Herman Wirth on Folksong

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There are two groups of people, neither of them large, who know who Herman Wirth was. One group has heard that in 1935 he was one of the founders of the Deutsches Ahnenerbe, and that is enough for them. The other group knows what Wirth meant by *Ahnenerbe* ("ancestral heritage"), and something of the history of that institution.[1] The Ahnenerbe, as Wirth conceived it, grew out of his researches of the 1920s, published in the large volume *Der Aufgang der Menschheit* (The Rise of Mankind) and developed in the even larger *Die heilige Urschrift der Menschheit* (The Sacred Primordial Script of Mankind).[2] These are monuments of what Wirth called *Geistesurgeschichte*,[3] mainly based on rock-carvings and inscribed artifacts gathered from the northernmost regions of the globe. Wirth deduced from his study of this corpus not only a coherent symbology and indeed mankind's first writing, but also the witness to an ancient matriarchal, monotheistic[4] culture that flourished in prehistoric times throughout the Arctic circle. He believed that when geological and climatic changes forced this ancient race to leave its Arctic homeland, it spread southwards in all directions, bringing its spiritual and cosmological legacy and mingling it with that of the other races it encountered. The peoples of northern Europe were its most direct descendants.

Wirth pursued his research with an unshakable conviction of his own rightness, fueled with nostalgia for his Arctic Ur-race: for their spiritual awareness without religious dogmatism, their honoring of the feminine principle, their peaceful way of life. These ancestors and their high paganism were the models he hoped to promote through his institute. By 1934 he was making plans for a "Germanic cultural landscape"—a sort of theme park or open-air museum—in the Kieferwald outside Berlin, which he was already calling "Deutsches Ahnenerbe."[5] In 1935, the adoption of this title for a state-sponsored institution, with Wirth himself as its president, must have answered his wildest hopes. But Wirth's notions did not coincide with those of Heinrich Himmler and his sycophants. Wirth was steadily marginalized until his resignation in December 1938,[6] and spent the rest of the National Socialist era as an internal exile, forbidden to lecture or publish. The sub-

sequent deeds of Ahnenerbe functionaries are therefore not to be laid to his charge.

This phase of Wirth's work finds its appropriate context in the centuries-long "Atlantis Debate," that is, the debate over whether high civilization existed in prehistoric times; and, if the evidence indicates that it did, then where did it flourish, and how did it come to an end? Plato, of course, situated it in the mid-Atlantic Ocean, and so did Ignatius Donnelly, the reviver of the debate in recent times.[7] Today's theories, given a powerful charge by the re-dating of the Sphinx of Giza, on geological grounds, to pre-dynastic times,[8] propose locations for Atlantis ranging from the Bahamas to Antarctica, and suggest a comet, a shift in the earth's crust, or an emanation from the center of the galaxy as the cause of its demise. Wirth belongs with that sub-group of Atlantologists who find evidence of high culture in the North, in Arctic or even polar regions: a strain of the debate that I have treated elsewhere.[9]

If this quest for the prehistoric mind was the reason for Wirth's ill-fated flirtation with the Schutzstaffel, how did he get started on it? It began as early as 1911, immediately after Wirth obtained his doctorate, with a project of photographing the strange carvings that decorated the old farmhouses of Friesland, in the northern Netherlands.[10] He resumed the project after World War I, during a period of high-school teaching in the Friesian town of Sneek, and became convinced that these carvings of wheels, ladders, swans, etc., had a symbolic significance, which he felt sure went back to pre-Christian times, and perhaps to a deeper antiquity still, if the *Oera Linda Book* (see below) was to be believed. As he searched the scholarly literature for parallels and for possible explanations of their meaning, he realized that he was dealing with something much larger than a regional folk-art. Fate had handed him the end of an Ariadne's thread that led back to a vastly ancient and widespread tradition, even to the discovery of the earliest writing of mankind.

Why did Wirth notice these sixteenth– and seventeenth–century carvings and think them significant, when no one else had paid any attention to them? The short answer is that he was in quest of his own ancestral heritage, as a Dutchman, and was thus alert to any relics of it. In particular, he had come to see folk art as superior, in a way, to so-called "high art." This brings us to the starting-point of Wirth's intellectual journey, and to the main subject of this article, which is his doctoral dissertation and first

HERMAN WIRTH, APRIL 1958, WITH "PALMPAASKEN," A SCANDINAVIAN FOLK OBJECT WITH SYMBOLS OF THE RETURN OF LIFE: SWANS, WHEEL, ODAL-RUNE, TREE OF LIFE.

book, *Der Untergang des Niederländischen Volksliedes* (The Decline of the Dutch Folksong).[11] And having cursorily worked back to that point, I must now sketch his early life.

Wirth was born in Utrecht on 6 May 1885 to Ludwig Wirth, a German from the Palatinate region, and a Dutch mother, Sophia Roeper Bosch.[12] Ludwig Wirth, a Doctor of Theology, was a teacher at the Gymnasium (select high school) and a *Privatdozent in Germanistik* (private tutor in German Studies) attached to Utrecht University. Herman's mother died in 1891, his father remarried, and the boy was raised by a strict Calvinist grandmother and aunt.[13] Here is Wirth's account of his education:

> I attended and graduated (1904) from the State Gymnasium in Kampen and immediately applied myself to Germanistik and historical studies at the University of Uttecht, taking the candidates' examination (for high-school teaching) in both faculties in 1908. Meanwhile in 1906 and 1907 I had pursued musicological studies in Leipzig, under Professor Hugo Riemann among others. After my candidates' examination I continued my studies while working as a high-school teacher, until on the recommendation of the Dean of the Philosophical Faculty, my respected teacher Professor J. W. Müller, I was appointed Lecturer in Dutch Language and Literature by the Philosophical Faculty of the Friedrich-Wilhelm University in Berlin, and received confirmation from the

Ministry of Culture in August 1909.[14]

As a doctoral dissertation, *Der Untergang des Niederländischen Volksliedes* is an anomaly. Thoroughly interdisciplinary, it has elements of literary history and criticism, comparative literature, sociology, history, and musicology. Moreover, the whole aim and tone of the work is opinionated and polemical in a way that no modern doctoral candidate could get away with.[15] The young scholar uses his study of folksong to present a revisionist view of his national history, driven by two purposes: to debunk the myth of the Dutch seventeenth century as a Golden Age, and to reveal the dreadful effects of the Calvinist religion.

Viewed more narrowly as musicology, Wirth's work was revisionist (for its time) in the way that he viewed the introduction of polyphony—the thing that most distinguishes the Western musical tradition from that of every other civilization. Its origins are inaccessible, but the question was whether polyphony came from folk music, or whether it was an invention of church musicians. Folk music, as an oral tradition, was almost never written down, whereas medieval churchmen were in command of music notation, hence the first to record any development, no matter where it came from. Consequently music historians have always overemphasized the written tradition of "art music" and been inclined to credit it with every innovation. Wirth is of the opposite opinion. He says that church music, like its ancestor, Greek music, was confined to the monophonic (one-line) singing of plainchant, at a time when folk music was already using polyphony; we know this from early chroniclers who write of people singing in harmony, especially in the Celtic regions (pp. 56–57[16]). Wirth states outright that "Polyphony is to be regarded as a property of the Germanic people" (p. 56), and supposes that it came to England with the Danish and Norwegian invaders, and was there refined. Based on later English sources, he guesses that early folk polyphony favored the intervals of thirds and sixths, which were arrived at naturally, in contrast to the fourths and fifths of theoretically-based church polyphony; that this preference led to *fauxbourdon* (singing in parallel first-inversion chords); and that it was from the latter that true polyphony emerged (pp. 58–59). Nineteenth-century musicology had indeed established that the English liking for the sounds of *fauxbourdon* spread after 1400 to Burgundy and the Netherlands and led, by the end of the fifteenth century, to a harmony based on triads and already containing the principles of

tonality (the major and minor keys). Wirth's contribution was to bring out the role of folksong in this evolution. He summarizes it thus: "The role played by English music in Netherlandish culture from the end of the fourteenth century is that of a savior. It freed folk art from the fetters of the unnatural high art of the Church, and made possible a fruitful penetration of churchly abstraction." (p. 71)

A lifelong pagan, in the original sense,[17] Wirth always takes the side of the folk against the Church, with what he regards as its "abstract" doctrinal concerns, and against the artificial life of towns and cities which became ever more dominant, especially in the Netherlands, as the Middle Ages drew to a close. He sees folksong, and folk art in general, as having the virtues of honesty, naturalism, and a straightforward acceptance of the facts of human life. To explain the contrast, he uses a subtle distinction based on two Dutch words for "worldview": *Wereldanschouwing* and *Wereldbeschouwing*. The former, perhaps translatable as "looking at the world," is "that unconscious, unreflective activity which we know from the animal, the child, and the so-called 'natural man,' and which folksong expresses by keeping within the world of sensory appearances, by lacking and eliminating abstraction, speculation, and by its *'sensorification'* of abstract, speculative elements." (p. 4) In contrast to this is the normal Dutch term for "worldview," *Wereldbeschouwing* (perhaps "looking round the world"), which Wirth says "rests on a reflected, abstract activity, which does not allow the world of appearances in its relative reality to act directly upon itself, but beholds it in the light of a speculative idea, and thus receives it at second-hand through speculation." (p. 5) This distinction is fundamental to Wirth's philosophy, and to his reconstruction of the psychological history of mankind.

As Wirth tells it, the effect of folk music on the art music of the Netherlands (and everywhere else) was permanent and positive. In consequence, "the sixteenth century stands completely under the sign of folk art"; it is marked by the decisive adoption of major and minor and the rejection of the church modes that were "forced on us Germans," and by the instrumental dances that derived from folk minstrelsy (p. 96). Not by chance did this coincide with the collapse of faith (i.e., the Reformation) and the supplanting of the Christian ascetic ideal by that of Antiquity (i.e., the Renaissance). Concerning the latter, Wirth was all for pagan naturalism as against Christian abstraction, or as he says, "Pompeii versus Ravenna." (p. 94) The trouble was that in the

Netherlands and Germany, the Renaissance was preceded by the Reformation. "This explains the fact that the inner problem of the Renaissance, which is the contact with a unified, sensual world whose basis is the law of nature, and the consequent liberation of the individual and of the body, the reclaiming of the freedom of life, the relinking with the world of appearances, never came out in poetry, so that we find only an outward form, a form of social convention whose basis is a social class-distinction." (p. 93)

This raises the social problem that looms so large in Wirth's story. He tells of how the flood of capital gained through trade created a gulf between rural and city dwellers. The latter, anxious to slough off any taint of peasant ancestry, rejected folk art, music, and poetry, adopting instead an artificial high culture imitating French and Italian humanism. From what Wirth says, and illustrates with many examples (pp. 144ff.), by 1600 everyone in the prosperous towns of the Netherlands belonged to a "Rhetoric Academy" (a sort of literary club) and was writing bad poetry in a classical vein, while congratulating themselves on how sophisticated they were. I cannot fully appreciate the Dutch poetry that he quotes in order to reveal its vapidity, its artificiality, and its prurient humor, but it is clear enough that he is waging war on one of his nation's sacred cows: the myth of the seventeenth century as its Golden Age. "I feel it my moral duty," he says, "to reveal the inside of this society, so that the reader will no longer admire this legendary cultural epoch." (p. 149)

Like all Traditionalists—and Wirth, after his own fashion, was a Traditionalist—Wirth is nostalgic for the nobility. He contrasts it with the Amsterdam patriciate, "that particularistic, self-satisfied caste with its un-national interests and its haughty detachment from the entirety of the folk. It is a historical fact that the true nobility, which through its agrarian base always remains in contact with the flat land, is much more folkish and much more strongly rooted in the people than the patrician, the *bourgeois-gentilhomme*." (p. 140)

But the people and their traditional way of life had a still worse enemy in Calvinism, that branch of the Protestant Reformation which in Wirth's opinion far outdid the Catholic Church in ruining the life, the psychology, and the creativity of his countrymen. With its hostility to all sensuous enjoyment, Calvinism was not welcomed by the comfortable and worldly patricians of the cities, but it found a fertile field of evangelism in the small towns and villages, and among the farmers and peas-

antry. Here it set out, with a series of synodal decrees (cited on pp. 176–179), to eradicate every folk tradition and to clothe every sensual pleasure with guilt. In their dour worship, the Calvinists did away with symbolism, imagery, and all music except the droning of unaccompanied psalms (p. 181). Wirth's loathing for them is patent. Perhaps it had something to do with his Calvinist grandmother and aunt.

For all his emotional involvement in the topic, Wirth does not simply divide phenomena into good and bad, but has a scale of relative values that enables him to censure something in one context, then commend it in another. His approach to the Renaissance is an example. The aping of classical Antiquity by the Dutch poetasters seems to him artificial and absurd, yet the classical principles in themselves are praiseworthy: "In Greece, all the great natural forces are sacred, and man is not split into beast and spirit." (p. 147) Although far from being a Freudian, Wirth recognizes that repressing natural sexual impulses leads to their irruption in obsessive and perverse forms, and he sees symptoms of the latter in the poetry of the Golden Age. "The Christian-ascetic ideal has done a great deal of harm in this regard, and the depravity of sexual life, the forced unnaturalism, is to be attributed to it; in this respect, the dogma of the 'immaculate conception' may well qualify as a source of 'immorality.'"(p. 148)

His view of Catholicism, which here seems hostile, is similarly nuanced. Whereas in Dutch history, the Catholic Church is normally cast as the villain in view of the cruel oppression of the Netherlanders by Spain, Wirth barely mentions this. The legacy of Catholic Christianity may be bad, but in comparison with the more lasting influence of Calvinism it looks to him positively benevolent. He favorably compares Catholic asceticism, which is largely restricted to those choosing a monastic life, to the Calvinist version, in which everyone is expected to be an inner ascetic (p. 112). In this context Wirth quotes his contemporary, the sociologist Max Weber, on the "replacement of an easy outward yoke by the perpetual regimentation of all aspects of life." (p. 116) Weber's concept of the "Protestant ethic" was evidently one of the guiding thoughts behind Wirth's version of Dutch history.[18]

Although Wirth is writing about Dutch folksong, his glance continually strays across the frontiers. He looks to Catholic Flanders (now Belgium) in the South, where social conditions were much less repressive of the folk and their arts; and he looks

cast to Germany, the land of his father and eventually his chosen *Vaterland.* Up to the eighteenth century, the two lands were culturally alienated, for all that "Dutch" and *Deutsch* were essentially the same people, speaking dialects of the same tongue. The prosperous Netherlanders regarded their German neighbors merely as useful *Gastarbeiter* for low-paying jobs (p. 254). According to Wirth, it was music that acted as the first bridgehead between the two peoples (p. 271). One reason for this was the dawning realization of how fortunate the Germans had been in their Reformation: while the Netherlands had Calvin, Germany had Luther—and J. S. Bach. Although no friend of dogmatic theology, Wirth appreciates Luther's humility, as opposed to the Calvinists' complacency in being "saved" (p. 111), and most of all, he admires the Lutheran musical tradition (p. 207). Whereas in the Netherlands, all authentic art was squeezed out of existence by the dual (and mutually hostile) forces of Calvinism and patrician culture, in Germany it enjoyed a perpetual renewal.

Wirth sees folk music and art music as two streams existing simultaneously, one constant, the other changing. Folk music, from whatever period, always strikes one with a sense of innate familiarity (p. 238). Art music, on the contrary, is ever-changing, bound as it is to broader cultural developments; hence the parade of historical styles. But it keeps going back for renewal to the perennial springs of folk art (p. 2). I have already mentioned some of Wirth's examples of this, in the fertilization of Continental art music by the English school after 1400, and in the instrumental dances and songs of the sixteenth century. As it continued in later centuries, after the "abstraction" of the Bachian period came the folksong-influenced music of Bach's sons, the Mannheim School, Haydn, and Mozart. Later it was Wagnerism that called forth the reaction of Brahms, who went back to folksong to discover "the organic logic of inner form." (p. 18) Wirth accuses Wagner and the modernists (remember that he is writing in 1910) of "metaphysical backwardness" and of leaving no room for the listener's fantasy as they seem to say: "I will *make* you feel this, because it is the *only* truth!" He adds the revealing comment: "They are like philosophers who pretend to explain everything with their system; they do not know that the world is in fact only our representation, and that something completely different from what we think lies behind things." (p. 19) The return to folksong, on the other hand, is the consequence of cultural development, wherein "we return

consciously to the sense world and the deepening of the sensory, instead of getting lost in the formless supersensible." (p. 19)

At the end of the book, Wirth concludes that no renewal of folksong and all that it represents is possible without an inner rebirth of all participants, to overcome the forces that have divided the folk and destroyed not only its art but its national life. "A folk without its own life is like a man without an ego, without individuality or independence." (p. 302) But more than ever before, it must be firmly based on the sense world. There is no room today for elves or goblins: others factors must be valued and poeticized. Thus, he concludes, we face the difficult problem of creating a new folk art. He ends with the clarion cry: "The future now belongs to the nation!" (p. 303)

Wirth's dissertation received a surprising number of reviews, most of them warmly favorable.[19] An Italian reviewer wrote that "Such a work is among the few that raise aesthetic study, so despised these days, to a true science of the arts."[20] Most reviewers wondered at the scope of the work, belying its modest title. "...the whole book reads almost as a cultural history of Holland,"[21] said one, while others went more deeply into its implications:

> This book strikes a different tone from that which we are used to hearing from modern hyper-aesthetes and the obsessively specialized average scholar. It not only deserves to be read for scholarly purposes by literary historians and critics within their four walls, but to find an echo and au effect in the widest public sphere. The practical consequences that could arise from such a book can hardly be auything but a blessing for the collectivity.[22]

This comes from a long, serious review by the German folksong specialist Arthur Kopp (1860–1918). He criticizes Wirth's anti-Wagnerism, his one-sided anti-Calvinism, and the many misprints in Latin and French quotations, but appreciates and shares the global implications of Wirth's work. Kopp writes:

> Using the example of the Netherlands, [Wirth] shows that folk art is the lasting foundation of every healthy cultural development of a people; of their scientific and artistic, moral and social blossoming; of the true prosperiug and

> unfolding of all creative forces; of real improvement and authentic culture. Above all, the rural population, with its native and rooted quality, has everywhere proved to be the carrier of good, solid folk art and folk culture. When it is completely oppressed or subjugated by urban culture—as it was by the commercial world of Amsterdam in Holland, and, thanks to the dominance of Holland, in the whole United Provinces—then instead of true art and education, what prevails and alone is possible is the parasitic, meretricious, uncontrollably fermenting "culture" of the big city population, in which the stuck-up parvenus and the uncultivated rabble are the most influential, if not the only arbiters.[23]

Kopp adds that the same goes for Berlin, and, thanks to the dominance of Prussia, for the whole of Germany, in whose big cities, thanks to an "international plutocracy," indigenous culture is completely shut out.

During the ten years following the publication of *Untergang*, Wirth threw himself into musical activities of many kinds. He planned a second volume of the work, which would consist of musical examples.[24] Beside his responsibilities at the University of Berlin, for which he compiled Dutch grammars and vocabularies,[25] he was constantly giving lectures, slide presentations, and lecture recitals in Germany and the Netherlands. Some of these were about Dutch folksong, while others were aimed at making the music of the Netherlands better known inside the country and outside it. For a multimedia presentation on "Flanders and its People," he arranged the musical examples for large orchestra.[26] He made editions of Renaissance dances that included the choreography, not just the music.[27] The Dutch musicological society published his edition of dances from the first decade of the seventeenth century, in which Wirth recognized a blend of the madrigal style with the tunes of itinerant folk musicians.[28] During World War I he published *Old Netherlands Army Marches* and a volume of *New War Songs*.[29] After the war, he became a leader in the *Trekvogel* movement—the Dutch version of the German *Wandervögel*. The movement, which aimed to get city children out to hike and explore the country, would have appealed to Wirth for its outdoor orientation, its clean-living morality, and for the importance of singing (*Vögel*=birds!) among its activities.[30]

HERMAN AND MARGARETHE WIRTH, CA. 1920, DRESSED FOR AN EARLY MUSIC CONCERT WITH A THEORBO LUTE.

Towards 1919 Wirth prepared a course of articles or lectures, probably with a view to a professorship of music history that never materialized.[31] They include "Ancient Germanic Musical Instruments, Their Migrations and Their Fate, Comprehensively Illustrated"; "The Musical Instruments of the Middle Ages" (a slide-lecture); "Studies of Instruments in Flemish Paintings;" and four articles on the origin of the trombone. After the war, Wirth and his wife Margarethe Wirth-Schmitt formed a small early music ensemble which went on tour, presenting songs and dances in period costume. She played the theorbo (a seventeenth-century lute with extra bass strings) and he the contrabass lute.[32]

From all this activity it is plain that Wirth is an unrecognized pioneer of two important musical movements of the twentieth century. First, he belongs to the initial phase of the early music revival, in all of its three aspects: unearthing and performing the music of the pre-Bach period; discovering and if necessary build-

ing the appropriate instruments for this music; and researching performance practices through literary and iconographic sources. Thinking of this movement, I am struck by the parallels between Wirth and one of its most prominent figures, Arnold Dolmetsch (1858–1940). A voluntary immigrant to England, Dolmetsch, like Wirth, was a vegetarian with a reputation for eccentricity and a belief in the moral value of early music. There are photographs of Dolmetsch, too, got up in knee-breeches for concerts in which he was assisted by his family. After World War I he founded a workshop for building harpsichords, clavichords, viols, and recorders, and in 1925 he started the Haslemere Festival, the first festival dedicated to authentic performance.

In another contemporary parallel from the English-speaking world, Wirth's concern to rescue his nation's folksong resembles that of Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1959), who urged his countrymen to return for their inspiration to folksong, and to the music of the time before foreign domination. Like Bartók in Hungary, Vaughan Williams collected folksongs from the men and women who were still singing them, and used these melodies in his own works, as did Gustav Holst, Peter Warlock, Percy Grainger, and many other English composers. Most influentially, Vaughan Williams included folksong melodies when he compiled *The English Hymnal* (1906), which became the musical equivalent of the King James Bible: the fount of melody known to every English schoolchild and churchgoer. This attunement of the national ear is probably why folksong continued to be favored by English composers, through Benjamin Britten right up to the end of the century, with Harrison Birtwhistle and Peter Maxwell Davies. I suppose that one could count this as another example of Wirth's principle of the perennial renewal of art music through contact with folk music. In any case, Wirth's idea of musical and national renewal through the return to early music and folksong seems to have been realized in the British Isles more successfully than anywhere else. Having spent my schooldays in the England of the 1950s, I can confirm the effects of folksong, maypole and Morris dancing, *The English Hymnal* and the music of the Anglican Church, on the national consciousness of my generation.

It was a different story in the German-speaking lands, which hardly needed to be urged to cultivate their own native talents in music. The history of Wagnerism, post-Wagnerism (Strauss,

Mahler, Bruckner), and the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg, Webern) does not concern us here, unless one follows Wirth's principle in identifying the folksong revival of the inter-war years as a wholesome reaction to it. Rather than influencing composers, as it did in Britain, this revival addressed the young. Three examples of it are the prominent use of folksong in the *Wandervögel* movement, in Rudolf Steiner's Waldorf Schools, and in Carl Orff's system of musical education. After being suppressed during the National Socialist era (which, however, continued to cultivate folksong in its own youth movements), all three movements flourish in Germany to this day, with the result that children involved in them grow up with a rich fund of folksong: something that cannot be said of many other nations.

Returning to the young Wirth and his aspirations, these clearly belonged within the folkish nationalist movements of the period that ended effectually with World War I. Unlike the brand of nationalism that led to that war, this was a non-aggressive return to folk roots and local traditions, rejoicing in the "otherness" of every people but preferring to cultivate one's own ethnic heritage. It was in part a reaction against industrialization, the materialistic religion of progress, the decline of the crafts, and the marginalization of the countryside. Politically it tended toward a national or regional socialism; and Wirth, like other folkish types, initially saw in the movement that assumed that label a haven for his aspirations.[33]

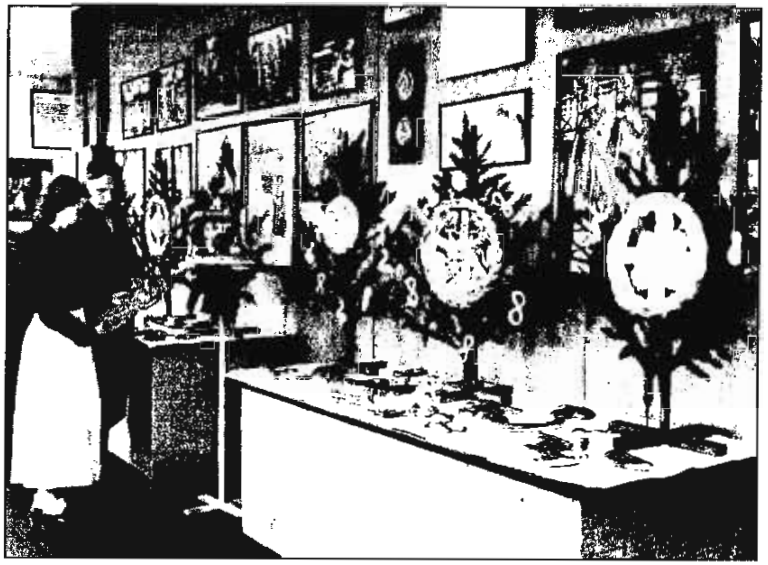
The most negative reaction to Wirth's dissertation was a long and searching review by the philologist J. F. D. Blöte, who pinpoints the contradictions in Wirth's one-sided story. These, he says, "may have their basis in the fact that the author has specific hypotheses in view, without asking himself whether his material is sufficient to support these hypotheses."[34] Blöte's words, sad to say, might serve as the epitaph to all of Wirth's enterprises. *Untergang*, though of all his works it has the best claim as scholarship, already betrays the tendencies that would come to full flower in *Der Aufgang der Menschheit*, *Die Heilige Urschrift der Menschheit*, and, catastrophically, in Wirth's edition of the *Oera Linda Book:* an eighteenth-century manuscript that Wirth believed to contain genuine mythological material going back to the sixth century B.C.E. and supporting the theories of *Aufgang*.[35] In his replies to the attacks on the *Oera Linda Book*, he dug himself ever deeper into historical implausibilities, after which no one in the academ-

HERMAN WIRTH, CA. 1978, OUTSIDE A HESSIAN HOUSE WITH TRADITIONAL SYMBOLIC DECORATION.

ic world would take him seriously.

But I take Wirth seriously, for at least two reasons. First, because he is an example of a distinct human type, whom I have described elsewhere. The following passage was written in a context of esotericists and occultists, but, *mutatis mutandis*, it holds good for Wirth:

> The search for universality runs risks that are just as serious as those of more limited fields, albeit of another order. A person often sets out on this search after some kind of spiritual revelation, or at least some profound psychological experience. Perhaps the illuminate has a glimpse in which the entire cosmos seems to explain itself. No one, he feels, can ever have had such a revelation of divine secrets! He believes himself invested with a sacred mission; he must tell his fellows about these unknown or forgotten truths, for their own good. Alas, the world does not want to know about them. Faced with such ingratitude, the illuminate turns inward and cultivates the precious seed that God or Providence has bestowed on him. He



HERMAN WIRTH'S EXHIBITION "DER LEBENSBAUM IM GERMANISCHEN BRAUCHTUM" (THE TREE OF LIFE IN GERMANIC CUSTOMS), BERLIN, 1935, SHOWING THE SURVIVAL OF ANCIENT SYMBOLS IN FESTIVE BREADS.

> builds his revelation into a system that explains the cosmos and uncovers the hidden causes of things. Wrapped up in the fascinating developments of his intuition, he loses contact with other ways of thought, which in any case he rejects. Does he end by becoming a sage, or a paranoiac?[36]

Wirth is a particularly interesting example of this type, because he was not an occultist or an esotericist. Although with his later researches into prehistory he seems to rub shoulders with Theosophists, Anthroposophists, and the like, he was never given to what he spurned as "abstract" speculation. The key to his philosophy resides in the *Wereldanschouwing* which he defines at the very beginning of *Untergang* and associates there with a "conscious return to the sense world and the deepening of the sensory." Its corollary is the observation that has already been quoted: "that the world is in fact only our representation, and that something completely different from what we think lies behind things." Fifty years later, his empiricism had not changed, but he felt freer to emphasize its non-materialistic aspect, granting that

the objective world includes "parapsychological phenomena," and that man possesses (or once possessed) the capability of perceiving "things beyond time and space," as in telepathy, and so on.[37] Such thoughts lead to a kind of secular mysticism, more akin to the nature-based, non-theistic philosophies of the Far East (Taoism, Zen Buddhism) than to any Western school.

Second, I happen to like studying this type because he sees things differently from the run-of-the-mill scholar or the academic time-server. He is touched, however lightly, by the fire of genius, which allies him not with scholars—for no scholar is a genius—but with artists, epic writers, composers, architects, and men of action. More often than not—and Wirth is a case in point—music has a part to play in his makeup. Like Kepler with his planetary geometries and harmonies, or Goethe with his metamorphosis of plants, he transcends the barrier that separates science from art; and one no longer worries about whether the creative artist is "right" or "wrong."

Such a person may turn out to have been on the right track after all. In Wirth's case, his theory of "light from the North" receives support from recent carbon-14 dating, recalibrated by tree-rings. This has proved that the megalithic cultures of northern Europe long preceded those of Egypt and the Near East, thereby upsetting a whole basket of assumptions about cultural diffusion.[38] Here Wirth resembles his contemporary Alfred Wegener, whose theory of continental drift was ridiculed for decades (including by the later Ahnenerbe, which preferred Hörbiger's World Ice Doctrine), but is now accepted as a valid geological hypothesis. Wirth's account of prehistoric religion, like most other efforts to penetrate the inner world of early man, is probably off the mark—but what is the "mark" in this regard? His privileging of the feminine and his image of a primordial matriarchy, while incompatible with the *Männerbund* mentality of the Schutzstaffel, resurface in the anthropology of Marija Gimbutas. I do not know whether or not this happened through the direct influence of Wirthian ideas during her doctoral study in Tübingen (1945–46), but Gimbutas's alternative prehistory, while much more acceptable in the scholarly world, has a remarkable similarity to Wirth's. Gimbutas's ideas in turn trickled down into contemporary feminist, "Goddess"-oriented strains of neo-paganism and Wicca.[39]

One purpose of this article has been to make a first documentation of the musical side of Herman Wirth, about which much remains to be discovered.[40] My overview of his dissertation is intended to show how the seeds of his subsequent and more famous work were already present when he was in his twenties. For example, his ascription of the invention of polyphony to preliterate musicians adumbrates his theories of a *heilige Urschrift*, a symbolic script preceding the era of hieroglyphic and alphabetic writing. His interpretation of history not as progress but as *Untergang* would expand from the scale of a few centuries in Holland to many millennia of world history. In his late work *Um den Ursinn des Menschen* (1960), Wirth suggested a Hegelian model for the latter.[41] The "thesis" is the prehistoric era (given as 40,000 B.C.E. or at least 13,000–3,000 B.C.E.), called *Mann- und Frau-Zeitalter* (Man and Woman Age). In *Untergang*, the equivalent thesis would be the beginningless state of pure folksong and folk art. The "antithesis" is the historical era since 3,000 B.C.E., a *Mann-Zeitalter* of unbalanced masculinity that begins with the nomadic incursions and goes on to develop kingship, priesthood, state gods, absolutism, feudalism, clericalism, capitalism, and finally proletarian class warfare, ending with the "break-up" of the Russian Revolution in 1917. On the very much more modest scale of *Untergang*, the antithesis would be the so-called Golden Age of Dutch culture, with its patrician and Calvinist dominance. Thirdly, in the Hegelian model, comes a "synthesis" of the two contraries. This is what Wirth was calling for in 1911 with his idealistic hopes for the "inner rebirth of all participants" for the healing of music, culture, and society, and his conviction that "the future belongs to the nation." Fifty years later, in *Ursinn*, he was postponing the synthesizing era till the third millennium. Then, maybe, would come another *Mann- und Frau-Zeitalter* with a fulfillment of philosophy, a naturalism, and a renewed awareness of the *All-Kraft* (universal energy), leading to a new humanism and its humanity.

Notes:

1. The intricate history of Wirth's relation with the Ahnenerbe is told in Michael Kater, *Das "Ahnenerbe" der SS 1935–1945: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturpolitik des Dritten Reiches* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1974). Some further biographical information is in H. Wirth, *Um den Ursinn des Menschseins* (Vienna: Volkstum-Verlag, 1960); Eberhard Baumann, ed., *Verzeichnis der Schriften, Manuskripte und Vorträge von Herman Felix WIRTH Roeper Bosch von 1908 bis 1993 sowie der Schriften für, gegen, zu und über die Person und das Werk von Herman Wirth von 1908 bis 1995* (Toppenstedt: Uwe Berg Verlag, 1995), p. 9; E. Baumann, *Der Aufgang und Untergang der frühen Hochkulturen Nord- und Mitteleuropas als Ausdruck umfassender oder geringer Selbstverwirklichung (oder Bewusstseinsentwicklung) dargestellt am Beispiel des Erforschers der Symbolgeschichte Professor Dr. Herman Wirth* (Passau, 1991).

2. *Der Aufgang der Menschheit* (Jena: Eugen Diederichs, 1928, reprinted Horn, 1993); *Die heilige Urschrift der Menschheit* (Leipzig: Koehler und Amelang, 1931–36, reprinted Frauenberg, 1979; Horn, 1993). The latter title provocatively echoes that of the German Bible, *Die heilige Schrift*, implying that mankind's original script, or scripture (*Schrift* means both), was another and a more ancient one.

3. *Geistesurgeschichte* translates as "prehistory of the spirit" or "of the mind," or even as "intellectual prehistory." The original title of the Ahnenerbe was "Studiengesellschaft für Geistesurgeschichte, Deutsches Ahnenerbe." See Kater, p. 11.

4. Monotheistic not in the sense of devotion to one personal god, but in acknowledging a single principle behind existence which Wirth calls *das Gott*, using the neuter rather than the masculine article.

5. Joachim Günther, "Germanische Kulturlandschaft—dicht bei Berlin: Gespräch mit Herman Wirth über seinen Plan eines Nationalparkes 'Deutsches Ahnenerbe,'" in *Die Unterhaltung*, 4 January 1934. I am grateful to Michael Moynihan for access to this illustrated newspaper article.

6. In Wirth's letter of resignation from the Ahnenerbe, he declared his conviction that "the repeated emphasis on an official warrior-band ideology is not the beginning of a new age, but the end of the old one." See Wirth, *Ursinn*, p. 50.

7. Plato: *Timaeus* and *Critias*, I. Donnelly, *Atlantis, The Antediluvian World* (New York: Harper Bros., 1882, many reprints).

8. Robert M. Schoch with Robert Aquinas McNally, *Voices of the Rocks; a Scientist Looks at Catastrophes and Ancient Civilizations* (New York: Harmony Books, 1999).

9. J. Godwin, *Arktos: The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism and Nazi Survival* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press/London: Thames & Hudson, 1993, reprinted, Kempton: Adventures Unlimited, 1996). See also my "Out of Arctica? Herman Wirth's Theory of Human Origins" in *Rûna* 5 (2000), pp. 2–7.

10. See Wirth, *Ursinn*, p. 44.

11. Wirth's dissertation was accepted by the Philological-Historical Section of the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Basel on 24 May 1910. It was published by the academic press of Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1911, in two versions: (1) *Der Untergang des Niederländischen Volksliedes* (Abschnitt V: Das "Goldene Zeitalter" und sein Ausgang) *Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doctorwürde Eingereicht der philosophische Fakultät der Universität zu Basel von Herman Felix Wirth aus Utrecht (Niederland)*, 132 pages; (2) *Der Untergang des Niederländischen Volksliedes von Dr. H. F. Wirth mit Beilagen*, 357 pages. Version 1 is identical in all except front-matter and pagination to Part Five of Version 2.

12. Hence Wirth's occasional use of his full name in Dutch style, Herman Felix Wirth Roeper Bosch.

13. Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, p. 8; information on Ludwig Wirth from Wirth's "Vita" in *Untergang*, Version 1, p. [1].

14. Translated from Wirth's "Vita" (see previous note). Wirth taught at the university in Berlin until the summer semester of 1919, as documented in the regular faculty and lecture lists (Baumann, Verzeichnis, pp. 83–91). From 1922 he taught Dutch and Geography at the Gymnasium of Sneek (Baumann, Verzeichnis, pp. 6–7). In 1923 he moved to Germany and settled in Marburg, which remained his home until after World War II.

15. Wirth's Doktorvater (thesis advisor) was Prof. John Meier (1864–1953), a prolific scholar of German folksong, folk art, and philology. Meier's presence in Basel probably explains why Wirth chose that university for his dissertation.

16. All page references are to *Untergang*, Version 2.

17. Derived from Latin *paganus*, a countryman, as opposed to

the Christianized urban masses.

18. In a review written the year after *Untergang*, Wirth reproaches another author for neglecting Weber's "ground breaking" work. See H. Wirth, review of L. Knappert, *Geschiednis der Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk gedurende de 16e en 17e Eeuw*, in *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* 21 (1911), pp. 427–29.

19. Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, pp. 83–88, lists twenty-five reviews.

20. "L. Th.," review of *Untergang* in *Rivista musicale italiana* 18 (1911), p. 453.

21. Ernst Schultze, review of *Untergang* in *Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft*, 1914, p. 807.

22. A. Kopp, review of *Untergang* in *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 44 (1912), pp. 378–83; here p. 379.

23. Ibid.

24. Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, no. 449 is "Unpublished songs of the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries," vol. 2 of *Untergang*, announced but never published.

25. Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, nos. 24, 28.

26. Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, nos. 34–35, give the score as published by Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1917, and the parts as existing in manuscript.

27. See Baumann *Verzeichnis*, nos. 450, 458.

28. Dr. Herman Felix Wirth, ed., *Orkestcomposities van Nederlandsche Meesters van het begin der 17de eeuw*. Amsterdam: G. Alsbach/Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1913 (Vereeniging voor Nederlandsche Muziekgeschiedenis, vol. XXXIV). Wirth's comment on p. 12.

29. *Altniederlandische Armeemarsche* (Berlin: Bote & Bock, 1915); Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, no. 26. *Ein Hähnlein wollen wir rupfen: Neue Kriegslieder* (Jena, 1916); Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, no. 29.

30. See Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, nos. 42, 44–50.

31. Baumann's *Verzeichnis*, nos. 464–80. In December 1916, Kaiser Wilhelm II named Wirth "Titular Professor" at the Brussels Conservatory (see Kater, *Ahnenerbe*, p. 12), and promised him a chair in musicology there. After the liberation of Belgium, this was of course impossible.

32. See "Mein Leben ist immer geistliche Revolutionsarbeit gewesen: ein Gespräch mit Prof. Wirth," *Humus* 1–2 (Löhrbach, 1979), pp. 127–32; description of the ensemble, p. 128. Photograph of the Wirths circa 1920 in Baumann,

Verzeichnis, p. 355.

33. For Wirth's analysis of this, see *Ursinn*, pp. 83–84, 91–92.

34. J. F. D. Blöte, review of *Untergang* in *Anzeiger für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Litteratur*, 36 (1913), pp. 258–61; here p. 259.

35. H. Wirth, ed. *Die Ura Linda Chronik; übersetzt und mit einer einführenden geschichtlichen Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Koehler & Amelang, 1933). Among the flood of reactions (see Baumann, *Verzeichnis*, pp. 180–259) was the devastating criticism by the philologist Arthur Hübner: *Herman Wirth und die Ura-Linda-chronik* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1934).

36. J. Godwin, *Music and the Occult: French Musical Philosophies 1750–1950* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1995), p. 50.

37. Wirth, *Ursinn*, p. 118.

38. See Colin Renfrew, *Before Civilization: The Radiocarbon Revolution and Prehistoric Europe* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

39. I am grateful to Michael Moynihan for pointing out this connection.

40. *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2nd ed., Sachteil vol. 7, p. 193, gives a short but tidy estimation of the historical position and influence of Wirth's dissertation. To go much further would require research into surviving archives in Austria and Germany, and into printed sources (e.g., concert reviews) in Dutch, in order to discover what competence Wirth possessed as performer and composer, what contacts he had with other musicians, and whether music played any part in his life after the 1920s. This would establish whether he made any real contribution to the early music and folksong revivals.

41. *Ursinn*, pp. 114–15.

The photographs in this article appear in Eberhard Baumann's bibliographical Verzeichnis *of writings by and about Herman Wirth, published by the Uwe Berg Verlag (Toppenstedt, 1995; see note 1 for full citation).*