

## Introduction

Can we ever have a sensible conversation about opera? The question is still present in Patrick Carnegy's engaging new book, which I am honoured to introduce here. The book is not quite what it seems to be at first sight. Under its beautiful surface are signs of turmoil in the opera world in general and among Wagner's interpreters in particular, especially the attempts of Wieland Wagner, Joachim Herz, Patrice Chéreau and Hans-Jürgen Syberberg to reinterpret him after Hitler. Wagner created many of these turbulences himself, including issues about funding models and a sophisticated idea of performance that demanded controversial and constant reinvention, not just of his own works, but of beloved composers and operas as well. (His re-orchestrations of Beethoven and radical reworking of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* for which he even changed the ending, are two good examples.) Now we have seven successful Amazon television series in 40 chapters about the trials and tribulations of classical music in New York collectively called *Mozart in the Jungle*, I don't see why there shouldn't be a *Wagner in the Jungle* to follow. A clip from Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* might be a good start: those two glasses of water with barely noticeable ripples for instance that grow ominously wider as the footfall of a big beast makes itself felt. In this book too there is a subtle crescendo of very real crises, aesthetic and political, as we progress.

Since the 1960s Patrick Carnegy has been a keen observer in the jungle. A music critic for *The Times* and *The Observer*, assistant editor at *The Times Literary Supplement*, music-books editor at Faber & Faber where he published writings by Mahler, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, a key position in the managerial framework of the Royal Opera House, and then fifteen years as *The Spectator's* Stratford-upon-Avon drama critic, during which he wrote some 120 shrewdly observed reviews about Shakespeare performance. If jungles had ringside seats as they do in cinemas, I imagine that Patrick must have always been sitting in the very front row.

Reading his pioneer work on Wagner production – a big gap in theatre history until he published his masterpiece *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (2006) after years of painstaking research – there is a sense that Patrick was there at performances in the past as well. Reporting on the immediate sense of vastly different takes on Wagner's stage works wherever they took place, the way they looked, how singers moved, directors directed, the smell of the times that influenced the way they were judged, he takes us

through a veritable cornucopia of detail about Wagner in action. We witness Wagner doing the things he liked best, composing works for the stage, directing, and in his younger years conducting them. And we get very close to others in history reinterpreting them for the theatre, so close in fact that we almost feel the grease paint and the impact of the *mise-en-scène*. Wagner wrote to Ludwig II just before the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865 that his work is 'only complete when as drama it fully and physically comes to life in front of us and speaks directly to our hearts and senses'. It was a condition for all his works, for all their future interpreters, and for all who wanted to write about them. As Patrick was one of the first to show at length, the staging of a Wagner work is crucial and anyone who would claim to have fully grasped Wagner's achievement cannot afford to ignore it.

About *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, Pierre Boulez said at the time of its appearance that he truly believed it to be 'one of the best documented publications in all the recent literature on Wagner'. It still is. With even richer documentation, a third of it this time in colour, this new book ventures into broader ramifications of Wagner's legacy, including a detailed account of mind-blowing productions like *Tristan und Isolde* in 1903 Vienna conducted by Mahler with Alfred Roller as scenic director. It was a landmark in theatre history, rightly seen here as the moment when producers of opera not only broke decisively with the absurd literalism and only-according-to-the-master's-voice authoritarianism of Bayreuth, but also finally established the idea that producers are perfectly within their rights radically to reconceive works of art against the grain of what their creators originally wanted – or rather what some members of audiences think they wanted – much as Wagner himself did with Beethoven and Gluck. Influenced by the Vienna Secession at the turn of the century, 'director's theatre' (*Regietheater*) was essentially born. And so was the controversy that has accompanied it ever since.

The book opens with a previously unpublished essay on the absorption of Shakespeare into Wagner's own ideas about drama. Again, it is a pioneering study. A larger historical and critical question that has never been adequately answered convincingly is how Shakespeare was injected creatively into the cultural bloodstream of German-speaking theatre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. German-speaking literary figures had a tendency to see Shakespeare as one of their own, frequently praising August Wilhelm Schlegel's famous translations (by the time we get to the nineteenth century when they were augmented by translations by Wolf Baudissin and Dorothea and Ludwig Tieck) as superior to the original. The haughty judgement obviously begs the question of how well the distinguished German-speaking champions of the English Bard, including Wagner, understood the plays if they referred to them, as they often did with only half-joking smiles, in their 'English version', in contrast to what was felt to be the true home they had found in the German language. Perhaps in retaliation English-speaking critics have tended to describe Shakespeare's influence on Wagner as minor. Here in Patrick's foray into the subject we realize just how wide of the mark that is. Simply put, Wagner would not have spent as much time as he did from his youth through middle age to his last years reading, discussing, writing about Shakespeare and attending performances of the plays if all of that had not been of central importance to his art. Taking major stretches of the *Ring* as just one instance, the pathways of suffering and undaunted

representations of violence, not to mention the ethical mayhem strewn over the cycle's tragic journey, owe a great deal to Shakespeare's example.

The next five chapters are devoted to productions over a span of a hundred years from the premiere of the *Ring* in 1876, under Wagner's own direction, to the centennial production by Patrice Chéreau conducted by Pierre Boulez. As is well known, the latter has been greeted in some circles with storms of abuse. For many Wagner enthusiasts and philosophers passionately interested in Wagner, the ideas of Chéreau and Boulez were a centennial bridge too far. The complainers felt cheated because the two pesky Frenchman had robbed the *Ring* of its totalizing mythology in full dress, so to speak, and its supposed romantic inheritance, despite Wagner's insistence time and again that with the *Ring* he had made a decisive break with romanticism. This so-called French *Ring* was no longer a mystifying exercise in comforting profundities about human life seen through the gauze of remote myth or lazy symbolism, but a tour de force of intense, emotionally involved acting (clichéd operatic gestures were banned) and a provocative mixture of mythic and modern imagery in the director's imagination that brought audiences into closer touch with violence, remorse and suicidal suffering. Even its playful elements were a painful counterpoint to the overall melancholy of the story. It felt uncomfortably close to the world we live in ('life as it really is', as Wagner said when talking in private about his amazing conception), and probably for this simple reason, despite the protests of a minority, it eventually met with great success. Patrick is refreshingly frank about his own mixed feelings about the centennial *Ring*. Apart from the tiny fistful of philosophers, however, more significant in the context of the documentary wealth of his research is the large brigade of serious Wagner watchers who clamoured for a return to Wagner's original intentions. Little did they know then, though they will if they read this book, just how fragmentary the historical record actually is. Patrick relishes the recent discovery of the diaries of Alfred Pringsheim, a noted professor of mathematics who recorded some fascinating critical observations while visiting the rehearsals and performances of the 1876 Bayreuth Festival, but regrets that a third of them are lost. We have no photographs of what the staging looked like (those of the singers were done in photographers' studios) and there is no guarantee that Josef Hoffmann's paintings of his scenic designs commissioned by Wagner looked like the scenery that was eventually built. Everywhere the records of what happened in the making and performance of the production are frustratingly incomplete.

A large part of this book is devoted to highly readable reviews of books about a 'quartet' of conductors: Toscanini, Klemperer, Karajan, Solti. Patrick casts his critical eye over these figures and the attempts of their biographers to capture – not always with total success – their extraordinary careers. The implicit link is that they all flourished in the tradition of the conductor-as-interpreter (as opposed to the mere time-beater) that emerged from the nineteenth century into the twentieth with the massive authority of Wagner behind it. Wagner was not the only one to establish the role of conductors as high-octane celebrities who match – even sometimes out-match – the genius of the composers whose works they bring back to life. But in the 1830s and early 1840s as an ambitious twenty-something composer and Musikdirektor striving for international recognition, he was already fashioning the idea of himself in concerts and opera houses as the visible conduit of great music (Beethoven and Weber especially), which in the

long run would lend historical legitimacy to his own work and the 'master' conductor capable of conveying its message. If we add Mahler, who is prominent in the earlier chapter on Roller's *Tristan*, it is striking that three of the five conductors Patrick writes about – Mahler, Klemperer, Solti – were Jewish. All three had to make their peace with Wagner's anti-Semitism. Wagner's practical and philosophical view of the conductor's role, which he set out in his treatise *On Conducting* (published in 1869, the same year as the expanded version of his polemic *Judaism in Music*), was coloured by a deliberately controversial distinction between German Jewish conductors, who supposedly skim efficiently through Beethoven without dwelling strongly on anything too profound, and those who are 'properly' German and hence able to catch fire and penetrate the sublime depths of German music in a way their Jewish brethren never could. *On Conducting* was a highly influential document for generations of conductors. Over the years, many who were Jewish took note along with everyone else of Wagner's ideas about variable tempi, phrasing, how to conduct specific works by Mozart, Beethoven and Weber, and why the conductor has huge potential as an interpreter. But not a few Jewish conductors like Mahler, Klemperer and Solti also turned out to be truly outstanding interpreters with wide repertoires, including Wagner. This could be an instance of Wagner's legacy saving him from the worst of himself. As time passed, the fact that generations of Jewish conductors contributed in major ways to his legacy has been proof that his original prejudice was complete nonsense, eminently forgettable, even though it undeniably left behind eerie echoes in the notorious Nazi attempts to erase Jewish conductors and composers for ever from Germany's cultural map. For that reason alone it is still not easy to forgive.

The last part of the book is an offshoot from Patrick's experience working for the Royal Opera House in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What he wrote in the light of opera's crises just a few years later still feels for me acutely relevant now. Indeed, only three weeks before starting this introduction I heard about the decision of the Arts Council of England (ACE) on 4 November 2022 to scale down financial support for four major opera companies in the UK. That included the cancellation of the entire annual recurring grant for English National Opera (ENO) at the London Coliseum, one of Britain's most important venues for opera. In a matter of months after 130 years of remarkable history, ENO's extinction, as I write, is on the cards. (If it still exists when you read this, it will be a miracle.)

Included in this final section is a scorching review of two books by former bosses of the Royal Opera House with decidedly different opinions about what opera can do and how it should be managed. Their views are basically antagonistic. But on one thing they agree: 'that the House has always been strapped for cash'. We are back in the jungle. The climax arrives in Patrick's next, and highly perceptive, review of Suzie Gilbert's 2009 book *Opera for Everybody: The Story of English National Opera*, which in part is also the story of the huge financial deficit incurred by that institution during its most adventurous years. The title of the review, 'Blood on the Carpet', says it all. It reverberated widely then. And now, because of ACE's blunder more than a decade later, the beast is closer and louder than ever. ACE's director of music thinks that 'traditionally staged "grand" or large-scale opera' has shown 'almost no growth in audience demand'. Behold, the heavy footfall of lazy ACE-speak, this time coyly standing in for all the old prejudices.

Why opera at all? Is it ‘relevant’? Why the vast sums – especially taxpayers’ money – wasted on the yearly resurrection and preservation of an art form that’s supposedly little more than decadent?

It’s an old story. Wagner was already railing against the beast in 1848 when, after elections in Saxony of radical revolutionary-minded delegates, the subvention of the Court Theatre in Dresden was to be cut because it was merely a luxurious place of entertainment. His response was a detailed proposal for theatre reform running to 45 closely printed pages, brimming with new ideas about an interaction of all the arts that could restore ‘true dignity’ (‘wahre Würde’) to theatre. He was not the first or the last. In 1790, when French revolutionaries were questioning opera’s connections to the old regime, Beaumarchais wrote in a preface to his libretto for *Tarare* (music by Salieri) that to survive opera should get serious about drama. And Brecht, no less adamant in the economic crisis of 1930 when state exchequers in Germany’s Weimar Republic questioned opera’s ‘relevance’ as an excuse to balance their beleaguered budgets, responded with two highly original operas with Kurt Weill and a lament that ‘nobody demands a fundamental discussion of opera (its function!)’. As Patrick points out here in his absorbing review of Peter Heyworth’s biography of the conductor Otto Klemperer, Berlin’s Kroll Opera was peremptorily closed down for ‘economic’ reasons only a year after Brecht made his remarks. Since 1927 it had been demonstrating – with deeds rather than words – how new conversations about opera production for contemporary audiences can bear precious fruit. But nobody in power was listening. Patrick’s own book surely makes an important contribution to the issue by reminding us that history shows us just how much danger opera is in if a productive conversation about it is forced to stop.

Appropriately enough, the book ends with an actual conversation about opera. Sir Michael Tippett was a profoundly humane British composer with almost Homeric ambitions for opera and its still far from exhausted possibilities. Not everyone will agree he won all his battles. But this exchange with Patrick, with Wagner looking over his shoulder at key moments, is a heroic effort to explore what serious opera is capable of achieving, even in these days when it feels more challenged than it ever has been before. Thank you, Patrick, for letting us read it again.

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