

Bryan Magee
WAGNER AND PHILOSOPHY
Excerpts

Wagner was one of the very few really great composers who was an intellectual in the sense of taking an interest in ideas generally, beyond the requirements of his own work. The standard edition of his published writings round to sixteen volumes, and this does not include his letters. Wagner was the only one of the great composers who studied philosophy seriously. Never at any time in his life was he conservative in his views or attitudes: to the end of his days he remained radically critical of the society he knew, and never from a right-wing point of view. His significant movement was not from left to right but from politics to metaphysics.

He developed to its limits first of all German romantic opera as he found it, then the quite different form of music drama that he invented; in doing so he developed the symphony orchestra to its maximal size, inventing new instruments in the process; and most important of all, he carried Western music to the outermost frontiers of tonality, so that successors who felt called on to go beyond him were forced over that frontier into atonality.

From an early age Wagner had felt himself to be different from other people, possessed of more than ordinary powers, marked out for immortality. Until his fifties not a year of his adult life went by in which he did not seriously contemplate suicide. To his friends he never stopped talking, always and only about himself; and when he was separated from them he wrote them innumerable letters explaining what he was doing and why, claiming universal importance for it; also identifying the enemies of it, and attacking them. The result is an amount of self-disclosure unsurpassed by any other great artist. It may have been tiresome for his friends, but for us it is a godsend.

Wagner is thought of as quintessentially right-wing, a pillar of the German establishment, jingoistically nationalistic, a racist and an anti-semitic, a sort of proto-Nazi. While it is true that Wagner was always a German nationalist, it is not true that German nationalism was at that time a right-wing cause. Similarly with anti-semitism. The young Wagner was shamefully anti-semitic. However, anti-semitism was not then associated with right-wing views, as it came to be in twentieth-century Europe, but was spread across all sections of the political spectrum: liberals, socialists, communists and anarchists all had more than their fair share. These are both examples of anachronistic assumptions on our part, of our reading back into Wagner's life interpretations and associations that may hold in our time but did not hold in his. This is especially true of anti-semitism. Wagner lived in a society in which anti-semitism was endemic. We in our time cannot help seeing this in the light of the subsequent uses made of it by Hitler and the Nazis, and thus we slide into thinking of Wagner as some sort of fascist before Hitler, when in fact, until his forties, he was a socialist. He ceased to be a socialist in middle age but he was never any kind of proto-fascist. He never espoused right-wing politics, but merely lost faith in left-wing politics.

For years after his period as an enthusiastic Young German in his early twenties he held political views of a utopian socialist character, and held them passionately and sincerely. We do know that what attracted him more and more, and came eventually to command his deeply considered allegiance, was the philosophy of anarchism. All his life he had explosive outbursts in which he expressed a wish for wholesale destruction. I believe they have to do with his sense of alienation from the world.

The documentary evidence, of which there is a great deal, puts beyond any doubt whatever the fact that the political views of the young Wagner were of a passionately socialist-anarchist or communist-anarchist kind. And this is important because they made their way into the libretto of *The Ring*. I sometimes think there are two Wagners in our culture, almost unrecognizably different from one another: the Wagner possessed by those who know his work, and the Wagner imagined by those who know him only by name and reputation. The difference is at its greatest with respect to *The Ring*. The backgrounds of beliefs and assumptions against which all this is set is not right-wing but left-wing; not pro-authority but anti-authority. And over and above all this the music, at its best, is of an extraordinarily beauty, unforgettably haunting, spellbinding. There is no music deeper, and because the work is essentially musicodramatic, no drama deeper either. It is enough in itself to place Wagner alongside Shakespeare and Mozart. That these two views of the Wagner of *The Ring* exist side by side in our culture is a fairly obvious fact. The one based on ignorance is, inevitably, far the more widespread of the two, and creates an incomprehension of Wagner-lovers to which they have to learn to accustom themselves. A good-natured, intelligent and musical friend of mine who once came to a party in my flat and noticed the long rows of Wagner recordings remarked to another guest: 'I had no idea Bryan was a bit of a Nazi'. Such assumptions are held not only by the intelligent but unmusical, or by only the ill-disposed, but by people of culture. And they create misunderstanding not only of their fellows but, more importantly, of Wagner and his works. I have innumerable times heard well-meaning people say in minatory tones such things as 'After all, one can't ignore the ideas behind these works', as if the ideas were quite different from what they are. Such people seem to think they know that the ideas are of a dictatorial and chauvinistic nature. This often goes together with another attitude that is widespread among people lacking acquaintance with the actuality of Wagner's work, and that is a sense of personal superiority towards it. I know of no other great artist of whom we find this to the same extent: we encounter with almost baffling frequency people who, if they refer to Wagner at all, do so in a self-amused and superior way, as if to say that it goes without saying among people like ourselves that low-grade stuff like that is not the sort of thing that needs to be taken seriously; that it really is rather embarrassing when people talk about it as if it were great art,

or beautiful music, or interesting in its ideas; and that this only goes to show that such people do not know what they are talking about and can be safely patronized. Clearly the speaker's sense of superiority to Wagner contributes to his own self-esteem. Aside from the fact that what this conveys is the opposite of what the speaker intends, its inappropriateness to Wagner in particular, of all artists, is grotesque.

Wherever Nietzsche is read and discussed, his criticisms of Wagner are read and discussed. There is no reason why such readers should be music-lovers, though, and if they are not they are unlikely to have much in the way of independent knowledge or independently formed views on Wagner. They are therefore not normally in a position to take an independently critical view of Nietzsche's criticism. Even more to the point, they are often lacking in any serious understanding of Wagner's intellectual capacity and influence, even if they appreciate his extraordinary genius as a creative artist; and they mistake him for a lesser figure than Nietzsche. I know from much experience that they frequently accept and absorb Nietzsche's disparagements of Wagner at their face value, and then voice these as their own. This happens a good deal, for example, in the philosophy departments of universities.

The assumption, commonly expressed, that Wagner was much influenced by Nietzsche, is mistaken, at least in the sense normally intended. The important truth is the other way round: Nietzsche was decisively influenced by Wagner, with an influence that was colossal and lifelong. To do Nietzsche justice, he never attempted to hide or blur this fact. Even after his friendship with Wagner had broken up so rancorously, and they had become enemies in public, he never ceased to voice a unique sense of indebtedness to him. Years after Nietzsche's death the philosopher was taken up by Nazi ideologists as their philosopher, just as Wagner was treated by Hitler as his special composer. This now multiplies the damage to Wagner's reputation. He suffers from the fact of his personal friendship with Nietzsche, and from being the object of whole books of invective from the selfsame source, and also from being twinned with him in the infernal pantheon of Adolf Hitler.

The repellent nature of Wagner's anti-semitism is not a licence to misrepresent it. His anti-semitism was of a very different stamp from Hitler's: in the first place it was almost entirely cultural in its concerns. It was crassly and cruelly expressed, and is not to be defended, but no intellectually honest account of it can make it the same as the anti-semitism of Hitler. The only important Nazi who loved Wagner was Hitler. There was no special relationship between Wagner and the Third Reich. Performances of Wagner's opera's in Germany did not increase in frequency under the Nazis, they diminished, and very markedly.

Between us and Wagner lies the Holocaust, a moral abyss of unsurpassed depth. Nothing more horrific than that has ever happened in human history. We cannot get our minds round it. We cannot grasp it even when our imaginations are working at full stretch. And it has transformed our attitude towards anti-semitism. Now that we have seen that anti-semitism not only can but did create hell on earth, anything that smacks of it is utterly repugnant to us, abhorrent. Anti-semitism leads to Auschwitz. But to apply standards of judgement based on what the Holocaust has done to us to people who lived generations before it happened is to look at

history through a distorting lens. Somewhere at the back of many people's minds is an uncomfortable feeling that to understand is to exonerate. I am afraid that this is how all too many of the writers I am referring to respond to the situation: they are afraid of seeming to try to understand, for they fear that they will then be seeming to condone; They either want, or want to be seen to give expression to towering anger and indignation, with no shred of condonation, and therefore no concession to understanding. But this is the mentality of the lynch mob, so morally outraged by the terrible crime someone is accused of having committed that they string him up or beat him to death without enquiring seriously into his guilt; and if anyone protests that this is wrong, or attempts to stop them, they accuse that person of condoning the crime, and being in effect on the side of the criminal, and they turn against him as well. What they are actually concerned to do is not arrive at truth or justice but give vent to their righteous indignation at the heinousness of the crime, and they will savage anyone who gets in the way of their doing so. It is self-indulgence pure and simple, as unworthy of personal and emotional as of intellectual respect. But I am afraid it is what the greater part of the existing literature on Wagner and anti-semitism consists of. Much of it has to do with the expiation of feelings of guilt. Most of it is produced in Germany, written in German by Germans for Germans.

I would see no impediment in principle to there being anti-semitism in Wagner's operas; and if I thought I found any sign of it I would have no difficulty in saying so; and it would not derogate from my view of the greatness of the works. The sober truth is that the reason why successive generations of cultured and intelligent Jews have loved these works without seeing anything particularly anti-semitic about them is that there is not really anything anti-semitic to see. It has occasionally struck me that allegations of anti-semitism against some of the character-representations in Wagner's operas sometimes themselves smack of anti-semitism. A writer will often say something to the effect that, as a wheedling, whining, cringing and crawling or shuffling and shambling dwarf, Mime is obviously meant to be Jewish. I should be interested to hear from a Jew what he thinks of that as a form of argument.

The obstacle that none of those who allege the existence of anti-semitism in Wagner's operas has ever succeeded in getting round is the fact that neither in the operas themselves nor from outside the operas is there any mention of it whatsoever from Wagner; and this is uncharacteristic in the extreme. It puts the accusers perpetually in the position of themselves reading things into the operas from outside, then drumming up arguments to try and show that what they say is there really is there, and further arguments to explain why Wagner so uncharacteristically failed to say anything about it, and then challenging the rest of us to prove that they are wrong-knowing of course, that it is not possible to prove a negative of that kind. When we concede our inability to prove the negative they then say triumphantly: "There you are, you see: you can't rebut the argument". Such a procedure is intellectually fraudulent from beginning to end.

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