

'Music Of The Future? Liszt, Wagner And The Audiences Of The Day' By Dr David Larkin, 16 October 2016

2.00pm: Presentation by Dr David Larkin

Always a welcome contributor to our meetings, David Larkin again delivered us a stimulating and interesting lecture, with just the right mix of erudition, scholarship and anecdote, decorated with illustrative musical examples. The theme this time was the question that is particularly urgent today, when funding for the arts depends increasingly on “box office”, namely, how far is it the duty of composers and performers to entertain the audience of the time, giving them what they enjoy, and how far should they follow a higher duty, that of developing their art, pushing the boundaries, challenging our perceptions and, in short, writing for future generations?

David took us on a journey through the nineteenth century to explore with us how Wagner and Liszt considered this issue through changing times, and how their composing and performing lives were influenced by the demands of high art on the one hand, and audiences and critics on the other.

Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (“The artwork of the future”, 1850) was one of the theoretical works written by Wagner during his exile in Switzerland. The concept was borrowed from the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), to whom Wagner dedicated the work. Die Musik der Zukunft, or Zukunftsmusik, (“the music of the future”) was a term twisted by hostile journalists to mean awful music that might one day just be acceptable. It was applied mockingly to Wagner, but the phrase was not new. The music journalist Karl Gaillard had used it disparagingly of Berlioz’ music in 1847. Later, Wagner wrote an essay Zukunftsmusik, (“The music of the future”, 1860), in which he aimed to reclaim the term as a favourable one, so in fact the term could be used negatively or positively. The essence of the definition was that it might be acceptable at some time, eventually.

Wagner and Liszt first crossed paths in Paris in 1840. Wagner was writing music reviews to keep himself from starving, while Liszt was a famous virtuoso performer. In March 1841, Liszt gave a recital to raise funds for a statue of Beethoven. When Liszt came on to the platform with

a violinist to play the 'Kreutzer' Sonata someone called out, "Play us the Fantasia on Robert le diable!" Liszt replied eventually, "Je suis le serviteur du public"; they got the fantasy before the sonata. Wagner, who was there to review the concert, was scandalised. He accused Liszt of caving in to public taste. This was a time when Wagner still liked Meyerbeer. David played us an excerpt from Liszt's *Réminiscences de Robert le diable* – a rather dull and pedestrian piece of music!

By 1850 Liszt had retired from giving solo concerts and had settled in Weimar, where he wanted to concentrate on being a "proper" composer. Wagner had left Dresden and gone to Zurich; he was engrossed in his theoretical works. *Lohengrin* had not been performed; Wagner asked Liszt to have it performed in Weimar, even though the resources of the Weimar theatre were insufficient. The interest is in the correspondence. Wagner writes: "What cannot be made true today will remain untrue in the future". He wants his work performed here and now, whatever the limitations.

Wagner describes contemporary operagoers as having been corrupted by the formulaic operas of the day – an unnatural degradation where "natural" musical impulses of the folk have been corrupted to a form of scum. He doesn't believe that the answer is education: since the existence of connoisseurs, art has gone to the devil. He just wants simple unspoiled people, with an open mind and a healthy soul.

Throughout the 1850s Wagner had no direct contact with his audiences. Liszt, in contrast, was right on the front line and in touch with audiences and what they enjoyed. In Vienna, his orchestral compositions had a mixed response. Hostile reviewers exerted much influence on their audiences. Alexander Ritter, a composer and conductor who had lived in Weimar for several years during Liszt's tenure, told his "mentee" Richard Strauss in the 1880s that Liszt's music was always very popular at the première but that later on people thought it was not so good. Even Schumann wrote disparagingly of Liszt's music.

It was said of the Viennese audiences later in the century that they would be timid in their applause and not decide what they thought until after "he" (Hanslick) had made his opinion known, next day in the press!

Liszt maintained that negative criticism is like chalk on the base of a monument – it will be washed away, leaving the monument standing proudly in perpetuity. Throughout the 1850s Liszt fought fire with fire. He wrote pamphlets, introductions, pieces in newspapers. At important performances he would make sure that there was a sprinkling of friends and supporters.

Liszt also arranged meetings with antagonistic journalists. In Berlin, in December 1855, he went around to [his publisher] Schlesinger's place, at which he had prepared a supper with the hostile journalists. They did not sit down until 11.30 p.m. and talked until 3 a.m. A toast was proposed to Liszt, who replied that he had left the city as a great artist in the 1840s: "as the servant of art, I return!"

As an example of Liszt's compositions at this period, David played us an excerpt from the symphonic poem, Tasso: lamento e trionfo. The 16th century poet Torquato Tasso was a quintessential Romantic figure whose poetry was widely read until the 20th century. After a brilliant but turbulent career at the court of Ferrara, he was confined to an asylum for some years. After a further period of wandering, he came to Rome and was named Poet Laureate by the Pope, but died before he was crowned. Liszt's Tasso is majestic and hymn-like, with lots of brass and percussion (especially triangle!).

In the 1860s, Liszt left Germany for Rome and Wagner returned to Germany. Their roles were now reversed. Liszt was burnt out after his fifteen years in Weimar. In earlier years, Liszt had spoken of his hopes for Weimar, where he and Wagner would preside over a musical golden age, as Goethe and Schiller had previously presided over a literary golden age. Now he writes to Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein that he no longer cares for audiences. But after a few years he finds himself popping off to other parts of Europe to see friends, to perform, to schmooze.

Wagner is now face to face with the audience: Tristan, Meistersinger, the Paris Tannhäuser. The last-named was sponsored by Princess Pauline von Metternich, the wife of the Austrian ambassador, and she was not popular*. Paul Linder was drafted into this performance as a paid applauder in the clique – not Wagner's idea, but part of the theatrical practice. Students willingly did this simply for a ticket. They were strategically placed throughout the auditorium and applauded or booed according to their instructions.

The 1860s started pretty badly for Wagner: Tannhäuser failed in Paris; Tristan was abandoned in Vienna after 70 rehearsals. One thing Wagner could do was give concerts to introduce his music to the public. At one such concert, in Paris in 1860, the audience liked it but it was hissed by others, who were then shouted down by those in favour. Such a distinguished critic as Berlioz did not like it.

The young Ludwig II then appeared in 1864 as a *deus ex machina*, solving Wagner's financial woes at a stroke and preparing the

way for the realisation of his artistic ambitions. This was the period of *Die Meistersinger*, a music-drama in which we can see the artist/audience/critic relationship played out. Walther, the inspired outsider, is initially not welcomed by the guild of mastersingers, but under the guidance of Hans Sachs he obtains the approval of the public, the mastersingers and also gets the girl. Beckmesser was initially to be called Veit Hanslick. The mastersingers can be envisaged as the musicians of the day. At this point David played us the last section of Walther's 'Prize Song', in which Walther takes the strict rules of the mastersingers and modifies them to produce a magnificent musical depiction of the poet's dream.

The last decades saw Liszt and Wagner reconciled in 1872 after their estrangement. Wagner was better known as a composer, but Liszt was more of a celebrity. Liszt's biographer described Wagner's re-cultivation of Liszt as "a calculated investment." Liszt, however, remained generous. A concert was planned in Budapest to raise funds for Bayreuth and the tickets were slow to sell. Liszt heard; he volunteered to play the 'Emperor' Concerto: tickets sold out.

However, Liszt was feeling sidelined: "At Bayreuth I am not a composer but a publicity agent." In the Wagner family this attitude persisted – he was referred to disparagingly as "the Abbé". Nike Wagner said his name was hardly ever mentioned, and Wagner was dismissive of some of his music.

Liszt's later works were quite experimental; he didn't even publish some of them. One such was even entitled "Bagatelle without tonality" and was not published until after his death. Liszt's aim was "to hurl my javelin into the indefinite realm of the future."

Wagner wrote a late essay: "The public in time and space" (*Das Publikum in Zeit und Raum*, published 1878). He now doubts that a great artist would be in tune with his own age. Being alienated from your time is a mark of your true greatness. By this time, however, he had "arrived" and achieved recognition in his lifetime. Wagner's recognition reached its apogée just before World War I. Liszt too achieved recognition, and his piano music has survived, but his orchestral music is just not played, not even *Les Préludes*, which is the best; there are 12 symphonic poems and two symphonies.

David played (beautifully, on the piano) a short piece by Liszt, written in 1883. This was *Am Grabe Richard Wagners* (*At the grave of Richard Wagner*). Slow, not dense, complex or showy, it contains fragments

of Leitmotive from Parsifal, which David described as being more or less disconnected and just stuck.

Finally, we heard some music, which for many of us is probably still “of the future” – excerpts from Ligeti’s *Le grand macabre*, sung by the soprano Barbara Hannigan and conducted by Simon Rattle. Ligeti died in 2006—a decade ago—but in listening to his music some of us probably feel as unfamiliar and at sea as the early audiences for *Tristan und Isolde*.

*WSB note: Wikipedia says that she taught ladies to smoke cigars “without fear of their reputations.”

Baudelaire, Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris. https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Richard_Wagner_et_Tannh%C3%A4user_%C3%A0_Paris

By Bill Brooks