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Review Article
In Search of After

ARMAN SCHWARTZ*

Mark Berry, *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from* Parsifal *to Nono*. Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014. 325pp.

Adrian Daub, *Tristan's Shadow: Sexuality and the Total Work of Art after Wagner*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 240pp.

Kevin C. Karnes, *A Kingdom Not of this World: Wagner, the Arts, and Utopian Visions in* Fin-de-Siècle *Vienna*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 272pp.

David Trippett, *Wagner's Melodies: Aesthetics and Materialism in German Musical Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 464pp.

It is always exciting when a philosopher publishes something important about music. And yet if the unveiling in 2010 of Alain Badiou's *Five Lessons on Wagner* was an event in an everyday sense of the word – something to be discussed at wine receptions, an excuse to splurge on faster shipping – it seems resolutely to have failed to become one in the thinker's own, truth-shattering, meaning.[1] Before long, musicologists had noted Badiou's reliance on an impoverished work concept, as well as the less savoury aspects of his politics.[2] Insiders explained his ideas to novitiates, and offered some gentle criticisms of their own.[3] In short, the discipline buzzed along as usual. The widespread handwringing that had accompanied, say, the English-language translation of Vladimir Jankélévitch's *La musique et l'ineffable* in 2003 was nowhere in evidence.[4]

'Are there any maîtres à penser left?' asks Hal Foster (not without melancholy) in a recent essay on Jacques Rancière's art criticism. 'Do we still want such figures?'[5] Whatever answer Badiou's own career might offer to the former question, *Five Lessons on Wagner* is nothing if not an emphatic 'yes' to the latter. 'Greatness is no

* Arman Schwartz, University of Birmingham; A.Schwartz.1@bham.ac.uk.

1 See Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London, 2010).

2 On work concepts, see Ellen Lockhart, 'Photo Opera: *La fanciulla del West* and the Staging Souvenir', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 23 (2011), 146–7; on politics, John Deathridge, 'Waiting for Wagner: Reluctant Musicology, Radical Philosophy, and the Rescue of a Fraught Legacy', *Opera Quarterly* 30 (2014), 267–85.

3 See Stephen Decatur Smith, 'Badiou and Wagner: From Fidelity to Prophecy', *Opera Quarterly* 29 (2013), 335–41, as well as the collection of position papers by Michael Gallope, Brian Kane, Naomi Waltham-Smith and Kenneth Reinhard that follow.

4 See Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, 2003).

5 Hal Foster, 'What's the Problem with Critical Art?', review of Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, *London Review of Books* 35/19 (10 October 2013), 14.

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longer merely part of our past; it is part of our future as well', writes Badiou in his fourth 'lesson'.[6]

> I would say that the position I'm staking out is that we are on the cusp of a revival of high art and it is here that Wagner should be invoked. My hypothesis is that high art has once again become part of our future – I have no idea how this is so, but I am absolutely sure of it.[7]

To be fair, Badiou's project is to theorise a 'high art *uncoupled from totality* ... greatness of a new type'. 'This could be expressed as heroism without heroizing', he clarifies, 'or greatness subtracted from the paradigm of war, or something similar'.[8] But it is the impression made by those forbidden words – 'high art', 'greatness', 'Wagner' – that lingers.

Badiou is not alone in these ambitions. Indeed, if an earlier generation of researchers had struggled to critique or qualify Wagner's power, we seem now on the cusp of a new moment, one more interested in offering redemption to the redeemer. Introducing a special issue of *Opera Quarterly* on the subject of *Wagner and the Left*, Matthew Wilson Smith adapts Elisabeth Kübler-Ross to suggest that scholarship on the composer, having passed through bouts of denial, anger and bargaining, as well as an obligatory period of New Musicological depression ('the painful, necessary reencounter with *Jewishness in Music* as essay, idea and principle of composition'), has arrived finally at 'Accepted Wagner', the 'fifth and last stage of reception'.[9] He recalls some of Wagner's more positive legacies: 'Wagner as inspiration for Bernard Shaw and Ralph Ellison, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Eisenstein, Ernst Bloch and Hans Mayer, Christoph Schlingensief and Ruth Berghaus, Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez, Edward Said and Fredric Jameson, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek'.[10] To similar effect, three of the books under review here emphasise Wagner's productive impact on later artists. Their titles – *After Wagner*, *Tristan's Shadow*, *A Kingdom Not of This World* – could easily be exchanged for one another, as could the blurbs on their back covers. Which monograph 'illuminat[es] the composers and artists whose utopian visions were inspired by Wagner'? Which 'shows why Wagner mattered – and continues to matter – enormously'?

The newfound interest in influence is striking. On the one hand, such a category might seem irremediably stuffy and patriarchal, an unlikely candidate for resurrection. On the other, few things might seem less urgently in need of demonstration than Wagner's impact. The fact that three recent books could largely fail to make a convincing case for it, could allow something as manifest as Wagner's influence to seem elusive and inscrutable, may thus be especially worthy of attention.

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Mark Berry's *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from* Parsifal *to Nono* is a case in point. As its title indicates, this is a wide-ranging book. Its chapters consider

[6] Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 83.
[7] Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 82–3.
[8] Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 83.
[9] Matthew Wilson Smith, 'A Note from the Guest Editor', *Opera Quarterly* 30/2–3 (2014), 170.
[10] Smith, 'A Note', 169.

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Parsifal, Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, Strauss's *Capriccio*, Dallapiccola's *Il prigioniero*, Nono's *Intolleranza 1960*, Henze's *Der langwierige Weg in die Wohnung der Natascha Ungeheuer* and Stefan Herheim's recent Bayreuth production of *Parsifal*. A final chapter touches on issues involved in the staging of *Iphigénie en Aulide*, *Don Giovanni* and *Lulu*, before settling on Nono's *Al gran sole carico d'amore*. It is, by any reckoning, an eccentric list. Many major operas that are routinely described as being 'after Wagner' do not figure in Berry's story, nor do some of the works that struggle most violently with the composer's impact. This is a history of Wagner's legacy without *Otello*, *Pelléas et Mélisande* or *Licht*, but also without *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* or Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*.

What, then, are Berry's criteria for selection? At the start of his introduction, he suggests that 'a combination of seriousness of purpose, and a broader, religious or quasi-religious, political or quasi-political, conception of art and the artwork may certainly be understood to form an integral part of this tradition "after Wagner"' (2). 'It may reasonably be claimed', he goes on to note, 'that all of my composers shared a concern – often willingly, but on occasion despite themselves – to bear witness, a concern inescapably born of the history, the politics, the thought, of their times' (8). In addition to seriousness and bearing witness, 'questioning' also seems to be an important value. 'A running theme will be that questioning is more important than answering, a theme that may certainly be tracked back to Wagner's dramas', Berry alerts his reader (6). After quoting Joseph Auner's observation that *Moses und Aron* 'poses questions and problems admitting of no solution', Berry exclaims, 'In that, it could hardly be a more Wagnerian work: it might even be considered *plus royaliste que le roi*' (85).

L'habit ne fait pas le moine, one is tempted to respond. None of the values that Berry ascribes to Wagner are exactly false, but they are hardly specific to the composer and his offspring. If what you seek is quasi-religious, quasi-political opera that bears the imprint of its historical moment and fails to come to tidy conclusions, might not you find *Nabucco* more satisfying than *Capriccio*? Or prefer *Dialogues des Carmélites* to Dallapiccola? What is more, by keeping the terms so broad, Berry overlooks some of the more complex lessons he might draw from his own material. Nono's final dramatic work, *Prometeo*, is in many regards a more 'Wagnerian' composition than either *Intolleranza* or *Al gran sole*: it places extreme demands on its audience as it unfolds slowly in the course of a single, nearly two-and-a-half-hour act; spectacle is avoided, vocal display suppressed, the orchestra rendered largely invisible; a specially constructed, quasi-sacral non-theatre must be built for each performance; central themes include travel, hero-redeemers and the fraught legacy of German Idealism. An essay on *Parsifal* and *Prometeo* could be fascinating, but it would require a consideration of some of the darker and less palatable aspects of both works.

Such an approach is certainly not Berry's. *After Wagner* suggests that the composer's legacy is largely one of quality and high standards. 'Wagner's strenuous conception of music drama as something beyond mere "opera" haunts the following pages', Berry writes (1). 'More importantly, it haunts the theory and practice of those composers and, in many respects, performers to be discussed' (1). It is tempting to

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put some pressure on that strange phrase 'mere "opera"', but it might be equally instructive to ask what is at stake, for Berry, in privileging the relatively anodyne term 'music drama' over the more fraught '*Gesamtkunstwerk*'. In his insightful history of the latter concept, Matthew Wilson Smith tracks Wagner's influence even further afield than Berry, devoting chapters to *Bauhaus* and Leni Riefenstahl, Walt Disney, Andy Warhol and Bill Gates.[11] In Smith's telling, though, 'The history of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is, to a large degree, the history of unreconciled dialectical struggles performed under the sign of aesthetic totality.'[12] It is difficult to imagine Berry ever sounding this ambivalent. For him, *Gesamtkunstwerk* functions as a term of value. *Moses und Aron* is 'definitely an opera, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* even, not the concert-work originally conceived' (77). In their collaborations, the stage director Stefan Herheim and the conductor Daniele Gatti exhibit 'a more fruitful and indeed more correct understanding of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* than if one treated it as mere agglomeration … Greater emphasis upon the staging heightened rather than lessened the effect of the orchestra, and so on' (227–8).

In these last sentences, Berry may begin to sound more like a music critic than a disinterested historian. There is nothing wrong with advocacy: Berry's discussion of Herheim's *Parsifal* is the most extended treatment available of a production that has already achieved cult status, and who could complain if someone wants to stand up for poor *Natascha Ungeheuer*? A bit more distance, though, might have saved Berry from replicating many of the biases and blind spots of his subject. I chuckled at the phrase 'like men (people) in general' (3), but was less amused by the attempt to blame Cosima Wagner for some of her husband's worst formal and political miscalculations.[13] Many of the book's strangest pages are devoted to establishing the essential German-ness (and *ipso facto* value) of Berry's pantheon.

> Much of Nono's early success – and, indeed, much of his later success – came courtesy of German musical life. Almost all of Nono's early works were premiered in Germany, seven at the Darmstadt International Summer School for New Music. Italy made him wait until 1961 for the Venice Biennale premiere of *Intolleranza 1960*. Furthermore, that premiere notwithstanding, it is noteworthy that the only recording of *Intolleranza* vaguely available at the time of writing, albeit a recording deleted from the catalogue, comes from a Stuttgart production – in German.
>
> (150)

Even Henze needs to be quoted as saying, 'German music, it's difficult to match isn't it? It's so rich and so deep and has inspired so many adventures' (203). 'If he had not yet made peace with German politics', Berry glosses, 'then the richness of his engagement with German music, and more broadly German history and culture, would never be in doubt' (203). Strange words from an author who, discussing the nominally anti-Fascist opera *Il prigioniero*, asks why Dallapiccola might have

[11] See Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York, 2007).
[12] Smith, *Total Work of Art*, 3.
[13] 'Is Strauss perpetrating all of the time what Wagner, advised by Cosima, might have been doing at the end of *Die Meistersinger*, deflecting attention away from devastation by engaging us in a paean to holy German art?' (104).

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suppressed the identifiably Jewish name of his protagonist, only to conclude, 'Sometimes a desire for greater universality is simply that' (134).

Such strictures alas risk overstating the book's coherence. Although the chapters on *Parsifal* and *Capriccio* present original interpretations of their texts, others read more like programme notes; they narrate composers' biographies and point out key moments in their scores, and generally seem intended as guides to unfamiliar works. The chapter on Herheim, meanwhile, largely consists of three of what Berry somewhat misleadingly terms 'diary reports' – aka, posts on his blog.[14] Along the way, Berry critiques a performance of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony that he heard Esa-Pekka Salonen conduct in 2012, considers the effects of consuming pornography via DVD and defends some notorious comments made by Donald Rumsfeld. Even short sentences collapse under the weight of the Great Tradition. ('Like Christ, Siegfried heralds "freedom", as "a new religion, the religion of our time", to quote Heine, an important influence upon Wagner' (36).) Given Berry's evident identification with his *Meister*, it is tempting to read behind the following claim a certain *profession du foi*: 'Like many writers, Wagner did not know precisely what he would say when he first put pen to paper; and when he did, he would often change his mind' (29).

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After the raging generalities of Berry's study, Kevin C. Karnes's *A Kingdom Not of This World: Wagner, the Arts, and Utopian Visions in* Fin-de-Siècle *Vienna* seems an oasis of restraint. Although Karnes (unlike Berry) is as interested in fine art and architecture as he is in music, he wisely limits his focus to a single city during a clearly demarcated span of time. What is more, he has a specific critical intervention to propose. Noting that 'recent studies of Wagner's legacy have been written by scholars working within what might seem to be nearly every field of humanistic inquiry *except* for musicology' (here he is thinking of books such as Smith's *The Total Work of Art* and Juliet Koss's *Modernism after Wagner*), Karnes offers 'a consideration of Wagner's music, and of the ways in which the experience of that music helped give shape, direction, and inspiration, and crucial historical grounding to other artists' creative projects in whichever media they worked' (1).

Such precision is welcome, as are music examples that have more than totemic status. Karnes persuasively argues (against authors such as Carl Schorske) for the presence of a strong utopian strain in Viennese modernism. He does so via a series of linked case studies that focus first on visual artists (prominently, Max Klinger and Gustav Klimt) and then on composers (the common ground he establishes between Mahler's 'late' *Das Lied von der Erde* and Schoenberg's 'early' *Gurrelieder* is particularly suggestive). Along the way, he proposes new perspectives on many lights of the era: Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Maeterlinck and Ibsen. Although the 'utopian visions' explored in *A Kingdom Not of This World* might have taken on a different hue when considered against the actual potential for revolutionary social change at the *fin-de-siècle*, Karnes proves an able guide to bourgeois longing.

[14] See boulezian.blogspot.co.uk.

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And yet Karnes's stated project, establishing in concrete detail the influence of Wagner's music on specific individuals, proves no easy thing. A chapter exploring Wagner's impact on the famous *Beethoven Frieze* that Klimt painted for Klinger's 1901 Secessionist exhibition is indicative. 'There is neither documentary nor anecdotal evidence to suggest that Klimt read Wagner's *Beethoven*', Karnes notes. 'We are certain, however, that Klimt knew and pondered a musical work that reflects on the same theories of mind and creativity that Wagner laid out in that centennial essay: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*' (105). Klimt's clear familiarity with *Die Meistersinger* seems a reasonable enough starting point for a discussion of influence – but, then again, how certain are we?

> Under the direction of Gustav Mahler, Wagner's *Meistersinger* was among the works most frequently performed at the Vienna Court Opera, having been programmed eighty-two times by Mahler between 1897 and 1907. We do not know if Klimt attended any of these performances. But ever since Mahler's arrival in the city, he and Klimt had traveled in overlapping social circles, and Klimt certainly would have known of Mahler's widely trumpeted critical success with one of the conductor's signature works. (105)

Firm evidence has given way to a series of conjectures, and soon things begin to seem scarcely more secure than Klingsor's castle. Although we do not know if Klimt ever heard Mahler conduct *Die Meistersinger*, he probably heard about it, and, in any case, 'Sometime around 1900, Bertha Zuckerkandl recorded a conversation during which Klimt reportedly referred to his Vienna critics as "Beckmesser und Kompagnie"' (106). But the fact that Klimt may once have spoken the name of one of Wagner's best-known characters is evidence of very little – certainly not that he would have imbibed a specific 'theory of mind and creativity' from a work as long and baffling as *Die Meistersinger*.

In the end, these biographical speculations are placed in service of a very simple claim: 'The duality inherent in Wagner's view of creativity – the conviction that artistic visions originate within the depths of the unconscious mind, paired with a belief that the substance of those visions resonates with the experience of all individuals – found powerful expression in Klimt's contribution to the Klinger-Beethoven exhibition' (114). Not unlike Berry, then, Karnes defines the content of Wagner's message in terms so general that it can be heard anywhere. Another chapter considers Max Klinger's *Brahmsphantasie* – a lavishly illustrated edition of six of the composer's songs – as a response to (and critique of) the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. True, Klinger does combine image, music and text, but he does so within the covers of a small luxury item intended for domestic consumption. 'We might succeed in "reuniting" the disparate arts on the printed page or in the vestibule of a suburban Berlin home – or, for that matter in the Secession's exhibition hall, or on the operatic stage of Bayreuth', writes Karnes, paraphrasing Klinger's project (55–6). But these spaces are not equivalent. If the *Brahmsphantasie* is, indeed, a critique of Wagner, its argument does not only take place through the elaborate counterpoint of media that interests Karnes but also through a baser gesture, offering up the splendours of Bayreuth for the salons of *Beckmesser und Kompagnie*.

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Tristan's Shadow by Adrian Daub opens with what, in this context, may seem an alarming claim. 'Wagner's aesthetics had an afterlife independent of what his actual operas actually accomplished', Daub writes. 'After Wagner the cosmic unity, the restoration of Greek totality, the possible reversion of the mechanistic state into an organic one, haunted composers not because Wagner had somehow realised them (we would know if he had); it haunted them as a possibility, as a terrifyingly wide and ambitious frame of reference' (18). This proposal steers clear of the hoariness of Berry's 'strenuous conception of music drama', and it also saves us from worrying about who heard what during which performance. It suggests that Wagner's shadow was, like all shadows, a projection, and one with the potential to destroy.

For Daub, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was, as Wagner conceived it, both an aesthetic and an erotic project. Just as the individual arts longed to shed their arbitrary separation and restore a lost totality, so too did the members of an idealised sexual union. This is hardly news, but it does have hitherto unrealised implications for reception. As Daub states his central thesis, German composers after Wagner 'address the entwinement of sexual relationship and operatic form, but they understand this entwinement as a problem … rather than an asset. The conjunction of sex and form they inherit from Wagner allows them to interrogate form through sex' (26). In other words, by exploring narrative alternatives to the *Tristan und Isolde* archetype – satisfying but unremarkable marriages, affairs that quickly sour – composers were also experimenting with new medial configurations, alternative *ménages* of staging, poetry, and music.

This thesis offers a compelling way to frame the sheer variety of (now largely forgotten) operas created in Germany between *Parsifal* and the Nazis' rise. In 1934, Paul Bekker (who often seems one of Daub's guiding lights) noted that Germany was the only nation that seemed to have witnessed an *increase* in operatic creativity in the early twentieth century, describing 'an almost convulsive eruption, which in its precipitancy reveals no community of spiritual impulse behind its varied manifestations – in fact hardly permits of any organised approach to its consideration'.[15] Bekker's claim gives the lie to simplistic Oedipal narratives about Wagner's legacy, but it also leaves space for a more 'organised approach', and this is what Daub's best chapters provide. A sudden vogue for Oscar Wilde's cruel dwarf story *The Birthday of the Infanta* (adapted by both Franz Schreker and Alexander von Zemlinsky) appears not just as another symptom of *fin-de-siècle* decadence, but rather an attempt to think through the ways in which the *Gesamtkunstwerk* denies and represses ugliness. The crushingly elaborate dynastic plots favoured by Siegfried Wagner (the inept, gay heir to his father's legacy) take on a dignity that has rarely accrued to them. Similarly, Eugen d'Albert's eternal optimism in matters of the heart (he was married six times) acquires new meaning when connected to his unwillingness to commit to a single librettist or operatic style. In contrast to Wagner's oppressively totalising works, with their self-authored libretti, 'Opera, like marriage, is irreducibly dual in d'Albert' (130). Daub's judgement on the composer of *Tiefland* could serve as the epigraph to many

[15] Paul Bekker, *The Changing Opera*, trans. Arthur Mendel (London, 1935), 257.

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of his chapters: 'When seen through an erotic lens, d'Albert's eclecticism loses its air of arbitrariness; rather it represents a careful if fitful and ultimately abortive, attempt to think through the legacy of Wagner's sexual metaphysics while taking the hereditary problem of opera seriously' (150).

Unique among the authors under review here, Daub is mindful of the fact that opera is something that first happens in a theatre. He explores insightfully how Wagner and Schreker staged their spectators; he knows (as they did) that you can deflate even the most strenuous conception of music drama by imagining a specific Tristan in bed with a specific Irish bride. He has produced, you might say, a rare comic take on Wagner reception – and it thus makes sense that he is largely concerned with composers one might dismiss as second rate. (Richard Strauss does get a chapter, but it is limited to his first opera, *Guntram*. It is unclear why other, seemingly relevant figures – Pfitzner, Busoni, Max von Schillings – did not make the cut.) At the same time, Daub's focus on minor (in the conventional but also perhaps the Deleuzo-Guattarian sense) figures made me wonder about the larger stakes of his argument. If the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was, as Daub suggests, understood in powerfully erotic terms, why did that understanding not make its impact felt on *Elektra* or *Wozzeck*, *Jonny spielt auf* or *Die Dreigroschenoper*? And why, as Daub states explicitly, was such knowledge limited exclusively to Germany? It is possible, of course, that only insecure German composers, those who struggled and failed to find a voice under the shadow of Bayreuth, were in a position to realise the dirty secret of Wagner's legacy, but such a claim is never made. It might have occasioned a more detailed discussion of the dynamics of German nation building.

Readers unfamiliar with *Der singende Teufel*, *Rainulf und Adelasia* or *Tragaldabas, der geborgte Ehemann* may find themselves wondering what such works sounded like. It also seems fair to ask what a study of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a study, more specifically, of the relationship between different media within the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – misses by paying so little attention to an opera's music. Too often Daub relies on other scholars for even basic information about a score, and his attempts at analysis (a brief melody is described as 'a quartet of triplets, modulating down in half steps') are maladroit (182).[16] In the end, *Tristan's Shadow* leaves one anxious to extend its arguments, and not only in the direction of musical detail. I suspect that Daub could have had a field day with *Von Heute auf Morgen*, the twelve-tone comedy authored by Arnold and Gertrud Schoenberg. I also found myself wondering about the alternately broken-down and distended families that structure those Maeterlinck plays turned into operas (missing parents, too many wives), as well as about the fascination that homosocial communities held for modernist composers (*Suor Angelica*, *Sancta*

[16] It should also be said that *Tristan's Shadow* suffers from remarkably poor copy editing. '*Tragaldalbas*' and '*Der geborgte Ehemann*' are given separate index entries. The claim, 'As chapter 6 showed, operatic phantasmagoria depended on a particular operatic erotics', surely refers to chapter 4 ('Erotic Acoustics') (190). Sentences at times seem to be missing words, leaving one to puzzle over proposals like, 'But, in keeping with his divine attribute of fire, Loge is accurate messaging that can take place in signification (the subject of hermeneutics), but instead everything to do with the deception and distortion that can plague the signifying process' (170).

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Susanna, *The Fiery Angel*), as if the best defence against the knights of Montsalvat was a group of horny nuns.

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Would it be possible to write a study of Wagner that made no mention of his influence? A book, more radically, that attempted to undermine if not refute the idea that he could have had a legacy at all? It seems unlikely that David Trippett began work on *Wagner's Melodies* with these questions in mind. Nonetheless, the difference between his approach and that of the other works under review is striking. *Wagner's Melodies* has already garnered an extraordinary amount of recognition: the American Musicological Society's Lewis Lockwood Prize, the University of Oxford's Donald Tovey Memorial Prize, a Philip Leverhulme Prize, inclusion on Alex Ross's year's best list. I worry, though, that the bright light of acclaim may detract attention away from a less-noted circumstance: that this is an extraordinarily strange book.

Put blandly, *Wagner's Melodies* is an attempt to historicise Wagner's theory and practice of the art of melody. To do this, Trippett delves deep into contexts including pedagogy and copyright law, as well as the discourses of philosophy, philology and science. He devotes more attention than is usual to Wagner's *Lehrjahre*, and also to his interactions with performers; a rich, revisionist account of the composer's epochal relationship with the soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient is one of the book's highlights. Trippett is not unduly interested in interpretation, but does at times use his archival findings to illuminate passages in *Lohengrin*, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Meistersinger*. Meanwhile, the birth pangs of the German nation throb ominously in the background.

In all this, *Wagner's Melodies* may seem exemplary – modest, even – and of a piece with other recent materialist histories of Romantic music.[17] Trippett's distinctiveness, however, is partially an effect of style. Chapters tend to begin with pithy formulations ('Wagner must have been a good listener' (198), '*Oper und Drama* is a crash site' (330)), but as they slowly accrue information in their sixty to eighty pages, language too gains weight. An essay that opens with the innocent-seeming proposal 'Goethe said it first' (69), soon announces that, 'Devices such as the psychograph, in short, can be read as materializing a conception of automatic creation through a concealed process of ideation that remained mechanic-systematic: this was precisely the task of melodic theory during the nineteenth century' (91). Ten pages later, Trippett steps back to clarify his argument:

> Let me summarize the matrix of *Genie-Gedanke* laid out so far in relation to melodic theory: simulacra of musical invention such as the melograph – propped up during *Vormärz* aesthetics by the *Mozartbild* – embodied an inventive process that obviated inhibiting consciousness by seemingly materializing processes of mechanical associationism theorized within 1830s psychology.
>
> (101)

It would be possible, of course, to dismiss such sentences as so much bad writing, but it may be that the steady accumulation of bizarre technologies, obscure

[17] See James Q. Davies, *Romantic Anatomies of Performance* (Berkeley, 2014); and Emily I. Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge, 2013).

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philosophical concepts and exotic German compound nouns is very much to Trippett's point. The 'Springtime for Kittler' tone of *Wagner's Melodies* certainly seems related to its recherché illustrations ('Berlioz's two-page entry in the Album of Marie von Sayn-Wittgenstien, entitled *Valse chanté par le vent dans les cheminées d'un de mes châteaux en Espagne*', 'Johannes Müller's illustration of how a human cadaver can be manipulated to produce artificial tones') and frequently extravagant digressions.

Discussing the ideas for a never-finished theatrical work named *Percunos* that Wagner sketched on the back of the manuscript copy of his overture on *Rule Britannia*, Trippett asks one of several pertinent questions: 'So who was Wagner's *Percunos*?'

> *Percunis* is the Old Prussian name for thunder (Latvian: *Pērkons*; Lithuanian: *Perkūnas*), as recorded in the Elbing glossary (a Middle Low German glossary which contains some 802 Old Prussian words; dated *ca.* 1300). This mythical Percunos, the pagan god of thunder, would later be refashioned as Donner in *Das Rheingold*, and in his *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (1848), the eminent philologist Jacob Grimm would characterise the three deities Wagner adduces (the three 'chief divinities' of the ancient Prussians or *Pruzzi* according to James Bell's 1832 account) as archetypal powers within different pre-Christian cultures: military, creative, and thunderous (earth fertilizing) power, respectively. (156)

Although this anecdote does, arguably, offer new information about the *Ring*, other anecdotes do not. Confronted with the seemingly unremarkable fact that Romantic writers associated the nation of Italy with beautiful women, Trippett observes, 'It was of course an age-old association, inscribed in the palindrome *Roma tibi subito motibus ibit Amor* … which appeared fragmentarily as graffiti during the second century AD in such disparate places as Ostian and Aquincum, while the play on Roma-Amor exists even on coins of the Constantine period' (190).

One reviewer may have had passages like this in mind when she noted that 'Wagner sometimes seems to recede in Trippett's discussions'.[18] This both is, and is not the case. On the one hand, the magic name of Wagner is heard clearly even in its absence; it is, after all, the only reason that we sit patiently through re-enactments of forgotten episodes in the history of music theory, the *point de caption* that pins Trippett's floating anecdotes together, that carrot that keeps the reader jogging, promising a hermeneutic payoff forever out of reach. On the other hand, it often seems that a desire to make Wagner recede – to bury him deep, deep beneath the mud of historical particularity – is precisely what motivates Trippett's excesses. It is in many regards a laudable desire, and one with a distinguished lineage, extending at least as far back as Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Le silence déjà funèbre d'une moire'.

My favourite chapter of *Wagner's Melodies* describes the composer's attempt, in 1839, to write a substitution aria for Bellini's *Norma*. (It was offered to, and rejected by the great bass Luigi Lablache; Wagner never heard the piece performed.) In the course of a close (to put it mildly) reading of Wagner's 'most slavish and yet paradoxically his most self-consciously original composition' (181), we learn about a wide variety of topics, some predictable (Germany versus Italy) some unexpected

[18] Kirsten Paige, in *Notes: Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 70 (2014), 708.

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(an alarming anticipation of *Tristan und Isolde*). We also get a vivid, humane portrait of a nervous, vain, not obviously talented composer. It remains unclear how this man would grow up to strike terror in the hearts of whole nations, or where he would learn to write the music that makes such an enormous physical impact on many of us still. This is a fault, especially for those who, like Badiou, long for prophets that may help us step outside of time. Sceptics, though, should welcome any chink in the armature. It shows few other signs of giving way.

ARMAN SCHWARTZ is a research fellow at the University of Birmingham. He recently guest-edited 'Opera and the Avant-Garde', a special issue of *Opera Quarterly*, on whose editorial board he serves. Forthcoming publications include his first monograph, *Puccini's Soundscapes: Realism and Modernity in Italian Opera* (Leo S. Olschki), as well as the essay collection *Puccini and His World* (Princeton University Press), which he co-edited with Emanuele Senici.

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