

4 *Wagner Takes the Stage*

Richard Wagner once told Franz Liszt that, whatever his passions demanded of him, he became for the time being – musician, poet, director, author, lecturer or anything else. In fact, that ‘anything else’ ranged from journalist, theatrical reformer and cultural ideologue to proselytizing vegetarian, revolutionary activist and virulent anti-Semite – a range of concerns that, under the guise of Wagnerism, exerted a vast influence over the cultural life of Europe for decades after his death. No wonder that a survey by Barry Millington concluded: ‘We cannot understand Wagner’s music fully without understanding him and his era.’¹ And yet, after a century in which generations of biographers, musicologists and cultural historians have toiled to do just that, we might wonder whether we are really much closer to grasping Wagner himself in all his contradictions.

Meanwhile, his greatest works have continued to move, challenge, disturb or delight audiences far removed in time, place and culture from Wagner’s own – suggesting that they substantially transcended the assumptions and limits of their time. We call works that do this ‘classics’ and, among his many other aims, Wagner certainly aspired to create a classic art. Maybe we have a better chance of defining his achievement by asking, not what he meant then, but what he still means now.

Admittedly, the works of Romantic artists are supposed to be inseparable from their lives – think of Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* (1830). Yet Wagner possessed a remarkable ability to block out his personal circumstances, to give his all to his chosen dramatic, symbolic or mythological material. To understand *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1862–67) fully, we hardly need to know he faced the worst financial crisis of his life while writing it. And his affair with Mathilde Wesendonck seems to have been less the inspiration of *Tristan und Isolde* (1857–59) than the result of its composition.

We might also wonder whether all his other activities matter that much any more. For instance, Wagner was an early opponent of vivisection, but he hardly figures in the pantheon of today’s animal rights campaigners; and while anti-Semitism has not gone away, one doubts whether its proponents are any longer directly influenced by Wagner’s racist musings. In any case, how many, except specialists, would still willingly wade through the turgid German or English multi-volume editions of the Collected Writings?

Which leaves the musical output – or, some of it, since neither the student Symphony in C (1832) nor the early overtures, except for that to *Rienzi*, have ever established themselves in the repertoire (though the striking *Faust Overture* deserves more frequent performance). For that matter, the first three operas – *Die Feen* (1833), *Der Liebesverbot* (1836) or even Hitler’s

favourite *Rienzi* (1840) – hardly rate today as more than precursors. The piano pieces scattered through the output are mostly inconsequential and the later orchestral marches pompously unmemorable. We are driven back to the realization that Wagner's standing among composers depends upon no more than 12 scores. Granted, ten of them, including the four comprising *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1853-74) are evening-length music dramas, while the *Wesendonck Lieder* (1857-58) are studies for *Tristan*, and the *Siegfried Idyll* (1870) is a spin-off from Act III of *Siegfried* (1858-71). Yet this simply underlines the fact that all that really matters to us in Wagner comes out of his involvement in the theatre – and a specific form of theatre at that.

Wagner may have aspired to unite Gluck's reformist drive for opera as drama with the symphonic impetus of Beethoven; aspired even to establish at Bayreuth a musical theatre that would become the conscience of the German nation in a way that the theatre of Aeschylus had served ancient Athens. Yet the dramatic themes and musical imagery of his stage works derive mainly from the world of early-nineteenth-century Romantic opera, with its gothic chivalry and wild evocations of Nature, its omens, apparitions, talismans and potions, its dramas of black magic and love unto death.

And here the historians might be thought to have a point. For while Wagner grew up in the Romantic world of Weber, the whole cultural climate had changed by the time he came to realize his later music dramas. Europe after 1850 was an increasingly industrialized, imperialistic culture with a bias in the performing arts away from the extravagancies of Romanticism towards detailed Realism. It is often argued that the perennial problems of staging Wagner stem from the fact that, while his conceptual and musical thought kept pace with the changing times, his ideas of performance remained stuck in the old Romantic theatre. After minutely supervizing the accident-prone first complete staging of *The Ring* in 1876, with its craggy landscapes, horned helmets and Rhine Maidens trundled around on trolleys, Wagner despairingly told his associates it would all have to be done differently next time.² Sadly, he died before showing us how.

More seriously, it could be argued that Wagner's range of subject and tone was circumscribed by the irrational emotionality of his Romantic heritage: Nietzsche complained that someone in Wagner's operas always wanted to be saved. And certainly, if one approaches *Tristan* from the human comedy of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (1790) or the historic sweep of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1868-72) or the harsh realism of Berg's *Wozzeck* (1914-22) it can seem a hothouse theatrical bloom. But this would be to underrate how Wagner transformed his Romantic themes and materials. Take the device of the fatal ring. In Weber's *Euryanthe* (1823), this is a mere cog in the plot. By the end of Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* (1869-74), it has become a psycho-economic power-symbol of the most complex significance for the later-

nineteenth-century world of Marx and Freud. And when W. H. Auden joked that the beginning of the second act of *Die Walküre* resembles 'a Victorian breakfast scene, Wotan meekly cracking his morning egg behind *The Times* while Fricka furiously rattles the teacups,' he was really hinting at how closely, beneath the mythological surface, Wagner approaches the bourgeois realism of Flaubert and Ibsen.³

He was, after all, an artist who developed tremendously over his creative life. Only the first three mature music dramas stand directly in the early-Romantic tradition. Of these, *Der fliegende Holländer* (1840-41) concerns the redemption of an unquiet spirit by love; *Tannhäuser* (1843-45) tackles the conflict between love sacred and profane; while *Lohengrin* (1846-48), with its pageantry and swan-knight, is about ... well, exactly what? Already, one has a sense of plot and symbolism coming slightly apart, acquiring a looseness and latency that opens them to a variety of interpretations. Indeed, with his last music drama, *Parsifal* (1877-82), we reach a work so complex and ambiguous that nobody seems to agree what it all means. But then, as Wagner clearly realized, the lasting vitality of great works often lies in their very inconsistencies and imperfections, which challenge interpreters to make newly coherent sense of them.

Meanwhile, armed with the epic theatre doctrines of his manifesto *Oper und Drama* (1851), he had embarked upon *The Ring* in 1852, only to break off after Act II of *Siegfried* in 1857 in order to compose that utterly opposite pair of music dramas, *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*. If the treatment of the theme of the fulfilment of love in death in *Tristan* attains an obsessive intensity far beyond anything in early Romantic opera, the leisurely romantic comedy of *Die Meistersinger* might seem exceptional in Wagner's work – until one notices that, like *Parsifal*, it concerns the renewal of a community by an unlikely outsider. When he resumed work on *The Ring* in 1869, the enriched tonality of *Die Meistersinger* duly flowed into the jubilant final scene of *Siegfried*, just as a post-*Tristan* chromaticism compounded the terminal glooms of *Götterdämmerung*.

And the key to all this? As a youth, Wagner aspired to be a playwright even before a composer, and he evidently had a feeling for large-scale dramatic timing long before he developed musical skills to match. He certainly always started from the dramatic idea, first making a prose sketch, then writing his libretto, or 'dramatic poem'. The music was supposed, as far as possible, to flow directly from the words, symbolism and structure of the libretto – not just in terms of immediate melody, gesture, colour and atmosphere, but also in its longer-term shape and direction.

In this he evolved a new and opposite principle of music drama to his greatest contemporary, Verdi, who inherited a range of traditional operatic forms and formulae that he gradually adapted and combined to his own

purposes over a long career. But this meant that whereas Verdi always had a background form to guide his musical invention, Wagner – at least after *Lohengrin* – had to depend from moment to moment on spinning out whatever musical idea that text happened to suggest. His system of so-called leitmotifs – brief musical ideas associated with particular characters, events or symbols in the drama – is often described as a subtle means of commenting on the dramatic predicaments or psychological motivation of his characters. However, it may have originated as a simple means of filling in his vast time spans. If a character mentioned the curse on the ring, and Wagner had already invented the curse-motif some way back, then at least he had a bunch of notes or harmonies to help him fill the next few bars. This method he enhanced by a symbolic use of harmony – notably the contrast between diatonicism (light, health, goodness) and chromaticism (darkness, sickness, evil) – so that, in the *Ring*, leitmotifs grow more chromatic in shape and harmony as corruption spreads. The most radical outcome of his approach, first fully attained in *Tristan*, was what Wagner called ‘musical composition as the art of transition’ – the idea of a ceaselessly changeable flow reaching stability, if at all, only at the end.⁴

Of course, other composers have sought a union of words and music by writing their own librettos. Yet Wagner’s achievement surely remains unique in its daring, mastery and completeness. He was, on top of all his other multifarious activities, one of the best-read composers ever. The works of the Ancient Greeks, the Medieval Romances, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and many others all fed into the subsoil of his dramatic imagination. The dramatic poem of each mature music drama duly conjures into being its own musical world. So the luminously sweet *Lohengrin* style substantially differs from the rough-hewn heroic *Ring* style, just as the sliding harmonies of the *Tristan* style contrast radically with the hearty counterpoint of the *Meistersinger* style – and all of them differ from the eerie phosphorescence of the *Parsifal* style. These differences were heightened by Wagner’s evolving concept of orchestration as he moved from the strong colour contrasts of Weber by way of the more sonorously blended texture of his middle years to the diffused ideal of his late music. Claude Debussy described *Parsifal* sounding ‘as though lit from behind’.⁵

For true Wagnerians, those complementary worlds of concept and drama, expression and sound, add up to something so vast it dwarfs the achievements of any other composer. Anti-Wagnerians tend to resist this very power and bigness as coercive, as seeking to influence its audience not only as individuals but also in the mass – hence his appeal to certain totalitarian tendencies. Those in between (such as this writer) might argue that, while Wagner stands among the greatest composers, he had very real limitations; that there are areas of musical thought and feeling and, indeed, concepts of

musical theatre that lay quite outside his scope. To think of the wholly 'other' musical worlds of, say, Monteverdi or Haydn, Mozart or Stravinsky, may help to put Wagner's in perspective – which is not to deny that what he did, he did supremely well.

NOTES

Source: 'Composer of the Month [Wagner]', *BBC Music Magazine*, December 2004, pp. 44-8.

- 1 Barry Millington, 'Richard Wagner', *BBC Music Magazine*, March 1995.
- 2 See: *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, Vol. 1: 1869-77, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, tr. Geoffrey Skelton, London, Collins, 1978, pp. 921-22.
- 3 W. H. Auden, quoted in: *Robert Craft, Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship*, rev. ed., Nashville, Vanderbilt UP, 1994, p. 344.
- 4 Letter to Mathilde Wesendonck, 29 October 1859, reprinted in: *Wagner: A Documentary Study*, ed. Herbert Barth, Dietrich Mack and Egon Voss, London, Thames and Hudson, 1975, p. 189.
- 5 *Debussy Letters*, sel. and ed. François Lesure and Roger Nichols, tr. Roger Nichols, London, Faber, 1987, p. 262.