

'After Wagner' By Andrew Ford, 19 June 2016

12.30pm: DVD: Anna Russell's "analysis" of The Ring Cycle
2.00pm: Presentation by Andrew Ford

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After an unavoidable and dramatic last minute postponement of his talk in 2015, Andrew Ford gave his much anticipated talk on music "After Wagner" on 19 June 2016. As a musician himself, with an impressive discography and a number of well-received books about music, including the emergence of modern music, he is well placed to discuss Wagner's influence on his contemporaries and later composers. Many in his audience were also very familiar with his long-running and very wide-ranging ABC Radio National program The Music Show (Saturdays and Sundays at 1100am and repeated those days at 10pm).

Challengingly, Andrew began by asking audience members to name a couple of features people immediately think about on entering a theatre: the responses included "the lights dim" and "curtains open"—both of which Wagner was responsible for introducing to theatres for the first time in the Bayreuther Festspielhaus. However, these technical innovations were accompanied by his influences on the music making of other composers. Among the other innovations were the epic structure of the music-dramas, the replacement of "stop-start" recitatives and arias with "continuous melody," the weaving together of music and drama, and the use of Leitmotifs (taken up by Hollywood through Eric Korngold among others). Perhaps most influential, though, was Wagner's use of harmony with, according to Andrew, the opening of Tristan und Isolde, the tonality of which is so hard to pin down, opening up the whole world of atonality to be exploited by the Second Viennese School.

However, Andrew also pointed out, perhaps from the perspective of a composer, that Wagner's use of the orchestra opened us new sound worlds for later composers to explore. Andrew convincingly contended that Wagner's works were astonishingly well-orchestrated, with a very high level of innovation in instrumental use (and in once case invention). He reminded us that much more than we often think (and certainly non-Wagnerians think), Wagner uses a chamber music level of instrumental support for his singers, who are mostly engaged in domestic conversations.

Having set the stage, Andrew then considered only a few of the many composers whom Wagner influenced, either positively or negatively, accepting his innovations, or rejecting them. Firstly, he noted that he would not talk about Bruckner, since the Wagnerian influence was “too obvious,” nor even Stockhausen, with his attempt to “out-Wagner Wagner” with his *Licht* (Light), subtitled “The Seven Days of the Week,” a cycle of seven operas composed between 1977 and 2003. He was also not considering Elgar, whose *Dream of Gerontius* would have been “impossible” without *Parsifal*; nor Mahler, even though the opening and overall structure of his first symphony reflect much of the music of *Das Rheingold*.

Andrew focussed, rather, on Schoenberg, Berg, Debussy, Boulez and Boulez (not in chronological order!). For instance, Schoenberg’s *Verklärte Nacht* (Transfigured Night) and *Erwartung* (Awakening), whose sound worlds are very similar to the *Forest Murmurs* of Siegfried. In the case of Berg, Andrew cited the example of Berg’s use of a canon form in the Painter scene of *Lulu*, in imitation of Wagner’s use of complex counterpoint in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and *Parsifal* to link the music with the stage action. Andrew also noted how the march from Berg’s *Three Orchestral Pieces* is a harsh version of Siegfried’s funeral march.

Debussy, though, gives us a more complex situation of attraction and distancing, given that Wagner’s musical presence in Paris was unavoidable. While Debussy did not much care for Wagner’s “heavy-handed” use of Leitmotifs in *The Ring Cycle*, he loved *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, but for different reasons. The former because Wagner’s use of Leitmotifs was more subtle; the latter because of the orchestration and the orchestral sound it produced, which is quite different from Wagner’s previous works in being very lightly orchestrated, with little orchestral doubling, and so creating a very transparent sound. As examples, Andrew pointed to the 1913 *Jeux*, with its light, mercurial music (which is also, Andrew wittily noted, about a ménage à trois—“very Wagnerian”). As in *Tristan und Isolde*, for example, Debussy’s compositional method “does not look back,” that is, he does not repeat any musical phrases, but rather modifies them each time. Andrew compared the music to a single skein of orchestral music thrown out with no repetitions. As Andrew noted, *Jeux* was itself an important influence on later composers, especially those using the twelve tone system.

Andrew moved on to Boulez, who has been generally better known as a conductor (including of *The Ring Cycle* and *Parsifal* at Bayreuth). Intriguingly, Wagner’s *Faust* overture was one of Boulez’s favourite

pieces of music, which he thought wonderfully constructed. He also recorded the less known 1843 *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel* (Love Feast of the Apostles). Andrew suggested that, although Boulez was not Wagnerian in his early music, in his later music, after the experiences of conducting Wagner works, the influence becomes more evident as his composing changes. After playing excerpts from Boulez's *Notations*, Andrew observed that, for an orchestral player, it is like "sitting inside a kaleidoscope," also giving the player a "3D sense in orchestral sound."

As a kind of bridge from the living Wagner to the mid-20th century, Andrew then turned to Strauss. Andrew reminded us that Strauss's horn writing was influenced by Wagner's, as well as by his own father's career as an orchestral horn player who played, against his preference, in some Wagner premieres. While *Elektra* is, Andrew suggested, Strauss's most Wagnerian work, *Capriccio* and *Ariadne auf Naxos* have much of the domestic qualities of scenes in *The Ring Cycle*.

Andrew summed up by observing that, while Wagner wrote for very large orchestral forces, he used such passages sparingly and for specific purposes to colour the dramatic action. He was also able to transform his palette rapidly, so that there are only a few big set pieces interspersed among many more smaller, quieter sections. Andrew then responded to a number of questions before continuing the discussion with Members over afternoon tea.

By Terence Watson