

LAWRENCE D. MASS

ON THE FUTURE OF Wagnerism

Art, Intoxication, Addiction,
Codependence and
Recovery

Introduction by Adam J. Sacks



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Art, Medical Humanism and Civil Society

The voice of Dr. Lawrence Mass unites the worlds of music, gay history and activism with addiction medicine. He has found a novel and effective means to communicate his expertise and concerns in these areas via the figure of Richard Wagner. The current volume is a successor text to his acclaimed memoir, *Confessions of a Jewish Wagnerite: Being Gay and Jewish in America* (currently available on Amazon Kindle).

A sequel to *Confessions*, *On the Future of Wagnerism* is a wide-ranging anthology of memoir, personal journalism and essays that elucidate common denominators of recurrent maladies of our world: antisemitism and homophobia, addiction and codependence, health care inadequacy and malfeasance. Mass accomplishes this while maintaining an accessible style filled with valuable accounts of the culture and politics of late 20th Century Europe and America. His role as a co-founder of Gay Men's Health Crisis and gay rights activist who wrote the first press reports on AIDS render him a figure of historical significance.

His engagement with Wagner, however, brings his reflections to a mode of thought and criticism rarely seen in any widely available fashion since the Weimar Republic: that of the doctor of medicine who diagnoses and engages with cultural life. From Albert Schweitzer to Max Nordau, the medical humanist once carried authority throughout civic life. Mass renders this seemingly esoteric objective with clarity and friendliness.

But why the German composer Richard Wagner as a central focus? Richard Wagner and the cult following that emerged in his wake—"Wagnerism"—is unique in the annals of modern culture. Wagner was an artistic and technical genius who used his formidable talents in support of a deeply antimodern, antagonistic and exclusionary worldview. Wagner, who still stands astride concert and opera houses all over the world, challenges the presumptions of any link between genius and goodness, as well as the role of representative arts in a healthy democratic civic sphere.

As Mass attests via his own experience of being acculturated to Wagnerism, the cult of Wagner not only lives on, it provides a lens

through which to reconsider many of the greatest challenges of Mass's own life experience, and of the various minorities and subcultures—gay, Jewish, recovery—that experience reflects.

Written against the backdrop of our Post-9/11 era of backlash against globalization and the international turn to authoritarianism, Mass offers an arsenal of cultural perspectives and psychological tools to understand how individuals become seduced by malevolent magicians of politics and art. For it is too often images—whether visual, literary or musical signatures—that at first fascinate, then intoxicate and play their key roles in the indoctrination of paranoia and intolerance. It is sensitive outsiders like Mass who have antennae keenly attuned to these workings, who best shed light on their mechanisms and fallout.

The interrelationships Mass charts of Wagner with antisemitism and homophobia reveal the basic but startling ways in which art, music and visual culture can turn toxic. As Wagner ultimately emerged as a prime incubator of the National Socialist ethos, any effort to stem the tide of the rehabilitation of Nazism must turn back to him. Thus the project of working through the troubled past of Wagner is part of a larger effort of establishing and securing Enlightenment values of human rights and inclusivity.

Notwithstanding considerations of aesthetic and musical greatness, Wagner may always stand for narratives of racial purity and reactionary retrenchment, for a bygone era that existed only in myth, an outbreak of romantic, antimodern idealization which brought great suffering and death to countless millions. Such populist myth-making is nothing less than fake news on a global scale. Mass's effort in bringing the light of humanist reason, by virtue of his own personal struggles and activism, to this iconic historical lesson suggests that there is a path forward to the future of contemporary cultural maladies and conflict.

Above all, the power of this volume lies in the personal intimacy of its narrative. Mass does not illustrate through abstraction but rather through storytelling of his own lived experience. His contact and friendship with many notable figures in recent American cultural life, including leading gay and AIDS activist and writer Larry Kramer, and his relationship with his brother Steve Mass, impresario of the famed Mudd Club (at the heart of the downtown NYC underground art scene of the late 1970's), all receive fascinating biographical detail and critical scrutiny. Through it all Mass never shies away from the disturbing and often unacknowledged reality that those most engaged with

unconvention and creativity, so often heroicized, are often driven by phenomena of narcissism and addiction at the expense of maturity, responsibility and ethics. Underlying his effort throughout is a commitment shared with colleagues such as Dr. Gottfried Wagner, great grandson of the composer, who have long endorsed Mass's work: that art can and must be united with humanism and inclusion, as it directly impacts upon matters of civil society.

It is the interweaving of minority experience, the political impact of music, and perspectives of addiction that distinguishes this book and renders it a unique document of our time. Mass's examination of the wellsprings and mechanisms of scapegoating and paranoia, while delineating processes of recovery, could not be more pertinent for a world suffering deeply from the ills of addiction—to drugs, to escapism and self-indulgence, to arrogance and bigotry, to power. An important contribution to literature on the legacy of Nazism and the Holocaust, *On The Future of Wagnerism* provides a visceral but subtle *cri de coeur*, a call to us to come out of our complacency, to reposition our assumptions, and reckon anew with false idols that retain their ability to intoxicate.

Without pat answers or didacticism, Mass brings hope for a future concerned not merely with uncovering hidden history or finding new ways to reinterpret fallen idols, but which looks beyond, via self-affirmation and personal recovery, to new narratives for an art of the future not held captive by past demons.

Adam J. Sacks*

*Editor and Creative Consultant for *On The Future of Wagnerism*, Adam J Sacks is a PhD in History from Brown University. He is now serving as Lecturer in the Faculty of the Arts at the University of Hong Kong and publishes regularly in specialist and non-specialist venues.