I should like to start with the twenty-first century, before returning (as I seem to have been doing all my academic life) to Wagner, before tracing my way back to our own time. We all, I suspect, have strong operatic memories: our first time, no doubt (I have always been inordinately proud, and inordinately ready to bore people with this fact, that my first opera in the theatre was *Wozzeck*), but also particular moments in performance, whether of staging, of singing, of conducting, of some or all three of those, and more. I certainly remember the first time I heard – and interestingly, saw – Waltraud Meier on stage. It was as Ortrud at Covent Garden, in 2003. For whatever this might be worth, I remembered nothing of Elijah Moshinsky’s production of *Lohengrin*, despite it being my first; I was – in retrospect, at least – surprisingly impressed by Valery Gergiev’s conducting; but it was Meier, perhaps above all in the first act, who provided my abiding memory. There is an irony there, in that Ortrud has precious little to sing in that act. What struck me – in my memory, continues to strike me – was the extraordinary presence she had on stage, *despite* the paucity of vocal, let alone solo vocal, work. I had not even heard of her at the time, but as soon as she stepped on stage, I could not take my eyes off her. She did not seem to play a role; she simply *was* Ortrud, a feeling I have had many times since in performances she has given – and indeed in performances other similar ‘singing actresses’ have given. This was already a fully formed character, one with dangerous, indeed seductive charisma. I felt rather as I did as a child watching wearily predictable cartoons: it was the supposedly evil character who, for once, I wanted to win. In a way, of course, she does, this being a tragedy; or rather, Lohengrin does not win. She certainly won in the memorability stakes.

Now back to Wagner, but first to one of his greatest inspirations, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient. Schröder-Devrient was, for a period of about twenty years, from the mid-1820s, perhaps the most celebrated German operatic soprano. She was the daughter of a celebrated actress, Sophie Schröder, and interestingly, made her first stage appearances in spoken theatre, before making her operatic debut, at the tender age of sixteen, as Pamina in 1821. Wagner knew her principally from her work in Dresden, but she had an international career, across German speaking countries, and indeed beyond, in Paris and London too. It seems that the claims of vocal flaws – the English critic Henry F. Chorley wrote of the ‘barbarism’ of the ‘false school’ of ‘nature-singing’, ‘a more absurd phrase was never coined by ignorance conceiving itself sagacity’ – were not groundless. Stephen Meyer, who has looked at the Dresden parts for Halévy’s *La Juive* – conducted by Wagner himself, who always greatly admired it – has found coloratura simplified and even eliminated in order to accommodate her voice. Chorley complained, ‘What [*Guiditta*]Pasta *would* be, in spite of her uneven, rebellious, uncertain voice – a most magnificent singer – Madame Schroeder-Devrient did not care to be.’ That, apparently, was a consequence of German antipathy towards ‘grace, taste, and vocal self-command … the characteristics of the Italian method.’ (Just in case you thought it was only we Teutonophiles who could sometimes be slighting about other traditions…)

However, other critics – often, but not always German – lauded her as what we have come to know as a ‘singing actress’. Reviewing her 1828 performance in Weber’s *Euryanthe*, Ludwig Rellstab was kinder to her voice, but was nevertheless clear that the voice in itself was not the thing:

Madame Devrient possesses the purely musical gifts of a singer, namely, voice and the school of solfège, only to a moderate degree, although her talents are always worthy of praise. Yet she has brought the art of declamatory song and its connections with exceptionally effective drama to a level seldom otherwise attained. At many times, she shows herself a worthy daughter and student of her mother, whose tragic art was recognised and honoured throughout Germany.

One may note there the phrase ‘purely musical’: Wagner would persistently lament the degeneration of opera into something purely musical, or the realm of ‘absolute’ music. Such was the vapid realm – for him, that is – of Rossini’s vocal display, or worse. Rellstab, in an article on Schröder-Devrient for the 1834 *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, compared her to those ‘singers [who] almost never achieve a truly artistic performance, because they have prioritised a completely superficial, mechanical training of the singing organ.’ Wagner, in his 1872 essay, *On Actors and Singers*, which he dedicated to her memory recalled:

I have time and time again been asked whether her *voice* were really so remarkable, since we glorified her as a singer—the voice being all people seem to think about in such a case. It constantly annoyed me to answer that question, for I fought against the thought of the great tragedian being cast into the same group as the female castrati of our opera. If I were asked again today, I should answer in the following manner: ’No! She had no “voice” at all; but she knew how to use her breath so beautifully, and to let a true womanly soul stream forth in such wondrous sounds, that we thought neither of voice nor of singing!’

Wagner’s Schröder-Devrient conversion experience, or at least his retelling of it – he portrays it with quasi-religious fervour – upon hearing, and of course seeing, her for himself took such ideas further. In *Mein Leben*, he wrote of a ‘miracle … coming to us [in Leipzig] from Dresden,’ in 1829, a miracle which ‘suddenly have a new direction to my artistic sensibility and one which was to prove decisive for a lifetime’. He went on to explain:

This was a brief appearance as guest star by Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, who stood then at the pinnacle of her career, young, beautiful, and ardent as no woman I have since seen on the stage. She appeared in *Fidelio*.

It is, perhaps, worthy of note that Wagner should praise her female beauty in a trouser-role. Indeed, a feature common to many descriptions of the singer was her androgynity (which was arguably, at this time at least, more often considered with respect to men than to women, however illogically!) Wagner continued:

When I look back across my entire life I find no event to place beside this in the impression it produced on me. Whoever can remember this wonderful woman at that period of her life will certainly confirm in some fashion the almost demonic fire irresistibly kindled in them by the profoundly human and ecstatic performance of this incomparable artist. After the opera was over I dashed to the home of one of my friends to write a short letter in which I told her succinctly that my life had henceforth found its meaning, and that if ever she should hear my name favourably mentioned in the world of art, she should remember that she had on this evening made of me that which I now vowed to become. I dropped this letter at Schröder-Devrient’s hotel and ran wildly off into the night. When I came to Dresden in 1842 to make my debut with *Rienzi* and could often visit the home of this artist, who was amiably disposed towards me, she once surprised me by reciting this letter word for word, for it appears to have made an impression on her, and she had actually preserved it carefully.

… I wanted to write a work that would be worthy of Schröder-Devrient.

That is quite a testimony from the 1860s, looking back. The only problem with it is that Wagner, whether misremembering or falsifying the past, seems to have substituted this alleged visit in *Fidelio* for a visit five years later, in 1834, in which Schröder-Devrient actually sang in an Italian opera, Bellini’s *Romeo und Julia* (as it was known in German translation). Whatever the actual truth of the matter, she mattered enough for him to rave so long after the event and for him to grant her a place in his operatic development that could hardly be more honoured. Her Leonore was famed, in any case, Schröder-Devrient as early as 1822 having achieved great renown for having shouted rather than sung her defiant ‘Töt erst sein Weib!’ (‘First kill his wife!’) Wagner wanted to trace his lineage, not just in Beethoven but in Beethoven’s interpreter – and a female, singing and acting interpreter at that. Interestingly in that respect, Anno Mungen has pointed out, Schröder-Devrient was praised for her ‘feminine’ eroticism, but also in ‘masculine’ terms, for her ‘genius’.

Schröder-Devrient went on to create three Wagner roles: Adriano (*Rienzi*), Senta (*The Flying Dutchman*) and Venus (*Tannhäuser*). That was quite a range, from trouser role, to Romantic dreamer, to goddess of love and proprietor of the Venusberg. She was well remunerated: better than Wagner himself was in Dresden, her salary of 4000 thalers compared to his 1500 as *Kapellmeister*. This, moreover, was a time when Wagner was making his name not only as a composer – and a German composer, at that – but was in some sense creating the role of the opera director as we understand it today.

For instance, Wagner’s 1847 Dresden production of Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Aulide* revealed Wagner not only as conductor but as imaginative editor and composer, a musicologist of sorts. He even composed a new ending, returning beyond Racine to Euripides, ridding Gluck’s work of what many have viewed as its disappointingly conventional concluding marriage between Iphigénie and Achille. From such direct experience sprang theoretical writings such as *Opera and Drama*, in which the importance of an actor’s *Gebärde* (gesture) features strongly, far more strongly than many Wagnerians acknowledge – or perhaps wish to acknowledge. Wagner would certainly be today excoriated as a purveyor of so-called ‘Eurotrash’ in some quarters, those very quarters – of course – that would ‘protect’ his works against – well, against people such as Wagner. On which note, I should like to quote a little of his own retelling of that production and its circumstances, again from *Mein Leben*:

The first external claim on my attention in this new year (1847) was the production of *Iphigenia*, wherein I had to prove myself as a stage director as well; indeed, I was even obliged to lend the most urgent aid to the scene-painters and the machinists. Since the scenes in this work were strung together clumsily and without apparent connection, I had to find new ways to enliven the staging, for the problem seemed to me to lie largely in the conventional treatment of such scenes prevailing at the Paris Opera during Gluck’s time. … The outcome of the whole thing was favourable beyond expectation, and even the management was sufficiently amazed at this exceptional popular success of a Gluck opera to take the initiative and add my name to the posters from the second performance onward as the author of the adaptation. This put the press on my heels at once; but this time, I must say, they did me justice almost entirely: only my treatment of the overture, the sole piece form this work with which the critics were previously familiar from the traditional feeble renditions, aroused any great objection.

Schröder-Devrient was, I think, at the very least a contributor towards Wagner’s conception of opera as drama, in which, less ironically than dialectically, the greater seriousness afforded to what, analytically if not necessarily dramatically, we might call ‘non-musical’ elements, actually enhanced the importance of what we might call, with a similar reservation, the more purely ‘musical’ elements of the work. For instance, in trying to penetrate to the heart of what opera as drama might actually be, he wrote in that book of ‘the unspeakable thing which the orchestra can express with the greatest definition, and indeed, in union with another unspeakable thing – *with gesture*.’ It was something at which speech could only ‘hint’, but which was to the eye what the orchestra was to the ear.

And so, let us return to someone who might in some senses be considered the Schröder-Devrient of her time. There are differences, of course. No one would speak in such terms of Waltraud Meier’s vocal abilities. On the other hand, many would say that ‘the voice’ is definitely not the thing *in itself*. I indeed already have. One often hears, moreover, that her presence on purely audio recordings does not come across; one notices, in ‘purely’ vocal terms, imperfections. We need, we are told, to see her on film, or better still, in the theatre. She is – this is a phrase often employed, and I have done so myself – a ‘stage animal’. Meier, moreover, is known above all as a Wagnerian singer; other important roles include those in an emphatically Wagnerian tradition, for instance Klytämnestra in Strauss’s *Elektra* – and yes, Leonore in *Fidelio*. She is also a singer, or a singing actress, who has happily – and sometimes unhappily, I should admit – worked with directors who stand very much in Wagner’s own tradition of what we have, rightly or wrongly, come to know as *Regietheater*. This is certainly not an artist who wishes just to ‘stand and sing’, or, in the older, still less flattering formulation, to ‘park and bark’.

I mentioned her 2003 performance in *Lohengrin*. Interestingly, when that Moshinsky production was revived at Covent Garden six years later, without her, albeit with strong musical performances – more musical, though, than musico-dramatic’ – I noticed the production far more strongly, and not to its advantage. Having recently seen Stefan Herheim’s brilliant new production at the Staatsoper in Berlin probably did not help, but even bearing that in mind, it was not an impressive experience. I wrote at the time, reviewing it myself:

‘Traditionalists’ might, I suppose, like this lifeless pageant, in which absurd Christian and pagan totems are wheeled on and off, a risible combat scene makes one wonder about – but finally decide against – comedy having being intended, and the direction of the chorus is more or less limited to walking on and off and having each member cross himself. ... Most productions, I admit, would look tired, were they revived after more than thirty years, but I cannot imagine that this had anything to offer even in 1977.

Then, the following year, 2010, I saw Meier again in the role, this time at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin. The production was actually older still, being that Götz Friedrich had created in 1990. If it were hardly *avant garde*, after numerous revivals, it held its interest well, and I found that, unlike Moshinsky’s production, it did not detract from the performances on stage; quite the contrary, it assisted them, Meier’s included. Despite a problematic Lohengrin (over whose identity I shall draw a veil), I found much to admire, and crucially, to make me think about, in tandem with the staging, and, I think, in tandem with that first encounter. Like Wagner, I remained under the spell of the singing actress, although I am pretty sure that, in my case, that first encounter actually took place.

… Waltraud Meier, who was, astonishingly, making her house debut. Ortrud has always been one of her finest roles, the tessitura fitting her voice extremely well, and the dramatic demands bringing the best out of her on stage. She can hold an audience in the palm of her hand even when silent. So it proved here. The malevolence in Ortrud’s character – Wagner spoke with disgust of her as a ‘female politician’ – is offset by a clear sense of conviction in the justice of her cause. Moreover, there is, in Friedrich’s production, an interesting possible twist at the end; it is perhaps suggested that the new Führer, Gottfried, may have fallen under her spell. With Meier in the role, one should certainly not write off Ortrud.

So far, so good; but what has that said, other than that Meier is a fine singing actress, who might have certain things in common with another fine singing actress of the past? Perhaps not very much, but I should like, in conclusion, briefly to consider one further staging, which made me think about just the matters I have been discussing here. Ironically, it was one which Meier herself (according to an interview) seems not to have liked herself, but there was no sense whatsoever of that on stage, her performance as committed as ever. I speak of Peter Konwitschny’s Munich *Tristan*, which I saw last year. Her two performances, of which I saw, marked her farewell to the role of Isolde, one of her most celebrated of all. I gushed somewhat, as I think did everyone in the theatre. I also returned to some of those preoccupations I have mentioned above, some of which I think, like Wagner with Schröder-Devrient, I can trace back to that youthful encounter:

We came, of course, at least most of us did, above all for Meier. It is a tribute to the performance and production alike that she did not overshadow but indeed flourished. It would be unduly perverse, though, to overlook her contribution. Over the years in which she has sung Isolde, she has offered many, developing virtues, whether related to production, musical performance, or even the stage of her career. Here, everything seemed in more or less perfect balance – or, better, fruitful dialectic. Attention to words was second to none, likewise stage presence. Sustaining of a vocal line, however, was equally impressive. Suffice it to say, she did not play Isolde; she was Isolde.

I was also set to think, however, not just about Konwitschny’s fascinating production – discussion of which, I am afraid, will have to wait until another day – but about the work ‘itself’, or rather not the work itself, rather the work as it existed in its complicated relationship with performance and production. What do we call *Tristan und Isolde*? That might seem a silly question. *Tristan und Isolde*, surely, and *Tristan* for short, although already we come to the exquisite difficulty, as Tristan and Isolde themselves partly seem – though do they only seem? – to recognise, of that celebrated ‘und’. Yes, *Tristan* is just a shortened title, so we should not necessarily read anything into the disappearance of Isolde, but, whilst we clearly value both lovers and both singers portraying those lovers more or less equally – great Tristans perhaps more so, given their ridiculous rarity – it struck me as perhaps particularly perverse to have been referring to my seeing *Tristan* at the Munich Opera Festival, when, like so many in the theatre, I had been going especially to see and hear Waltraud Meier. I began to wonder whether I should actually have said I was off to see and to hear a work called *Isolde*. I did not, of course, but asking myself the question raised all sorts of other questions in my mind, concerning tradition, performance, production, both specific and general. The singing actress with whom I had had not just a formative operatic experience but a lengthy association as audience member since had again engaged my mind as well as my emotions, had brought me closer to a Wagner both authentic and authentically inauthentic; she had contributed to what Wagner, in *Opera and Drama*, still in thrall to the example of his own singing actress, had called the ‘emotionalisation of the intellect’.