



CELEBRATING
40 YEARS 1980 - 2020



Sunday 6 June 2021, 11:00am
Alex Ross, via zoom from San Francisco, in
conversation with Dr David Larkin about Alex's
book 'Wagnerism, Art and Politics in the
Shadow of Music'



Top L-R: Dr David Larkin, Alex Ross and host Esteban Insausti (President WSNSW)

Report by Minnie Biggs

Fifty-two guests from NZ and the east and west coasts of USA and Australia enjoyed listening to 'the most significant music critic in the world', Alex Ross, author of *WAGNERISM - Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*, as described and introduced by David Larkin.

In response to the question, Ross spoke of his background. He was quite slow coming to Wagner. His family of music listeners and goers did not include Wagner operas among their records, and when Alex took out an LP of Lohengrin from the public library, aged about 12, (! My exclamation point) he wasn't sure what to make of it. It did not stick. Finally at college, listening to more opera. He was still a bit skeptical, and not until he heard live performances at the Met did it really hit him.

Larkin asked about why he (deliberately) chose to leave Wagner as a person out of this book, and why he did not speak about his influence on musicians, and composers, rather than focusing on all other branches of the arts. Because, he felt, while Wagner did influence later composers, he did not exert any more influence than many others, such as Bach, whereas his influence outside music was widely, wildly extensive.

Interesting discussion as to whether Wagner's influence came out of the times, or from himself personally: a bit of both. No question that his artistic capacity and as a potent dramatist around structural action was unique to him. But the times, the late 19th century, were times of great change and transformation.

Also exploring the differences in the nationalist reception of Wagner: the French and the German characters evident while the Americans embraced the wide-open possibilities.

What might be CORE in view of the always conflicting power and ambiguity, vagueness in Wagner and his writings? The almost deliberate confusion he dwelt in? Myth. Only and succinctly the Power of Myth. Myth can be adapted by anyone. Anywhere. Any peoples. Any time. All times.

About the subtleness of indirect influence, that many artists who were not actually aware of him, nevertheless, whose work fell into a sort of echo or perhaps resemblance to Wagner, such as Yeats, Whitman. As distinct from those who were confessedly Wagnerites, such as Mann, Joyce and Cather.

Gesamtkunstwerk, Wagner only used the word 5 times, yet it was so often taken up that Wagner was tired of it, even in his lifetime. (My personal observation is that his work WAS it, and that is enough.)

At a page in the 300s Ross says that Wagner's influence had hit its peak at the beginning of World War I. So, what happened in the next 300 pages? And to bring us up to date? Indeed, it shifted and often in more dangerous ways - the German nation, and of course a lot about Nazism, and how and to what extent all that is to be considered. That ambiguity comes back into play, with the Nazis picking and choosing what they wanted to use, discarding the religiosity of Parsifal, ignoring Wagner's anti-Semitism, which was certainly well known; it was not useful to Hitler. Whom Ross describes as a 'helpless fan' of Wagner. Later, post WW2, Wagner was seen as the wounded artist.

David Larkin was terrific. He asked and explored bigger and deeper than anyone heretofore. How I'd love to be a fly on the wall for their next hour of conversation!

Finally, some questions - about hero worship and Wagner's liking to cross dress, and the homosexuals in his family, son and grandson: he was not critical, rather sympathetic, clearly ahead of his time. Later Bayreuth became a Mecca for gays. So, that, of course, later still he would be attacked for his (not) pro-gay stance.

Lastly, nothing Wagner did was non-political, even Tristan which Ross had said was a refuge from politics. The Ring is claimed by the Left and the Right and the Middle. Altogether political.

Finally, Ross said that writing his book WAGNERISM has been the greatest education of his life.

Larkin responded: reading the book WAGNERISM will be the greatest education of our lives.

Minnie Biggs, June 6 2021

From the Wagner Quarterly 161, June 2021

About Alex Ross



Alex Ross will talk to us from San Francisco about his monumental book *Wagnerism, Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music*.

Alex Ross is a 1986 graduate of St Albans School in Washington, DC, having previously attended the Potomac School in McLean, Virginia. He is a 1990 graduate of Harvard University, where he studied under composer Peter Lieberson and was a DJ on the classical and underground rock departments of the college radio station, WHRB. He earned a Harvard AB (Bachelor of Arts) in English *summa cum laude* for a thesis on James Joyce.

His first book, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, a cultural history of music since 1900*, was released in the US in 2007 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux and in the UK in 2008. The book received widespread critical praise in the US, garnering a National Book Critics Circle Award, a spot on *The New York Times* list of the ten best books of 2007, and a finalist citation for the Pulitzer Prize in general nonfiction. The book was also shortlisted for the 2008 Samuel Johnson Prize for nonfiction.

His second book, *Listen to This*, was released in the US in September 2010 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux and was published in the UK in November 2010. In September 2020, his third book *Wagnerism, Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* came out.

About Dr David Larkin



David Larkin is a senior lecturer in musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney, specialising in nineteenth-century music. He joined the University in 2010, after two years as a postdoctoral research fellow attached to the School of Music, University College Dublin sponsored by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

His music education began at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, where he studied piano, violin and organ. He graduated from University College Dublin in 1999 with a first-class honours BMus degree, and in 2002 was awarded the MLitt degree with distinction for a thesis exploring the musical and personal connections between Liszt and Wagner. In 2007, he gained his PhD from the University of Cambridge for a dissertation entitled 'Reshaping the Liszt-Wagner Legacy: Intertextual Dynamics in Strauss's Tone Poems.'

Dr Larkin has given a number of presentations to the Wagner Society in NSW; his latest was a zoom talk on *Beyond the opera house: CS Lewis and Wagner reception in Edwardian Britain* in October 2020.