RICHARD WAGNER'S WOMEN

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Every type of research that focuses on the consciousness of man, his 'reason' and his 'ideas', but does not at the same time take into account the nature of human emotions and passions – their urges, their proclivities and their very form – is from the outset bound to be limited in its effectiveness.

– *Norbert Elias*

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Illustrations

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Prelude

IN THE FEATURE FILM *Humoresque* of 1946, we see Joan Crawford gazing at us through a veil of tears as she sits at home, busily drinking herself into oblivion. Her lover, meanwhile, is in the concert hall, playing an arrangement for solo violin of themes from *Tristan und Isolde*. The yearning love theme gains in intensity, while Crawford's tears pour out as profusely as she pours in the alcohol. As the waves of Isolde's 'Liebestod' surge on and upwards, Crawford runs in desperation to the beach, obviously intent on putting an end to herself. At the moment of musical climax, the facial close-up blurs, massive waves drown out the picture, and she goes to her death. During the final bars the sea calms down and the last notes die away on the concert podium.

It is hardly a matter of chance that innumerable arrangements of Wagner's music feature in movie soundtracks; often it's the 'Ride of the Valkyries', though sometimes, as here, it's *Tristan und Isolde*, which seems well-nigh predestined to underscore romantic emotion. Richard Wagner's music has long since left the confines of the opera house. It enchants, comforts and enthuses, its opulence speaking directly to our senses. But this is not the only reason why Wagner's works have become such a musical goldmine for Hollywood. The musical language that Wagner employed is still valid today, and in it he made use of the long-established rules of the 'affects' as he knew them, which had been passed down from the music of the Renaissance through the Baroque and into the Classical period. He refined this tradition in all its parameters, though remained all the while faithful to tonality. Not until after his death – and after Bruckner, Mahler and Strauss – was a music devoid of 'Affekt' invented by Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern and others, a music that overcame tonal relationships, emancipated the dissonance and abjured long-accepted modes of meaning. This in turn determined the course taken by the 'New Music', which to the present day still struggles for general acceptance.

But there is something else that connects Wagner's work with our own times. It is not surprising that the aforementioned film offers us a woman whose passive role is maintained unto death, while the man is placed in the public eye to claim fame for himself alone. Wagner played his part in consolidating such cultural models. It is these above all that are the subject of this book. When the feminist movement arose in the 1970s and we all went hunting enthusiastically for lost women composers, it also became popular to discuss seemingly misogynistic works of art (such as the disjointed dolls of the artist Hans Bellmer) or of music (such as Beethoven's *Eroica* with its regressive

act of hero-worship) in order to question how we should approach them today. At the time, Wagner seemed the worst of them all, not just because of the very real way in which he subjugated his wife, Cosima (of which we were able to read much in her recently published diaries), but also because of the manner in which his female characters were willing to play the victim: Elsa, Elisabeth, Senta, Brünnhilde and Kundry. It was easy to condemn him. But a sense of discomfort remained, for his music still lost none of its fascination. How can we resolve this contradiction – that we can love Wagner's music, yet reject the stories it tells on account of their misogyny? It seemed imperative to find out more about his own views of the sexes, and how these are conveyed in his music.

It was recognized that Wagner's œuvre – both his writings and his music – is suffused with subjective experience, and influenced by it. In methodological terms, the historical connection between the composer-as-human-being, his work and the society in which he lived has remained unresolved. We do not necessarily have to follow James McGlathery, who is convinced that Wagner's work deals primarily with erotic passion and is 'full of incestuous feelings and needs'.[1] To give due attention to Wagner's biography is surely essential for an understanding of his œuvre, but music research was long dominated by a musicology influenced by the history of ideas, which restricts itself first and foremost to an abstract view of the mind and of being. It thus allows itself an elegant detour around the topic of 'woman', not least because an investigation of a composer's private life is swiftly proscribed as being voyeuristic, even cheap gossip. It is all too rarely acknowledged that the borderline between the private and the public is drawn arbitrarily, and that the experiences, the sufferings and the joys to which a creative artist is subject all leave their mark on his or her work. It is precisely Wagner's own eventful life, in which women played such a prominent role, that allows one to jump to spectacular conclusions. Many of the interpretations offered hitherto excel themselves in vulgarity and *Schadenfreude*, and thus help us not one whit to arrive at a deeper understanding of his psyche. But whenever Wagner scholarship endeavours to bring the private and the public into equal focus, a sense of unease cannot be avoided. For how could a composer display such genius in his music, yet be such a scoundrel in his personal relationships? One feels the same unease with those who roundly condemn the women in Wagner's life so as to present their hero in all the more glowing colours.

The truly great Wagnerian theme is love, the mysteries of erotic and maternal fascination. In short: woman. Joy and sorrow, jealousy and aggression, fear of loss and jubilant success: these are the affects that determine the course of his operas, and this despite the composer's own insistence that his œuvre was

intended to edify, even to change the world. In the end, he always lands back in those 'big' emotions. When Martin Gregor-Dellin declares, in his large-scale Wagner biography, that 'it is doubtful whether Wagner really suffered from the "curse" of sex; its uncontrollable urges irritated him at best',[2] he is simply wrong. For Wagner, sexuality was a legitimate basic need. The erotic was a source of life to him; indeed, it even constituted his mental 'nourishment'. It was the fundamental requirement of his creativity. 'Like as the hart desireth the water brooks, so longeth my soul after thee,' he said to Cosima, quoting the psalmist[3] – and this at a time when they had already been together for more than a decade. Even those unwilling to acknowledge the prominent role that sexuality plays in his opera texts would at least have to recognize the fervent, erotic power of his music. It was one of Wagner's greatest achievements both that (as early as the mid-19th century) he was able to understand the degree to which sexuality is an elemental human need, and that he was able to depict it in artistic terms.

It would be simplistic, however, to concentrate solely on relationships between life and work and to suppress the issues raised by the historical context, for historically conditioned views of man and woman form a fundamental structural principle in society. They influence not just economic and political activity, but also the field of artistic production. As early as Mozart, we find traits of a bourgeois self-understanding that determines his views of man and woman – as, for example, in his rejection of feudalism, the way in which the bourgeois detaches himself from the plebeian classes and societal power is assigned to the man; this is particularly clear in *The Magic Flute*. When, in *Così fan tutte*, Mozart introduced two female characters who contrast starkly with the bourgeois wish-fulfilling image of female constancy, he was strongly rebuked for it. It is noteworthy that Wagner criticized the opera, for he himself regarded female infidelity as contrary to nature.[4] It henceforth became the norm in cultural artefacts to position the sexes according to the notions of equality posited by the Enlightenment, while at the same time not endangering the dominant position of the man. This all points to the existence of a self-image that was thoroughly bourgeois. We find this endeavour reflected in music too, as in the idealized cases when a woman voluntarily sacrifices herself for a man. Even Beethoven supported this bourgeois struggle, creating just such a figure with Leonore in his *Fidelio*. Leonore was important for Wagner, inasmuch as she was not just a loving woman, but also a strong, active one – a combination that would never cease to fascinate him.

Wagner and his contemporaries were convinced that the character of the sexes was founded in nature. This understanding had a decisive impact on the composer's work. But if we were to hunt out the misogynistic aspects of his

œuvre simply in order to put them in the dock for all to see, then we would only underline once more the role of the woman as outsider, even perhaps – fatally – to the point of reinforcing it. Instead of continually reaffirming the hierarchy inherent in relations between the sexes, it makes more sense to ask how those relations are woven into the artistic process itself. This allows us to observe that the concept of gender in Wagner is in fact not confined strictly to the biology of the sexes. For example, Erik in *Der Fliegender Holländer* is depicted as a weak man and undergoes a process of feminine semanticization; and Siegfried's adventure of discovery in the music drama that bears his name also leads him into a space where semantics are feminized. If we take this into consideration when returning to the concept of gender, then we begin to move away from the standard pattern according to which the man is the aggressor and the woman the victim, and thereby acquire an epistemological framework that considerably expands our perception. And it is at such moments in Wagner that his musical language plays a decisive role. Does Brünnhilde, though dishonoured by rape, regain her dignity through jubilant song? Does Wagner use instrumentation as a vehicle for gender politics?

Those Wagner commentators who have hitherto taken gender roles into consideration have often been led to inaccurate conclusions because the traditional questions were themselves gender-neutral only in superficial terms. In truth, they were rooted in environments and experiences that were patriarchal in origin. As early as 1979 Silvia Bovenschen proved the extent to which depictions of the feminine in literature, philosophy and aesthetics were subject to male norms,[5] and we can easily add music to this list. The semblance of neutrality is further perpetuated if one carries out analysis not with a view to achieving the greatest possible understanding, but instead (as is sometimes popular in literary theory) regarding it as something fragmentary – a subjective construction. Despite the polyvalence of Wagner's work, this is surely something of which he would never have approved. He wanted to be understood. There is simply no other way of explaining why he published and promoted his libretti, why he wrote all those articles elucidating his œuvre, why he spent his life endeavouring to achieve proper performances that corresponded to his expectations, and why he offered such innumerable oral commentaries on it all. He did not set myths to music for the sake of the myths themselves, but insisted on their relevance to his own time. The creation of Bayreuth was a result of his innermost wish to have his operas performed so that their sense could be understood. Understanding that sense also means understanding Wagner's approach to gender roles. I do not intend to consider here the different interpretations that can be extrapolated from Wagner's works (for these

can always alter according to the musicological fashion of the day), but rather what Wagner himself wanted to express with them.

Analysing the music offers an important handle on this, not least because it can give concrete form to the subtlest of nuances and degrees of differentiation. There are innumerable studies that deal with Wagner without discussing his music. Everyone is entitled to an opinion on the matter, whatever it may be, or however personal: Sabine Zurmühl, for example, in a moving article connects Wotan with the post-War predicament of her own disappointed, disillusioned father.[6] Such subjective confession has its place. And yet the music is inalienably interconnected with Wagner's message and thus cannot in any way be 'blended out'. Music speaks a language that we have to decipher – not in the sense of secret messages or emotive, subjective supposition, but paying due consideration to the tradition that assigns specific meanings to specific musical means. This tradition is in many ways as valid today as when the music was written. It is particularly fascinating to observe how Wagner was able to depict physical and mental phenomena in music.

One's enjoyment of a cubist painting by Pablo Picasso or an early woodcut or linocut by Gabriele Münter is not diminished if one knows when they created them, from whom the artists learnt and whom, in turn, they influenced. Indeed, such knowledge can further stimulate one's sense of aesthetic pleasure. In the same way, one's experience of a piece of music can be enhanced by knowledge of its historical background and of its composer's intentions. While it is perfectly legitimate that operatic productions should distance themselves from historical models, it is nevertheless odd if producers ignore the messages inherent in the musical language and instead endeavour to express on stage their very opposite. For example, when Jürgen Flimm, in his Bayreuth production,[7] intended Brünnhilde to be dressed as a Valkyrie for her final monologue, he ignored the fact that Wagner, by excising the Valkyrie motif and introducing another, makes quite clear in musical terms that his protagonist has changed over the course of the opera; Wagner even referred to this in his writings.

For long stretches, Wagner's music possesses a drug-like quality, paired with a tendency to dimensional exaggeration and the bombastic. The multifarious motifs that, in all manner of variations and transformations, are enmeshed in his works, especially those of his later years, make of his œuvre a well-nigh bottomless treasure trove for eager commentators. It is clear that in order to do justice to the subject of this book I had to set priorities in a clear and manageable way. I thus, largely, avoid issues of symbolism, but I pay particular attention to the ideologies to which Wagner subscribed. Similarly, I investigate his texts because they shed so much light on his way of thinking. Operatic

music in general – including the singspiel, which was consciously regarded as a pedagogical medium – also serves as an instrument for determining societal differentiation and location. Here it becomes clear how different the messages were that were intended for men and for women, and how meaningful it can be for us today to decipher them and to bring them into general awareness. How did Wagner 'experience' (in the broader sense, of course) the women of his day? To what extent did these women find their way into his art? Does not art transcend all historically conditioned norms? How did Wagner, who throughout his life was dependent upon women, succeed in his art in creating such strong-willed female characters? In order to answer such questions, and in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of his gender roles, I shall draw together into a discursive network his philosophical and musico-aesthetic convictions, his music, contemporary theories of gender, and not least his own experiences with women as portrayed in his letters and diaries and in his private remarks as recorded by Cosima. This will help us to avoid using him as a mere object of projection (though this pitfall can naturally never be excluded completely) and enable to us position him in his own historical context.

But the question is just as engaging when asked the other way round. How did women experience Wagner? From the very beginning, women were among the most enthusiastic admirers but also the most passionate critics of his work. His admirers no doubt sensed that some of his female roles carried within them the potential to burst out of the straitjacket of bourgeois convention, while his puritanical opponents among the opposite sex feared a dissolution of moral ideals that would be to the detriment of woman. The writer Luise Büchner (1821–77) belonged to the latter camp. For her, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was a sacrilegious attempt to present the sexual drive as an overarching moral law:

> But fie, such things as would make every decent person blush and turn away were instead portrayed on that stage and sung! Such coarseness, such an utter lack of decency was surely not to be found anywhere except here, in the nineteenth century and on a German stage, before an elite audience of German men and women![8]

On the other hand, the music commentator Marie Lipsius (1837–1927), who always worked under the pseudonym 'La Mara', wrote after a performance of *Tannhäuser* that 'The new spirit of this at once passionate and yet transcendent poetry in music, in which I heard the future flutter its wings, overpowered me.'[9] Wagner himself took note of the deep impression that the *Tannhäuser* Overture made on women, saying that 'They had to resort to sobbing and

crying [...] only after this sorrow had given vent to itself in tears came the comfort of the greatest, most exuberant joy.'[10]

'The exemplary ability of Wagner's work to draw attention precisely to the ruptures in our own thought may not be allowed to give way to a self-satisfied sense of arbitrariness,' writes Ulrich Drüner with good reason.[11] Theodor W. Adorno's sometime words in praise of Walter Benjamin are equally valid for all interpretations of the Wagner phenomenon: 'To think means to reject all the superficial security of mental organization, all deductions and conclusions, submitting oneself wholly to the joy and risk of using experience in order to attain what is fundamental.'[12] The musical experience itself sets forces free within us, and motivates us time and again to try to understand the work in question. This study aims to encourage others to embark upon that adventurous act of interpretation, and to engage in description and extrapolation. Critical remarks here on the work of other colleagues naturally presuppose an inherent respect for their achievements. Wagner's work can only protect itself from incrustation if it is subjected to lively debate.

Chapter 1

'... the world as yet has no notion of it': Wagner's Musical Language

RICHARD WAGNER'S artistic approach to expressing aspects of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' extends over many interrelated areas. It begins with linguistic metaphor, progresses via the semantic power of his musical style, and closes with gendered references within certain ideologies (such as nationalism). To Wagner, it was an incontrovertible fact that music can speak. In his dramatic œuvre he assigned to music a greater significance even than the text: 'Only through the music [does my poetic intent] become clear. This has become apparent to me once again; I cannot even look at the poem again without the music,' he wrote, after beginning to set his *Ring des Nibelungen*.[1] The music has to express the plot. Every bar of dramatic music was justified only insofar as it expressed something relevant to the plot or the character in question, he wrote to Franz Liszt, who was one of the first to recognize how Wagner translated his characters' personality into music by assigning them corresponding rhythms and melodies. And Nietzsche found that Wagner had 'augmented immeasurably the linguistic capabilities of music'.[2]

If a composer wanted to venture to the boundaries of the 'new', as Wagner did, he had to take his cue from the conventions established by tradition if he was to be understood. And for Wagner, absolute comprehensibility was one of the most important commandments. It is at this point that the text comes to the fore again. If the public was to feel at home in what was foreign to them, then they had to be able to understand the words. For this reason, Wagner endeavoured during the act of composition – particularly when writing his *Valkyrie* – to draw the music from the nature of the text itself. The melodic line is derived from the intonation of the text in order to make the words easy to grasp for the listener. But comprehensibility did not just apply to the text: since, when we speak, we form phrases, Wagner did the same with his music.

Wagner often put pen to paper to elucidate his compositional method – as for example in his essays 'Opera and drama' and 'On the application of music in drama'. According to him, music is able to express everything that would overwhelm language, and thus one must try to fuse them together. But everything should be guided by what is happening on the stage. Wagner wrote that he created his themes 'always within a greater context and in a malleable manner',[3] and he honed this art in one work after another. Wagner works with small particles, called motifs, which he varies and modulates according to the

situation at hand. Periodic cadences are no longer his sole structural criterion, but rather the musico-dramatic events determine proceedings.

Wagner was well grounded in the music of Weber, he knew his Mozart as well as his Beethoven and the Italian opera composers, and he took this knowledge and used it in his own musical language – just as later composers such as Richard Strauss did in their turn. While for Wagner the music was a participant in the plot and in the expressive content of his works, in the broader context of music history we are less sure as to whether music can truly 'speak'. From the Baroque *Affektenlehre* (the theory of the 'affects' or 'emotions') via the expressive principles of the era of sensibility (*Empfindsamkeit*) to the Romantic aesthetics of the emotions, and from there in turn to film music – thus from Monteverdi via Richard Strauss to Max Steiner – music possesses an expressive ability that we can never 'decode' without continually arguing over it. We are united in the belief that music expresses *something*, but cannot agree about how this musical language functions. Those commentators who have researched musical signification, such as Rolf Dammann, Constantin Floros, Vladimir Karbusicky, Hartmut Krones and Georg Knepler, have often found that their work has been met with intense criticism.

One of the commonest arguments against theories of meaning in music is that those meanings alter over time, leaving a work without any firm, static core of meaning. Of course, even if the musical language itself remains unaltered, the semantic content can still shift, and only specialists will be able to recognize the original meanings. Yet there are also certain musical features that have a 'universal' character that everyone can understand. Just as thrusting one's arms into the air is recognized as an act of jubilation, while a person slumped in on himself is assumed to be sad,[4] so in music too sounds have a positive connotation when they strive upwards, and a negative one when they descend. Whoever moves quickly signals activity and a sense of setting out, so positive emotions in music are largely expressed in a rapid tempo. Whoever walks slowly is generally sad, weak or in solemn mood – and these feelings are also depicted in music that is measured in tempo. Such musical depictions founded on anthropological constants do not experience any shift in meaning and have the same emotional impact on the listener today as they had in the past. The musical depiction of physical movement such as flying or running, or of sounds of nature such as thunder and birdsong, are the simplest to recognize. Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* is full of such musical mimicry, and one comprehends it at a first hearing.

Besides onomatopoeia, the mimicking of movement and the imitation of speech inflexions, the depiction of emotions was particularly important in Baroque opera. It was this that was the starting point for Wagner's musical

language. In the Baroque period it was assumed that every emotional state of man or woman was characterized by a specific emotion or mixture of emotions. These expressions of emotion were termed the 'affects' and were assigned to different categories. The Baroque composers built on this tradition. Thus the cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach are treasure trove when it comes to the interpretation of words and the development of a tonal language. Handel remained long unrecognized in this regard, and only in recent decades has there been a more intensive study of the semantics of his operas.[5] In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, the lyrical–emotional language of the affects acquired fundamental significance. Many musical theorists and practitioners of the time endeavoured to systematize these affects in composition manuals, treatises and pedagogical works. All the same, there is no standard musico-aesthetic work that offers a classification or a unified system of the musical implementation of the affects, any more than there is a precise definition of the concept itself. In his book *Der vollkommene Kapellmeister*, Johann Mattheson offered a highly coherent system of the affects, but observed aptly that 'sounds in themselves are neither good nor evil, rather do they become so according to how one uses them'.[6] How one judges the affects depends on numerous factors, and they rarely appear either isolated or in their pure form. There will never be a means of translating the meaning of affects in music that has general validity, though this is not to say that we cannot understand their musical import intuitively.

Bruno Flögel has listed the affects that one finds in literature and that can be applied to music.[7] These refer back principally to the system drawn up by Christian Wolff in his *Psychologia empirica* of 1732. Among the affects with positive emotive meaning (*affecti jucundi*) are love, hate, joyful calm, *Schadenfreude*, joy in fame, joy in the absurd, hopeful joy, pluckiness, happiness; those with negative emotive meaning (*affecti molesti*) include pity, envy, regret, shame, fear, despair, pettiness, grief, boredom and anger.

An emotional state is expressed in musical terms primarily by tonality, rhythm, instrumentation, tempo, inner movement and harmony, and by certain intervals. But the declamatory expression of the voice also plays its part. When interpreting an affect, one should always pay attention to the overall musical gesture, though individual affects that are clearly audible are also occasionally deployed. A closer look at them is well worth the effort if one wants to understand the rich spectrum of emotional states that Wagner's music is able to express.

In the general depiction of affects and character states, intervals have a meaningful function because they are the constituent parts of the melody and can give us many clues. When Wagner says of *Parsifal* that he could not