

WAGNER RECONSIDERED

BY LOUIS N. PARKER

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I CAN only write concerning things I myself have seen or heard, so that whatever I write takes on an autobiographical form. This must be my apology for the much too frequent 'I's' with which this paper is studded.

I have headed my paper 'Wagner Reconsidered.' By whom? By me. That is, of course, ridiculous. As well might the mouse patronizingly reconsider the mountain that had given it birth. Yet even a mouse has a right to reconsider the mountain if he do not take himself too seriously; if he do not display too blatantly the little button on the top of the Grand Panjandrum. Far be it from me to lay down the law; far, far be it from me to say, 'This or That *is* so.' All I venture to say is that I think it is so; all I can be sure of is that it seems so to me.

In the seventies Richard Wagner filled the world; not the musical world only, but the dramatic, the literary, the philosophical, and, to some extent, even the political world. Particularly on the Continent. It must be very difficult for the present generation to realize the kind of unrest, of turmoil, that Wagner's theories, his music, his earliest dramas, even his mere name created when they began to percolate into the placid contentment with the mediocre in music which characterized the period between 1870 and 1890.

We Victorians had one great merit — we were enthusiasts. If we liked a

thing, we went for it bald-headed, and if we disliked it there were wigs on the green — which amounts to the same thing. We were passionate partisans, and opposite camps said things about each other in language which left nothing to the imagination. A large dictionary is entirely devoted to the names his enemies called Wagner. A still stouter volume could be (but, I am sorry to say, has not been) compiled, of the names Wagner called his enemies. At Bayreuth, in 1876, the opponents bashed each other with stone beer-mugs. In England it was at first a one-sided fight. Abuse was showered on Wagner, and he had no defenders. The great musical critics were anti-Wagnerian, almost to a man. Chorley thundered in the *Athenæum*, and Joseph Bennett danced on what he thought was Wagner's prostrate form, in the *Telegraph*. As the old birds sang, so the chicks piped.

What one notices as a chief characteristic of the work of these early critics of Wagner is that they never tried to understand him; that they took no pains to find out what he was driving at. They just put their heads down, shut their eyes, folded back their ears, and butted at him. After every butt they thought they had butted him out of existence, and they were surprised and pained to find he was still alive and kicking — kicking ferociously.

In the musical circles in which I

moved, the name of Wagner was anathema. So were other names — Liszt, Berlioz, Schumann; and you had to be a little cautious in your praise of Beethoven beyond a certain opus-number, as most people shrugged their shoulders at the later works, and said Beethoven was stone-deaf when he composed them, and only the stone-deaf could listen to them with pleasure. To have confessed oneself a Wagnerian would have been to incur the peril of ostracism, not so much because of his music — which few people knew anything about — as because he had dared to belittle Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn. I do not rake up all this foolishness to revive dead quarrels, but in order to show the sort of passive resistance there was to Wagner — the sort of amorphous wall that was built up against him, behind which young students were carefully sheltered from his malign influence.

But the moment you build a wall round youth, youth contrives by hook or crook to peep over it; and, however fair the garden within may be, the mysterious vistas without are infinitely more attractive. So it was with us. The more we were told that Wagner was the devil, the keener we were to get a glimpse of his horns.

Things happened to help us. That fine artist and great gentleman, Hans von Bülow, came to England and played Beethoven to us as we had never heard him played; interpreted him in the orchestra also, as we had never heard him interpreted. Von Bülow, we knew, was one of Wagner's staunchest disciples — we did not at the time know how staunch, how self-sacrificing, how quixotic — yet here he was, revealing Beethoven to us. This was very disturbing; for, if this revelation came from the devil's favorite disciple, what might we not expect from the devil himself? Horrid doubts crept

into our hearts respecting our dear old professors who glued us to Hummel and Moscheles and Ferdinand Hiller; and in the privacy of our student lodgings we began in dreadful secrecy to look deeper into the Wagnerian mysteries. I assure you that secrecy was necessary; for at that time Wagner's name not only connoted the negation of music, but was surrounded with I know not what suggestion of immorality, of atheism, of black magic.

A small army arose, ready, partly from conviction, partly from a sheer love of battle, to do or die for Wagner. Lord, how the fur flew! We do not fight now. We do not sling ink as we did in those happy days. In those happy days, when in mutual vituperation we had exhausted our ink, we hurled the ink-pots at each other. Hundreds of us, from all classes, from the workshop, the countinghouse, the vicarages, the literary coteries, and even the minor peerage, went forth in full panoply of war to exterminate anyone who suggested that Wagner was not perfect from every point of view, including the matrimonial.

We lectured to each other; we read profound papers about Schopenhauer, whom we did not understand, and Nietzsche, whose name we could not spell. We solemnly inquired into the inner, world-upheaving significance of individual verses in the dramas, such as the famous 'You see, my son, here Time is turned to Space,' in *Parsifal*; and we tried to found systems of life on musical phrases. We obscured Wagner's already sufficiently obscure texts by turning them into obscurer English; and we were monstrously learned on assonances, alliterative verse, and the Teutonic mythology. All this was domestic; it took place in our own family circle.

We thirsted for wilder adventures. We wanted to be martyrs. Covent

Garden was beginning to play Wagner. We went there. We taught the audience manners. We introduced the famous 'Bayreuth Hush.' If anyone coughed or sneezed we were down on them. Also, we watched the performances, and when they were bad we wrote to the *Times* and the management in a style which combined the righteous indignation of Junius with the vitriolic sarcasm of Swift. We were especially severe on cuts. I think we did quite a lot of real good in our immodest way. At any rate, we got ourselves thoroughly disliked, and were warm and happy. In season and out of season we battled for our hero. He was the one important factor in our lives. The world — no, the universe — seemed concentrated in him. I am not exaggerating when I say that he affected, modified, in some cases utterly transformed our minds, our æsthetic ideas, our outlook on life, our very characters and personalities. An enthusiasm filled us, unequaled, I do believe, in the history of any art. Especially did we glow after we had once been to Bayreuth and could sport the green turban of the returned pilgrim.

To anyone who is intimate with the strange and tragic epic of Wagner's life, Bayreuth — the theatre, and the performances in that theatre — must be as amazing as the greatest of his other works. For it is not overstating the case to say that he brought every beam and every brick of that great building and put it into its place with his own hands in the face of every hindrance, every discouragement, every sort of contumely which his own people could heap upon him. Or — and this is saying the same thing in opposite terms — he built Bayreuth with the brickbats his own people hurled at him.

The knowledge of this, and the fact that here also stood his house; that he

had walked over these uncommonly hard cobbles; that his family still lived here; and that here, at long last, after failure heaped on failure, after outlawry, starvation, bankruptcy, perpetual ill-health, persecution, and ridicule, he had triumphed in *Parsifal* — triumphed only to die — gave Bayreuth an atmosphere such as I suppose no other place has ever possessed, unless it were Athens in the time of the tragic poets. There is a village in Warwickshire which could emulate Bayreuth, but does not.

A visit to Bayreuth was always a delightful experience. The semi-Bohemian life, even though untinged by anything disreputable, was eminently enjoyable. We moved in an atmosphere of higher thought, and we moved in it in our best summer clothes. We put our elbows on the tables of the inadequate restaurants, and talked transcendentalism far into the night; we led the simple life, sustained by roast capons and Liebfraumilch. And we were steeped in the belief — so innocent were we — that here, at last, we were seeing masterpieces performed in every detail exactly as the poet-composer had conceived them. We came back to our workaday life with the far-away look of those who have glimpsed the Beatific Vision.

From 1883 — the year of Wagner's death — until 1913, I think I did not miss one Bayreuth year, and, but for a fortunate accident which forced me to return my tickets in 1914, I should have been interned there. From 1883 to 1913 — thirty years — we were fighting, tooth and nail, hammer and tongs, fangs and claws. As I look back I am amazed at the frenzy of our worship, at the fury of our hatreds, at the splendid folly of our acts, at the violence of our words.

Do people hate like that, or love like that now? I cannot believe it. I see no

symptoms, I hear no echoes of such passions. Critics, with the horrible fate of their predecessors staring them in the face, have become timid. Amateurs have become indifferent. Is it that there is nobody and nothing worth fighting for? Is it that our young people are born middle-aged? Is it that the steam-roller of experience has passed over our ideals and flattened them all out? Is it that we have had so many greatnesses thrust upon our notice by an ingenuous Press, which, after a week-end immortality, have shrivelled into microscopic littlenesses, that we no longer believe in any greatness at all? Have we lost the divine gift of hero worship, or are there indeed no heroes? I do not know. But I do know that, although I have tried to keep all my youthful illusions and am ready to make as big a fool of myself as ever, I can think of nobody about whom I feel it my duty to go mad. Can you?

If only we could have been rapt to heaven in the midst of this enthusiasm! For, as time went on, some of us began to have horrid doubts — began to be besieged by importunate questions. Were the Bayreuth performances actually ideal? That they came nearer to the heart's desire than those at any ordinary opera house was indubitable; but that was saying little. But were they perfect? Were poem, music, scenery, singing, acting, really so blended as to form a single composite art, as they claimed to be? Alas, no. Could we hear the text better? No. Were the performers ideal? No. Was the scenery always right? No.

Trivial matters? Not so. Bayreuth claimed to be perfect. It set a standard. Other theatres reproduced all its faults and then said, 'As at Bayreuth.'

As to the personalities of the singers, let us be charitable. They were as God and a generous diet had made them. With some great and glorious excep-

tions — Scheidemantel, Scaria, Gudehus, Malten, Sucher, van Rooy, Vogl — one wished they had been created invisible: *voces et practerea nihil*.

Then came the war and blotted Wagner out — at least for one enthusiast. I remember the curious feeling, half of anger and half of regret, with which, on August 4th, 1914, I turned the key on him. I did not turn the key out of paltry chauvinism, or as my share in keeping the home fires burning. I did not turn the key on Bach, or Beethoven, or Mozart. But Wagner had professed to be more than a music-maker. He had been the prophet, the preacher, the teacher, the Grand Lama, who issued his edicts *urbi et orbi* from the dim recesses of Wahnfried. He had brought back Wotan and all the Teutonic gods and goddesses; all his heroes and heroines were super-Teutons, and most of them displayed all the less amiable traits of that race.

When you come to examine them you find they do not bear examining. What shall we say of Lohengrin, who deserts his wife because she wants to know whom she has married? What is Elsa but the typical *Hausfrau* submitting meekly to her *Mann's* irrational exigencies? What is Wotan but a breaker of treaties, and henpecked at that? What Siegmund but a betrayer of hospitality? What Siegfried himself but an idealized Junker Lieutenant?

There was no doubt about it — Wagner was one of the corner stones of German Kultur. The modern Teutonic spirit, the Teutonic ideal, was to a large extent his creation. Therefore, to continue to steep oneself in the intoxicating beauty of his Rhine music, his Forest music, his Nuremberg music, was to feed and foster a sentimental yearning for the glamour of that Germany which had vanished in the blood and fire, the unutterable horrors of Namur, of Louvain, Arras, and Ypres.

So, although much of the joy of life was shut out, much that had moulded one's thoughts and contributed to one's happiness was put away — the key was turned.

And now, when, after an interval of eight years, one turns the key back and opens the door, what sort of a Wagner is it who comes out?

I do not think it is too soon to ask. I do not think we are too near him to answer. The war is the equivalent of a hundred years. 1914 is as far away as 1814. It is only with a mental wrench we can force our memory back to the halcyon days before the great catastrophe. I know I think of myself in that period as of a remote ancestor, for whose self-indulgence, for whose blind trust in the immutability of things, I, his innocent descendant, am paying God knows what in the pound. I think we have now almost the historic view of the nineteenth century.

Looking at Wagner through the atmosphere cleared by the war, I still see him, on the whole, as the most gigantic figure in the landscape — but with a difference. Much that was confusing and incomprehensible about him is cleared away; much that we, his uncritical admirers, had idealized into him, has faded, has turned out to have been no part — or the baser part — of him. I think we can at once relieve him of all his politico-religious-sociological-philosophic baggage. There remain the Poet, the Dramatist, the Musician, and the Man.

With the Man I think we have no present concern. It cannot matter very much to us what sort of a man he was. Moreover, the study of such a man is altogether beyond the scope of this paper. I devoutly wish Mr. Lytton Strachey would put him under his microscope. He would find him worth while, and literature would be enriched by another miracle of analysis.

All I will say now is that, as a man, in what one must call his private capacity, he was as bewildering, as contradictory, as inconsequential (partly adorable, partly detestable) as — well, as any one of us.

As a Poet, apart from his dramas, I am ready to dismiss him with a caution. Glasenapp, his biographer, has edited a volume of his verses, and says he is a lyric poet. But Glasenapp also says Siegfried Wagner is a genius. Therefore, Glasenapp will say anything. When a man will say anything, nothing he says has any value. Let Glasenapp say what he likes, the volume is in print and, like other volumes of sweepings from the waste-paper baskets of great men, it is only a curiosity. The verses are either turgid apostrophes to King Louis of Bavaria, or they are occasional doggerel, such as people write when they receive the gift of a pork pie. Let us put them inside the crust and forget them; they are certainly not the four-and-twenty blackbirds which sang before the king.

In his dramas, Wagner was truly a great poet — not of words, though, but of ideas. I think he always found words a hindrance to his self-expression. Whether in his verse or his prose he seems ever to be wrestling with them; there is an everlasting struggle to force them into some sort of order in which they will give an image of his thought.

But, putting language aside, how does he stand as a dramatist, as a playwright? Is he a great tragic poet? Here, again, I feel we shall gradually eliminate much of his work; most, alas, of the work he thought his greatest — the 'Ring.' I believe no tragedy can be great which is devoid of human interest; and, studying it now in cold blood, what human interest is there in the 'Ring'? The gods and goddesses are all poor creatures, not ethically on a

higher, but on a lower level than human beings; they are puppets with whose failings, passions, and desires we can have no sympathy, because they are beneath our own. As for the humans, even when at last Siegfried has, with quite exceptional difficulty, got himself born, he turns out to be a poor thing. I cannot greatly admire a hero who is invulnerable, or only vulnerable in the small of his back. Not much merit in going to battle if you know you cannot get hurt.

The 'Mastersingers' is a sublimated folk-comedy. In it Wagner displays, for the first time, perhaps, extraordinary cleverness of construction, unfailing resource in the invention of amusing or picturesque incidents, and absolutely perfect stage-craft. Granted the initial improbability that a wealthy goldsmith of Nuremberg would put up his only child, his heiress, as a prize to be sung for, with the stultifying proviso that she was not to go to the winner unless she liked him, the action evolves easily, spontaneously, naturally, and offers a long string of exquisitely poetical or humorous pictures. This comedy could be played admirably without the music.

But *with* the music! Well, there it is! With the music, the worst, the most ill-constructed, the ugliest, the most absurd of Wagner's scenes becomes an incomparable jewel. His most involved, most illogical situations become crystal-clear. His most turgid speeches, his most long-winded narratives, his damnable iterations become things of beauty; and even the dragon is adorable.

It is obvious that in writing his dramas Wagner's mind worked simultaneously in two terms. To him the words and the music were interchangeable; the former postulated the latter, and vice versa. When first you glance at the text of a Wagnerian drama you say that these rugged, ragged lines,

these intractable syllables, cannot be set to music; when you hear the music to which he set them, you realize that not only was this the only possible setting, but that it was obvious: it was inherent in the words; it was the essence of the words, or they were the essence of the music: the words and the music merge into one language.

But, in this combination, the music is invariably and constantly the dominant partner. I defy anyone who has not heard the music to read the texts with any real enjoyment; I defy anyone who has heard the music to read the texts without hearing a continuous stream of music accompanying them and turning them into exalted poetry.

And so I reach the conclusion that Wagner was first and last, and continuously, the greatest dramatic composer the world has yet seen. He was so great a dramatic music-maker that his music stands as dramatic music without the aid of the drama. Knock all the scaffolding away; take away the stage, the actors, the scenery, even the words; and the music remains, the finest expression of drama. The most perfect performance of Wagner to which you can treat yourself is to read a full score by the side of your hearth; the next best is to listen to a magnificent orchestra without any stage accessories. Podgy Parsifals, perspiring Tristans, globular Iseults, matronly Brunhilds, get in our way, kill illusion, bring our ideals down to the pot of beer with which we are sure they refresh themselves in the intervals. Away with them! Give us the music without the ills which flesh is heir to. What magic-lantern can add to the effect of the 'Ride of the Valkyries'? What need of silk ribbon fluttering to an electric fan to intensify Brunhild's 'Ring of Fire'? What need of illustration to the threnody on Siegfried's death? Often and often, even

at Bayreuth — especially at Bayreuth — I have wished the actors would go away; I have wished the scenery would disappear; I have wished I could be left alone in the darkness to steep my soul in the ocean of music welling up from the unseen orchestra.

That, I think, is what remains of Wagner, and will remain: his music — extraordinarily eloquent, amazingly pictorial, sometimes terrible, sometimes overwhelmingly lovely, always great. And so the most pitiful mouse has reconsidered the mountain.

TO SHELLEY

BY LEIGH HUNT

[This unpublished poem of Leigh Hunt's is from a manuscript owned by Messrs. Chaundy and Cox, of London. The mood and manner is that of about 1853, when Hunt published his book, The Religion of the Heart. 'One other sweet fervid voice' is probably a reference to Vincent Hunt, the poet's favorite child, who died in 1852.]

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BELOVED Shelley, friend, immortal heart,
Whose name so long has been shut up in mine,
Which could not speak for tears; oh most belov'd
And divine soul, scarcely less visible
Or more a spirit now (so strong has love
Stamp'd thy warm image) than when heretofore
Thou satst beside our hearth, half lifted up
On pinions of seraphic will, and breath'dst
Fires of sweet faith, and beauteous scorn of scorn:

Oh now thou seest (out of that orb, where souls
Of martyrs go, to rest till the day come)
What golden hours await this yearning globe,
By hope at last, and honied breath like thine,
Spun like a starry bee. Which thought, and one
Other sweet fervid voice, which late I heard,
Forth pouring to it as I stood, in tears,
Strong in their weakness, and for infinite wants
Felt heav'n ordaining infinite supply,
Move me to utter what I heard, in words,
And stretch the stormy sweetness, far as breath
Is giv'n me, chaunting to thy spirit, friend,
And dim-seen angels, and desiring man.