Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online
Wagnerism

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

THE PROBLEM REVISITED

Chapter: CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)
Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
Author(s): Richard Taruskin

No matter what they thought of Wagner or how they valued his achievement, his contemporaries, and many listeners ever since, have been forced to acknowledge the unprecedented and perhaps never equaled rhetorical force of his music. Whether they loved the experience or hated it, all recognized that the experience of Wagner was emotionally draining and even physically exhausting in a way that no musical experience had ever been before. And all were aware that Wagner's force of expression was a force arising precisely out of his novel and audacious manipulations of the same age-old functional relationships that had governed musical structure and undergirded its coherence since the seventeenth century—since precisely the time, that is, when music's role as "the great persuader" was upheld by the Florentine neo-Platonist academicians who midwifed the birth of opera out of the spirit of the ancient drama.

But as Plato himself was the first (at least in the European tradition) to recognize and warn, if music is the great persuader, then we have to ask what it is that music persuades us of, and we have to be wary of it. Clara Schumann, the aging widow of Robert Schumann, and (as the secret dedicatee of Schumann's *Phantasie*) a woman who knew a thing or two about love music but had ample reason to hate Wagner for snubbing her husband, was only one of many who saw in *Tristan und Isolde* an affront to moral decorum and, ultimately, a threat to social stability. After attending a performance in 1875, ten years after the opera's premiere, she wrote in her diary that

> it is the most repulsive thing I ever saw or heard in my life. To have to sit through a whole evening watching, listening to such love-lunacy till every feeling of decency was outraged, and to see not only the audience but the musicians delighted with it was—I may well say—the saddest experience of my whole artistic career..... It is not emotion that the opera portrays, it is a disease, and they tear their hearts out of their bodies, while the music expresses it all in the most nauseous manner.[51]

Indeed, anyone who, as Clara Schumann observed, takes delight in Isolde's orgiastic death by love (and delight is a mild word indeed to describe the reaction many listeners experience) has been momentarily persuaded that the resolution of the dominant-seventh chord on F♯ to the tonic triad of B major is the most important thing in the world—from which it follows that the visible embodiment of that deed of music, Isolde's mystic union with Tristan in death, was, as Shakespeare's Hamlet might have remarked, "a consummation devoutly to be wish'd."[52] Whether looked upon in Schopenhauerian terms as a transcendence of the world of appearances, or in terms more in keeping with our terrestrial experience as a symbolized (or simulated) sexual orgasm, the opera's all-conquering climax validates (and justifies?) a passion that defied every social norm and behavioral constraint of Tristan's and Isolde's world—and, by extension, if we revel in it, of our own.

Going beyond the more obvious question whether music, by virtue of its wordlessness and its invisibility, was exempt from normal taboos on the explicit representation of sexual behavior, we are prompted to ask another. If we can be so easily persuaded of the superior claim of passion over propriety in the imaginary world of the opera, are we not susceptible to similar persuasion in the actual world that we inhabit? Wagner's contemporaries had to ask themselves that question when confronted not only by Tristan's and Isolde's licentious deeds but by Wagner's own flouting of moral law: first in his dalliance with his benefactor's wife in Zürich, in which the triangle of the composer and the two Wesendoncks vividly paralleled that of Tristan, Isolde, and King Marke; and second, even more notoriously, in his wooing of Liszt's own daughter Cosima, who deserted her husband, the pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow (a devoted Wagnerian, even afterward), to become Wagner's second wife in 1870.

Wagner was perhaps the most powerful advocate for the implied proposition that a great artist's private life, however scandalous, was to be condoned out of reverence for his artistic genius; that art, in Nietzsche's famous phrase, was "beyond good and evil";[53] and that artists were not subject to the same moral strictures as "ordinary mortals." Even more disquietingly, artworks like *Tristan und Isolde*, in their "liberatory" message, could seem to invite its audience to emulate the characters and their creator in their dangerously emancipated behavior. The questions that Wagner forced thus represented an encroachment of the Beethoven myth into dangerous territories that the original creators of the myth never foresaw.

As Brian Magee has put it, Wagner's art, unlike Beethoven's, is not only "aspirational": it does not seek only to express what is highest and best in us, but also what is forbidden. That is what gives his works their very special persuasive power, or in Magee's words their "special emotional impact which everyone, including people who do not like them, acknowledges."[54] The philosopher continues, "They give us a hotline to what has been most powerfully repressed in ourselves, and bring us consciousness-changing messages from the unconscious." This begins to suggest what many in the twentieth century have suggested: that the most appropriate context in which to appreciate Wagner's achievement is not the one into which Jacques Barzun inserted him in the book cited near the beginning of this chapter. Rather than with Darwin or with Marx, Wagner should perhaps be ranged as an artist with Sigmund Freud, another explorer of the unconscious desires that drive our conscious lives in directions we might be loath to acknowledge.

Nor are these the only parlous terrains toward which Wagner beckoned his listeners with his astounding persuasive skills. Here we circle back to the beginning of the chapter, where Wagner's relationship to his nation was broached. His tendency toward xenophobia and tribalism, expressed in bigotry—against the cosmopolitan Jews, against the "Enlightened" French, and by extension against internationalism and rationality themselves—was both symptomatic of the late nineteenth century's new exclusionary and aggressive brand of nationalism, and, to a much-debated extent, among its formative influences. His persuasive skills can look to those implicitly excluded like demagoguery. His appeal to the feeling's-understanding, implying a cerebral bypass, can look like the appeal of later German demagogues to "think with the blood"[55] rather than with the reasoning brain.

The ending of Wagner's single mature comic opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* ("The master-singers of Nuremberg," composed 1861–67, performed 1868), is often cited as a case in point. The story, set in the sixteenth century, is an attractive one to say the least: proud young Walther von Stolzing, guided by the wise old master singer Hans Sachs (a real historical personage), harnesses his native genius to his national traditions and produces the greatest artsong of the day, winning not only the singer's prize but also the hand of the maiden he loves. But Wagner could not resist the urge to give the final scene a didactically nationalistic turn, somewhat sinister even in its own contemporary context, when the German states under Prussia's leadership were preparing both for national unification and for a vindictive war on France, and increasingly sinister over the course of the twentieth century, with its two world wars largely caused by German aggression.

While the orchestra gives out the themes of the Master Singers, the Apprentices, and Walther's own *Preislied* (Prize Song), montaged in exquisitely wrought counterpoint, Sachs exhorts the assembled performers to

Habt Acht! Uns dräuen üble Streich':	Beware! Evil threatens us:
zerfällt erst deutsches Volk und Reich,	if the German land and folk should one day decay
in falscher welscher Majestät	under a false foreign rule
kein Fürst bald mehr sein Volk versteht;	soon no prince will understand his people any more;
und welschen Dunst mit welschem Tand	and foreign mists with foreign conceits
sie pflanzen uns in deutsches Land;	they will plant in our German land;
was deutsch und echt, wüßt' keiner mehr,	what is German and pure no one will know
lebt's nicht in deutscher Meister Ehr'.	if it does not live in our esteem for our German masters.
Drum sag ich Euch:	Therefore I say to you:
ehrt Eure deutschen Meister!	Honor your German masters!

Dann bannt Ihr gute Geister;	Then you will have protection of the good spirits;
und gebt Ihr ihrem Wirken Gunst,	and if you remain true to their endeavors,
zerging' in Dunst	even if mists should dissolve
das heil'ge röm'sche Reich,	the Holy Roman Empire,
uns bliebe gleich	there would still endure
die heil'ge deutsche Kunst!	our holy German art!

fig. 10-14 *Die Meistersinger*, Act II in the first production (Munich, 1868).

Not only does the opera end on this note, but the music that accompanies the crowd's repetition of the last exhortation resounds with the leitmotif of ridicule for the old pedant Beckmesser, the comic baritone, whom many (and not only Jews) have recognized as a caricature of the impotent Jewish artist Wagner had already derided in his notorious essay of 1850. Beckmesser alone is unhappy at the end of the opera; indeed he has been banished from the happy people's midst. But the music is heavenly, all the better to persuade, and in its very heavenliness has confronted music lovers with a moral dilemma.

The first to face it were the "*welschen*" themselves. The word, translated (quite properly) as "foreign" in the extract just given from the libretto, has "Romance"—that is, Latinate—as its primary meaning. Often it simply means "French," and that usage gave Sachs's speech an inescapable subtext for the opera's original audiences, who in their everyday speech used the word "*Welschtum*" to mock "fancy Frenchy manners" or any pretension or foppishness. The French knew the word, too, and what the Germans meant by it. And no one greeted the humiliating outcome of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 more gleefully than Wagner, who even wrote a malicious one-act farce called *Capitulation* to rub French noses in defeat.

The irony and the difficulty was that French musicians—fascinated by effects of harmony ever since the days of Rameau and very much aware of the power of symbolism in the work of their poet countrymen such as Charles Baudelaire (a hardened Wagnerolater)—were perhaps the most receptive of all to Wagner's musical innovations, and most susceptible to his spell. Their

attempt to solve the dilemma by severing all consideration of Wagner's nationalism from appreciation of his music, and to declare "extramusical" considerations off-limits to any discussion of musical values, has set the tone for more than a century of still-raging controversy. Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921), already a famous composer by the time of the second *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth in 1876, covered it for a French newspaper. His aggressive intervention on Wagner's behalf was received by many as a breach of national honor. His arguments, however, were influential and are still relevant to the issue as it is debated today. "From the outset," he declared,

> let us avoid any confusion between nationalism and art. Richard Wagner hates France—but does that matter in considering the quality of his works? Those writers who have been insulting him in the crudest fashion for fifteen years now think him ungrateful—in this they may well be right, because nothing gave him greater publicity than their ceaseless attacks.... Let us, however, forget the author of this work and deal solely with the *Nibelungenring*. That poem was written out and published in 1863 and has nothing to do with the difficulties between France and Germany since that date....
>
> I myself have studied the works of Richard Wagner for a long time. I have given myself completely to this study and all the performances I have attended have left me with a profound impression that all the theories in the world will never succeed in making me forget. Because of this I have been accused of being a Wagnerian. Indeed, for a while, I believed myself to be one. What a mistake and how far from the truth! I had only to meet some true Wagnerians to realize that I was not one of them and never could be! Because for the Wagnerian, music did not exist before Wagner, or rather it was still in embryo—Wagner raised it to the level of Art....
>
> But what is there to be said about those who feel their sense of patriotism outraged at the very thought of Wagner having his operatic tetralogy performed in a small Bavarian town? Truly it is possible to impute much to this patriotism and it might be more sensible not to so misuse one of the finest of mankind's sentiments but to preserve it carefully as a weapon to be drawn only on special occasions. Others, true and proven Frenchmen, would gladly immolate themselves on their idol's altar if it took his fancy to ask for human sacrifices. I regret I am not able to share any of these feelings, I merely respect them.[56]

It seems clear that the anxieties surrounding Wagner have played a key role in inspiring the "estheticism" that came to dominance around the turn of the twentieth century and continues to infect discussions of art even now. Estheticism is the doctrine that the arts are concerned only with beauty and that beauty is an autonomous entity existing in a world apart from the "worldly" and the "historical," and (to re-borrow that useful phrase from Nietzsche) beyond good and evil. In uneasy alliance with the historicism encountered in the previous chapter—the belief that all history, including the history of art, is self-motivated and deterministic—estheticism has undergirded and safeguarded the autonomy of twentieth-century art and artists to the point where many have seen estheticism as a prerequisite for creative freedom, indeed for the continued possibility of artistic creativity itself.

And that is how an art conceived in politics and dedicated to social utopia has been resolutely depoliticized and desocialized even as (in the opinion of many) it has continued to have a momentous political and social influence in the sometimes horrible history of the twentieth century. Like historicism, estheticism has created a crux—a tangle, a knot, a quandary—in the history of modern art that will color every succeeding page of this book. Wagner—anything but an estheticist himself but unavoidably and tendentiously misunderstood—was its chief begetter.

Notes:

(51) Clara Schumann, diary entry (Munich, 8 September 1875); in Irving Kolodin, ed., *The Composer as Listener* (New York: Collier, 1962), pp. 206–7.

(52) Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, sc. 1, lines 63–64.

(53) Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886).

(54) Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher*, p. 269.

(55) Slogan attributed (or misattributed) not only to Adolf Hitler but to a wide variety of English writers, including D. H. Lawrence and Rudyard Kipling.

(56) Camille Saint-Saëns, *Harmonie et Mélodie* (1885); quoted in Robert Hartford, ed., *Bayreuth: The Early Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 57–58.