**Richard Wagner’s Revolution: ‘Music Drama’ against Bourgeois ‘Opera’**

Contrary to widespread opinion, Richard Wagner started off his career as the most revolutionary composer of the nineteenth century, not just in a musical sense, but also in a more straightforwardly political manner. Contemporary obsession with alleged anti-Semitism in his dramatic works, aided and abetted by the *de facto* prohibition upon their performance in Israel, has tended to drown out all other controversy, of which there should be more, not less, both in quantity and in quality.

Wagner was not simply a supporter of the 1849 Dresden uprising, one of the more bloody episodes of the 1848-9 revolutions; he was an active participant. Wagner probably ordered hand-grenades; he certainly served on the barricades and acted as look-out, observing street-fighting from the tower of the Kreuzkirche, whilst engaging in animated politico-philosophical discussion. Many revolutionary leaders, participants, and sympathizers were killed or punished, including Wagner’s comrade-in-arms, the Russian anarchist, Mikhail Bakunin. By chance, and with his friend Franz Liszt’s help, Wagner escaped into Swiss exile (Newman, vol.2: 104-5). There he would both pen a good deal of theoretical writing, often dealing with the implications of artistry in the modern, capitalist world that so repelled him, and also write his vast musico-dramatic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*, which he wrote to ‘make clear to the men of the Revolution the *meaning* of that Revolution, in its noblest sense’ (Wagner 1967-, vol.4: 176, author’s translation).[[1]](#endnote-1)

For Wagner, that revolution remained in the air, even after Louis-Napoléon’s 1851 *coup d’état*, which had marked its final act to many German erstwhile ’48ers. Revolution still promised to bring not only political and social but artistic transformation. Indeed, reinstatement of the public, anti-individualistic essence of art, was very much of a piece with socialism in ‘political’ life. Wagner’s ideas may not have been so clearly acknowledged by twentieth-century successors as they should, whether through ignorance or through embarrassment at hijacking by the Nazis. However, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment, was enthusiastic, as were many of his fellow Leninist revolutionaries. Indeed, Lunacharsky’s festive-revolutionary plans for the Bolshoi and Mariinsky (soon to be Kirov) Theatres were explicitly inspired by Wagner’s own *Art and Revolution* (Bartlett 1995: 256). Such ideas have certainly not disappeared today, although in an artistic world cowed by late capitalism, they are heard less often than they should be.

**Renewal of Athenian tragedy: public and political**

It would be fruitless to argue about whether Wagner’s conception of theatre was backward- or forward-looking, for it was both. Wagner aimed not at a *restoration* of tragedy, but at its *renewal*. His plans may be understood in terms of an abiding problem of modern political philosophy: how to reconcile the apparently idyllic communal integration of Hellenic life and the post-Classical or Christian conception of subjectivity. The Greeks, Wagner wrote, ‘knew no superlative of “free”.’ Only through the superlative of freedom’s negation, ‘through dehumanization, can we come today to full knowledge, owing to the highest necessity, of freedom’ (Wagner 1912-14, vol.12: 255, author’s translation).

Wagner saw the Athenian *polis* as an embodiment of harmony between the individual and society, private and public. Art and its performance were not merely part of this, but the most important part, the supreme manifestation of harmony. The Greek state was, following Schiller, itself a political work of art, in contradistinction to the abstraction of the modern bureaucratic state. Art, then, was ‘public’ in the truest sense of the word. Wagner contended that, for ‘the Greeks, it [art] was present in the public consciousness, whereas today it is present only in the consciousness of individuals, meaning nothing to the unconscious public.’ Greek art was conservative, whereas its renewal, Wagner suggested, must be ‘revolutionary, since it exists only in opposition to the existing public’ (Wagner 1912-14, vol.3: 28, author’s translation). The Athenian spectator had been reconciled with ‘the most noble and profound principles of his people’s consciousness’; Wagner’s post-revolutionary audience would celebrate its membership of ‘free humanity’, a ‘nobler universalism’ (Wagner 1912-14, vol.3: 30, 23, 39, author’s translation).[[2]](#endnote-2) The *Ring* was a culmination of idealism’s attempt to renew what Hegel had called the ‘religion of art’ (Hegel 1977: 424-53, author’s translation), for much early socialism was at least as much concerned to found a new religion upon the apparent ruins of Christianity as to respond to the Industrial and French Revolutions.

To that end, Wagner sought renewal not only of the public nature of *art* but also of the unity of the *arts*. Art had, following the demise of tragedy and the Athenian city-state, given way to reflection upon art, that is, to æsthetics. What came to pass for art was broken down into its constituent parts, mirroring societal particularism and egoism. It was mere fashion: artificial, arbitrary stimulus. Individualistic luxury and the concomitant, alienating torments of ‘needless need’ had replaced true, communal need, prerequisite of all true art (Wagner 1912-14, vol.3: 56-8, author’s translation). Wagner drew an analogy with the instrumental musician’s desire to divorce himself from the community and to make music alone. ‘Truly, the entirety of our modern art resembles the keyboard: in it, each individual component carries out the work of a mutuality, but, unfortunately, *in abstracto* and with utter lack of tone. Hammers – but no men!’ It was no accident that even Liszt, the miracle worker of the piano, was now turning his attentions to the orchestra, and thereby, to the human voice (Wagner 1994: 131-132, author’s translation).

Art had taken a battering even before the rise of the Church. Wagner followed Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* in viewing Roman ascendancy as poor compensation for the loss of Athens (Wagner 1912-14, vol.3: 56-58, author’s translation). The baleful transformation of politics and culture was symbolized by the metamorphosis of the god Hermes into his Roman equivalent, Mercury. Hermes had been ‘the incarnation of Zeus’s thoughts; he swept down, in winged flight, from the heavens to the depths, to proclaim the almighty power of the sovereign god’. Mercury’s winged mission, however, ‘signified the nimble activity of haggling, profiteering merchants,’ which, ‘crowned with the halo of Christian hypocrisy,’ had persisted and intensified unto the present day. Mercury had become:

… the god of the modern world, … the commander and master of ceremonies to our modern ‘art’. You see him incarnate in a bigoted English banker, … who engages principals from the Italian opera to sing privately for him in his drawing room instead of in the theatre … since he will glory in paying more for the privilege. (Wagner 1912-14, vol.3: 18-19, author’s translation)

If we pause for a moment to contrast this situation with Athenian tragedy, its gravity becomes clear. ‘Our God is money,’ Wagner continued, ‘our religion its acquisition’ (Wagner 1912-14, vol.3, 28, author’s translation). Gone was the religion of art, or art of religion. Public life had vanished, in favor of an unholy alliance of private counting-houses and the ‘Christian’ privacy of the interior, personal life, the conjunction far from accidental. Man’s purpose having been located outside his earthly existence, life could ‘remain the object of man’s care only with respect of his most unavoidable needs’. Industry thus came to rule over the earth, neglected by an absolute, utterly transcendental God; and so, ‘art sold itself, body and soul’, to its new mistress (Wagner 1912-14, vol.3: 25, author’s translation). Art as free, productive activity had been perverted, alienated, privatized. The true nature of Mercury’s art ‘is industry, its moral purpose the acquisition of money, its æsthetic purpose the entertainment of the bored’ (Wagner, 1912-14, vol.3: 18)

**Contemporary opera and the music drama of the future**

Gone, moreover, was the unity of the arts. Opera in particular had degenerated into a chaos of sensuous elements, randomly mixed and served up, each spectator choosing whatever took his fancy: ‘Here,’ Wagner observed, ‘the dainty leap of a ballerina, there the singer’s daring passage-work, here the set-painter’s brilliant effect, there the amazing eruption of an orchestral volcano’ (Wagner 1912-14, vol.3: 20, author’s translation). In this way, composers such as Rossini had become the toast of the ‘entire civilised world’, and acquired the protection of Metternich and his European System (Wagner 1994: 45-47, author’s translation).

Coming to his *bête noire*, Giacomo Meyerbeer (who had shown Wagner great kindness during his earlier stay in Paris), Wagner unmasked his ‘secret’ as mere ‘effect’. Opera had reached its nadir: it had become, Wagner wrote, an ‘outrageously coloured, historico-romantic, devilish-religious, sanctimonious-lascivious, risqué-sacred, saucy-mysterious, sentimental-swindling, dramatic farrago’ (Wagner 1994: 100-101, author’s translation). The chaos of the modern division of labour was reflected in its tawdry entertainments; the egotism of the Parisian *juste milieu* was the progenitor of grand opera, in which a random conjunction of unmotivated spectacles replaced true artistic unity. To the idealist mind, the realms of art, politics, and philosophy were inextricably related; art was, in Wagner’s own words, a ‘social product’ (Wagner, 1912-14, vol.3: 9, author’s translation).

That was why he came to reject the term ‘opera’ entirely for his own work, it having become irreparably tainted by the æsthetic barbarism of the modern world. The ‘artist derives enjoyment,’ he wrote, in a fashion which clearly followed the aesthetic reflections of another dramatist, Friedrich Schiller, ‘not only from the object of his creative labour, but from the very act of creation.’ This contrasted with the *artisan*, whose work gave him ‘no pleasure; it is only a nuisance’ (Wagner, 1912-14, vol.3: 24-25, author’s translation). Activity must be free, conducted for its own sake; it must not be the means to a mercenary end.

However, whereas Schiller had seen the æsthetic education of man as the only way of moving towards a reorganization of social relations, Wagner believed that change in the nature of man and society must be simultaneous, or perhaps *vice versa*. He declared:

A *performance* [of the *Ring*] is something I can conceive of only *after the Revolution*; only the Revolution can offer me the artists and listeners I need. The coming Revolution must necessarily put an end to this whole *theatrical business* of ours: they must all perish, and will certainly do so; it is inevitable. (Wagner 1967-, vol.4: 176, author’s translation)

That artwork turned out to be highly political in many ways. Had I more space, I should go on to discuss in detail its mythological subject matter and its relationship with contemporary – not only to Wagner but also to us – political and economic issues.[[3]](#endnote-3) For instance, the dwarf Alberich’s realm of Nibelheim is clearly an artistic reimagination of the modern factory, Alberich’s brother slaves toiling away to create the hoard of gold from which Alberich forges the ring of power, which grants the tetralogy its name. Likewise, the god Wotan, Alberich’s antagonist, inhabits in a number of senses the worlds of power in a political and religious sense. The smashing of his spear of law and domination by the revolutionary sword of the frankly anarchistic hero, Siegfried, may be understood to represent that downfall of the bourgeois state for which Wagner believed he had been fighting in Dresden.

**Hans Werner Henze: an ambivalent successor to Wagner**

However, I should like to say a little about one of Wagner’s successors. Although those following Wagner’s artistic innovations – whether in a more technical, musical sense, or more aesthetically – did not necessarily share his revolutionary socialism, some did. More to the point, however, even many of those who did not – Arnold Schoenberg, for example, the most musically revolutionary composer of the twentieth century, yet in many ways quite conservative in his explicit politics – continued to bear witness to the importance of a vision of art that was necessarily in an antagonistic, accusing relationship to the modern, capitalist – or late-capitalist – world.

Hans Werner Henze, a post-war German composer, who died in 2012, felt great ambivalence towards Wagner and his legacy, on the one hand considering it tainted, like much German art, by association with the horrors of the Third Reich in which Henze had grown up, whilst admitting its enormous historical and musical importance.[[4]](#endnote-4) As preparation for composition of *The Bassarids*, his librettists, WH Auden and Chester Kallman, had insisted that Henze attend a performance of *Götterdämmerung*, in order that he should ‘learn to overcome’, as Henze wrote in his autobiography, his ‘aversions to Wagner’s music, aversions bound up in no small measure with my many unfortunate experiences in the past’. Success was at best mixed, Henze continued:

I was perfectly capable of judging the wider significance of Wagner’s music: as any fool can tell you, it is a summation of all Romantic experience … But I simply cannot abide this silly and self-regarding emotionalism, behind which it is impossible not to detect a neo-German mentality and ideology. (Henze 1999: 207)

Interestingly, however, *The Bassarids* turned out to be one of his most Wagnerian works. Moreover, its (relative) popular success, being fêted at the bourgeois citadel of the Salzburg Festival for its premiere, marked an important staging-post on Henze’s move politically leftwards (he would eventually join the Italian Communist Party during the mid-1970s). That move had much in common with paths taken by other artists, intellectuals, and concerned citizens. Since the early 1960s, there had come increasingly vehement attacks upon those stifling denials of the past and the obscenity of a reconstructed present which wished to downplay, even to ignore, the tendencies in German society and culture which, for Henze, had done so much to engineer his own emigration from West Germany to Italy.

Henze took the decision that no longer would he write for himself and his friends, but ‘to help socialism’, that he would embody in his work ‘all the problems of contemporary bourgeois music,’ and yet ‘transform these into something that the masses can understand’. That certainly did not involve submitting to commercial considerations, but nor was there, he wrote, any ‘place for worry about losing elite notions of value’ (Henze 1982: 179-80). In the 1960s, he had begun:

... to read systematically ... I started with Marcuse, and read some Adorno; Marx and Lenin were to come later. This marked the start of a period of theoretical study. ... During this time I went often to Berlin to meet and talk with the radical student group, the SDS [Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund/Socialist German Student League – at the time a powerful movement with thousands of members] and Rudi Dutschke in particular. ... the experiences of the late 1960s – my involvement with the young left in the Federal Republic and West Berlin – were significant for my subsequent political development. As things turned out, that was to take place not in Germany but in Cuba and in Italy, where I had settled. There, with ever-increasing confidence, I began to learn how my music and my political beliefs could support and strengthen each other. (Henze 1982:55-56)

Just as Wagner’s *Ring* had been a child of the revolutions of 1848-9, *The Tedious Way to Natascha Ungeheuer’s Apartment*, a ‘show for seventeen performers’ – like Wagner, Henze for a while eschewed the term ‘opera’ – was born of the 1968 European revolts against the (re-)established socio-political order. In a *Gesamtkunstwerk* for the 1970s, a vocalist, brass quintet, Hammond organ, percussion, jazz ensemble, and, perhaps most notably, denoting the bourgeois origins of the protagonist, an instrumental quintet identical to that used in *Pierrot lunaire*, each member dressed in blood-soaked white coats, enact and indict Henze’s own lonely journey.

I shall draw to a conclusion by quoting from a summary of this work by its librettist, the Chilean poet and nephew of Salvador Allende, Gastón Salvatore, who had himself taken an active role in those ‘events’ as an active leader in the student movement, at one point imprisoned and deported:

Natascha Ungeheuer is the siren of a false utopia … [which] should be regarded as an all-denying immobility, as a kind of cowardice, which permits itself to appear identified with the ‘Revolution’ …

Such an existentialistic, non-historical form of political self-reflection places the leftist bourgeois in the position of exploiting the proletarian struggle, as an occasion for a merely self-indulgent moralising. …

The leftist bourgeois ... refuses to go the full way to the apartment of Natascha Ungeheuer. He has not yet discovered his way to the revolution. He knows that he must turn back on the way he has gone so far, and begin again. (Translation as in the published score: Henze 1971.)

That was clearly being presented as the predicament of the modern artist, not least Henze, and particularly of his relationship to the German bourgeoisie which, after all, had funded and would continue to fund a great deal of his artistic endeavors, just as Wagner had found himself compelled to bow not only to the royal patronage of Bavaria’s Ludwig II but also to the creation of a joint stock company to fund the Bayreuth Festival, at which the *Ring* received its first performances in 1876. If anything, it is the legacy of this festival, run since Wagner’s death by his widow, Cosima, and their family, that reveals the dilemma of Wagner’s and every other artist’s anti-capitalist ventures.

The English-born Winifred Wagner’s showcase for Nazi rule, Bayreuth, allegedly denazified, turned, once Allied Forces had imposed bourgeois democracy upon West Germany, into a ritual meeting ground for the rich and powerful and the not-so-rich and not-so-powerful German right-wing intelligentsia, plus invited, tolerated guests. On the other hand, Bayreuth has become ever more strongly a venue for radical-left stage experimentation. Patrice Chéreau’s 1976 ‘Centenary’ *Ring* triumphantly reinstated nineteenth-century political and industrial tensions to the stage. Stefan Herheim’s 2008 *Parsifal* overtly accused post-war ‘New Bayreuth’ of disingenuously divesting Wagner’s work of its revolutionary politics, whilst the present Bayreuth *Ring* from Frank Castorf, first seen in 2013, intensifies deconstructionist attempts to liberate Wagner from his German conservative *derrière garde*.

The conundrum of the politically committed artist, then, has remained as acute as ever. As Wagner had signed off that letter previously cited, in which he had suggested the revolutionary intent and testimony of the *Ring*:

However extravagant this plan may be, it is nevertheless the only one upon which I can wager my life, my writing, my energies. Should I witness its achievement, so shall I have lived gloriously; if not, so shall I have died for the sake of something beautiful. Only this can still cheer me. –

*Leb wohl!* (Wagner 1967-, vol.4: 176, author’s translation)

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**Keywords**

Music, opera, revolution, Wagner, socialism

**Biography**

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1. On the importance of ‘Die Revolution’ as a ‘fundamental concept’, following Reinhart Koselleck, for Wagner in a nineteenth-century context, see Berry (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Such ‘universalism’ should not be confused in Wagner’s world-view with the trivial, fashionable ‘cosmopolitanism’ of Paris, epitomized by *grand opéra*. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Berry (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For more on Henze, particularly in a post-Wagnerian light, see Berry (2014, chapter 6). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)