

Wilhelm Furtwängler: Defending Art, Defying Oppression

ABSTRACT

Wilhelm Furtwängler, one of history's most celebrated conductors, occupied a morally ambiguous position in Nazi Germany. While never a member of the Nazi Party, he chose to remain in Germany from 1933 to 1945, believing he could use his influence to protect Jewish musicians, preserve artistic freedom, and uphold the institutions he loved, including his family and the Berlin Philharmonic. That decision was much criticized for its relation to German propaganda. This paper examines Furtwängler's overlapping responsibilities: civil, familial, professional, and public. Drawing from historical documents, letters, and contemporary scholarship, it argues that Furtwängler's decision to stay in the Third Reich was shaped less by complicity than by a commitment to his moral and social obligations under totalitarian rule. Each section of the paper considers how these responsibilities clashed or overlapped, revealing a man navigating impossible choices under extraordinary pressure. Furtwängler's case complicated simple narratives of heroism or collaboration and ultimately underscores how individual agency under authoritarian regimes is constrained by ethical, structural, and political forces. His legacy compels modern scholars to rethink what responsibility means in times of oppression, illuminating Furtwängler's enduring relevance in debates on morality and courage.

Introduction

In the 2001 biographical drama *Taking Sides*, at his post-WWII denazification trial regarding his actions in Nazi Germany, the world's leading orchestral conductor at the time, Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886-1954), declared: "art and politics should have nothing to do with each other!"¹ Furtwängler was, and still is, universally acknowledged as among the most brilliant musical geniuses in history. By 1923, the 37-year-old prodigy had become the principal conductor of three of Germany's most prestigious musical institutions, and even Hitler was an ardent admirer.² Furtwängler was known for his deeply philosophical and personal approach to music, treating markings on musical scores as fluid and interpretive. His recordings of Beethoven, Brahms and Bruckner sought not just precision, but metaphysical depth, marked by flexible tempos, sweeping phrasing, and a remarkably improvisational intensity in the *fortissimo* sections.³ The Greek soprano Maria Callas who closely worked with Furtwängler, exclaimed that "to me, he was Beethoven."⁴ Furtwängler's artistry transcended national boundaries to achieve global fame, but he found himself increasingly entangled in the political realities of his time. On the eve of Hitler's ascent to power and the Nazis gradually sullyng his homeland, Furtwängler faced a difficult choice: to stay, or to leave Germany. Ultimately, facing the systematic dismantling of rights under the Nazi regime—including freedom of expression and association—Furtwängler was forced to weigh his mounting responsibilities. He chose to stay and work as a freelance conductor in Germany from 1933-1945, believing he could preserve some measure of

¹ István Szabó, dir., *Taking Sides: The Wilhelm Furtwängler Case*, performed by Harvey Keitel, Stellan Skarsgård, and Moritz Bleibtreu (Paris, France: Paladin Production S.A., 2001), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9quzpymm98>.

² Sam Shirakawa, *The Devil's Music Master: The Controversial Life and Career of Wilhelm Furtwängler* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 193.

³ Berliner Philharmoniker, *Wilhelm Furtwängler: The Radio Recordings 1939–1945* (Berlin: Berlin Phil Media GmbH, 2018).

⁴ Rudolf Ondrich, "Reading Wilhelm Furtwängler Jurisprudentially: Furtwängler's Music Making in the Light of Legal Philosophy." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 31 (2018), 350. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-018-9548-y>.

artistic freedom and protect his family and orchestra even as the regime curtailed basic civil liberties. That choice became the source of his controversy. In Nazi Germany, he protected Jewish musicians and never joined the Nazi party, yet he is known as a “Nazi conductor” and “Hitler’s pampered maestro.”⁵ He wished to work as an apolitical artist, yet, under his baton, his orchestra became the *Reichsorchester*. He witnessed the Nazi regime’s systematic censorship and the eradication of rights central to cultural life, forcing him to live and work in oppression unparalleled in modern societies.

Amid Nazi Germany’s pervasive repression, Furtwängler’s multi-layered responsibilities compelled him to make morally ambiguous decisions, the center of which is his decision to remain in Germany. The totalitarian nature of the Nazi regime complicated even simple peacetime responsibilities, and Furtwängler’s reputation became tarnished as he tried to fulfill his civil, familiar, professional, and public responsibilities. His approach to navigating his responsibilities during difficult times stands as an instructive case for historians. As the framework of this essay, responsibilities are defined as “holding ourselves and others responsible for actions.”⁶ In a wartime fascist state, Furtwängler gradually lost ability to say “no” as Nazi censorship tightened its grip. Struggling to take on several roles at once under such a regime, Furtwängler was tortured from being forced to make compromises with the Nazi regime in order to protect the people and ideals for which he cared for. The extreme and complex situation that Furtwängler faced exemplified the courage it takes for citizens to prioritize moral responsibilities even in the most difficult of times, and despite Nazi appropriation of his music, he remained a role model as a man of moral rectitude who tried his best to fulfill his responsibilities under oppression.

Civil Responsibilities: Furtwängler the Protector of Fellow Musicians

As the Nazi regime stripped Jewish citizens of their fundamental rights, Furtwängler undertook the daunting responsibility to civil disobedience and saw it as his civil responsibility to shield Jewish musicians from Nazi persecution, leading him to stay in Germany where he could wield his influence to protect them. Biographer Fred Prieberg writes that “it was clear to him that he could not abandon the members of the Berlin Philharmonic to their fate—they were attached to him.”⁷ This attachment is an extraordinary responsibility to take on during wartime, when one could hardly guarantee their own survival. He ensured the safe departure of the six fully Jewish musicians in his orchestra by 1936 and protected the partially Jewish musicians until the end of the war,⁸ an astonishing achievement in an increasingly hostile and violent Germany. He directly saved the life of violinist Carl Flesch with a letter of recommendation, working tirelessly for years to personally appeal to Goebbels for Flesch’s safety.⁹ Furtwängler’s helping hand extended to all who were in need, taking as much responsibility as he could regardless of who required assistance. Perhaps the most striking testimony of Furtwängler’s consistent efforts comes from the music teacher Hugo Strelitzer, who had no personal relations to Furtwängler. When news of Strelitzer’s imprisonment and torture reached Furtwängler, he immediately and repeatedly went to personally plead to the Minister of Culture and the Police Commissar. Strelitzer was freed, and in deep gratitude, wrote of Furtwängler in 1965: “If I am alive today, I owe it to this great man...”¹⁰ Strelitzer’s words speak for many others. Furtwängler’s

⁵ Florian Scheduling, “Is it Possible to Ask Too Much of Music?” – Yehudi Menuhin and Wilhelm Furtwängler, Berlin, 1947,” *Euphonia* 1 (September 2004), accessed March 12, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/10032892/_Is_it_possible_to_ask_too_much_of_Music_Yehudi_Menuhin_and_Wilhelm_Furtw%C3%A4ngler_Berlin_1947_.

⁶ Matthew Talbert, “Moral Responsibility,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2024, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/moral-responsibility/>.

⁷ Fred K. Prieberg, *Trial of Strength: Wilhelm Furtwängler in the Third Reich*, trans. Christopher Dolan (London: Quartet Books, 1991), 42.

⁸ Prieberg, *Trial of Strength*, 130.

⁹ Shirakawa, *The Devil’s Music Master*, 256.

¹⁰ Daniel Gillis, ed, *Furtwängler Recalled*. (Tuckahoe, New York: John de Graff inc., 1965), 98.

persistent efforts prompted Georg Gerullis, Nazi Undersecretary of Culture, to remark, “Can you give me the name of a Jew who is not backed by Furtwängler?”¹¹ As a result of his efforts, over eighty survivors testified for him during his denazification trial as evidence of his courage amid the horrors of Nazi subjugation.¹²

Not only did Furtwängler fulfill his responsibilities to others, but he also exercised his responsibility of civil disobedience against an oppressive regime. Despite Himmler tapping his phone and collecting material against him, Furtwängler still worked tirelessly to resist Nazi presence at his concerts.¹³ He never joined the Nazi party or saluted Hitler, even in his presence. He refused to hang swastikas in his concert halls or conduct the Horst-Wessel-Lied, the Nazi party anthem.¹⁴ When Nazi officials organized a banquet for him after a concert, “without replying, [he] threw his score at their feet and left them,” instead returning to his Jewish secretary and friends.¹⁵ The political upheaval and subsequent complaint from the Nazis attending his concert did not stop him from small acts of resistance: throughout the war he largely refused to conduct in occupied countries, performing a total of only four times,¹⁶ and even deceiving the Nazis by purchasing fake medical certificates to avoid conducting these concerts.¹⁷ Despite the regime persecuting those who resisted against it, Furtwängler still pushed to exercise his responsibility of civil disobedience. His choice to undertake this responsibility to support the persecuted thus marks his extraordinary courage.

The complexities of his situation are often oversimplified when scholars scrutinize his actions and discuss his enduring controversy, often lacking full recognition for the extreme difficulties he faced in making his choices. The most famous words of attack came from fellow conductor Bruno Walter, who left Germany in 1933: “Consider too that you ultimately have lived for twelve years in the Nazi empire without terror, or fear of it...of what significance is your assistance in the isolated cases of a few Jews?”¹⁸ Emigre writer Thomas Mann similarly accused him of merely “staging a political show” in his acts of assistance.¹⁹ They imply that Furtwängler had a political responsibility to leave Germany, even if it meant abandoning his civil responsibilities there. These post-war comments—made when Walter and Mann were safe in California—outlined a dangerous oversight: Furtwängler’s responsibilities were more nuanced than a simple political gesture, and overlooking other parts of his responsibilities resulted in arrogant presentism. The complexities and stress of Furtwängler’s situation demand historians to approach his case with sufficient recognition for the tangible impact of his courageous actions, which are preserved in the lives he saved.

Familial Duty: Furtwängler the Guardian

As son, husband, brother, and father, Furtwängler had a deeply personal duty to his family, who were all born, raised, and located in Germany as Nazi regime gained power in government. The deep entanglement with his family members made even short tours torturous, when he is required to take a prolonged absence from his family. Furtwängler was born into a prominent family and had at three siblings; apart from his wife, Elisabeth, he also had at least three children whom he regularly wrote to.²⁰ During times of conflict, he took up the massive responsibility to care and provide for his entire family using influence and wealth, and whenever he is away, his family members

¹¹ Harvey Sachs, “Furtwängler and the Führer,” *The Yale Review* 81, no. 3 (July 1993), accessed March 12, 2025, http://oreloundation.org/journal/journalArticle/the_furtw228ngler_case.

¹² Curt Riess, *Furtwängler: Musik und Politik* (Bern, Switzerland: Alfred Scherz Verlag, 1953), 17.

¹³ Hans-Hubert Schönzeler, *Furtwängler* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990), 99.

¹⁴ Schönzeler, *Furtwängler*, 91.

¹⁵ Berta Geissmar, *Two Worlds of Music* (New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1946), 77.

¹⁶ Shirakawa, *The Devil’s Music Master*, 227.

¹⁷ Prieberg, *Trial of Strength*, 291.

¹⁸ Samuel Lipman, “Furtwängler and the Nazis,” *Commentary* (March 1993), accessed March 12, 2025, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/samuel-lipman/furtwangler-and-the-nazis/>.

¹⁹ Scheding, “Is it Possible to Ask Too Much of Music?”

²⁰ Lipman, “Furtwängler and the Nazis”.

became Wilhelm's primary concern. To stay with his family, Furtwängler had to remain in Germany, despite the option to leave. Before the war, during heightened tensions in March 1935, he wrote to his mother, saying that "you shouldn't have to worry about finances", implying that he has been continuously supplying her with enough money.²¹ In February 1944, at the height of the war, he wrote to his mother: "I hear that your apartment situation in Heidelberg is back in order. Otherwise, if you have any problems, just let me know right away. Even though I'm often far away, I can usually help you right away."²² His influence within the Nazi circles allowed him to find his mother a safe refuge in the city of Heidelberg, which was not bombed during the entirety of the war. He further mentions that "Elisabeth and the children now live in Achleiten, Post Rohr, Upper Danube, near Linz, where they are, as far as humanly possible, protected from enemy bombs."²³ His protective instinct extended not just to physical safety, but also to emotional support. In a letter to his daughter Friederike dated to October 1937, he gently urged her to open up about her inner struggles: "But if you're really very sad and don't know what to do, you should write to me and tell me what's bothering you. Can't you do that? ... We still have a lot to talk about; (also about the religious things you touch on in your letter, which are difficult to write about.) ... Always remember that I love you very much."²⁴ These words reveal not only a father's tenderness, but also the quiet emotional labor he undertook, even amidst the pressures of conducting and political compromise. His concern for Friederike's wellbeing—mental, spiritual, and personal—was just as serious as his efforts to shield her from bombs. The arrangements with his mother, wife, and children were only made possible with Furtwängler's enormous influence within the circles of the Nazi government, which would not have been possible had he left Germany in 1933.

Perhaps the most poignant example of his profound sense of familial duty came on the most heartbroken day in Wilhelm Furtwängler's life came on November 14, 1944. That day, Wilhelm learned that his mother had passed away and that "the funeral had already taken place on November 9th, and I [Wilhelm] sent her a telegram on the 12th, still unaware, announcing the birth of our son."²⁵ He found it "particularly bitter to have written to her so rarely recently" and "on the very day Märit's letter [informing him of this tragedy] arrived, I had intended to write her [his mother] a long and detailed letter, including about our child."²⁶ The unspeakable grief of a son was not to overcome him: the grief in his voice immediately cut to concern for Märit, his sister, who he asked to "come to Berlin or somewhere closer to us" because she no longer has to take care of their mother.²⁷ Albert Speer, the Minister of Armaments and War Production, had built a safe shelter in Furtwängler's Berlin residence, protecting from aerial bombings, and so Berlin was safer than anywhere else.²⁸ Even during such a moment of grief, his first

²¹ Wilhelm Furtwängler, eds. Frank Thiess, *Briefe* (Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1980), Letter 71, to his mother Adelheid. Translated from the German: *Über deine Finanzen sollst Du keine Sorgen haben.*

²² Furtwängler, *Briefe*, Letter 103, to his mother Adelheid. Translated from the German: *Ich höre, dass Deine Wohnungssache in Heidelberg wieder in Ordnung ist. Sonst, wenn Du irgendwelche Schwierigkeiten hast, teile es mir nur gleich mit. Wenn ich auch oft weit weg bin, kann ich Dir doch meistens gleich helfen.*

²³ Furtwängler, *Briefe*, Letter 103, to his mother Adelheid. Translated from the German: *Elisabeth und die Kinder wohnen jetzt in Achleiten, Post Rohr, Oberdonau, in der Nähe von Linz, wo sie nach menschlichem Ermessen vor feindlichen Fliegerbomben geschützt sind.*

²⁴ Furtwängler, *Briefe*, Letter 83, to his daughter Friederike. Translated from the German: *Wenn Du aber wirklich sehr traurig bist, und keinen rechten Rat weisst, so solltest Du an mich schreiben und mir erzählen was Dich drückt. Kannst Du das nicht? Wir haben ja auch noch sehr viel miteinander zu sprechen; (auch über die religiösen Dinge, die Du in Deinem Brief berührst, und über die es schlecht zu schreiben ist.) Liebes süßes Kind, schreibe mir bald, erzähle mir von Dir und denke immer, dass ich Dich sehr lieb habe.*

²⁵ Furtwängler, *Briefe*, Letter 108, to his wife Elisabeth. Translated from the German: *Die Beerdigung hat schon stattgefunden, am 9ten XI., und ich schickte ihr noch ahnungslos am 12ten ein Telegramm mit der Geburt unseres Sohnes.*

²⁶ Furtwängler, *Briefe*, Letter 108, to his wife Elisabeth. Translated from the German: *Besonders bitter ist mir, dass ich ihr zuletzt so selten geschrieben hatte. Ich hatte gerade an dem Tag, als Märits Brief kam, die Absicht, ihr lang und ausführlich, auch über unser Kind, zu schreiben.*

²⁷ Furtwängler, *Briefe*, Letter 107, to his sister Märit. Translated from the German: *Du kämst nach Berlin oder sonst mehr in unsere Nähe.*

²⁸ Prieberg, *Trial of Strength*, 309.

concern was for the safety and wellbeing of his siblings, and despite this setback, continued to provide for his family until he was forced to flee in 1945.

During the war, he ended the various letters to his family in loving signatures, including “Dein Vater [your father]”, “Dein W. [your W.]”, “immer immer immer Dein W. [always, always, always your W.]”, “Willi [a diminutive of Wilhelm]”, and “Viele Küsslein von deinem Vater [many kisses from your father]”.²⁹ It is clear that Furtwängler’s love and attachment to his family is palpable and motivated him throughout the war to protect and provide for them. Since moving his entire family was impossible, Wilhelm must stay in Germany, so that he could use his influence to shield for those who he cared for. His family would be left helpless and powerless had he chosen to abandon them in the times of war; thus, his decision to remain was not just a political compromise—it was an act of guardianship rooted in love, made for the family he could not bring with him.

Institutional Leadership: Furtwängler the Steward of the Philharmonic

As the longtime principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic, Wilhelm Furtwängler bore not only artistic but also institutional responsibility: he was the steward of a financially crumbling orchestra that, despite its global stature, was teetering on the edge of collapse. Publicly revered as the world’s leading orchestra, the Philharmonic was financially unsound and the whole ensemble was near structural collapse. As Prieberg notes, Furtwängler “knew that he was artistic director of a bankrupt undertaking, a fact which was nervously kept from the public.”³⁰ The orchestra suffered several major economic blows in the 1920s and 1930s. The post-WWI depression in the German economy resulted in hyperinflation such that by November 1923, the cost of a single concert program had ballooned to 200 billion Marks.³¹ Despite efforts to combat inflation by the implementation of the *Rentemark* policy in December 1923, reducing prices by 10,000%, the orchestra continued to find itself unable to cover the increasing expenses of paying its musicians.³² In 1924, the number of *Active-Mitglieder* [active members] who plays through all seasons of concerts had increased from 54 to 66, and by 1926, the orchestra was running a deficit of 90,000 RM.³³ The financial situation did not improve as the Great Depression hit the global economy. The annual subsidy of 90,000 RM from the City of Berlin was soon unable to cover the debt, which grew to 400,000 RM by 1926 and eventually escalated to 480,000 RM.³⁴ That mounting pressure was too much for any government, organization or individual to afford, and the Berlin Philharmonic soon found itself legally bankrupt.

Adding to the financial troubles of the orchestra was its legal structure. The orchestra functioned as a limited liability company, with each musician being shareholders who both rely on the orchestra to pay their salaries and collectively bear legal responsibility for the orchestra’s debts.³⁵ Hence, as a Public Limited Company, the orchestra was subject to PLC Law #64 for Germany at that time, which stipulated that any insolvent company must declare bankruptcy within three weeks. Amazingly, the orchestra’s management decided to conceal the bankruptcy for over two years, risking a fine of 5,000 RM each and up to one year in prison.³⁶ Prieberg asserts that “their behavior was as illegal as that of any common crook”, and because each musician was a shareholder, everyone in the orchestra was at risk of losing their jobs, being arrested and imprisoned, and ultimately Germany would lose its foremost orchestra.³⁷

As the principal conductor, Furtwängler had a responsibility not to allow that tragic possibility to unfold on his watch. The only way to alleviate the financial pressure was to seek sufficient funding for the orchestra, and with

²⁹ Furtwängler, *Briefe*, signatures from Letters 84, 107, 108, 70, 104, respectively

³⁰ Prieberg, *Trial of Strength*, 42.

³¹ Misha Aster, *The Reich’s Orchestra: The Berlin Philharmonic, 1933-45* (Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2012), 80.

³² On *Rentemark*

³³ Aster, *The Reich’s Orchestra*, 78.

³⁴ Aster, *The Reich’s Orchestra*, 79.

³⁵ Prieberg, *Trial of Strength*, 42.

³⁶ Prieberg, *Trial of Strength*, 42.

³⁷ Prieberg, *Trial of Strength*, 43.

the Nazis assuming power, the only viable option in front of Furtwängler was to accept state subsidy, via the government buying most of the orchestra's shares. Instead of the musicians being the shareholders, the government now holds the majority of the orchestra's shares and obtains a dominant voice in the operations of the orchestra. Aster writes that in 1933, the year of Hitler's ascendancy to the post of Prime Minister, "the Nazi Reich saved the Berlin Philharmonic from bankruptcy."³⁸ Huebel writes that in essence, "the orchestra exchanged its independence for economic security."³⁹ Had Furtwängler left the country in 1933, the orchestra would have been unable to strike the deal with the Nazi government and face dissolution, as the Nazis were clear that they "did not intend to lose Furtwängler" and the orchestra came in only second.⁴⁰ Only Furtwängler had the influence among the high-ranking members of government to strike the deal, and thus his name became inevitably tied to the transformation of the Berlin Philharmonic from an independent musical organization to the much controversial *Reichsorchestra*, the Reich's orchestra.

Furtwängler's decision to guide the orchestra through its financial crisis reflected a deep sense of responsibility, not only to the quality of music produced with the Berlin Philharmonic, but to the orchestra and the musicians themselves. Each musician's livelihood depended on the integrity of the orchestra, and to abandon the orchestra would have meant abandoning those who played in it—and the very possibility of music's survival amid political catastrophe. Despite the costs to his personal reputation and the artistic independence of the orchestra, Furtwängler's responsibility to the musicians of the orchestra played a significant role in contributing his ultimate decision to remain in Germany and with his musicians. Through times of unrest, he remained in Germany and continued in the unenviable role of steward of the orchestra until 1944, when Allied bombing destroyed the Philharmonic concert hall.⁴¹

Public Responsibilities: Furtwängler the Influential Artist

As an artist, Furtwängler initially exercised his right to independently pursue his artistic goals. However, under Nazi rule, the regime's increasing control over cultural institutions meant that this right was progressively restricted, and exercising it came with a profound responsibility: to recognize how his music could be appropriated as propaganda. His inability to fully recognize this responsibility to the German public ultimately compromised the very right to autonomous artistry he sought to preserve. Furtwängler stated that his musical principle is to pursue "a kind of high naivety" which is "simple and noble";⁴² and his artistic personality was described as "the very essence of the old and trusted values."⁴³ Hence, he is often regarded as the epitome of a 19th-century artist who believed in the purity and abstraction of art—art for art's sake. In 1933, on the eve of Hitler's ascent to power, he wrote: "art cannot be placed at the service of public life. It must be left as it is, its materials are the great primal forces."⁴⁴ This belief was echoed in 1942, writing that art can enjoy "separation from people...ineffable peace in nature and God", and that it is his lifelong goal which "is surely worth a few sacrifices."⁴⁵ As an artist, it was his right to practice art as a standalone pursuit separate from politics. To him, music was not merely an aesthetic experience but a metaphysical journey, a search for ultimate truth beyond the material world. The exercise of his right to artistic

³⁸ Aster, *The Reich's Orchestra*, 67.

³⁹ Sebastian Huebel, "Cultural Exceptionalism in Nazi Germany? The Case of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra." *Madison Historical Review* 11, no. 4 (September 2014), 2. <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol11/iss1/4>.

⁴⁰ Chris Walton, "Furtwängler the Apolitical?" *The Musical Times* 145 no. 1889 (Winter 2004), 8. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4149126>.

⁴¹ Gottfried Eberle, "A matter of the heart for the whole of Germany," *Berlin Philharmoniker*, <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/about-us/philharmonie/friends-of-the-berliner-philharmoniker/>.

⁴² Wilhelm Furtwängler, interview by Werner Egk, Hochschule für Musik, Berlin, Germany, February 27, 1951.

⁴³ Prieberg, *Trial of Strength*, 17.

⁴⁴ Wilhelm Furtwängler, *Notebooks, 1924-54*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Quartet Books, 1995), 1933

⁴⁵ Furtwängler, *Notebooks, 1924-54*, 1942.

expression cemented his reputation as an exalted conductor, his legacy secured in video and audio recordings of his concerts.

The exercise of his artistic rights blinded him from seeing some of the responsibilities as an esteemed public figure, failing to recognize that music was and has never been apolitical in Germany. In this regard, Furtwängler was unable to fully uphold his responsibility to confront the political implications of his widespread influence in society. Cultural historian Pamela Potter argues that the “‘German’ nation was a *Volk der Musik*”,⁴⁶ a people of music, tracing their roots back to the longstanding musical tradition of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner for a sense of national identity. This same *Volk der Musik* under Nazi rule would find that “the role of unity and synthesis in the symphony suited perfectly ... Nazi ideology,”⁴⁷ making music a crucial tool through which the Nazis sought legitimacy. Political appropriation thus came swiftly: Goebbels openly wrote to Furtwängler that music must be “responsible, professional, popular [*volksnah*] and militant”,⁴⁸ challenging the conductor’s ideals. Furtwängler soon found himself unable to conduct music that was not “popular” and “militant”. In 1934, when premiering avant-garde composer Paul Hindemith’s opera *Mathis der Maler*, which central theme was art and freedom,⁴⁹ the scheduled performance was forcibly cancelled and his personal assistant was forced out of the country.⁵⁰ This incident would be the prelude to many more, demonstrating the Nazi government’s iron will to ban politically dissenting music. As a result, Furtwängler was compelled to open his concert programs to government intervention which resulted in frequent political manipulation. As the Nazi regime continued to appropriate his music, Furtwängler’s career in Germany became doubly tragic: Nazi appropriation of his music both compromised his right to his brilliant artistic expression, and also limited his ability to fulfill public responsibilities, making him a symbol of a regime he resisted against.

Nevertheless, parts of Furtwängler’s responsibility were impossible to fulfill due to the Nazi regime’s active manipulations of his image. As a public figure, Nazi misportrayals of him in the media eroded his ability to express himself and lead the public against the regime as part of his responsibility. Consequently, his failure to recognize the political impact of his music cannot be singularly attributed to himself. For instance, he was forcibly conferred the ceremonial title of *Staatsrat*, or State Councilor, which could not be “refused or renounced. It was a title for life.”⁵¹ The *Staatsrat* title gave him no power, and Furtwängler never used the title, but he was always referred to as a *Staatsrat* in the newspapers, listing this title preceding all other ones. By conferring a title on Furtwängler against his will, the Nazis effectively seized control of his public image, portraying him as a loyal supporter in a narrative he had no power to shape or resist. A similar propaganda attempt was Friedrich Herzfeld’s 1941 biography of Furtwängler, published during the war a decade before Furtwängler’s death. Herzfeld, a Nazi collaborator and state-sponsored author, attempted to paint Furtwängler as “Aryan, most German, and most profound conductor,”⁵² the embodiment of a perfect German according to Nazi ideology. The antisemitic and chauvinistic lens of Nazi propaganda painted Furtwängler as a loyal supporter of the Nazi system for millions of Germans, whether they were reading this biography or the newspapers.⁵³ His ability of expression was nullified by the overwhelming intensity of Nazi propaganda which stole his music to turn against him. As his own voice outside

⁴⁶ Pamela M. Potter, “Dismantling a Dystopia: On the Historiography of Music in the Third Reich,” *Central European History* 40, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 623-651, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20457284>, 4.

⁴⁷ Karen Painter, *Symphonic Aspirations: German Music and Politics, 1900-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 213.

⁴⁸ Wilhelm Furtwängler and Joseph Goebbels, “Correspondence between Wilhelm Furtwängler and Joseph Goebbels about Art and the State” (letter), April 1933.

⁴⁹ Misha Aster, *The Reich’s Orchestra: The Berlin Philharmonic, 1933-45* (Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2012), 23.

⁵⁰ Geissmar, *Two Worlds of Music*, 122.

⁵¹ Shirakawa, *The Devil’s Music Master*, 168.

⁵² Friedrich Herzfeld, *Wilhelm Furtwängler: Weg und Wesen* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1941), 133.

⁵³ Albrecht Riethmüller and Gregor Herzfeld, eds., *Furtwänglers Sendung: Essays zum Ethos des deutschen Kapellmeisters* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2020), 125.

of music gradually became silenced, his image and his music were in effect out of his control, thus rendering it impossible to fulfill his responsibility of responsibly leading the public.

Final Words

Musicologist Peter Palmer gravely asserts that “the posthumous denazification of Furtwängler is doomed to run to all eternity.”⁵⁴ This “trial” by posterity consists of two conflicting historical viewpoints that constantly struggle to reshape the narrative of Furtwängler. Scholars such as musicologists Michael Custodis and Chris Walton take the radical stance that Furtwängler voluntarily allowed his music to be appropriated by the Nazi regime, Walton even contesting that Furtwängler held Nazi beliefs himself.^{55 56} This extreme is contrasted with the apologetic view held by many prominent historians, such as Curt Riess, Furtwängler’s first biographer, who believed that Furtwängler was physically compliant but spiritually resistant, and his presence in Germany did not mean complicity, but rather courage.⁵⁷ While history has no definitive narrative, the contemporary opinion of Furtwängler resides somewhere in the middle, as does this paper. A modern viewpoint will no doubt recognize the imperfections but also the merit of his choices, as his flawed undertaking of civil, familiar, professional, and public responsibilities is contrasted with his incredible bravery in his attempt to fulfill his responsibilities. He fought to uphold his dwindling responsibilities even under unprecedented tyranny in modern civil societies. His quiet yet intense struggle vividly illustrates the profound difficulty of undertaking moral responsibilities under the crushing weight of a violent and all-consuming totalitarian regime.

Modern audiences revisiting the 2001 film about Furtwängler will surely feel both sympathy and frustration towards the character. After all, how could art “have nothing to do with politics”, when the Nazi regime tied their politics so closely to his work and presence in Germany?⁵⁸ For us, his story remains a reminder that complex circumstances can challenge the very definitions of responsibilities and how one navigates them. Furtwängler’s case, then, can be interpreted as a social experiment that documents human responses to war and dictatorship. To avoid the internal torment that plagued Furtwängler for his whole life—his daughter recounted that by the end of his life he was spiritually exhausted and “wanted to die”—a delicate balance must be struck.⁵⁹ That balance is not easy to achieve, as Furtwängler illustrates with the 12 years of his struggle under an oppressive regime as an influential figure facing morally complex choices. Each human has a multitude of roles and responsibilities. Furtwängler’s life will remain a case of a man who courageously undertook but ultimately did not have enough power to fulfill his responsibilities in times of war and despotism. He defends himself in a letter to Thomas Mann, a staunch critic of his, and in defense of himself to all of his judges from posterity: “After all, the point is not to dwell on the past, but to work on constructing a new world.”⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Peter Palmer, “Review”, *Tempo* no. 184 (1993): 35.

⁵⁵ Riethmüller and Herzfeld, *Furtwänglers Sendung*, 107.

⁵⁶ Chris Walton, “Furtwängler the Apolitical?” *The Musical Times* 145, no. 1889 (Winter 2004): 5-25, accessed March 12, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4149126>.

⁵⁷ Curt Riess, *Furtwängler: Musik und Politik* (Bern, Switzerland: Alfred Scherz Verlag, 1953).

⁵⁸ István Szabó, dir., *Taking Sides*.

⁵⁹ Frederike Kunz (née Furtwängler), “Frederike Kunz Tells”, interview by Ute Neumerkel, Archive Ute Neumerkel, 2010.

⁶⁰ Furtwängler, *Briefe*, Letter 162, to Thomas Mann. Translated from the German: *Es handelt sich doch schliesslich darum, nicht an der Vergangenheit hängen zu bleiben, sondern an einem neuen Aufbau der Welt zu arbeiten.*

Annotated Bibliography

Primary sources

Aber, A. "Music and Politics in the Third Reich." *The Musical Times* 85, no. 1216 (June 1944): 179-180. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/922027>

Aber, whose first name was not given, responds to Geissmar's *Two Worlds of Music*, the newer edition which is also cited below. Geissmar was Furtwängler's personal assistant before escaping to England, and Aber laments the debilitating effects of Nazi censorship on music, comparing the two worlds depicted by Geissmar and relating to his personal experiences. Aber's response supplements Geissmar's memoir and illustrates the impact of Nazi censorship on German music.

Berliner Philharmoniker, *Wilhelm Furtwängler: The Radio Recordings 1939–1945*. Berlin: Berlin Phil Media GmbH, 2018.

Furtwängler served in the capacity of principal conductor for the Berlin Philharmonic intermittently for thirty years until his death, and his book accompanies his extensive discography in that post. This book is one of the best testaments to Furtwängler's musical genius, containing interviews and recollections about him from his colleagues in all fields.

Furtwängler, Wilhelm. Interview by Werner Egk. Hochschule für Musik, Berlin, Germany. February 27, 1951.

Werner Egk was a fellow German composer whom Furtwängler kept in close professional contact with. In this post-denazification interview, Furtwängler discusses his musical principles and details in conducting, such as dynamics, tempo, and staging, emphasizing his unwavering belief in absolute music.

Furtwängler, Wilhelm. *Concerning Music*. Translated by L.J. Lawrence. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1953.

Concerning Music consists of seven of Furtwängler's conversations and interviews discussing his affinity for classical music, finding modern music lacking expressive depth.

Furtwängler, Wilhelm. *Briefe*. Edited by Frank Thiess. Wiesbaden: F. A. Brockhaus, 1980.

Briefe, or letters, is a compilation of personal and professional letters Furtwängler sent throughout his life to either family members, or fellow artists or scholars with whom he discussed philosophical and artistic matters. This collection of personal and professional letters reveals Furtwängler's consistent efforts to assist those around him during the war.

Furtwängler, Wilhelm. *Furtwängler on Music*. Edited and translated by Ronald Taylor. Aldershot, United Kingdom: Scolar Press, 1991.

This book is a collection of essays written by Furtwängler on individual composers throughout German history, whose works he regularly performed. Published after the war, this collection avoids political discussion even when regarding controversial composers like Wagner, reflecting Furtwängler's desire to separate musical appreciation from political tensions. He intended to foster cultural reconciliation and to reestablish music as a unifying force in the war-torn Germany.

Furtwängler, Wilhelm. *Notebooks, 1924-54*. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. Edited by Michael Tanner. London: Quartet Books, 1995.

These private notebooks contain the most intimate musical and personal thoughts Furtwängler had in the thirty years he was the principal conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. Many of these ideas are still audible in his recordings. These notebooks reveal Furtwängler's belief that he could keep music apolitical during the Third Reich, especially when examining a comparison of pre-war and post-war beliefs, informing his decision to remain in Germany.

Furtwängler, Wilhelm, Goebbels, Joseph, "Correspondence between Wilhelm Furtwängler and Joseph Goebbels about Art and the State" (letter), April 1933.

In this published exchange in a newspaper, Furtwängler publicly defends Jewish conductors and opposes Nazi cultural policies. Goebbels' reply, also publicly printed, foreshadows future Nazi censorship, making definitions about state-approved and "acceptable" music that Furtwängler would go on to resist in the future.

Eberle, Gottfried. "A Matter of the Heart for the Whole of Germany." *Berlin Philharmoniker*. Accessed August 4, 2025. <https://www.berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/about-us/philharmonie/friends-of-the-berliner-philharmoniker/>

This entry details the destruction of the Philharmonie concert hall in 1944.

Geissmar, Berta. *Two Worlds of Music*. New York: Creative Age Press, Inc., 1946.

Geissmar, Furtwängler's personal assistant, fled to England with a visa obtained by Furtwängler. She recounts anecdotes illustrating his opposition to the Nazis and his efforts to help her escape, providing a close-up view of his character.

Gillis, Daniel, ed. *Furtwängler Recalled*. Tuckahoe, New York: John de Graff Inc., 1965.

This book is a compilation of memories by his wife, children, former orchestra members, soloists, musicologists, and other scholars who had personal relationships with Furtwängler. The collection offers numerous perspectives on Furtwängler's personal and professional life. It includes accounts, like that of Hugo Strelitzer, that verify Furtwängler's efforts to ensure others' safety.

Goebbels, Joseph. *Der Steile Aufstieg: Reden und Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1942/43*. München: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1944.

This collection of speeches by Goebbels, the minister of propaganda, reveals the Nazi ministry's exploitation of Furtwängler's prestige. Goebbels sees Furtwängler as the leader of the German musical world, and he increasingly distorts Furtwängler's image to imply that he is a Nazi collaborator.

Herzfeld, Friedrich. *Wilhelm Furtwängler: Weg und Wesen*. Leipzig: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, 1941.

This biography came in 1941, backed by the Nazi regime, and aims to depict Furtwängler as the epitome of a perfect German in Nazi ideology. Contrasting this work with modern scholarship reveals how later historians have worked to disentangle Furtwängler's actual convictions and artistic legacy and analyze his rights and responsibilities beneath.

Kunz, Frederike, (nee Furtwängler). "Frederike Kunz tells", interview by Ute Neumerkel, *Archive Ute Neumerkel*, 2010.

Frederike Kunz was Wilhelm Furtwängler's daughter. Her distant memories of her father are some of the last remaining eyewitness accounts of Furtwängler as a person. She emphasizes the torment Furtwängler felt throughout his life and the exhaustion of navigating the oppression of Nazi Germany.

Matzner, Joachim, ed. *Furtwängler: Analyse, Dokument, Protokoll*. Zürich: Atlantis Musikbuch Verlag, 1986.

This compilation of original documents relating to Furtwängler notably includes unpublished documents and essays about and by Furtwängler and a complete list of concert programs that Furtwängler gave during the war. It is a clear indication that Furtwängler never gave in to Nazi demands to perform Nazi-sponsored music works in his concerts, instead adhering to the traditional repertoire of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and Mahler.

Secondary sources

Aster, Misha. *The Reich's Orchestra: The Berlin Philharmonic, 1933-45*. Ontario: Mosaic Press, 2012.

Aster examines the Berlin Philharmonic's finances during the Nazi era, arguing that financial pressures troubling his orchestra are also an underlying reason for Furtwängler to keep performing, a point I ultimately did not have room to discuss.

Berry, Mark. "Romantic Modernism: Bach, Furtwängler, Adorno." *New German Critique* 35, no. 2 (104) (Summer 2018): 71–102. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1215/0094033X-2008-004>

Mark Berry's theoretical study focuses on Furtwängler's conducting style opposite to Toscanini who was a follower of textual literalism, in contrast to Furtwängler's regular artistic liberty taken with the music score. Berry analyzes Furtwängler's conducting style in contrast to Toscanini, focusing on Furtwängler's artistic liberties with musical scores.

Furtwängler, Florian. *Wilhelm Furtwängler - Eine Dokumentation, 1968*; Berlin, Germany, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wFFFeCZEnk>

This documentary was made by Wilhelm Furtwängler's step-nephew. Florian's documentary defends his uncle, arguing that Furtwängler's physical presence in Germany did not preclude spiritual resistance. His documentary is a step further towards a more contemporary understanding of Furtwängler.

Frühauf, Tina. "Music and Politics after the Holocaust: Menuhin's Berlin Concerts of 1947 and Their Aftermath." *Science, Thought, and Culture* 187 (September-October 2011): 887-904. Accessed March 12, 2025. doi: 10.3989/arbor.2011.751n5006

Frühauf examines Yehudi Menuhin's 1947 Berlin concerts and their aftermath, exploring the controversies surrounding Furtwängler and the origins of the view that he was complicit with the Nazis. She explores the role of Furtwängler's music in shaping post-Holocaust memory and identity and cultural reconciliation.

Huebel, Sebastian. "Cultural Exceptionalism in Nazi Germany? The Case of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra." *Madison Historical Review* 11, no. 4 (September 2014): 0-14. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/mhr/vol11/iss1/4>

Huebel examines the Berlin Philharmonic's complex relationship with Nazi cultural policies, arguing that their perceived "exceptionalism" both protected and endangered them as they navigated artistic freedom and authoritarian pressures.

Lipman, Samuel. "Furtwänglers and the Nazis." *Commentary* (March 1993). Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.commentary.org/articles/samuel-lipman/furtwangler-and-the-nazis/>

Lipman analyzes Furtwängler's interactions with Nazi authorities, evaluating the ethical dilemmas he faced and illuminating the broader debate on artists' responsibilities in oppressive environments.

Jaszoltowski, Saskia. "Furtwänglers Sendung: Essays zum Ethos des deutschen Kapellmeisters." *Musicologica Austriaca: Journal for Austrian Music Studies* 62, no. 11 (November 2021): 1-13. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9698-0044>

Jaszoltowski's article is a review of the book edited by Riethmüller and Herzfeld, a collection of essays that form the foundation for modern critical analysis of Furtwängler. This article helps the reader connect the twelve separate essays into one cohesive narrative that is similar to the hostile stance explored in Frühauf's study.

Ondrich, Rudolf Michael. "Reading Wilhelm Furtwängler Jurisprudentially: Furtwängler's Music Making in the Light of Legal Philosophy." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 31 (2018): 349-387. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-018-9548-y>

Ondrich analyzes Furtwängler's performances through the lens of jurisprudence, arguing that Furtwängler acted like a legal philosopher. He argues that the scathing quality of tone in Furtwängler's performance of Beethoven's Ninth during the 1942 concert, which Hitler was in attendance, was a symbolic representation of his quiet but brutal fight against the Nazis.

Painter, Karen. *Symphonic Aspirations: German Music and Politics, 1900-1945*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Painter organizes German diaries, journals, newspapers, and unpublished materials into chronological order to illustrate the evolution of the connection between German music and politics over time. She reaches the conclusion that the two were never separate, and music has always served as a source of legitimacy for German statesmen, a phenomenon that the Nazis were not afraid to exploit. Her study suggests that Furtwängler should have recognized the political implications of his music, attributing responsibility to him as an influential artist.

Palmer, Peter. "Recent Furtwängler Books." *Tempo* 184 (March 1993): 31-38. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040298200002643>

Palmer's review article reviews opposing viewpoints that highlight the controversy surrounding Furtwängler, concluding that he will be forever judged by posterity due to the divisive scholarship on him.

Potter, Pamela M. "Dismantling a Dystopia: On the Historiography of Music in the Third Reich." *Central European History* 40, no. 4 (Dec., 2007): 623-651. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20457284>

Potter, a 20th century cultural historian focused on Germany, examines historical scholarship narratives surrounding music in Nazi Germany. She argues that oversimplified depictions obscure the realities faced by musicians which were far more complex and emphasizes the need to revisit the overly simplistic dichotomy of a “good versus evil” framework, advocating for more nuanced interpretations of artists' rights, responsibilities, and agency under authoritarian regimes.

Prieberg, Fred K. *Trial of Strength: Wilhelm Furtwängler in the Third Reich*. Translated by Christopher Dolan. London: Quartet Books, 1991.

Prieberg's book is the seminal work in the category of Furtwängler scholarship, one of the first to detail Furtwängler's life and music and emphasize the extreme situations that he faced and the courage in response to that. He argues that exercising the rights of creative independence and civil disobedience under oppression is itself a significant and heavy responsibility for artists caught between oppressive demands and personal conscience.

Riethmüller, Albrecht, Herzfeld, Gregor, eds. *Furtwänglers Sendung Essays zum Ethos des deutschen Kapellmeisters*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2020.

This collection consists of twelve essays critiquing Furtwängler's ethics. While these essays draw on established philosophical frameworks and present ethically coherent arguments, they often overlook the gradual escalation of the regime's control and the extreme difficulty of assessing individual choices under extreme constraints. Despite at times appearing overly confident in hindsight, these critiques offer a necessary counterbalance to more sympathetic interpretations like those of Riess and Prieberg, contributing to a more complete and more critical understanding of Furtwängler's legacy.

Riess, Curt. *Furtwängler: Musik und Politik*. Bern, Switzerland: Alfred Scherz Verlag, 1953.

As the first post-war biographer and a witness at Furtwängler's denazification trial, Riess had access to crucial primary evidence. Having personally heard witness accounts at Furtwängler's trial, Riess takes a sympathetic stance in his biography, which, despite Furtwängler's complaint that it didn't devote enough attention to his music, remains a valuable contemporary reflection on his political legacy.

Sachs, Harvey. “Furtwängler and the Führer,” *The Yale Review* 81, no. 3 (July 1993). Accessed March 12, 2025. http://orelfoundation.org/journal/journalArticle/the_furtw228ngler_case

Sachs provides a comprehensive review of historiography on Furtwängler, focusing on his music's enduring appeal despite the controversies surrounding his life and choices under Nazi rule.

Scheding, Florian. ““Is it possible to ask too much of music?” – Yehudi Menuhin and Wilhelm Furtwängler, Berlin, 1947.” *Euphonia* 1 (September 2004). Accessed March 12, 2025. https://www.academia.edu/10032892/_Is_it_possible_to_ask_too_much_of_Music_Yehudi_Menuhin_and_Wilhelm_Furtw%C3%A4ngler_Berlin_1947_

Scheding's article examines Furtwängler's post-war life and focuses on his collaboration with Yehudi Menuhin. He appraises Furtwängler's impact through the popularity of his concerts, emphasizing the power of music to heal and unify people.

Schreiber, Wolfgang. “Furtwängler: An Important Reassessment.” (lecture) Matinee of the Wilhelm Furtwängler Society, Berlin, September 15, 2024.

Schreiber's lecture asks his audience to recognize the immense depth in Furtwängler's music and feel his personality through his music, despite the technological limitations of these old recordings. He argues that Furtwängler's musical genius is still significant even if his actions are contentious.

Schönzeler, Hans-Hubert. *Furtwängler*. Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1990.

This comparatively short biography, written by an acquaintance, provides an overview of Furtwängler's life and confirms existing accounts. It serves as a helpful introduction to the Furtwängler case.

Shirakawa, Sam. *The Devil's Music Master: The Controversial Life and Career of Wilhelm Furtwängler*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Shirakawa's seminal book incorporates almost every piece of available evidence as well as the biographies published before him—Riess, Gillis, Prieberg—to explore both his political myopia and moral courage. Shirakawa analyzes Furtwängler's rights and responsibilities, providing a basis for further discussion.

Szabó, István, dir. *Taking Sides: The Wilhelm Furtwängler Case*. Performed by Harvey Keitel, Stellan Skarsgård, and Moritz Bleibtreu, 2001; Paris, France: Paladin Production S.A, 2001.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9quzpymm98>

This historical drama, aptly titled *Taking Sides*, illustrates Furtwängler's dilemma: choosing between remaining in Nazi Germany to protect his loved ones or escaping to make a political statement. *Taking Sides* never takes sides, and it leaves the audience plenty of room to choose for themselves—the Furtwängler case presented here as food for thought without taking a definitive stance.

Talbert, Matthew. "Moral Responsibility." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2024.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/moral-responsibility/>.

This entry defines rights as entitlements to actions, a definition applicable to Furtwängler's situation.

Walton, Chris. "Furtwängler the Apolitical?" *The Musical Times* 145 no. 1889 (Winter 2004): 5-25. Accessed March 12, 2025. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4149126>

Walton's analysis of Furtwängler's notebooks suggests they contain an underlying alignment with Nazi ideology. However, his analysis relies heavily on interpreting isolated words in Furtwängler's writing through a modern lens which often ignores the writing's historical context and the fluid nature of language. His approach risks projecting contemporary meanings onto ambiguous phrases, ultimately weakening the credibility of the argument.