

Defining Opera

THE WAGNER STYLE



Arnold Whittall

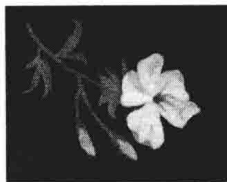
Defining Opera
Editor: Christopher Wintle

THE WAGNER STYLE

Close Readings and Critical Perspectives

Arnold Whittall

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THE WAGNER STYLE



Tristan and Isolde with the head of Richard Wagner
(Franz Stassen, 1869–1949)

Editor's Preface

Arnold Whittall's *The Wagner Style* inaugurates a new series of Plumbago books bearing the title *Defining Opera*. The title is both negative and positive: negative in signalling what it excludes – histories of opera, opera houses, singers, conductors, producers, directors and so forth; positive in focussing on philosophical enquiry, be it analytical, critical or polemical. The series will inevitably root itself in the time, place and circumstance of London in the early twenty-first century, though without intending to be parochial. The historical, of course, is intrinsic to any critical thought worth its salt, and opera, unlike sacred or secular music in general, benefits from having a more-or-less agreed point of inception and a relatively clear, if multi-faceted, evolution. So the fields of philosophical enquiry in this series may well range over the full four hundred years or so of operatic history. It is entirely appropriate, for example, that the author of *The Wagner Style* is also a twentieth-century specialist, and that his book ends with an account of *Wagner Dream*, a recent opera by a British composer, Jonathan Harvey, on whom he has already written a monograph.

This book's title is obviously redolent of Charles Rosen's *The Classical Style* (1971). Yet the titles and subtitles of the two books stand in inverse relation. Whittall associates 'style' with a single composer, Wagner, whereas Rosen appends to his 'style' the names of three composers, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven; Whittall conducts his investigation through 'Close Readings and Critical Perspectives', whereas Rosen posits 'The Classical' as embodying a set of attributes that unfold à la Hegel: musical classicism rises, flowers and dies – expiring at the very moment that Robert Schumann published, in 1839, his homage to Beethoven, the Fantasy in C major for piano Op. 17. For Whittall 'Wagner' is still an open book, whereas for Rosen 'The Classical' can be recovered only through an act of creative irony – Mahler, he writes on his (admittedly provocative) final page, employed 'sonata forms with the same mock respect that he gave to his shopworn scraps of dance-tunes'. So for Whittall, 'defining opera' is a matter of indicating not just a 'style', but also the activities through which that style emerges.

It was Barry Millington, editor of *The Wagner Journal*, who suggested publishing this book – which is still only a selection of Whittall's writings on Wagner – to celebrate its author's eightieth birthday in 2015. I am grateful to him, not only for the suggestion, but also for choosing the illustrations and recommending the highly co-operative Matthew Rye to adapt and add to the music examples he had already prepared for the journal. I must also thank Anthony Bye of the *Musical Times* for being so courteous and prompt in passing over materials relating to those essays first published in his journal. Indeed, as both Barry Millington and Anthony Bye edited materials for this book at the time of their first publication, they must share in the editorial credit. The cover photograph by Clive Barda, showing Bryn Terfel as Hans Sachs in the Welsh National Opera production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (2010), appears by agreement with ArenaPAL. The pictures by Milein Cosman appear by kind permission of The Cosman Keller Art and Music Trust. Our own tireless Julian Littlewood has done the typesetting and supervised the book's production, and Rachel Beaumont and Kate Hopkins have done some of the typing and sub-editing. And last, but far from least, thanks to Arnold Whittall from us all for his help in the editorial process, along with our best wishes for 'many happy returns'.

Christopher Wintle
London, 2015

Preface

For more than ten years from my later schooldays I was confident that my primary musical interests were contemporary. A world in which Vaughan Williams was being confronted by Britten and Tippett against a background of the challenges thrown down by the likes of Bartók, Stravinsky and Schoenberg was fascinating enough to absorb my attention, and to mark out what seemed an attractive contrast to the Bach and Mendelssohn which I was dutifully learning for my practical examinations and diplomas. The fact that circumstances at Cambridge forbade a contemporary topic for doctoral research also reinforced this transgressive tendency, and even the psychological attractions of the more melancholic and sentimental varieties of Romantic music from Schubert to Wolf, Richard Strauss and Mahler made it possible – even desirable – to bypass what I then saw as the brash confidence and vulgar heroics of Richard Wagner.

Two developments changed all this during the early 1970s: my wife Mary's work on translations of German writings about Wagner, and the experience of live performances at ENO and Bayreuth, along with recordings appearing at the time when complete operas by Wagner on LP were emerging in substantial numbers. The fact that a musical thinker as radical as Pierre Boulez took Wagner seriously was no disadvantage either, and by the end of the 1970s I was beginning to write about Wagner myself – despite an acute awareness of the imposing and intimidating mountain of material to which I was adding my handfuls of sand and gravel.

Some passages in this present collection were first drafted well before the year 2000, though everything has been recast since 2007. As a specialist in theory and analysis I have usually been asked to write about the music's technical and stylistic qualities as manifested in the 'finished product' rather than about all the sources, sketches, drafts and external factors which served to make that product the multivalent phenomenon it is. All but the last of the studies collected here include sections where Wagner's finished scores (in the most authentic and fully-researched editions available at the time of writing) are subjected to close reading. But even there, a variety of other readings,

older and more recent, inevitably impinge, and open up perspectives that touch on many contextual aspects of Wagner's distinctive style.

Having continued to be involved in the fraught, fractious world of contemporary music, I have always been intrigued by the contentious and diverse roles Wagner continues to play within that world – by professional example if not by direct musical influence. I suspect it is sometimes a source of particular frustration to struggling living composers to realise that great masters of the increasingly distant past – not only Wagner – somehow seem to remain more contemporarily relevant to the majority of music-lovers than they do. I know several distinguished musicians – including composers – happy to avoid Wagner. I do not expect this book to change their minds: but it might help to explain why not avoiding Wagner matters to so many.

Arnold Whittall

London, 2015

A Note on the Music Examples

Ideally, the many musical quotations included in the following pages would all have been in full score, annotated with the full performing instructions and (on occasion) stage directions provided by the scholar-editors of the multiple volumes of the current *Richard Wagner Gesamtausgabe*. The much-reduced and highly selective extracts offered instead are intended to provide enough textual and musical information to support the book's close readings. In particular, indications of tempo, whether verbal or metronome marks, are included only when there are significant changes within an extract. It is also hoped that readers who experience Wagner primarily through live or recorded performance, often with texts, liner notes and subtitles to hand, will find the sometimes sketchy score extracts useful joggers of musical memory. The translations included in the captions that accompany the music extracts are by the editor; however, German phrases that serve merely to indicate a place in the score come without translation. Where two or more citations from the same sources appear in close succession, only the first receives an end-note indicator.

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Part One

The Romantic Operas



*The pilgrims return from Rome, but without Tannhäuser
(Hugo L. Braune (1875- ?))*

1 Weaving a Spell: Wagnerian Craft in 'Der fliegende Holländer'

1 Subtlety, Simplicity

It might seem surprising that, after Thomas Mann has asked an uncompromising rhetorical question – 'But what is it that elevates Wagner's work so far above the intellectual level of all previous forms of musical drama?' – and answered the question in general terms, to do with Wagner's unprecedented exploitation of the 'forces of psychology and myth', the first work cited should be, not *Tristan* or *Parsifal*, but *Der fliegende Holländer*.

How extraordinarily Wagner's poetic powers go beyond those of a mere librettist, right from the beginning – and not so much in terms of linguistic accomplishment as of psychological insight! 'Die düst're Gluth!' sings the Dutchman in the lovely duet with Senta in the second scene:

Die düst're Gluth, die hier ich fühle brennen,
sollt' ich, Unseliger, sie Liebe nennen?
Ach nein! Die Sehnsucht ist es nach dem Heil:
würd' es durch solchen Engel mir zu Theil!¹

These are lines written to be sung, yet never before had such complex thoughts, such convoluted emotions been sung or put into singable form. The accursed man falls in love with this girl at first sight, but he tells himself that the love he feels is not for her, but for redemption, salvation. On the other hand she stands before him as the physical embodiment of that salvation he seeks, so that he is not able – or indeed willing – to distinguish between his longing for spiritual deliverance and his longing for her. For his hope has assumed her form, and he can no longer wish it otherwise; in other words, in loving redemption, he loves this girl. What an interweaving of double meanings – what a penetrating insight into the complex depths of an emotion!²

The first thing a musicologist might seek to do after reading this passage is to bring Mann down to earth with the remark that Wagner's musical

setting of this expression of 'complex thoughts' and 'convoluted emotions' is regular, conventional to a fault. Mann quotes the last of the three quatrains of text (rhyming aabb) which together make up the first half of the duet's first main section. The first quatrain (No. 11, bars 9–24) is introductory, set in the tonic minor, with both antecedent and consequent phrases cadencing on the dominant. After the switch to E major, the second 16-bar quatrain (bars 28–43) cadences on the mediant. Then, the setting of the lines quoted by Mann, as a consequent to the antecedent of Quatrain 2, moves from the dominant to the tonicised subdominant (bar 52) and on to cadence at last with a full close in the tonic (bars 44–63); however, this is only achieved through the extension of the second eight-bar segment by four bars, and the repetition of the last line of text – 'würd' es durch solchen Engel mir zu Theil!' (Ex. 1.1).

From a musical perspective, then, the only 'complexity' lies in the chromatic enrichments of E major harmony which are present, primarily, in the setting of the third quatrain. 'Complexity', by Wagner's later standards, that is, for what makes this passage musically representative of early Wagner is not so much its four-square phrasing, with only an intersection between the last bar of the first quatrain and the four-bar orchestral link to the second to introduce a mild element of irregularity: it is the absence from the undeniably well-shaped melodic line of any motivic content that recalls or anticipates other moments in the drama. Nor does the orchestral accompaniment, though harmonically expressive, participate significantly in the thematic process.

To accept Mann's judgement of the subtlety of Wagner's text is therefore to acknowledge a contrast between verbal complexity and (relative) musical plainness, laying conveniently broad foundations for the evolution of increasing musical richness and sophistication to match the verbal, textual variety that Wagner contrived in the later operas and music dramas. Yet this is not to concede that the music Wagner provides for the *Holländer* duet is somehow inappropriate, or fails to match the text. The form and metre of the quatrain discussed by Mann are straightforward, and the gradually increasing intensity of expression in melody and harmony – notably the long-delayed and well-prepared attainment of the high E during the setting of the last two lines – is a perfectly adequate match for the complex depths of emotion which the Dutchman experiences. But Mann's analysis, focusing solely on an aspect of the duet's early stages, misses the episode's larger function, which is to display, as only music for two characters singing shared material simultaneously can display, the extraordinary unity of purpose which the pair embody – a unity of purpose willed in particular by Senta, in active response to the Dutchman's passivity: she therefore seems if anything the more 'masculine' of the two. Carl Dahlhaus goes to the heart of the matter in an imaginative paradox:

[p] DUTCHMAN *cresc.*

Die dü - st're Gluth, die hier ich füh - le bren - nen, sollt' ich Un

[Sostenuto]

pp *cresc.*

f

se - li-ger sie Lie - be nen - nen? Ach nein! Die Sehn - sucht

f *p* *p*

ist es nach dem Heil, würd' es durch sol - chen En - gel mir zu

cresc. *f* *p*

Theil, würd' es durch sol - chen En - gel mir zu Theil!

pp *pp*

Example 1.1: Richard Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer*, No. 11, 44-63.

Translation: 'This dark desire I feel burning within, should I, wretch, call it love? Oh no! My passion is for salvation: would that I could achieve it through such an angel!'