Wagner in Perspective - **120 Years After the Master's Death** -

by Professor Michael Ewans

This is an impossible subject, and I am the wrong person to take it on. I have seen many fewer productions than the rest of you, and have spent much of the twenty years since *Wagner and Aeschylus* working on staging of Greek drama, and on other opera composers. But my perspective may interest you. I still teach some Wagner, and I have done much more work on Greek tragedy. I have just completed a big book *The Greeks in Opera*, discussing operas based on Greek myth from Monteverdi to Turnage, and I have myself in recent years directed opera productions in Newcastle. You will also have to bear in mind that I am a professor of drama as well as of music, and I believe that Wagner's contributions to the development of drama in the twentieth century are as significant as some of his contributions to the development of music.

Why is Richard Wagner still 'the Master' (Cosima's pretentious description?) and why is he so loved (as witness the existence of so many Wagner Societies) and hated (there are many people who dislike his music intensely, and the debate about his anti-Semitism and jingoistic nationalism still rages in Germany)? Is he really 'the Master' – and if so, what could privilege him above other composers, apart from the mere fanaticism of his fans? My job is to try to put Wagner into some perspective, as the twenty-first century begins and we are 120 years after his death. And unlike, perhaps, some of you, I do not believe that every one of his compositions is an uncriticisable masterpiece. So here goes!

Whether or not he has any right to be called 'the Master', Wagner belongs to a very select group of six or seven composers – those who have composed more than five operas, which remain in the standard international repertory today. This group comprises Mozart, Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, Strauss, Janácek, and possibly Britten. Creating and developing a personal style which works as a fusion of music, text and stage action is a very difficult business, and a truly masterly working synthesis was achieved only by these very few. Furthermore, none of these composers reached that ability without creating at least one opera that is mawkish, naïve, and/or firmly bound by the tradition from which he was eventually to escape. In Wagner's case these works are *Das Liebesverbot*, *Die Feen* and *Rienzi*; only with the first stirring tremolo and horn melody in *Der Fliegende Holländer* are we suddenly in the world of a mature, natural born music dramatist.

Musically, Wagner had now begun to compose the works of his maturity. But thematically, emotionally and dramatically he was very far from the achievements for which I believe he should be most celebrated today. In *Holländer, Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* Wagner furnished three of Germany's most stage-worthy standard repertory operas. But they are limited by their repetitious obsession with the theme of romantic self-sacrifice. *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* are in formal terms regressions from the achievement of *Holländer* because they revert to the large (and often incomprehensible) ensembles of traditional early 19th Century opera; they revert also to mediaeval stories as sources rather than myth. Also, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* have a relatively simple moral structure - Venus and Ortrud are unambiguously bad, Elizabeth and Lohengrin are irreproachably good – that is far removed from the moral complexity and ambiguity of the principal figures of the *Ring*.

This is a rather severe reading of these two operas, but it is I think justified, given that Wagner ignored their formal structure and based the reforms, which he introduced in *The Nibelung's Ring,* on the style of *Holländer – durchkomponiert*, with few large ensembles other than simple choruses. Also, in the *Ring* Wagner once again uses mythical subject matter; the Dutchman, unlike Tannhäuser or Lohengrin, is a morally ambivalent figure, a true precursor to Wotan.

Wagner's innovations, as he reflected in exile after 1848 on the dramatic achievement of the Greek playwright Aeschylus, cover almost every aspect of his vision of opera, and his achievement in the *Ring* and *Tristan* – both of which works he described as dramas, not operas – is his chief legacy to modern opera. I am going to discuss each of Wagner's principal achievements.

1. Myth

Wagner revived Aristotle's claim (*Poetics* ch.9) that the Greek way of creating drama – using the mythical material of prehistory, rather than setting dramas in definable historical periods – allowed for a deeper and more universal impact. This coincided with his own vision of a new kind of drama in which the plot was to be relatively uncluttered, allowing the action to penetrate to the deeper level of *Fantasie* - the world of the unconscious mind (referred to in the last lines of *Tristan und Isolde* as 'unbewusst', the term which Freud was to use for the unconscious). Wagner proclaimed that the dramatist was to take one far-reaching but compact idea (the content of the myth), and ensure that this was realized 'with the fullest definition' in one 'inevitable and decisive action':

Here [in *Tristan]* I sank myself with complete confidence into the depth of the soul's inner workings, and then built outwards from this, the world's most intimate and central point, towards external forms. This explains the brevity of the text, which you can see at a glance. For

whereas a writer whose subject matter is historical has to use so much circumstantial detail to keep the continuity of his action clear on the surface that it impedes the exposition of more inward themes, I trusted myself to deal solely with these latter. Here life and death and the very existence and significance of the external world appear only as manifestations of the inner workings of the soul. The dramatic action itself is nothing but a response to that inmost soul's requirements, and it reaches the surface only insofar as it is pushed outwards from inside.

Wagner condensed Gottfried von Strasbourg's *Tristan* down to three one-act segments of action, each leading inexorably to a climax; there is an absolute contrast between this economy and the large cast of characters, and the cluttered and episodic action, in *Tannhäuser and Lohengrin*. The drama becomes a single line of action, acted out by a small number of mythical characters, so the depths of psychological and (in the *Ring* politico-social) insight can be added by the music.

This was an enduring legacy, creating one of the most fascinating strands in 20th Century opera. Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande,* Strauss' *Salome* and *Elektra*, and Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* are the first and greatest myth-based operas of the twentieth century, opposing the tendency of their times towards modern and realistic settings and probing the depths of the psyche under stress in ways which were directly inspired by Wagner. Other major composers, especially Puccini, Janácek and Britten, have preferred to base their operas on more realistic texts, but Wagner's preferred use of myth – what Peter Brook would call the 'holy theatre' - remains an occasional and important strand in modern opera….At the dawn of the twenty-first century, myth has lost none of its power to present universal issues in a compellingly direct form.

2. The style of the music and its relationship to the drama

In *Das Rheingold,* Wagner foreswore aria and ensemble altogether. The music of *Rheingold, Walküre* and *Siegfried* Acts 1 & *2* unfolds as a continuous sequence, in which individual utterances may occasionally overlap slightly, but (except for some short passages where the Rhine-daughters all sing the same words in harmony), no one singer is allowed to sing a complete vocal line at the same time as another. Accordingly, in a performance at Bayreuth, where the covered pit largely solves the problem of balance that the *Ring's* large orchestra can pose in more conventional theatres, every word should (with a good conductor) be audible.

This is a severe mode of composition, which denies one of the most popular spectacles that opera can offer: massed soloists – four to eight, sometimes with chorus, brooding simultaneously on their different reactions to the same situation. Few composers have followed Wagner in this privileging of words and action above music (which is directly alluded to in the subtitling of the four parts of the *Ring*, and *Parsifal*, as 'stage festival plays'); and Wagner himself abandoned it in the comedy which he composed while composition of the *Ring* was at a standstill; *Meistersinger von Nürnberg* sets a libretto whose formal structure is no different from that of Verdi's mature works, with strophic songs, choruses, and several ensembles including a famous Quintet.

Wagner broke his own strict rules in *Meistersinger*; and, in *Tristan,* the other work that he created between Acts 2 and 3 of *Siegfried*, he extended the boundaries of harmony to a breathtaking degree, while *Meistersinger* introduces complex counterpoint for the first time to Wagner's musical vocabulary. So it is no surprise that he incorporated these on returning to the *Ring* in the 1860s. The prelude to *Siegfried* Act 3 introduces complex counterpoint between principal motives whose style is totally different from anything heard in the *Ring*, while complex chromatic harmonies are frequently employed in *Götterdämmerung*. He also chafed against the strict rules of 1848-9 about vocal overlap and started to break them with the extended duet between Siegfried and Brünnhilde at the end of *Siegfried*.

He was greatly aided by the serendipitous chance that he had created *Siegfried's Death* - the libretto which now became the basis for *Götterdämmerung* – as a 'grand heroic opera', before he had adopted his classical Greek aesthetic and before the privileging of word over music that is an essential part of the theory, which he was formulating at the same time as he created the other three *Ring* texts (working backwards from *Siegfried* via *Walküre* to *Rheingold).* So, the libretto for the last drama of the cycle was written in a more traditional operatic form than the other three. As a result, *Götterdämmerung* contains a rapturous love duet as Brünnhilde despatches Siegfried on his adventures, an oath-swearing duo for Siegfried and Gunther, a revenge trio and a chorus of vassals, together with some extended passages for one singer that might almost be called arias. The new Wagner threw aside the constraints that he had imposed upon *Rheingold*, *Walküre* and all of *Siegfried,* except the last duet, and embraced these opportunities with zest.

In the texts for the first three dramas of the *Ring*, Wagner created a new kind of drama in which the music could be of previously unimagined richness (at least in *Walküre* and *Siegfried*) while remaining dovetailed closely to an audible text, which constantly advances the drama. Operatic forms, grand moments in which the demands of melody and indeed of music *per se* took precedence over the unfolding of the drama, were strictly avoided.

This proved to be an impossible ideal; Wagner himself, as we have seen, soon abandoned it, and few opera composers since then have maintained a pure style of music drama in which voices never overlap. The exceptions were however distinguished: Debussy and Bartók only completed one opera, and apart

from one brief passage of duet each, at brief moments of great intensity, *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* both strictly follow the *Rheingold* model; but Wagner's other great operatic disciple, Richard Strauss, decisively abandoned this type of libretto after sustaining the pure, non-overlapping style throughout most of *Salome* and *Elektra*. From *Der Rosenkavalier* onwards, Strauss demanded libretti that allowed him to display ensemble voices at their richest. Indeed, the highest achievement of *Der Rosenkavalier* is an ecstatic trio in which three separate soprano voices are intertwined, each articulating their characters' different reactions to a situation. They sing beautiful melodic lines, but the words are virtually inaudible. Similarly, composers as diverse as Puccini, Stravinsky, Britten and Henze have insisted on texts that allow them to compose ensembles – Britten in particular favouring (in and after his first major opera, *Peter Grimes*) a text that reverts to Verdian form in its combination of recitative, arias and ensembles.

Wagner's ideal has, however, never been completely lost in the 20th Century, even if it (equally) never became an absolute rule for any major composer after 1911. Michael Tippett's *King Priam*, for example, contains two trios, one for the three main male Trojan characters and one for the female, but, elsewhere, the music drama unfolds as a linear narrative as starkly (and as clearly and audibly) as that of *Rheingold*. Even composers who believe strictly that music must serve the drama find moments where the surging emotions generated by that music demand an explosion into ensemble, just as Wagner did at the end of *Siegfried,* and Bartók did when Judit pleads with Bluebeard not to make her join the other wives. And it is hard to deny that the duet between Brünnhilde and Siegfried is more powerful (if also more coarse) in its headlong energy than the rapturous, but strictly non-duet dialogue between Siegmund and Sieglinde as they declare their love in the closing moments of *Walküre* Act 1.

3. The content of the music

This is the hardest part of Wagner's achievement to evaluate. Some of his music has itself reached almost archetypal status; you have only to play the Ride of the Valkyries to evoke images of large ladies on horses with horns, or of helicopters surging into battle over Vietnam. The yearning chromatic suspensions of the *Tristan* prelude (and/or Liebestod) have only to be played for a mood of Romantic love to be evoked, ripe and ready for modernist parody (as in the David Allen sketch where Cathy and Heathcliff miss each other as they run searching passionately across the moors). Meanwhile, junior academics carefully teach our music history students how Wagner's use in *Tristan* of extended suspensions - chromatic 'passing phrases' (rather than the 'passing notes' in other keys which were normal in Classical and early Romantic music) - led inexorably to the very advanced chromaticism and bitonality of *Salome* and *Elektra* and the atonality of Schönberg and Berg from c.1903 to 1914, which in its turn led to the reintroduced discipline of composition with twelve tones, to the neo-classicism of Stravinsky, etc.

In our post-modern period, the 'advanced' harmonic vocabulary of *Tristan* and *Parsifal* is no longer seen as part of an evolutionary process which makes up 'music history'; Wagner simply contributed a new set of colours to the palette, colours that early modern composers took further as part of the extreme expressionism of the ten to fifteen years before the first world war, and which, since then, have been available whenever a modern or post-modern composer wishes to evoke the same unsettling, yearning atmosphere that prevails in Wagner's two ritual dramas: *Tristan* and *Parsifal* – the first a rite dedicated to the religion of Frau Minne, goddess of love, the second Wagner's extraordinary, and very disturbing, reinterpretation of the ritual bases of Christianity. Assimilated Wagnerian techniques are to be found everywhere in modern composition – from the yearning lyricism of Alwa's love for Lulu in Berg's opera to the seductive chromaticism that surrounds Dionysus in Henze's *The Bassarids*. In this way, Wagner made a very important contribution to the language of music.

Less often celebrated, but in my view far more important, is the way in which Wagner – in his own phrase – 'applied' music to drama. Here again I am not so much concerned with the use of recurrent so-called *Leitmotive* – a Wagnerian device that has also become an available resource for any modern composer who cares to use it – as with the purposes to which Wagner employed his music as a whole – leitmotives, chromaticism, and above all the expanded colours of his orchestra. In his mature dramas Wagner used the orchestra, to quote his own description, to 'enclose the performer with an atmospheric ring of Art and Nature'. And 'the orchestra will take so intimate an interest in the motives of the plot that …it will keep the melody in the requisite unceasing flow, and so convincingly impress these motives on the spectators' feeling'. What exactly does this mean? My example will be Siegfried's interaction with the forest, in *Siegfried*.

As soon as Mime has finally departed and Siegfried lies down comfortably under the linden tree, the forest murmurs re-enter in the orchestra with renewed strength and greater persistence. They rise and fall, in pitch and intensity, together with the mood of Siegfried's musings; this is a process of mutual exploration. And as the scene proceeds, it becomes clear that it is also a process of reciprocal exchange: for each further stage of understanding that Siegfried attains, the forest extends a reward to him, which in its turn stimulates further insight. First, his 'silent thoughts' lead Siegfried to speak of his father, and by understanding that Siegmund would have looked just like himself, he is

able to complete the rejection of Mime towards which he was moving throughout Act 1. He then falls into 'deep silence' – and the theme associated with Sieglinde emerges on a solo clarinet, from forest murmurs of ever-greater delicacy and subtlety. Siegfried is moved to fall into a deeper reverie. As he broods on his mother and (his voice becoming ever softer) on his own loss, he becomes for the first time capable of feeling compassion. His reverie ends thus:

> Oh, if only I, her son
> Could see my mother!
> My mother –
> She was some man's wife.

It is a moment of unutterable beauty and pathos; and it is one of the great turning points of the *Ring*. As Siegfried ends his meditation, nature's fundamental rising theme returns to the orchestra, with the original figurations which were heard supporting it in the prelude to *Rheingold*; and the motif of the goddess of love rises from these textures on a solo violin, to become embraced by rich and beguiling harmonies – just as when Loge stated that nobody is willing to exchange anything for 'woman's beauty and worth'. Siegfried's affinity with and compassion for his mother make him able to grasp all the meaning of the fact that 'she was some man's wife'. These simple words mark the moment at which Siegfried gains both full consciousness of himself, and desire for woman.

The 'eternal feminine' manifested itself to Alberich in the form of the Rhine-daughters, whose whoreish teasing and seductive, but ultimately empty, melodies were precisely appropriate temptations for his all too corruptible eyes. Siegfried's total innocence and powerful energy make him worthy of a deeper, more forward-looking insight – which he now receives. The wood bird calls to Siegfried, and the four related melodies of her song sound out in the orchestra.

Wagner unites powerful insights into human psychology with a vision of man and woman surrounded and interpenetrated by (a female) nature (cf. especially, for example, the moment in *Die Walküre* Act 1, where spring burst into the house to mark the reunion of Sieglinde with Siegmund); and he uses musical material to give power to dramatic symbols (such as the forest murmurs and the wood bird, or Siegmund's sword) which would carry almost no power in a purely spoken drama, but become in these dramas deep indicators of, interacting with, the state of the psyches of his characters. In this he has only one equal in the whole history of opera – a man who achieved parallel and equally powerful effects with almost totally contrasted musical means, Leos Janácek. The Forester's monologue, in the closing scene of *The Adventures of the Vixen Sharp-Ears*, shows a human being surrounded by nature, and rewarded for his insight by a vision of its processes, which is precisely analogous to Siegfried's meditation under the linden tree.

4. The political and social meaning of the *Ring*

With the sole exception of Bernard Shaw, interpreters – both in written treatises and in staged productions – have largely managed to evade or distort the fundamental purposes of the *Ring*. Shaw argued that the *Ring* is very much concerned with its own times:

The *Ring,* with all its gods and giants and dwarfs, its water-maidens and Valkyries, its wishing-cap, magic ring, enchanted sword, and miraculous treasure, is a drama of today, and not of a remote and fabulous antiquity. It could not have been written before the second half of the nineteenth century, because it deals with events which were only then consummating themselves. Unless the spectator recognizes in it an image of the life he is himself fighting his way through, it must needs appear to him a monstrous development of the Christmas pantomimes, spun out here and there into intolerable lengths of dull conversation by the principal baritone….

Shaw read the trilogy and its prelude as an allegory of the decline and fall of late 19th Century capitalism:

Really, of course, the dwarfs, giants and gods are dramatisations of the three main orders of men: to wit, the instinctive, predatory, lustful, greedy people; the patient, toiling, stupid, respectful, money-worshipping people; and the intellectual, moral, talented people who devise and administer States and Churches. History shows us only one order higher than the highest of these: namely, the order of Heroes.

I felt that, at last, Shaw's reading had been vindicated, in Patrice Chéreau's centenary production, when the industrialist from Bremen, who held seats next to ours at the 1979 revival, lent over to my wife and I at Fritz Hübner's appearance as Hagen with the vassals in *Götterdämmerung* Act 2 – grubby shirt and jacket, loose tie - and whispered; 'they are the workers, and he is the trade union boss'. Recht so!

Shaw's vital point was ignored in production for one hundred years (until Patrice Chéreau) for historically unfortunate, indeed downright bad, if understandable reasons:

1. After Wagner's death Cosima established a tradition of unquestioning adherence to what both she and Richard had at the time acknowledged (as we now know from her *Diaries*) as the visually and conceptually inadequate kind of *mise-en-scène*, which was established by the first production in 1876.
2. The full meaning of the *Ring* – that to lust for power is inexorably to destroy your capacity for love and therefore to create your own destruction – necessarily had to be repressed during the Third Reich. This was not at all what Hitler wanted Wagner to say to the *Herrenvolk*.
3. To cleanse Wagner of the negative socio-

political connotations read into his work by the Nazis, Wieland Wagner after the war produced the *Ring* in highly abstractionist settings that gave a false feeling of universality.

Without wishing to denigrate a whole host of productions of which I have only read reports, I have to say that I am less than impressed with the approach of most productions since 1976. After Chéreau's practical demonstration of the immense impact of Shaw's reading, post-modernist producers have tried with greater or lesser success to present new glosses on the *Ring*, trying to extract different kinds of meaning from the work, with at best limited success. In Peter Hall's 'English Ring' at Bayreuth, at the Met, and in Seattle, one can still see modern re-creations of the Cosima Wagner aesthetic – mock early-Teutonic costumes (and those horns again!) – in other words, literal fidelity to the stage directions as opposed to a deep response to the meaning of the music.

Academic writing has less good grounds for ignoring Shaw; but it was fatally easy, for example, for Robert Donington to be diverted by the heady teachings of Jung into making all the characters symbols of aspects of the unconscious, which, if pursued in production, would make the *Ring* into an extremely abstract piece of psychodrama.

Shaw was fundamentally right. When Wagner wrote the texts for the *Ring*, he had until recently been a companion of the visionary anarchist Bakunin, he had met Engels, and was conversant with the basic tenets of Marx. And so the *Ring* began as an allegory of the emergence of a 'new man', Siegfried, who would ascend to Valhalla with Brünnhilde, and rule the world after the destruction of capitalism. However, as Wagner's interest in Schopenhauer and Buddhist renunciation deepened – leading to the interruption of the *Ring* for the composition of *Tristan* – he came to believe that this scenario was far too optimistic. He therefore changed the ending, so that Brünnhilde, leaping to her death, ignites a funeral pyre which burns Valhalla; then the hall of the Gibichungs, which represents the now destroyed political power of Gunther (who symbolises developed nineteenth century capitalism), collapses, and in Wagner's conception - as we now know from a letter discovered in the early 1980s – the world is bequeathed to the *Gesamtheit* of mankind.

Chéreau, though he did not of course know about this letter in 1976, intuitively sensed Wagner's intent when he made the surviving human beings turn to us in the final moments of the cycle. *We* must now remake the world: dwarves, giants, gods and heroes have all failed to resist the corruption of power, that the ring represents, and have therefore been destroyed. (Incidentally, the world does not end, though the gods, dwarves, giants and heroes do, at the end of *Götterdämmerung*; it was meretricious of Deryck Cooke to take, for the title of his book on the *Ring*, a line – 'I saw the world end', which he took from a discarded draft of Brünnhilde's last monologue).

When this perspective is firmly maintained, Wagner can be seen to have used the opera theatre to political ends in a way that is not even equalled by the middle-period operas of Verdi, whose political impact was largely 'read in' by the public during the turbulent and revolutionary times of the Risorgimento. Wagner's allegory of industrial society is complete even down to the smallest details – if, like me, you accept Chéreau's costuming of Donner and Froh as eighteenth-century dandies, the last remnants of an aristocracy quite deluded as to its actual power (hence Donner's toy hammer) and simply out of their depth in the tough commercial bargaining of the nineteenth century, which is represented by Wotan's compact with the giants – and his way of getting out of it.

5. Wagner as director

Wagner's movement from operas to 'stage festival plays' involved the creation of a new theatre in which his works could be performed, and a new concept, the summer festival, to allow an audience to go to the opera not for a relaxing entertainment after a hard day's work, but for absorbing (one hopes) the political and social message of the *Ring* trilogy during afternoons and evenings of contemplation, having spent the day in leisure activities around Bayreuth, and therefore ready to devote their full energies to the 'stage festival plays'. And although his politics had moved far to the right since the heady days of the Dresden revolution, and he was now happy to be bankrolled by a king, enough of the socialist remained in Wagner for the formation of the Wagner Societies, to ensure that not every member of the audience was there simply because of his or her wealth and position in society.

The creation of Bayreuth allowed Wagner to stage the performances of the *Ring* (and subsequently of *Parsifal*) under conditions that he dictated (though the process of getting these works to performance was not at all without the practical trials and tribulations endemic in the casting, design and construction, and rehearsal of any large-scale operas). Two of Wagner's most important innovations lie not in any specific detail of the style and content of the *Ring*, but in the new standards he laid down for the actor-audience relationship.

The opera singer had also to be an actor. Wagner assumed an almost entirely novel role (the only contemporary parallel was in the work, then just beginning, of the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen's company of actors). Although he had done long service in his earlier years as a *Kapellmeister,* and therefore would have been more than competent to conduct the world première of the *Ring* had he chosen to, Wagner elected instead to remain on stage and become the first stage director.

For some of his singers, this entailed a substantial retraining! The whole basis of traditional operatic acting

in the nineteenth century – if it can be called by that word – gave primacy to the voice. The singer had simply to identify his or her high points in the role – arias, and ensembles in which his or her character had a leading part – and advance to the footlights for these moments, stand, strike a pose, and deliver. Porges' notes on the rehearsals for the *Ring* show that Wagner introduced two then entirely novel ideas that we now take for granted: that the singing actors should interact realistically with each other when they are singing their own parts, and that whether they are singing or not they are always to remain focussed, and must think about – and show in their reactions - the implications for their character both of what another singer is singing to them, and of what the orchestral commentary is saying about the situation. Wagner was followed in this by Stanislavsky, and his expectations of the singing actor are now universally accepted.

In view of the frequent tendency in more modern productions, from Wieland Wagner onwards, to stylise, it should also be noted that Wagner's tendency was towards realistic postures and gesture. There are only a few ritualistic moments in the *Ring* (Brünnhilde's threefold greeting to the Sun, when she awakens in *Siegfried* Act 3, is a good example). Elsewhere, the fact that the characters are gods, dwarves, giants and heroes drawn from myth must not take priority over the fact that they have intensely human feelings, and musical ways of expressing those feelings that need to be complemented by action on the stage. For example, Porges records that for *Walküre* 2.3, 'Wagner was particularly concerned with the stage action in this scene since the sudden changes of position, gesture and facial expression raise considerable difficulties. The looks and movements of the protagonists must convey the wildly conflicting feelings, the ecstatic bliss, the desperate fear, which the orchestral melody is voicing'. He goes on to record in detail the passionate alternation of movements and gestures with which the composer required his singers to respond to the powerful music of the scene. I am certain that Wagner would have approved of the detailed and intensely realistic (and passionate!) acting, which Chéreau drew from his singing actors – Janine Altmeyer and Siegfried Jerusalem - in the centenary production.

6. The auditorium

Wagner's reforms to the audience were as wide-ranging as his new demands on the singers. A traditional operatic audience watched the show with the auditorium half-lit; they were free to converse, and to applaud or hiss whenever the end of an aria or ensemble came (or, if they wanted, before!). Furthermore, they were socially divided between stalls, boxes, circle and upper circle – each paid for at a different price, and each designed for interaction only between people of a particular social stratum.

Wagner's study of ancient Greek drama had extended to the design of the Greek *theatron* (spectators' viewing area) – a steeply raked set of continuous banks of seats, which surrounded the playing space on three sides. The auditorium at Bayreuth adapted this design as far as was possible to the necessity of a proscenium arch. There was (and remains) one continuous bank of seating, steeply raked so there are clear sightlines over the heads of those below, and with each row arranged as a continuous segment of a circle. Pricing is based simply on the distance of a spectator's seat from the stage, and the only concession to social strata is the set of boxes (the central one for the pathologically shy King Ludwig) that are placed at the rear of the auditorium. Unlike the boxes of a conventional 19th Century theatre, they furnish a relatively distant view of the stage; and they are not in a conspicuous place where less privileged members of the audience can observe the privileged spectators who occupy them.

However, the combination of a darkened auditorium and a wedge of steeply raked seats did not entirely realize Wagner's 1849 ideal of an audience participating, like a Greek audience in a community theatre, in an active, democratic process. The darkened auditorium and the direct lines of sight into a large proscenium arch to a brightly lit stage are totally unlike the open-air, day-lit theatre of the ancient Greeks; your first and constant impression at Epidauros is that you are one of thousands of people, who are as visible to you as you are to them; all of you choose to watch the performance, by focussing your eyes down into the playing circle, but the Greek theatre actively encourages the feeling that you are part of a community, and you can talk to your neighbours during the performance without disrupting it for anyone else. (And the Athenian audience was organized into separate wedges of seats for each of the twelve tribes, so your neighbours were your friends).

Wagner's innovations moved the audience in almost exactly the opposite direction; when the house lights go down at Bayreuth, there is almost none of the light spill that is such a distraction, especially to circle patrons, in most conventionally designed opera houses (the sunken pit and hood remove almost all of the light from the orchestra). There is little consciousness of your neighbours, or indeed of any of the rest of the audience; your attention is entirely focussed onto what happens in the only source of light – the stage behind the proscenium arch - and on the hypnotic power of the music emanating from the 'mystic gulf'. Brecht was utterly opposed to this mode of theatre in which the spectators become not active participants but supine receivers of the spectacle that is put before them; and indeed Wagner seems to have deliberately ignored the fact that Aeschylus and Sophocles had to work hard to make their tragedies dramatically interesting in broad daylight (or the spectators would chat, be bored, and look away) with a combination of emotional involvement and dramatic logic. Wagner saw himself as fulfilling their legacy by becoming a master-manipulator of emotions; accordingly, he

unleashed on his spectators, who had to get used to being plunged into almost total darkness (this was a startling experience at first), a vast range of effects, from the aggressive rhythmic power of the anvils in two of the scene transitions of *Rheingold* and the extreme power of his full, expanded orchestra at all the great climaxes of the *Ring* down to the plaintive voice of a solo 'cello, evoking the tentative feeling of affinity and nascent love that emerges between Siegmund and Sieglinde in *Walküre* 1.1. Such is the acoustic quality of Bayreuth that the climaxes can be overwhelming without being abrasive, and the delicate orchestration for solo instruments in many parts of the work is still crystal clear.

I am therefore totally baffled by the fact that the stage/auditorium/pit relationship created by Wagner and his architect, Gottfried Semper, has not been more widely adapted. Several continental theatres for spoken drama copied the Bayreuth audience configuration, but I know of no opera houses that have adopted the innovation of a pit concealed from the audience.

7. Set design

Wagner's greatest failure is in some ways his most important success. The *mise-en-scène* for the *Ring* by Brandt was disastrously 'realistic' in all the wrong ways, and for *Parsifal* - even though Wagner had handpicked his designer and made von Joukowsky, for example, visit Siena Cathedral and take it as his model for the temple of the Grail - he jested bitterly to Cosima that having invented the invisible orchestra, he now wished that he had invented the invisible stage. Wagner failed to imagine a concept of setting which could go beyond the standard 19th Century practice of reading the stage directions literally, painting a picture which evoked the landscape or interior imagined by those stage directions, and dividing that painting into background that should go on the backdrop, and foreground that should be painted either onto flats projecting from the sides of the stage, or made into flat wooden outlines (e.g. of rocks in *Rheingold* scene 1) that should be placed in the playing area supported by back braces.

Fortunately for the history of Wagner production after the second world war, and more importantly for the history of drama as a whole in the 20th Century, Wagner's great achievement in the music drama of *Tristan* and the *Ring,* and his failure to realize it in visual terms, were both appreciated by a young Swiss designer who attended performances at Bayreuth in Cosima's first seasons after Wagner's death. His name was Adolphe Appia, and this is how he criticised the *mise-en-scène* for Act 3 of *Tristan*:

> 'An abandoned castle in Brittany,' Richard Wagner tells us. However, nothing in his text expresses what he implies in that simple statement. Two words of Kurwenal, at the beginning, are enough to orient us. Then we are placed, by the author himself, between the light of day, which blinds and tortures a sick man, and the beneficent dark in which that sick man finds rest by losing consciousness. *That is all.* For assuredly it is not with the eyes of Kurwenal that we must live this hour of passion, without precedent in any literature…

He was of course absolutely right. Wagner had initiated in his mature stage works a symbolic style of drama designed to penetrate to the interior of a human psyche – what Freud and Breuer were soon to term the unconscious mind. He had reformed opera and its audience in the ways which I have discussed earlier; but (although he clearly sensed some problems with the visual aspect of the premières of both the *Ring* and *Tristan* at Bayreuth) Wagner had not had sufficient vision left to take the final step, and free his *mise-en-scène* from the realistic evocation of exterior surroundings which Hoffmann and the brothers Brandt had created for him in the *Ring*, and which Paul von Joukowsky, faithful entirely to his Master's commands, had created in his designs for the first *Parsifal*.

The design must not simply realize the stage directions; it must grow out of the meaning of the music. In *Tristan* Act 3, Appia heard the desolation and isolation of the wounded Tristan, forced to remain in the sunlight, but only seeking to be reunited with Isolde and plunged into the darkness of death. This requires no more setting than the raked disc beaten down on by the sun, the pallet bed for Tristan, and the cyclorama depicting (at first) the empty sea and sky, which Wieland Wagner, following Appia's principles, designed for his 1952 production at Bayreuth.

Historical factors, which have already been discussed, prevented Appia's ideas from achieving recognition at Bayreuth before Wieland Wagner wholeheartedly adopted them as the basis for his post-war productions. Appia had little success with the productions of Wagner that he himself mounted in abstracted sets in Switzerland in the early 1920s; but Appia's reaction to Wagner inspired the whole of the modernist approach to set design, which has abandoned realism in favour of a simple evocation of underlying realities whenever a play or opera has symbolic and psychological depth that is more important than its surface environment. Without Wagner's mature dramas and their influence on Appia, the heavy favouring of surface realism in the contemporary spoken drama of Ibsen and Chekhov would have delayed the development, early in the twentieth century, of a symbolic and expressionist theatre.

Wagner has given the world, apart from his juvenilia, three powerful repertory operas – *Holländer, Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. In *Tristan,* he composed an extraordinary hymn to a love that is so extreme that it can only be consummated in death. *Meistersinger* is a humane comedy evoking the world of the mediaeval minnesinger. His most problematic work, *Parsifal*, is a tortured synthesis of pagan and Christian. But Wagner's central achievement as a dramatist and musician is the *Ring,* in which he achieved his ideal of becoming the

Aeschylus of his time, and explored the drastic problems of an industrial society that seeks power at the expense of love, in a mythical scenario so bold, and with drama and music so powerful, that the three dramas and their prelude have arguably even more impact, and a no less urgent message, to our post-industrial society than they had in Wagner's own time.

His use of myth to convey meaning, in the *Ring, Tristan* and *Parsifal*, is a path that only few composers have followed; but those who have done so have done so with great effectiveness, probing like Wagner himself into the depths of the human psyche.

Wagner left an important legacy not just to opera, but also to the whole world of theatre. By creating the role of the director, he imposed on the first productions of his own works a standard of overall coherence that has, since around 1910, been regarded as essential to any theatre production. He also created a novel theatre design, which provides far better performance conditions for serious opera than those of conventional theatres; and, as already noted, it is both strange and unfortunate that architects have failed to prosper from his model.

Finally, Wagner created in the four works based on myth a new kind of music drama that demanded the abandonment of traditional realistic approaches to set design. He did not himself have the vision to solve the problems that they posed in practical performance, and allowed Hoffmann and Joukowsky to create designs that attempted a realistic realisation of the stage directions; but he inspired Adolph Appia to revolutionize the stage. Wagner's *Tristan* and *Ring* became the basis for a radical new theory of stage design that applies not only to them, but also to all symbolic and expressionist forms of drama. In this way Wagner made the modern, non-literalist stage possible.

He is surely not the [only] Master. Of the great music drama that I have discussed in this paper, some of the greatest and most profound was written by Janácek, who only became an opera composer of the first rank after he had liberated himself from the crushing impact of Wagnerism on his first opera, *Sárka*. And as I write this paragraph, ABC FM is playing an aria from *Don Giovanni*; it would be very hard to persuade me to mark Mozart's Da Ponte operas patronisingly as 'second class', even to satisfy an audience of Wagnerians!

Furthermore, there will always remain at the outside edges of Wagner's oeuvre some nasty questions; is there not an unacceptable element of jingoistic German nationalism and male chauvinism, especially in the finale of *Meistersinger* and the whole concept of the Knights of the Grail? If you ever search out *Eine Kapitulation*, Wagner's Aristophanic satire upon the Prussian defeat of France in 1870, you will read one of the nastiest nationalist and racist pamphlets penned even in the 19th Century, which was not noted for political correctness. And in the same vein: is his anti-Semitism simply the

common currency of 19th Century European attitudes, or is there (as has been powerfully argued) a specific and unpleasant caricature of Jews in the characterization of Mime, and of Beckmesser? These questions remain under active debate, quite rightly, in Germany.

Finally; Wagner clearly loved women – and he loved many of them in his life; in his art they only live a fully rounded life in *Tristan* and the *Ring.* Isolde, Sieglinde, Brünnhilde and Gutrune are totally believable characters; elsewhere we see impossible saints (Senta, Elizabeth) or seductive temptresses (Venus, Kundry) whose duty it is to expire quietly as our pure hero triumphs over them. (Elsa, who fails to be a true Senta/ Elizabeth style saint, comes perilously close to joining this category). In this respect – very important in our own new century, with the unquestionable advances of feminism in the last thirty years of the 20th Century– Wagner's operas and music dramas as a whole (the *Ring* partially excepted) fall seriously short of the deep insight and total approval of women and the power of the feminine that we find in the operas of Mozart and Janácek. If it is right to demand a comprehensive world-view from a man upon whom the title 'master' is to be conferred in the composition of opera – and not simply to swoon at the magical powers of his music – then Wagner has some problematic shortcomings, viewed from our early 21st Century perspective, as well as the great excellences that I have described to you.