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[Calendar](#)
[News](#)
[Jewish Life](#)
[Obituaries](#)
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## Is Gustav Mahler's music inherently Jewish?



By Dr. Herbert Rakatansky

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### The interplay between an artist's values and creations

The Rhode Island Philharmonic Symphony's upcoming May 7 performance of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 3, published in 1899, raises interesting issues. This will be the first performance in Rhode Island of this work. Although much of Mahler's music was not appreciated for many years – and this work was not performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra until 1962 – because of its different musicality and radical structure, there is another reason why his music, indeed his career, was affected negatively: anti-Semitism.

Mahler (1860 – 1911) had dual successful careers as a major composer and conductor, a distinctly unusual occurrence among classical musicians. He was born to a Jewish family in Eastern Europe where anti-Semitism was heavily entrenched. As Mahler advanced to more prestigious conducting positions, his Jewish heritage assumed increasing significance. The apex of conducting posts was the directorship of the Vienna State Opera, an imperial appointment that, by law, was not available to a Jew.

In 1897, after Mahler converted to Catholicism (he was neither an observant Jew nor an observant Catholic), he was appointed to the post two months later. However, anti-Semitic critics continued their attacks on him and his music, and Mahler eventually moved his conducting activities to New York for what was, tragically, a short tenure. He died some years later of bacterial endocarditis, then a fatal disease.

We believe that people should be judged on the basis of the intrinsic quality and value of their accomplishments – and not on the basis of religion, race, gender, etc. What about an artist who is unabashedly anti-Semitic or racist? Richard Wagner comes to mind. He openly supported anti-Semitism in his writings. What about guilt by association? The Nazi regime proclaimed Ludwig van Beethoven, Wagner and Anton Bruckner as ideal German composers. Nobody has suggested that music by Beethoven or Bruckner should be banned. However there is controversy about Wagner's music, which generally is not played in Israel. Should we condemn an artist's creations because of his or her personality? Should we decline to exhibit Picasso's paintings of women because he did not treat women well?

The Nazis banned Mahler's music because he was still an ethnic Jew despite his conversion. It has been suggested by reputable authorities that his music is "inherently Jewish." Klezmer and other "Jewish" strains and melodies are present in his symphonies. Other authorities have noted Christian influences. Symphony No. 2 is about resurrection, the text of Symphony No. 3 refers to heavenly joy given to mankind by Jesus through Peter, and Symphony No. 4 tells of heaven, mentioning St. Peter and others.

In 1933, the Nazi regime established Kulturbund, the Jewish Culture League, in part as a propaganda maneuver to demonstrate to the world that Jews were being well treated. Started in Berlin, it expanded to include 46 chapters. Jewish music was to be played by Jewish musicians for exclusively Jewish audiences. "True German" music was prohibited. Mahler was performed in 15

## Contents

[Home](#)
[Calendar](#)
[News](#)
[Jewish Life](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Dr. Stanley Aronson](#)
[Mike Fink](#)
[Tema Gouse](#)
[Ruth Horowitz](#)
[Nancy Kirsch, Editor](#)
[Alan Krinsky](#)
[Sam Lehman-Wilzig](#)
[Rabbi James Rosenberg](#)
[Daniel Stieglitz](#)
[Joshua Stein](#)
[Guest Columnists](#)
[d'var Torah](#)
[Letters to the Editor](#)
[Advertise](#)
[Contact](#)

concerts in Berlin over seven-and-a-half seasons. In the darkest days of Nazism, on Feb. 27, 1941, the Jewish orchestra performed Mahler's Symphony No. 2 in Berlin for a Jewish audience. Martin Goldsmith, whose parents played in that orchestra, has described this incredible event, in his book, "The Inextinguishable Symphony," published in 2001 by John Wiley & Sons.

"For the next hour and 25 minutes, Mahler's 'Resurrection Symphony' took possession of the theater, of the musicians, of the audience. No one, either on stage or in the hall, was conscious of time passing, just of an immense sound and an equally immense spirit moving among them... More than 1,000 people, men and women who had come to know danger and pain and hurt and humiliation on an almost daily basis for more than eight years, heard from a valiant ensemble of artists who had struggled along with them a vibrant musical account of their difficulties and then the infinitely hopeful message that they had not lived and suffered in vain and that from their depths they would rise again."

The audience and artists that night responded not to specific religious allusions, but to elemental spirituality. Such is the power of Mahler's music. Later in 1941, the Kulturbund was dissolved and most of the participants were sent to the camps as part of the 'final solution.

Mahler himself said that he was creating an entire world in Symphony No. 3. The immense power in this music, as in all art, can now be experienced for what it is and not judged by racial, religious, political or other invidious criteria. How lucky we are, finally, after over 110 years to have this "world" come to Rhode Island in a free society where all, performers and audience alike, can enter Mahler's realm freely and without fear.

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