

Richard Wagner and his World, ed. Thomas S. Grey

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‘As long as there are books, it seems, there will be books on Wagner’, begins the Preface by Thomas S. Grey. Not, as it happens, the preface to this book; this is from his preface to last year’s big Wagner compendium, also edited by him.¹ The preface of the present volume, in a similar mode, repeats the conventional wisdom that the Wagner legacy is ‘almost inexhaustible’.² Grey’s ‘it seems’ and ‘almost’ are wise, for this compilation shows distinct signs of the almost unthinkable – could we be in the age of *Wagnerfestchriftendämmerung*? I will return to this thought presently.

Grey’s Cambridge preface continues ‘The claims of this [book] are relatively modest, geared to the general aims of the *Cambridge Companion* series to provide an accessible portrait of the artist as we see him today, and at the same time to offer information about his life, times, works and reception’. Substitute ‘Bard Music Festival’ for ‘Cambridge Companion’, and it might serve adequately for the 2009 volume. But the Bard series suffers, compared with the Cambridge series, when it comes to focus. The Cambridge series can sit comfortably on the shelves of both the academic and the musical layman as an informed complement to our present enjoyment of the music they discuss. The Bard series, with its emphasis on the composer’s own world, is rather more specialised in its appeal. Founded nearly twenty years ago, with its initial subjects being Brahms, Mendelssohn and Richard Strauss, it has sought annually to evoke for the benefit of the academic and/or music professional contextual portraits of its subjects with a mixture of modern original essays, and biographical and critical insights from the subject’s own era. (The present volume contains seven essays covering about 200 pages, with a further 320 pages of documentation). Such evaluations, especially the excavation of material relating to the composer’s own personal and musical reception in his time, were a relative novelty for most of its subjects. The insights and opinions, for example, of many of Mendelssohn’s circle and coteremporaries, little-known to academia at a time when the composer’s reputation was

¹ *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey, (Cambridge 2008), p. xiii.

² *Richard Wagner and his World*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Princeton, 2009) – henceforward RWW - p. ix.

undergoing significant re-evaluation, often formed a striking contrast to the received image of the composer.³

But the very plethora of printed material about its subject, noted by Grey, makes the task of producing a comparable volume on Wagner almost impossible. Wagner's whole career and after-life have been a highly public and publicised polemic, printed, reviewed and argued over for some 150 years; the risk is – and this book demonstrates it – that there may now not be sufficient novelties to merit our detailed consideration. Even the rich veins of Wagner, it appears, have become pretty much exhausted at some locations.

We of course want to hear about contemporary impressions of Wagner and early Bayreuth, but that doesn't mean that it's *ipso facto* justifiable to publish every scrap one can gather, especially if the reporter is a block-headed American cousin of Charles Pooter (Wagner's dentist, Newell Jenkins – “Wagner was unable to come and see me and greatly needed certain treatment [...] and accordingly, although I was myself tired and overwrought, I determined to go; and this was the beginning of a friendship which lasted until Wagner's death”)⁴, or a self-satisfied German cousin of the same, (the bass-baritone Eugen Gura – “I have the largest and nicest room on the second floor”)⁵.

In the section on Wagnerian literature, Steven Huebner presents to us extracts from the Parisian *Revue wagnérienne*, which flourished briefly in the 1880s, written by Huysmans, Wyzéwa and Dujardin, but gives us no convincing rationale or context for their place in the volume. The *Revue* existed, but did anybody read it? We are not told anything about its circulation, for example. We certainly don't want to wade through its prose, queasy even in translation (“Deluged by ineffable promises and passionate murmurs, [Tannhäuser] falls, delirious, into the arms of the perverting clouds that embrace him”.....was Huysmans really that awful? A quick glance at my long untouched copy of *A rebours* convinces me that, alas, he was). A couple of paragraphs would give us the general idea, that a bunch of aesthetically elitist Frenchmen were

³ See *Mendelssohn and his World*, ed. R. Larry Todd, Princeton, 1991.

⁴ RWW 240

⁵ RWW 456

obsessed by Wagner and paved the way for James Joyce; nine pages is far too much of not such a good thing.⁶

We have Wagner's 'complete programme notes' in translation. Nice to have them all together, I suppose, although of course a number of them have long been available (admittedly in Ellis's translation, than which Grey's is more readable if less characteristically muscular). But those which were not so accessible don't necessarily add much value – for example, a 'Reader's Digest' vision of Beethoven's op. 131 ("Melancholy morning thoughts of a deeply suffering mind"), or a padding-out of an account of Beethoven's Ninth with extensive tracts of Goethe.

And although the snide, disingenuously humble critique of *Tannhäuser* by Mendelssohn's friend J. C. Lobe – Polonius as music critic – is interesting in its way, even when truncated to 42 pages⁷ (representing about 8% of the present book), it significantly outstays its welcome. And yet.....it's about Wagner, it hasn't been made easily available in English before, it must be important to publish it....mustn't it?

I don't want to imply in any way that all the documentary materials here are as annoying or disappointing as the above. A notable exception, for example, is Nicholas Vazsonyi's edited selection of early Bayreuth press releases, which he appropriately subtitles 'an Early Attempt at Spin Control'; this is an important continuation of his research on the Wagner industry of the late nineteenth century. The 1887 article on *Parsifal* by Hans von Wolzogen (introduced by Mary A. Cicora) reveals a pompous, pseudo-academic and religiose attitude to the opera which seems as remote to the modern intellect as mediaeval scholasticism; but it is important for us to make the effort to understand this mindset.

But even apart from the variable quality of the documents offered us by Grey, the book as a whole displays a very curious perspective. Setting aside the original essays (the first, and by far the most rewarding section of the book), its documentary sections are: 'Biographical Contexts', 'Towards a Music of the Future 1840-1860', 'Wagner and Paris', 'The Bayreuth Era', and the 'Collected Programme Notes'. When one bears in mind that the essays themselves contain only one about a specific opera, (Karol Berger's ho-hum ramble around *Tristan*), one begins to doubt

⁶ RWW 377-386: in fairness, I omit in my count a page of pictures.

⁷ RWW 269-310

whether the book as a whole can give to a notional non-Wagnerite reader any balanced comprehension of 'Wagner and his World'; for the result is - as regards the operas - that there is next to nothing in the book about two of Wagner's central achievements, the *Ring* and the *Meistersinger*, (except ironically for Hanslick's smart demolition of the *Ring* in Vienna, in the 'Bayreuth Era' section), whilst we get an awful lot one way or the other about *Tannhäuser* and *Parsifal* (to this writer two of Wagner's most insufferable creations both as characters and operas). A survey of Wagner without the *Ring*? In the *Cambridge Companion*, Grey performed well to his prescribed format; but here without such a clear prescription the perspectives he opens to the reader seem unorthodox to the point of being perverse.

The Polonius mode of Herr Lobe is not entirely absent from the modern essays either. Lydia Goehr, in an unpromising opening to an essay on Wagner and naming, goes out of her way to deter the reader by wittering on for a page in posing the question as to why Barry Millington called *Die Meistersinger* a music drama (why not just send our Editor a postcard and ask him direct?) She wins the prize for the book's most fatuous footnote; after chiding Millington 'why does he title his book [...] *Wagner and His Operas*, and not *Wagner and His Music-Dramas*?', the note reads 'For the sake of the argument I have to ignore the fact that Millington's book belongs to an Oxford series of which *X and His Operas* is the generic title'⁸ Fortunately she presently redeems herself, as do the authors of the best articles in this collection, by displaying original insight and research.

Mr. Grey's article on Wagner's *Eine Kapitulation*, an effusion of the Master understandably generally avoided in the past, places it valuably in context without making any concessions to its obnoxiousness. Katharine Syer gives a useful account of Wagner as stage director. Kenneth Hamilton parallels Liszt and Wagner with wit and perception (so that we are charmed to come across once more his account of the death of Liszt's *Sardanapale*). Christian Thoreau's account of the commodification of the Wagnerian *leitmotifs* as tourist guides for the acculturating German bourgeois is an original contribution to the study of Wagnerism. Maybe the editor might have reined in Leon Botstein a little in his essay on *German Jews and Wagner*, which takes us well into the 1920s, somewhat beyond the volume's declared scope, but then Botstein is an acknowledged *maven* on his topic, (and, besides, he is the President of Bard College, so an

⁸ RWW 66, 85. The work referred to is 'The New Grove Guide to Wagner and his Operas', (Oxford 2006)

editor's discretion in these circumstances is understandable). I can envisage that I am likely to return to all of these. But the variance between the modern and the documentary sections of the book remains disappointing.

Someone ought - I offer up the idea *gratis* – to do a study of the economics of Wagner publishing over the past 150 years. As the present volume demonstrates, both by extracts and by numerous references, the end of the 19th century seems to have been virtually awash with pamphlets and articles by pro- and anti-Wagnerians. This literature however was mostly paid for and read by the combatants and their cheerleaders themselves – with very few exceptions, it was never a paying proposition, except perhaps for the printers. Now the market for the regular stream of Wagner volumes from university publishers seems clearly (from the prices involved) to be university libraries; this seems rather a parallel with the old conundrum of the village where folk lived by taking in each others' washing - but will such buyers prove reliable as economic stringencies bite ever deeper world-wide (and particularly in the US)?

Indeed Grey even offers a pointer to the Publishing of the Future. Noting that he had more edited documents available than he had room for, he is grateful to this magazine for offering to host the overflow⁹ (an arrangement which commenced with Hans von Bülow's essay on the *Faust Overture* in vol. 3 no. 3). And of course we are in an age when so much about Wagner is freely accessible on the Internet (not only through such academic gateways as JSTOR, but, for example, through complete free downloads of out-of-copyright books, and some neat articles in Wikipedia).¹⁰ Those seeking information about the Master have far less need now to seek it on the shelves of university libraries. Between specialist journals, free access to arcana, and the *samizdat* of Wikipedia, does the massive (and expensive) Wagner tome still have any *raison d'être*? On the evidence of this offering, it will have to work hard to prove it.

⁹ RWW, xiv

¹⁰ You can in fact download for free a complete Wikipedia book on Wagner, (compiled from Wikipedia articles), which at the time of writing was 275 pages long. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Books/Richard_Wagner.