

Critics of Ring Festival LA point to composer Wagner's anti-Semitism

By Troy Anderson  
Staff Writer

A citywide opera festival touted as the most significant cultural event in Los Angeles since the 1984 Olympics has sparked protests by Jewish leaders because of plans to showcase the works of German composer Richard Wagner, whose anti-Semitic writings inspired Adolf Hitler.

The \$32 million Ring Festival LA, planned to last from April 15 through June 30, 2010, is expected to draw thousands of cultural tourists for a variety of exhibitions, performances, symposiums and special events.

The centerpiece will be Wagner's epic four-opera cycle "Der Ring des Nibelungen," a performance organizers say will be a "defining moment" for the city but critics say will reopen wounds of those who survived the Holocaust.

"My concern is that Wagner was one of the great haters of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries," said Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, director of interfaith affairs at the Simon Wiesenthal Center, an international Jewish human rights organization. "He was one of the literary architects of the Holocaust. He was one who wrote you cannot abstract the artistry from the artist.

"We do have concerns voiced by some of our constituents – Holocaust survivors – who suffered greatly at the hands of the fruit that Wagner bore."

Wagner's writings included statements on why Jews could not make good musicians and why they should abandon their culture to integrate into German society. Critics also say he created characters in his operas that embodied negative Jewish stereotypes.

But not all in the Jewish community in Los Angeles are united in opposition to the festival.

Some argue it is indeed possible to separate the artistry from the artist's beliefs – to not let his personal views dampen appreciation for his work.

They also note the festival plans to fully acknowledge and discuss Wagner's controversial ideas.

Los Angeles attorney E. Randol Schoenberg is the grandson of Arnold Schoenberg and Eric Zeisl, Jewish composers who lived in Vienna at a time when Wagner's views – that Jews could not be great artists unless they abandoned their Jewish roots – were influential. Now president of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust and a member of the LA Opera board, he argues that Wagner's contributions to music deserve recognition.

"He was absolutely a lunatic when it came to Jewish issues, but his music is beyond question important," Schoenberg said.

"As a Jewish person who is interested in music, you have to deal with Wagner, just like you have to deal with Mozart, Beethoven and my grandfather, Arnold Schoenberg. You don't have to be a follower of Wagner, but it's an unavoidable part of music history."

Although Wagner's family continued to express anti-Semitic views after his death and were early supporters of Hitler, Schoenberg said Wagner has since become a "convenient scapegoat" who died in 1883, six years before Hitler was born.

“The festival is not intended to be a glorification of Richard Wagner’s anti-Semitism,” Schoenberg said. “It’s actually the opposite. We are scheduling seminars and discussions to talk about his anti-Semitism.”

In the guide to “The Ring,” the LA Opera says, “Los Angeles will celebrate Wagner as no other city in the world can.”

The production will be a “defining moment” in the city’s cultural history, according to LA Opera officials. The festival will involve about 75 cultural and educational institutions such as The Getty Center, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and the Southern California Wagner Society.

Besides the exhibitions, performances and symposiums, it will also feature German food at Patina’s restaurants and a German beer garden on the plaza of the Music Center.

Long before “The Lord of the Rings” movies enthralled audiences, Wagner composed the four operatic episodes featuring a universal story about a golden ring’s curse and how power seduces and love redeems, according to LA Opera promotional materials.

“This is the coming of age for the LA Opera, which was founded 24 years ago,” said Barry Sanders, the festival leader and an LA Opera board member. “It puts L.A. on the operatic map worldwide. So this is a big deal, a very big deal.

“And because it’s such a big deal for the opera, we decided a year and a half ago that the whole city should be invited into the celebration and we decided to have a citywide festival. It will be the biggest cultural festival in L.A. since the 1984 Olympics festival.”

Although Wagner’s music is often performed in the United States with little objection, the four-opera cycle has a long history of controversy, especially in Israel where it has been the subject of an official boycott since the late 1930s, said Marc A. Weiner, a professor of Germanic studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, and author of “Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination.”

“All of the stereotypical cardboard, cookie-cutter features of a Jew – show up all over the place in Wagner’s essay and letters and also show up all over the place in his musical dramas,” Weiner said.

Los Angeles-based opera critic Carie Delmar is spearheading a grass-roots campaign to persuade organizers to broaden the festival to include many composers, such as Mozart, Mendelssohn and Schubert, rather than focus on Wagner.

Delmar, 62, the daughter of an opera singer who fled Nazi Germany, said she won’t settle for just increasing the number of lectures about Wagner’s anti-Semitic views.

“I will continue tirelessly to expand this festival, not so there are more lectures that Wagner was a despicable anti-Semitic racist. But I want to expand it so that we can have an artistic festival where all the various cultures can come together so we send a message to the world that we’re a cultural mecca,” said Delmar, who writes for OperaOnline.us.

“Right now, it remains a narrow festival, it’s all about Richard Wagner and it’s an insult to our city and it’s insensitive to the Jewish community.”

But Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky – who along with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa participated in a November press conference announcing the festival – said it is not designed to celebrate Wagner’s views.

"This is a very sensitive subject in the Jewish community and it's a sensitive subject for me," Yaroslavsky, who is Jewish, said in a recent interview.

"Wagner was a virulent anti-Semite who became the poster child for Hitler's anti-Semitism. And he was Hitler's favorite composer and many people who lived through the Hitlerian period associate him and even his music with the experiences they themselves, the Jews of Europe, had from 1933 to 1945."

Out of empathy for Holocaust survivors and their children, Yaroslavsky said he's working with festival leaders to include more seminars and symposiums to "connect the dots" between the man and his anti-Semitic views.

"There really is a connection that ought to be explored between Wagner, Nazism and the refugees that Nazism created and Los Angeles," Yaroslavsky said. "We want people who are interested in 'The Ring' and Wagner to have a clear understanding of who he was and the havoc his philosophies wreaked in the last century, as much as they gain an understanding of the music and the opera."

Sanders said the American Jewish University and the Skirball Cultural Center will feature programs during the festival on the "interesting divide between his music on the one hand and his hateful philosophy on the other."

"The purpose of this festival is to celebrate a milestone in LA Opera, which is also a milestone in the history of L.A." Sanders said.

"It's not about resurrecting a bad man, although we have lectures to let people know about that. It's about the city's coming of age. And it's coming at a time when the city needs a party."

A defining moment?

Broader festival sought.

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