Reflection on opera – upon what it is, what it might be, what it ought to be – is as old as opera itself. One might even claim, not entirely nonsensically, that it is older still; for opera as we know it has its roots in an intellectual discussion concerning how best to perform ancient tragedy. Almost as old is hostility towards such reflection, whether from those who disdain opera or from those who would prefer it to be just ‘entertainment’, whatever that might be. Wagner, an inescapable figure for any understanding of musical, let alone operatic, modernism, sometimes veered dangerously close in some of his theorizing, though never in his dramas, to (highly mediated) insistence upon immediacy, upon a lack of mediation – although we should always bear in mind that his celebrated phrase in *Opera und Drama*, ‘Gefühlswerdung des Verstandes’ (‘emotionalization of the intellect’), does not imply abdication of that intellect. Whether in composition or stage direction – he more or less invented the role of the modern opera Regisseur – Wagner was, almost irrespective of intention, perhaps the single most important godfather to a critical, modernist tradition of staging and interpretation that has been unavoidably, if problematically, linked to the word *Regietheater* (director’s theatre). Without wishing entirely to elide ‘modernist’ and ‘critical’, let alone to elide either or both with *Regietheater*, whose caricatured binary opposition to ‘traditionalism’ has generated plenty of heat but little light, it is to that world of still raging, if all too often threadbare, controversy that I shall attend.

Let us first, though, take several steps further back to one of the multiple dawns of Western musical drama, in order to travel beyond Wagner in the opposite direction. What is opera, or perhaps better operatic culture, concerned with? How does it relate to modernist culture? One of the principal themes to be explored in this chapter is the importance of that reflexivity to our understanding of an operatic culture we can reasonably consider to be modernist in nature, without embarking too far down upon the hopeless, if tempting, path of tick-box definitions.

In the beginning, or close to the beginning, was Orpheus: a mythical ‘truth’, or at least believed to be so, repeated persistently through Western musical culture, and especially throughout operatic history. What did Orpheus do, and why did it matter? He sang, to the accompaniment of his lyre. Every scene in his legend relates in some sense to music, both in the ancient, broader understanding of *mousikē* (all that emanated from the Muses) and in our own, more...
restricted sense. The Muses, it may be worth reminding ourselves, were traditionally nine: Clio (Muse of history), Euterpe (lyric), Thalia (comedy), Melpomene (tragedy), Terpsichore (dance), Erato (love poetry), Polymnia (hymns), Urania (astronomy) and, first among equals, Calliope (epic), who in turn submitted to their true leader, Apollo Mousagētēs. Orpheus was Calliope’s son, and according to some tellings of his legend (Pindar is ambiguous) Apollo’s too. He tamed animals and resisted the Sirens, even charmed Hades itself, through performance on his lyre. His purview – and that of mousikē – was far greater than that which we, in an age labouring under the curse of specialization, might consider to be ‘music’: he was poet, enchanter and prophet; he communicated the qualities of all the Muses, not in addition to, but through his very identity as a musical performer.

If not the first opera, what has often been considered to be the first great opera – a value judgement modernism has never relinquished – was Claudio Monteverdi’s 1607 Orfeo, its roots traditionally understood to have lain in the sixteenth-century Florentine Camerata’s belief that Attic tragedy had been sung. When Christoph Willibald von Gluck and his librettist, Ranieri de’ Calzabigi, believed opera to have strayed too far from its dramatic purpose, to have degenerated too far into an opportunity for commercially inspired vocal display, their first ‘reform opera’ would be Orfeo ed Euridice. After tragedy, there should come a satyr play, and what better example, knowingly so, might one give than Jacques Offenbach’s Orphée aux enfers (discussed elsewhere in this volume by James Currie)? In The Mask of Orpheus, Harrison Birtwistle composed what many have regarded as the greatest twentieth-century English opera; at the very least it marked a new level in English musico-dramatic complexity.

Reflection has thus not been only, or even primarily, external. It has, at the very least, been intrinsic to those composers and works most central to what we might characterize as the modernist operatic canon. (Re-)traced back now to Monteverdi, it has some points of contact with what we might call the ‘actually existing’ practical canon or, perhaps better, working repertoire of opera houses. It also, though, stands apart from that working repertoire – which, admittedly, varies considerably over time and place – and criticizes it. The two stand in a dialectical relationship to one another, neither capable of existence without the other: on the one hand the modernist and, on the other, the non-, anti- or counter-modernist. And yet perhaps both partake of modernism in one way or another. We are brought, whether we like it or not, to the thorny, insoluble question of definitions. There is no need, however, to lament the lack of solutions. If there were some definitive solution somewhere, we should arguably have no need of art, nor indeed of writing upon it. We can reach for it, and it is perhaps in that act of reaching, in that act of trying to understand, that we find something of what it is or was to be modernist, or to partake or to have partaken in modernism.

Opera and modernism

In the introduction to a recent collection of essays on musical modernism, Julian Johnson and Erling E. Guldbrandsen write:

Modernism is neither a style nor an epoch; it has neither imploded nor come to a historical end. Rather, musical modernism is an attitude of musical practice – in composition, performance and listening – that involves an increased awareness of its own historical situation [. . .]. As soon as music starts reflecting upon its own language – its means of expression – it takes on a historical self-awareness that amounts to modernist, critical reflection. From this view, musical modernism simply (?) involves a heightened consciousness of the relations between present and past, between present and future.
and between continuity and discontinuity in the history of music; in brief, it provokes an acute awareness of the condition of historicity that has always been embedded in the present moment of musical experience.\(^3\)

Forestalling one immediate possible rejoinder, the writers continue: ‘such a historical awareness was already a characteristic of Beethoven’s world and of the modernity that erupts with the French Revolution and the philosophy of Hegel’.\(^4\) One might, of course, trace it further back, to the disintegrative whirlwind of competing dances and to those distended cries into (or from) the abyss of ‘Viva la libertà!’ heard in the first act of Don Giovanni, or to Gluck’s or indeed to Monteverdi’s Orfeo.

Perhaps the point is, then, that tendencies and examples – which might be made to stretch back further and further, even to the very beginning – reach at some point a critical mass. Once that moment has been reached, critical reflection, whether consciously articulated or not, seems necessary on the part of the general musical (and, in this case, musico-dramatic) culture, if not altogether ineluctably on the part of creators themselves. There will be anti-modernist currents, or at least tendencies we may consider as such, just as the Enlightenment, for Isaiah Berlin in a celebrated and still highly valuable article, met a counter-Enlightenment neither to be directly associated with nor directly dissociated from ‘early’ or ‘pre’-Romanticism.\(^5\) Whether we consider them to be ‘modernist’, to partake of ‘modernism’ to some degree, or to be downright ‘anti-modernist’ is perhaps not so very important beyond the particular terms of our particular endeavour. There remains – however unfashionable such Hegelianism may have become in certain, often ‘anti-modernist’, even neoliberal quarters – something of a spirit of the age to such thinking. That seems unavoidable: take the opposing conception and you also witness a Zeitgeist, almost a mirror image. As Jacques Derrida warned following the events of 1989, Marx and, by extension, Hegel are far from dead; they have rather become, like the modernism with which they stand so inextricably interlinked in cultural terms, all the more indispensable in a world of (neo)liberal triumphalism, a world which at the time of writing seems considerably less secure than it did in 1993.\(^6\)

Whatever modernism might ‘be’ or ‘have been’ – ontological inquiry is unlikely to be of assistance – it neither refers to nor even concerns itself with style. Individual examples may well do so. (Stravinsky’s neoclassicism certainly does, though that is another matter.) But works such as Schoenberg’s Moses und Aron and Debussy’s Pelleas et Melisande – or even Schoenberg’s tone-poem Pelleas und Melisande – do not share a fundamental style, which is neither to say that one cannot find certain musical features in common, nor to say that one cannot learn much from discovery and analysis of such features. Nor, by the same token, does an idea or framework of modernism prescribe stylistic identity or even proximity between, say, the ‘modernist’ Kroll Opera’s production of Der fliegende Holländer, directed by Jürgen Fehling and conducted by Otto Klemperer, and a Berlin ‘modernist’ or ‘modernistic’ successor, directed by Harry Kupfer and conducted by Daniel Barenboim. Stylistic kinship may be present, yet it need not be; indeed, there is nothing more pernicious than a tick-box approach to such matters. ‘The modernist may dispense with “atonality”, so long as (s)he includes some compensating developing variation’ is as absurd a proposition as it sounds, perhaps more so. None of that is to say that every opera written or produced during this period ‘is’ modernist, or can be helpfully understood as ‘modernist’, although it may well be the case that every opera written or produced might be helpfully understood within a modernist frame of reference. The relative ‘abstraction’ of the concept is part of its point. In that respect, but not only that respect, it has a good deal in common with ‘Renaissance’, ‘Enlightenment’, ‘Classicism’, ‘Romanticism’, and so on.
Modernist operatic culture

The director as modernist: Wagner and his successors

Wagner has stood at the forefront of musico-theatrical experiment since he burst onto the operatic scene, not just as composer but as conductor, director, aesthetician and cultural phenomenon. His was in many ways an experimental, critical approach that we should be hard put, indeed perversive, not to consider modernistic. Uncomfortably for those, from the bizarre ‘Bayreuth Idealists’ onwards, who would protect his work against transgression, the ‘Master’ had no compunction in treating other composers’ works in a way that would have today’s operatic reactionaries scream ‘Eurotrash’, ‘desecration’, or – still worse to many of their ears – Regietheater. In his autobiography, Wagner tells of his work in Dresden on Gluck’s Iphigénie en Aulide (or Iphigenie in Aulis, since it was performed in German). His 1847 staging – ‘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’ – revealed Wagner not only as conductor but as imaginative editor and composer, even musicologist. He presented Gluck’s opera in a new edition, providing preludes, postludes and transitions, in order, as he saw it, to aid the dramatic flow of a number opera, while also bringing to Gluck’s orchestration the advantages or otherwise of a mid-nineteenth-century hue. ‘I had to find new ways,’ Wagner would recall, ‘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.’

Wagner additionally attempted a return beyond Racine to Euripides when he transformed the ending, ridding Gluck’s work of its conventional concluding marriage between Iphigénie and Achille. In just the same way, Jürgen Flimm and Daniel Barenboim would in 2016 rid Gluck’s Orfeo of its lieto fine, both criticizing the work and attempting a restoration of a superior version that never was (but ‘should’ have been), very much in the tradition of Wagner. In their Berlin production of the original Vienna version, following the expected choral and balletic rejoicing, the performance returned to the Parisian number (that is, for the later Orphée et Eurydice) that many would have missed most of all: the ‘Dance of the Blessed Spirits’. Eurydice vanished once again, somewhere between the cracks of competing versions, yet without forsaking insistence (indeed arguably inciting still greater insistence) on an ideal version, thereby maintaining adherence to a Wagnerian work concept against the more haphazard tendencies he denounced in his own Paris and elsewhere. Orfeo’s fevered, grieving imagination seemed to have conjured hope only for it to dissipate. The vision of a happy ending such as Adorno excoriated in his vituperative critique of Wagner was lain bare for what it was: the protagonist’s desperate, unrealizable fantasy. Fire and its heat, emptiness, and loneliness return. Awaiting him now were only the Maenads – or perhaps Jupiter, an additional Wanderer-like figure introduced by Flimm, who observes events but never intervenes, although he would presumably be capable of doing so.

Moreover, Wagner’s own works, his widow Cosima’s understandable role as Bayreuth protectress notwithstanding, have always been at the forefront of critical intervention on the stage (as well as, arguably, in the pit, Boulez complementing Chéreau in the most celebrated instance of all, the 1976 ‘Centenary Ring’). The highly influential ideas of the Swiss designer Adolphe Appia, who had aimed at a drastic simplification of the stage clutter by which he had felt so distracted in Parsifal at Wagner’s own Bayreuth staging in 1882, were bitterly opposed by Cosima. Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s attempts to persuade his mother-in-law that Appia’s ideas might hold some validity came to naught. Wagner had, to quote Patrick Carnegy, ‘wanted to establish a “fixed tradition” because he needed to defend his own imaginings against misunderstanding
and perversion’. So, rightly or wrongly, do many creators. We might think of Samuel Beckett, in his attempt to prevent a Boston staging of *Endgame* of which he disapproved:

> Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theater production which dismisses my directions is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn’t fail to be disgusted by this.

Beckett’s decision to bring an injunction against the Berlin production was somewhat puzzling in the light of his earlier disinclination to do so in similar cases, true to the belief that such action was not within the rights of the playwright. Still, the injunction failed, upon which outcome Beckett proceeded to amend the contract licensing his plays for performance, so as to include a clause forbidding deviation not only from the script but also from his stage directions. Closer still to operatic home, we might think of György Ligeti, always a strenuous taskmaster to musical performers of his work, dissociating himself from Peter Sellars’s nuclear-age premiere production of the revised version of *Le Grand Macabre*, whose extremely detailed stage directions have never been ‘faithfully’ observed, and perhaps never will be. And yet, as Carnegy also remarks, ‘what Cosima forgot to say was’ that Wagner, like Shakespeare and Goethe, ‘had also built and run theatres, and that they and Wagner all recognized that performance had its own active, ultimately protean role in the completion of the written text’. Carnegy continues: ‘In “fixing” a tradition he most surely did not intend’, as Cosima, Fafner-like, did, ‘to imply a ban on the freedom of intelligent performers and stage directors to contribute their own artistry and make lively contribution to the challenges he had flung down.’

Ultimately, Appia’s vision would win out across Europe and the world, and eventually even at Bayreuth under Wagner’s – and Cosima’s – grandson Wieland, whose post-WWII ‘New Bayreuth’ not only saved the Festival from extinction, following its close association with National Socialism, but also proved so influential as a modernistic trailblazer for operatic culture more generally. There was, in Wieland’s work, good ideological reason for dissociating his new Wagner from what had come before, both immediately and in the longer term. John Deathridge once commented that when Wieland ‘spoke of “the clearing away of old lumber” (Entrümpelung), [. . .] [he produced] stage pictures bereft of their “reactionary” ethos – and, as sceptics were prone to add, most of their content as well.’ Wieland’s *Die Meistersinger* ‘ohne’ rather than ‘von’ Nürnberg was perhaps the most celebrated, or notorious, case in point there. Yet, quite apart from the dramatic advantages that might be won by scenic minimalism (less can often be more), that *Entrümpelung* paved the way for subsequent stagings, which proceeded to engage more directly with the critical content and potentialities of operatic works (not that Wieland ignored those elements entirely – far from it). That renewed critical engagement extended far beyond Wagner, of course, but the concentration here on modernist, reception-focused Wagner will, I hope, be forgiven, given that it is impossible to discuss everything within the confines of an essay such as this.

**Die Meistersinger**

I shall consider four productions of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, the first three in their different ways very much modernistic in the critical sense I have outlined, the fourth almost defiantly not so, and yet unable to resist – just as, say, Rachmaninov’s music cannot resist comparison with Stravinsky or Schoenberg – being considered in their light. (That, I hasten to add, is intended
neither to denigrate Rachmaninov’s music nor to claim that it possesses no ‘modernist’ features.)

Why, though, *Meistersinger*? Partly it is a matter of picking up from Wieland Wagner, and partly a matter of not repeating themes I have discussed elsewhere. However, there is more to it than that. There are specific, rather than accidental, reasons for paying attention to *Meistersinger* too.

The work’s concern with the mediated nature of art, its production, and its performance makes it perhaps Wagner’s most self-reflective work. Its deliberate anachronisms pave the way, or at least have been seen to do so since the Second World War, for similar playing with history and with its retelling, rewriting, relisting. Pierre Boulez, whose plans to conduct a new production of this work and of others (such as *Wozzeck*, *Elektra*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Boris Godunov* and *Don Giovanni*) with Wieland were forestalled by the latter’s death, once noted, very much in this connection:

> The Romantics rediscovered the Gothic style. At the end of the nineteenth century there were Gothic churches in profusion. This was the most striking example of stylistic reference. On the other hand, although in *The Mastersingers* there is no end of references to the Minnesänger, and to the forms of sixteenth- and – even more so – fifteenth-century music, Wagner’s music actually has nothing to do with the historical truth about the town of Nuremberg. This is why I feel really ill at ease when people try to depict the historical town on the stage when it is absent from the music.

If Hans Sachs says of Walther’s Prize Song, ‘It sounded so old, and yet was so new’ (‘Es klang so alt und doch war so neu’), we should also both guard against eliding the multiple varieties of ancient and modern: the celebrated *quérelle* between the two should perhaps be pluralized. Boulez, as one of Wagner’s foremost modernist interpreters and successors – composer, conductor, polemicist, revolutionary, although never actually as opera composer – offers a powerful, *musical* case against slavish adherence to stage directions, just as Appia had to Cosima. Yet, as Carnegy writes, in speaking of Wagner as ‘the creator of drama from the spirit of music’, Cosima was, unknowingly on the same ground as Appia, whose point was that the production must derive from the music and not from the stage instructions. The crucial difference was that while Cosima believed that music and stage instructions told the same story [always an unwise assumption], Appia maintained that the latter were an aberration [to be fair, something of an exaggeration] and that, in Schopenhauerian spirit, only the music was to be trusted.

There was mysticism, then, to be rid of, or at least to be questioned, in Appia’s conception too, and he was not merely prefiguring a successor when saying that the ‘contrast’ in *Meistersinger* ‘between the external events and the inner meaning is central to Wagner’s intention’. Nevertheless, the idea that the music might stand closer to the drama than Wieland Wagner’s ‘lumber’ has certainly offered critical possibilities to performance and to operatic culture more generally. Boulez would explore them more fully in his work with Chéreau on the *Ring*. We shall now, however, turn to those promised stagings of the one Wagner ‘music drama’ Boulez never had the opportunity to conduct.

### Harry Kupfer: old and new/*alt und neu*

Harry Kupfer, director of one of the two most successful overall (certainly, prior to Frank Castorf’s post-dramatic treatment, the most celebrated) post-Chéreau Bayreuth *Rings*, also directed
the nine ‘canonical’ Wagner operas, from Der fliegende Holländer to Parsifal, for Berlin’s Staatsoper Unter den Linden, in collaboration with one of the performing musicians closest to Boulez, Daniel Barenboim. I mention that since Barenboim may, in certain cases, be understood to have picked up the baton (had Boulez used one) from the French composer-conductor in a number of modernist operatic projects, not least Tristan und Isolde at La Scala with Chéreau (long postponed, but originally suggested as a Boulez-Chéreau Bayreuth reunion). Modernism has its own traditions, which, as Boulez remarks (in a comment that simultaneously acknowledges their existence), ‘a strong personality will inevitably transform’.20

Kupfer’s Meistersinger, his second staging of the work, ran through the second half of the 1990s and the following decade until what seems to have been its final appearance in 2008. Kupfer did not go so far as to present a Meistersinger ohne Nürnberg. Indeed, Nuremberg was present throughout, replete with Cranach, stained glass and banners (including King David and his harp), although never with quite such exuberant delight as, say, in Graham Vick’s roughly contemporaneous Breughelesque production for Covent Garden. What perhaps better served that general point from Boulez concerning a mismatch between work and history was a stair centrepiece (see Figure 19.1), serving in different guises as the Katharinenkirche, as the balcony of Act Two, as a staircase to Sachs’s workshop, and so forth. The city whose absence from the stage Boulez had advocated was reinstated, albeit in mediated, critical fashion. That centrepiece’s shape suggested a ruined tower, perhaps even an image of Berlin’s own celebrated Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche, and thereby seemed to allude to the devastation of Friedrich Meinecke’s ‘German catastrophe’, the course of German history to which even the most studiously uncritical

Figure 19.1 Richard Wagner, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (dir. Harry Kupfer, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin). Festwiese scene (Act 3, scene 5), with staired centrepiece visible

Photo © Monika Rittershaus, for Staatsoper Berlin. Used by permission
of *Meistersinger* stagings will struggle to avoid reference entirely. An impression of the modern city was superimposed, by virtue of a skyscraper backdrop to the second act and the first part of the third, suggesting, like an affectionate Adorno (if such a figure can be imagined), tension between Wagner’s thoroughgoing adoption of modern technical and technological means and his harking back to a pre-modern age of guilds and corporations, an age prior to excessive division of labour. A guiding principle of the production, not obsessively emphasized yet certainly present and productive (generative, one might say, in parallel to the developmental qualities in Wagner’s score), was that of conflict between old and new, with due reference to those shades in between.

Moreover, a utopian quality to that lost age was gently suggested by the joy of the *Festwiese* scene and its processions, complete with giant figure of Death, flamethrowers, acrobats, and all. To be utopian cuts both ways, for a utopia cannot exist – and certainly has not existed. Kupfer’s staging did not travel very far down the deconstructionist route, but the presentation was finely nuanced. There was, however, a nice touch to Sachs’s inability, following Walther’s refusal (see Figure 19.2), to find someone on whom to bestow the *Festwiese* garland. It was eventually placed on the floor. A sentimental path might have been simply to present it to Beckmesser. Instead, with considerable poignancy, the defeated town clerk walked over, looked at the abandoned garland, and imagined what might have been. The way in which Beckmesser was excluded from the general rejoicing without being entirely ostracized was both faithful to and yet critical of the broad dramatic thrust of Wagner’s drama and its reception.

*Figure 19.2*  
*Die Meistersinger* (dir. Kupfer, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin). Eva offers the *Festwiese* garland to Walther (Act 3, scene 5)  
Photo © Monika Rittershaus, for Staatsoper Berlin. Used by permission
Stefan Herheim: dreaming, reimagining, performing tradition

Next for consideration is the staging by the Norwegian director Stefan Herheim, first seen at the Salzburg Festival for the bicentenary of Wagner’s birth in 2013 and then again at the Paris Opéra in 2016. I shall not attempt firmly to distinguish between the two, for the ‘revival’, if we might call it that, was very much an extension of the first outing, and, in Bayreuth Werkstatt tradition, a Herheim production tends to be an ongoing, developing artwork rather than something set in stone.

The production opened, during the opening Prelude, in Hans Sachs’s nineteenth-century workshop. Sachs was seen dreaming, like Wagner, of a Nuremberg which, like the ‘traditional’ productions of ‘traditionalists’, never was, and for Appia and Boulez never should have been. We proceeded to see – and to hear – how Sachs and, by implication, Wagner created rather than exhumed before themselves and us a Nuremberg of their own time(s). They invited, perhaps even required, us to do the same, for the historical distance between us and the designs on stage – between directorial reflection and all-too-beautiful, more-than—a-little-knowing designs – was brought to the forefront of our self-consciousness by what we saw and heard. It might be worth reiterating here that it could not be further from the truth – a dividing line, if an unstable one, between many conceptions of modernism and postmodernism – to confuse Wagner, that theoretician of the ‘emotionalization of the intellect’, with someone who would have us abdicate that intellect. Indeed, brazen ‘infidelity’ to Wagnerism will most clearly be found in the ‘traditionalism’ of latter-day Nietzschean ‘Wagnerians’, those who would ‘protect’ the composer’s works from the very development to which Wagner subjected works of earlier composers, whether as performer, composer or theorist.22

Still more than Mendelssohn before him and (Adorno’s) Second Viennese School after him, Wagner took the modernist route for Bach: to quote Adorno in his celebrated Bach essay, he ‘calls his music by name in producing it anew’.23 Not for nothing did Wagner decline in his score to employ even the most cursory stylistic – as opposed to formal – reference to Renaissance music. His guiding spirit here was his very own creation of Bach, the ‘history of the interior life of the German spirit’, according to the contemporaneous essay ‘What Is German?’.24 Invention of tradition was seen throughout the production, just as it was heard throughout the musical performance. The Masters’ Nuremberg – seen at a time (post French Revolution) of renewed crisis for guilds and other corporate institutions – was shiny, new, a little insistent, a little desperate. Echoes, visual and verbal, were to be experienced of that Tand both of Sachs’s peroration and, earlier in Wagner’s oeuvre, of Loge’s description of the Rhinegold. All that glistened, were it in the Rhine or at a guild meeting, was not necessarily gold. Indeed Sachs, rightly or otherwise, would, at the close of the work, condemn it as the very thing the Masters insist it is not: ‘wälsche[r] Tand’, foreign vanity.

A key feature of Wagner’s Romantic conception of Sachs and indeed of Nuremberg concerned overcoming the division of labour – or, the more cynical, perhaps Marxist, commentator might respond, never having reached it in the first place. In that sense, at least, we might consider Wagner pre-modernist. Yet Marx and Engels too had their poetic flight of fancy in a celebrated passage in The German Ideology:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, […] it is possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without even becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic.25
Wagner and Herheim portrayed Sachs in more post-Nazarene fashion; there was something of later German Romantic painting to this dream. Yet Sachs remained a polymath and, more than that, a rebuke to involuntary specialization: cobbbling, writing verse, singing, indeed painting too. Not only did he dream at the opening; he continued to do so, Herheim reminding us of Schopenhauer, of Freud, of fairy tales and, of course, of the centrality of dreams to the work ‘itself’.

The ‘real’ world – shades of Schopenhauer, modernistically read back into Freud, himself strongly influenced by Schopenhauer – both disappeared and yet remained, projected onto the curtain as it was opened and closed, with increasing difficulty, by a night-capped Sachs at the beginnings and ends of the first two acts. And when he dreamed, objects in his workshop grew, like the Christmas Tree from Tchaikovsky’s Nutcracker; or was it that he and the characters of his dreams shrank? Still more than in Salzburg’s Grosses Festspielhaus – Herbert von Karajan’s vast, modernist stage – there was, in the Bastille amphitheatre of the Paris Opéra, a strong sense of toy-town, even before the toys came out to play. Yet the dream world, initiated erotically by Sachs’s sexual approach to Eva in the church, was made up of what he knew, and of what his – and Wagner’s – culture knew. A painting was transformed into Eva herself. Sachs’s writing bureau, magnified, became the organ (Figure 19.3), as indeed the furniture generally offered another Nutcracker-like magnification and intensification for the Wahn of the second-act riot. Did the organ, resplendent as a nineteenth-century, Leipzig Gewandhaus-like invention of tradition, become Sachs’s bureau, and thus nourish via tradition, in a proper sense, his creations, whether artistic or social? It was not either/or: this was a dialectical world, for composer,
director and intelligent audience. A bust of Wagner made its ambiguous, multivalent point, without undue exaggeration.

The Prelude over, and the curtain once again drawn back, the back of the writing desk became the church and indeed the municipal organ. The green of the surface became, crucially, the arena for contest, never more so than in the remarkable *agon* – intensified in Paris from Salzburg – between Walther and Beckmesser. In Paris there was to be heard in the person of Bo Skovhus an undeniably charismatic Beckmesser. He had to fight for the Masters’ support, they having been initially enraptured by Walther’s song. They swayed, literally and metaphorically. Such seemed a contest as political as it was aesthetic, and we are of course very much in the realm of Walter Benjamin’s aestheticization of politics, an idea which did not spring from nowhere but was very much rooted in ideas which, if not Wagner’s as such, were similar and historically related. All but the most historically ignorant of audience members would know, however regretfully, where such ideas might lead – and what role Nuremberg would come to play in them, just as Wieland did with his *Entrümpelung*. Dancing in concentric circles around Walther, even after Beckmesser’s apparently successful intervention, the Masters – and, in front of them, the Apprentices – might yet have decided in either direction. They looked outwards, though, not at Walther but perhaps at the audience, in the hope that it too might play its part in the artistic production of self-reflection. It was anything but a benign scene, whatever the prettiness-on-steroids. The violence, more or less sublimated, when Sachs came close to striking Beckmesser caused visible, audible intakes of breath when I saw it.

Books featured heavily. In the first act *Der Knaben Wunderhorn* proved the (neo)Romantic inspiration. Towering above the characters, a giant volume was opened to reveal, as such volumes often do, pressed flowers. They came to life as visual instantiations of David’s tones: ‘deeds of music made visible’, one might say – as indeed did the composer to whom Cosima and Appia, Wieland Wagner and Boulez, and not least Herheim himself have all made their appeals. In the second act it was the Brothers Grimm whose ‘characters’ came to life, inciting and participating in the *Prügelfuge*, that splendidly dialectical creation of dramatic chaos out of musical, fugal order, as if to remind us that ‘fuga’ means flight. There was madness, delusion, illusion – Wagnerian *Wahn* aplenty, however we translate that elusive, Schopenhauerian concept – in that dream of Sachs. By the third act Sachs’s whole library was on offer: a clear offer of interpretative freedom, the director following Wagner as man of the theatre rather than a forbidding dispenser of rules (via his widow). And it was in this act that old Meister Wagner came visibly, not just audibly, on stage – *ersichtlich gewordene Taten der Musik* indeed.

All good, and bad, things must come to an end, however. The action began to unravel with Sachs’s shocking refusal to shake Beckmesser’s proffered hand. Beckmesser had been humiliated, bruised in every sense, and yet seemed willing to meet Sachs half way. Was Sachs actually, then, the proto-fascist that some, often unable to distinguish between two different German words for ‘master’, *Meister* and *Herr*, have claimed him to be? As the action froze, the unraveling proper gathered pace. There was yet another awakening: that of Beckmesser as *alter ego*. Who had dreamed whom? It was not Sachs who, for the final time, drew the curtain. Or was it? Beckmesser emerged for his curtain call – that strange, liminal zone both part of and yet beyond the performance ‘itself’ – in night dress, matching that of his antagonist. It was a move alert equally to the comedy and to the darkness at the heart of a work whose depths lie in precisely those matters *faux* ‘traditionalists’, from the Nazi period (or even further back) up to the present day, would ignore and preferably bury. The problem with such ‘tradition’ from a modernist standpoint is not that it is invented, for what is not? It is rather that it refuses to consent to the truth content, as Adorno might have put it, whether of Wagner’s world, of our own, or of the
world in which both of those worlds, perhaps others too, collide, corrode, self-criticize: that of
the artwork in performance.

Perhaps most telling on a structural level was the way in which Herheim’s staging traced,
or rather instigated, Sachs-like manipulation of \textit{Wahn} – and doubtless \textit{Wahn}’s manipulation of
Sachs. Just as Walther, his song, and Nuremberg’s public are guided, so too were Sachs’s dream
and Sachs’s reality – not least by the score. Yes, there were proto-fascist undertones there for
those wishing to find them, as suggested by the chilling lighting of a semi-crazed Sachs during
his final peroration. The glow worm who could not find its mate, to whom Sachs would refer
in the following act, could be seen in the mêlée of the \textit{Prügelfuge} (Figure 19.4) desperately –
graphically – trying to find a replacement. This is no world of idealized Romantic or even sexual
love; it is clear-eyed, brutal as Schopenhauer’s Will itself. And so the creation of the third act,
Wagner’s and Sachs’s, both broke with and incorporated what had gone before, like the Prize
Song itself. Opera took more than a few steps towards music drama, perhaps even towards a
reimagined form of music theatre.

\textbf{David Bösch: the violence of reconstruction}

David Bösch’s staging for the Bavarian State Opera, with designs by Patrick Bannwart and
Meentje Nielsen, was first seen in 2016. It proved far more than a vehicle for Jonas Kaufmann
as Walther, although that was not unreasonably an attraction for much of the audience, just
as was Kirill Petrenko’s conducting. If less all-encompassing than Herheim’s staging – much
German theatre since the Second World War, and not just its most post-dramatic reaches, has
understandably recoiled from neo-Hegelian claims to ‘totality’ – it intrigued by virtue of an
unusually feminist standpoint, criticizing and revivifying the work in a different, yet no less
valid, fashion. To look more closely at Eva’s standpoint and her treatment is something staging
and scholarship alike might usefully, fruitfully attend to. No more than Romanticism or most
other ‘isms’ does modernism gain a feminist pass, although it may well offer us some poten-
tially useful critical tools (as well as the contrary). Eva Rieger’s observations that ‘so little has
been written about Eva Pogner’, and that what has been written tends to correspond ‘to all
the stereotypes of the traditional bourgeois woman’, offers a critical challenge that did not go unheeded here, whether consciously or otherwise.29 Bösch’s staging also arguably offered one of the most intriguing treatments yet – I shall not say a ‘solution’, for surely there is none – to the perennial ‘Beckmesser problem’: how to justify, or to deal with, the undeniable cruelty to this Malvolio figure, who may or may not be a victim of sublimated anti-Semitism.

Bösch took his audience to the 1950s: an interesting move for a work concerned with reconstruction, set in a city which, more than most, has had to be concerned with reconstruction. The relationship between provincialism and post-war reconstructionalism was to be explored here. (Lest we forget, 1955 was the year in which the West German Army was (re)founded, denying its origins in what had gone before.) ‘They say Bach, [but] mean Telemann,’ as Adorno unforgettably put it.30 For there is nastiness as well as homeliness in provincialism; Bösch drew out the former, in a useful corrective to the norm. What might initially have seemed an almost philistine nostalgia for the period and its ‘popular culture’ – similarly in Bösch’s Munich staging of L’Orfeo, to take us back to where we began – was revealed to be far more complicated than that, that slight sense of nostalgia more a way of drawing in the audience member only to confound him or her. For one thing, what does ‘popular culture’ mean? That problem lies at the heart of the opera, at the heart of relationships between the Masters and the populace and of Sachs’s suggestion that the rules be tested. Such has arguably become still more so, given the rise of what some of us are old-fashioned enough still to regard, with Adorno et al., as the Culture Industry. If resistance is to come, it will be more likely to come from Helmut Lachenmann than from the world of commercial music, successfully masquerading as ‘of the people’. And so, when microphones and various other paraphernalia of the recording industry – ‘Classical’ in the deadly marketing-speak of that world, then as well as in the twenty-first century – were put in place, we sensed an act of domination over our ‘administered’ world and lives.

Although the Personenregie of Bösch’s staging was detailed throughout, it was only really – as in the work itself – towards the end of the third scene, in the Singschule, that things came closer into conceptual focus. As befits the modern, administered state, the means by which this was accomplished was violence – violence that implicitly criticized and yet perhaps also helped salvage the darker provincialism of the work. David had already come across as a vainer, indeed more interesting character than usual, with the strong implication that his penchant for small-scale violent behaviour was owed in part not only to provincialism but also to his inability to be a true creator. (The two of course may well be related.) Walther had tried to defend David when the apprentices, at the beginning of the scene, attacked him, but he would have none of it; outsiders were not to be welcomed. Would David prove to be a second Beckmesser? That remained to be seen; for it was the first Beckmesser who provided the shock – literally.

The electric shocks administered by the Marker to Walther, forcibly restrained in his chair, are the work of what Gudrun Ensllin would soon call the Auschwitz generation. As Ensllin continued, there could be no arguing with them – something that came across strongly in Bösch’s production despite, or perhaps because, of Beckmesser’s – and Pogner’s – relative attractiveness (relative to how we usually see them, and indeed to the definitely older-school Kothner). Who, after all, had not occasionally found something of attraction in the discipline of fascism, especially when emboldened, as there, by readily available bottles of Meisterbrau? The guilds had never been as stable as nostalgia suggested – that was surely part of Wagner’s meaning here – and Bösch was merely bringing already existing divisions to the foreground. Indeed, it seemed no mere accident that some Masters looked (costumes are crucial here) and acted with greater modernity, or at least closer to the dictates of fashion than others. If the Guild were keeping things together – and such was the crux of nineteenth-century Romantic and Hegelian
defences in the face of liberal attacks upon them – then it was not clear whether it would succeed for much longer. ‘Reconstruction’ has a tendency to incite – as any Stolzing, Ensslin or, indeed, Lachenmann would tell you. Consider the latter’s open letter to Hans Werner Henze, during their angry confrontation over the claims of modernism. Lachenmann definitely takes the ‘Wagner’ role here, quoting from a lecture he had given the previous year:

that outbreak of the muzzled subject into a new emotional immediacy will be untrue, and degenerate into self-deception, wherever the fat and comfortable composer, perhaps slightly scarred structurally and therefore the more likely to complain, sets up house again in the old junk-room of available emotions. The temptation to do this is great, and the impression cannot simply be dismissed out of hand that after so much lamentable stagnation, the recent teeming abundance of powerfully emotional music exists thanks to the degenerate fruitfulness of maggots having a good time on the fat of the tonal cadaver.\footnote{31}

Sachs’s van – ‘Sachs’ read the neon, definitely not of a Fifth Avenue variety – captured our attention at the beginning of the second act. The mise-en-scène was clearly of a grimmer 1950s: a product in part, presumably, of the cost of war. But this, one felt, had never been a suburb of joy. It was not the Munich we see in the second Heimat of Edgar Reitz, teeming with modernist life; nor was it the Nuremberg the tourist would see. In its reassertion, Beckmesser’s virtuosity came to the fore. He was not a fraud, unimaginative though he may have been; he had craft if not art, to employ a (neo)Romantic formulation. He was, moreover, certainly no mere figure of fun. His piccolo guitar to Walther’s full-size version invited a number of reflections. And yet his song worked, in its way: perhaps of another age, another age that perhaps never was. But such is – and was – reconstruction. Anti-modernism, then, was granted its voice, even its dignity.

The violence of the Prügelfuge’s staging eclipsed any I have seen. David’s deeds with baseball bat marked him out as every inch the neo-fascist, to be greeted with open arms by Pegida or its predecessors. At its close, the Night Watchman (in modern policeman’s garb) was dealt with by the remaining small gang of young townsfolk. They took him back to his car and sent him on his way, but it was clear that he had no choice; this was their manor. Crossing themselves beforehand, they had mimicked the (deliberately?) incongruous religious procession at the opening: they knew how to use traditional forms, visual and musical, when it served their purpose. The final punishment beating took place as the curtain – and one of the thugs’ baseball bats – fell.

The final Festwiese scene posed questions of the work very different from those in Herrheim’s staging. Who owned the guild, or at least its ‘products’, symbolic of that ever-present, ever-powerful, even omnipotent Culture Industry? A corporation, albeit in the modern rather than the archaic sense: ‘Pognervision’. The early televisual variety show we saw might initially have seemed ‘popular’ but, as with most of what loudly proclaims itself to be ‘of the people’, it was deeply – and indeed shallowly – manipulative. Falko Herold’s video work provided ‘titles’ for each Master (‘individual’, or styled to be corporate?) as he came on stage, just ‘like on the television’. (Adorno would have had something to say about that.) There was something for all the family – within strict limits. David and a troupe of camp dancers suggested the reality of ‘deviance’, which might be tolerated as a ‘harmless’ joke, yet would certainly be rejected if it were to offer any serious attack to patriarchy. In any case, David was not in on the joke and was once again humiliated, a proto-Beckmesser: violence bred violence. When compelled (‘peer pressure’) to drink too many shots in order to prove his real ‘masculinity’, he fell paralytic, unable to perform his social and sexual functions.
The cruelty meted out to Beckmesser would be even worse. However, we were reminded that he wished essentially to buy Eva, a fully fledged bartered bride. Indeed, he made very clear his desire to possess her, even against her will. Bedecked in gaudy ‘variety’ gold, anything but comfortable, he had been set up to fail. ‘Entertainment’ was, as a game show host might have put it, the name of the game; more broadly, the audience was reminded of the cruelty of a work in which the comedy, in the common sense at least, pertains to characters laughing at another – comedy at which we should feel uncomfortable. Eva, who had learned a great deal during the course of the work, was increasingly disgusted by what she saw. When she thought that Sachs had fallen in with her father’s plan to sell her off – this ‘show’, with related ‘philanthropy’, never forgot its roots in the commercialism Wagner claimed so to abhor – she could not bear to look at him any more. While the crowd, manipulated by the ‘event’, sang his praises, not only did she turn away; from her balcony she cast the contents of her glass in his direction. No one noticed on stage, but the audience did. If, to quote Rieger, ‘German musicologists still condescendingly use the diminutive “Evchen” as if they identified themselves with Sachs’, Bösch – and, in some sense, the material of Wagner’s drama – redirected us so as to rectify his and the male guild’s disinclination to ‘take her particularly seriously’. 32

Yet otherwise, Sachs remained wiser than most, realizing that all had gone awry at the moment when most – whether on stage or in the typical audience – complacently believe that it has been resolved. He remained deeply troubled rather than triumphant. Then Beckmesser returned, desperately trying to shoot dead the presumed author of his misfortunes, yet falling before being able to carry that out. Things never worked out as ‘intended’, then, whether for Beckmesser, for ‘reconstruction’, or for attempts to ‘protect’ Wagner’s works from the implications of his own standpoint and from the unavoidable – even should one wish to avoid it – path of historical reception.

David McVicar: anti-modernism and entertainment

And so, to consider, more briefly, largely for the sake of contrast, a staging that could not really be considered as partaking of the modernist operatic culture we have been considering, and might even be thought of as anti-modernist. Enter David McVicar, latterly a darling of operatic reactionaries online, such as the notorious ‘Against Modern Opera Productions’ Facebook group and its harder-line German sister-group, ‘Gegen Regietheater in der Oper’. 33 McVicar had earlier presented himself as offering a ‘third way’ – in what, perhaps not entirely coincidentally, had been the era of New Labour – between so-called Regietheater and backward-looking musico-theatrical inertia. His work had indeed seemed to be just that: a keen sense of theatre allied to a visual aesthetic generally acceptable to even such timid opera audiences as those of London’s Royal Opera House and New York’s Metropolitan Opera. Latterly, though, he has adopted an explicitly anti-modernist stance, veering close to the overblown vulgarity of the later Franco Zeffirelli or the determinedly ‘anti-interpretative’ kitsch of the Vienna State Opera’s house favourite, Otto Schenk. (Schenk’s Meistersinger remains in the Met’s repertoire, a bold attempt to have a reworking of Herheim’s staging replace it having been safely seen off by the house’s patrons.)

A fawning interview with McVicar in 2009 in The Independent seems both to have reflected and perhaps even to have heralded some part of that transformation. Having admired the director’s biceps, the journalist interviewing him gushes: ‘Actually, he [McVicar] laughs quite a lot,’ continuing:

One of the things he laughs at (but not in a good way) is the way operas can be produced in Germany. ‘There’ll be combat physiques,’ he says, ‘and balaclava helmets, and
Modernist operatic culture

machine guns, and there’ll be neon strip-lighting, and everything will be antiseptic and everyone will over-react madly and the audience will sit there, taking it all incredibly seriously, and I’ll be sitting there stuffing my fist in my mouth, because I’m trying so hard not to laugh.34

So far, so unamusingly caricatured, especially coming from one who, in several earlier productions, had taken care to deal with history, reception and indeed other conceptual, critical matters, albeit in a relatively unthreatening way for conservative or reactionary audiences. The Teutonophobia, which seems perhaps more a reflection of anti-modernism than actual xenophobia, becomes sharper with the following:

What he hates most of all is a ‘concept’ (‘das Koncept’ [sic] he says in a forbidding German accent), anything that sticks a work of art in a straitjacket and tries to ‘tie up the ends’. ‘Art,’ he says, ‘comes from a much more instinctive, intuitive place.’35

Thus we return to the realm of the allegedly unmediated.

And yet there seemed, at least to start with, as though there might actually prove to be some kind of Konzept to McVicar’s Glyndebourne staging, first seen in 2011. The action certainly did not take place in sixteenth-century Nuremberg, idealized or otherwise, but rather in the earlier nineteenth century, presumably at around the time Wagner was growing up. There are many things to be said for such an idea, looking at influences upon the young Wagner that helped shape his worldview (from a more hostile standpoint, his ideology). It would not have been so very distant from what Herheim was doing at more or less the same time in Salzburg and Paris. For instance, German guilds and corporations came under concerted post-Enlightenment attack at this time; Hegel, generally supportive of the Prussian reform movement, opposed the removal of their monopolies as an attack on partial association, on civil society.36 The guild in Nuremberg, then, might well be portrayed as under attack; such is surely in part the meaning of Walther’s intrusion, a typical Wagnerian move of introducing a charismatic leader to a society from without, a move which might itself be subjected to criticism.

There was, unfortunately, no evident attempt to do any such thing with the updating. It was difficult to rid oneself of the suspicion that the principal point, or at least principal result, of the updating was simply to present an audience uninclined to criticism, whether of artworks or itself, with a host of ‘pretty’ designs. The Culture Industry, one might say, was offering more of the same through carefully ‘curated’ variety. Vicki Mortimer’s handsome designs might have done so much more, just as those Heike Scheele and Gesine Völlm most certainly did for Herheim, yet they were granted no opportunity to do so.

Drama, moreover, was determinedly reduced to mere ‘entertainment’. There is nothing wrong with art being entertaining, of course; it would often be failing, in some sense, if it were not. However, McVicar’s playing to the gallery – not in a metatheatrical sense, imitating or leading Wagner’s dialectical relationship between Masters and people – became wearying. ‘Amusing’ interpolations, which served little or no dramatic purpose other than to make those who have partaken of a few too many glasses of champagne erupt into apparently helpless laughter, were too often the order of the day. Downright silly, seemingly quite irrelevant dances, especially painful at the opening of the second act, seemed present more to give the choreographer something to do than to make any dramatic point. Perhaps most bizarrely of all, Beckmesser became a preening figure of high camp. Unlike, say, the intrusions of carefully manufactured camp into Bösch’s staging, there was no obvious (or even less obvious) reason for this other than to make certain of those audience members once again laugh uproariously. It was uncomfortable, though,
Mark Berry

for anyone who might be concerned with the cruelty inflicted upon that most problematic of characters. Doubtless that was not the intention, but such is perhaps one of the problems with an anti-critical stance that ‘simply’ wishes to ‘entertain’.

In modernist conclusion: to Beckett, Stockhausen and beyond

A dramatist such as Beckett could never justly have been accused of that. And yet he was notoriously no fan of ‘alternative’ or, as we might say, critical approaches to the staging of his dramas. Indeed, the Beckett estate adamantly pursues a policy of mortmain. So there is certainly an alternative modernism, or at least a stance taken by those we should consider modernists in their creative work, one which insists ever more strongly upon the letter. (Perhaps we might call it Stravinskian, given that composer’s notorious, if personally inconsistent, disdain for interpretation.) Beckett seems to have felt similarly when it came to opera, despising Chéreau’s staging of Berg’s Lulu for its three-act premiere under Boulez. As Duncan Scott related:

He had been very upset by Patrice Chéreau’s design for Berg’s Lulu in Paris [actually Richard Peduzzi’s]. He said he couldn’t understand how Boulez could ‘let somebody fuck such an opera about’ except that Boulez and Chéreau were ‘cronies’. A water-closet on the set particularly upset him. He called it a ‘Lulu loo’. 37

A stress on the performative, or at least the interpretative, such as I have offered may lay itself open to the charge of having missed the modernist point. And yet I do not think it does so completely. There has always been tension between ‘creators’ of artworks and those who would perform, criticize, interrogate them. What I have wished to show is that the more strongly critical approach of an operatic culture we might consider modernist has been one of its most important and interesting developments – not that it has been its only one, and not that it has not been challenged, even from ‘within’.

For modernism retains, even at this late – some might say too late – juncture, some hope, however despairing, of the emancipatory, especially when considered in contrast to the conservative-reactionary and to the postmodern. It retains something of a post-Romantic appreciation of the crucial importance of structure, while pouring new wine into new and old bottles alike (with apologies to Liszt). That holds even in the case of Adorno, for the practice and theory of relentless criticism without hope – it is never quite so straightforward as that, as Adorno’s discovery of a sliver of hope even in Tristan would suggest – remains predicated upon the emancipatory. 38 That is, one cannot dash hope where hope does not or cannot exist; the idea of an administered society makes no sense without an alternative. Postmodernism, by contrast, mocks any idea of truth content, of emancipation. Thus, in our particular operatic world, a staging in which criticism is predicated upon, say, revolutionary transformation, however hopeless a prospect that might seem, however tragic the denouement, may be distinguished from one in which it is all a bit of a game and nothing should be taken too seriously. We might actually, tentatively, reinstate a distinction, although certainly not mutual exclusion, between ‘art’ and ‘entertainment’.

Part of that battle, and one of the principal reasons I have chosen to look at responses to Wagner, lies in a critical determination to take seriously the claims of music to be – not simply to enhance, let alone to prettify – drama. By the same token, part of that battle is to continue to engage critically with artworks from the past, to refuse to let the museum door close behind us. It is no coincidence, I think, that those tendencies and some of the others considered above have been prevalent in an age haunted by the coming, in the 1960s and 1970s, of music theatre as a critical alternative to ‘opera’ – as, indeed, Wagnerian ‘music drama’ had been a century earlier.
Modernist operatic culture

I am far from suggesting that we should elide music theatre and Regietheater (for want of a better term). They denote broadly different, although not mutually exclusive, things. However, it may well be worth considering the latter, as it emerged from roughly the 1970s onwards, as part of an operatic response to the former; it may even be worth considering the former as part of a response to earlier twentieth-century manifestations of the latter. At any rate, further consideration of the dialectical relationship between the two would be valuable. Operas such as Stockhausen’s Licht works – and we seem to call them operas – incorporate a good deal of the music-theatre approach. One might think, for instance, of the trombonist’s seduction, provocation, serenade, whatever it may be, in Mittwoch’s ‘Michaelion’, of Luzicamel, Bactrian ‘emanation’ of Lucifer. Given the paucity of performances, we have not yet reached the stage of a Regietheater reassessment or deconstruction of Stockhausen, estimable though Graham Vick’s Birmingham Opera 2012 staging and indeed all aspects of that Mittwoch performance were. It will come, though – and it would not be entirely surprising to see it resisted by the keepers of the Stockhausen flame, following in the footsteps of the Beckett Estate or indeed Cosima Wagner. A Wieland, however, will most likely come thereafter, or maybe she or he is already here, awaiting a 2019 ‘semi-staged’ performance – no longer, alas, the initially promised intégrale – in Amsterdam.

Who knows? The future is ours, but it is not for us to know, or we should be doing it now. One may or may not be able to make some better sense of Licht via, for instance, Originale; however, one could certainly not predict the former from the latter. As Marx put it, declining to play the utopian parlour game of outlining the nature of communist society, he was not in the business of ‘writing receipts (Comtist ones?) for the cook-shops of the future’. Such is perhaps as close to a modernist lesson, even a modernist truth, as we shall come. Alternatively, as a modernist composer once asked:

New German opera houses certainly look very modern – from the outside; on the inside, they have remained extremely old-fashioned. To a theatre in which mostly repertoire pieces are performed one can only with the greatest difficulty bring a modern opera – it is unthinkable. The most expensive solution would be to blow the opera houses into the air. But do you not think that that might also be the most elegant solution?

Notes

2 ‘And from Apollo’s home came Orpheus, the lauded lyrist, king of song’ (Pythian IV, lines 175–77); Pindar’s Odes, trans. and ed. Roy Arthur Swanson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), 89. Pindar’s scholiast (writer of marginalia) cites authorities for Apollo as father, and notes the (deliberate?) ambiguity in the Greek text.
4 Ibid., 2.
8 Ibid., 338.
Mark Berry

11 Patrick Carnegy, Wagner and the Art of the Theatre (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 149.
13 Ibid., 121–22.
14 Carnegy, Wagner and the Art of the Theatre, 149.
16 In After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from Parsifal to Nono (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer and University of Rochester Press, 2014), I devoted chapter 7 to Stefan Hérmann’s Bayreuth staging of Parsifal (2008–12) and chapter 8 to stagings of Lohengrin.
18 Carnegy, Wagner and the Art of the Theatre, 148.
19 Quoted in ibid., 180.
26 That, rather than spurious, unearned dignity, is perhaps the best way to have a character now, rightly or wrongly, seen as problematical, taken seriously. For a summary of some of the issues, see Hans Rudolf Vaget, ‘“Du warst mein Freund von je”: The Beckmesser Controversy Revisited’, in Wagner’s Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation, ed. Nicholas Vazsonyi (Woodbridge and Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer and University of Rochester Press, 2003), 190–208.
33 For a brief placing of such groups’ ideology within broader cultural and political milieux, not least that of National Socialism, see my review of Bernd Weikl’s Swastikas on Stage: Trends in the Productions of Richard Wagner’s Operas in German Theaters Today, trans. Susan Salms-Moss (Berlin: Pro-Business, 2015), in Wagner Journal 10, no. 22 (2016), 78–82.
35 Ibid.
Modernist operatic culture


38 Adorno, Versuch über Wagner, 143.


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Mark Berry


