

LEITMOTIVE

THE JOURNAL OF THE WAGNER SOCIETY OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

NIETZSCHE AND WAGNER: III

The Philosopher's Transformation From A Lion To A Child

We were friends and have become estranged. But this was right, and we do not want to conceal and obscure it from ourselves as if we had reason to feel ashamed. We are two ships each of which has its goal and course; our paths may cross and we may celebrate a feast together as we did — and then the good ships rested so quietly in one harbor and one sunshine that it may have looked as if they had reached their goal and as if they had one goal. But then the almighty force of our tasks drove us apart again into different seas and sunny zones, and perhaps we shall never see each other again; perhaps we shall meet again but fail to recognize each other: our exposure to different seas and suns has changed us.

—Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft

Introduction

Having survived the “morbid isolation” [*krankhafte Vereinsamung*] experienced in “the desert of these experimental years” [*Versuchsjahre*] that followed his traumatic break with Wagner, Nietzsche emerged from his “lion” phase of radical questioning and self-doubt to metamorphose into a “child.” The child is a paradoxical symbol of “that *mature* freedom of the spirit which is fully as much self-mastery and discipline of the heart [*Zucht des Herzens*]...which permits paths to many opposing ways of thought.” Nietzsche gave firm direction to his rich

impulses for knowledge, having attained “the great health” [*die große Gesundheit*] a condition in which thinking springs from an “overfullness” akin to a pregnancy of mind that struggles to bring to light what is most sublime and illuminating.

No longer seeing Wagner as the all-knowing genius deserving of the highest respect and obedience, but as a man with “human, all too human” character flaws, whether excessive vanity, petty prejudice and questionable aesthetic and political theories, the Maestro took his rightful place in Nietzsche’s history of becoming fully himself: “No longer chained down by hatred and love [*nicht mehr in den Fesseln von Liebe und Haß*], one lives without Yes and No, voluntarily near, voluntarily far...now the free spirit concerns himself only with things (and how many there are!) which no longer *trouble him* “ [*welche ihn nicht mehr bekümmern*].

Nietzsche proceeded to author visionary works that placed him among the few elect thinkers of world history — works that defy being categorized academically as “philosophy,” “poetry,” “psychology,” “sociology,” “history,” or “religion,” much as Wagner’s operas are not easily pigeonholed, given that his genius forged song, music, myth and drama into an organic whole that evades simplistic description. The books of Nietzsche’s “child” period include: *Also Sprach Zarathustra: ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra: a Book for Everyone and No*

One, Parts I and II, 1883; Part III, 1884; Part IV, 1885); *Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft* (*Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, 1886); *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1887); *Der Fall Wagner: ein Musikanten-Problem* (*The Case of Wagner: a Musician's Problem*, 1888); *Die Götzen-Dämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert* (*Twilight of the Gods or How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, 1888); *Der Antichrist* (1888); *Ecce Homo* (1888); and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1888).

Nietzsche said that turning away from Wagner “was for me a fate, to like anything after that, a triumph. Perhaps nobody was more dangerously attached to—grown together with Wagnerizing, nobody tried harder to resist it; nobody was happier to get rid of it.” Claiming that a genuine philosopher is obligated to “overcome his time in himself” to remove prejudices that distort seeing cultural and political trends with a judiciously penetrating eye, Nietzsche added that he was “no less than Wagner a child of this time...that is, a decadent,” but unlike Wagner “I comprehended this, I rejected it...the philosopher in me resisted.” Decadence for Nietzsche is a condition of “declining life, impoverished life, the will to the end, the great weariness,” and he affirmed that modern European culture and some of its leading

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Hal Sarf concludes his comprehensive essay concerning the relationship of Wagner and Nietzsche. Interestingly, Dr. Sarf's work is from Nietzsche's perspective (we hope to present soon a piece from Wagner's point of view). A British author, Gordon Burrett, gives us his thoughts on the current European trend of producers making major deviations from Wagner's staging instructions ["Deviationists"]. Finally, we offer a review of the recent Los Angeles Opera production of Tristan.

— LETTERS TO THE EDITOR —

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

Los Angeles Opera – February 1, 1997

Editor,

As a relatively new member of the Society, I would like to bring to its attention what strikes me as the finest short summary of the Master and his music I have yet to find. I refer to the first of six essays on Wagner in Pierre Boulez, *Orientations*, a Faber and Faber publication available in paperback. Entitled “Richard Wagner: The Man and The Works,” the essay is only eight pages long. But it would be impossible to find a more succinct, a more cogent summary and assessment.

“Hagiographers,” Boulez begins, “seize like vultures on the figures of those who have contributed most to forming the character of an age. . . .Titans,” Boulez continues, “have no weaknesses,” while “the unity of the man and his work is one of the most persistent articles of faith.” Wagner “provides an exception to the rule.”

Boulez’s is a rich and profound discussion — too dense easily to summarize. “Was Wagner himself the servant of the society of which he had aspired to be the prophet? Was he not increasingly obliged to play a role that he had once attempted to live?” Much of the essay hangs on the answers to questions such as these. It was Wagner’s “search for a total solution” that was the passion of his life and “provided the justification of even its most ambiguous and unacceptable aspects.” Nor does Boulez blink the latter. “The descent from Greek tragedy to racist manifesto constituted a degradation for which he can be held only partly responsible, though responsible even so. This is why,” Boulez concludes, “it is difficult, even impossible, wholly to disperse the mists, the shadows, and the darkness that have gathered round his name. . . .For us he remains a problematical personality and a supreme artistic achievement: the personality has not yet vanished behind the achievement. Can it ever?”

Almost as good is the next essay, “Cosima Wagner’s Diary: ‘R. is working.’” The diary leaves us, Boulez asserts, “with a picture of the intellectual landscape in which Wagner lived,” though it

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The Los Angeles Times advertisements for the opera *Tristan und Isolde* proclaimed:

“Vengeance. Magic. Irony. Bliss.
The Tragic Love Story that Sends the
Thin Line Between Love and Hate
Screaming for Its Life”

Fortunately, Peter Hemmings, General Director of the Los Angeles Opera Company, had much clearer vision and insight when he chose to reprise the 1987 production by the celebrated British/California artist David Hockney, using a stellar cast and his magnificent orchestra. The results were well worth the attention of any who revere this music drama.

Hockney designed a *Tristan* which is most surprisingly full of colour; brilliant cerulean blues, vermilion reds, greens, yellows, purple. Most productions of *Tristan* over the last century have tended to the monochromatic — since it is a sombre tragedy, the usual colours of gray and muted brown have tended to predominate. Hockney has made this the most colorful *Tristan* probably ever presented and generally it works well. It was a visual joy throughout.

Vorspiel (prelude): Conductor Richard Armstrong (Music Director of Scot-

tish Opera) made clear in the slow, but carefully crafted, swell of sound in the Prelude that he knew exactly what was to be asked of his large orchestral forces: The cellos at the first phrase assured us of the care and thought devoted to the entire string section.

Woodwinds were always in graceful balance; the brass section produced gentle sonorities—but was brilliant and powerful when needed.

Act I — Hockney has created a boat with fanciful sails and terrific Celtic emblems embroidering the sides of the ship; sails and sky change color throughout the act with appropriate response to the dramatic events. While it was impressive visually, the stage was so steeply raked (30°!) that it must have been dangerous for the singers to work on; and all three acts had similarly steeply raked sets.

Lighting Director, Duane Schuler (resident lighting director for the Chicago Lyric Opera) understands both the musical and visual requirements for Wagner as well as enhances the art work of David Hockney.

The Sailor (tenor Jonathan Mack) made a lovely beginning to the Act, albeit unseen. Interestingly, this same person sang the part of the shepherd in Act

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Robert S. Fisher, Editor

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NIETZSCHE

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figures manifested nihilistic traits. If Wagner is judged to be “merely one of my sicknesses,” then Nietzsche felt “grateful to him” because *der Meister* served as an “indispensable symptom” that illuminates, on close inspection, the cultural disorders of the age.

Wagner, then, is subjected to the strong light of Nietzsche’s philosophic magnifying glass to understand the “labyrinth of the modern soul”; indeed, “where could one find a guide more initiated, a more eloquent prophet of the soul than Wagner?” If Nietzsche’s mission is “to overthrow idols”—warning his readers to “be on guard unless a statue crush you”—then he also claimed to be “warlike by nature,” needing “objects of resistance, a mighty problem or opponent” to stimulate his thinking. A noble warrior in the service of truth never attacks persons or problems that are contemptibly base. Required are “opponents who are equals,” whether world-historical individuals such as Wagner and Schopenhauer, or “victorious causes” such as the New German Reich or cultural romanticism, that can be analyzed “to make visible a growing calamity.” Wagner, then, became Nietzsche’s majestic “antipode” because he was a genius of enormous if problematic cultural influence.

What exactly did Nietzsche in his “child” phase find questionable about Wagner’s person, music-dramas and outlook on life?

I

Nietzsche claimed that Wagner tied the fate of his art to the growing wave of nationalism that flourished after Bismark’s Prussia defeated France in a great show of military prowess, and began to unify the dispersed German kingdoms and principalities to build a strong centralized state. Wagner, in Nietzsche’s estimation, compromised the universal appeal of his great music-dramas by viewing these as an exclusive German art. “What did I never forgive Wagner? That he condescended to the Germans—that he became *reichdeutsch*,” pridefully espousing

“*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*,” as if Germany represented the “moral world-order” and stood far above other states in actualizing the highest degree of freedom and culture. For Nietzsche, Germany “is sick with nationalism,” that “most anti-cultural sickness” and “dead end street of particularism and petty politics” that fosters intolerance, hatred and violence between peoples. Wagner’s intense nationalism smells of “bad air” and represents a repudiation of the noble sentiments of Humboldt, Herder and Goethe who taught that Germans ought to cherish their culture, language and unique history but without supposing these are intrinsically superior to those of other peoples. For them, being German invoked the duty to respect the great diversity of ethnicities, languages, religions and cultures of other nations as testaments to the sublime variety of God’s expressive life as manifested in the human order.

Wagner, then, chose nationalism over patriotism and intolerance over mutual understanding; he was the antithesis of Nietzsche’s ideal of the “good European” as exemplified in his “hatred of Jews to whom he is not able to do justice when it comes to their greatest deed...the Jews are the inventors of Christianity.” Wagner denied Jesus’ Jewish origin partly because that fact contradicted the racial ideas of his associates, Count Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain—the latter was Wagner’s son-in-law—both of whom theorized that history is propelled by a basic conflict between noble, creative races of Aryan blood and peoples of inferior stock who, through racial mixing with their superiors, brought about political, cultural and moral decline.

Nietzsche thought it rather hypocritical that Wagner preached the virtues of a vegetarian diet and anti-vivisection, asking for “mercy in our relations with animals” while “advocating antipathy toward Jews” as an alien presence in German life and unworthy of being granted full citizenship in the New Reich, thereby showing him to “disguise his deep hatred against certain things and people in his love of animals.” The unique combination of compassion and extreme antipathy in a single breast indicated to Nietzsche

that Wagner was poisoned by *ressentiment*, an ignoble emotion born of feelings of inferiority that led him to blame whole groups (Jews, Jesuits and French), or individuals (Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn or Hanslick) for hatching evil plots to thwart his artistic success or to poison Germany’s cultural vitality. Wagner’s avowals of Schopenhauer’s ideals of compassion, selflessness and virtue masked an angry and intolerant spirit, and Nietzsche claimed Wagner failed to confront his own contradictions, instead holding others responsible for his suffering.

II

Wagner never viewed himself merely as a composer of epic music-dramas, but he also imagined himself a writer of deep vision and distinction who filled volumes addressing the many topics that fascinated him, including aesthetics, composition, conducting, music history, German and European politics, philosophy, religion, diet, and political theory. Nietzsche remarked that Wagner’s prose works exude a bloated vanity and offer “a course in shrewdness” that sought to convince his readers that he alone possessed the wisdom to solve the most difficult problems of communal and personal existence: “Everything Wagner could do, nobody will be able to do after him, nobody has done before him, and nobody shall do after him.” If Wagner sees himself offering “genuine” and rare insights—being a “divine” gift to humanity—then he possessed the “instincts of an actor and orator” bent on impressing his audience at any cost. Thinking that his music—and essays—conveyed “infinite meaning,” Wagner wrote to “persuade all the world to take his music seriously,” proclaiming himself the true spokesman for the German *Volk*—the voice of the “unconscious spirit of the people”—and posing as a “holy master” and redeemer of Germany in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, as if his momentous music-dramas and cultural theories would cure sick spirits by exposing them to the magical powers of Teutonic myth and saga.

Nietzsche said—no doubt thinking of his own experience—that “One pays

heavily for being one of Wagner's disciples," for *der Meister* demanded total devotion to his person, tireless dedication to the Bayreuth project, and unquestioned loyalty to the New German Reich. Declaring war against "free spirits," he seduces young and old to his cause—the "old minotaur drags all to his den" with the "tones of magic maidens"—using his charisma and their idealism to transform them into "worshipful moon calves" to be "disciples of his secret art" devoted to propagating his "gospel." If "the best German youths become horned [helmeted] Siegfrieds," then they have lost their capacity to be freely critical: "You ought to, must believe" in Wagner as an act of faith. For Nietzsche, it is a sign of spiritual health to "resist him" given that Wagner persuades without being "certain of what one is persuaded to," and his music-dramas offer seduction on a "large scale" with the "blackest obscurantism concealed in shades of light."

Never denying the truly magnetic attraction and imaginative vision of Wagner's art, Nietzsche remarked: "Nothing equals the dangerous fascination and the gruesome, sweet infinity of *Tristan*—this work is emphatically Wagner's *non plus ultra*; with the *Meistersinger* and the *Ring* he recuperated." If the Master exposed his listeners to "the voluptuousness of hell, the 50 worlds of alien ecstasies for which no one besides him had wings," then his admirers failed to see what lay concealed behind the shimmering surface beauty of sound and verse, namely, an art of "weakness," "exhaustion" and "decadence." Wagner is "the modern artist *par excellence*: the Cagliostro of modernity and musician become actor" who offers "histrionics," a "persuasion of nerves," "tones for the heavy-hearted," and a "drowsy happiness" evoked by "theatrical rhetoric," "sensuousness in place of style," "grand effects" and extremes of feeling that achieve a "terrifying duration" through "infinite melody." It was "blasphemy" for Wagner to proclaim himself to be Beethoven's true heir, and the wreath laid on his grave by the first Wagner Association with the inscription "redemption for the redeemer" ought to have read "redemption *from* the redeemer."

III

Nietzsche's strong sarcasm ought not to deflect seeing that his conflict with Wagner grew from incompatible theories of culture, morality and existence. Thinking back on his "camel" stage of discipleship to Wagner, Nietzsche says: "as a young man I interpreted Wagner's music as an expression of a Dionysian power of the German soul...the earthquake through which some primeval force that had been damned up for ages finally liberated itself." However, he had been "*mistaken*" to judge Wagner's music as a "symptom of superior force, of more audacious courage, and of a more triumphant fullness of life..." as if it had signaled the birth of a noble, tragic culture inspired by life in ancient Periclean Athens. Instead, both "Schopenhauer's philosophy of the will or Wagner's music" were symptoms of something quite different, namely, the victory of "*romantic pessimism*"—the "last great event in the fate of our culture."

Claiming that great art springs from intense suffering, and that aesthetic creations should be evaluated in terms of whether these hinder or enhance the experience of living, Nietzsche divides art into two opposing ideal types: the Dionysian-tragic and Romantic-pessimistic.

Dionysian-tragic art is born from affirming that life is abundantly rich and supremely rewarding despite the pain, decay, conflict and anxiety that living entails. Nietzsche's point is that the unwelcome, problematic sides of existence cannot be abolished—at least not without destroying life itself—and further, that these negative experiences are essential for knowing their contrasting opposites, whether repose, joy, love, or beauty. Life, then, is composed of reciprocally conditioned polarities, and the goal of Dionysian-tragic art is to transfigure suffering, thereby showing that existence has absolute worth despite its paradoxes and miseries.

Romantic-pessimistic art springs from a deep desire to flee life because it has hateful, objectionable and painful traits. Indeed, if life is ultimately futile, and if the self is a vanity that ought not to be, as Wagner and Schopenhauer claimed, then

they offered a philosophically inspired aesthetics of "redemption," thinking that suffering, imperfection and transience are insurmountable objections to existence itself. Hence, an art of "rest, stillness, calm seas...or convulsions and intoxication." Wagner's music-dramas either anesthetizes the suffering self by the sweet power of "infinite melody" or obliterates it by exposure to overwhelmingly powerful pseudo-religious experiences produced by grand theatrical effects. Nietzsche claims that *der Meister* is a "god for the sick" who "slanders life" by seeking to ameliorate suffering through a flurry of intense feeling that negates the *will-to-live*—such negation being a vengeance against, and cure for, a world filled with individual and communal distress. Indeed, Wagner's "opera is the opera of redemption" because it offers a Schopenhauerian inspired deliverance that Nietzsche judged to be a "counterfeit transcendence" that embodies a "nihilistic, Buddhist instinct in music."

If Wagner was the "most famous living follower of Schopenhauer"—the philosopher he believed to be the "unriddler of the world"—then Wagner went wrong by entering into an uncritical discipleship to his master's metaphysics, ethics and aesthetics: "more and more Wagner's art wants to present itself as a companion piece and supplement to Schopenhauer's philosophy"... the "spell that blinded him" to a healthy aesthetic. Wagner embraced Schopenhauer "as a herald and protection...when the latter's time had come," for Wagner lacked the "courage for the ascetic ideal without the...authority of Schopenhauer's philosophy which gained ascendancy in Europe."

IV

Nietzsche claims that Wagner's discipleship to Schopenhauer entailed a "complete theoretical contradiction" between "his earlier and later aesthetic creed." In *Opera and Drama*, Wagner said that the ideal art-work ought to achieve an organic harmony and approximate equality between dramatic action, word and music, but under Schopenhauer's impact, he theorized that music is sovereign because

it alone expresses directly the archetypal moods of the eternal Will without recourse to linguistic or visual mediums. Further, Wagner's adoption of Schopenhauer's "cult of *genius*" meant that the "value of the musician himself went up in an unheard of manner...he becomes an oracle, a priest, indeed, more than a priest, a kind of mouthpiece of the in-itself of things, a telephone from beyond..." Given Wagner's vision of himself as a missionary savior of a Germany fallen into decadence, he relied on Schopenhauer to legitimate himself as a genius who, in the guise of a musician-poet, is a "ventriloquist of god" who reveals the mystic truths of the Will's eternal archetypes that are normally inaccessible to ordinary humanity.

According to Nietzsche, Wagner embraced Schopenhauer by treating "Christianity as a seed of Buddhism" and by helping to "prepare a Buddhistic era in Europe," sometimes masking that impulse by an "occasional rapprochement with Catholic-Christian formulas and sentiments." Most significantly, homage is paid to the "*ascetic ideal*," perhaps most powerfully in *Parsifal* where chastity is idealized as a supreme, redemptive virtue as witnessed by the fall and suffering of King Amfortas who corrupted himself by succumbing to carnal desire as symbolized by Kundry, the beautiful enchantress, thereby endangering the vitality and purity of the Grail-brotherhood. For Nietzsche, the opera discloses an "insane hatred of knowledge, spirit and sensuality—a curse on all the senses"—as if embracing the bodily delights of Klingsor's magic garden is inherently "evil," whereas an anti-natural, disembodied and otherworldly spirituality has the highest value. After Wagner found Schopenhauer, he turned away from his previous embrace of Feuerbach's "healthy sensuality" to preach an austere self-denial that expressed *ressentiment* against life itself, and against himself, as seen in his spiritual struggles with his own powerful sexual impulses.

If Wagner and Schopenhauer "glorify liberation from the Will-to-Live" as the essential goal of a higher aesthetic, then Nietzsche thought this avowed aim concealed a hidden agenda, namely, to "gain release from a torture"—*life itself*. Pity,

humility and chastity are affirmed as supreme virtues because these prepare the individual to negate absolutely its "Will to Live" to achieve a condition of selfless "salvation." The goal of existence is to *cease to be*—to embrace annihilation and death. That Wagner's music-dramas were ardently received by the French romantics, whether Delacroix or Baudelaire, was not accidental for Nietzsche. They, as Wagner, are "fanatics of expression at any price," addicted to exotic and gigantic theatrical effects, and to "the ugly and gruesome"—all a group of opiates that "seduces, allures, compels, overthrows" ordinary ego boundaries through intense states of feeling that evoke an ephemeral transcendence.

Placing the opposition between "sensuality and chastity" at the "center of his art," Wagner elevated selfless love, loyalty, self-sacrifice and pity to supreme virtues, a move that struck Nietzsche as hypocritical given *des Meister's* arrogant nature, intolerance, and lusty drives that found outlet in several marital infidelities. For Nietzsche, however, the essential issue is not Wagner's contradictions—for Wagner, too, is "human, all too human"—but that his vision of the nature of love is suspect.

For Wagner, love is found in the experience of transcending the boundaries of self to achieve unity with another, and ultimately, with the eternal Will itself. The true barrier to love, for him, is the "evil" of egotism which fosters the destructive metaphysical illusion that the self has independent substance and can achieve fulfillment on its own. Wagner, then, upheld Schopenhauer's idea that "one becomes selfless in love," seeking the "advantage of another human being, often against one's own advantage." Love is a deathly fusion, the shattering of personal identity, portrayed in Brünnhilde's drive for self-extinction in a fiery immolation that also serves to cleanse a tainted, evil world through compassionate sacrifice. Still, Wagner's espousals of love, pity and forgiveness hardly extend to Mime, the horde of Nibelung dwarfs or to Klingsor who was refused entry into the Grail brotherhood for no apparent reason—signifying that Wagner selectively

applied his ideal of love.

What, then, is love for Nietzsche? He says that "love is egoistic; when wounded, love is the least generous," as when Brünnhilde, from possessiveness, jealousy and anger, plots Siegfried's destruction, mistakenly thinking he willfully abandoned her for another. If love is conceived as the intensification of self-awareness and pleasure through risking mutual vulnerability, then genuine love for Nietzsche is not found when two persons, e.g., Tristan and Isolde, seek wholeness through endless fusion experiences, as if each lacks substantial being apart from the other, and as if they find their highest fulfillment, dignity and well being in assuming absolute responsibility for the happiness of each other. Nietzsche judged that Wagner closely linked love with death because he failed, as did Schopenhauer, to appreciate that a fulfilling, healthy love lacks impulse to destroy the boundary between self and other; rather, the boundary remains intact no matter how intense the momentary sharing of bodies and spirits because lovers must always return to the prisons of their own selves—the fate of being human. Love for Nietzsche, then, is most authentic and heightened when persons freely give to each other from a reservoir of inner abundance rather than from wanting to use the other to fill one's own emptiness in a futile effort to gain a center.

If Nietzsche claimed Wagner's music is "an alliance of the beautiful and sick," then the Master is the "Klingsor of Klingsors" who established Bayreuth as his "holy temple" where the "Indian Circe beckons" the vulnerable to accept his "new Gospel." It is a "sign of decadence"—of weak, exhausted instincts—to be drawn to Wagner, and persons who find his "poison attractive" have embraced a Romantic-pessimistic view of life that ultimately fails to meet their heart-felt yearnings for meaning and fulfillment. For Nietzsche, Wagner achieved enormous popularity by *appearing* to embrace traditional Christian pieties and aspirations while actually offering an aesthetic substitute for religion in an age when the feeling for the sacred was in steep decline under the impact of scientific "enlightenment" with its

spectacular technological successes and promise of endless material progress. Wagner's art offered a beautiful if nihilistic solution to the perplexities and tragedies of personal and social existence; indeed, it seduced the spirit into experiencing a speechless luminosity that retarded clear rational reflection on the thorny problems of the human condition. Despite the sentiments expressed in *Parsifal* and other works, Nietzsche never trusted Wagner's espousal of Christian values, thinking these masked his anger, vanity and egotism, "if Wagner was a Christian, then Liszt was perhaps a church father."

Conclusion

It is a rare event in cultural history when two geniuses meet, form an intimate friendship marked by strong intellectual and emotional bonds in which one is disciplined by another, experience a fracture that fails to heal, and set sail on different seas to discover new lands where they built their own remarkable monuments for posterity to cherish. Still, perhaps it is a misnomer to describe the bond between Wagner and the young Nietzsche as true "friendship" given that Wagner, being some thirty years older and a controversial artist of supreme attainment and missionary ardor, likely took little of lasting value from their relationship, having already possessed clear and determined vision about his life's project before they met.

Nietzsche in his "child" stage knew that his association with Wagner was truly epic; fated to be a rich if controversial topic for earnest analysis by historians, philosophers and musicologists; and a subject for endless charges and countercharges among their partisan admirers and detractors about which of them planted seeds of enmity that withered their relationship. He recognized that his sharp criticisms of Wagner that followed a lengthy period of devotion to him would lead succeeding generations to identify them as two radiant suns that circled the heavens in adjacent orbits:

That in which we are related—that we have suffered more profoundly, also from

each other, then men of this day are capable of suffering—will link our names again and again eternally; and as certainly as Wagner is merely a misunderstanding among Germans, just as certainly I am and always shall be.

Did Nietzsche turn against Wagner from jealousy over his artistic deeds, from suffering a severe Oedipal complex, from being a petty and ungrateful spirit, or from emotional instability that eventually led him into the abyss of mental collapse? Strange as it seems, my judgment is that Nietzsche's harsh, uncompromising criticisms of Wagner were motivated by *compassion and friendship!* My unusual claim demands clarification.

Nietzsche remarks in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*:

I and me are always deep in conversation: how could one stand that if there were no friend? For the hermit the friend is always the third person: the third is the cork that prevents the conversation of the two from sinking into the depths. Alas, there are too many depths for all hermits: therefore they long so for a friend and his height.

For Nietzsche, friendship is a rare gift that enables the self's inner dialogue to be joined by another. Friendship invites intimacy, vulnerability and, above all, loyalty. However, loyalty must not be unconditional and blind, as if friendship demands the formation of a mutual admiration society in which persons are obligated to stroke warmly the other's ego and never express critical, pain-inducing judgments that can foster self-awareness and growth: "In a friend one should have one's best enemy. You should be closest to him with your heart when you resist him." Indeed, it is "no honor for your friend that you give yourself to him as you are..." for Nietzsche conceives the friend as an "arrow and longing for the superior being" [*Übermensch*—his symbol of one's highest self.

Friendship, then, carries the duty to help each other perceive the outlines of one's own unrealized virtues, "What is the face of your friend anyway? It is your own face in a rough and imperfect mir-

ror." Honesty is required when a friend is morally compromised or refuses to acknowledge faults that hinder the attainment of greater perfection. That is why true friendship for Nietzsche carries the obligation to engage in criticism born of deep care: "Compassion for the friend should conceal itself under a hard shell, and you should break a tooth on it. That way it will have delicacy and sweetness."

Nietzsche actualized his ideal of friendship with respect to Wagner when he criticized him, having judged that *der Meister* was blind to negative traits that both he, and his followers, ought not to excuse for reason of his epic artistic achievements, whether his extreme nationalism, insufferable vanity, moral hypocrisy, egoistic manipulation of people, drive to have worshipful disciples, prejudices against whole nations and races, incapacity to admit mistakes, hatred of individuals who disagreed with his pet ideas, and blind acceptance of Schopenhauer's philosophy. If Wagner acted the part of a self-righteous tyrant who refused to entertain criticism, and demanded absolute loyalty from his followers, then Nietzsche would not remain the Master's "yes" man—a sham friend!—as that would only reinforce his unjustified vanity of proclaiming himself the true redeemer of the German *Volk*. Nietzsche, then, judged Wagner to be wrong on several scores; and his ideal of friendship led him—from duty, compassion and sense of justice—to be the composer's greatest critic.

Although Wagner was angry that Nietzsche left his circle of disciples, and targeted him for severe ridicule, the composer provided the rich experiences that enabled Nietzsche to metamorphose from a "camel" into a "lion" and finally, into a "child"—thereby unwittingly contributing to the development of a philosopher of greatness who bequeathed a rare legacy to a world sorely needful of thoughtful illumination. If Nietzsche called "Wagner the great benefactor of my life," it is because the composer fully actualized the ideal of genius as one who sublimates deep passions into works of vision, having inspired the younger man to ponder the meanings of suffering, redemption,

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WHAT IS WAGNER FOR?

The Former Chairman Of The British Wagner Society Discusses Deviationists

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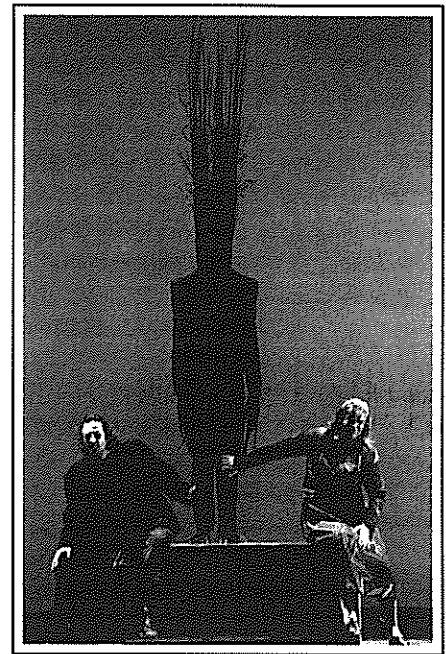
It is possible to feel sorry for both Norah Plummer (*Wagner News* No.108) and Philippe Monnet (*Wagner News* No. 109) though for quite different reasons. Mrs Plummer has been outraged by some modern Wagner productions and feels deeply that something she holds dear has been defiled. Her feelings are unlikely to have been assuaged by Mr Monnet's obscure justification of the ways of Richard Jones, the producer of Covent Garden's *Ring* offerings. It is doubtful whether she will accept his extraordinary assertion that those who criticise Mr Jones's stage tricks do so because they themselves exemplify the evils exposed in the *Ring* and do not like being depicted on the stage. But even if she still fails to sympathise with Mr Jones's creative intentions, one must feel sorry for anyone whose sense of reverence has been so cruelly treated. Mr Monnet, on the other hand, is upset by her reaction which he regards as a threat to the producer's right, as he sees it, to interpret or adapt Wagner as he chooses and, in doing so, pay him 'an enormous compliment'. I am sorry for him because I think he betrays a fundamental ignorance of what the true Wagner experience is, how it is conveyed and why Wagner's works are worth performing at all. And this has led him to misconceive the legitimate function of the producer. Nor is his case helped by his absurd claim that producers, and presumably also critics and academics, necessarily know best. Mrs Plummer writes with the self-interest of one who defends what she rightly holds dear. That is human and entirely legitimate. Mr Monnet, by contrast, defends the self-interest of so-called professionalism and its dupes. That too is human but its legitimacy is doubtful.

The two sides to this argument will never agree because they speak different languages, seek different ends and are in fact quite different kinds of people. Neither can produce arguments which will either convert or annihilate the other. This being so the best one can do is to point out some self-evident facts, not in order to prove anything, but simply as a description of how things appear to someone who happens to think that Mrs Plummer has by far the stronger case.

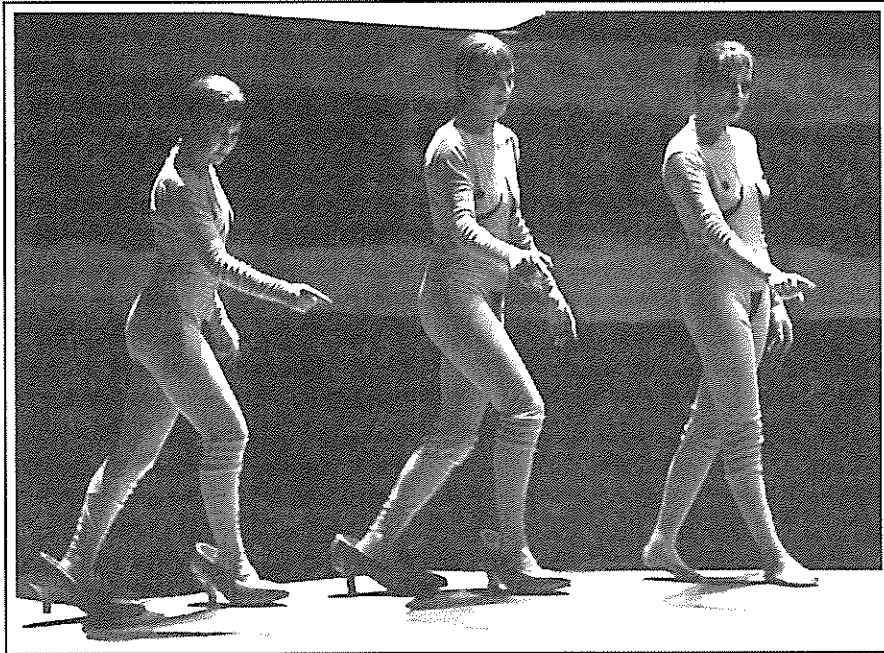
First, we need to remind ourselves that Wagner's works cast a uniquely powerful spell over countless people. His genius creates dramatic reality to a degree unequalled perhaps by any other opera composer, or dramatist apart from Shakespeare. We are entranced, as if magically, by the compulsive truth and beauty of his operas. This power is what will ensure their immortality and, we should not be too shy to say, compels our reverence. Responding to it passionately is the true Wagner experience. And perhaps its most important quality is that, not withstanding the evil and stupidity Wagner so vividly portrays, we feel that something sublimely good is being asserted about the Universe and our place in it. To put it no higher, we leave successful performances of his mature works convinced that the world is a good place and that we can help to make it better. This Wagner experience is unique, precious, over-powering and cathartic. It is also humbling because its huge proportions dwarf us. If we are to deserve it, and to continue to enjoy it, we must cherish, and above all, respect it.

By what means is the Wagner experience conveyed? As with opera generally, there are many elements involved and they fall into two clearly distinguishable categories. The first, and self-evidently most important, consists of the composer-given elements, music, the drama (concept and events) and words. All three interrelate and are essential to the total experience. But they are emphatically not of equal

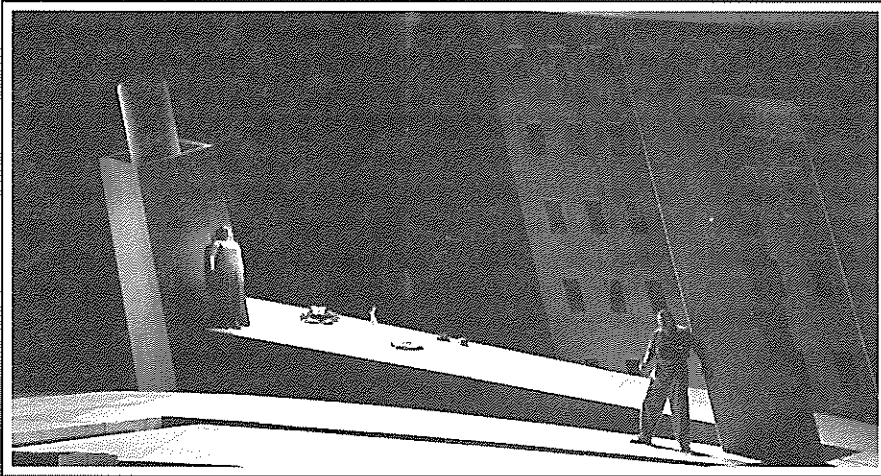
importance. For although the experience is our imaginative and emotional response to the unfolding drama, it derives its power almost entirely from the music. The fact that Wagner's mature dramas are sublime in concept, miraculous in organization and wonderfully apt in their word poetry does not materially affect the preponderant role of the music in creating the total experience. The drama may precede the music in the creative process but once these two elements are joined, we experience the drama as the incarnation of the music. Indeed if this were not so Wagner's operas would rarely if ever be performed. If this musical primacy were not in fact universally accepted, respect for Wagner's scores might not have inhibited 're-interpreters' from tinkering with them in order to make points in productions with messages. That would in fact be a quite logical extension of the thinking behind some modern productions, and it may yet happen. We can be thankful too that apart from the question of 'cuts', the element I have called 'words' has also so far escaped the attentions of modern producers.



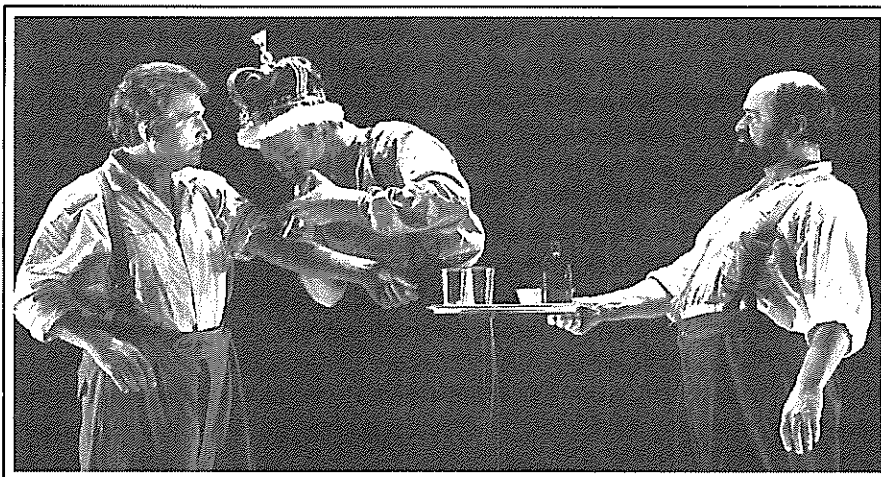
Walküre, Act I. Siegmund and Sieglinde with a straw man who portrays the sword-bearing ash tree in Hunding's house.



The Rhinedaughters dressed in tight fitting jump-suits with painted breasts. And their shoes: where is Hans Sachs when we need him? All photos by Clive Barda through the kind courtesy of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.



Deborah Polaski as Brünnhilde and Siegfried Jerusalem as Siegfried.



Gunther gives Siegfried an injection to make him forget, while Hagen assists.

These are Wagner-given and alterations would be unequivocally a violation of the composer's intentions. We are not yet ready for that. So we have the absurdity that what we sometimes see in the opera house makes nonsense of the words he wrote.

So far at least modern Wagner performances have aroused controversy only in the second category of elements necessary for conveying the Wagner experience. These may be subdivided into the musical elements i.e. singers, conductor, players, and the non-musical elements, staging, costumes, acting and an intruder called 'message'. Our problem centres on these last four. The difficulty here is that they are only partly Wagner-given. We know his broad intentions through his writings, through the tradition of his own productions, through his stage directions, and, most important of all, through the sense of the texts and the music. But when all this is put together you do not get a blueprint for performing Wagner's operas. There is only a broad prescription. At one extreme this rules out (so far as I know) a happy ending to *Tristan* or making Beckmesser triumph over Walther and Sachs. At the other there is a wide and legitimate scope for variation in the visual images presented on the stage without profaning Wagner's art.

The scope for legitimate variation within these Wagner-given elements does not end here. Singers, conductors, orchestras, all exert a profound influence on the quality of the Wagner experience and since they are mediating the supreme element of music their power for both good or bad is enormous. They can greatly enhance the experience or destroy it altogether. But their power derives solely from the quality of the artistry they can bring to bear. They operate essentially within and in support of the Wagner-given elements. And success in doing so satisfies their ambition. They do not set out to make points of their own without regard to the composers' intentions and their potential contribution to the total experience is far greater than that of the most talented producer whether or not he remains within the proper limits of his craft.

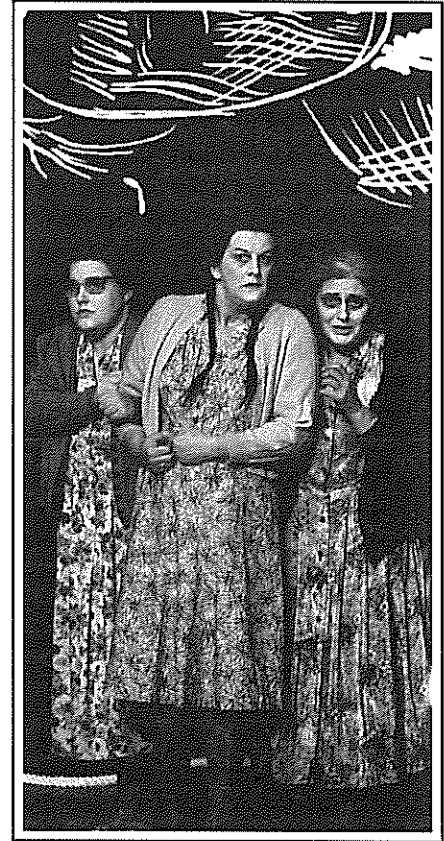
The situation of the producer/designer

is quite different. His, or her, function is to provide a visual incarnation appropriate to the experience of the three Wagner-given elements. What the audience sees on the stage can and should powerfully reinforce the impact of the total experience. And self-evidently it can damage or destroy it if it is blatantly irrelevant, ridiculous or hostile. But this power to enhance or destroy does not mean that its importance for the total experience is crucial or more than a relatively small part of the whole. One of the most moving Wagner performances I have experienced was a concert performance of *Das Rheingold* where the singers made minimal gestures to make dramatic points. The experience might well have been even more moving had the performance been staged. But the imagination of a sympathetic audience with an adequate knowledge of the story Wagner is telling, and fired by the music, can readily create its own visual images without the help of the producer/designer. The lesson here is that staging/production matters only within the limits set by the primacy of the three Wagner-given elements. It can never be what matters most in a performance, still less the main purpose for performing Wagner at all.

Why then do producers nowadays so often appear to be claiming that the main reason for performing Wagner is to present a particular interpretation of the drama far removed from the composer's intentions or anything he could have conceived, and carry this to the point of detracting totally from true Wagner experience? Of course I do not know the answer. But there seem to be four main possibilities. The most charitable is that producers, and the managers and critics who encourage them, genuinely think that they have 'new insights' which will renew or enhance the Wagner experience for a contemporary audience. Unfortunately these insights rarely if ever speak for themselves. And when explanations are offered in programmes or in response to criticism, they are either mumbo-jumbo inspired by political correctness, or amateur psychotherapy or self-evident puerility. On the rare occasions when the intention is clear and relatively harmless most people can-

not see how the result adds anything to the value of the total experience. That Wagner experience is a 'given' in all the essentials. Who leaves a modern production convinced that he now knows for the first time what Wagner really meant or how he is 'relevant' to the end of this century? To believe that can happen is to be insufferably patronising or arrogant.

Less charitably, our modernists may believe that the Wagner experience, as he created and bequeathed it, is losing its power to enthral and that he must be represented in modernist guise if he is to be worth performing for modern audiences. If that were indeed true it would be difficult to see the point of staging Wagner at all. Certainly he could not be revalidated by smart producers trying to turn him into something he was not. But to believe that revalidation is needed is to misunderstand the nature of the Wagner experience and the sources of its power. It is to assume that the spectacle of gods, heroes, nature and timeless antiquity, as Wagner conceived it, must be repellent or ludicrous to the modern mind. Worst of all, it implies that the moral verities of say, the Ring,



The Norns as lower middle class housewives in their calico dresses.



Brünnhilde with Gunther and Hagen. Paper sacks were also used to cover the heads of the Nibelungen in this production. All photos are of the current Covent Garden Ring.

are unclear or invalid as Wagner conceived them. There is no evidence that any of these assumptions are true. The intelligent, informed and sympathetic spectator can perfectly well appreciate the eternal truth of Wagner's dramas in the form he conceived them through stage presentations consistent with the three key elements he has provided. It is insulting to Wagner and to modern audiences alike to think otherwise.

Even less charitably, it might be thought that producers succumb to mere trendiness. The messages they purport to convey may vary but they usually have a politically correct flavour which does not even have the merit of reflecting the real problems of the contemporary world. Such people would be worthier of respect, and do much less harm, if they created their own art forms to promote their beliefs.

The least charitable explanation, and I fear the most likely, is that producers/critics/managements are motivated by professional self-interest rather than the desire to help present the true Wagner experience to those who employ them by buying tickets and paying taxes. We live in times when the incredibly luxuriant creative power of European art prior to the early decades of this century seems, we may hope temporarily, to be in abeyance. Would-be creative artists should not need to market their talents by battering on their betters. If they have nothing immortal of their own to offer, they should not seek satisfaction and prestige in the role of trendy producer. If the blame does lie here, it is less the fault of the producers themselves than of the managers, critics and academics who encourage them and who, in their turn, acquire career fodder by taking them seriously. They could but do not blow the whistle and put the producer in his, or her, proper place.

What is this place? First of all the producer must be faithful to the Wagner-given elements. If he is not he will cause deep and justifiable offence to those who understand, seek and pay for the true Wagner experience. At worst he will eventually destroy what he feeds on. Secondly, he should realise that Wagner does not need to be constantly re-created. He is a mighty self-existent fact which is already

there before the producer starts work. His task is to provide one element of the total presentation and he must accept that, by comparison with the whole, that element is important but minor. Thirdly, he must respect the creative imagination of an audience and resign himself to the fact that, fired by the total experience, that imagination is shackled, even outraged, by a producer's attempts to coerce it to his own fancy. His job is to feed it not distort it.

My final point is to emphasise, as strongly as I can, that nothing I have said means that Wagner productions should be dull, colourless, unevocative, unmoving or incapable of adding a valuable dimension to the total experience. We should think again about naturalism and reject the daft notion that it is somehow unworthy of the late twentieth century or that we have outgrown it. The opposite may well be nearer the truth. What can possibly be wrong with seeing an effective scenic portrayal of what we hear during the Good Friday music (rather than the single flower in a pot which I once saw at Bayreuth)? Naturalism can add a valuable dimension to what we hear. And it is folly to think, as some do, that impressionistic staging has had its day and that the future can only belong to message-peddling producers. Wagner productions should not be like *haute couture* and impose change for change's sake. With the use of modern stage technology there is legitimate scope for endless variety in production, scenery, costumes and stage effects which can add beauty and eloquence to the total experience if only the talents of the producers are directed to that end. There is too an infinite variety provided by the supreme element of music through the artistry of the performers. For good measure there is too the wide variety of our personal reactions to the Wagner experience depending upon our mood at the time. We do not need, and there is no legitimate room for, idiosyncratic productions at enmity with the true experience.

If we love Wagner's works, and perhaps some producers do not, except as means to their own ends, let us stop talking and behaving as if a sane person would regard the producer's function as more

important than Wagner's. The producer must be cut down to the size and influence proper to his true role. And he must be made to realise that there is ample scope for his talents, if not his devout egotism, within a more circumscribed role. We go to the opera house at great expense to experience what Wagner has created. He belongs to everyone and not to self-loving professionals practicing an insolent form of elitism. And Wagner would have been the first to say so.

Somewhere Tennyson said: 'Nothing worth proving can be proven, nor yet disproven'. Nothing I could say would remove the scales from Mr Monnet's eyes. But I hope he may come to see that Mrs Plummer has a legitimate point of view which deserves more respect than he is willing to concede.

—Gordon Burrett

LETTERS

(Continued from page 2)

tells us nothing of the process by which his works came into being. On the other hand through Cosima's dedicated, not to say obsessive chronicling, "we have made the acquaintance of a really great personality, inextricably tied to a partner indefatigable in her self-sacrifice and her fidelity."

The following four Wagner essays are more technical than philosophical, but all of them contain profound insight into the works themselves. They are "Parsifal: The First Encounter," "Wieland Wagner: 'Here Space Becomes Time'," "Approaches to Parsifal," and "The Ring: Time Explored and A Performer's Notebook." All six of the essays make for riveting reading for the lover of Wagner. The first of the six is more than that: it is essential reading not only for the Wagnerite, but also for all who are interested in the arts and their relationship to the personality of the artist and the society in which he lives.

It should be noted that the essays were translated from the French by Martin Cooper in 1985.

Sincerely yours,

—Dr. Tom Wendel

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

(Continued from page 2)

III, although we first thought it was two entirely different singers that we had heard! He was excellent in both roles.

Brangäne (Jane Henschel) was a large contralto, impressive in size and voice....except that she also had a huge vibrato. Her voice was reminiscent of the 1930's recordings in which the uncontrolled vibrato was regarded as a dramatic exposition of emotional feeling....this is an unfortunate tradition to this reviewer's ears.

Isolde (Renate Behle) is a very engaging, graceful, young-looking woman who truly resembles a real princess. Marke says of her in Act III "...so splendid, fair and exalted, could not but delight my soul." Her portrayal makes this statement believable.

Her voice is pure and true—from the first roar of outrage in her formidable Narration and Curse to the last murmur of her sublime *Liebestod*. Her musicianship and her dramatic sensibility (the 'singing actor' that Wagner demanded) was witnessed throughout the entire musicdrama. An example of her skill could be found in her rendition of that moment in Act I with her confrontation with Tristan (before the

drinking of the potion) when she says:

"Mein Herr und Ohm, sieh dir die an..."
 'My Lord and Uncle, look at her!
 A gentler wife you could not discover.
 Her betrothed I once slew
 and sent her home his head;
 the wound his sword inflicted on me she kindly healed.'

The bitterness and anger in this epithet was sent with soaring vigor and venom. It was thrilling.

Note: the audience was appreciative of such moments due to the use of supertitles, intelligently translated (by Christopher Bergen from the San Francisco Opera) and properly cued.

I would like to say the Tristan was up to this Isolde....but he was not at his best (some speculation is that the severely raked sets had bothered his back and otherwise disturbed him). He seemed wooden (although for much of the First Act, that works)....but when he finally drank the potion, he lay down (expecting death) and then rose to Isolde just as wooden and cold as he was before. Isolde, on the other hand, drank from the potion (shared licentiously from the same small cup) and when SHE came around, she was wild with desire....visually, vocally, dramati-

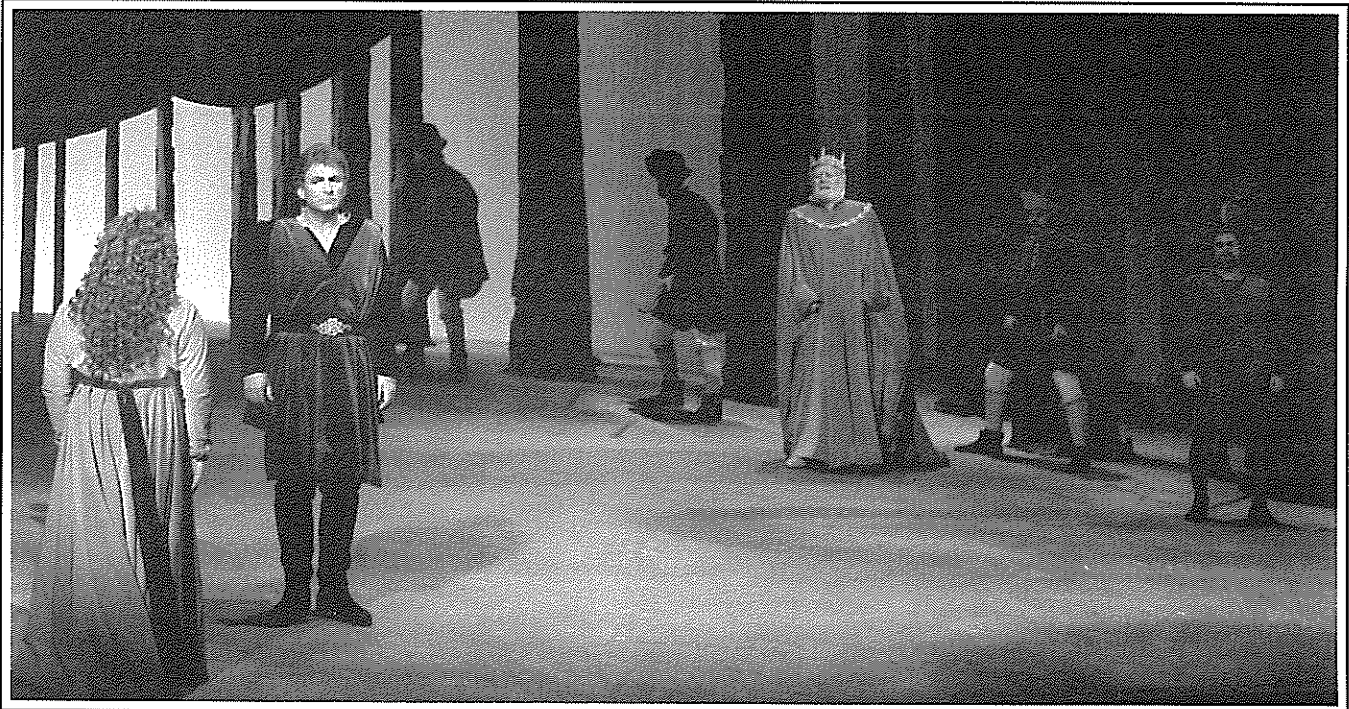
cally, emotionally, etc.....

A musical touch at the end of this Act which I found exhilarating was at the moment King Marke finally arrived on the ship, conductor Armstrong gave the orchestra a rhythmic boost and increased the tempo—it was a stirring conclusion to the act.

Act II – A fairy-tale medieval castle, rose-coloured with castellated turrets, and a moat was all perfectly charming. The rest of the stage was a geometric grid of fanciful trees soaring off in exaggerated perspective, the branches looking like whorls of finger-paint; it was all playful whimsy. But there is absolutely nothing whimsical in *Tristan* whatsoever. I found this set to be at odds with the tremendous emotional and psychological power of the work.

Siegfried Jerusalem was a tepid suitor; worse, his voice even cracked at some soft, high notes in the Love Duet. In contrast, Renate Behle was wholly convincing in her ardor and sang with perfect control; her voice is not huge (like a Birgit Nilsson's) but has a pure, ringing timbre. She may well have held her voice back to accommodate her Tristan through the love duet.

Lighting for most of the *Liebesnacht* bathed the lovers in a bright blue moon-



David Hockney's production uses dazzling color and sets that are fairly plain and simple. Photo by Ken Howard, Los Angeles Opera.

TRISTAN UND ISOLDE

(Continued from page 11)

light from stage right which gradually waned until it was a dark, starry sky. Then the moonlight curiously “returned” (two moons?) until the dawn broke from stage left with a bright orange cast. Very effective.

King Marke (Donald McIntyre) was magnificent. His long diatribe, following the absolutely gorgeous music of the *Liebesnacht*, can be a real let-down (particularly when sung by a droning bass). But MacIntyre’s Marke was a regal presence whose outrage over the betrayal was tempered with his deeply-felt disappointment over losing Tristan’s trust. Loss of honor was far more important than the adulterous act. Marke behaved as if Tristan were his son (and there is some evidence that Wolfram von Eschenbach and other medieval chroniclers of this tale made veiled hints that Marke might have been Tristan’s true father, but were too squeamish to say outright that father and son were having sexual relations with the same woman).

Melot (Timothy Mussard) made a strong impression in this minor role. This American heldentenor will be tackling his first Siegfrieds in Marseille’s 1999 *Ring*. Andrew Porter said, having heard him sing Lohengrin in Seattle, “(He) is a tenor to watch.” (London Observer)

Stage Director Stephen Pickover added a nice touch with the sword fight between Tristan and Melot: Tristan throws away his sword once the conflict begins, and grabs the end of Melot’s weapon and guides it to his chest.

The orchestral playing was glorious: great brass playing, particularly with the hunting horn sequence at the opening of Act II (and a lovely touch where the flute mimics the hunting leitmotif when the hunting party has just barely gone out of

hearing). The harp was particularly pleasurable to hear clearly throughout the Love Duet.

Act III – Hockney has created a great rocky promontory that rises way up on the steep raked stage but it actually creates the illusion of the rock soaring out over the sea rather than towering above the singers. This bare yellow rock extends over an azure void, suggesting both empty sea and sky.

Throughout most of this act the set is awash in a bright yellow light which yet has an oppressive, sickly quality. It is a nice touch because the healthy sunlight is poisonous to Tristan—he yearns for the Night, to be with Isolde. In no other opera is the subject of light (or its absence) so crucial as it is in *Tristan*. Again kudos to the wizardry of lighting director Duane Schuler.

The Shepherd (Jonathan Mack) sang beautifully and acted with earnest conviction. Earle Dumler played the English Horn solo with great feeling.

There was great orchestral playing in Tristan’s delirium scene, especially as the two climaxes build (the first ending with the mournful English Horn melody; the second with the triumphant fanfare).

And, curiously, Siegfried Jerusalem was much stronger and in better voice during this whole scene leading up to his death—possibly because he could lie down for much of the time rather than clamber around the steep set.

One very interesting staging innovation occurred when Isolde finally emerged on-stage: in most every performance I have seen, she arrives just a bit too late (i.e. Tristan dies just before she can touch him) and she sings that puzzling F sharp “Ha!”. In this production, Isolde embraces Tristan, gently lowers him down on his cot and comforts him....until his arm falls down (a similar gesture is seen with

Mimi’s death in *La Boheme*) signifying his death, to which Isolde responds in shock, “Ha!”. It is very moving seeing him die in her arms; it is a splendid touch.

There was a credible sword fight at the end and a moving plaint from Marke who views the mayhem with deep pathos. But it is Isolde who, figuratively and literally, takes over and ends the tragedy with her *Liebestod*. Renate Behle was nothing less than sublime at this transforming moment. (One quibble: she sang and expired not on or near Tristan, but at the other side of the stage!?) The audience was rapt with attention and—bless them—did not make a sound until the very last note of the orchestra had died away.

Renate Behle and conductor Richard Armstrong both received well-deserved standing ovations.

—David Marsten

NIETZSCHE

(Continued from page 6)

aesthetic creation and the value of existence while opening his eyes to the dangers that discipleship poses to personal freedom and integrity. Nietzsche said:

“That we have become estranged is the law *above* us; by the same token we should also become more venerable for each other—and the memory of our former friendship more sacred. There is probably a tremendous but invisible stellar orbit in which our very different ways and goals may be *included* as small parts of this path; let us rise up to this thought. But our life is too short and our power of vision too small for us to be more than friends in the sense of this sublime possibility. Let us then *believe* in our star friendship even if we should be compelled to be earth enemies.”

“I have loved Wagner” [*Ich habe Wagner geliebt*].

—Hal Sarf

The Wagner Society of Northern California
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