

BOOK REVIEW

Patrick Carnegy. *Wagner's Theatre: In Search of a Legacy*

Cambridge, UK: The Lutterworth Press, 2024

ISBN 9780718897406 (hbk). 180pp., index

Reviewed by Rachel Orzech

As former assistant editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, former radio broadcaster, founding member of the Bayreuth International Arts Centre and the Royal Opera House's first dramaturg, Patrick Carnegy has a lifetime of work in music, literature, opera and Wagner to share with his readers, which is exactly what he does in his new book *Wagner's Theatre: In Search of a Legacy*. In chapter 13, an essay responding to Susie Gilbert's 2009 *Opera for Everybody: The Story of English National Opera*, Carnegy recounts the story of his first experience of live opera in 1959, when he cycled twelve miles to see the English National Opera perform *Tannhäuser* at the Coventry Theatre, chatted afterwards with conductor Colin Davis in the theatre bar and, upon discovering that Davis had forgotten his *Oedipus Rex* score and was supposed to be rehearsing the work while he was there, cycled over the next day to lend him his own copy. Anecdotes like this can be found throughout the book and Carnegy's ability to incorporate his personal experience as both audience member and dramaturg into his writing about opera and Wagner is one of the book's most successful features. His account of the rollercoaster ride of the Royal Opera House, for example, during and after his tenure as dramaturg in the 1980s, contains real insights into the inner workings of these kinds of institutions, and the sorts of challenges they face even today.

Carnegy's earlier book, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), provided an illuminating description and analysis of some of the landmark stagings of Richard Wagner's music dramas since the founding of the Bayreuth Festival in 1876. *Wagner's Theatre: In Search of a Legacy* is Carnegy's second book on Wagner staging, focusing on many of the same productions and covering a similar time period. This new book is in fact a collection of lectures, reviews and other previously published writings from the period 1977 to 2014, brought together under the broad theme of legacy, which encompasses staging, conducting, film interpretations and behind-the-scenes English opera house machinations. Beginning with

a warm and effusive introduction from Wagner scholar John Deathridge, the book is then divided into four parts: The Master's Dream, Arts of Interpretation, A Quartet of Conductors, and lastly, Opera Backstage: the Dramaturg's Story. Each part comprises three or four chapters and the writing style is appealing and accessible.

Part 1 includes two essays from the *Wagner Journal* on new sources relating to Wagner (including the Bayreuth diary of mathematician Alfred Pringsheim and paintings by the Wagner stage designer Josef Hoffmann) as well as an unpublished talk on Wagner and Shakespeare that brings to light a collection of sixty-five delightful watercolour illustrations of significant moments in Wagner's life given to him by his sixteen-year-old daughter Isolde on his sixty-seventh birthday. All three chapters offer unusual angles on Wagner staging as well as the discovery of new peripheral sources. The excellent colour reproductions of a number of Isolde's illustrations are a highlight here. Carnegy effectively situates the small watercolours in the context of Wagner's life and work and exploits them to support his argument about the important and overlooked Shakespearean influence on Wagner's early operas and later music dramas. The illustrations, though published as a collection with commentary by Isolde's granddaughter Dagny R. Beidler in 2013,¹ are not well known and offer insight into Wagner's personal life and artistic legacy as understood by his family not long before his death.

Part 2 covers many of the same themes as *Wagner and the Art of Theatre*, including chapters on Gustav Mahler and Alfred Roller's revolutionary 1903 *Tristan* production in Vienna; the famous Patrice Chéreau/Pierre Boulez centenary Bayreuth production in 1976; the attempts to de-Nazify Wagner in German productions after Hitler, whether that be through a process of de-politicisation or re-politicisation; and some amusing anecdotes from the filming of a BBC Wagner documentary at Bayreuth in 1995. Carnegy's account of the revolutionary nature of Mahler and Roller's approach to staging *Tristan* is compelling, revealing them as the first to brave a rupture with the 'authorised,' Cosima-enforced Bayreuth version: 'the idea that a scenic artist could make an *original* contribution to the performance of an opera was revolutionary, and was immediately recognised as such' (p. 72). The Chéreau chapter is less successful, mainly because it appears to be an unaltered re-publication of an essay written for the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1977. This results in instances of both awkward reading—for example, referring to a 1977 publication as 'recently published' (p. 77)—and a sense of being somewhat out of date, such as in the discussion of the relationship between Wagner and the French, which has been copiously investigated by music scholars since the 1980s (p. 77).² Much of the material

¹ Dagny R. Beidler, *Für Richard Wagner!: die 'Rosenstücke-Bilder' seiner Tochter Isolde* (Köln: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

² See, for example, Gerald D. Turbow, 'Art and Politics: Wagnerism in France', in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, ed. David C. Large et al. (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1984); André Spies, 'Lohengrin Takes on the Third Republic: Wagner and *Wagnérisme* in Belle-Epoque Paris', *Nineteenth-Century Studies* 3 (1989): 31–36; Annegret Fauser and Manuela Schwartz, eds, *Von Wagner Zum Wagnérisme: Musik, Literatur, Kunst, Politik* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1999); Jane F. Fulcher, 'A Political Barometer of Twentieth-Century France: Wagner as Jew or Anti-Semite', *Musical Quarterly* 84.1 (2000): 41–57; Annegret Fauser and Thomas S. Grey, 'Debate at the Paris Opéra: *Tannhäuser* and the French Critics, 1861', in *Richard Wagner and his World*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 347–71; Annegret Fauser, 'Cette musique sans tradition: *Tannhäuser* and its French Critics', in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 228–55; Manuela Schwartz, "'Der Unhold Wagner Frisst Alles": Französischer Wagnérisme Nach Debussy', *Wagner Spectrum* 6.2 (2010): 101–19; Katharine Ellis, 'How to Make Wagner Normal: *Lohengrin's* "Tour de France" of 1891–92', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 25.2 (July 2013): 121–37.

here was also covered in Carnegie's earlier Wagner book, which included an extensive analysis of the Chéreau production. Nevertheless, it has value as a first-hand account of the centenary production and a glimpse into Wagner staging and scholarship at that time. Carnegie describes Chéreau's approach as 'curiously detached, a fulfillment of Boulez's suggestion that it would be nice to see the *Ring* produced by someone who had stumbled on it more or less by accident, as indeed Chéreau had' (p. 82). In 2024, this is of course no longer a novel approach.

Four essays on conductor biographies and memoirs, previously published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, make up Part 3, covering Arturo Toscanini, Otto Klemperer, Herbert von Karajan and Georg Solti. Nazism casts a shadow over all four in different ways, and Carnegie's keen sense of how the personal sphere interacts with political context comes through very effectively in this section. Toscanini, examined here through his letters edited and published by Harvey Sachs, famously withdraws from the 1933 Bayreuth Festival for political reasons, much to Hitler's disappointment. The Hungarian Jew Georg Solti gets his first big break at the Bavarian Opera House in a devastated Munich in 1946, at a time when German conductors were either still in exile or unable to be employed pending denazification trials. In the discussion of Peter Heyworth's *Otto Klemperer: His Life and Times*, the tortured and manic Klemperer (who is born Jewish, converts to Catholicism and then later back to Judaism) finds himself the first of the emigré conductors to return to a destroyed Germany in 1946. And the essay on Karajan, a discussion of Richard Osborne's *Herbert von Karajan: A Life in Music*, opens with a scene from the conductor's denazification trial in Vienna, 1946. The connection to Wagner in this section, however, is tenuous. All four were of course conductors of Wagner's operas to greater or lesser extents, but this aspect of their work is not discussed in any detail in the essays, particularly in terms of what kind of a mark they may have left on Wagner's legacy.

Part 4 comprises two more responses to books, this time related to the trials and tribulations of the Royal Opera House and the English National Opera, as well as a final chapter, the author's 1977 interview with Michael Tippett, focused on his operatic compositions and conducted on the eve of the premiere of his fourth opera *The Ice Break*, at the Royal Opera House. Carnegie's insider look at the two opera houses is fascinating (if sometimes verging on gossipy) partly because of what John Deathridge describes in the introduction as its acute relevance to the present, namely, 'that the House has always been strapped for cash' (p. 133), a point on which everyone seems to agree, even when they disagree on how to solve the problem.

The book is beautifully produced, with good quality paper, attractive typesetting and presentation, along with plenty of colour and black and white images. In fact, to some extent the images are the drawback, and the book allows readers access to illustrations and photos that they may not have otherwise seen. It is a shame, then, that the approach to listing illustrations and acknowledging provenance is somewhat haphazard and not at all user-friendly.

Wagner's Theatre may have been better served by a more transparent description of what it is: a collection of Carnegie's writings on Wagner or tangentially related to Wagner rather than a cohesive 'story of Wagner and his interpreters over the course of the twentieth century.' The list of Carnegie's 'Selected Writings' in the back matter cements a perception of the book as a collection of writings. As a celebration of the career and work of Carnegie and his invaluable knowledge of the way that Wagner's works can function on the stage, as well as the inner workings of English opera houses and their future, it is an insightful contribution that will entertain and enlighten any reader interested in the behind-the-scenes maneuverings that

take place in the orchestral and operatic world. It also illustrates how works such as those by Wagner develop complex, intriguing and ever-changing afterlives as they evolve on the stage from one decade to the next.

About the Author

Rachel Orzech is an Honorary Fellow at the School of Music, University of Queensland and a Senior Research Assistant at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne. Her monograph *Claiming Wagner for France: Music and Politics in the Parisian Press, 1933-1944* was published by the University of Rochester Press in 2022. Her current research examines notions of musical nationalism, exchange and internationalism through the lens of the Australian music publisher Louise Dyer and her Paris-based press Les Editions de l'Oiseau-Lyre.