Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)

Wagner

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THE PROBLEM

A specter has been haunting the last six chapters of this narrative—the specter of Richard Wagner. We met him first as the pseudonymous author of a violent and rancorous tract, published in 1850, that heralded a new, aggressive phase of European nationalism. Next we saw him applying this new idea of nation, and the role of art within it, to the interpretation of Weber's *Freischütz*. We heard tell of him later still as a political revolutionary, temporarily exiled from Germany, and as an artistic revolutionary, the dread darling of Weimar, where Liszt's performance of Wagner's opera *Lohengrin* in 1850 was the very event that led to the christening of the music of the future. Now it is time to meet him as a composer and dramatist, and encounter at first hand the musico-poetic imagination in which these nationalistic, revolutionary, and artistic personas intersected—an imagination so powerful, backed up by a technique so novel and so impressive, that neither the music of his own day nor that of succeeding generations (even, some would say, down to the present) is conceivable without him.

So emblematic is Wagner of his time and his country, in their most glorious as well as their most horrible aspects, that he has become a figure of furious and apparently unendable debate. “Suffering and great as that nineteenth century whose complete expression he is, the mental image of Richard Wagner stands before my eyes,” wrote the thoroughly haunted German novelist Thomas Mann in 1933 (“not, I confess, without misgivings”[1]), right before going into temporary exile from a Germany whose violent and rancorous new leaders saw themselves as Wagner's heirs. Yet Mann saw himself as Wagner's heir, too; and so, willy-nilly, have all twentieth-century Germans, and all European and Euro-American musicians regardless of nationality.

fig. 10-1 Richard Wagner (1865) by August Friedrich Pecht.

And not only Germans, and not only musicians. Wagner's influence has been so great that the intellectual historian Jacques Barzun—in a once widely read book called *Darwin, Marx, Wagner*—cast him as one of the three pivotal figures of the mid- to late nineteenth century who ushered in the agonizing modern age, the age of the godless and materialistic twentieth century. The threat to Christianity posed by Darwinism, with its rival history of creation, and by Marxism, with its rival theory of social justice, is obvious. The nature of Wagnerism is more difficult to pin down, and not only because Wagner worked in a nonverbal medium (for he wrote words, too, well-nigh graphomaniacally). Clearly he was no materialist in the sense that Darwin and Marx were materialists. He even wrote a couple of ostensibly Christian dramas about knights of the Holy Grail: the already-mentioned *Lohengrin* (1848) and *Parsifal* (1882), his last work, whose title character was Lohengrin's father. Wagner was in an important sense a religious thinker in his own right. That is why Wagner's name—uniquely among artists—has become an “ism.”

But his religion was not Christianity. *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal* were based on German legends that were only incidentally Christian, and it was German myth and legend that formed the basis of Wagner's mature work. The ecstatic and redemptive religion his works proclaimed was in effect a new paganism born of ethnic rather than political nation-worship, and anyone who knows the history of the twentieth century knows that ethnic nationalism has been an even more volatile force in that history

than Darwinism or Marxism have been. Wagner's words and music, with their colossal power of suggestion and persuasion, played a crucial role in disseminating that baleful impulse.

Thus, even if we conclude that Wagner was no true intellectual bedfellow of Darwin or Marx, his comparable rank as a culture hero cannot be denied. Also undeniable is the fact that of all the artists of the nineteenth century, only Wagner demands (or deserves) to be placed in such company. To say this is not to say that he was the best or greatest of all nineteenth-century artists. (How could it be proved that he was better or greater than Beethoven—to pick the most obvious "rival"—except on specious Zukunftist grounds?) But the work of no other artist looms as large as Wagner's as a cultural and political watershed. And for a third undeniable thing, only a musician could have made such a list of nineteenth-century figures, and no such list could have been complete without a musician. Such was the stature of music among the nineteenth-century arts, and it was Wagner who preeminently embodied that stature.

Finally, like Darwin's and Marx's, Wagner's legacy has been one of quarrels and fanaticism. Alone among nineteenth-century composers, perhaps alone among composers, Wagner can still provoke a riot in the concert hall, especially in the state of Israel, where a strict if unofficial ban on the public performance of his works is occasionally breached and invariably enforced with loud spontaneous protests. Jacques Barzun's book was especially bound to include Wagner among the giants of the nineteenth century in view of its date of publication: 1941, when Europe (soon to be joined by the United States) was engaged in a war that had been provoked by the same self-designated and enthusiastic Wagnerians who had impelled Thomas Mann into voluntary exile eight years before.

Wagner, in short, is one difficult and problematical artist who has never stopped being a problem. That in its way is the supreme attestation of his genius: only an artist of the greatest and most unshakeable stature could have become so great and unshakeable a problem. Our task, then, will be an especially complicated one where Wagner is concerned. We cannot say it is done until we have grappled both with the greatness and with the problem.

Notes:

(1) Thomas Mann, "Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner"; in *The Thomas Mann Reader*, ed. J. W. Angell (New York: Knopf, 1950), p. 420.