The Python in the Pit

Mark Berry contrasts Frank Castorf’s ‘Ring’ with Patrice Chéreau’s centenary cycle

When guest editing *The Wagner Journal* this time last year, I contributed a brief editorial, entitled ‘Wagner Rescued from the Opera House?’ I tried to suggest the incompatibility, as recognised by Wagner and his more discerning interpreters and successors, between Wagner’s works and the everyday life of a typical opera house. As Pierre Boulez, whilst at work on the *Ring* at Bayreuth, put it: ‘Opera houses are often rather like cafés where, if you sit near enough to the counter, you can hear waiters calling out their orders: “One *Carmen*! And one *Walküre*! And one *Rigoletto*!”’ What was needed, Boulez noted approvingly, ‘was an entirely new musical and theatrical structure, and it was this that he [Wagner] gradually created’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Whilst deliberately leaving matters open-ended, I was hinting at the need for more opera houses to become like Bayreuth, or rather to consider a modern version of Wagner’s principles. Interestingly, however, some readers thought I was urging a transfer of Wagner performances from opera house to concert hall. Indeed, upon considering the matter further, I realised the uncomfortable truth that my two greatest live *Ring* performances had been, if not quite in ‘concert’, minimally staged. It is surely indicative that I immediately think of them with reference to their conductors, Bernard Haitink and Daniel Barenboim, and not, as now tends to be the case with theatrical performances, to their stage directors.

I returned to such thoughts several times during this year’s Bayreuth *Ring*.[[2]](#footnote-2) A more fundamental disquiet than Frank Castorf’s manifold dramaturgical inconsistencies arose. In a number of ways, Bayreuth actually seems – without, admittedly, having taken the step of expanding its repertoire – to have travelled in the opposite direction, towards other houses. That is certainly not all to be regretted. Progress has been made with respect to accessibility, wresting a good number of tickets from the Fafner-like clutches of the various Wagner Societies, so as to enable attendance from something a little, if only a little, more akin to the broader public the revolutionary Wagner always desired, even demanded, even though free admission remains elusive. But musical values seem, with the magnificent exception of Stefan Herheim’s *Parsifal*, to have slipped further and further down the pecking order. Once, Bayreuth audiences would have expected respective roles’ greatest exponents to be largely present on the Green Hill. Now much of the cast, with some highly distinguished exceptions, would be well enough received in a second-ranking house, whilst falling considerably short of what Barenboim assembled for his Proms performances.

A more fundamental problem with respect to this particular *Ring*, however, was the apparent total lack of interest Castorf showed in the work as a *music* drama. At his best, and there are some good ideas amongst the debris, Castorf seems to have treated Wagner’s poem alone as the ‘text’. I do not propose a Debussyan ‘calling-card’ parody of Wagner’s method, making visual reference to an object every time its leitmotif appears, although Wagner’s particular brand of realism may sometimes invite such practice.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet, if one remains wilfully deaf to the voice of Wagner’s orchestra as Greek chorus, how can one possibly emerge with anything other than a partial understanding of Wagner’s drama and its countless possibilities and implications? How could one make any sense whatsoever – in one’s own mind, let alone on stage – of the Funeral March, the close of the Immolation Scene, or any of those numerous cases when the music intensifies, questions, even contradicts, the poem, reminds us of something, crucial to its understanding, which happened several hours previously or suggests something which will happen several hours hence? Just as Aleksander Denić’s set designs – magnificent, considered simply as sculptures – often seemed reduced to backdrops, so was the score reduced at best to the level of a soundtrack and, one suspected, a tiresome one at that for Castorf. He would surely have been happier, and the results preferable, had he followed his usual practice of cutting, interspersing other texts, and so forth, maybe presenting a new *Ring* in spoken form, at a venue such as the Berlin Volksbühne. Ironically, those passages in which he seemed to have lost all directorial interest – for instance large, often ‘Romantic’, swathes of *Die Walküre* – resembled the ‘bad old days’ of ‘park and bark’, highlighting from the other side the dangers of letting one musico-dramatic element predominate – especially when, as in Wotan’s seemingly interminable monologue, the singing proved less than convincing.

By contrast, Patrice Chéreau, although similarly new to opera, strove to learn as much as he could about score and meaning(s) from Boulez. The increasing strength of their partnership still asserts itself, in one of the few opera DVDs to which I regularly return. In the year of their first revival, Chéreau, writing of the end of the Immolation Scene, expressed his desire:

that the orchestra pit be, like Delphi’s smoking pit, a crevice uttering oracles – the Funeral March and the concluding redemption motif. The redemption motif is a message delivered to the entire world, but like all pythonesses, the orchestra is unclear, and there are several ways in which one might interpret its message. […] Should one not hear it with mistrust and anxiety?[[4]](#footnote-4)

To enlist the services of a director who might think in such terms should not be the least priority for Bayreuth, or any other house, when forging a new *Ring*.

1. Pierre Boulez, ‘Time Re-explored’, in *Orientations: Collected Writings*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, tr. Martin Cooper (London and Boston, 1986), 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is not the place for a review, which the reader will find elsewhere in this issue from Tash Siddiqui. For anyone interested, my thoughts may be found in some detail at <http://boulezian.blogspot.com>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robin Holloway discusses – if at times with exaggeration – the strong realist currents in the *Ring* in ‘Motif, Memory and Meaning in “Twilight of the Gods”’, in Nicholas John (ed.), *Twilight of the Gods/Götterdämmerung* (London and New York, 1985), 13–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Pierre Boulez and Patrice Chéreau, ‘Commentaires sur “Mythologie et idéologie”’, in Bayreuther Festspiele: Programmheft, *Siegfried* (1977), 86–102, esp. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)