

WAGNER

Everything Richard Wagner (1813–83) thought, did, and created was characterized by a hugeness of scope and ambition. He grappled with the most universal themes of human existence yet seldom settled for easy answers or soothing moral pieties. Not content to use someone else's librettos, Wagner wrote his own texts, so that he was responsible for the sound and meaning found in the words as well as the music. Most of his operas are four to five hours in length, including intermissions, and require enormous commitment and active participation on the part of the audience as well as of every performer and artist involved in creating the production. By the time he was thirty-seven, Wagner had deemed it necessary to build his own theater—a sort of shrine to his artistic vision. While this dream would not be realized until he was fifty-nine, the theater whose construction he oversaw in Bayreuth, Germany, is still a mecca for thousands of opera lovers and aesthetes, who come to drink at the Wagnerian source and debate the significance of every detail they see and hear.

Wagner was very much a man of his time, in both the good and bad senses of that concept. He was a political revolutionary who fled from the police in Dresden. He was perpetually in debt and had to appeal to royalty and to wealthy patrons to keep him afloat. He was ambivalent about the virtues of capitalism versus a more communal form of economics. He sought in German myth and contemporary philosophers a justification for his beliefs that the German people were superior to all others. He was rabidly anti-Semitic, yet it was a Jew, Herman Levi, whom he chose to conduct *Parsifal*, the

most Christian of his works. Women in his operas often embody virtues and wisdom that his shortsighted men lack, yet there is little indication that he regarded most of the real women in his life with the same reverence he bestowed upon his characters. He had a complicated relationship with his second wife, Cosima, the daughter of the famous pianist and composer Franz Liszt. She was a spiritual model and a protector, but many observers think Wagner used her shamelessly to advance his own goals. In fact, Wagner used many people, men and women, expediently getting from them what he needed and then moving on.

Wagner also has a unique legacy among artists. Because he so carefully documented his beliefs on matters artistic, political, and philosophical, he made it very easy and tempting to analyze his work based on his writings and statements. Since he wrestled with great existential issues in his operas, his work was viewed as greater, or at least more important, than the operas of Verdi and other contemporary composers. In fact, Verdi dealt with many of the same issues Wagner did, but with a lighter hand and without leaving such a long paper trail. But most major critics, including George Bernard Shaw in his amusing yet insightful book *The Perfect Wagnerite*, did much to enshrine Wagner further by considering him more serious and more worthy of discussion than other artists. Wagner did a very good job of creating the cultism that still encircles him today.

There are Wagner societies around the world, many filled with profoundly philosophical individuals who find great spiritual meaning in Wagner's operas. They return to his works often to reconsider what the composer intended in his words and his music. There is also, unfortunately, a lunatic fringe among Wagner cultists, who treat him as a spiritual leader and who justify rather dastardly beliefs and behaviors in his name. Hitler was surely an example of this: he found in Wagner a confirmation of his own beliefs in German superiority and justification for the murder and torture of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and millions of other people. Wagner died fifty years before Hitler came to power, but the association of Wagner and Nazism still exists. In fact, his music has effectively been banned from public performance in Israel since 1938. While members of the Israel Philharmonic voted to lift the ban in 1992, the

outcry was so strong among many Holocaust survivors that the management and musicians of the orchestra decided to respect their wishes on this sensitive issue.

Many performers and composers who were alive during the Nazi era and, in some cases, sympathetic to the Nazi cause have been treated less harshly than Wagner. Richard Strauss remained in Germany throughout the war, yet his works are not greeted with the same degree of anger abroad that Wagner's receive. It is a question as old as art and creativity whether to judge a work of art on strictly aesthetic terms or whether the personality and values of the artist should also be included in the evaluation. It is probable that Wagner was not a person whose values and opinions would be respected by decent, fair-minded people. But it is also true that he wrote some of the most sublimely beautiful music ever written, and that his ideas about man's relationship to God, nature, and other human beings are provocative and require ongoing consideration and discussion.

While Wagner's first operatic efforts, *Die Feen* (1834) and *Das Liebesverbot* (1835), were written in styles imitating the German Romantic idiom and Italian comedy, respectively, he was already preparing for bigger things. *Rienzi* (1840) was a French-style grand opera (to be discussed later on in this chapter). Its overture and *Rienzi's* prayer are popular concert hall and recording pieces today, but, like most of the operas on which it was modeled, it is seldom seen today because its demands are beyond the reach of the average opera company.

On a trip to London in 1839, Wagner encountered terrible storms in the North Sea, which came to influence him as he drafted his libretto for *Der Fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman), completed in Paris in 1841. Just as Weber had dazzlingly depicted the sounds of the forest in *Der Freischütz*, Wagner in *Der Fliegende Holländer* wrote some of the most pictorially descriptive music ever created to describe the sea. The opera is about salvation through love: specifically, how a doomed man is saved by a woman's love and sacrifice. The theme of love and salvation recurs in nearly all of Wagner's works.

Der Fliegende Holländer gave Wagner some fame and prestige and resulted in an appointment as the kapellmeister to the court of

Dresden (1843–49). During this fertile creative period, Wagner wrote *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1850), two of the most gorgeously lyrical operas ever written. The beauty of these works further spread his fame. Both dealt with themes from German literature and myth, and their German-ness became part of their appeal. His key artistic development during this period was that he began to diminish the importance of the aria, replacing it with arioso and extended musical passages in the orchestra. Wagner used the orchestra to create potent images, colors, and tension. The chorus, particularly in *Lohengrin*, serves to comment but also plays roles in the opera, as soldiers, crowds, wedding guests, and so on. *Lohengrin* is probably the last opera written in the great German Romantic tradition; afterward Wagner departed toward a more personal style.

The year 1848 was one of great political upheaval in Europe. The last revolutionary fervor was vented, after which nations began to form and capitalism began to rise. Wagner was involved in political activity in Dresden and had to flee before being arrested. He moved to the safety and serenity of Zurich, where he found a patroness and gradually began to distance himself from his first wife, Minna. He began to write the poem that would become the text for his four-opera cycle, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. He completed the poem in 1852. The *Ring* cycle, as it is often called, is quite simply the most ambitious accomplishment in the history of opera, and for many people the greatest. Drawing from Nordic and Germanic myths, Wagner created a society of gods and mortals who vie for the power and control conferred by possession of the cursed gold ring. The cycle depicts great acts of love, greed, and violence, and it has been interpreted by scholars and stage directors through various lenses: as a treatise for or against capitalism, as a Romanticist's appeal for the restoration of harmony to nature, as a revolutionary's call for the overthrow of society, even as a diatribe against the Jews. Over the next twenty years—with breaks to write other operas—he wrote the music for the four operas—*Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*—and the first complete cycle was staged at Bayreuth in 1876. A notable feature of the *Ring* cycle is Wagner's expanded use of what he called the *Hauptmotiv* and what

subsequently came to be known as leitmotifs, which had appeared in embryonic form in Weber's operas. Depending upon whose judgment you accept, the *Ring* cycle contains anywhere between seventy and two hundred leitmotifs, representing everything from the ring itself and the curse placed on it to the love that eventually redeems the world. As Wagner blends and weaves these leitmotifs together in various ways throughout the fifteen hours of the cycle, the orchestra creates a texture and fabric that go a long way toward unifying this magnum opus. You will notice, in attending Wagner performances, that the audience gives the orchestra a much more rousing ovation than you will hear at performances of Mozart or Puccini operas. This is because, rightly or wrongly, there is the perception that the orchestra has more to do or has played a greater role. In fact, opera orchestras always play a huge role, but their work, unfortunately, is usually more noted when they don't do well. Every composer from Monteverdi to Philip Glass creates demands for an orchestra that must be met if an opera performance is to succeed.

The four operas of the *Ring* cycle are customarily performed over six days, and the whole experience is much greater than the sum of its parts. The work's implications and meanings carry much more weight when they can be considered over a short period of time. *Ring* cycles are performed almost every summer in Bayreuth and Seattle, and have begun to appear with increasing regularity in New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Munich, and Vienna.

During composition of *The Ring*, Wagner wrote *Tristan und Isolde*. In its famous dissonant opening notes many musicologists claim to hear the beginning of modern music. Though Monteverdi and many other composers knew how to use dissonance effectively, Wagner made great strides forward, and in this opera he created an erotic, sexually charged world for his characters. As in the *Ring* cycle, we see Wagner attempting with all of his force to understand the meaning of existence. While the Romantics in the early part of the nineteenth century often idealized the human condition, by the second half of the century artists had seen revolutionary ideals fail, wars rage, and human misery accelerate, so Wagner's view became dark and tragic.

Wagner's two other late works, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1867) and *Parsifal* (1882), curiously reflect a certain return to optimism on the part of the composer. *Die Meistersinger* is a five-and-a-half-hour comedy (including intermissions) that attempts to create an ideal world of harmonious spirit in which the artist has a significant place in society, where work is appreciated and accomplishment rewarded. This is perforce a simplistic description of a very complex work, but this opera is singular in Wagner's oeuvre, like Verdi's *Falstaff*, in being a comedy written by an older man looking back on what life has taught him and trying to find humor in it. On the other hand, *Parsifal* is a profoundly serious exploration of pure simplicity in a person as a virtue and a gift. World-weary Wagner was detaching himself from all of the grinding political and social issues, attempting to find truth in Christian myth, the eternal peace that comes with redemption and the stripping away of all earthly concerns. The fundamentally tragic viewpoint of the *Ring* cycle is replaced in *Parsifal* by the desire to be cleansed by faith. Wagner referred to his last opera as a "consecration festival for the stage" and insisted in its performances at Bayreuth that there be no applause following its two-hour first act. With intermissions, the opera is almost six hours long, and at a good performance an audience member feels as if he or she has been on a long journey to an unfamiliar place. The musical pacing is very slow, with few of the rousing sections found in other operas. But if concentration can be sustained, this journey permits reflection and introspection and can be very meaningful.

When Wagner died in 1883, the year after *Parsifal*'s first performance, he left an enormous void in German opera. While Verdi was still holding forth in Italy and other artistic movements moved apace in Europe, Wagner's giant shadow over German musical life required time before perspective could be regained.

Not all Teutonic opera was heavy. Germany had two popular composers of lighter operas that were comic or sentimental in spirit: Gustav Lortzing (1801–51) and Friedrich von Flotow (1812–83), whose *Martha* (1847) is still very much loved today.

The most direct heir to Wagner was Engelbert Humperdinck (1854–1921). (If this name conjures up someone you might have

heard sing in Las Vegas, the truth is that the British crooner who sports it borrowed it from the German composer.) Humperdinck studied in Cologne and Munich and met Wagner in southern Italy, where he was working on the second act of *Parsifal*. Wagner invited Humperdinck to Bayreuth to assist on the first production of the opera. Humperdinck was infused with Wagnerian orchestral scoring, which he used to great effect in *Hänsel und Gretel* (1893), his operatic rendering of the popular fairy tale. Under all of that gingerbread is an extraordinarily elaborate score, with beautiful solos, choruses, and orchestral passages. Because of its subject matter, many adults bypass this opera, which is a shame. Although Humperdinck never equaled his achievement with *Hänsel und Gretel*, it stands as a great work that reflects the influence of Richard Wagner yet is very much an original, not an imitative, work. The opera's premiere was conducted by Richard Strauss.