

The Ideology of Wagner's Stage; Adorno, Boulez; antisemitism

Music is part of the social systems that affect the development of the individual. Next to aesthetical messages art also takes in normative standards and propagates these. This is not merely a modern phenomenon. The ideological signification of Wagner's work has been an issue from the beginning, although it has only been subject to critical stagings and analyses since a few decades, in spite of much traditionalist and conservative resistance.

As you know in the mean time, the dismantlement of precisely Wagnerian opera theatre on stage, was initiated in a remarkable way at the celebration of the centenary of The Ring conducted by Pierre Boulez and staged by Patrice Chéreau in 1976. The performance caused quite a stir and both French initiators of this 'clean sweep' of German cultural heritage were accused of treachery to Wagner.

More recently, we witnessed the scandalous jubilee staging at the Bayreuther Festspiele by Frank Castdorf of the Schaubühne in Berlin. Castdorf conceived the idea of presenting the key symbol of The Ring - namely the gold [das Rheingold], which is the central object of the entire tetralogy, in today's worldwide importance of OIL. A very striking metaphor for all that can awake the lowest but also the noblest of instincts in man; just like gold. His concept resulted in stage views of a gas station, a derrick, and to suggest the final fire that destroys all a liquid was sprinkled around which at least created an illusion of petrol and inflammation.

This could remind one somehow of the image Chéreau used in 1976 for the Gold and the Rhine to make a connection with the important energy sources of capitalist society, in an arrangement that resembled a hydro-electric power

station. There too lots of fire and smoke were used for the underworld domains, where Alberich who steals the gold from the Rhine Daughters, resembles a supervisor on a shopfloor.

Would The Ring be as much alive as a work of art if it lacked the many difficult, pervert and irritating aspects? As long as it continues to create conflicts and scandals, that liveliness will remain intact and its ideological overtone may be variable, but nevertheless effective.

For the permanent visitor of Bayreuth who unconditionally believes in the independent greatness of Wagner's music voluntarily submits himself to that inexhaustible longing for scandal in order to be immersed in its greatness.

The true Wagner fan cannot do without the scandal, even though it will be repeated year after year how much precisely these scandals are regretted.

This phenomenon is much like a compulsive cultural ritual. Wagners decree - 'Kinder, schafft Neues !' – apparently has not only been interpreted as encouragement, but foremost as a *carte blanche*, which evidently most of all gives rise to all those conflicts. But which artist does not like to appeal to a liberal, libertine spirit?

In 1937 and 1938, Theodor Adorno, the brilliant Jewish social critic and philosopher of music, already occupies himself in London and New York with Wagner's ideological and anti-Semitic traits. He of course meant the traits of the composer as a person as well as potential characteristics of his work that in the ideology of the Third Reich obviously could be used as congenial.

In 1939, four chapters were published in numbers 1 and 2 of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*.

Most of the copies of the first publication of his *Fragments on Wagner*, which would later, in 1952, be published under the title *Versuch über Wagner*, were destroyed in German occupied France. From a strongly developed understanding

of psychological dynamics and the socio-historical context of human actions, Adorno focuses on the nature and work of Wagner.

The excessive self-conceit and the compulsive lust for power, present in the first opera hero Rienzi, are immediately identified by him as characteristics of fascistic thought, in which preoccupations with death, *Todesfeier* and *Todesgeweihtheit* play an important role. Off-stage in Wagner's pursuit of freedom, death and destruction are ready to enter the stage, Adorno says.

The libertine sexual views and the erotic drive, like the idealisation of asceticism, eventually all point towards death; *Lust und Tod, lächelnde Tod, Tod als höchste Lust*. There are other observations on personal and character traits that are of importance. He often sees a direct link or identification between the creator of the Gesamtkunstwerk and his own stage creations or dramatis personae.

He dismantles Wagner's conflicting inner character structure: his sentimentality, the narcissistic desire to provoke compassion, and his ruthlessness.

One of the works he focuses on is *Die Walküre* and the relationship Wotan-Brünnhilde: the way in which the close pact between the god and his most sovereign counsellor, his sublime female alter ego, is very roughly and brutally violated. This happens precisely when she fulfils his deepest unspoken wish, for she saves the fleeing Sieglinde and therefore the unborn Siegfried at the same time, who as a putatively free man is of crucial importance to Wotan. However, of greater importance to this narrow-minded Wagner-Wotan is that Brünnhilde has been disobedient. After all, she has thwarted the obligations he has toward his own consort, goddess of marriage Fricka. The incestuous union between Siegmund and Sieglinde that Wotan wanted and from which Siegfried is conceived is abhorred by his wife Fricka and must be made undone.

Brünnhilde voices an unconscious desire of Wotan by preventing this act. In this fragment, she faces the god boldly with his terrible ambivalence. He is also ambivalent in his affection for the woman in whom he puts his highest trust,

prompted by the cunning bourgeois morale of Fricka. The punishment he gives her is out of all proportion, but we can look at it from a pragmatic perspective: this punishment is inevitable for the sake of the dramatic unfolding of the plot. For what would remain of *The Ring* if Brünnhilde were not locked inside a circle of fire where, fallen asleep, she would have to wait for a hero to wake her?

According to Adorno, Wagner's inconsistencies, his sentimentality, his narcissistic craving for compassion and his thirst for power are such that he suffers from a defective character structure.

To substantiate this, he portrays Siegmund in the first act of *Die Walküre* as a lamentable person, a character who presents himself as a pitiful member of a repressed caste, and at the same time as some kind of revolutionary. He comes to Hunding's home – the established order – to ask for help, and thereby implicitly hints that he wants to identify himself with them in order to acquire *Waffe und Weib*. He certainly is someone who renounces his roots, a kind of defector, according to Adorno's views.

It is Wagner's lack of character, Wagner the tyrant and the beggar whom Adorno wants to portray. Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner* is imbued with ideas and opinions influenced by the psychoanalytical achievements which came to full bloom during that same period.

In Adorno's view there is a lot of sadomasochism in Wagner's personality. This refers to the typical dominant behaviour in various inter-personal relationships, in which Wagner deeply humiliates personal friends, such as the Jewish Parzival-conductor Hermann Levi, and at the same time binds them. He attaches himself to a person for example by – and there are various modalities – making himself dependent on him.

Wagner's prominent Jewish contacts have often been brought up by liberal minds to play down the composer's anti-Semitism, thereby ignoring his sickly manners – although the words 'cat and mouse game' are sometimes dropped. It

is striking that, judging on the anti-Semitism of Wagner people often use very special and broad criteria. However, it was more than just jealousy, a personal antipathy of Jewish colleagues, more than the so called spirit of that time. Wagner's anti-Semitism has all characteristics of the severe biological racism of later in the twentieth century, Adorno claims. It should be noted here that Adorno while writing his texts on Wagner is a contemporary of this form of anti-Semitism of the thirties and forties. It is self-evident that in his writings he refers to extracts from Wagner's often concealed or veiled document *Das Judentum in der Musik*. He published it in 1850 under the pseudonym K. Freygedank, and in 1869, by then apparently more sure of his ground, republished it under his own name.

To show the fierceness of Wagner's loathing of Jews, Adorno refers to statements that have also been recorded by biographer Glasenapp, who in doing so relies on the quote from Cosima Wagner of 18 December 1881. A horrible fire destroyed the Vienna Ring Theatre, killing hundreds of people. This elicited the following statement from Wagner, which was meant as a joke. I open Cosima Wagner's quote: "Er sagt im heftigen Scherz es sollten alle Juden in einer Aufführung der Nathan verbrennen". [Wagner here refers to the piece *Nathan der Weise* by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who was considered as the perfect example of interreligious tolerance.] Adorno comments on this passage in a radical way, which I shall not repeat here. He also points out that *Das Judentum in der Musik* mentions the salvation of the Jews. Wagner wrote, and I quote: "To become human together with us [non-Jews] to the Jews in practice means to stop being Jews." He goes on: "Do realise that only one thing can redeem you from the burden of your curse: the redemption of Ahasverus – der Untergang!"

This phrase is problematic for each translation or quotation, since 'Erlösung' is a central term in Wagner's operas. He of course does not explain how we should

interpret that burdened term 'Erlösung', so that we tend to think – as happens more often – that by using the words Erlösung and Untergang in one phrase his aim is solely to provoke or reach a rhetorical effect.

Reading *Das Judentum in der Musik* is a shocking experience. Adorno claims that the book is based on the disgust triggered in Wagner by the fallacy that the power over the world lies with the Jews. What is more: Wagner thinks all resistances he endures through his stageworks have their origins in the conspiracies of the Jews against him.

Wagner's text starts from the questionable apriorism that it is not at all necessary to give facts or truths. After all, to him anti-Semitism is a given fact that he wishes to explain further, especially where it concerns art and the artists. He hits all the clichés and uses very repugnant anti-semitical circumscriptions which, according to him, are generally used and accepted. He also dwells at length on how, in his view, the Jews pronounce their language. He claims that people are taunted, also subconsciously, by their lack of a normal human power of expression. Because of the importance of vocal elements in music, Jews are in his view incapable of taking part in it. And this is where *Das Judentum in der Musik* contains an elaborate discussion on how Jews in our history were able to become musicians.

Where Adorno writes about Wagner's stage directions for Mime, the blacksmith in *Siegfried*, he bases himself on the biography by Newman. Wagner later withdrew his original very ugly directions. In Adorno's view, Mime was for dramaturgical reasons deliberately presented as a caricature. That is to say: Mime was created to be a counterpart within the tetralogy to Alberich, both of them are often mentioned in discussions on Jewish stereotypes in *The Ring*. Chéreaus courageous solution for the problem of Mime is in his deep consideration to liberate his doom as Wagnerian antisemitical personification of a Jew by lending him a scenical character-development that is not in the text.

We see Mime, more or less liberated from a lot of aspects of former encasements, Chéreau gives him some kindness, some intellectual attitude. Nevertheless as we see in the reactions of Loge, he has kept his bad smell, he is a wandering Jew, a Jew with a suitcase. But also, and here Chéreau makes the point, he is a Jew shivering from severe psychotic symptoms, full of internal pain and post-war trauma.

Certainly it were adaptations like these that led to suppositions that Chéreau and Boulez in fact were betraying Wagner and the Wagner tradition.

Adorno makes mention here of Wagner's fear of caricatures. He insinuates that the similarity between his stage directions for Mime and his own appearance may have frightened the composer. And with this, we touch of course on the important theme of Wagner's possible urge for self-abasement and self-hatred, also in relation to assumptions about his own Jewish background.

Forty years after Adorno, Pierre Boulez shows that he is deeply convinced of the greatness of Wagner's music. Wagner is a hero, to such extent that this fact outweighs everything else, as happens in case of sincere admiration.

To substantiate Wagner's excellence, Boulez mentions the fact that he deals with the language of music as such. The unequalled greatness and genius lies in the merging of sound and very diverse and conflicting elements: texts, textual sources and theatrical aspects, all present in the Gesamtkunstwerk. In one of his articles on Wagner, Boulez however also clarifies the ambiguities between the nature and the work of Wagner, and other problematic characteristics of his. In 1975 [Divergences] he explains why it will never be really possible to write a hagiography on Wagner.

A hagiography is a mostly mediaeval document, describing the life of a saint (hagios= holy).

What does Boulez mean by this? Wagner was no saint. Implicit in the claim that we cannot write a hagiography on Wagner is also the supposition that, in fact,

we could. As an admirer and conductor of Wagner's oeuvre, Pierre Boulez indirectly evokes an excessive admiration for Wagner that we all more or less recognise; the actually existent Wagner adoration and cult. Maybe he does so as a literary device. A device, surely, that gives him room for argumentation. His aim seems to be a serious thought-experiment on a high level. Its conclusion is as follows: it is impossible to write a hagiography in this case, because – in brief – there is quite a bit to be said against Wagner. But Pierre Boulez puts first that Wagner is a hero. Maybe in our time, he could be on Twitter, as some of our singers was suggesting yesterday. A hero has no weaknesses, but in this text of Pierre Boulez Wagner is an exception to that rule. The thrust of this argumentation is quite mysterious, but at the same time I know that Boulez' style of writing on many places in his big oeuvre of books and articles has enigmatic characteristics that can be worth contemplating.

Boulez writes his article one year before he starts his collaboration with Chéreau in Bayreuth. What is wrong about Wagner and his music? And what in the substance is it that - in spite of everything – makes that the exceptional label 'hero' stands so firm in this playful text? Here, Boulez makes mention of Wagner's political dillettantism and anti-Semitism: it is in his view impossible to consider this anti-semitism as a mere 'quantité négligable' .

He draws attention to Wagner's deceptive ambition in very diverse areas. He points out that Wagner considers himself much like a prophet, who far surpasses everyday reality and towers high over other artists – he has chosen a religious angle after all, or at least a hint of sacredness.

Wagner seems to be enlightened in a way. As an artist he is a saviour. He possess universal knowledge and came to bring redemption to the world from his intuition.

As a saviour and leader this artist wants to be the man to reveal humanity its fate through his genius. This artist, in his own view symbolizes redemption. So

far Pierre Boulez who than describes how the utopian and revolutionary Wagner develops into a bitter and disillusioned conservative, who tries to come on equal terms with kings and emperors, for the benefit of the ecstatic dream of “German Art”.

Pierre Boulez starts from Wagner’s obsession with this “German Art” *Deutsche Kunst* – the issue of that time- to make an intriguing connection with Greek theatre; the tragedy that according to Nietzsche has its psychological breeding ground in music. Tragedy to Wagner is the ultimate example of a nationalist art form that gave a society its identity. That is also how “German Art” should work, which – obviously – was to be established in Bayreuth. Such a false irony of fate, Boulez says, that society disturbs especially this ambition of Wagner’s – “due to all kinds of misunderstandings”, he claims – so that it degenerates into a terrible and narrow-minded symbol of nationalism and racism: Bayreuth.

However, once he is freed of this horrible mask, Wagner again has a fascinating influence, Boulez argues. It leads to a reasoning by which it appears that the “horrific nationalism and racism” have not been caused by Wagner himself and that this is indeed a misunderstanding.

The wordings Boulez uses to talk of Wagner are a proof of the tolerant mentality he is known for. He declares, and this has also often been stated by others, that Wagner in his anti-Semitism is no exception to the intelligentsia of his times - although he may, as the creator of ideological adaptations of Nordic myths that were never intended to be interpreted in such a way, have walked into a trap. Boulez points out that Wagner is however responsible for the degrading of the image of Greek tragedy to what he calls the racist manifesto: ‘de la tragédie grecque au manifeste raciste, il s’est produit une dégradation, dont on ne peut le reconnaître que partiellement responsable; cependant, responsable’ In the German translation the words : *Abstieg der Griechische Tragödie bis zum rassistischen Manifest*. This refers to the way in which Wagner debased high

classical ideals for the benefit of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, in which classical images served merely as a direct source of inspiration.

For that he is responsible, Boulez says. And whatever the case may be:

Wagner's chance of having his own hagiography, the *summa cum laude* written by Boulez has gone by because of this fact. This responsibility of Wagner makes him – and Boulez uses a meaningful word here - vulnerable, [*vulnérable*]

As to the racist manifesto mentioned here, referring to *Das Judentum in der Musik*, Boulez is holding Wagner as the author responsible for what he himself, under his own name, has written in this text. By using the word vulnerable he proves himself the clement and tolerant person as we know him , sympathetic – also with Wagner in this case. He doesn't use the word reprehensible, for instance. It is in fact, bad enough for Wagner that Boulez, great admirer of his music, does not hesitate to use here the term *manifeste raciste*, racist manifesto, as an evident condemnation for Wagners text in question.

Working on these subjects and thinking them over and over again and again it is my conclusion, and not only mine, that in the end even Wagners most brilliant and intelligent admirers have to cope with dizzy and terrible forms of ambivalence.

I think it is in the ambivalence as such that we meet a mechanism that keeps going our curiosity towards this incomprehensible synchronicity of scandals and fascinations caused by Richard Wagner.