

The Devil's Music Master? Perspective Structure in Ronald Harwood's *Taking Sides*

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Ronald Harwood's drama Taking Sides revolves around the denazification trial of the famous German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler. Harwood's presentation of Furtwängler's case establishes a complex balance between various different perspectives but does not offer a definite conclusion. This paper provides a close analysis of the major figure perspectives in Taking Sides, in relation to each other as well as to the play's temporal structure, and argues that the central question of the artist's accountability for his role in upholding the Third Reich is ultimately left unanswered.

1. Introduction

The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! [...] [It] implies a perspective from which things appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature. This mitigating circumstance prevents us from coming to a verdict. For how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit? (1985: 3)

In his now-classic text *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera frequently points to the fact that we only have one life to live and, therefore, no possibility to “experiment”—to find out what would have happened if only we had acted differently in this or that situation. This “mitigating circumstance,” as he calls it, often makes it difficult for us to decide on “the right thing to do.” It was this uncertainty about the course of things and our role in it, about the inability to judge a situation correctly and be judged, even from hindsight, which attracted Ronald Harwood to the case of the German conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, the protagonist of his play *Taking Sides*:

Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886–1954) was the outstanding conductor of his generation, rivalled only by Arturo Toscanini. He was at the height of his powers when Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933. Many of his colleagues, because they were Jews, were forced to leave; others, non-Jews, opponents of the regime, chose exile as an act of protest. Furtwängler decided to stay; as a result he was accused of serving Nazism. (1995: “Foreword”)

What Harwood “loved about it was the ambiguity of it all, that you couldn't quite make up your mind which side to take.” This was the “heart of the matter” to him: the “impossibility of judging” (in Stern 1999: 56f). And indeed, Harwood's play makes it fairly difficult for the reader to “take sides,” to stand either for Furtwängler's *l'art pour l'art* stance or with the American authorities who pursued him relentlessly for his doubtful role under the Nazi regime. It raises

more questions than it answers and presents his audience with the inconvenience of an open ending, thus calling upon them to resolve the protagonist's dilemma for themselves.

In this essay I will analyse the play's perspective structure and the temporal structure linked to it. It should be noted that the paper refers primarily to *Harwood's* Furtwängler, a constructed dramatic figure that, to some extent, probably resembles the historical character of the conductor, but that can, of course, not be taken to be identical with him. However, the few instances where I include biographical material, such as genuine letters and notes, will show that "life writing" can be just as constructed and carefully crafted as fiction and is, therefore, relevant not only from a historical point of view (i. e. as "background" information, supporting certain points made in the play), but also from a literary one.

I will examine the play according to Manfred Pfister's notion of the "figure perspective" and demonstrate how the major figure perspectives and the time levels to which they are bound serve to build up an open perspective structure in *Taking Sides*. I shall further discuss the theme of diverging realities and Harwood's treatment of it through his choice of narrative elements and musical examples. As a starting point I will provide a short introduction to the notion of "denazification" to situate the play's plot in its historical context.

2. Denazification in the Arts

Denazification, the process of "rid[ding] of nazism and its influence" (*Webster's Dictionary* 1986) was based on the laws that the Allied Control Council enacted after 1945. Their chief aims were *Generalprävention* and *Generalabrechnung* (Henke 1991: 21): to prevent a possible comeback of Nazism and to implement the punishment of its active supporters. Despite their efforts to standardise the process through a structured programme, especially in the American sector, the Allies "faced several peculiar problems in putting denazification into practice." As Shirakawa points out:

In order to denazify Germany, they first had to determine what Nazism was and who indeed was a Nazi. They then had to decide the degree to which those accused were involved in carrying out or supporting Nazism. (1992: 298)

As it is, being in possession of a Party number was not always conclusive, as there were opportunists, for instance, who had a Party number although they had never really had much to do with the NSDAP, and there were those who supported the party actively without being officially registered.

In his biography of Herbert von Karajan, Roger Vaughan criticises the concept of denazification and its simplistic assumption that all Nazis and Nazi institutions—even in the arts—could be cleansed, while everyone and everything that only bore the name of "Nazi" but was not genuinely national socialist was permitted to continue as before (1986: 20). However, Oliver Rathkolb draws attention to the fact that Nazi Germany consciously built on existing ideological traditions to support the idea of German racial superiority, including the traditional field of high culture. Those traditions were promoted intensively, which was the only way the

NSDAP could appeal to the lower and educated middle classes, thus securing their support (1991: 270). Consequently, artists did have a political function and it was made obvious in the way the Party went about the complete reorganisation of cultural institutions in Germany, which were centrally controlled forthwith. In Rathkolb's view denazification trials in the arts were, therefore, an absolute necessity: the political responsibility of the artist could not simply be ignored. As a matter of fact, right after the war ended the Allies drew up "a list of 327 persons in the arts, all of whom were under suspicion for their part in upholding the Third Reich" (Shirakawa 1992: 296), one of them being Wilhelm Furtwängler. What most artists had to fear was being disqualified from their profession, although Leni Riefenstahl, for instance, was actually imprisoned after the war. Furtwängler was eventually pronounced a "Mitläufer" (a mere "hanger-on") and permitted to resume his career as conductor.

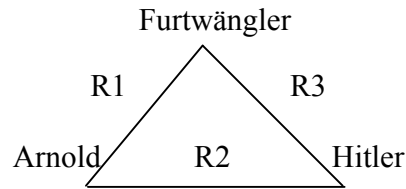
3. The Perspective Triad in *Taking Sides*

According to Manfred Pfister "the perspective from which a dramatic figure observes the action" is conditioned not only by "the level of advance information the figure has had access to" but also by the figure's "psychological disposition and ideological orientation" (1988: 58). Major Arnold's perspective in *Taking Sides*, for instance, could not be accounted for by simply adding up the facts and information he has about Wilhelm Furtwängler. Just as for any real-life person, Arnold has to bring those facts in tune with his outlook on life, with his worldview, which will differ substantially from the worldview of, say, his secretary Emmi Straube.

At the same time Pfister draws the crucial distinction between "figure-perspective on the one hand, and the reception-perspective intended by the author on the other" (1988: 58). He notes that "focus," i. e. "the differing degrees of emphasis applied to perspectives" can contribute as "an implicit control technique towards establishing 'the author's attitude' [...] – in other words, the reception-perspective intended by the author." It should be observed, however, that focus "is something that really cannot be defined with any degree of precision," as Pfister (1988: 63f) admits.

The perspective structure in *Taking Sides* is of a peculiar nature. At a first glance we can identify two main characters: Wilhelm Furtwängler and Major Arnold. They are two more or less 'multidimensional figures' in the play, or "round characters," as Pfister terms them, "defined by a complex set of features taken from the most disparate levels," which may, for instance, "concern [their] biographical background, psychological disposition [and] interpersonal behaviour towards different people" (1988: 178). It could be argued, however, that a third main character is discernible in the play, a kind of ghost figure that is never present on stage but that has been assigned a crucial role in the play nevertheless, namely Adolf Hitler. His perspective, which is narrated and implied rather than actually presented on stage, has a considerable impact not only on the perspectives of Furtwängler and Arnold, but also on the structure of the play as a whole. It can be seen as the link between them: the causal factor in their relationship. As such, Adolf Hitler cannot simply be understood as the personification of National Socialism, the core figure of a coherent and clearly-defined ideology (which it never was), but must be viewed as a vague construct that both Furtwängler and Arnold reject as "the other"—while simultaneously

projecting it onto each other in widely differing forms. Thus, we are presented with a perspective triad of the following form:



Each of the three relationships that the triad produces (R1, R2, R3) is based on opposition. Two of them will be discussed separately below, although all three relationships are, of course, interlinked.

Major Arnold, the interrogator in Furtwängler's *Spruchkammer* trial, is portrayed as a problematic figure in *Taking Sides*. Having worked in insurance before the war, Arnold has dealt with a number of doubtful cases, and his job was to examine whether the suspects were guilty or innocent. It is therefore not surprising that his worldview is largely based on dichotomies. He introduces Emmi Straube as "a good German," for instance, because "her father was in the plot against Adolf" (1995: 10), whereas the violinist Helmut Rode is found to be a bad German. Accordingly, Arnold is kind to Emmi, while he shows himself condescending towards Rode, for whom he has nothing but contempt. "You don't know right from wrong" (66), Lieutenant David Wills is told in another instance by the Major. So, Arnold seems to feel a strong urge to categorise people along the lines of dichotomies: innocent/guilty, good/bad, right/wrong. Clearly, such an outlook on life does not allow for grey zones.

The Major's oversimplifications are exposed through the figure of Tamara Sachs: "There's a woman attacking Dr Furtwängler, I don't know who she is, she's crazy" (20). With these words Tamara Sachs is introduced to the audience shortly before she storms into Arnold's office. When she then grabs Emmi, shouting "You're crazy, you're all crazy, you don't know what you're doing" (20), her accusation seems almost comical, considering her wild behaviour and her frequent lapses of memory ("I can't remember what I wanted to say now. It's gone out of my mind," 22). Arnold immediately believes (or wishes) her to be mad so he can quickly discard her evidence as unreliable and get on with his self-appointed task of "nailing" Furtwängler, and thus he shows no interest whatsoever in her list of Jews that Furtwängler is supposed to have helped to flee the country. When it turns out that Tamara did not actually attack the conductor (whose innocence her evidence should prove), but that she tried to kiss his hand, her previous behaviour is suddenly made to appear far less incoherent than before, while Arnold's refusal to take her seriously seems all the more biased and unjust.

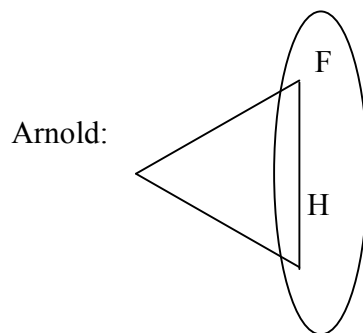
Yet there is a more direct way in which Harwood uses Tamara Sachs to undermine Arnold's position. In the second act a letter of hers is read out which she has addressed to "the American authorities in *Wiesbaden* and *Berlin*. The *good* and the *not so good*" (Harwood 1995, 47, my emphasis). It is amusing to see that Arnold is suddenly confronted with his own categories of "good" and "bad" and that he is clearly thought to belong to the latter. This dualistic perspective of the American, revealed in the play through the figure of Tamara Sachs, plays an important part in his relationship to Wilhelm Furtwängler.

3.1 Uncultured moralist meets old-world aesthete (R1)

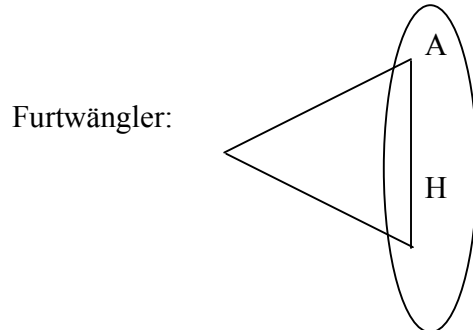
When Arnold and Furtwängler meet we experience a clash of two hugely differing perspectives, which is realised also in their differing use of language. An utterance like “Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony bores me shitless” (30) for instance, or “my scrotum feels like a shrivelled prune” (19) contrasts strongly with a statement like “My only concern was to preserve the highest musical standards. That I believe to be my mission” (30). In the first half of the play it is Furtwängler who controls the dialogue between them, and we are left in no doubt about his intellectual superiority, which he expresses in an utterance like “If you are going to bully me like this, Major, then you had better do your homework. You obviously have no idea how stupid and impertinent your remarks are” (33).

Arnold displays a kind of blind hatred in his irrational pursuit and humiliation of Furtwängler, which is partly due to the horrors he has witnessed at the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, the images of which still haunt him in his dreams. Part of it, however, can also be explained in terms of his psychological need to place people in dual categories, which is explicated by Nietzsche in the following way: “The mind wants equality, i. e. to subsume a sense impression into an existing series. [...] the will to equality is the will to power – the belief that something is thus and thus (the essence of judgement) is the consequence of a will that things as much as possible *shall be* equal” (1998: 362). Thus, part of Arnold’s irrational hatred can be explained as a consequence of the difficulty he has in labeling Wilhelm Furtwängler. Christoph Houswitschka assumes that therein lies the play’s success, “because Harwood chose not a genuine Nazi like Speer, but an artist whose responsibility cannot be determined objectively” (2002: 198).

Throughout the play Arnold tries persistently to classify Furtwängler as guilty in order both to satisfy his unconscious need of dualistic categorisation and to turn this case into a personal success against the world’s evil. His announcement that “We’re after the big guy here, the band leader” (1995: 11) can be regarded as another indicator of his figure perspective, showing it to be almost directly opposed to that of Wilhelm Furtwängler. The “band leader” of National Socialism, the ideology that Arnold, as a representative of the Allies, aims to root out is clearly not Furtwängler but rather its *Führer*, Adolf Hitler. The conductor cannot be held directly responsible for the cruelties that Arnold witnessed in the concentration camps but since Hitler, the foremost representative of National Socialism, circumvented the denazification efforts of the Allies by suicide, Arnold must make do with the next best Nazi within his legal reach, Furtwängler. With regard to our perspective triad the Major’s figure perspective can therefore be illustrated in the following way:



Arnold equates Furtwängler (F) with Hitler (H) in order to punish the latter, and draws them together as “the other,” the side of the world that is morally opposed to his. Furtwängler’s perspective can be illustrated in similar terms:



The conductor claims that music is his religion, and indeed it seems to be the only thing he has ever been concerned with: “I insisted for many years, until quite recently in fact, on the absolute separation of art and politics. I truly had no interest in politics, I hardly read any newspapers, my entire life was devoted to music” (50). Thus, it is easy to see how he regards Arnold and his denazification trial as a nuisance that interferes with his art and keeps him from conducting, in the same way that the Nazis used to interfere with, and limit, his artistic freedom. Consequently his belief in the necessity to separate art from politics generates the above perspective, which draws Hitler (again as the representative of Nazi policies) and Arnold together as “the other”: as members of the political sphere that stands in opposition to, and is incompatible with, his own sphere of art. In his notes the historical Furtwängler draws a direct parallel between Nazism and Allied denazification policies:

Die Methode des “Wie du mir, so ich dir” ist die Methode des niederen Menschen. [...] Ich denke blind an Vergeltung, statt an meine Pflicht, statt an Gerechtigkeit. Das ist der Standpunkt Hitlers gewesen – jetzt ist es der der Alliierten. (in E. Furtwängler 1996: 253)

Furtwängler equates the Allied forces’ actions with the unbridled thirst for revenge that characterised National Socialism, which, in his view, is a mark of the “inferior human being.” Harwood’s Furtwängler clearly regards Major Arnold as inferior, as painfully crude and uncultured. Arnold, on the other hand, sees nothing but a “degenerate” (Harwood 1995: 26) in Furtwängler, an arrogant Nazi who sided with Hitler out of convenience and who is co-responsible for the numerous crimes against humanity that the Nazis have committed.

Since there is hardly any overlap between their figure perspectives, it is not surprising that the relationship between Furtwängler and Arnold is based on a mutual aversion that regularly leads to a breakdown in their communication, as in the case of Arnold’s supposedly unanswerable question. “Get a sign writer, write it big,” Arnold tells Emmi, “THERE’S ALWAYS ONE QUESTION THE GUILTY CAN’T ANSWER” (1995: 8). The idea of the unanswerable question creates suspense as it is brought up again later in the play when David voices his concerns that they do not really have any hard evidence against Furtwängler. Once more Arnold claims that he has “the one question he’s going to find it impossible to answer”

(19), raising the audience's expectation further. On the whole, however, the scene in which Furtwängler is finally asked the long-awaited unanswerable question seems more like an anti-climax. Arnold asks the conductor why he did not leave in 1933 when Hitler came to power, and Furtwängler has no difficulty whatsoever to explain his motives. "I love my country and my people," he states: "I remained to give comfort, to see that the glorious musical tradition, of which I believe I am one of the guardians, remained unbroken . . . I remained because I believed my place was with my people" (33).

This answer does not count for Arnold, however, and he notes: "See, David? He can't answer the question. I'll ask you again" (33). Arnold's perspective is shown to differ so widely from Furtwängler's that he simply cannot understand the conductor's reasoning, just as Furtwängler seems for a long time unable to follow Arnold's idea of the artist's political responsibility. Since the Major's dualistic view only allows for people to be either for or against National Socialism, he completely fails to comprehend Furtwängler's political indifference and his exclusive concern with music. As his urge to prove Furtwängler's guilt becomes greater, he resorts to immoral methods that are, in fact, characteristic of National Socialism, the creed he actually means to root out. He bribes Rode into giving an obviously false testimony, for example, and pretends to have evidence that does not exist while deliberately ignoring genuine exculpatory evidence.

For Victoria Stewart this blatant undermining of Arnold's moral credibility signifies that "in *Taking Sides*, the argument is won by Furtwängler from the very beginning" (2000: 7). Nevertheless, I would argue that the perspective structure that Harwood creates works on several different levels and is on the whole too complex to produce an unambiguous reception perspective. Although Major Arnold is endowed with unquestionably condemnable character attributes, Arnold is also the only figure in *Taking Sides* to display genuine outrage at the cruelties of Nazism, and his outrage is understandable. Furthermore, there is a recognisable balance in the depiction of the relationship of Arnold and Furtwängler in view of the over-all structure of the play. At the beginning it is still Wilhelm Furtwängler who very much controls the dialogue through his rhetorical skill and superior intellect, yet towards the end of the play his speech becomes increasingly broken as he has to struggle for control over himself:

(*Near breakdown . . .*) I have always tried – I have tried to analyze myself closely. You are right, Major. I am no better than anybody else. But . . . in staying here, I believed—I thought—I walked a tightrope between exile and the gallows. You seem to be blaming me for not having allowed myself to be hanged. (63)

At this point not only does he finally take his investigator seriously, but he also even admits that "it would have been better if [he]'d left in 1934" (65) and his desperation and linguistic fissure culminate in the conductor's complete inability to speak, when he retches and has to leave the room. Here it suddenly becomes clear that Furtwängler's moral innocence and Arnold's immoral behaviour stand in no direct relation to each other: the Major's corrupt actions do not make Furtwängler a better person. Presumptuous as Arnold is, the conductor's loss of control and authority towards the end indicates that he does recognise some sort of moral guilt in his own past conduct. Harwood writes in his foreword that "Furtwängler was humiliated, relentlessly

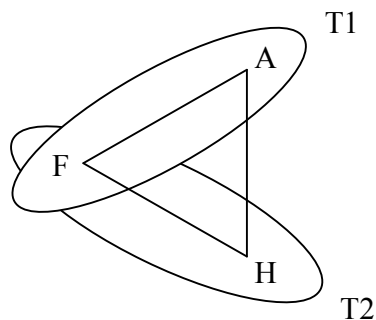
pursued and, after his acquittal, disinformation concerning him appeared in American newspapers. This may or may not have been justified. It all depends on the side you take.”

Harwood does not seem to suggest that it could in some cases be justifiable to treat any suspect as Furtwängler has been treated. Of course it was wrong of the Allies to forge evidence, to blackmail witnesses or to misinform the public intentionally. The trial in its prejudiced, random form was utterly unjustified, so in this respect it is not difficult to “take sides.” However, recognising the injustice of the trial *in its form* does not in itself answer the questions of whether Furtwängler deserved the trial in the first place and whether its outcome was justified: whether Furtwängler as an artist kept his moral integrity in the Nazi regime. Thus, we must distinguish between two distinct lines of argument. In Harwood’s depiction of the relationship between Furtwängler and Arnold, this second question remains unanswered, even though Arnold’s behaviour is outrageous and the conductor is finally acquitted.

Identifying a definite reception perspective in *Taking Sides* is further complicated when Harwood’s presentation of Furtwängler’s relationship to Hitler, as the personification of National Socialism, is taken into account.

3.2 The devil’s music master (R2)

With regard to the perspective triad in *Taking Sides*, the relationship between Furtwängler and Hitler (R3) raises a number of questions which cannot easily be answered. Its fascination lies in the fact that the play operates on two different time levels (T1, T2):



The more obvious of these is T1, which comprises the action taking place on stage, i. e. the encounters of Furtwängler and Major Arnold. T2 is the time level that can be described as Furtwängler’s past, his encounters and relationship with the Nazi regime, as narrated by him and other characters in the play. It is part of the play’s “tertiary fictional time” as Pfister terms it, referring to “the fictional duration of the story from the beginning of the purely verbally related background events to either the end of the text or to the point in time mentioned in the play that is furthest in the future” (1988: 283).

What is unusual about *Taking Sides*, although a common feature of so-called “courtroom dramas,” is the prominence and relative importance that this past time level has been assigned. Its significance becomes clear when we examine the play in terms of the action on stage. Both acts are set in the same room, and most of the play seems rather static, since it is primarily the

figures' dialogue that carries the action. Also, the character constellation is revealing in that respect: none of the figures in *Taking Sides* would be there if it were not for the Nazi regime. Their past experience of World War II has brought them together and has somehow become the determining factor in each of their lives. It is the reason why, for example, the insurance agent Arnold is now investigating denazification charges and why the second violinist Rode works as a janitor in an office of the Allies.

Since the figures' dialogue as the carrier of T2 features so prominently in the play, any judgement of Furtwängler's past will be based almost exclusively on the patchwork of narratives about it. The difficulty in reconstructing the conductor's past lies in the fact that taken together the individual accounts do not make up a coherent whole. The testimonials of Helmut Rode, Tamara Sachs and Wilhelm Furtwängler, as well as the guesses and assumptions of Lieutenant Wills and Major Arnold are confusing through their sheer diversity and frequently contradict each other. When Furtwängler claims, for instance, that he never officially represented the regime when he played abroad with the Berlin Philharmonic, Arnold retorts, "What d'you imagine people thought? The Berlin Philharmonic's taken over by Josef's Propaganda Ministry but Wilhelm's a freelance, so music and politics are now entirely separate?" (1995: 52). Arnold's shots in the dark often prove to be inaccurate or wrong but, equally, Furtwängler's own tale cannot be relied on with any certainty. In this regard, when Sidonie Smith speaks of the constructed nature of autobiography she notes that:

memory is ultimately a story about, and thus a discourse on, original experience, so that recovering the past is not a hypostasizing of fixed grounds and absolute origins but, rather, an interpretation of earlier experience that can never be divorced from the filterings of subsequent experience or articulated outside the structures of language and storytelling. (1987: 45)

In *Taking Sides* this becomes apparent in instances where Wilhelm Furtwängler is unable to remember past occurrences in any detail: "No. I don't think Goebbels sent me a telegram. I was simply told. In a letter, I think. I don't remember exactly" (1995: 28). The accuracy and objectivity of the conductor's accounts of his past is thus challenged, and it becomes obvious that all arguing is theory in this case, since the past can always be reconstructed only partially, in fragments. It is a tale, the moral of which will depend very much on the way it is told, and by whom. Thus, Tamara Sachs seems to echo Harwood's thoughts on "the impossibility of judging" when she asks, "How can you find out the truth? There's no such thing. Who's [*sic*] truth? The victors? The vanquished? The victims? The dead?" (24).

A central narrative of the past is the "tale of two spheres," as evoked by violinist Helmut Rode: "The music was quite separate from the politics. That is the Maestro's creed: politics and art must be kept separate" (17). Rode explains Furtwängler's belief in the fundamental separation of art and politics here, and the conductor himself later confirms it. Furtwängler did indeed attempt to steer clear of politics and was apparently no supporter of Nazi ideology, as one of Tamara Sachs's letters testifies: Göring was seen to be "embroiled in a stormy interview with Wilhelm Furtwängler, the famous conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, who was vainly seeking permission to keep his Jewish concert master" (61). In fact, it turns out that Furtwängler had

supported and saved a great number of Jewish musicians and protested vehemently when the regime tried to interfere openly with the affairs of his orchestra.

The conductor's insistence on the separation of the two spheres—music and politics—can be regarded as a moral necessity: a means of justifying to the world and himself his decisions in 1933 to remain in Germany and to keep conducting under the Nazi regime. However, this idea of the separate spheres is given an interesting turn when Furtwängler's open letter to a Berlin newspaper is introduced:

Wenn sich der Kampf gegen das Judentum in der Hauptsache gegen jene Künstler richtet, die—selber wurzellos und destruktiv—durch Kitsch, trockenes Virtuositentum und dergleichen zu wirken suchen, so ist das nur in Ordnung. Der Kampf gegen sie und den sie verkörpernden Geist, der übrigens auch germanische Vertreter besitzt, kann nicht nachdrücklich genug geführt werden. Wenn dieser Kampf sich aber auch gegen wirkliche Künstler richtet, ist das nicht im Interesse des Kulturlebens. (in Prieberg 2000: 50)

This letter, written by the historical Furtwängler in 1933, is also discussed in the play (cf. 1995: 28). It is interesting in two respects: it clearly opposes Nazi ideology with its idea of Jewish racial inferiority and has a strong undertone of defiance, as though the conductor were telling the authorities to mind their own business and stop interfering with matters that concerned only the musical sphere, *his* sphere. In *Taking Sides*, the conductor announces: "For my part, the only divide in art is between good and bad" (28), and in the above letter he proposes to 'fight' musicians whom he regards as no "real artists." The historical Furtwängler speaks of an "*Auslese-Prozess*" (in E. Furtwängler 1996: 325), a selection process, in his notes, which should be given top priority in music, and we can see how Harwood subtly plays with this idea of selection in *Taking Sides* to draw parallels between Furtwängler and Adolf Hitler.

While the political *Führer* tries to enact his Social Darwinist idea of the natural selection of racially superior human beings, Furtwängler's own scheme is in fact shown to be of a similar nature in that he proposes a selection process in the sphere of music, for which he obviously sets himself up as "leader." Tamara describes the following uncanny scene that took place when the young Jewish pianist Walter Sachs required Furtwängler's help to flee Germany:

That evening she sent a message: be at such-and-such an address at midnight. It was a cellar, once a nightclub but closed down. We were terrified. We knocked. Dr Samuel opened the door and admitted us. There was only one other person there. "This is Wilhelm Furtwängler," she said. "He will listen to you play." (23)

Again we find the idea of selection here: Walter Sachs has to play for Furtwängler and demonstrate his worth as a musician to secure the help of the musical "leader." A conductor is also a dictator," Helmut Rode confirms, "he is also a terrifying power who gives hope and certainty, and guarantees order" (40). Furtwängler is indeed portrayed in the play as standing above ordinary human beings not only on his conductor's platform. His delayed entrance raises the audience's expectation and recognition of the conductor's exceptionality, which is emphasised when, unlike Arnold's ordinary suspects, Furtwängler does not babble away after the first question. However, raising the conductor above the average person and depicting him as a

kind of natural leader is ultimately also Harwood's most powerful device of deconstructing Furtwängler's halo.

Throughout the play subtle parallels are drawn between the leaders of the musical and the political sphere, as though Major Arnold's view should be confirmed. Interestingly, Arnold also happens to be the only character in the play who does not worship the conductor for his musical genius, who does not join in the "But he is the greatest conductor in the world" hymn that obviously demands double standards for Furtwängler and is echoed again and again in the play like a leitmotif (cf. e.g. 25: "I think that Dr. Furtwängler's in a different category. He is, after all, one of the most famous conductors in the world").

Furthermore, *Taking Sides* discredits Furtwängler's belief in the possibility of separating art and politics as it highlights the limits of the conductor's power in his sphere of music. Goebbels "demanded I acknowledge Hitler as solely responsible for cultural policy," Furtwängler says. "Well, that was a fact. He was the sole arbiter and it seemed to me pointless to deny it" (29). Thus, the conductor either did not recognise the falsification of his principles as such, or he chose to ignore it.

The climax of this "tale of the two leaders" as embedded in the play's narrative can be found in the legendary handshake between Hitler and Furtwängler. "As I said, Hitler was in the front row," Rode reports, "and at the end of the concert, he suddenly stood up, went to the platform and offered the Maestro his hand. And the Maestro took it, what else could he do?" (17). Again the dominance of the political over the musical sphere is demonstrated, and arguably Furtwängler's rage ("He ripped the wooden covering off the radiator in his dressing room, that's how angry he was," 15) can be seen in this light. His anger was not so much due to his association with the chief representative of an ideology that he rejected, it was caused rather by the interference of one leader with the affairs of another, by the *Führer's* trespassing into the realm of the *Maestro*.

Ultimately, it is instances like the legendary handshake that help to extract Adolf Hitler's perspective from the narrative in *Taking Sides*. Hitler's music politics, as outlined at the beginning of this paper and as they are reflected in the play, leave no doubt about his belief in the power of music, and thus it is not surprising to find that he defined art as "eine erhabene und zum Fanatismus verpflichtende Mission": an exalted mission leading to fanaticism (in Prieberg 2000: 203). This statement is taken from a speech Hitler held at a Party rally in 1933 and sheds light on his determination to control not only all cultural activity in Germany, but also the people involved in it. In order to realise his scheme of absolute control he had to make sure that the German cultural scene excluded individuals who did not agree with his ideas, which is the reason why he had public figures like Furtwängler acknowledge him as "solely responsible for cultural policy" (29).

Hitler's perspective, although contained only in its narrative, is crucial to the play. It serves as a measure of Furtwängler's moral integrity as the audience are called upon to "take sides" and answer the question to what extent the conductor adopted Nazi views and practices or how far he opposed them. That Harwood's Furtwängler did oppose Nazi politics to a certain extent, as did the historical Furtwängler, has been demonstrated above. Not only did the conductor help a great number of Jews to escape, but he also protested openly against the exclusion of Jews from orchestras, for instance. Yet Harwood's Furtwängler shows no signs of

opposition that transcend his own sphere of music. Thus, when he claims that in a letter to Goebbels he was “lamenting the decline of musical standards due to racial politics,” Major Arnold retorts that the conductor “didn’t complain about the racial politics, just about the decline of musical standards” (32), at which point Furtwängler falls silent. Arnold’s view appears to be confirmed here, and again it seems legitimate to interpret the conductor’s opposition as motivated purely by the vain desire to keep the “other leader” out of his own realm.

Thus, the relationship between Furtwängler and Hitler, and between their perspectives, raises a number of questions for which no ultimate answers are provided in *Taking Sides*. The issue of Furtwängler’s usefulness to the regime is not resolved, since, as Stern (1999: 57) points out, he fails to avoid becoming the Nazis’ “advertising slogan” abroad (Harwood 1995: 62). Eventually there is nothing Arnold can effectively hold against Furtwängler; he has no “hard evidence” (11), as David Wills observes, so the conductor is acquitted in the end. Nevertheless it becomes clear that legality and morality are not necessarily identical. I would suggest, in fact, that Harwood’s depiction of a sort of *Führerkult* around Furtwängler, exposing the conductor’s leadership with its principle of selection to be of a similar nature as that of Adolf Hitler, does not make the audience more sympathetic towards the conductor and his self-centred perspective. Stewart’s claim (2000: 7) that the argument is won by Furtwängler right from the start is therefore not tenable: the audience has to make up their own minds and take sides.

Attempts to establish a definite reception perspective are further undermined as the role of music and its power to defy reality is called into doubt, which shall be discussed in the following.

4. Reality versus Music

What have I come to? I’ve never had a company like this one. I’m reduced to old men, cripples and nancy-boys. Herr Hitler has made it very difficult for Shakespearean companies. (Harwood 1980: 31)

With these words Harwood’s ageing actor-manager in *The Dresser* laments the miserable situation of his acting company. Interestingly he never blames Hitler for bombing the country and killing a great number of civilians. It is the ruin of his little company that he reproaches the dictator with, of this tiny little fraction of the world that happens to also be affected by the war. Like Wilhelm Furtwängler he is only concerned with his own very limited sphere, and this lack of proportion in the actor’s perception of the world is related to his weakening grip on reality in the play when Harwood has the old man take off his clothes on the market place in confusion and re-enact the storm scene of *King Lear*. Eventually he is punished for his narrow perspective and the loss of reality it entails as it leads to his death.

It is easy to see how the fall of “Sir” in *The Dresser* parallels that of Wilhelm Furtwängler. The conductor, too, is punished in *Taking Sides* for his naivety, his refusal, conscious or unconscious, to see the world as it is. As if the denazification trial itself were not penalty enough, the revengeful Arnold bribes a “tame journalist” (1995: 66) to distort the truth to an extent that will ruin the conductor’s reputation for all times.

This notion of diverging realities in *Taking Sides* stands in logical succession to the idea of the broken narrative. Suspicions arise not only as to the reliability of any information about Furtwängler's past but also about the very nature of the reality out of which it was born. "I believed that I could, through music create something practical . . . The maintenance of liberty, humanity and justice" (50), Furtwängler claims. Of course, he could achieve this only in his own limited sphere, if at all, which meant that he had to shut the rest of the world out of his view. Again the play indicates how problematic such an approach is. David Wills confesses to Furtwängler that when he heard him conduct for the first time he was "waking to a new world. You showed me a place where there was—an absence of misery" (35). "Waking to a new world," however, implies that he must have been sleeping before, so he reverses the common perception of dream and reality: arguably, for most people in those days "reality" denoted the misery outside the concert hall rather than the music within. With these words David confirms an idea that Furtwängler himself utters earlier in the play when he claims that he remained "to see that the glorious musical tradition [...] remained unbroken, was intact when we *woke from the nightmare*" (33, my emphasis). Thus, he saw it as his mission to set up the sphere of music as an alternative reality, which to him does indeed seem more real than the "nightmare" outside, and characters like David and Emmi are full of gratitude for the "other reality" that the conductor created for them. However, this function of music as a hiding place, as an escape from the harsh world all around, neither saved the victims of National Socialism, nor did it lend them moral support, since the concert halls mostly admitted only people who were tolerated by the regime. Their eyes (and ears) were closed to the cruelties of the "real world" by Furtwängler's conjured-up alternative.

In order to sound out the play's stance towards Furtwängler's accountability for his representative role in Nazi Germany it may be worth analyzing Harwood's use of musical examples, for as Manfred Pfister observes:

the juxtaposition of a-perspectively transmitted information and information transmitted via a figure-perspective enables the receiver to recognise an utterance as perspectively distorted if it deviates from the non-verbal information and then allows him or her to make allowances for it in the intended reception-perspective. (1988: 61)

Pfister refers to the fact that non-verbal information, like a Beethoven symphony for instance, can contribute towards establishing a play's reception perspective. From a close examination of musical examples in *Taking Sides*, it is easy to attribute a concrete function to Beethoven's Fifth symphony: the *Schicksalssymphonie* introduces a play that revolves around the *fate* of Wilhelm Furtwängler. Similarly, the *Adagio* of Bruckner's Seventh is employed as an effective means of opening the conductor's eyes to his own role in Nazi Germany. It should also be noted that the Fifth symphony prevents Emmi from hearing David's knocking at the beginning of the play ("I suppose he knocked but I didn't hear him. The music," 9), which can be taken as a first indication of the "diverging realities" theme, i. e. the music makes her deaf to what is happening around her.

Finding a definite purpose in Harwood's use of Beethoven's Eighth and especially, Ninth symphonies is not as simple however. One possible interpretation can be found in the structural parallel between the two acts of *Taking Sides*. At the end of the first act Emmi, for

whom music seems the only way to overcome her shyness and ‘voice’ her opinion, puts on the first movement of the Eighth symphony at full blast, but Major Arnold simply takes the record off and “*the music stops abruptly*” (36). At the end of the second act, by contrast, Arnold is on the phone to Alex Vogel, devising his unjust scheme of misinforming the press when David puts on Beethoven’s Ninth. Again Arnold is disturbed by the noise, but this time he cannot turn it off, and the play ends with the first movement of the Ninth, anticipating Schiller’s “Ode to Joy” with its theme of reconciliation and eternal brotherhood. Of course, this could be read as Furtwängler’s final triumph over Arnold, as the conductor’s personal reconciliation with the world after his acquittal. One might be tempted to speak of “poetic justice” here, a convention according to which “a happy ending for one figure is tantamount to a retrospective affirmation of his or her perspective whilst conversely, a tragic ending for another will negate his or her perspective” (Pfister 1988: 62). Thus, the Ninth symphony might be taken as the retrospective affirmation of Furtwängler’s perspective, of the power of music to maintain liberty, humanity and justice.

However, *Taking Sides* allows again for a different interpretation of the role of music that will largely depend on our idea of a “happy ending.” The conclusion of the play can equally be regarded as “tragic”—Furtwängler’s spirit is broken, after all, his reputation is ruined—and can thus be understood to undermine Furtwängler’s perspective.

The key to the latter reading lies in the negation of the idea that music has the power to convey a definite poetic idea or message. “I know that a single performance of a great masterpiece was a stronger and more vital negation of the spirit of Buchenwald and Auschwitz than words” (63), the conductor claims. And yet, Furtwängler’s music “was actively enjoyed by the very people who sent the Jews to their death.” As Guy Stern points out: “What does that say about the spiritual and redemptive qualities of art?” (1999: 61). The “message” that a Beethoven symphony contains, if any, can at best be described as vague. Had Furtwängler written a poetic ode to Hitler and his racial policies he would have been in trouble indeed, but the low referential content of a symphony permitted the conductor to find in it the “maintenance of liberty, humanity and justice” (Harwood 1995: 50), while for Hitler it expressed the superiority of the German people.

Thus, Furtwängler was saved in the end by the very vagueness of music that actually undermines his own standpoint. Consequently, the end of the play can also be understood as a ridiculing of the conductor’s persistent refusal to see the world as it is. He will conduct his music, come hell or high water—or the mass murderer Adolf Hitler. When the sounds of Beethoven’s Ninth reach him at the end of the play, he even conducts “*in the rubble*” (67), stubbornly refusing to realise what is happening in the world around him.

Conclusion

There are various ways in which Ronald Harwood’s *Taking Sides* establishes a balance in its complex argument that does not permit the audience to arrive at a definite conclusion about the case of Wilhelm Furtwängler. While the play reveals the unfair treatment the famous conductor received at the hands of the American authorities in Berlin, the question of Furtwängler’s

accountability for his role in upholding the Third Reich is left unanswered. In other words, it is impossible to identify an unambiguous reception perspective. The perspective structure of *Taking Sides* is “open”:

there is no single line of convergence that might draw all [the] perspectives together, [...] which has the effect of challenging the sensibilities and critical faculties of the audience and leaving it to choose between accepting the perspectival ambiguity of the text or creating its own ‘unofficial’ reception perspective. (Pfister 1988: 67)

The open perspective structure of *Taking Sides* is achieved both through the relationships into which the main characters and their perspectives enter and through the different temporal levels that constitute their framework. The observable animosity between Wilhelm Furtwängler and his prosecutor Major Arnold serves as a present-time basis for the exploration of Furtwängler’s relationship with Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime in the past, which emerges as a patchwork of individual narratives that fail to make up a coherent whole. As the reliability of Harwood’s ‘narrators’ as well as the power of Furtwängler’s music to create a ‘better world’ are called into doubt, *Taking Sides* points towards the bigger question, whether art can ever be apolitical and to what extent artists can therefore be held responsible for the appropriation of their work by forces lying outside their own narrow, artistic spheres.

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