thought patterns. The counter-example given by Cosima also combines personal and artistic aspects: "I find it most characteristic of him that the prelude to Act III 'Parsifal' was his greatest achievement. This wandering and searching (admittedly of a different kind in Parsifal) was his fate, and death was his Grail territory, his ultimate goal."

In the "Parsifal" period, the idea of foreign infiltration is closely linked to the debate about liberalism. Because the economic prosperity of the founding years could not be prolonged in the united German Reich (a favorite idea of the liberals), an old form of anti-Semitism was once again in vogue: anti-capitalism. In other words, the liberals condemned the Jews and with them democratic goals. Precisely because they were now freed from special laws, Jews seemed tangible as a supranational entity and could be held responsible as a collective beyond religious aversions. This is the point at which hatred of Jews often takes on an integrative function and solidifies into anti-Semitism. Wagner's addition to his pamphlet "Judaism in Music" cannot be understood without this context. Anti-liberalism as anti-Semitism is one of the thought patterns in which Cosima carried on and radicalized her husband's views.

The perfidious thing about the treatment of Levi as a conductor is that the devoutly irrational approach of his admiration for Wagner was instrumentalized. Levi's attitude brought religious and musical sensibilities closer together. He not only mystified Wagner's music, he sacralized it in his personal understanding. Nevertheless, devotion and contemplation, which Wahnfried attributed to other artists as "faith", were denied him and interpreted as a weakness in musical leadership. The slogans that Wagner's writings "Das Judentum in der Musik" and "Über das Dirigieren" (On Conducting) issued were applied to Levi and always boiled down to the same characteristics: restlessness, smoothness and empty elegance. In such judgments, musical practice and worldview intertwined. Like her son later, Cosima emphasized that Levi had appropriated Wagner's works through "intelligence" - not through "spontaneous feeling". Wagner's thought patterns are thus internalized: when the "master" played Mendelssohn and Beethoven to his family in Venice in 1882, Cosima's diary states that this resulted in a "description of what melody is, what feeling is, as opposed to 'Semitic excitement'". The defamatory suspicion of Jewishness alone determined the Bayreuth occupation policy until well into the 20th century, and the National Socialists were able to start there effortlessly.

For years, Levi both demanded and feared an end to his work in Bayreuth. In 1894, he clearly requested that he be released from the circle "in which I can only ever be considered a stranger, an intruder". He knew that he was only "endured" because he had been "appointed in 1882". Above all, he had realized that it was neither a theological rejection (based on the Old Testament) nor a rejection based on the history of mentality, but a racial ideology: "I believe that everything here, too, can be understood from one point of view: I am a Jew, and since it has become dogma in and around Wahnfried that a Jew looks this way and that, thinks and acts this way and that, above all, selfless devotion [...] is impossible for a Jew, everything I do and say is judged from this point of view." Levi reaffirmed his appreciation of Wagner's writings on Judaism and advocated a minimal consensus one last time: "But that I should accept all the characteristics of the Jews as present in myself is not to be expected of me: my awareness of my own nature is quite different." This did not help him in his conflict with Wahnfried. When Anton Seidl replaced Levi at the Festival, he was immediately celebrated as the "born" conductor of "Parsifal".

I hope that this at least gives an outline of the many forms of discrimination Hermann Levi was exposed to in Bayreuth: racist, religious and artistic ideas flowed into one another. Finally, if we look at the potential for conflict that overshadowed Levi's work in Bayreuth from the perspective of psychoanalysis, we can identify five points that complement and, in part, combine the above-mentioned facts:

- 1) The starting point of identification is a "difference experienced as deficient between the identifying subject and the object of identification". Levi described this in particular in his letters to Johannes Brahms and Joseph Joachim. The pull that Wagner's work exerted on him had to do with the attempt to catch up with a hitherto absent reality - a reality that his circle of friends regarded as illusory and ideologically precarious.
- 2) The generative moment of the object connection was twofold. On the one hand, the connection to the object of identification (Wagner's work and message) meant for Levi a piece of actively traveled life path. On the other hand, because Wagner himself authorized the appointment of the Parsifal conductor, a passive moment was installed (Levi was "assigned"). The conductor tried to correlate both aspects by aligning images of self and object. He assumed Wagner to be tolerant and great, played down the intrigues of his assistants and for a long time imagined the Parsifal conducting as a conflict-free area in which his Jewishness played no role.

3) Because the active moment of Wahnfried was perceived selectively, the feeling of a collectively shared ego could not take hold in Levi. It was consistently prevented. This explains why the anti-Semitism that Levi was confronted with was more than selectively expressed personal resentment and why it drove the conductor's psychological and ultimately also physical deterioration. Wahnfried's collective identity was exclusive. Levi's self-identification and becoming-identified diverged - especially with regard to musical practice.

4) Levi's situation in Bayreuth intensified to the extent that Cosima, as festival director, asserted a collective Bayreuth identity as a real state and understood it to be static in principle. What followed from this were paratitular inclusions, exclusions and punishments. Levi's belief in the collective substance was alternately praised and denied.

5) The fact that such a variability of affiliation decisions was possible at all was related to the diversity of the object of identity. Wagner's person (and his decisions), what Cosima called the "Bayreuth cause", Parsifal as an ideologeme and as a practical musical challenge are different layers of the object of identity, which were alternately combined and functionalized by Wahnfried (but also by Levi).

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