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Wagner in Performance. Edited by Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992. x, 214p.

While casting a very broad net, in what could conceivably be a very large ocean, Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer have managed to catch a number of rather distinctive fish. Despite its slim width, this volume provides the clearest demonstration yet of the vitality, breadth, and potential of the study of music in performance. Its ten chapters present a range of topics on both relatively old and new subjects. To date, most work on music in performance has investigated either historical performance practices or reception history and both areas are represented here. Attempts to change modern performance practice in response to these historical investigations has, of course, led to a great deal of discussion about the practical use of these "authentic" practices, and there is herein a single philosophical essay by Jean-Jacques Nattiez on this subject. The rest of the volume is devoted to the less well-traveled area of the performance history of Wagner's works, which can at times overlap with reception history (as it does in Joseph Horowitz's essay) but still deserves to be seen as its own endeavor. Not surprisingly, many of the writers presented here have had considerable experience mounting performances themselves and the mix of historical scholarship and practical experience proves to be a rich one.

The more traditional topics of performance practice and reception history are covered in essays by Clive Brown and Amanda Glauert. Brown's essay, "Performance Practice," is an excellent survey of the current scholarship on Wagner's performance ideals and practices. It contains just enough information about contemporary 19th-century practices to indicate what Wagner wanted and what he simply had to tolerate. With only short sections on orchestra size and instrumentation, instrumental and vocal vibrato, portamento, ornamentation and tempo modification, it is neither a manual nor a thorough study. Brown provides only enough evidence here to make his general case, but it is enough. There are only a few studies which provide more detail about individual subjects.¹ As reception history has become a growth industry, the editors wisely chose to feature only one example rather than a complete survey. Glauert's "The Reception of Wagner in Vienna, 1860-1900" provides a brief but interesting glimpse into the difficulty the Vienna Wagner Society encountered, from both Bayreuth and the Viennese

¹ For more information about pitch, orchestral size and instrumentation, for example, see Warren A. Bebbington's "The Orchestral Conducting Practice of Richard Wagner." Ph. D. dissertation, State University of New York, 1984.

public, when it tried to connect Wagner to a broader post-Wagner Viennese tradition, specifically to Wolf and Bruckner.

Nattiez's "'Fidelity' to Wagner: Reflections on the Centenary Ring" is one of the longest and easily the most difficult essay in the book. While I agree with most of his conclusions, I find two problems with the multi-faceted nature of the essay. First, the essay presents itself both as a theoretical investigation of the "Judgement of Fidelity from the Semiological Point of View," and as a spirited defense of the Patrice Chéreau /Pierre Boulez centenary *Ring* at Bayreuth. It is a bit like the "historical" investigations of the life of Jesus by Christian scholars: the "judgment" is never in doubt since Nattiez is clearly a believer. Second, Nattiez could have left out most of the semiotic argument and still concluded that "the meanings given to human works are always constructs." (p. 98) Still, this is an important article, as it provides a solid philosophical theory of interpretation.

Nattiez employs epistemologist and classical historian Paul Veyne's concept of "plot" and argues that faced with Wagner's texts there are any number of "plots" or interpretations which can be drawn; to construct a plot is simply to invent "a coherent series of facts." (p. 95) Nattiez demonstrates both that there is a multiplicity of "correct plots" and that "it is in the nature of human works to become distorted in relation to the network of possible meanings which they originally possessed." (p. 96) In other words, the meanings we draw from the *Ring* are naturally and necessarily different from Wagner's. Nattiez neatly separates the job of the musicologist from that of the producer by arguing that "whereas the musical or literary historian reconstructs the meaning of a text with references to its original context, the producer and conductor, by contrast address themselves to their contemporaries." (p. 96) Musicologists, I would add, can safely contemplate a multiplicity of interpretations at once from the safety of the blackboard, while a performer usually has to commit to a single interpretation per performance. Nattiez's conclusion is that as long as we do not change the "facts" of Wagner's text, any coherent plot is a possible interpretation: "every producer, every conductor proposes a possible Wagner—always assuming he or she does not abandon the text completely." (p. 97) Oddly enough, this conclusion skirts the question of whether or not we can evaluate the different interpretations. The judgment of fidelity, it seems, indicates only whether or not a particular interpretation is "possible," and if it does not alter the text, it is. Nattiez, of course, does provide a few hints as to what kinds of interpretations he prefers. Like most of us, he values plots or interpretations that connect more of the facts; both comprehensive and rational interpretation are especially praised. "They [the producer and the conductor] have to work on the libretto and score from beginning to end, without omitting a single line, after

which they have to propose a coherent plot.” (p. 96) There are, of course, other ways of evaluating interpretations. While most of us are suspicious of an interpretation which ignores what we thought was a major feature, we also tend to privilege interpretations which reveal something new. Ultimately we can (and do) value interpretations for any and all the reasons we value works; we judge both interpretations and works with respect to their beauty, patriotism, sexism, logical coherence, cleverness, humor, imagination, newness, comprehensiveness, and a host of other values. As long as an interpretation does “not abandon the text completely,” according to Nattiez, we cannot or, at least should not judge an interpretation with regard to its fidelity to the original context. Even if we accept this, we need not abandon the study of what we believe to be the original context; it is, after all, a new plot for *us*.

All of this sets the stage for the bulk of the book, wherein the performance of interpretation history of Wagner’s works is revealed. It begins with chapters on conducting and singing by Christopher Fifield and Desmond Shawe-Taylor respectively. Both chapters are short, but they provide a good introduction to the who’s who of Wagner conducting and singing. Shawe-Taylor has so many singers to mention that he is occasionally forced merely to list them with an oft-repeated epithet, but without a new examination of its validity. It is unavoidable in this situation, and Shawe-Taylor makes up for it by describing the changing expectations of Wagnerian singers, noting especially that “what Wagner required from his singers was pretty much what most 19th and 20th-century composers have usually demanded: beautiful tone, clear enunciation, a firm vocal line, and precision in musical detail.” (p. 15) Only later, as Shawe-Taylor points out, “was the dubious idea accepted of the Wagnerian singer as a distinct species.” (p. 22) Fifield presents more evidence in his survey of Wagnerian conductors through to Klemperer, but, perhaps, relies a bit too heavily on Schonberg’s *The Great Conductors*² for several primary source references. Most of his conclusions, however, are well-founded and he has reduced a tremendous body of research into a clear narrative. Fifield is absolutely right that “today conductors no longer consider Wagner’s theory and practice of melos,” i.e. tempo modification, and chapters on the recordings of Wagner conductors and a discography would have been useful additions. (As it is, few of the chapters carry their discussions to the present day.) Future research will build on this descriptive base.

An example of a more critical approach, and a companion to the singing chapter, is David Breckbill’s analysis of Wagner’s singers on record.

² Harold Schonberg, *The Great Conductors* (London, 1967).

Oddly, it does not follow Shawe-Taylor's chapter on Wagner's singers. While Breckbill agrees with the generic periodization and the usual assertions about the history of Wagner singing as presented by Shawe-Taylor and others, his detailed analysis of texts and recordings adds a great deal of substance to those claims. For example, while Breckbill agrees that the brittle enunciation associated with the Bayreuth style was crafted largely by Cosima Wagner, he hastens to point out that it "is far from a consistent trait among its representatives who made records—the stylistic diversity with which Wagner had to contend was a dependable feature of Bayreuth up to the First World War." (p. 165) It is a fine piece of scholarship and a persuasive model for those who would pursue this avenue of research.

In a book such as this there is inevitably some overlap: here, it is most noticeable in the two chapters on Wagner productions. Despite the titles, "Producing Wagner," and "Designing Wagner: Deeds of Music Made Visible," both Mike Ashman and Patrick Carnegy (respectively) have in fact contributed chapters on the history of Wagner productions. Both chapters cover the big names, Wagner himself, Swiss scenographer Adolphe Appia, Wieland Wagner, and Patrice Chéreau, but the examples each use and the highlights each emphasize are different enough that the overlap seems almost justified. Still, they do occasionally repeat each other. For example, both discuss Wieland Wagner's controversial 1956 *Meistersinger*:

Wieland's interpretations were quintessentially selective: aspects of a work were put into high focus to throw light on the whole. About the controversial 1956 *Meistersinger*—dubbed 'ohne [without] Nürnberg' because of the lack (in its first year) of any indication of the town in Act II or of the festival meadow in Act III—he wrote: 'I have centred the individual acts on their high point. I decided these were . . . the congregation's opening chorale . . . , the spirit of St. John's night . . . , the "blessed" Quintet and the great "Wach' auf" chorale. There should be neither too much nor too little "milieu" in the production . . . so that . . . above all the element of common humanity . . . can shine strongly through.' (Ashman p. 40)

Myth and psychology apart, Wieland always sought to cut through accumulated clichés and to revitalize the living heart of the opera. This was very evident in two productions of *Die Meistersinger*, the first (1956) rejecting specific evocation of sixteenth-century Nuremberg in favour of the bare minimum of visual reference—for example in Act II a huge floral sphere suspended above Sachs's head on a largely bare stage instead of the expected representation of a half-timbered street scene and elder tree. (Carnegy p. 64-65)

Carnegy is more descriptive of the productions themselves, but both emphasize the *Ring*. Neither has much to say about modern American productions. (Probably only an American whose first *Rings* were witnessed in San Francisco, Seattle, and the MET would notice the latter.) The photographs in these chapters are plentiful and well selected; both chapters are worth reading.

The absence of American performers and conductors is somewhat ameliorated by Joseph Horowitz's winning chapter on "Anton Seidl and America's Wagner Cult." In an essay that nicely mixes reception history and performance analysis, Horowitz carefully sifts through reviews and memoirs to describe both Gilded Age performances and the effect they had.

Finally, in the most imaginative and unexpected chapter in the book, "Taking the Waters at Bayreuth," Matthais Theodor Vogt provides an intriguing account of Wagner's plan to hold only a single purifying festival of art in Nature: one modeled on his own purifying experience of taking a cold-water cure in Albisbrunn in 1851. From Vogt's careful account of Wagner's growing interest in hydrotherapy to his description of the modern experience, it is a wide-ranging and persuasive story.

For once, a claim that a volume is addressed to "both specialists and the opera-going public" is warranted. While a Wagner performance "specialist" might hope for more detail, most musicologists and performers will find a wealth of information assembled here only. Let us hope that similar studies of other composers will follow.

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