

Maestri weighed on tilted scales

A skewed comparison of opera's heavyweights results in a bloodless spectacle, notes Mark Berry



**Verdi and/or Wagner:
Two Men, Two Worlds, Two Centuries**
By Peter Conrad
Thames & Hudson, 384pp, £24.95
ISBN 9780500515938
Published 24 October 2011

Fafner und Siegfried, Siegfried und Fafner,” sings Mime in *Siegfried*, gleefully anticipating the deaths of both. Perhaps there are a few (Baroque-and/or contemporary-inclined?) opera lovers who long for the twilight of “Verdi und Wagner”; many more, however, would elevate one composer born in 1813 above the other. Peter Conrad addresses that constituency on behalf of those adapting the “und” from *Tristan und Isolde* to unite twin peaks of 19th-century opera.

Conrad opens with an arresting image of two, separated busts in Venice’s Giardini Pubblici. However, the anticipated union never quite materialises, although we

take in amusing vignettes such as George Bernard Shaw suggesting that Henri Bergson, champion of instinct over intelligence, should direct *Il Trovatore*. Indeed, tales of reception often prove more illuminating than treatment of life and work. Conrad barely addresses the music beyond descriptions such as “a yelping exchange of high notes, including two high Cs from Isolde”: a serious drawback when discussing men who were first and foremost composers. It is notoriously difficult to write about music, its structure and its meaning for non-musicians; it remains necessary to try.

Sometimes the comparative framework drives Conrad too hard to discern discrepancy, agreement concerning a sunken orchestral pit coming to indicate a practical-mystical distinction. Verdi’s description of “musicians in tailcoats and white ties... jumbled in the sightline with the

Egyptians, Assyrians or Druids onstage” as “absurd” actually complements utterances from Wagner, who, steeped in German idealism, unsurprisingly cast his argument in more metaphysical terms.

Farther-flung comparisons seem strained: “Siegfried imitates...[the Woodbird’s] song, like Rameau who mimicked a hen’s pecking... or Messiaen...in his *Catalogue d’oiseaux*.” What to conclude, beyond the likelihood that the writer also knows two French composers? More seriously, there is misrepresentation in an unspecified connection posited between the necessity of fundraising and Conrad’s claim that “Wagner was no anarchist”. For a crucial period of his life, “anarchist” justly describes this reader of Proudhon and comrade-in-arms of Bakunin. Verdi’s counterpointed, reluctant participation in Italian civic life has no bearing on that either way.

Lists are presented as substitutes for analysis and argument. Comparisons come thick and fast, often arbitrary, even somewhat homespun: “Verdi’s longing was for rootedness, stability, not the heaving Wagnerian flux that gave [Eduard] Hanslick qualms.” For all Conrad’s undeniable richness of reference, we expect more than a final acknowledgement that the Venetian statues will never quite exchange glances.

The scales, moreover, are persistently tilted towards “humanist” Verdi: “Wagner was a drug”, whereas Verdi was “a tonic”. Verdi’s music “is good for us”; Wagner’s is, contra Nietzsche, simply not harmful. Whereas Verdi addresses love, Wagner trades in (mere) eroticism – even though *Tristan* surely stands after *Così fan tutte* as the most devastating indictment of Romantic love. Even Verdi’s viewing opera as the means to transform a self-styled peasant – his father was an innkeeper – into a millionaire is preferred to Wagner’s revolutionary-socialist opposition to capitalism. Moreover, Wagner “had no shame” in asking others for money, yet Verdi’s “respect for avarice in others” was “healthy”.

Pretence at balance vanishes with generalisations such as: “Germans are troubled by Wagner because they feel disgraced by him. Italians are troubled by Verdi for a different reason: they feel unworthy of him.” Clearly Conrad and I know

different Germans. Often “troubled”, certainly “problematised”, but “disgraced”? Even smaller German companies are moved to stage Wagner more regularly than our British houses, so in thrall to Verdi and Italian opera.

Conrad is entitled to weigh Wagner in the balance and find him wanting. Impartiality may prove not only impossible but undesirable – or worse, uninteresting. Doubting Thomases from either camp remain unlikely to be convinced.

Mark Berry is lecturer in music, Royal Holloway, University of London. He is author of *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner’s “Ring”* (2006).