

Press Information

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Richard Wagner and the Nationalization of Feeling

From 8 April 2022 in the Deutsches Historisches Museum

Richard Wagner experienced and influenced the 19th century in many different ways – as a dynamic composer and court musician, as a writer, a revolutionary, an exile, a bankrupt, a protégé of wealthy patrons and of a king, as a theatre reformer and founder of a music festival. In the exhibition **“Richard Wagner and the Nationalization of Feeling” (8 April to 11 September 2022)** the Deutsches Historisches Museum presents Wagner not only as a witness and critic of the political and social upheavals of his time, but in particular as a controversial artist and entrepreneur who knew how to strategically integrate society’s sensitivities into his work and to stage it as the epitome of German culture.

From the 1840s on, opposition to the economic, social and cultural developments of Modernity grew in Germany and throughout Europe. Richard Wagner was among the critics of the spread of industrialisation and capitalism. On the other hand, his artistic ascent would not have been possible without a modern market for art and music. The Deutsches Historisches Museum shows Wagner as a technician of feelings who, in the increasingly commercialised world, positioned the social significance of art and the artist in a new light. To this end he developed marketing strategies in which emotions played an essential role. His ideas of music drama as an artistic synthesis, a “Gesamtkunstwerk”, were part of his criticism of Modernity and were marked by his ambition to change society as a whole.

Wagner and the nationalization of feelings

Proceeding from the undiminished polarisation that Richard Wagner still provokes, the exhibition relates his life and work to the movements and sentiments of his era. It focuses on four basic feelings of the 19th century that acted as driving forces for the circumstances of the time and for Wagner’s ideas: Alienation and Belonging, Eros and Loathing. These four chapters examine how Wagner perceived the emotional conditions of society and reacted to them artistically: What concrete feelings did he stage and construct? How did he teach his audience to feel and – in his later work – to feel German? And what role did his writings play in this process?

Wagner’s creative oeuvre can be seen in the context of the ubiquitous search for a German identity in politics, science and art after the founding of the German Empire. This was also why the question of who should belong to the German community and who should not gained importance in his compositions. Original objects such as the poem dedicated to Reich Chancellor Otto von Bismarck “To the German Army” (1871) illustrate how the specifically “German” aspect became a trademark of his works and how staged, communally experienced feelings of “folk”

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and “nation” became the benchmark. The different versions of his inflammatory essay “Judaism in Music” from the years 1850 and 1869 show that Wagner’s pronounced anti-Semitism and his nationalism grew inseparably hand in hand. In his installation, created specially for the exhibition “Schwarzalbenreich”, theatre director Barrie Kosky leads museum guests into a Black Box. There in total darkness they experience a sound collage that mixes Wagner quotes about the Jewish way of speaking, translated into Yiddish, with passages from the overblown portraits of the anti-Semitic figures Alberich and Mime from “The Ring of the Nibelung” as well as with synagogal chants.

Alongside first-rate items on loan from Germany, Austria and Switzerland, the exhibition curated by Michael P. Steinberg and Katharina Schneider presents original objects from the DHM’s own collections: personal notes and objects that belonged to Wagner, paintings, drawings, manuscripts, letters and photographs that show Wagner’s mindset and oeuvre in relation to various junctures in the 19th century. In each chapter, excerpts from performances, audio stations and short interviews with Wagner singer Waltraud Meier and opera director Stefan Herheim help visitors to experience the respective fundamental feelings of the time. An epilogue throws light on the history of Germany’s volatile relationship with Wagner. The exhibition ends with a number of current voices from the fields of culture, academia and politics on the importance of Richard Wagner today.

Karl Marx and Richard Wagner: two 19th century contemporaries

This year the Deutsches Historisches Museum is honouring two leading German personalities of the 19th century: the **contemporaries Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Richard Wagner (1813–1883)**. Both had an enormous impact on the 19th century, but also on the 20th and 21st centuries. And both became icons of their politically opposite camps: Marx for the Left, Wagner for the Right. Except for a few years, they both experienced the same world and the same economic and social upheavals, but came to completely different conclusions: Marx wanted to overhaul Modernity, Wagner to redesign it.

Parallel to “**Richard Wagner and the Nationalization of Feeling**”, the DHM is showing the exhibition “**Karl Marx and Capitalism**” (10 February to 21 August 2022). It portrays Marx as a sharp critic of Modernity and capitalism. It focuses on topics that have lost none of their explosiveness: religious and socio-critical controversies, anti-Semitism, revolution and violence, new technologies, destruction of nature, global economic crises, and international protest and emancipation movements. The exhibition thus links Marx’s historization to questions of his topicality. At the same time, it takes a critical look at the worldwide reception of his theories in the 20th and 21st centuries.