

Books

All you Need is Love

Mark Berry is stimulated by a controversial new study of Wagner's works

Barry Emslie, *Richard Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (Boydell Press: Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2010). viii + 312pp. £50. ISBN: 978-1-843-83536-3

I enjoyed reading this book – an observation which may sound banal, but is no minor point. Books should be intended to be read, a point too often forgotten by their authors. That cannot be said of Barry Emslie, who writes engagingly, carrying one along with his way of thinking, and driving one to think for oneself. For instance, he writes amusingly of Kundry's kiss, 'The male is indeed fortunate if he not only doesn't have to settle with the father before he usurps his place, but is also rewarded by a maternal kiss that is both a sensual pleasure and a religious benediction.' (p. 238) A couple of sentences on, Emslie pithily dismisses 'all decent and thereby false Wagnerites'. If only the opera houses of the world would unite and similarly lose their chains. The important point is that no one, but no one, will write a book on Wagner with which anyone, let alone everyone, else wholeheartedly agrees. One is bound, then, to be provoked: no bad thing. The question is, how? The greatest of Wagner's critics, such as Nietzsche and Adorno, sometimes make one want to throw their books against the wall but also open up new possibilities, which, even if modified strenuously and severely, point toward a more sophisticated understanding of Wagner's work. That is surely what anyone who cares about Wagner would wish to glean. And so, if I talk more in this review about that with which I take issue, it is partly because I have been positively provoked to take issue rather than negatively to discount.

I could not disagree more when Emslie calls the *Ring* 'a mess', except when he goes on to write of the 'bad fit' between its 'sprawling story [...] and Wagner's compositional method' (p. 55). Like George Bernard Shaw, Emslie sees incoherent collapse in *Götterdämmerung*, though he makes a more substantial case. It is perhaps not irrelevant to note here that the word 'empirical' arises too often, seemingly intended to signify a sort of common-sense (English?) corrective to German idealism rather than a highly ideological construct in its own right. Misunderstandings can follow. Emslie surely identifies Brünnhilde too closely with Wagner (p. 92); she is a character rather than a mouthpiece. He likewise misses the point of Brünnhilde's refusal to return the ring to Waltraute (p. 91), though, in that she considers herself married and will therefore never give up her wedding ring, a point quite germane to Emslie's broader concerns. However, if there is much to disagree with in the lengthy *Ring* chapter's first part, 'Contradiction, disorder and musical language', I found that considerably more diverting than the concluding section on incest, which meanders somewhat, a little unclear as to its goal. Is incest quite so crucial to Wagner's world-view as Emslie argues, both here and subsequently?

If Emslie cannot take this artistic 'swindle' as seriously as many of us, he clearly admires much of Wagner's dramatic work: if not *Götterdämmerung*, then certainly *Die Walküre*, and still more *Tristan*, writing (p. 135), 'When Marke sings of his love for Isolde [...] anyone who is not deeply moved should never go anywhere near another performance of *Tristan und Isolde* again.' Here Emslie valuably corrects a common misunderstanding of *Stabreim*, pointing (p. 155) to the importance of assonance as well as alliteration, and to the wider relationship with 'sound effects in poetic language [...] what the Germans tellingly call "the Lyric"'. Moreover, Emslie seems to stand in awe of *Parsifal*, rightly pointing to the importance of Christianity, which, given many commentators' concerns, is more necessary than one might reasonably expect. It is, however, unfortunate that we should read 'it is Easter' (p. 242) for the third act, when of course it is Good Friday. Given Wagner's concerns with the Cross, the Saviour, and whether the latter might be brought down from the former, the Church calendar is not unimportant.

But let us address the concern of the book's title more directly: love as a 'unifying concept' (p. 2) in Wagner's work, albeit 'seen – *prima facie* – in the context of two separate and arguably opposed categories: the spiritual and the sensuous' (p. 3). *Tannhäuser* is explored in this respect. Moving on to Wagner's uncompleted dramatic project *Jesus of Nazareth*, Emslie makes the interesting point (p. 32) that, for Wagner, an attack upon private property must first be an attack upon marriage. In his conclusion, Emslie neatly encapsulates the unifying concept and some of its implications (p. 291): 'Wagner's agenda, especially in the music dramas, is to plant as deeply as possible a concept of heterosexual love that turns out to be the royal road to a complex nexus of virtues: discovery of the true self, knowledge at its deepest and most abstract, physical bliss, redemption from sin and suffering, and (ultimately) renunciation of the world.' The problem for Emslie is that this necessarily involves love's dialectical opposite: hate, which for Wagner, it is claimed, manifests itself especially in his anti-semitism – love for the German nation entails hatred of the Other. It often has done, in different forms, but Wagner's nationalism, such as it is, tends to be more ambiguous than is allowed here; it can permit of more than one dialectical opposite, for instance universalism. Indeed, I recall not a single reference to Wagner's contrast in *The Artwork of the Future* between the national and the 'un-national' or 'universal'. Whereas Greek tragedy had been 'generally national', the artwork of the future would represent the second of the 'two principal moments in mankind's development'.¹ In another of the Zurich reform writings, *Art and Revolution*, we read that the Athenian spectator had been reconciled with 'the most noble and profound principles of his people's consciousness', whilst Wagner's envisaged post-revolutionary audience would celebrate its membership of 'free humanity', a 'nobler universalism'.² One may take the attitude that such words contradict Wagner's practice, but they merit attention.

There are issues of history, intellectual and political, with which I am uneasy, for instance, the highly contentious claim (p. 188) that, by the time of Napoleon's death blow,

¹ 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', in Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, 4th edn, 16 vols. (Leipzig, 1911) [SS], iii.61.

² 'Die Kunst und die Revolution', SS iii.30, 23, 29.

the Holy Roman Empire 'had long been a joke'. Much recent work has highlighted the Empire's 18th-century vitality. Moreover, its borders were not unstable in the way that Emslie supposes (p. 189). The Reich of blessed memory was not a state, more a legal *and* a cultural framework – a point relevant to *Die Meistersinger*. Its millennium in existence surely answers the writer's question (p. 286): why a thousand years for the (successor but one) Third Reich? Emslie's early references to Hegelian 'synthesis' may mislead the reader through employment of too positive a term. Hegel never employed the all-too-common formula, thesis–antithesis–synthesis, which vulgarises the sublating concept of *Aufhebung*: an invaluable, well-nigh untranslatable term for German cultural commentary, encompassing negation, preservation, mediation and more. 'Mediated unity' is probably as good as one can get; yet, if one can employ the German term *Volk*, surely one can *Aufhebung* too. Emslie does later (p. 235), though in a way that implies final resolution, rather than an invitation to further negation. This may or may not be what Wagner wanted. I do not think that he achieved it, even, as Emslie suggests, in *Parsifal*, and it is certainly not what Hegel meant. It seems to be implied in a 'thereafter' (p. 21) that Schopenhauer was a chronological successor rather than contemporary to Hegel. That 'thereafter' should pertain to most Schopenhauer-reception, Wagner's included, but not to Schopenhauer himself, an important point given his chronological proximity to the German Romantics. However, the thesis of Wagnerian presentiments concerning Jürgen Habermas, via Hegel's Jena writings (p. 46) – the latter more important, I think, than Emslie allows – is a fascinating prospect, which deserves further attention.

An interesting point made is that drama 'as genre is customarily focused on individuals and all its greater connotations (whether Fate, the Gods, the tribe, the nation, class struggle etc.) are difficult to dramatise in terms other than in the destinies of subject/actors' (p. 138). It is a pity Emslie goes on to say that whilst 'this is not an uninteresting conundrum – Marxist aesthetic theorists, for instance, tore into each other in the early decades of the twentieth century as they tried to come to terms with all the issues it raised – it is not strictly relevant here.' For it is highly relevant to Wagner, whether in analysis of his own works or his legacy to theorists of different hues, and indeed to artists of the 20th century. Schoenberg springs immediately to mind, likewise Brecht; so does *Die Meistersinger*. Wagner's dramas are distinguished from treatises in various ways, but one is the inherent tendency for radicalisation in drama, or at least in successfully dynamic drama. Ideas, abstractions, 'greater connotations', call them what one will, may at some level actually be more deeply probed through dramatic than analytical means, partly because of the way characterisation allows such exploration. This is not quite what Wagner says in *Opera and Drama*, but nor is it remote from that. It would have been interesting to hear more from Emslie on this, not least given his subsequent concentration upon nation and race. However, no book will be able to address everything; to suggest fruitful tangents on which the reader may choose to embark is a good deal of its purpose. Likewise, given Emslie's continual, quite justified, insistence on the centrality of *heterosexual* love – the qualifier is usually attached – I wondered whether we should at some point be treated to a 'queering' of Wagner. There is certainly ripe material here; a starting point might have been Hans Werner Henze's divining 'something disagreeably heterosexual [...] in all those rampant horn calls' heard in

Götterdämmerung.³ Sadly, that was not to be, the sole, brief mention of homosexuality (p. 121) leading nowhere in particular. Perhaps the purpose was simply to suggest; again, a single book cannot accomplish everything.

We should return, however, to the posited dark side. More important than the 'German' to Emslie is the negative form of Wagner's 'love', the 'inimical, allegedly inadmissible bloodline' (p. 198) of the 'loveless' (p. 217) Jews. Indeed, blood and race colour a great deal of this book. It is here that the writer truly goes on the attack, having little time for those he considers Wagner's 'apologists'. I do not consider myself an 'apologist', the writer's favoured term for those who take a different view, nor a 'literalist', an 'acolyte' or a 'loyalist'. It is certainly not the case that, in the face of evidence, I seek to excuse Wagner. When I challenge the general thesis of anti-semitism in the music dramas, I have given the matter some thought. Emslie is quite right to argue that 'you cannot, or at least should not, put a firewall around the music dramas', though one may still not accept that 'the anti-semitic issue [...] is an essential ingredient' (p. 203). He is also right to argue that 'there has to be an argument about interpretation' (p. 205); likewise that it is not enough, though surely important, to point out that none of the music dramas 'explicitly attacked Jews' (p. 204). An argument concerning interpretation may begin in all sorts of places, yet there are worse places than with Wagner (and Cosima). None of the 'accusers', or whatever one might call them – were one inclined to regard them as Them – seems able to explain why Wagner did not once ever draw attention to an anti-semitic text or subtext. If Wagner's 1869 decision to republish *Das Judentum in der Musik* was 'courageous' (p. 201) – I fail to see it as especially so – then why did he demonstrate such little courage in the present respect? He might well have failed to do so had this been an issue that cropped up once or twice – Beckmesser seems the most plausible of the usual suspects – but for something that has an allegedly 'unparalleled epistemological function [...] within Wagner's conscious *Weltanschauung*', and which is therefore alleged to permeate anything and everything? Emslie rightly, however, points to the lack of division of labour, more Romantic-nostalgic than Marxian, in *Meistersinger*. And though I do not see the prospect of Eva and Walther eloping as constituting betrayal of Nuremberg (p. 171), if one does, it fits well with the nasty, *völkisch*, almost totalitarian nationalism Emslie discerns. After all, Sachs prevents them from escaping.

Ultimately, though, the argument concerning the dramas remains circular: Wagner hates the Jews; certain characters and characteristics are bad; these characters and characteristics must be Jews; Wagner hates the Jews.... It is not clear why one should not do the same with Frenchmen or Jesuits; or rather, it is not clear why one should do it with any group. If 'the Jew', that is Alberich, 'turns to gold and silver as substitutes for what might have been' (p. 218), do we say this of Fafner too? Perhaps, at a push, Fasolt, once Loge advises him to take the ring? Presumably, since race and blood are so crucial, we should have to allow Fasolt, since brothers could hardly be of different races, and yet, he could hardly have suddenly become a Jew at that point. And if Emslie calls Siegfried 'a non-Jew if ever there was one' (p. 260), one must ask why. What of a letter to Malwida von Meysenbug, in which Wagner contrasts the Messiah with the Jews who thought

³ Hans Werner Henze, *Bohemian Fifths: An Autobiography*, tr. Stewart Spencer (Princeton, NJ, 1999), 207.

he would turn out to be an agent of political liberation: 'Believe me, all our political freedom fighters strike me as being uncannily like the Jews.'⁴ One might just as well, then, though quite absurdly, claim that Siegfried is really 'a Jew'. For if one permits that there might be something else at work, the whole 'racist' edifice collapses. Opposition to Jewish culture and religion is amenable to a less 'literalist' approach to plot detail; fundamental, as opposed to more incidental, racism is not. Renunciation of love, conversion of gold into capital, power-lust, and so on, issues that are treated onstage and in Wagner's own comments upon his work, may actually *be* his fundamental points. It is possible that he might have wished to conceal 'epistemological' anti-semitism, but given the nature and the volume of his pronouncements, that seems highly implausible and requires explanation. If we permit that Wagner's opposition to 'Jewishness' may partly have reflected some other concern(s), that opposition loses its ascribed function. This is not to say that what remains is unworthy of comment, simply that it cannot fulfil so ambitious a task. It seems more plausible to see Wagner's reaction to Jewishness, in *all* its varieties, as in good part a consequence of his identification of 'the Jew' with the capitalist, instrumentalist modernity the composer so abhorred.

Sometimes Emslie runs into trouble when it comes to music. This is a difficult matter when writing for the elusive 'general reader', but one which, to the author's credit, he does not shirk, though the brief description of the music of *Tristan* (p. 151) sounds merely naive. One issue may seem merely nomenclatural, when Emslie writes, in his author's note, 'Unlike Wagner, I have chosen to use the term "music drama" exclusively for all the theatrical works from *The Flying Dutchman* to *Parsifal*, and the term "opera" for the three preceding works. However, whilst the 'traditional' distinction between music drama and Romantic drama is not absolute, it serves a useful purpose, and Emslie's redrawing of the boundaries confuses. 'What's in a name?' one may ask, though, as the author elsewhere avers, the Lohengrin-like answer may be, 'more or less everything' (p. 17). For this reclassification sometimes appears to lead to treating works such as *Tannhäuser* as if they were 'music dramas' in the usual sense (p. 61), even though later on, Emslie, citing Arnold Whittall (p. 64), acknowledges development in Wagner's method. It is true that the precepts of *Opera and Drama* are to some extent born of practical compositional experience – the works preceding *Das Rheingold* – yet, like Wagner's leitmotifs themselves, they look forward as much as back. It is surely more revealing to follow Carl Dahlhaus in acknowledging a 'qualitative leap in the evolution of symphonic style', for which the traditional usage acts as shorthand.⁵

A few typographical errors are more or less inevitable, though there are perhaps too many here. Many will find the split infinitives easier to overlook than I do. Nevertheless, I repeat that I enjoyed reading *Richard Wagner and the Centrality of Love*. It has given me much to ponder, much to contest. Other readers will doubtless respond in similar fashion.



⁴ Letter of 15 June 1862 to Malwida von Meysenbug, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1987), 546.

⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, 'Wagner's Place in the History of Music', tr. Alfred Clayton, *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller, Peter Wapnewski and John Deathridge (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1992), 110.