

The Relevance and untimeliness of Richard Wagner's Work: From the Pathological to Guilt

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Introduction

Referring to Wagner's music, Adorno first wrote in 1952 that 'the bourgeois world generates elements from within itself that objectively assume the very quality of illusion¹'. His aim is thus to critique what he considers to be intrinsic qualities of this music which, according to the author, foreshadow the advent of mass music in the 20th century, as an art consumed by the masses, in the same way that commodities are consumed. On the other hand, the *Jahrhundertring* performed at Bayreuth in 1976, and conducted by Pierre Boulez with stage designs by Patrice Chéreau, puts forward a socialist interpretation of these operas.

Yet the contradiction between an art that would be intrinsically socialist and intrinsically bourgeois could not appear more striking. This fundamental difference between the interpretations of the same work takes us back to a fundamental ambiguity of aesthetic philosophy, a discipline which hesitates between an objective view of aesthetic qualities, and a subjective posture regarding those same qualities. Baumgarten himself, when coining the word 'aesthetic', oscillates between these two positions². In the first case, aesthetics is an objective field of research and can claim the status of a science of the empirical. But if we follow the second hypothesis, we must consider that the link between aesthetic qualities and ethical matters is much looser. In this case, aesthetics become a mere commentary on the impressions that beauty, or its lack, can give us. This problem can help shed some light on the question of the guilty pleasure, or a morally problematic pleasure, found in listening to Wagner's *Ring*, particularly after its appropriation by the Nazi dictatorship. We would then like to pose the following questions: does this music contain elements that are intrinsically problematic, such that the aesthetic taste that relishes them can be called objectively bad, or guilty and sick if we cite Nietzsche's scathing critique in *The Case of Wagner*? Or should we rather adopt a subjectivist position and consider that appreciating Wagner's music can be a sign of either good or bad taste, but in either case it is not linked to ethical problems, and cannot be diagnosed as a pathology from a medical perspective?

Nietzsche's position toward Wagner's music must be understood with regard to his philosophical stance of perspectivism. This stance is precisely situated in a sort of in-between that holds together the objective and the subjective perspectives. Nietzsche posits that there is no such thing as an intrinsically good or bad action, an affirmation that also applies to people or artworks. Indeed, each work of art must be evaluated not with respect to its moral value, but with respect to the feeling of strength and power it is capable of giving to its audience. The best artworks of all were thus the first Greek tragedies, because of their ability to transfigure their actors into divine figures, embodying Dionysus and the mythical creatures who followed him. Thus, Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy* that 'here only an exuberant, even triumphant life speaks to us, in which everything existing is deified, whether good or bad³'. Here we can note that in Nietzsche's writings,

¹ Theodor Adorno, *In Search for Wagner*, translated by R. Livingstone, Verso Books, London, 1981, 95.

² As an example of this ambiguity, we can cite the § 424 of his *Aesthetica* in which he distinguishes 'AESTHETIC TRUTH' from 'OBJECTIVE TRUTH'. The first concept refers to a form of knowledge that can be derived from singular objects, such as a piece of music, a painting or a poem. The second kind of 'truth' is derived from the scientific observation of phenomena that can be repeated. But since objective truth is also, ultimately, dependent on empirical observation of varying phenomena, these two kinds of knowledges aren't so much opposed as they complete each other in Baumgarten's view. (Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim & New York, 1970, 160).

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Complete works*, vol. 1, G. Allen & Unwin edition, London, 1923, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by WM. A. Haussmann, § 3, 33.

the hierarchy of good and bad art, and thus of good and bad taste, is of the utmost importance. Consequently, his refusal of the commonly accepted moral criterion must not lead us to think that he rejects any normative criteria for distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘bad’ artworks. These two adjectives simply take on a very particular meaning in his writings. His perspectivism can then be taken to mean that there are, indeed, good aesthetic tastes that are able to discern artworks that help people gain strength in life, as opposed to bad artworks that diminish this same strength. But Nietzsche takes a step further, notably in *The Case of Wagner*, by affirming that those who appreciate this music have an actually sick aesthetic taste. This medical vocabulary comes from Nietzsche’s theory according to which the will to power is both psychological and physiological, and expresses itself, or is affected, in every aspect of life. It can then be affected even by works of art, and diminished by an escapist art that seduces the audience into immersing itself in a fantastical world, and keeps it in a state of passive fascination and submission, as does *Wagner’s Ring*, according to Nietzsche.

Although these views are mostly considered outdated today, at a time when the most widely shared posture in aesthetics is firmly subjectivist, it is surprising to find that many recent authors, similarly to Nietzsche, adopt an objective posture regarding Wagner’s work. Jankélévitch is one such author, as he posits that the Nazi’s recovery of Wagner was due to intrinsic qualities of his music, notably antisemitism and the presence of a romanticized Nordic mythology. We can note that this criticism of the story of the *Ring* can also serve to bring to light the status of this artwork as part of a “bourgeois pop culture”. What we mean by this phrase is that, on the one hand, the presence of gods and mythical creatures, living in a different world from ours, shows a taste for the fantastical akin to the one found in heroic fantasy, a genre often criticised for this very taste. We can note here that the *Ring* was precisely one of Tolkien’s main inspirations for the plot of *Lord of the Rings*. On the other hand, our use of the adjective “bourgeois” refers here to the institutional framework that encloses opera, and to the preconceived notion that, being opera, these artworks can only be serious and profound. This assumption was already questioned by Nietzsche when he claimed that the *Ring*’s depth of meaning was faked, and that it was, in truth, only a superficial artwork, merely able to give premonitions of transcendence and no truly profound thoughts. In any case, this comparison with the fantasy genre shows that ethical and elitist values are still attached to aesthetic properties, as they constitute a normative criterion for differentiating a good artwork from a bad one.

Having established these problems, we can now ask ourselves why this objective position regarding aesthetics seems so hard to leave behind, despite the general disregard that is nowadays attached to it. What does this reveal about the objective nature of the values attached to the works of art containing these qualities? And how should we then qualify the taste that appreciates or rejects them, between a conception of its subjective nature and an acknowledgement of its objective quality, allowing us to call it good, bad, or sick in a moral sense?

We would like to start with a review of Nietzsche’s position regarding Wagner’s work, in order to understand how an aesthetic taste can be called sick and pathological for what it reveals of an individual’s constitution. We will then shift our focus to the Nazi recovery of the *Tetralogie* to analyse the difference between an aesthetic taste that is called sick and one that is considered guilty. We would then like to conclude this article with a look at the possible rehabilitations that have been suggested by various interpreters, such as Patrice Chéreau or James Levine, and examine which criteria have been used in the reception of their work to defend its aesthetic quality, or lack thereof.

I. Pathological taste and mass culture

1. Nietzsche and the sick taste

According to Nietzsche, there is precisely nothing to be appreciated in Wagner's late operas, at least for a healthy individual. This violent rejection can seem all the more surprising when compared to Nietzsche's first stance on Wagner, to whom he dedicated his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, with a very admiring note. The 21st paragraph of the book also contains a description of the third act of *Tristan und Isolde*, in which Nietzsche affirms that its composer 'has thus, so to speak, put his ear to the heart-chamber of the cosmic will⁴'. This praise comes from the beauty and strength of the feelings and ideas that the audience can attain through this opera. In a similar way, Nietzsche writes of Bizet's *Carmen* that 'by listening to it we ourselves become "works of art"⁵'. The key notion here is that artworks can have such a powerful influence on their audience that they change the spectator's very identity. However, this influence may be positive or it may be negative, acting in both cases like a contagion.

Indeed, after listening to the *Jahrhundertring* in 1876, Nietzsche completely revised his opinion of Wagner, adopting a clinical vocabulary to describe his music as a pathology. He thus wrote in the conclusion of *The Case of Wagner*: 'A diagnostic of the modern soul – what would it commence with? With a resolute incision into this contradictoriness of instincts, with the disentangling of its antithetical moral values, with a vivisection performed on its *most instructive* case⁶'. According to this passage, not only does the *Ring* reveal something about the health and ethics of its audience, but this music becomes a symptom of the spirit and condition of a whole society. More precisely, Nietzsche accuses these operas of pretending to give their audience a hope in 'the other world⁷', while actually being a music devoid of any spirituality or profound meaning. This hypocrisy is then described as that of the whole society contemporary with the author. Indeed, because of an exhaustion of the 'quantum of energy⁸' available in that age, the audiences contemporary with Nietzsche would prefer a consolatory art, one that depicts a glorious transcendence, to an art representing the woes and sufferings of their lived world. But even this fallacious promise isn't fulfilled by Wagner's operas, since all they actually do is plunge their audience into a state of passive admiration, instead of provoking philosophical thoughts. Nietzsche thus writes that Wagner's music only contains 'sound, movement, colour, in short, the sensuality of music. Wagner [...] wants effect, he wants nothing but effect⁹'. It is then the false depth of a physiological music, a music primarily played and composed for the pleasure of the senses but that pretends to be intellectual and profound, that Nietzsche ultimately denounces.

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Complete works*, vol. 1, G. Allen & Unwin edition, London, 1923, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by W.M. A. Haussmann, § 21, 161.

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ibid.* vol. 11, *The Case of Wagner*, §1, 6.

⁶ *Ibid.* Epilogue, 57-58.

⁷ *Ibid.* 55.

⁸ *Ibid.* 54.

⁹ *Ibid.* §8, 29.

This explains his seemingly contemptuous position towards the physical in *The Case of Wagner*. On the contrary, Nietzsche aspires to become the ‘doctor of culture¹⁰’ in his late writings and affirms that an art or a philosophy that would be appreciated by a healthy aesthetical taste would need to satisfy both the body and the mind¹¹.

2. Modernity against untimeliness

Adorno has leveled a similar criticism toward Wagner’s operas, positing that behind their air of deep philosophical importance, there is no rich meaning to be grasped while listening to them. This argument is built upon the fact that, only a few years after the first stagings of Wagner’s operas, a few famous pieces started to be played separately from the rest of his works, for example the *Ritt der Walküren*. According to Adorno, the fact that these pieces can be detached from the whole of the opera shows that, by themselves, they have no direct link with the meaning of the opera as a whole and can be heard as nothing more than a pleasant air that seduces its audience with its sensual qualities. This negative characterisation is then linked to mass music and its rise through the 20th century, which Wagner’s compositions had heralded according to Adorno. He also adopts a somewhat objectivist perspective in several passages of the book, writing for example that ‘the element of falsehood in Wagner’s expression can be traced right down into the origins of his compositional practice¹²’, while referring to his use of the leitmotif which, according to Adorno, slows down the passage of time in the perception of the audience and prevents the music from developing its expression. So, while recognizing the aesthetic and formal function of the leitmotif, Adorno also posits that its presence creates a state of passive acceptance for the listener. The fact that this music contains elements that incite the audience to passively digest it is what allows Adorno to compare it to mass music, which he considers to have become a commercial commodity.

But these philosophical writings make a point to distance themselves from the works of historians, for whom Wagner is obviously a central composer of his time. Aside from his formal influence, which is known to have had an impact on Mahler, and then on Schonberg’s compositions, Wagner’s influence on the reception of operas can be of interest in our study of the sick, good or guilty pleasure that can be found in his work. Indeed, the fact that the audience is now silently listening to the music, in a dark theatre where the orchestra is hidden, may have influenced the religious connotations which this music, and the fact of listening to it, has acquired. In this case, the criticism attributed to aesthetical qualities that were thought to be intrinsic to his music could be taken to derive from these listening conditions, rather than the music itself. On the topic of the reception by the audience, we can also note that the search for “effects” denounced so vehemently by Nietzsche is on the contrary sought out by Wagner, notably in his advice on orchestral direction¹³, in which he claims for example, that obtaining these “effects” is more important than

¹⁰ *Posthumous Fragments, NF-1872,23[15]* — *Nachgelassene Fragmente Winter 1872–73. 23[15]*, Nietzsche source, digital critical edition ([www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1872,23\[15\]](http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1872,23[15])) . We are translating “Der Philosoph als Arzt der Kultur”. See also chapter 4 of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ‘The despisers of the body’, where Nietzsche poses the physiological origin of any conscious thought, and thus the central importance of the body, going against the strong philosophical tradition that tends to reject or ignore it.

¹¹ See for example § 370 of *The Gay Science*, and the ambiguity between the physical and the cultural that runs throughout the text. There, Wagner’s music is also quoted as a symptom of a weakened civilisation, both in the physical and spiritual sense. Translated by Thomas Common, Dover Publications, New York, 2009, 153.

¹² Theodor Adorno, *op. cit.* 37.

¹³ Richard Wagner, *Über das Dirigieren*, Breitkopf & Härtel, Leipzig, 1914, 74-75.

seeking a perfectly faithful restitution of the musical text, which is by itself a disputable goal. The interpretation must then favour the clarity and flexibility of the expression, so that the audience may be affected in the most direct way by the shifts and twists of the music. The very characteristic so violently denounced by Nietzsche is thus a goal explicitly sought by Wagner. We can also note that Nietzsche's sudden distaste for Wagner's music after 1876 could perhaps be attributed to the formal innovations that can be found in the *Ring*. Even though the innovative quality of these elements is praised in musicology, Nietzsche's philosophical perspective on Wagner's music made him see them as symptoms of a deeper, hidden tendency in the audience and in society at large, rather than consider the formal innovation that they represented.

This question of a sick pleasure will then turn into the problem of a guilty pleasure taken in Wagner's music. Here we mean by 'guilty' a sense of moral guilt, since some of the aesthetic qualities of this music will take a decisively darker connotation after Wagner's recovery by the Nazi regime.

II. Political recovery and guilt

1. Against monumentality

As soon as the Nazis came to power, Wagner's work was co-opted as a symbol of so-called German greatness. Wagner's reinterpretation of Germanic mythology, brought to life in dramatic form within the framework of the Ring Cycle, was now, in the eyes of the Nazis, a sign of the superiority of German culture. From the perspective of the aesthetic qualities employed, it was above all the monumentality of Wagner's orchestra that was harnessed for propaganda purposes, as evidenced by the official film of a performance of the *Meistersinger* Overture conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler at an AEG Workers' Concert in 1942. The Bayreuth Festival, a central venue for the dissemination of Wagner's work, was heavily co-opted by the Nazis, who turned it into a privileged cultural venue. Winifred Wagner, then in charge of the festival's management, promoted productions with a medieval aesthetic and, above all, a monumental scale, both in terms of the resolutely traditional sets and the number of performers on stage. It was at this time that Arturo Toscanini, for whom Wagner was perhaps his favorite composer, refused to accept Hitler's invitation; he would never set foot in Bayreuth again. As for Bruno Walter, who in 1935 had conducted the first attempt at a studio recording of *Die Walküre*, featuring Lotte Lehmann and Lauritz Melchior, he would never again conduct a Wagner opera after the Anschluss and his flight to the United States in 1938.

From then on, even after the war, even after Nazism, Wagner's work took on a macabre tinge. Wagner was a central figure in Western culture, constituting in particular a key milestone in opera as well as a benchmark for orchestration. For Wagner embodied modern opera, conceived as a total art form. However, whilst a few dissenting voices had already, during Wagner's lifetime, criticised certain aesthetic qualities perceived in his music—Nietzsche foremost among them—such as the internal monumentality of the musical discourse or the pretension to an 'other world' inherent in the librettos, Wagner's music remains, in everyone's memory, the music of Nazism. In France, one musicologist and philosopher embodies this critique of Wagnerism: Vladimir Jankélévitch. As Timothée Picard explains in 'Le topos de la "musique du silence"', Jankélévitch contrasts the monumentality of Wagner—which, in his view, is perfectly consistent with Nazi totalitarianism—with the intimacy of French music. Thus, what stands in opposition to Wagner's overwhelming power is the unique charm of French music, that of Fauré, that of Debussy, which opens up through the ineffable rather than closing in on the unspeakable. Whereas Wagner relies on the production of

effect—in the singular, to use Nietzsche’s term—he effectively stands in opposition to the natural, which his irregularity renders inexplicable whilst allowing for openness: Wagner is said to give rise to an illusion of transcendence, whereas French music is resolutely immanent. For the ineffable, like the unspeakable, are mysteries, but, as Jankélévitch explains in *La musique et l’ineffable*:

It is the dark night of death that is the unspeakable, because it is impenetrable darkness and a despairing non-being, and because an insurmountable wall bars us from its mystery: in this respect, the unspeakable is that of which there is absolutely nothing to say, and which renders man speechless by overwhelming his reason and stunning his speech.¹⁴

It is therefore the case that the unspeakable does not inspire hope, unlike that which the charm reveals to the eye, the famous ‘feel¹⁵’—which we cannot fully articulate—that is characteristic of French music.

2. A new level of seriousness

But this sense of guilt that has long cast a shadow over Wagner’s music is felt even by Wagnerians themselves. At the very least, it is felt among performers. The Wagnerian orchestra, in particular, takes on a sense of weight and gravity. This gravity was entirely absent from the performances recorded during what is usually referred to as the ‘golden age’ of Wagnerian performance, extending up to the pre-war period. Undoubtedly, the best way to observe this is through an empirical study of a stylistic evolution: that of Wilhelm Furtwängler. Why Furtwängler? Because he epitomised the application of the advice Wagner gave to conductors. In reality, it is above all because Furtwängler was himself a direct heir to Richard Wagner. His art consisted, in fact, in the apotheosis of this conception of conducting based on perceptual adaptation, in other words, the alignment of interpretative choices with the listeners’ perception, which was embodied in a certain flexibility. If the figure of Wagner had emerged so strongly, to the point of making the performer—in this case, primarily the conductor—the embodiment of the musician, it was because his approach was, at its core, demiurgic. This is because it allowed his truly creative dimension to be fully and explicitly perceived. As a conductor, Wagner emphasised the creative aspect of his work on any composer’s piece through this interpretation, for it was perceptive, fluid and intuitive. In *Über das Dirigieren*, his principal essay on conducting, Wagner explained that any change occurring within the continuous flow of the musical discourse must be gradual, both in terms of dynamics and tempo. The main thing, therefore, was, in his view, to prioritise the right balance between the intended effect and the perceived effect, rather than the strict adherence of interpretative choices to the composer’s score. Thus, Furtwängler took Wagner at his word, who, moreover, sought to prioritise the continuity of the melody.

Let us therefore consider two of Furtwängler’s interpretations of the Ride that opens the third act of *Die Walküre*. On the one hand, during a performance at Covent Garden in 1937, and on the other in Vienna in late 1954, in what was to be his very last studio recording. It is clear that much

¹⁴ Vladimir Jankélévitch, Béatrice Berlowitz, *Quelque part dans l’inachevé* (1978), Paris, Gallimard, 92-93, quoted in COSTE, Claude, « La verve musicale de Vladimir Jankélévitch », *Recherches & Travaux*, 85 | 2014, 189-203. We translate : « C’est la nuit noire de la mort qui est l’indicible, parce qu’elle est ténèbre impénétrable et désespérant non-être, et parce qu’un mur infranchissable nous barre de son mystère : est indicible, à cet égard, ce dont il n’y a absolument rien à dire, et qui rend l’homme muet en accablant sa raison et en médusant son discours. »

¹⁵ Timothée Picard, « Le topos de la “musique du silence” dans la stratégie identitaire de la France au xxe siècle ». *Écriture et silence au xxe siècle*, edited by Michèle Finck and Yves-Michel Ergal, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pus.2400> We translate : « Sentir ».

has changed. Firstly, and this is one of the defining features of this internal development within musical discourse that took place after the war, the thematic priority in the melody prior to the war lay with the strings, with the woodwind counterpoint taking precedence over that of the brass, as this is, on a diegetic level, a truly aerial ride; to this we must once again add that Wagner's priority in his conducting choices was consistently that of the singing. Pierre Flinois, in the discography devoted to the *Ring* in the *Guide des opéras de Wagner*, published by Fayard in 1988, explains that in 1937, 'the Ride, harsh yet cheerful, surges forth, [and that] the moments of Farewell radiate¹⁶'. However, regarding the 1954 version this time, it is said to be more 'disembodied, almost abstract¹⁷'. This is also because this greater unification of the orchestra leads to a deterioration of the organic dimension, characterised primarily by irregularity—and notably, in 1937, by a certain disunity among the orchestral sections. And the critic concludes: "We shall never hear this again, even with the same musicians, in future versions, whether complete or not: a war will have passed in the meantime, to break their spirit, somewhere.¹⁸" This new abstraction, and above all this general sense of heaviness, is in fact evident in every post-war recording, which marks the end of the era of lyrical, or even Mozartian Wagner, an era founded on the very flexibility and progression of which Wagner himself spoke.

III. The path to rehabilitation

1. Modernism and marxism

However, after the war, attempts at rehabilitation sought to dispel the sense of guilt that haunted Wagner's memory and weighed heavily on Wagnerians. The first approach adopted was what we propose to call the modernist approach. This approach first emerged with the reopening of the Bayreuth Festival in 1951, under the direction of Wagner's two grandsons, Winifried Wagner's sons Wieland and Wolfgang. It was Wieland who initially took charge of the stagings. He designed minimalist sets, in relatively cool yet saturated colours, with a highly abstract quality. The aim was to focus attention on the inter-subjective relationships between the characters, and to mark a break with the tradition of Wagnerian staging and its medieval sets, which were part of an archaic aesthetic, championing an idealised vision of Germanic mythology and widely appropriated by Nazi propaganda. The direction taken by Wieland Wagner, resolutely modernist and quite similar to avant-garde and even post-war painting—a style focused on form, in which painting consists of flat areas of colour on a flat surface, and whose principal post-war advocate was the American art critic Clement Greenberg—led to significant conflicts with the musicians, in particular with the conductors Herbert von Karajan, who left the Festival after its first year in 1951, and Hans Knappertsbusch, who went on strike in 1953—and was replaced by Clemens Krauss¹⁹. The

¹⁶ Pierre Flinois, Discography of the *Ring* Cycle, in *Guide des opéras de Wagner* (1988), directed by Michel Pazdro, Paris, Fayard, 802. We translate : « « la Chevauchée, rêpeuse, mais riante, déferle, [et que] les moments d'Adieux irradient » ».

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 796. We translate : « désincarnée, abstraite presque ».

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 802. We translate : « on ne réentendra plus cela, même avec les mêmes, dans les versions futures, intégrales on non : une guerre aura passé entre temps, pour leur briser, quelque part, l'âme. »

¹⁹ It is therefore interesting to note that the desire for a break with tradition at the heart of the 'New Bayreuth', as asserted by the two Wagner brothers, is primarily scenic, or intra-diegetic. Some performers had worked under the Nazis, notably Herbert von Karajan, of course.

modernist break was intended above all to be aesthetic, to refocus the reception of the work on the humanity of the characters and the universality represented in their relationships. The ambition was to achieve a break perceived on an aesthetic level, yet with strong political connotations, the aim being also to break with tradition in diegetic representation, embodied in the staging by medieval—or archaic—aesthetics.

This path towards universality was subsequently pursued in a more explicitly political manner in 1976. For the Centenary *Ring*, Wolfgang Wagner, then head of the Festival—Wieland had died in 1966—called upon a French duo: the conductor Pierre Boulez, already a seasoned Wagnerian—and particularly renowned for his interpretations of Parsifal—and the young stage director Patrice Chéreau. And whilst Boulez's vision would shed the post-war heaviness to reconnect with lightness and verve—even if the declamation is not as raw as in the aesthetics of the golden age, the orchestral texture is not as irregular, nor is the sound as concentrated and organic as in the post-Romantic ideal, which had been under intense scrutiny since the late 1950s—, Chéreau offers a Marxist interpretation of the Ring Cycle, completely at odds with the conservatism that had still managed to hold out, as seen in the productions of Wieland Wagner, who kept the relationships between the characters unchanged. Chéreau sets the Ring in the 19th century, and replaces the overthrow of the gods by men with that of the powerful by the people. The production caused a scandal, and Chéreau was accused of misappropriation. This warrants a brief look at the context specific to Wagner, in order to clarify certain assumptions that allow such criticism to be dismissed. Indeed, Wagner represents the emergence of post-Romanticism through the realisation of distinctly Romantic aspirations, both in terms of instrumental ambitions—the orchestra can at last be seen as a malleable and intuitive entity from the conductor's perspective, for whom the ensemble sounds like a unified whole, like a single, unique instrument—as well as in the concepts preceding musical interpretation, where the subjective affirmation of a singular individual's genius can justify 'tweaks'²⁰ to the text, to use René Leibowitz's word in *Le compositeur et son double*. In other words, the very context in which the Ring Cycle was written affirms the primacy of individual expression over the strict reproduction of the work. The only sacred domain, which must not be subject to any deviation, is that of the conditions of reception, a domain which Wagner, through Bayreuth, himself helped to sanctify.

In doing so, Chéreau also seeks to reinterpret a distinctly Wagnerian conceptual opposition, one to which Nietzsche was directly opposed: the incompatibility between love and power. Nietzsche refers specifically to a 'socialist utopia'²¹ in §4 of *The Case of Wagner*, which Chéreau reinterprets through a strongly materialist lens, freeing himself as much as possible from any magical or metaphysical representation. In any case, Chéreau once again appears to affirm a realistic link between aesthetic and moral qualities: if Wagner is an acceptable composer, it is not only because of his artistic modernity—highlighted here by the very location of Bayreuth, which will undoubtedly also contribute greatly to his institutionalisation—but also because of the emancipatory and even socialist significance of his work.

²⁰ René Leibowitz, *Le compositeur et son double, Essais sur l'interprétation musicale*, édition définitive (1986), Paris, Gallimard, 90. We translate : « retouches ».

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner* (1888), in *Nietzsches werke*, Stuttgart, A. Kröner, 1921, 16. We translate: « sozialistische Utopie ».

2. A matter of accessibility?

A completely different approach lies within the musical discourse itself. In this case, it involves focusing on the aesthetic qualities of the performance in order to make it more accessible. Of course, the embodiment of this approach was the first studio recording of the entire *Ring Cycle*, begun in 1958 by John Culshaw. The cinematic effects offered by the Decca production were not to everyone's taste at the time of the release of the recordings conducted by Georg Solti. However, it is interesting for us to note that accessibility was sought here through the realisation of a form of dramatisation, or theatricalisation, of a purely auditory work—a point on which most of the criticism centred: Wagnerian drama is the stage, and above all, it is the stage. The audio dimension alone would qualitatively diminish the narrative dimension of the *Tetralogy*²². Paradoxically, however, the criticism levelled at this 'ease' finds new relevance here, following the model denounced by Nietzsche or Adorno. The problem, precisely, with these—few—cinematic effects—feigned to anchor the sound within an embodied plot—is that they seek to make the apprehension of Wagner's music an easy matter.

However, we propose to contrast two approaches to Wagner's music on this very theme of accessibility: on the one hand, James Levine's approach, and on the other, Leopold Stokowski's. For they are polar opposites, and in a strangely paradoxical way. We suggested that there was a twofold social explanation for Wagner's success: on the one hand, drawing upon—or even establishing—the codes of popular fantasy, and on the other, justifying himself in the eyes of the cultured public through the institutional framework of opera. A paradox that Levine seems to bring fully to life. Perhaps this is because he seems to emphasise certain qualities that appear to run counter to what Wagner's discourse values, such as glitz, particularly through syrupy strings and flashy brass. Ultimately, we could find here an idea of kitsch! Whilst it is true that Wagner spent his career as a performer in opposition to Mendelssohn, adopting an approach characterised by liveliness and light tempos, and that he was not necessarily a direct advocate of fast tempos, any more than he was an advocate of lightness, Wagner himself agreed that whilst the singers take precedence above all else—and consequently the conditions that put them in the best possible frame of mind—certain approaches are preferable to others. And it is surely no coincidence that Furtwängler, even as late as 1954, chose to lighten the orchestral texture overall. Moreover, through accessibility, Levine opts for seriousness on a diegetic level, in contrast to the reflexivity that Wieland Wagner or Chéreau might have demonstrated on their own scale, by proposing to the Metropolitan Opera in New York a production by Otto Schenk, which revives the archaic aesthetic of Wagnerism's early days.

In contrast to Levine's vision, we find another form of accessibility in Leopold Stokowski. He establishes a light-hearted Wagner, laughing in his own way, precisely through the choice of reflexivity, embodied by the musical discourse itself. Indeed, Stokowski, who seems fully aware of this dual nature of Wagner's work, does not attempt to treat Wagner's fantastical dimension with a literal interpretation, but rather embraces what might essentially be called a spectacular show, in a very Hollywood style! Stokowski, a great orchestral leader in the United States, particularly in Philadelphia, possesses perfect technical mastery of the orchestra, a malleable and unified entity that is truly intuitive to him—thus embodying the historic ambition of Romanticism. Stokowski, following the specifically Wagnerian model, thus modulates in undulations and waves, constantly restoring irregularity, whilst accentuating the effect through an extremely unified string *legato*, and using counterpoint to provide a constant renewal of tension. Moreover, Stokowski ceaselessly alters

²² Incidentally, for Adorno, the best possible way to experience the opera is through the recording, and through an appreciation of the formal properties inherent in the musical discourse.

his tempo, bringing to life the progressive dimension intended by Wagner himself. On an institutional level, the element of spectacular Hollywood show still present in Wagner—which Adorno denounced—is embodied by the fact that Stokowski never conducted a complete Wagner opera, lending a resolutely epic dimension to excerpts that were sometimes cut or even reorchestrated by him. In particular, in terms of interpretation, Stokowski does not hesitate to emphasise certain details – notably certain strident outbursts from the woodwinds – to restore a sense of vigour and, more profoundly, to convey a stance, a retrospective view of a work with a dual nature.

Conclusion

What conclusion should we draw? Wagner today seems to remain a divisive composer. Nevertheless, his place in the evolution of music towards modernity, and ultimately towards dodecaphonism and atonality, remains decisive. But let us conclude with a paradox. Nietzsche had already denounced it: one often observes a certain intellectual ambition among a not inconsiderable number of Wagnerians. Wagner is said to have composed, particularly with the *Ring* Cycle, a work of philosophical and universal significance. Perhaps the ideas regarding what aesthetic reception should entail, as espoused by Wagner himself, have amplified forms of practice with strong liturgical connotations. As Joëlle Caullier explains in “L’art d’interpréter la musique, Un essai d’anthropologie culturelle”:

It was with Wagner that everything changed and conductors became the high priests of a mystical art open to the future, the as-yet-unknown truths of which only they could reveal. It was therefore from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards that the cult of performers developed and that the new materialist society recognised them as mediators of the spiritual realm, however secular it might be.²³

Wagner is thus at the origin of a ‘cult’ of which musicians have been the subject since the nineteenth century. However, is it a coincidence that, in order to rehabilitate Wagner, Chéreau chose materiality, or even corporeality? What if Wagner’s music were resolutely physical, made up of impressions, fundamentally cheerful and light-hearted, as the performers of the golden age presented it? Ultimately, it would therefore be no coincidence if the very qualities that justified the condemnation of Wagner’s musical drama—by Nietzsche and later by Adorno—were the very ones that constituted its unique aesthetic power, and even its irrelevance to the present day—for Wagner must be performed like Mozart.

Nor is it likely a coincidence that Wagner, who was so keen to transcend the genre of opera in order to create a ‘total art form’—a concept he encapsulated in the term ‘musical drama’—is regarded as the guiding figure behind contemporary film music. As an opening, one work attests to this in a particularly symbolic way. It is *Excalibur*, directed by John Boorman and released in 1981. Here, Boorman seems to invert the traditional content-form pairing in cinema to produce a self-reflexive work. The legend of the Grail is not so much the focus; it seems to serve as a vehicle, in this case, for a tribute to the medium of cinema itself. Boorman employs all the most artificial techniques that have made the seventh art famous, and endeavours to make them appear natural through the narration of a mythical story. And so, is it once again a coincidence that, to produce a

²³ Joëlle Caullier, « L’art d’interpréter la musique, Un essai d’anthropologie culturelle », in *TUMULTES*, No.37, 2011, 190-209, 194. We translate : « C’est à partir de Wagner que tout change et que les chefs d’orchestre deviennent les grands-prêtres d’un art mystique ouvert sur l’avenir et dont eux seuls peuvent révéler les vérités encore inconnues. C’est donc à partir de la deuxième moitié du dix-neuvième siècle que se développe le culte des interprètes et que la nouvelle société matérialiste leur reconnaît une fonction médiatrice avec le registre spirituel, fût-il laïc. »

manifesto film seeking ultimately to affirm what cinema is, Boorman chooses Wagnerian excerpts for the score—*Tristan*, *Parsifal*, and of course the *Funeral March*? Ultimately, what if the richness of Wagner lay in the purely emotional impact of his music?

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