

Wagner for the concert hall - Music or Drama?

In the music there is a shimmering and swelling, which finally blazes forth in a proud, even harsh, assertion of triumphal power. At the end of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, the Gods are finally, after a great deal of travail (and some downright haggling!), crossing the rainbow bridge into their citadel Valhalla.

Anyone sitting in the concert hall listening to this as purely an orchestral extract could be forgiven for thinking of this as music of unalloyed 'rubbing-the-loser's-nose-in-it' victory. They may even hate themselves for feeling excited, associating Wagner's music with images of Nuremberg Rallies and sheer unconscionable arrogance!

But the thing is, the 'Entry of the Gods into Valhalla' can only have this meaning when you've paid no attention to the storyline; when you've ignored the dramatic context. Because when you finally hear this passage in the theatre, or at least as part of the opera (or 'music drama', as Wagner called these works), you realise that the gods are entering a kingdom that has been doomed; that Wotan and Fricka and Donner *et al* are blind, as Loge says, 'to the end towards which they are heading'. It is the most spectacular example of irony in the history of... well, what - Music or Drama?

The question is: Do we do justice to Wagner in the concert hall? Do we miss out on essential elements of his greatness (getting only a portion of the full effect?) when we savour his achievement only as music?

Portion? hardly! not when you see the size of a Wagnerian orchestra assembled on the concert-hall platform. But does Wagner need words? Does Wagnerian opera deserve to be regarded as drama?

Says Newcastle Uni lecturer, Michael Ewans, in his 1982 book *Wagner and Aeschylus*,

Wagner insisted in all his theoretical writings (from *Opera and Drama* to his 1878 essay 'On the Application of Music to Drama') that in his theatre works, by contrast with traditional operatic practice, the music would be devoted exclusively to illuminating the action; and in order to proclaim this ideal clearly he... described the *Ring*... as a 'stage festival play', and... *Tristan und Isolde* a '*Handlung*', literally translating the Greek word *drama* (action)

And jazz vibraphonist John Sangster once said of Wagnerian opera, no doubt weighing up the totality of Wagner's achievement, 'You know - it's not as bad as it sounds.'

But seriously, is this really true - that Wagner created a genuine hybrid where the drama is just as important as the music?

Early in his career Wagner admired *bel canto* opera – the opera dominated by vocal display - of composers such as Vincenzo Bellini and Gioacchino Rossini. His early work *Das Liebesverbot* (The Love Ban, 1836), was modelled on the work of Bellini and the

French composer, Auber. There is certainly a deeper motivation lurking behind the later operas *The Flying Dutchman* (1843) and *Tannhäuser* (1845), and then, in the theoretical text *Opera and Drama* (1851), Wagner established and codified techniques for rendering music suitable for underscoring the drama - his famous theory of the *leitmotif*, for example, a musical theme associated with a particular person, thing or concept, which is musically transformed as that person, thing or concept proceeds through the plot, musically assisting audience members through the various developments in the progress of the drama. In *Opera and Drama* Wagner also explains how modulation (the changing of keys) - the musical device that powered the 18th century symphony and sonata - could be used to express the changing shades of meaning and emotion in a sung line.

There's a fantastic example in Act II of *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), the second opera in Wagner's magnum opus, the *Ring* cycle.

Brünnhilde has come to tell Siegmund that he is to die in the duel with Hunding the next day. It's a grim prospect, but Siegmund is not too dejected as long as there's a chance of finding his beloved in eternity. 'Will Siegmund find Sieglinde there?' he asks, as his music modulates up a fourth, expressing his rising anticipation. 'Erdenluft muss sie noch athmen; Sieglinde sieht Siegmund dort nicht,' replies Brünnhilde. In other words, flatly 'no', as the music cadences on a chord a semitone lower than our ears expect, underscoring the disappointing message.

'But Wagner moved away from the ideal balance he achieved between words and music in *The Valkyrie*!' cry those who argue that Wagner's career proves the ultimate futility of marrying music with drama.

Their argument goes: Under the influence of the philosophers, first Ludwig Feuerbach and then Arthur Schopenhauer, (who believed that music was the highest of all arts), Wagner quietly dropped the theories of *Opera and Drama*. By the time of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* (the third and fourth instalments of the *Ring*), and the non-*Ring* opera *Tristan and Isolde*, he'd reverted to more standard operatic procedures, to set numbers, passages primarily of musical interest. In *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), as one commentator remarks, the words are little more than 'sonant carriers' of the music.

What this point of view fails to take into account, however, is the continuing development of Wagner's *musical-dramatic* ideas through the 1860s and 70s in such essays as *Beethoven* (1870) and *The Destiny of Opera* (1871). In these, as Jack M. Stein argues in *Wagner and the Synthesis of the Arts*, Wagner gradually expounded a musical-dramatic theory in which music and *visual action* were the two complementary elements, as you can see in the long sequences of pantomime in *The Mastersingers*. This doesn't disprove the validity of Wagner's ambitions: it proves that Wagner was too good a man of the theatre to persist in thinking that words alone are what an audience takes in during performance (a pity modern librettists don't take more notice!)

In fact, in *Götterdämmerung*, the last of the *Ring* operas, the one which provides most of the extractable concert hall items, Wagner's score actually reflects bigger dramatic

elements: true, there is little word-painting, but the music amplifies and directs the onstage *events*, and reflects, at the level of detail, what are truly the basic units of drama, not the words but the psychological beats. Think of the basic shifts underlying Brünnhilde's closing monologue 'Starke Scheite':

Pile up the logs on which the noble body of the hero shall be burned./
Like pure sunlight his radiance beams on me, the true man who cheated his wife but...
was true to his friend; who never more truly swore an oath/
And yet betrayed all his oaths/
Do you know how it happened? See majestic god how you involved him in the curse
which undid you./
I know all things now./
You ravens, I'll send you home with your portents./
Rest now, you god./
(She signals to the soldiers to carry Siegfried's body to the pyre.)/

and also how the last moments convey the whole sweep of the closing stage pictures:

With a single bound she urges her horse into the blazing pyre. The fire flares up and seems to engulf the entire building. The glow eventually subsides leaving a pall which settles on the horizon like a cloud. The Rhine rises up in flood bearing the three Rhinemaidens. Hagen throws aside his spear and rushes forward: 'Get back from the ring,' but the Rhinemaidens twine their arms around him and drag him into the depths of the waters, emerging jubilantly with the ring. A red glow pierces the horizon's cloudbank. From the ruins of the fallen hall, the men and women see the gods sitting in Valhalla, consumed by flame.

So is it futile to listen to Wagner in concert? Are the concert extracts justifiably known as 'bleeding chunks'? Is listening to this as a musical experience doing it justice?

Well, the answer to the last is yes. Because Wagner was a *music-dramatist*. He worked *in* music. *Siegfried* and *Mastersinger* and *Parsifal* and *Walküre*, etc... contain so much that is worth hearing. And the dramatic impulse which shaped such powerful theatrical events also allowed him to find new musical shapes. While he may have described his later operas, such as *Tristan and Isolde*, as 'acts of music made visible', he also knew that the dramatic impulse allowed him to create radically new musical structures; that combining his music with the stage action freed it from the arbitrary forms of Absolute music. And we wouldn't get to focus on that if we were being engulfed by spectacle in the theatre.

But, secretly, how many of us, grateful for the surtitles and program notes, are recreating the visuals in our heads?

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