

Failure to Find Meaning: Jeff Wayne's Solipsistic *Spartacus*

The story of Spartacus and the slave revolt that he led in the last decades of the Roman Republic has been retold many times in contemporary popular culture. Depictions of Spartacus have been used to explore numerous themes and advance diverse agendas. Arguably the most famous—and commercially successful—retelling is the 1960 film *Spartacus*, produced by and starring Kirk Douglas, with direction by Stanley Kubrick. It has been the subject of much analysis by classical scholars. As Duncan and Ahl, among others, have shown (Winkler 2007), one of the most contentious aspects of the film's production was the battle over the greater meaning of Spartacus and the significance of his revolt.

In 1992 Jeff Wayne released his interpretation of the Spartacus story, a two-disc rock opera titled *Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of Spartacus*. Wayne was, and remains, best known for his musical adaptation of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, which featured narration by Richard Burton and was similarly released as a double album in 1978. Wayne's *War of the Worlds* had been an enormous success, reaching multi-platinum status in numerous countries around the world and remaining, as of this writing, the thirty-ninth best selling album of all time in the United Kingdom. Although Wayne's *Spartacus* was closely modeled on his *War of the Worlds* (e.g., its use of a distinguished Welsh actor as narrator, in this case Anthony Hopkins) and was his first major release since that success, it failed to find an audience and quickly dropped out of print. As a result it has received very little attention from classicists.

Nonetheless Jeff Wayne's *Spartacus* presents an interesting case of contemporary Classical reception. It is a lavish double album—its liner notes are over fifty pages long, with many fold-out illustrations—produced at a time when very little ancient material was present in popular culture (Cyriano 2005), much less material presented this seriously. As with his *War of*

the Worlds, Wayne skillfully uses leitmotifs and narration to construct the story of Spartacus and his revolt. Compared to other adaptations of the Spartacus narrative it is surprisingly faithful to the accounts of Plutarch, Appian, Florus, and Frontinus. Wayne's departures from those accounts offer interesting fodder for the student of reception. This paper will look at these aspects of the work and also explore the reasons for its commercial failure.

Artistic and musical choices no doubt played the foremost role in the album's failure, but to the classicist the work's greatest flaw is its inability to articulate a coherent theme or interpretation of Spartacus. It can be difficult to fashion meaning from a failed slave revolt, as Winkler has shown in his discussion of the 1960 film (Winkler 2007), but that difficulty has not prevented other artists from using Spartacus to explore such themes as American slavery, the Italian Resorgimento, and communism (Wyke 1997). Wayne's *Spartacus* struggles to find anything to stand for and ends up settling for banal generalizations about love and the human spirit. At best Jeff Wayne's *Spartacus* offers the listener a solipsistic kind of victory: if the revolt of Spartacus achieves anything it is that the Romans will not erase the memory of Spartacus and that his voice will carry on—in particular the voice one hears on this very album. For Jeff Wayne, Spartacus' greatest legacy may well be *Jeff Wayne's Musical Version of Spartacus*.

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