

MET WAGNER HEB IK EEN LIEFDE-HAAT VERHOUDING

Gerard Mortier over Richard Wagner

Gerard Mortiers interviews uit de jaren 1980 werden onlangs gebundeld door Simon Michael Namenwirth in "Gerard Mortier at the Monnaie" (VUB Brussels University press, 2002). Hieronder vindt u zijn uitspraken over Richard Wagner.

In the theatre, I prefer a conspicuous aesthetic, although not in a decorative sense – a theater of signs not symbols. That is the reason I really abhor Wolfgang Wagner's work in Bayreuth. I am referring to the use of "Brechtian" signs (communicative signs), comparable to script as a sign system"

Artists ...should convince economists and politicians that Europe is, above all, about culture, that culture can help to unify Europe. How can opera contribute? For example by putting Wagner against Verdi. Both are nationalistic composers but once they are dealing with love and death, they are European.

I consider "The Mastersingers" to be a key work, not about Germany but about Europe. Its message to us today is "honor the great European masters"... It is not a political piece but it points to the future. It represents a warning to Europe, a summons to reflect on our tradition.

By nature I have never been a Wagnerian. I have always loved Verdi, and later Mozart, whom I now hold to be the absolute apogee of operatic art. What fascinates me in Wagner is his bulldozer quality. It is incredible that he didn't only compose this monumental music outside of the norms of his era but that he managed to build his own theater in Bayreuth. Just the entrance to the theatre has a visual force which was totally new at that time. What annoys me in Bayreuth is the public. It has always been extremely conservative even though Bayreuth originally started as a revolutionary innovation. After World War II, Wieland Wagner initiated a thorough scenic renewal which at first was not accepted by the public. It took 20 years before his innovations were accepted and considered classical. Then Patrice Chéreau experienced the same thing when he was rejected by the public which now supported Wieland Wagner. It has always been like that. I remember the first time I visited Bayreuth. Götz Friedrich had staged a rather new version of Tannhäuser. I was criticized because I dared to call out "bravo". It created quite a scandal in the theatre.

I have to find a stage director who can demonstrate the "discontinuous" character of the Ring. It is a wonderful work of course, but it shows enormous ruptures as well. Wagner started the work in the revolutionary year of 1848 and completed it many years later when Bismarck was in power, a very different social context. In addition, the inspiration is not always maintained. It is similar to Thomas Mann, a great writer, although it is apparent that it is the work of someone who wrote a few hours every

morning after breakfast, inspired or not. Wagner was a revolutionary composer indeed, but, as librettist, he was rather conventional. His bombastic language reminds me of an author like Conscience.

Wagner needed a text to find music. However, he was sure that he mastered all forms of art including poetry, painting, and set design. Only in music was he an innovator; in other aspects he was a child of his time. His basic philosophy was adolescent. His idea of the Redeemer was pure rethoric; I can well understand that an unconventional philosopher such as Nietzsche was not willing to go along. It is incomprehensible that the Ring cycle is so fascinating despite its dilettantism. I believe that all these ruptures must be made apparent and that nothing should be hidden in honor of the great master. The main thing is to find the right stage director.

With Wagner I have a love-hate relationship. On the one hand I consider him a great genius. On the other hand, when I listen to the finales of Act I of Lohengrin or Act II of Tannhäuser, I say to myself, "How much greater a composer is Verdi"

In my opinion Wagnerism is nothing but a shameful sickness. In fact I would like to divorce Wagner from Wagnerism.

It is quite interesting for the audience to discover that a given production is not exhausted. It is scandalous to perform certain works so frequently. It bothers me to see "Norma" performed everywhere; this holds even more for "Tristan und Isolde"...Wagner considered it an exceptional piece....I find it ridiculous that all opera theatres believe that they can do justice to it. That is pure impudence.