**In the Shadow of Beethoven: Widmann, Liszt, and Wagner**

JÖRG WIDMANN • *Con brio*, Concert overture for Orchestra (2008)

FRANZ LISZT • Concerto for Piano and Orchestra no.1 in E-flat major

RICHARD WAGNER • Overture to *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*

RICHARD WAGNER • “Morgendämmerung” from *Götterdämmerung*

RICHARD WAGNER • “Siegfrieds Rheinfahrt” from *Götterdämmerung*

RICHARD WAGNER • “Trauermarsch” from *Götterdämmerung*

RICHARD WAGNER • Prelude to Act I, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

Before Wagner, before Liszt, before every other noteworthy nineteenth-century composer save for Chopin, stands and stood Beethoven. He now stands before Jörg Widmann too, although with the twist that Widmann also stands between Beethoven and Beethoven. *Con brio*, Widmann’s 2008 Overture, was commissioned by Mariss Jansons and the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra to accompany Beethoven’s Seventh and Eighth Symphonies. It plays intriguingly with the remains of tonality without lapsing into neo-tonalism. Moreover, it plays with Beethoven’s tonalities, A major and F major, a third apart, a relationship with distinctly Beethovenian, also Schubertian, resonances. There is throughout a strong and yet elusive sense of Beethovenian presence: allusion wins out over quotation; longing, haunting, perhaps even resistence, over recreation. This is no pastiche. Audible ‘cuts’, as well as a few instances of extended instrumental techniques, are perhaps the most audible signals of Berio-like ‘modernity’ in a temporal sense. What we post-Romantics most associate with Beethoven, symphonic development, is, it seems, no longer possible. Did not Thomas Mann’s Adrian Leverkühn, after all, revoke the Ninth Symphony, as a necessary break with the ‘German catastrophe’ that had led him, as composer and as German, and his country, as cultural and political entity, to the darkest night of its soul?

The road to Leverkühn’s act is in good part the road of German musical Romanticism, to which we now turn, although we should recall the problematical nature of ‘Romanticism’ here: a term taken from literature, it does not quite ‘fit’ music analogously, or at least contemporaneously, whilst apparently serving it all the better. It was, after all, Beethoven whom ETA Hoffmann and many other Romantics had most firmly in mind when considering music and elevating it to the status of most exalted of all the arts.

Liszt was one of those Romantics; amongst composers, he perhaps remains still the most underestimated. Some critics, far less so audiences, seem jealously unable to accept that the greatest pianist in history could also have been a great composer, let alone, in a very modern sense, a great sex symbol; they seem unable to appreciate that Liszt, who turned his back on the celebrity and fortune of a world-touring piano recitalist to concentrate upon composition, used his virtuosity, at least in his finest works, to defeat ‘mere’ virtuosity, not to enthrone it. He might, as a nineteenth-century performer, have taken his leave from Paganini’s devilry, but Liszt’s *Transcendental Studies* have more *musical* interest in a few bars than all of the violinist’s Caprices; likewise Liszt’s piano concertos vis-à-vis the concertos of Paganini, or indeed those of ‘mere’ piano virtuosi.

The First Piano Concerto was nevertheless written for Liszt to perform in the first instance, its 1855 Weimar premiere – Liszt, in order to work with an orchestra, had ‘retreated’ from the bourgeois marketplace into court employment – conducted by Berlioz. It suggests, both in construction and in the ‘transcendental’ calls made upon the pianist, that, to quote the celebrated motto of the Leipzig Gewandhaus, **‘**Res severa est verum gaudium’: true pleasure is a serious thing. Such might in many respects have been the motto too of Liszt, ever conscious of Beethoven’s ghost, ever unable to ignore it, even had he wished. In 1823, the composer was said to have given the twelve-year old *Wunderkind* a kiss of consecration (*Weihekuss*).) Beethoven’s was a mantle he must grasp with new means, or perhaps, in Beckettian fashion, continually fail better in his attempt to grasp it. As Liszt put it, new wine – whether that occasioned by new instruments, new instrumental techniques, or different musical material – demanded new bottles.

That meant, above all else, formally. Liszt’s fondness not only for one-movement structures which contained within them ‘traditional’ multi-movement form was partly inspired by what he and many Romantics saw, rightly or wrongly, as Beethoven’s dissolution of Classical forms and still more so by Schubert’s *Wanderer* Fantasy; however, he was never one to rest content, ensuring that the formal dynamism of each work varied according to its material, or at least attempted to do so. The four short ‘movements’ resemble in some ways those of Beethoven – although he would never have written a four-movement *concerto* – but their interconnection is crucial. Themes are transformed, one of Liszt’s greatest legacies to the twentieth century, the technique fascinating serial composers beyond Schoenberg, at least as far as Boulez, so that what one hears initially as contrasting lays claim also to unity. The transformation and combination of all the work’s principal themes in the final *Allegro marziale animato* is no simple matter of recollection, but above all of binding together, within a twenty-minute span, a plethora of musical material – retrospectively or otherwise. Schoenberg’s First Chamber Symphony is but a stone’s throw away.

Apparent lack of chamber music in Liszt’s output is only apparent, for, as with Wagner, there is a great deal of chamber music in his orchestral writing; such, in one respect, is the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Listen, for instance, to the duet for piano and clarinet in the opening *Allegro maestoso* of the writing for string quartet in the third section. The ludicrous, malicious claim by Joseph Joachim – he, Clara Schumann, and Brahms were adamant that Liszt was in no way an heir to Beethoven, and behaved quite appallingly to him – that Joseph Raff had orchestrated the piece is utterly false. There are many felicities and originalities of orchestration that we now think of as quintessentially Lisztian, the scherzo’s opening use of the triangle as solo instrument only the most celebrated. Liszt was equally concerned that orchestral blend and rhythm should match that of the soloist. He wrote to Alfred Jaëll that he should only consider performing the concerto after two or three ‘through rehearsals. … In Berlin [a performance by Hans von Bülow] there was still a little hesitancy in the attack of the woodwind instruments, which must function like trumpets at this moment, *in a military style*, and not like the national guard, helter-skelter!’ Technological, technical, and musical developments were for him, as for Wagner, as for Widmann, as for Beethoven, at least in his imagination’s ear, as one. Even that triangle solo must use an instrument ‘not of too base extraction’ and have ‘not too vulgar a vibration’. The triangle player, then, must too be a virtuoso – to defeat mere virtuosity.

Wagner was no piano virtuoso, although his deficiencies as a pianist and indeed as a composer of piano music have been exaggerated. Where he unleashed his virtuosity, again to defeat the ‘mere’ virtuosity of Parisian *grand opéra* was, above all, still more so than onstage, in the opera orchestra, the ‘Greek Chorus’, as he put it, of his music dramas: commenting, foretelling, precipitating, contradicting, recollecting, reflecting. Wagner wanted to combine the dramatic means of the greatest of spoken drama, above all Aeschylus and Shakespeare, with the symphonic achievement of Beethoven, whose works, he believed, at least for some time, had taken purely instrumental music as far as it could go. Both music and drama now needed each other. That is, perhaps, less so for the relatively traditional *Tannhäuser* Overture, although the composer’s subsequent musico-dramatic theorising would often be as much based upon what he had written as upon what he intended to write. Liszt relished transcribing for piano – extremely faithfully, as in the case of Beethoven’s symphonies too – the Overture, and it is remarkable how little is lost. Nevertheless, Wagner’s orchestral writing retains its own allure and majesty, never more so than in the wind. The sturdy, moral, ‘German’ Pilgrim’s Chorus, assailed by the disintegrative, perhaps Parisian tendencies – timbral, harmonic, frankly sexual – of the Venusberg, seems to emerge victorious, but do the brass, does the diatonicism, protest too much? Even in concert, we are both satisfied and longing for more: the sign of a successful Overture.

The extracts from *Götterdämmerung* – ‘bleeding chunks’, in Donald Tovey’s phrase – tell the story of the hero, at least his story in this concluding *Ring* drama, in miniature. We are first presented with ‘Dawn’ – in Wagner, time, weather, everything, are to be understood materially and metaphysically – on Brünnhilde’s rock. Siegfried has braved the fire, won Brünnhilde, and now must go back into the world ‘to new deeds’; but first, an evocation of that glorious first morning together. His Rhine Journey sends him out into the world, as he must, and as even Brünnhilde, who tragically believes the ring to betoken her marriage to the freest of heroes, recognises, indeed bids him. Where, in the first part of the *Ring*, *Das Rheingold*, the Rhine music had sounded relatively uncomplicated, home to the Rhinemaidens, now the contrapuntal complexity of Wagner’s late music – Bach increasingly a rival to Beethoven – is well suited to the greater complexity of the hero’s descent into the world of ‘civilisation’, the realm of the Gibichungs, in which, through Hagen’s machinations, he will find betrayal and death. Political modernity, as Wagner, student of Hegel knew, was as complex as the musical modernity he knew as student of Beethoven. So it is, still more so, in Siegfried’s Funeral March, which dramatically (in every sense) extends Liszt’s method in his own revolutionary tribute, the symphonic poem, *Héroïde funèbre*. In *Götterdämmerung*, the weight of memory, the outpouring, combination, in some cases culmination, of motifs is of a different order. Thomas Mann summarised Wagner’s genealogical method here as ‘an overwhelming celebration of memory and mind, from recalling ‘the longing questions of the boy [Siegfried] about his mother’ to the present ‘earth-shakings and thunderings*,* with the body borne high on its bier’.

The programme ends not, however, with the myth of Siegfried’s obsequies, but with the ‘real-world’ comedy of Wagner’s maturity. In the opening Prelude to *Die Meistersinger*, we hear five of the work’s principal motifs adumbrated, three of them combined in brazen *tour de force* contrapuntal mastery at the moment of return to the work’s deceptively wholesome C major tonality. That moment is humorously signalled by the triangle: a recollection of *Tannhäuser*’s Overture or Liszt’s concerto? It need not be either/or. Wagner’s counterpoint, like his reckless hero, Walther von Stolzing, disregards tradition, themes yoked together as much out of ‘dramatic’ as what he derided as ‘purely musical’ necessity. Sometimes, the better to honour Beethoven (or Bach), it is necessary to disregard him.