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RICHARD WAGNER:
HIS POLITICS, HIS PERSONALITY
AND HIS MUSIC

John R. Spraggins

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Honors Program

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Richard Wagner: His Politics,
His Personality and His Music

"Wagner is like a huge mountain in our path. We can try to climb it; we can never reach the top."¹ These words were spoken by the German composer and conductor Richard Strauss. They were spoken of Richard Wagner some time after his death. He was a man of great passion, talent and energy. At no time was a middle course possible for him. It was either all or nothing. In this respect he was consistent but when one looks at the details of his life it can be seen that he is nothing but constant inconsistencies. He was all things at one time or another. He could be either saint or sinner; a hero or a rogue. Wagner despised the public and wished for seclusion while at the same time he was unable to exist anywhere except in the center of the stage and in full view of the public he despised.² Possibly this personality made Wagner the great artistic genius he was.

In the 1840's Richard Wagner became quite active politically. His financial situation during this period was at a low point and his art was not being accepted. It is certain that his poverty, his debts and his disappointments had a good deal to do with making him a rebel against the established order of things. Mr. H.S. Chamberlin holds that Wagner was already a "revolutionist

¹Joseph Rosenstock, "The Wagner I Know," Opera News, December 14, 1963, p. 10.

²Ernest Newman, Wagner as Man and Artist (New York, 1924), p. 128.

against the artistic world of the present" when he was in Paris in 1840.³ As time passed he became more and more interested in politics for politics' sake, and he became interested in revolutionary propaganda as a means of showing his hatred of all who, unlike himself, had place, power and money. Wagner even did some writing of his own during this time on the subject of revolution. In The Revolution, which he wrote in 1849, he stated:

The old world is dissolving in the ruins from which a new world will arise; for the sublime goddess Revolution comes rushing on wings of the storm, her august head rayed around with lightning, a sword in her right hand, a torch in her left... "I come to you (declares the goddess) to break all the fetters that oppress you... I will destroy this order that divides man-kind into hostile nations, into powerful and weak, into privileged and outlawed, into rich and poor; for it makes unhappy men of all. I will destroy this order of things that makes millions the slaves of few, and makes the few the slaves of their own power, their own riches... and from the ruins of this old world may a new world arise filled with undreamed happiness."⁴

When the conflict broke out in Dresden on May 3, 1849, Wagner risked his life and career by engaging openly in the doomed revolution which was put down in less than a week. Fortunately, he was able to flee to Switzerland. During the ten years that followed he composed Das Rheingold and Die Walkure while a political refugee.⁵ Wagner had been profoundly moved by the revolution.

³Wagner as Man and Artist, p. 180

⁴Edward Downes, "Bridge to a New World," Opera News, February 22, 1969, p. 25

⁵Ibid.

He felt that his personal struggle was to be part of a great popular uprising and that in the new society it would produce, his artistic goal would be reached.

His thoughts and political ideas were apparent in his musical work. The progression of his political philosophy was seen in The Ring of the Nibelung. The Ring started with the rebellious young Siegfried as its redeeming hero but the reverses suffered by Wagner in the revolution mellowed his viewpoint and made the submissive Wotan the central figure. The theme of the Ring became the idea that an old order which is corrupted by power must perish before a new one can be formed.⁶ The first opera of the Ring, Das Rheingold, presented in mythological, symbolical form the beginning of the world. The end of the Ring, Gotterdammerung, was to symbolize the destruction of the corrupt civilization that Wagner knew and which he hoped would be destroyed by revolution. It was George Bernard Shaw who wrote in a book called The Perfect Wagnerite that "Siegfried first represents youth's revolt, then the progressive, political-minded man, and finally the whole labor movement."⁷

Wagner's thoughts progressed and matured through the years but his basic idea of German nationalism and the corruption of the present system remained on in his works. In German Art and

⁶James Helme Sutcliffe, "Mortal Coils," Opera News, February 24, 1968, p. 24.

⁷George Marek, "What does Wagner Mean to Us Today," Good Housekeeping, CXXXIX (October 1954), 102.

German Politics written in 1868 he begins with the thesis that the Germans are God's own people. He said that the trouble in the past had been that the German princes had betrayed and frustrated the true German spirit. The re-birth of the German spirit would not only "enable the public spiritual life of the German Folk" but it would also "found a new and truly German civilization extending its benefits even beyond our own frontiers." He ended by stating that this had been the "universal mission of the German Folk since its entry into history."⁸ With the defeat of France and the founding of the German Empire in 1871, Wagner was inspired to great heights. He wrote a poem of celebration and also a musical work, the Kaisermarsch, as a result of his inspiration. He was not necessarily gratified by the military victory, but by Germany's new solidarity and pride. All these developments led to an intensification in his already racist attitudes. By the time of his death he had become an ardent Jew hater and was all but completely irrational concerning the subject. His attitude to the very end is stated in this way by Ernest Newman:

There is no virtue in, no hope for, any but a "pure" race, of which the Germans could be the shining exemplar if it would only rid itself of the Jews and follow the path of true redemption pointed out by Richard Wagner of Bayreuth. He had been appalled by the "levity" the "frivolity" of the so-called statesmen who, in 1871, had decreed "the equalization of the rights of all German citizens, without regard to differences of 'confession'."⁹

⁸Ernest Newman, The Life of Richard Wagner III (New York, 1941), pp. 94-96.

⁹Ernest Newman, The Life of Richard Wagner IV (New York, 1946), p. 616.

The fact that his political views were reflected in his art was one of the reasons his work was then (and has been from time to time in this century) so controversial.

Richard Wagner's personality was what it was undoubtedly because he was "all artist." He himself as well as those who knew him recognized this fact as a blessing and at the same time as a curse of his nature.¹⁰ Being the artist that he was, Wagner could never write music, as so many composers do, for mere music writing's sake. He equated this with talking for talking's sake. He once said that "each new work should represent a new phase in its creator's inner life, a new extension of experience, a new conquest of material and of technique, a new crystallization not only of experience, a new conquest of material and power."¹¹ His idea was that for art works of the type he wanted to turn out, a long preliminary period of unconscious gestation was far more important than any amount of conscious reflection.¹² An extreme example of this might be the fact that thirteen years elapsed between the time the second act of Siegfried was written and when he returned to his work on the opera and began the

¹⁰Otto Strobel, "Richard Wagner," The International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians, ed. Oscar Thompson et al. (New York, 1958), 2005.

¹¹Ernest Newman, The Life of Richard Wagner I (New York, 1933), p. 500.

¹²Ibid., p. 501.

third act. In all, twenty-one years went by while he wrote the Ring a little bit at a time. Wagner's condition during his inspired creation was characterized "by complete self-forgetfulness, forgetfulness of the world" around him, by "limitless absorption in the subject."¹³ He said of himself during these periods:

There must be an indescribable inner sense present which is wholly bright and active only when the senses directed towards outer things are in a sort of dream state. When I actually no longer see clearly or hear distinctly, then this sense is most active and it shows itself in its function as productive repose: I cannot name it otherwise.¹⁴

The personality of Richard Wagner certainly had a great effect on those that were around him. Whether they were friend or enemy they all had strong opinions about him and reacted according to the direction these opinions took. At times he treated his friends with the same disrespect he dealt out to his enemies. Wagner literally repressed nothing. He did what he himself wanted to do and he cared little whom it hurt. He would do almost anything to accomplish his purposes. He believed the world owed him a living and cared little how it came or who had to foot the bills.¹⁵

Wagner showed signs of a psychiatric disorder along the lines of a manic-depressive. This is evident in that his nature

¹³Strobel, p. 2007.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Franz von Ehrenmeister, "The Amazing Idiosyncresies of Richard Wagner," The Etude, XLIX (March 1931), 163.

was "all extremes; he either loved intensely or hated furiously, was either delirious with happiness or in the darkest depths of woe."¹⁶ His egoism was overbearing at times. If, for example, anyone was playing to Bulow on the piano a composition that was not by Wagner and he was trying to sleep in the room above, Wagner would send word to stop the playing. If Liszt could not visit him at a time he felt the need for him, the engagement which prevented his coming was labeled by Wagner as trivial.¹⁷

Wagner used many people and in many different ways but the way he used his women was really the most outstanding and most interesting aspect of his personality. Here again his attitudes were expressed in his art. Wotan's love for Brunhilde and the Walsungs love for each other are good examples. This simultaneously adulterous and incestuous relationship of Siegmund and Sieglinde who were brother and sister was especially fascinating for Wagner whose own relations with women were more often clouded than not.¹⁸ His emotional attitude toward life which was one of constant search for the new and more profound experience also characterized his behavior toward women. After he married the beautiful Minna Planer his feelings for her quickly cooled and

¹⁶Wagner as Man and Artist, p. 146.

¹⁷Robert L. Jacobs, Wagner (New York, 1935), p. 129.

¹⁸Sutcliffe, p. 25.

he began to look for other women to satisfy his desires. Minna spent twenty years enduring and forgiving his infidelities. When Minna finally died he had already stolen the wife of his best friend, Hans von Bulow. He married Cosima von Bulow some time after this and stayed with her until his death. Cosima was the illegitimate daughter of Wagner's close friend, Franz Liszt. An interesting point to this situation was that even while he was trying to persuade Cosima to leave her husband he was writing to a friend to find out whether or not he could suggest some wealthy women whom he could marry.¹⁹ Fortunately for him he was able to get Cosima and she was the one thing that saved him from a world that was becoming too much for him. She saved Wagner from extinction and made sure of the completion of his work for the sake of posterity.²⁰

Even though Cosima was able to give him the inspiration he needed to complete his work, most important musicians were less than impressed with what he had created. Only Liszt and Spohr had praised him and his work without reserve. Men like Mendelssohn and Schumann who were still operating within the classical tradition considered him and his work antipathetic. Although the writing of Tannhauser gave him the opportunity to be within a cir-

¹⁹"Richard Wagner," World of Music IV (New York, 1963), p. 1448.

²⁰H.C. Colles, The Oxford History of Music VII (London, 1934), p. 287.

cle of writers and artists from which he derived stimulus, he could not enjoy this long because as he put it, "after all no one thought much of anybody else's talents." What he wanted were adherents, not colleagues.²¹ He needed adherents to reinforce his great self-love and conceit. Even Bismarck said of him after an interview they had with one another that "He himself was by no means without self-conceit, but such a high grade of it in another as Wagner possessed he had not yet come across."²²

Probably two of the greatest minds of the 19th century met when Friedrich Nietzsche was introduced to Wagner. Nietzsche was twenty-four at the time and Wagner was fifty-two. These men had much in common and a long friendship began. Nietzsche at first idolized Wagner and believed that he could do no wrong. As he matured, however, he became more and more inclined to believe that his friend was not perfect. Nietzsche began to challenge Wagner on several points and this marked the beginning of the end of their good relationship. With his lust for domination, Wagner could never endure independence in anyone around him. This was Nietzsche's great offence, that he dared to think his own way instead of falling into the ranks and becoming simply the instrument of Wagner's will. The friend had been turned out and was to become one of

²¹Jacobs, p. 54.

²²Ibid., pp. 113-114.

his bitterest enemies. Nietzsche wrote in his diary that "Wagner has not the strength to make those around him free and great. Wagner is not loyal; he is, on the contrary, suspicious and haughty."²³ Later he writes even more bitterly in his work The

Case of Wagner:

He plunders us of our youths, even our women he seizes and drags into his cave! What he has already cost us! Oh, this old Minotaur! Every year processions of our finest maidens and youths are led to his labyrinth, that he may devour them; every year there goes up the cry from all Europe: "Off to Crete! Off to Crete!"²⁴

After Wagner's death in 1883 Nietzsche continued to oppose the ideals he left behind. It may be said of Wagner that when he made an enemy he did a good job of it.

The point we must realize here is that behind all the amazing contradictions of behavior and the opposing forces of character which made him loved or hated as a man, Wagner was completely subject to one unchangeable law. That law was the accomplishment that came to be known by the title of his most famous literary essay, "The art-work of the future."²⁵

His art-work of the future was to be employed mainly in the area of Opera or Music Drama as Wagner preferred to have them called.

²³Wagner as Man and Artist, p. 136.

²⁴The Life of Richard Wagner IV, p. 327.

²⁵Colles, p. 282.

Wagner was not long in realizing that no matter how thrilling the human voice might be, the orchestra is the most powerful and most resourceful of all the instruments at the disposal of the opera composer. The opera orchestra which was mostly confined to the role of accompanying medium became a rich and colorful instrument under Wagner's influence. He said, "God denied we Germans the voices of Italians, but granted us the power of expression through the medium of instrumental music."²⁶ Wagner moved forward with this idea as he matured. This is evidenced by the fact that it would be impossible to make the Rhinegold intelligible without the voices but the orchestral part of the Gotterdammerung, which was composed several years later, would flow on with hardly a break if the vocal parts were omitted as would large parts of Tristan which was also a later work. Wagner knew that in the Ring and in Tristan he was changing not only the music drama but also music itself.

For his music dramas he created a whole new musical language in which leit motives were used to represent ideas and people. Events, characters and situations are all identified by characteristic musical phrases. When they appear in the music this tells the listener what the protagonists are thinking about, what they intend to do, where they came from or possibly what their destiny is.²⁷ He surely introduces the leit motives more often than they

²⁶William D. Revelli, "Revolution in the Orchestra Pit," The Etude, LXIX (July 1951), 20.

²⁷"Heroic Designer," Time, February 14, 1938, p. 61.

are really needed. For example, there is really no necessity for the "Siegfried horn" motive to be sounded at every appearance of Siegfried and even at almost every mention of his name. I think that this flaw can be forgiven however. Wagner was doing something absolutely new for his time and since he had such a mass of material that needed to be unified, the use of the motive seemed to him the only way to do it.²⁸ In using the leit motive method he devised a music that would express the emotions of the character and also the interactions of the characters in the drama. He had several motives recur constantly throughout the opera which were to underline the chief dramatic issues. With these developments, composers for the orchestra had new ideas to work with. Since some composers rebelled against Wagner's methods it may be said that "his influence was as powerful on those who refused to succumb to him as on those who hastened to signify their allegiance."²⁹

From the musical forms that Richard Wagner introduced came the basis for perhaps three-fourths of the music of our time.³⁰ He developed a new technique of scoring and, with the interest and cooperation of Germany's best string and wind instrumentalists,

²⁸Wagner as Man and Artist, pp. 284-285.

²⁹Colles, p. 281.

³⁰Wagner as Man and Artist, p. 276.

he did much to improve the instrumentation of the orchestra and especially the quality and use of the winds.³¹ He actually invented several wind instruments himself including the Bayreuth Tuba, so named for the Bavarian city where Wagner designed and had built, with the help of his friend King Ludwig, a theatre that could produce all of his mammoth works.

Wagner's persistent modulation without perfect cadences and a partial development of German chromaticism (twelve tone composition), particularly in Tristan, was later carried further by Schoenberg to the point where it led to the current breakthroughs in the area of atonality.³²

It can be concluded that Richard Wagner was probably the great turning point of Western music. He represented the final culmination of the old tonal system and he was the source of the new music of our time. But what may we say of the man and his life in conclusion? He was not an average man in any way as is true of most creative geniuses. He lived above the average man on a plateau which few men ever reach. Therefore his life cannot be measured in common man's terms of success and failure. The contributions he made to the development of instrumental music however will live on long after the actions of the man are forgotten.

³¹Revelli, p. 21.

³²"Richard Wagner," Encyclopaedia Britannica, ed. William Haley et al. (Chicago, 1969), 143.

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