

Music, Race and Nationhood: Wagnerism in Britain and America

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Early British performances of Richard Wagner's operas and music dramas took place in London in the 1860s; within thirty years, the one thousandth performance of *Lohengrin* was held at Covent Garden. In America too, to which the composer considered emigrating, his works were feted, and vigorous Wagner Societies flourishing by the 1890s. Wagnerism was, arguably, a seminal element of nineteenth-century cultural as well as aesthetic and musical history in Britain and America. In these countries, as in many others, Wagnerism had a scope and significance that exceeded the 'purely' aesthetic domain, and extended overtly into political subjects including gender, class and race.

This paper investigates one aspect of this phenomenon. Focussing on British and American Wagnerism (and anti-Wagnerism) of the nineteenth century, it explores the ways in which Wagnerism informed conceptions of the racial and national aspects of musical composition, performance and consumption. Wagner's anti-Semitism and commentaries on the unique qualities of Germanic art were infamous by the late nineteenth century, and remain so today. Nineteenth-century debates about the racial and national properties of music were modulated by Wagner's contributions, but also drew on arguments that were widespread in contemporary aesthetics, racial theory and science.

In this analysis, I will draw out the differences between British and American constructions of the racial and national aspects of music. I will consider, for example, the ways in which British and American critics variously responded to Wagner's national identity, and to the pre-eminence of German composers in contemporary models of the musical canon. The paper will contrast British anxieties about German military expansion, and perceptions of the affinities between the Nordic and Teutonic Northern European cultures, with American responses to a European musical heritage. It will compare accounts of Wagner's audiences in Britain and America, and representations of the cosmopolitanism of professional and amateur musical life. In considering these subjects, the paper will allude to criticism, journalism, and fiction by authors from Henry James to Mark Twain.