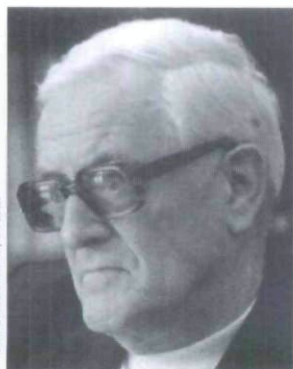

BLACK OR BROWN? HEINRICH SUTERMEISTER IN APARTHEID'S WEB

Chris Walton

Heinrich Sutermeister, late 1980s.
Photo: Hans Müller, Zurich



When the Swiss composer Heinrich Sutermeister (1910–1995) celebrated his 80th birthday in 1990, a discordant note was sounded by Antje Müller in the main Swiss musicological journal *Dissonanz*. Sutermeister had enjoyed his first major successes in Nazi Germany, and Müller now subjected this fact to more intensive scrutiny than had anyone before her, questioning how ‘neutral’ a creative artist can be in his dealings with a totalitarian state. While acknowledging that Sutermeister had written no overtly political music, she pointed out that his compositional style of the time – a mixture of Romanticism and the moderately Modernist with a dash of Orff – was bound to appeal to the proponents of a Nazi aesthetic. Furthermore, his acceptance of commissions from Nazi Germany contrasted uneasily with his later claims to have remained an ‘unpolitical artist’.¹ Müller’s article prompted an outcry amongst those well-disposed to the composer, who felt that an inopportune moment had been chosen to hunt for skeletons in the closet. Others, however, felt that a hitherto little-explored chapter of Swiss music history was at last being opened. The issue was particularly sensitive, because the position of Sutermeister had borne no small resemblance to that of Switzerland itself during the Second World War. The question posed in each case was: at what point does economic cooperation with a morally bankrupt regime turn from being arguably necessary to indisputably inexcusable?

Heinrich Sutermeister was born in Feuerthalen in Canton Zurich in 1910, the son of a Protestant vicar. He attended grammar school in Basle, then enrolled at the local university to study French and German. His interest in music proved the stronger, however, and so he moved to Munich in 1931 in order to study composition at the Music Academy with Walter Courvoisier (an old friend of Sutermeister’s father). While in Munich, Sutermeister became acquainted with Carl Orff and Werner Egk. He took several private lessons with the former, and they struck up a friendship that was to last until Orff’s death in 1982. Sutermeister returned to Switzerland in 1934, where he worked as a répétiteur at the Berne City Theatre. His first opera was a radio opera, written to a commission from Berne Radio in 1935–6 and first broadcast on 15 October 1936 (it did not receive its first stage performance until 1949). It was an adaptation of Jeremias Gotthelf’s novella *novella Die schwarze Spinne* (*The Black Spider*), the libretto being by the composer’s friend Albert Rösler. Sutermeister’s next opera was a setting of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, in German, to a libretto that the composer compiled himself. It was accepted by Karl Böhm in early 1939 for the Dresden State Opera, and first performed on 13 April 1940. It was an immediate, immense success, and was in the ensuing months taken up by dozens of opera houses

¹ Antje Müller: ‘Heinrich Sutermeister, der “Neutrale” im NS-Staat’, in *Dissonanz* No. 25, August 1990, pp. 11–14.

across Germany and Switzerland. This success afforded Sutermeister a degree of financial independence that few composers knew in the 20th century. In 1942, he used the proceeds to buy a little villa near Morges in French Switzerland that has superb views of the surrounding, gently rolling landscape (Sutermeister's good taste is shared by other successful men – the racing driver Michael Schumacher today lives in a large, nearby chateau).

Sutermeister himself referred to his *Romeo and Juliet* as 'late Verdi using modern [musical] means'. Verdi and Boito were obviously his models in paring down Shakespeare's text, though Sutermeister perhaps went a little too far. In order to give maximum emphasis to the love element, the warring families themselves are all but forgotten, even though they are the *raison d'être* of the whole plot. The result of this is not just a romanticization of the drama, but – in a sense – its depoliticization (which fact also thoroughly aligned the composer with the neutral, fence-sitting policies of his government). Nevertheless, the opera's combination of Orffian directness, an accessibly late-Romantic/early Modernist musical language and a quasi-Verdian dramatic sweep is an impressive achievement. Sutermeister here displays remarkable powers of orchestration, a real gift for the dramatic moment, and a high degree of literary taste. A further opera for Dresden, *Der Sturm*, based on Shakespeare's *Tempest*, was not as successful at its première in 1942. The 'monodrama' *Niobe*, to a libretto by the composer's brother Peter, was commissioned by the Berlin State Opera, but first performed in Zurich in 1946.² It tells the Ancient Greek myth of Niobe, whose arrogance led to the deaths of all her children. This work was singled out by Antje Müller for being 'obviously war propaganda ...'. The work's intention is clear: the mothers of fallen "war heroes" should accept their death as the work of inexorable fate, and should mourn silently.³ While this opera is undoubtedly problematical (the libretto is weak, and its mixture of dance and song an unhappy one), Müller's reading is somewhat over-enthusiastic and difficult to support. Sutermeister's own interpretation of 40 years later, namely that Niobe represents those who allowed their sons to die senselessly in the cause of dictatorships,⁴ is admittedly convenient, but remains the most convincing. There is no glorification of death in the opera, but clear criticism of how human pride leads to the suffering of the innocent.

Neither the *Sturm*, nor *Niobe*, nor any of Sutermeister's subsequent operas matched the popularity of *Romeo*. Nevertheless, his success as a composer continued well into the 1950s and '60s – his Requiem, for example, was given its world première in 1952 by Herbert von Karajan, with Elisabeth Schwarzkopf as solo soprano. In 1963, Sutermeister accepted a professorship in composition in Hanover, his status being such that he was required to travel there only for four days in every month. He wrote several more operas, all of them well-crafted, both in text and music, and which thoroughly deserve to be performed. His final opera, *König Bérenger I*, to his own libretto after Ionesco, was commissioned by the Bavarian State Opera, and first performed there in 1985. The present writer attended a performance of *Bérenger* in Schaffhausen at the time of the composer's 80th birthday celebrations; the final scene in particular has remained in the memory as remarkably beautiful.

² Peter Sutermeister: *Niobe. Oper in zwei Akten für Sopran, Doppelchor, Ballett und Orchester*. Textbuch. Mainz: B. Schotts Söhne, n.d. [1947?].

³ Antje Müller: *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁴ See Heinrich Sutermeister: 'Meine Bühnenwerke – Ein Gespräch mit Denis-François Rauss', in Dorothea Baumann, ed.: *Musiktheater. Zum Schaffen von Schweizer Komponisten des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Bonstetten: Theaterkultur-Verlag, 1983, p. 152.

Sutermeister was one of the most versatile composers of his day, turning his gifts just as easily to choral and absolute music. His essentially tonal style, however, proved less popular on the Central European music scene from the 1960s onwards. Although the number of performances of his works dropped in these years, the ascendancy of the Post-Modern aesthetic at the close of the 20th century has made his music once again 'acceptable'. Recordings and performances are no longer so few and far between, and his *Schwarze Spinne* has even been given its American première, which took place at the Gotham Chamber Opera in New York in February 2004.

The present writer became personally acquainted with Sutermeister in the early 1990s, upon being appointed head of Music Division of the Zentralbibliothek Zürich (the Zurich Central Library). Sutermeister's music manuscripts and letters had been deposited there just a few years previously, and it was naturally common practice to maintain regular personal contact with our composers. My first visit to his home in western Switzerland was admittedly undertaken with a certain degree of apprehension on my part, given the ripples that had been made by *Dissonanz's* recent accusations of his having colluded with Nazi Germany. However, the man I then met was quite different from the supposedly right-wing, self-centred artist whom I had anticipated. He proved not just charming – genuinely so, without affectation – but also modest, politically liberal, and infectiously passionate about both music and literature (the Russian novelists of the late 19th century being his particular favourites). This was a man whom I in future always looked forward to visiting (and there were several more visits over the ensuing years, each of which merely confirmed the impressions gained on our first meeting). Sutermeister's wife impressed just as much: his intellectual equal, though politically perhaps more sensitive than he, and an equally wonderful story-teller.⁵

When asked, Sutermeister himself told freely of his student years in Munich, how – for example – his lunch in a beer garden had been interrupted by the arrival at a nearby table of Hitler and his cronies (some two years before coming to power), and how he had overheard Hitler waxing lyrical about a girl he had seen on stage the night before ('Das ist eine rassige Tänzerin!' he had exclaimed – 'She's a fiery dancer!'). In conversation with the present writer, Sutermeister tried neither to defend nor to excuse his contacts with Nazi Germany, though he did mention in passing that he had refused to accept any official honours or prizes (which is verifiably true). His stance was that his success as a composer was a legitimate reward for his creative work, dependent upon the music-loving (ticket-buying) public, not on political considerations. Today, we look askance at any composer who can see an objective distinction between being offered prizes and commissions from Nazi Germany – the former to be turned down for being 'political', the latter to be accepted on purely artistic grounds – as it smacks of someone with a selective conscience. And yet, if we wish to be fair to Sutermeister, we must acknowledge that he did not have the benefit of our retrospective frame of reference. Nor was his stance any different from that of the Swiss government at the time, which maintained close economic and

⁵ My favourite story remains Verena Sutermeister's tale of her father – a doctor in Austria and an acquaintance of the Bruckner family – who, after the composer's death, rescued an important manuscript from the flower pots of the latter's nephew. 'Des is guat für die Pflonzen' ['It's good for the plants'] the latter had explained enthusiastically with regard to the porous paper that his uncle had used to write on.

cultural links with Germany. Sutermeister was just 30 years old when he achieved overnight fame with *Romeo*, and the temptations that came with it would have overruled the scruples of most men.

There is a largely forgotten episode in Sutermeister's life that, on the surface, is of potentially equal embarrassment to his memory, but can also serve to throw his experiences in Nazi Germany into relief: his visit to South Africa in 1964. The invitation for the visit came to him in a letter of 4 August 1962 from Bruno Peyer and Peter Haffter of the 'Music Theatre Pretoria', based at UNISA (the University of South Africa). Both men were originally from Zurich, and Haffter had sung in the chorus at a performance of Sutermeister's opera *Die schwarze Spinne* in Zurich in 1957. Haffter was now a lecturer of Romance languages at the University of South Africa, while Peyer worked at the music library of the SABC. The 'Music Theatre' had evolved out of a workshop branch of the 'Pretoria Opera Group', in which both men were active, and which had itself been formed just a few years earlier, in 1956, under the auspices of the then Prime Minister Johannes Strydom.⁶ Haffter and Peyer now proposed a performance in South Africa of Sutermeister's *Schwarze Spinne*, to be combined with a visit to the country by the composer himself. Sutermeister found the idea immediately attractive, as he confirmed in a letter to Peyer and Haffter of 10 August 1962. He also wrote to Schott to suggest that he and they facilitate the production by together releasing the Music Theatre from paying any royalties and from all music hire costs. Schott agreed without demur. On 12 May 1963, the Music Theatre wrote to confirm that a translation of the opera into Afrikaans was almost finished, and confirmed that the composer's presence would be welcome. Further correspondence included an invitation to give several lectures. Sutermeister was keen to go, but was concerned, however, about the possible political consequences of visiting South Africa. The international boycott of the country had not yet come about, but in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 and the declaration of a Republic in 1961, South Africa was rapidly acquiring pariah status. Although neither the Rivonia trial of 1963 nor the subsequent imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and his colleagues is mentioned in Sutermeister's extant correspondence, it was probably this that prompted him to ask for advice from the Swiss Arts Council, Pro Helvetia, in late 1963. Pro Helvetia was very much in favour of his going ahead with the visit, but in turn consulted the Swiss government in a letter of 18 December 1963. The answer was positive, and Pro Helvetia wrote to Sutermeister on 6 January 1964 that he should accept the invitation to South Africa 'without any misgivings'.

Sutermeister's visit accordingly took place from mid-February to the beginning of April 1964. The travel costs to and from South Africa were covered by Pro Helvetia, all costs inside the country by the 'Music Theatre Pretoria' (the present writer has not been able to prove his suspicion that these costs were in fact borne by the South African authorities, though given the low-budget nature of the Theatre's productions and the high-cost, high-profile status accorded to the composer during his trip, it is highly likely). Sutermeister flew rather than taking a boat, though on doctor's orders he broke his journey at several points along the way on account of irregularities in his blood pressure. The first performance of *Die schwarze Spinne* (now *Die swart spinnekop*) took place in the Little Theatre in Pretoria on Saturday, 29 February, as the second half of a double bill with Joseph Haydn's *Apothecary* (which

⁶ See J.J.P. Steynberg: *Die pretoriase operagroep*. BMus thesis for the University of Pretoria, undated, pp. 10 & 36.

was sung in English). The production, conducted by Bruno Peyer, employed a mixture of professionals and amateurs. The reviews on the following Monday in *The Pretoria News* and the leading conservative Johannesburg daily *Die Transvaler* were largely positive. Unfortunately for Sutermeister, the beginning of his trip coincided with a visit to South Africa of Arthur Fiedler (of Boston Pops fame), who attracted more press attention than did he.

According to Sutermeister himself, he had requested specifically that he be allowed to visit a 'Bantu university' while in South Africa. This wish was granted, and he was taken to the relatively new 'University College of the North' in Turfloop, several kilometres outside Pietersburg in the Northern Transvaal (now Polokwane in the Limpopo Province). We do not know whether or not he was informed that this had been founded primarily as an agricultural college, with no connection whatever to music, though it seems that he did not give a talk there. He did, however, give a lecture at the 'Indian school in Pretoria' (presumably the Pretoria Indian Boys' High School), visited Black schools in the company of a missionary by the name of Schneider who hailed originally from Lausanne, and was taken to see the Black prison Leeuwkop in northern Johannesburg. Sutermeister could not have known, however, that Leeuwkop was something of a Potemkin village. A colleague of the present writer, who passed her bar exam in 1964, has related how everyone in her year was invited to visit the prison, and was served a lavish dinner by prisoners dressed in fine uniforms. The overall impression conveyed was one of humane treatment in exceptionally fine conditions; neither she nor her colleagues were ever invited to any other prison to see the squalor that was actually closer to the norm.⁷



Leeuwkop Prison catering
Photo: South African Prison Service



Leeuwkop Prison Choir
Photo: South African Prison Service

⁷ Conversation with the colleague in question, in early 2006.

While in Pretoria, the composer had been granted the remarkable privilege of a one-to-one audience of an hour with Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd. According to Verwoerd, 'the grotesque excesses' of *apartheid*, such as separate park benches, lifts and the like, were a concession to right-wing extremists amongst the country's farmers, but were in any case not felt to be insulting by Black citizens. Furthermore, he said, measures were going to be taken against the misuse of Blacks as cheap labour in the farming sector, and the most pressing concern was 'to force the Bantu' to 'settle down and engage in rational agriculture'.⁸ Since Verwoerd, as the prime architect of *apartheid*, was directly responsible for the 'grotesque excesses' mentioned (and many more besides), and since *apartheid* was predicated upon the exploitation of cheap Black labour to improve the living standards of the white minority, we cannot read these comments without a degree of incredulity. But the wily, urbane Verwoerd obviously convinced Sutermeister – as he did so many others – that he was a decent man reacting as humanely as possible to difficult circumstances beyond his control, rather than the man in fact responsible for creating, controlling and perpetuating inhumane circumstances. One wonders which of his Black compatriots Verwoerd had taken the trouble to consult about their supposedly benign attitude to 'whites only' park benches, or which right-wing farmers had complained to him about the necessity for 'whites only' lifts.

Sutermeister's visit to South Africa was rounded off by a trip to the Cape, where he visited both Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town, the latter institution holding a concert of his music in his honour on 20 March. His return journey in early April was made via the Sudan, where he made a point of going to see the Nuba tribe later made famous through the photographs of Leni Riefenstahl. For all his care to be politically correct, however, Sutermeister's visit went neither unnoticed nor without controversy. On 9 March 1964, Abdul S. Minty wrote to Pro Helvetia to complain about its support of Sutermeister's lecture tour (Minty was a founding member and Secretary of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in London, a colleague of leading ANC members and the man largely responsible for having South Africa excluded from the Olympic movement). Pro Helvetia then wrote in turn to Sutermeister, asking blandly whether or not the 'problem of *apartheid*' had at all been raised in conversation with him during his visit, or whether he had 'perhaps' received the impression that 'members of other races' had from the outset been barred from attending certain of his lectures. Given that Sutermeister had spoken at several institutions of higher learning (such as the University of Stellenbosch, Verwoerd's *alma mater* and a bastion of *apartheid*) where no attempt was made to hide the fact that all 'members of other races' (excepting gardeners, toilet cleaners and other menial workers) were from the outset banned from the campus, Pro Helvetia's naiveté is so enormous that it actually becomes credible.

Apparently, the anti-*apartheid* protestors in London received no satisfactory response, with the result that a copy of their letter of protest was brought to the attention of the Swiss fortnightly magazine *Der Schweizerische Beobachter*. In its issue of 30 June 1964, it printed an anonymous article that described in no uncertain terms the nature of the South African *apartheid* regime, the (albeit superficial) opposition of the world community to it, and the extent of Switzerland's economic and military cooperation with the country (the article was entitled 'Heil dir Pro Helvetia', a play on the title of the national anthem-manqué *Heil Dir, Helvetia* – 'Hail to Thee, Helvetia'). The article then moved

⁸ This is related by Sutermeister in a letter to Pro Helvetia of 26 April 1964.

on to cultural matters, and criticized the decision of Pro Helvetia to finance Sutermeister's lecture tour to South Africa. The protest letter from London is mentioned, leaving little doubt that this was what had prompted the whole article in the first place. In the issue of the *Beobachter* of 15 August 1964, a letter from Sutermeister was published in which he stated openly that his lectures were given at 'white' universities, but that at his request, he had also visited a 'Bantu university' and spoke at the 'Indian School' in Pretoria, where a frank political discussion had ensued. All parties seem to have regarded the matter as closed thereafter.

It does not seem to have occurred to Sutermeister that he would hardly have been granted a long private interview with Verwoerd, had the South African authorities not deemed it politically expedient to entertain a leading composer from one of their most important trading partners. (Just how important Switzerland's economic and military aid was to South Africa during the *apartheid* years was the subject of an official investigation completed by the Swiss National Foundation in 2005 under the auspices of the historian Georg Kreis.⁹) However, it should be noted that Sutermeister was only one of a number of leading musicians courted by the South African establishment at the time. Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez, Pierre Fournier, Antal Dorati and many other famous names visited South Africa in the 1960s and 70s.¹⁰ The biggest of them was Igor Stravinsky, who had gone there just two years before Sutermeister, and had also made a point, like him, of including a visit to a Black area during his tour.¹¹ Stravinsky was accompanied throughout by Anton Hartman, head of music at the South African Broadcasting Corporation and a leading member of the *Broederbond*, an organization founded in 1918 to support the cause of the Afrikaners against British oppression, but which later became one of the pillars of the *apartheid* state.¹²

The *raison d'être* of Sutermeister's visit – a production of his opera *Die schwarze Spinne* – merits closer investigation. The extant correspondence makes clear that the choice of opera was made not by Sutermeister, but by the representatives of the 'Music Theatre Pretoria'. A vocal score of the work has survived in the library of UNISA today, bearing not only a handwritten dedication from Sutermeister to 'Eleonor und Bruno Peyer', but also the Afrikaans translation of the libretto, which was copied by hand into the score. The *Schwarze Spinne* is based on a novella by the Swiss writer Jeremias Gotthelf, first published in 1842. This story, a strangely Gothic tale to come from the pen of a 19th-century Alpine vicar, is a bizarre twist on an old folk tale not too far removed from the Faust legend. A tyrannical feudal lord orders the population of an Alpine village to transplant a hundred full-grown trees within a month. The task is impossible, but a stranger clad in green (the devil, of course) offers to do the deed for them, in return for an unbaptised child. One of the village women, named Christine, agrees to the deal. It is sealed with

⁹ Information on this report, completed in late 2005, can be found at <http://www.snf.ch/NFP/NFP42%2B/index.html>, accessed September 2006. In fairness, it should be stated here, however, that in recent years, both Pro Helvetia and the Swiss Embassy in South Africa have been active in dealing with matters of redress and transformation amongst the previously disadvantaged communities of South Africa.

¹⁰ For a list of the musicians invited to South Africa by Anton Hartman, the head of music at SABC, see Mia Hartman: *Anton Hartman, dis sy storie*. Pretoria: Berea, 2003; see also note 11 below.

¹¹ See John Hinch: 'Stravinsky in Africa', in *Muziki* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2004, pp. 71–86.

¹² For more information on Hartman in English, see Walton: 'Bond of Broeders: Anton Hartman and music in an apartheid state', *The Musical Times*, Vol. 145, No. 1887, Summer 2004, pp. 63–74.

a kiss, which, however, leaves a black mark on Christine's face. When the villagers renege on the pact, a horde of black spiders emerges from the black spot on Christine, spreading pestilence across the land. Finally, Christine herself turns into a huge, black spider, killing wantonly everyone in its path. A local woman saves the day by capturing the spider and sealing it up. The story repeats itself years later when the spider is inadvertently set loose; another act of selfless courage is needed to seal it up again. This double tale is itself framed by the tale of a present-day baptism.

Sutermeister's libretto (by his friend Albert Rösler) simplifies things considerably, taking away both the framing story, the transporting of the trees, and the second tale of the spider reborn. Nevertheless, the essentials remain. The people of an Alpine village enlist the aid of the Devil to rid them of the plague, the deal being sealed by a kiss from the girl Christine. When the unbaptised child that had been promised to the Devil is not delivered, Christine turns into a giant black spider that again spreads the Black Death across the land, terrorizing the local population until they are delivered by an act of self-sacrifice. If one reads the libretto in the context of 1964 South Africa, it acquires a quite specific significance: a girl from an upstanding Protestant community commits a sin of the flesh with a 'dark man' (for thus is the Devil described in the libretto), the result being the spread of a black plague that threatens the very existence of that community. (In Gotthelf, the Devil is referred to as 'der Grüne' – the 'green man' – on account of his hunting attire, though his face is described as being 'black'; this was, however, a common way of denoting darkness of complexion and facial hair rather than actual skin pigmentation). Only through religious faith and sacrifice can the body politic attain salvation. There could hardly be a tale better suited to express the fears of the Afrikaner élite of the *apartheid* era, with its horror of interracial sexual intercourse and its knee-jerk equation of blackness of skin with disease (a particularly paranoid belief that was popular with the theorists of *apartheid*, though neither invented by them, nor confined to them).¹³

The Afrikaans translation was made by Sarel Jacob Pretorius,¹⁴ a member of the academic staff of UNISA, but also a local poet well-known for his religious verse, and a translator, too, of prose and plays from numerous languages into Afrikaans. The decision to perform the work in Afrikaans was probably a primarily political one. Since English was and remains the language most widely understood in South Africa, and since the *Spinne* was performed alongside a Haydn opera sung in English, that would have been the most natural choice of language for any translation of the work. However, putting on an Afrikaans production would ingratiate the organizers far more with the state authorities, for whom promoting Afrikaans as a language of science and culture had for several years been a prime concern, and who were investing

¹³ See, for example, J. M. Coetzee: 'Apartheid Thinking', in *Giving Offense. Essays on Censorship*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996, especially pp. 181–182. In this chapter, Coetzee discusses the obsessions of the early *apartheid* theorist Geoffrey Cronjé; the latter's lengthy exposition of the 'sin' of miscegenation and the 'dangers' for the white community of the resultant 'impurities' can be read in *Regverdige rasse-apartheid*, edited by Cronjé, W. Nicol and E. P. Groenewald. Stellenbosch: Christen-studenteverenigingmaatskappy van Suid-Afrika [Company of the South African Union of Christian Students' (*sic*)], 1947.

¹⁴ See J.J.P. Steynberg: *Die pretoriase operagroep*, p. 38.

millions of rand in the language. Afrikaans was far more than 'just' a language: it was the emotive rallying point for an Afrikaner people who had only recently thrown off the burden of English imperialism. It was a means for them to designate themselves and, by implication, of course, to exclude others (let us not forget that its imposition as a language of instruction in Black schools led to the Soweto uprising just over a decade later).

Performing the *Schwarze Spinne* in Afrikaans thus effected a drastic shift in the sense of place in the work itself. The Alpine farmers of the original now become 'boere', which is not just a literal translation of 'farmer', but in a South African context is used specifically to denote the Afrikaner people. Christine thus changes implicitly into a 'boeremeisie', an Afrikaner girl whose 'sin' becomes the one that the whole edifice of *apartheid* was intended to prevent: that of miscegenation. This was in South Africa at the time a transgression against both God and State. The depiction of the Devil as 'donker man' ('dark man') was one that was bound to strike a chord with the white, Afrikaner audience, for it was repeatedly taught in the Dutch Reformed churches that God had made the white man, the Devil the black.¹⁵ Indeed, on 28 February, a day before the première, *Die Transvaler* – whose first editor, as it happened, had been Verwoerd himself, several years previously – published a preview of the work that concluded: 'This story serves as a warning to man that he should, as a Christian, lead a God-fearing life and be a match for all afflictions that evil brings'.

Two questions arise here: did the organizers of the South African production of *Die swart spinnekop* intend the reading we suggest? And was Sutermeister aware of such a possible interpretation of his work? The present writer's attempt to gain first-hand information in Pretoria on the background of Sutermeister's visit has been unsuccessful, so a 'yes' to the first question cannot be proven. The answer to the second question, however, is almost certainly 'no'. For Sutermeister to have understood fully the racist implications of his opera in a South African context, he would have to have had a more than superficial knowledge of either the workings of *apartheid* or of the extent of the sophistry employed to give it economic, theological and (pseudo-) moral foundations. We have no reason to suppose that this was the case. Apart from the fact that the architects of *apartheid* wrote mostly in Afrikaans (a language that Sutermeister did not know) and only partly in English (a language he knew but poorly), the content of their writings is in many cases so paranoid that Sutermeister, had he taken the unlikely step of perusing them, would in any case have probably regarded them as the peripheral rantings of mad individuals, rather than the real, intellectual basis of a mad country.¹⁶ The credulity that Sutermeister brought to Verwoerd's musings further supports an interpretation in which he was, if not innocent or naïve, then certainly unsuspecting. Furthermore, while the tone of Sutermeister's self-defence to the *Beobachter* appears to us condescending, it would not have been considered politically incorrect in his day. Most African countries were in 1964 either still in the possession of colonial powers, or had only recently been made independent; segregation had not yet been eradicated in the USA; the anti-racism laws of Western Europe did not yet exist; and the tolerance level of racism, both verbal

¹⁵ More than one acquaintance of the present writer has testified to being taught this theological oddity at both school and Sunday school, as late as the 1980s.

¹⁶ See, for example, Cronjé's *Regverdige rasse-apartheid*; Coetzee's discussion of Cronjé's writings, mentioned in footnote 13 above, deals directly with the 'madness' of *apartheid*.

and otherwise, was amongst both the general public and the intelligentsia of the West far higher than it is today. In his insistence on being exposed to 'non-white' South Africa, Sutermeister obviously felt that he had conducted himself during his visit as decently as possible. And he had, of course, consulted all the necessary instances before setting out on his visit. However, by visiting non-white schools, a Black prison and a Black university, he was tacitly confirming the validity of their separate existence and thereby unwittingly acting directly in the interests of the *apartheid* state itself. This was undoubtedly the reason that the South African authorities had allowed those visits in the first place.

There is, however, a further twist that can exonerate Sutermeister from direct complicity in a pro-*apartheid* interpretation of his *Swart spinnekop*. For it is possible to construct a more or less diametrically opposed reading of the work. At the time that it was composed – the mid-1930s – there was a specific 'plague' spreading across Europe that was associated with the colour black, namely fascism (while brown was the colour associated with the Nazi Party in Germany, black was the colour favoured by fascists in Italy, Britain and elsewhere). While we have no direct proof, either from Sutermeister or from contemporary critics, that the battle between good and evil portrayed in the opera was intended as a metaphor for fascism's struggle for political domination in Europe, the metaphor is so obvious – indeed, almost banal – that it must have registered on some level with the composer during the work's composition, and with his first listeners. Sutermeister himself mentioned in a late interview that his opera had not been allowed to be performed in Nazi Germany, though the reason he gave was that the Church is accorded a prominent role in it.¹⁷ His correspondence with Rösler of July 1937 supports this later statement. He mentions negative criticism of the *Spinne* in Germany on account of its subject matter, and offers a mocking suggestion that they would have to produce an operatic adaptation of *Mein Kampf* next time. He even makes a play on the German fascists' favourite colour: 'then we'll probably hit the black [i.e. the bull's eye], or rather, the brown'.¹⁸ The fact that three different operas based on Gotthelf's novella were written during the 1930s and '40s – the others being by Josef Hauer in 1932 and Willy Burkhard in 1947–48 – further suggests that there was a topical element to the story that appealed to composers during both the rise of fascism and its immediate aftermath.

We thus have the paradox that Sutermeister's *Schwarze Spinne* can be given a reading in which it is a latently anti-fascist work, and another in which it serves the racist ideology of a fascist state. The more readings one can give the work, the more it seems likely that Sutermeister himself interpreted the story in the more straightforward manner intended by the author of the original novella – as a battle between good and evil for the soul of man, a cautionary tale of the depths to which man (and woman) can be dragged down by his (and her) own frailty and greed. If the work does indeed contain any such lesson, then it is one that the composer himself did not really learn – for if he had, he would not have courted success in either Nazi Germany or *apartheid* South Africa.

Sutermeister was only one of many dozens of leading musicians to visit South Africa during the *apartheid* era, and to single him out for criticism is naturally far from fair – though not all, admittedly, were deemed important enough to meet the Prime Minister face-to-face. Sutermeister

¹⁷ See Sutermeister: 'Meine Bühnenwerke', pp. 143–4.

¹⁸ See Günter Birkner: *Heinrich Sutermeister. Der Weg des Bühnenkomponisten*. Zurich: Hug, 1985, p. 24. 'Ins Schwarze treffen' – 'To hit the black [target]' is the German expression for 'to score a bull's eye'.

was no fascist; nor is there any evidence to suggest that his political beliefs were ever in contradiction to the generally centrist, democratic politics of the majority of his countrymen. *Pace* Antje Müller, he wrote no music to glorify slaughter nor to support any oppressive régime; and while his conduct in South Africa and afterwards can appear to us today as implicitly racist, this was a racism shared – much as we might wish to deny it – by most of the white, supposedly liberal establishment of Western Europe. However, we must consider if, by thus relativizing his actions, we are in fact, by implication, merely placating our own conscience by consigning those actions to an area forever grey where no real moral imperatives exist, neither for him nor for us. For *apartheid* South Africa itself was far from grey; it was in many ways straightforwardly, perhaps inevitably, black-and-white. No matter how well-oiled were the wicked engines of the *apartheid* state – and exceedingly well-oiled they were – there is no denying that the many musicians, composers and others who came from abroad to be fêted by the régime could not visit South Africa without playing before whites-only audiences, without residing in whites-only suburbs in whites-only hotels with whites-only lifts, nor could they enjoy the scenery without walking along whites-only beaches or sitting on whites-only park benches. Separation was the everyday reality in the land, and with it all the concomitant effects of oppression and privilege; and it would seem that it did not bother its prominent (white) visitors any more than it did the majority of its own white citizens. And yet: that same Western society whose stance Sutermeister mirrored, that encouraged and exonerated him, is the society of which we are today the heirs. It is an odd fact that we expect greater moral integrity from individuals such as Sutermeister than we do from the governments that we ourselves elect. We cannot condone Sutermeister's ready acquiescence in his dealings with the *apartheid* state, and we may indeed express dismay at his moral torpor; but in doing so, we must also beware that such condemnation comes easiest when that torpor is in fact also our own.

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