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Online
ISSN 1440-9828

September 2013 No 717

Is Wagner bad for us?

Nicholas Spice, Vol. 35 No. 7 · 11 April 2013, pages 3-8

In one of the European galleries at the British Museum, there's a bronze medal of Erasmus made in Antwerp in 1519 by the artist Quentin Metsys. A portrait of Erasmus in profile is on the front of the medal. On the reverse, the smiling bust of Terminus, the Roman god of boundaries, and the words 'concedo nulli' – 'I yield to no one.' * It's said that Erasmus kept a figurine of the god Terminus on his desk. He wrote: 'Out of a profane god I have made myself a symbol exhorting decency in life. For death is the real terminus that yields to no one.'

Nicholas Spice.
Photo: Sebastiaan ter Burg

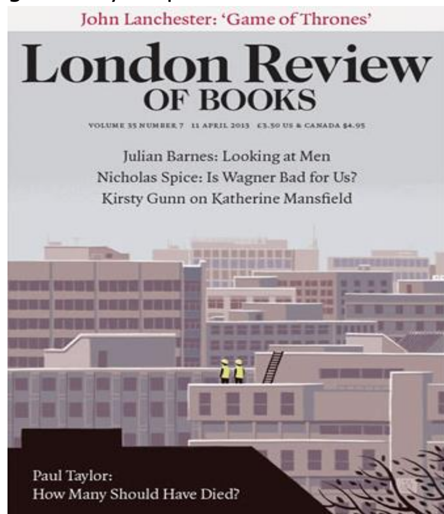
Like anyone who has spent time thinking about Wagner, I have inevitably come back to the subject of boundaries and limits, and in particular to questions about the boundary that lies between Wagner's works and his listeners, and about the experience, apparently not uncommon, of that boundary becoming blurred or even disappearing, an experience that may hold a clue to the feeling, also not uncommon, that Wagner's work is in some sense not altogether good for us.

Respecting boundaries was not Wagner's thing. Transgression he took in his stride – stealing other men's wives when he needed them, spending other people's money without worrying too much about paying it back – while artistically his ambitions knew no bounds. There is something awe-inspiring about his productivity under hostile conditions, the way, though living on the breadline, he turned out masterpieces when there was no reasonable prospect of any of them being performed: gigantic works, pushing singers and musicians to the limits of their technique, and taking music itself to the edges of its known universe. Theft; the breaking of vows, promises and contracts; seduction, adultery, incest, disobedience, defiance of the gods, daring to ask the one forbidden question, the renunciation of love for power, genital self-mutilation as the price of magic: Wagner's work is everywhere preoccupied with boundaries set and overstepped, limits reached and exceeded. 'Wagnerian' has passed into our language as a byword for the exorbitant, the over-scaled and the interminable.

Wagner has kept me awake at night. Sleepless, I turn my thoughts to *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner's most extreme work and the nec plus ultra of love stories, and I notice a kinship between aspects of Tristan and Isolde's passion and the experience of a certain kind of insomnia. The second act of *Tristan und Isolde* is Romanticism's greatest hymn to the night, not for the elfin charm and ethereal chiaroscuro of moonbeams and starlight, the territory of Chopin and Debussy, but night as a close bosom-friend of oblivion, a simulacrum of eternity and a place to play dead. Insomnia is a refusal to cross the boundary between waking and sleeping, a bid to outwit Terminus by hiding away in 'soundless dark', a zone beyond time. As garlic is to vampires, so clocks are to insomniacs, not because they tell of how much sleep has been missed, but because they bring the next day nearer. As Philip Larkin, poet of limits, knew so well, sleep has the one big disadvantage that we wake up from it: 'In time the curtain edges will grow light,' he wrote in 'Aubade', bringing 'Unresting death, a whole day nearer now'. For Tristan and Isolde, too, night must not give way to day, not for the trivial reason that day will end their love-making, but because dawn brings death one day nearer. They must stay awake, for to sleep is to allow the night to pass, to awake from the night is to live and to live is to die. And when, inevitably, day dawns, they have only one recourse. To Tristan and Isolde, in their delirium, it seems that by dying they will preserve their love for ever: by dying, they will defy death.

Tristan and Isolde's need to stay awake is embodied in the opera's famous Prelude, perhaps the most quoted and analysed piece in the history of Western music, and a gift to musical semiotics because of the way it withholds closure. The usual

thing to say about this (and Wagner himself said something along these lines) is that the music enacts the experience of desire, forever on the verge of satisfaction but never satisfied, a state of suspension symbolised by the first three bars, which 'resolve' the startling discord of bar two – the famous Tristan chord – onto a dominant seventh, itself a discord crying out for resolution. But we can also read this reluctance to resolve as the musical equivalent of staying awake: a bid to suspend the passage of time, in which sleep gratefully acquiesces.



I am interested in the way we take in Wagner's music, or the way it takes us in. In tonal music a final cadence is an acceptance that things end and a release into process. The Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, avoiding final cadences, refuses to sleep, holding the listener in a state of unrelieved alertness. For example, the opening 17 bars of the Prelude lead to an interrupted cadence that gently forbids us to leave the musical line. At the same time, beyond the expressive qualities of this opening passage, it's striking how clearly Wagner enunciates his musical argument, and how easy the grammar is to follow, as he takes the material of the first three bars through a series of iterations, with changes of register, instrumental colour, phrase contour and harmonic position creating difference within similarity. This use of repetition with variation is one of the ways that Wagner focuses our minds on what he is saying without boring us♪ listen .

Difficulties and disasters dogged *Tristan und Isolde* from the start and in the Wagner circle it came to be thought of as in some way cursed. The attempt at a first production in Vienna in 1862 foundered: the demands the opera made on players and singers were too much for them and the production was abandoned after 77 rehearsals. The planned public premiere in Munich in 1865 had to be postponed for a month, when Malvina Schnorr, who was singing Isolde, lost her voice on the morning of the first performance after taking a 'vapour bath'. Relations between the orchestra and the conductor, Hans von Bülow, grew strained: Franz Strauss, father of Richard and the brilliant first horn of the Munich orchestra, had a blazing row with von Bülow, stomped out of the pit and had to be coaxed back. Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, who sang Tristan to his wife's Isolde, caught a chill on stage and subsequently died; on his deathbed he is said to have called out Wagner's name. His wife abandoned her career after his death. 'I drove you to the abyss,' Wagner wrote in his diary; 'I pushed him over.' Four years later, during rehearsals for a revival of the first production, one of von Bülow's young assistants had a mental breakdown, apparently brought on by the opera, and was institutionalised. In 1911, Felix Mottl collapsed and died while conducting *Tristan* and Joseph Keilberth met the same end in 1968.

We enjoy the stories about *Tristan und Isolde* because they indulge our wish to find in Wagner someone prodigious, to see him as a Faustian genius who gave two fingers to the god Terminus. We know, of course, that Ludwig Schnorr could just as well have caught a mortal chill while singing Meyerbeer or Rossini. Nonetheless, the power of this opera is such that great performances leave listeners stunned and disorientated, uncertain about the status of what they have just witnessed. Formidably intelligent people describe *Tristan* in terms of a conversion experience. Michael Tanner speaks of its 'qualifications for religious status'; while for Roger Scruton, *Tristan und Isolde*offers nothing less than 'a sacrificial consolation for the imperfect loves of those who witness it'.

In the early days, the expressionistic intensity of *Tristan und Isolde* produced violent reactions in its audiences. The young Belgian composer Guillaume Lekeu fainted and had to be carried out of the theatre (he was to die of typhoid from eating a contaminated sorbet a day after his 24th birthday); Chabrier and Ravel both burst into tears while listening to the Prelude. But Berlioz, while reviewing the opera positively, privately admitted to being disgusted by the music, and *Tristan* became associated in some quarters with loss of self-control and moral atrophy. It acquired a reputation as degenerate, as what the Germans would later call, applying the term to a very different kind of music, 'entartete Kunst'. Thomas Mann was to satirise this attitude in *Buddenbrooks*, where Edmund Pfühl, the local organist, refuses to play excerpts from *Tristan* because of the music's immorality: 'I cannot play that, my dear lady!' he says to Gerda, 'I am your most devoted servant but I cannot. That is not music – believe me! … this is chaos! This is demagogy, blasphemy, insanity, madness! It is a perfumed fog, shot through with lightning! It is the end of all honesty in art. I will not play it.' In *The Man without Qualities*, Ulrich's friend Walter, rebuffed by his wife Clarisse, who has wriggled out of his embrace and, munching a cheese sandwich, gone off into the garden to hunt for

moths in the dark, seeks solace in music:

Walter's tenderness collapsed like a soufflé taken too soon from the oven. He heaved a deep sigh. Then he hesitantly sat down at the piano again and struck a few keys. Willy-nilly his playing turned into improvisations on themes from Wagner's operas, and in the splashings of this dissolutely tumescent substance he had refused in the days of his pride, his fingers cleared a path and gurgled through the fields of sound. Let them hear it far and wide! The narcotic effect of this music paralysed his spine and eased his fate.

It was the extreme and unrelenting expressive intensity of Tristan – what one might call its borderline aspect – that got people so worked up (as just one example, take the moment in Act II, when Tristan arrives for his secret night-time rendezvous with Isolde ♪ listen). And in the first decades after Wagner's death, attacks on his music often reflected contemporary models of the psyche and their preoccupation with hysteria. Nietzsche, who set the ground rules for all future combat with Wagner's work, in part constructs the music in terms of its effects on the nerves: 'Wagner is a great corrupter of music'; 'With it he found the means to stimulate tired nerves – and in this way he made music ill'; 'Wagner increases exhaustion – therefore he attracts the weak and exhausted to him'; and, inevitably, for Nietzsche, it's 'Wagner's … success with nerves' that explains his success with women. This may all seem very much of its time, and it's true that these days it tends to be men rather than women who get hysterical about Wagner, but the old tropes still surface. Published less than 18 months ago, Peter Conrad's big book *Verdi and/or Wagner* happily revisits Nietzsche's dichotomy between the fog-bound, mephitic, enervating music of the North (Wagner) and the life-giving vitality and pagan health of the music of the Mediterranean – with the difference only that he substitutes Verdi for Bizet. 'I associate Wagner with periods of post-adolescent gloom,' Conrad writes; 'Wagner induced a delicious listlessness, but an excerpt from Verdi could be relied on to activate my sluggish body'; 'If Wagner was a drug, then Verdi in my early experience was a tonic'; 'I have a feeling Verdi's music is good for us.' Only last year, Thomas Adès described Wagner's music as 'fungal', lamenting his influence on the composers who followed him: 'his grubby fingerprints' are 'everywhere'. 'Fungal' is in one sense rather a good image for the modular patterning of Wagner's music, but it also suggests infestation, decay, sickness and a tendency to spread uncontrollably, while the phrase 'grubby fingerprints' brings to mind something insalubrious, if not criminal.

It can sometimes seem that the history of reactions to Wagner has been self-sustaining: a ritual tradition of colourful hyperbole, unsupported for the most part by any explanation as to how exactly the music comes to have the power ascribed to it. This is perhaps scarcely surprising: our sense of the character of any music always closely involves its emotional tone, and in music emotional tone is largely determined by harmonic idiom, but we have no shared tools for analysing the expressive and semantic content of harmony. Any acquaintance with the literature of music aesthetics shows how far we still are from agreeing a theory of musical meaning or expression. So when Nietzsche declares the tone of *Parsifal* to be saturated with bogus religiosity but Debussy finds it sublime, and when Bernard Williams has serious qualms about the tone of Siegfried's Funeral Music but Daniel Barenboim thinks it 'noble', on what grounds can we adjudicate the differences?

*

The difficulty we have tying non-musical meanings back to the notes on the page has a direct bearing on the fraught question of the association of Wagner's works with National Socialism and, in my view, it makes the arguments in this debate convoluted and unsatisfactory. For this reason, I shall merely skirt the topic. Moreover, the subject of Wagner and the Nazis is too big to be fitted meaningfully into a set of general reflections on the composer, especially when the focus of the reflections is the music rather than the ideological content of the work, such as it can be construed. Music is a promiscuous and adhesive medium: as soon as you introduce powerfully expressive music into the vicinity of words, images and ideas, it jumps the gap and attaches itself to them (as Wagner understood better than anyone, before or since). A host of circumstances, not least Wagner's own writings (some of them utterly abhorrent), drove his music into the proximity of the most evil political system in the history of Western Europe. That Wagner's work became indelibly associated with German Fascism is a fact. Whether his music can be understood as a sinister prolepsis of this ideology is another matter altogether. I don't believe we are in a position to make this argument, although the tack I am taking may suggest ways of situating Wagner's music within the bigger context of music's amenability to exploitation for political purposes.

If there is a common denominator to the attacks on Wagner's work as bad for us it is the idea that it causes a loss of self-control or volition in the listener: that, in representing emotional states beyond normal bounds, it lures us into these states, so that we lose what Auden called our 'dream of safety'. 'Wagner's inspirations make

us identify with feelings which we experience as bad, evil,' Hans Keller wrote. As usual Keller didn't go on to say what these evil feelings might be or what in Wagner's music corresponds to them, but perhaps the really interesting question here concerns not the feelings but the being made to have them.

Music is capable of influencing our physical, mental and emotional state far more directly than any other art form. Our ears are open in a way that our eyes are not: we cannot 'listen away' as we can 'look away'. With music the question of distance is, therefore, an essential question. Where are we and where is it? Where does it stop and where do we begin? Which feelings belong to the music and which to us? In his essay 'The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner', Thomas Mann speaks of Romanticism as being uninterested in what he calls 'the pathos of distance'.

It was this essay that was the proximate cause of Mann's hasty departure from Germany in 1933: he caused particular outrage among the Nazi establishment for saying that Wagner had elevated dilettantism to the level of genius.

In one respect, it is easy to see what Mann means. In the first decades of the 19th century, composers took an increasing interest in the sensational dimension of music, its capacity to have an impact: to make a big and splendid noise. As the century advanced, orchestras grew in size and power, to accommodate the imaginings of composers intent on exploring acoustic extremes. Distance is to an extent a function of scale, and while the pathos of distance is important in our relationship with the musical miniatures that represent one side of the Romantic achievement (nocturnes, songs without words and, pre-eminently, songs with words), the large-scale orchestral works that typify the other side amount to a concerted bid to break down the distance between music and audience. Wagner was quite open about wanting to change the consciousness of his listeners – and he knew better than anyone how to harness the power of the new forces of musical impact at his disposal. At work on *Tristan und Isolde*, he wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck that he feared good performances of the work would drive people mad (and, as we have seen, he was spot on). To Hans von Bülow he said that he wanted the listener to give himself 'unresistingly' to his work, such that he 'involuntarily assimilates even what is most alien to his nature'. Wagner had no interest in the pathos of distance.

The state in which he found the art of opera in the middle of the 19th century didn't please him. He deplored its tired routines and swept them away. Where a traditional opera typically hauled itself along through a series of arias, duets and ensemble pieces, strung along a line of recitative, Wagner integrated words, drama and music into a discourse of continuous gesture. This did a lot to dismantle the structures which in traditional opera keep the audience at a distance from the action. In an opera by Rossini or Donizetti, we hop from one aria or duet or ensemble to another, negotiating an archipelago of self-sufficient pieces of music, and this acts as a kind of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, repeatedly ejecting us from the narrative, an effect the custom of applauding individual numbers as though they were concert items made even more pronounced. Wagner replaced this 'singing of pieces of music' with a free declamatory vocal style, embedding his singers in the fabric of the drama and rarely permitting them to sing at the same time as each other. In his mature operas, the ebb and flow of the action is controlled by music (Wagner partly characterised it as 'endless melody') which loosens the certainties of diatonic harmony and gives a wide berth to effects of unwanted closure in the musical syntax. As a result, the listener is given only rare opportunities to bail out of the musical and dramatic argument.

It is a central aspect of Wagner's genius (Mann writes about it wonderfully) that he conceived a way to draw the literary and musical components of his operas towards each other. His understanding of the ideographic potential of music – the capacity of music to suggest things, characteristics and ideas – was something quite special to him, and it probably partly accounts for our sense of his work as in certain fundamental respects different from most other music in the classical canon.

The movement towards each other of the musical and the literary in Wagner's art is most clearly to be read in the leitmotifs, the thematic cells and musical phrases used in his mature operas to characterise people, places, things and ideas. Debussy dubbed the leitmotifs 'calling cards' and most recently Adès has said of them that, while he can see that they are 'obviously useful markers for someone in an opium haze', he finds them 'embarrassing', a 'kind of pantomime theatre'. 'They're absurd,' he goes on, 'stuck on like post-it notes to remind you what things are. But they aren't part of the organic life of the music, the veins and the tissues of the music.' On the other hand, for Pierre Boulez it is precisely the organic nature of Wagner's development of the motifs in the *Ring* which is a source of admiration and respect. On this, I'm with Boulez. Rather than treating the leitmotifs as a handy glossary, where we can look up meanings and identifications as we travel through the Wagnerian landscape, we would do better to think of them as staking out a kind of semantic middle ground between music and drama (Wittgenstein called them 'musical prose sentences'). As the works unfold, the listener moves

continuously and fluidly between the music on the one hand and the drama on the other, holding them in a kind of dynamic equilibrium in the mind. The patterned integration of the leitmotifs into the musical fabric – like small marine fossils in certain kinds of sedimentary rock – symbolises the accumulation of experience over time (it was this aspect of Wagner that so excited Proust). And as a formal device, the leitmotifs helped Wagner give coherence and unity to immense spans of musical narrative. Wherever we surface in the onward stream of these operas, whether listening to them or reading them in score, we see a landscape of familiar forms, though always subtly evolving and combining in a kaleidoscope of shifting permutations.

The words often used to describe the effect of Wagner's work – 'seduction', 'irresistibility', 'enchantment' – and the way Wagner is spoken of as a magician or sorcerer or trickster, suggest dark and inscrutable arts; and, given that the stories he tells and the music through which he tells them, are full of emotional drama, at times extreme, we might assume that his power derives from his passion, and that if we feel a loss of will in the face of his work, it is because we have been overwhelmed and swept away by a lava stream of expression or irradiated by a blast of psycho-spiritual energy, or – and this is perhaps the most common trope of all – drugged. Echoing an observation of Mann's, Boulez has said of Wagner that 'his genius was both hot-headed – even irrational – and extremely analytical.' Brecht said that Wagner's art 'creates fog' and Tolstoy thought you could achieve the same effect more quickly by getting drunk or smoking opium. But what has always struck me about Wagner's work – certainly, the seven mature operas – is not that they enthral us through bewilderment or narcosis, but how unnervingly intelligible they are, and how, in being so intelligible, they hold our attention, and, in holding our attention, draw us ineluctably in.

We might think that he had to make things crystal clear to us because his imagination insisted on drawing everything out to such length – the danger of losing us would otherwise have been too great. But I am inclined to turn this on its head and say that it is the length of his operas that allows them to be so intelligible. In Wagner, size matters; of all the variables in his art it matters most. This is what Nietzsche meant when he said that Wagner hands us a magnifying glass. In his mature operas music and drama collaborate intuitively. Musical time and dramatic time do not naturally synchronise: we are better at taking in complex stories than complex music. So Wagner takes care to slow down the pace of his narratives, building them out of large, simply structured sections, which reduce foreground content and accentuate abstract underlay. Long passages of debate between characters about clearly etched issues, question and answer routines that recall fairy-tale storytelling, picture-book incidents and journeys: all help to create a roomy space within which the music can breathe.

Reciprocally, the music works to control the tempo of the action. In a play, there is a limit to how slowly (or indeed how fast) the dialogue can be delivered. Pauses and silences have to be used carefully. In Wagner, the music either speeds up the dialogue to increase emotional intensity (take Tristan's arrival for his night of love with Isolde) or, more typically, the music pours into the mould of the opera flowing between the elements of the drama and pushing them apart, stretching them out. We could think of this process as resembling the inflation of a balloon with a picture on it: as the air inflates the balloon the marks that define the picture move outwards and away from one another. It's as though Wagner were writing the story in very large letters, or reading it out very, very slowly. We follow the action in big temporal arcs, several times longer than those we would experience in a play using the same dialogue. For example, the dramatic action of the first scene of *Die Walküre* takes four times longer in Wagner's opera than it would if you simply read it aloud. In scene two, the factor of augmentation is three, and the third scene takes only twice as long as it would if read aloud. I think this partly explains the sense of increasing pace as the act develops. It's in the use of music to control the narrative flow that his operas may sometimes remind us of film, where it's the camerawork that creates this plasticity.

The dialogue between Brünnhilde and Siegmund in Act Two of *Die Walküre*, where Brünnhilde tells Siegmund the game's up, is a beautiful example of the way Wagner maps narrative structure onto musical argument: the simplicity of the question and answer routine creates utterly transparent musical paragraphs, while the music lends a profound abstract weight to the emotional essence of the scene. At 11 minutes, the musical treatment takes five times longer than the dialogue would if spoken**♪ listen** . In passages such as this one, Wagner's music has an effect on our sense of time that is the reverse of the effect most music in the classical canon has on us. Where most classical music expands our sense of temporal duration, Wagner's contracts it. Most music, though short, seems long; Wagner, though long, seems short. Until Wagner very few compositions – that's to say, self-contained pieces of music – lasted longer than 15 minutes; the majority much less than this. Music from the classical canon characteristically compresses its content into very short timespans,

as you would see if you were to look at a stopwatch while listening to a motet by Thomas Tallis, or an aria from the St Matthew Passion or *Don Giovanni*, a movement from a Beethoven or Webern string quartet, or a Chopin mazurka or a Schubert or Schumann song.

Where in much classical music, the exposition of material (the presentation of musical data to the listener's ear) stands in a very high ratio to passing time, in Wagner's work this relationship is radically relaxed. He sets out the basic propositions of his musical argument with extraordinary parsimony, letting the line out inch by inch, making absolutely sure that we have understood each element in the music before he introduces another one. The norm in classical music is for dense vertically integrated hits of musical information that are cognitively impossible to grasp in their full detail at the time of listening. Wagner spreads out the musical variables horizontally, allowing us all the time we need to register them fully.

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A simple juxtaposition of the first minute or so of each of the operas of the *Ring* with the first minute of *Carmen*, *Falstaff*, *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Wozzeck* (operas written within the force field of Wagner's immense influence and yet, in key respects, resisting it) throws into startling relief the distinctive character of Wagner's compositional procedures. In a minute of Bizet, Verdi, Strauss or Berg, the rapid release of musical information and the compression of the material – the sheer amount of stuff we are asked to take in – creates a distance between us and the music, rebuffing us, as it were, with its complexity or, in a phrase of Adorno's, its 'simultaneous multiplicity'.

First: *Carmen*, the work Nietzsche used to beat Wagner over the head with. By the time the first minute is up we've had three full statements of the opening theme plus a contrasting second subject**♪ listen** . In Verdi's *Falstaff*, an exuberantly syncopated opening phrase propels us within 15 seconds into the thick of a bust-up between Dr Caius and Falstaff, and by the end of the minute we have a complete working picture of the protagonist of the opera: fat, drunken, havoc-raising, insouciant, splendid**♪ listen** . In both these openings, the effect of a large orchestra in full spate is like a firework display, an explosion of energy, light and colour, but emphatically a spectacle, dazzlingly external to us. There's so much going on and in such a small space that although all of the music registers somewhere in our brains, we would be hard pressed, if asked a moment later, to describe more than a few of its salient features.

In *Der Rosenkavalier*, once again, the density of the counterpoint and the speed of harmonic change exuberantly packs the first minute with musical material**♪ listen** . But it's the opening of *Wozzeck* that is the most compressed of all. Here, the intricacy of the musical construction is matched by an extraordinarily rapid exposition of dramatic and emotional content: by the end of the first minute, the structure of class oppression around which the whole work is built has been established. Wozzeck's 'Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann' sums up the utter hopelessness of his Untertan position; while the captain, shrill and hysterical, finds space to elaborate a miniature paranoid disquisition on the nature of time**.♪ listen**

These four openings leave us in no doubt about where we stand. In *Falstaff* and *Wozzeck*, we are sudden spectators of a drama in midstream, emphatically pushed onto the outside. Carmen and *Der Rosenkavalier* present us with pieces of music, fully formed and clearly separate. With the exception of *Die Meistersinger*, where Wagner reverted, to some extent, to older forms, Wagner's later operas do not so much start as just appear, as if out of nowhere. *Tristan und Isolde*, the four *Ring* operas and *Parsifal* open with next to no discernible metre or pulse, so that where we stand in relation to this music becomes unclear. We just find ourselves in it. At the same time, Wagner feeds us only as much musical nutrient as we can comfortably metabolise, so that our absorption into the material is not in any way disturbed by feelings of incomprehension.

The most famous of these openings is, of course, the truly astonishing opening of *Das Rheingold*, where the idea of the origin of things is depicted through the elaboration of the chord of E flat major over 136 bars – that's four minutes of one chord**♪ listen** .

In similar fashion, the first minutes of *Die Walküre* tax us with scarcely more than the note D – buzzing and surging around our heads like an angry swarm of giant bees**♪ listen** . For the opening of *Siegfried*, Wagner planes down the leading edge of the opera to a bare slither: a scarcely audible timpani roll on a low F, setting up an almost imperceptible pedal on the dominant of B flat minor, which acts like a vacuum pulling us forward into the body of the work. Apart from this F we are given only three other musical items to take stock of: a sequence of falling sevenths played by bassoons in thirds, a simple stepwise rising figure played by the tuba, and a reinforcement of the F pedal played by the cellos and emphasised with an accented grace-note turn. Three shapes, each defined by instrumental colour: one falling, one creeping upwards, the third static**♪ listen** .

Finally, in the opening of *Götterdämmerung* we recognise a reprise of the music announcing Brünnhilde's awakening, but here transposed down a semitone, and so darker, more disturbing. Again, all that we are required to grasp are two chord progressions – E flat minor followed by C flat major and

then E flat minor followed by D flat minor – and two types of articulation: the E flat minor chords stark, single and bare, the two subsequent chords, rippling and emollient.♪ **listen**

To play the first minute of a Wagner opera – like measuring the first foot of a redwood tree – is a kind of nonsense. But that's part of the point, since what we learn from this exercise is that Wagner builds his music over the longer timespan through a gradual accumulation of discretely presented elements. The power and excitement of the orchestral prelude to *Die Walküre*, for example, is intrinsically dependent on the extreme simplicity of its ingredients. A mood of intense minatory agitation is created by the thrashing and surging melody in the cellos and basses, a relentless pacing up and down the harmonic minor scale of D, held like a force suppressed under the clamp or lid of the octave tremolando D in the violins and violas. Structurally all the music does is to take the 'melody' from the tonic up five notes to the dominant and back again. But a lot of play with the potential for harmonic clash between the notes of the diminished seventh chord on C sharp and the obsessive pedal on D, plus a gradual ratcheting up of the pulse – notably during a wonderfully effective stretto three-part canon in the strings at two beats' distance – leads to an explosive climax on the dominant (a timpani thunder clap) letting loose a sequence of descending woodwind and brass fanfares (of the kind that Adorno was so snooty about) and a gradual subsidence back to where we started. The collapse of tension here is almost more extraordinary than its build-up, as Wagner creates the effect of a sudden drop in atmospheric pressure (it's almost as if the strings are tuning themselves down as the line loses energy). The simplicity of the musical components allows us to feel that we are at the controls of this infernal machine, its drive our drive – and this is the authentic Wagnerian experience.♪ **listen**

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Most tonal music is structured by tensions moving towards a climax and away again, whether at the level of individual phrases, paragraphs or complete pieces. Wagner uses simple wave forms across particularly long stretches of music: he takes us up and then he takes us down again, or, in the case of the Prelude to *Lohengrin*, we start at the top, move through a progressive thickening of texture and deepening of register until we reach the climax, and then return to the thin high perch we started from – like a trapeze artist swooping down through a parabola from one high platform to another. Wagner said that composition was the art of transition and his transitions are indeed to be wondered at. One of the finest sees Siegfried ascend to Brünnhilde's rock through the curtain of fire behind which she is locked in sleep. This is the most profound emotional transition in the whole *Ring* cycle – whatever we may think of Siegfried as a character – and Wagner achieves it through a passage of gorgeous, effulgently orchestrated music, that takes us up to a broad high peak and then escorts us down the other side into an entirely new landscape. This majestic descent brings us to a point of almost complete rest, out of which grows a single violin line that sinuously feels its way upwards, like the tendril of some climbing plant searching for a place to attach itself, up and up, until, arriving at its limit, it turns and snakes back down again. The musical line is tethered at either end of its ascent by two statements of the so-called destiny motif played first in D and then up a tone in E. The meandering violin line is nothing more, then, than a hugely attenuated ornament on the dominant seventh of D on the way up and, on the way down on the dominant seventh of E. So all we have to think about are two chords and a line that has gone for a walk. And when the gentle state of anticipation induced by the dominant sevenths is finally answered, it's by a chord we have not been expecting, delicately expressive of Siegfried in his new, as yet uncertain psychological state ♪ **listen** .

Arnold Schoenberg – frustrated and, we may think, naively puzzled by the fact that people found his music difficult to understand – declared that all music is difficult. There is a lot to this. When someone complains that they cannot understand atonal music, I am prompted to wonder what in tonal music they have understood. On the surface, where melody and harmony follow recognisable routines, we feel we know what is being said. But this familiarity is deceptive, if not a barrier to understanding. The compression of information characteristic of much great music, the speed at which it passes, the bewildering density and delicacy of its over-determination, makes it difficult in the way that poetry is difficult. Like poetry, music deflects our gaze. It is an elusive medium which we grasp only partially through an endless process of interpretation. Like Hans Sachs in the second act of *Die Meistersinger*, silenced by the enigmatic beauty of Walther's prize song ('Ich fühl's und kann's nicht verstehn'), we feel the beauty of music but we do not wholly understand it.

Wagnerian music drama – the music and the drama and the way they combine – is unusually permeable to our search for coherence. There's a sense in which it gives up its meanings generously and that this is the result of Wagner's quite exceptional feel for the way our brains take in musical and dramatic information. When we have been drawn deep into the Wagnerian zone, much as we love Bach and Haydn and Bartok and Berg, the thought of their music can

seem a little bit too much like hard work.

Wagner's astonishing musical charisma works not just by giving us a great time, not just by plying us with rich and varied expressive goodies, but by conferring intelligence on us: he makes us feel we understand. I wonder, though, whether this results in our not only getting too close to him for comfort (an experience which on its own would be enough to trigger the impulse to push him away), but feeling that we have somehow incorporated him into ourselves. The word I like best for my experience of Wagner's work is 'engross', because it means to absorb totally and to write in large letters and, in Shakespearean usage, to make fat or pregnant. Who has engrossed whom is not clear to me. Have I swallowed Wagner or has Wagner swallowed me? Whichever it is, the consequences can seem quite bad: whether it is that, like a baby with a bottle with too big a hole in the teat, I have satisfied myself without a residue of want (always an unsettling condition), or that in gobbling everything down I have taken in things I find unpleasant along with those I find delicious.

Debussy said that it was 'hard to imagine the state to which the strongest brain is reduced by listening for four nights to the *Ring* … It is worse than obsession. It is possession. You no longer belong to yourself.' Returning from a Wagner performance in January 1917, Otto Klemperer said to his sister: 'When I like Wagner, I do not like myself.' I think one can go a step further and say that even disliking Wagner is not straightforward. There are many composers we may not particularly care for, but this poses no problem because we experience their music as separate from us, as other. They do not tamper with our sense of self. In possessing us, Wagner restricts our freedom to dislike him, since in disliking him, we can find that we end up disliking bits of ourselves. And this, after all is what he set out to achieve: he wanted his listener to abandon himself unresistingly to the work, so that he 'involuntarily assimilates even what is most alien to his nature.'

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In *Art and Its Objects*, Richard Wollheim suggests that it is 'part of the spectator's attitude to art that he should … make it the object of an ever-increasing or deepening attention'. Simone Weil defined true love as 'a pure attention to the existence of the other'. Taken together, these formulations suggest that in learning to attend to music as other than ourselves, we model other forms of attention – attention above all to each other. Recalling how Erasmus found in the god Terminus 'a symbol exhorting decency in life', we might observe that much harm comes from failing to acknowledge boundaries and that a music that seeks to overrun boundaries in some sense models other invasions, other grabs for power.

For me, *Tristan und Isolde* is Wagner's greatest single achievement, because it is the one work where his attention seems to be wholly turned away from us towards his subject. The overwhelming intensity of the music belongs to Tristan and to Isolde and, though we are made to experience it, not, in the end, to us. Like Brangäne, Kurwenal, King Marke and Melot and Wagner himself, we stand on the outside looking in. The visionary simplicity of *Tristan und Isolde* permits us to take it in at a glance, and what we see in this glance is an impossible object. For it seems both large and small, intimate and colossal, at the same time. Here it isn't a magnifying glass that Wagner gives us, but an electron microscope through which we see, blown up to a size that fills the frame, things which, with the naked eye, we cannot see at all. Or we could think of it as the musical equivalent of the Large Hadron Collider, an immense musical accelerator, built for the sole purpose of detecting the Higgs boson of the universe of love.

The particle at the heart of *Tristan und Isolde* is the word 'and'. In the midst of her ecstatic exchanges with Tristan in Act II of the opera, Isolde suddenly catches sight of the word. 'But our love, is it not Tristan and Isolde?' she asks, perplexed by what would happen if death were to destroy this little word. Andrew Marvell defined love as 'the conjunction of the mind and opposition of the stars'. 'And' is the conjunction that both connects Tristan and Isolde and separates them. The story of Tristan and Isolde is the story of 'and' and of what happens when the boundary it defends is overrun. In Act II, after almost an hour of unrelenting emotional pressure, the little word finally gives way. Tristan and Isolde collapse in on one another, no longer able to distinguish themselves as separate people: 'Tristan you, I Isolde, no longer Tristan,' Tristan babbles; 'You Isolde, Tristan I, no longer Isolde!' Isolde answers. Here music reaches the limits of its power to express feeling and something breaks. No sooner have Tristan and Isolde become one person, as it were, than King Marke (Isolde's betrothed) and Melot, Tristan's treacherous friend, burst in on them. 'Save yourself, Tristan!' Kurwenal cries **♪ listen** .

As movingly as any music in the classical canon, the music in the second half of *Tristan und Isolde*, with its unconsolable sadness, tells of 'infinite passion, and the pain of finite hearts that yearn', the final lines of Browning's poem 'Two in the Campagna', published four years before Wagner completed *Tristan und Isolde* and perhaps the perfect antidote to it. As Browning would know, Isolde's final transfiguration is a beautiful delusion. The god Terminus remains

immovable. 'Concedo nulli.' 'I yield to no one.'

In the question 'Is Wagner bad for us?' there's a hint of tiresome passivity, as though we had no choice in the matter. There are substances and there is substance abuse. It's surely up to us to manage Wagner's charisma, up to us to maintain the 'and' in our relationship with him. But whether it's really possible to keep Wagner at a distance without losing something essential in our experience of his work is unclear to me. What I do know is that to toy with the idea of *Tristan und Isolde* as the foundational event in a new religion or to take it as 'a sacrificial consolation for the imperfect loves of those who witness it' is to turn this great work into a fetish. When we talk like this, the issue is not whether Wagner is bad for us, but whether we are bad for Wagner.

Letters

Vol. 35 No. 8 · 25 April 2013

From Julian Rushton

Nicholas Spice writes that Berlioz, while reviewing *Tristan und Isolde* positively, 'privately admitted to being disgusted by the music' (*LRB*, 11 April). True, he added private expressions of distaste to the printed score presented to him by Wagner, now in the Bibliothèque nationale. But he never heard, still less reviewed, the opera. He reviewed the prelude, which Wagner conducted at his Paris concert of 1860. Berlioz wrote that it had 'no theme other than a sort of chromatic moan', and was 'filled with dissonant chords, their cruelty further enhanced by long appoggiaturas that replace the note that belongs to the harmony'. This public expression of disgust was reprinted in his essay collection *A Travers Chants* (1862) well before the first performance of *Tristan*.

Julian Rushton
University of Leeds

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From Ed Morman

I learned a lot from the article by Nicholas Spice and, as a result, I may finally allow myself to listen to, and like, Wagner's music. Mr Spice should know, though, that a trapeze artist – swinging on a fixed length of cord, attached to a fixed point – will describe the arc of a circle, not a parabola. The parabola is for the guy shot from a cannon.

Ed Morman
Baltimore

http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n07/nicholas-spice/is-wagner-bad-for-us

IMAGE: PUBLISHER NICHOLAS SPICE TALKS ABOUT WAGNER AND YOUR HEALTH ON THE MUSIC SHOW (MELBOURNE WRITERS FESTIVAL)

A-Z of Wagner: A is for Alberich

This year is the bicentenary of Richard Wagner's birth, and to celebrate our new series takes an alphabetical tour of the composer, updated fortnightly. In our first stop, A stands for Alberich, antisemitism and Apocalypse Now.

Stephen Moss, theguardian.com, Thursday 17 January 2013 04.13 AEST

A is for **Alberich**, the vertically challenged, sex-crazed villain whose theft of the gold at the beginning of **Das Rheingold** – the prelude to **the Ring Cycle – triggers a train of deranged events**, which concludes four evenings and 15 hours later with the destruction of the realm of the gods, the creation of a new world of imperfect humanity, and the restoration of the gold to the Rhinemaidens.

The character is based on the dwarf of the same name in the German medieval epic poem **The Song of the Nibelungs**, overlaid with elements from the Norse sagas. Alberich is a Nibelung and dwells in Nibelheim, which most modern productions locate somewhere in the West Midlands. He has a brother called Mime, who is easily the most boring character in the Ring Cycle (Das Rheingold is followed in the sequence by Die Walküre, Siegfried and Götterdämmerung). Whenever Mime appears, take a toilet break.

Alberich might be more interesting than his steelworker brother, but we still await a truly challenging production that makes his pursuit of power – and willingness to renounce love in its pursuit – a noble and heroic act. No doubt it will come. Alberich also has a son called Hagen who is, if anything, even dodgier than his dad. Hagen

makes his own bid to get hold of the supposedly power-giving ring forged from the Rheingold in Götterdämmerung, and meets a satisfyingly watery end. Oddly, Wagner fails to tell us what happens to Alberich, who, despite being responsible for all the Tarantinoesque mayhem, is the only character left standing by the end. Either his survival represents the continuance of evil in the new world or, more likely, it was an oversight by the composer, who had spent 25 exhausting years working on the Ring Cycle, mainly writing it backwards.

Going for gold … Alberich (in a Covent Garden production, sung here by Wolfgang Koch) and the Rhinemaidens. Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

A is also for **antisemitism**, **of which Wagner was unquestionably guilty**(the philosopher Theodor Adorno saw Alberich as an antisemitic stereotype), and **Apocalypse Now**, the Francis Ford Coppola film that used **Wagner's Ride of the Valkyries theme to lacerating effect.**

http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jan/16/a-z-wagner-alberich-antisemitism

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B is for Bayreuth

The next letter of our fortnightly alphabetical tour of the world and work of Richard Wagner is B, for Bayreuth and Brünnhilde

Thursday 31 January 2013 03.14 EST

Immortality or bust … statue of Richard Wagner, Volksfestplatz, Bayreuth. Photograph: Thomas Einberger/Argum

B is for **Bayreuth**, the capital of Upper Franconia in southern Germany, but more to the point the capital of Wagneria – it styles itself "Wagnerstadt" on local signs. It is a pleasant, quiet, conservative town that would be

as obscure as **Leamington Spa** were it not for the fact that in the 1870s **Richard Wagner** decided to build an **opera** house there.

Bayreuth Opera House. Photograph: Johannes Simon/Getty Images

Wagner visited Bayreuth in 1870, hoping to stage his works at the beautiful, jewel-like **Margrave Opera House**. But he decided it was too small to accommodate his wondrous inventions, so set about building his own at the top of a hill on the outskirts of the town, on land given to him by the burghers of Bayreuth, who cleverly realised that 130 years later worshipful Wagnerians would still be making the pilgrimage to the town for the summer festival.

The **Festspielhaus**, designed by Otto Brückwald to Wagner's precise specifications, opened on 13 August 1876 with Das Rheingold. Early festivals were intermittent because of Wagner's perpetual financial problems, but eventually they became annual and were hugely oversubscribed. Wagner also built a house in Bayreuth, and is buried there, at the bottom of the garden.

Amalia Friedrich Materna as Brünnhilde. Photo by Palm/RSCH/Redferns

B is also for Brünnhilde, the pyromaniac who **brings the Ring Cycle to an inflammatory end** by immolating herself in a fire that consumes Valhalla. Brünnhildes are traditionally **large women**, with tremendously loud voices, and used to sport chain mail and a winged helmet, though increasingly these are being replaced by more feminine attire. Kirsten Flagstad and **Birgit Nilsson** would be popular choices as the best Brünnhildes, **though the field is a competitive one**.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/jan/30/azwagnerbayreuthbrunnhilde?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

C is for Cosima

Wagner's second wife outlived the composer by almost half a century, devoting herself to keeping his flame alive

Thursday 14 February 2013 01.06 EST

Cosima Wagner circa 1870. Photograph: Imagno/Getty Images

C is for **Cosima Wagner**; AKA Francesca Gaetana Cosima Liszt, illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt; AKA Cosima von Bülow, wife of the conductor Hans von Bülow, who proved remarkably understanding when Cosima fell in love with the sexually rampant Wagner in 1863.

Cosima was tall, aloof, beak-nosed, antisemitic and altogether a bit weird. According to **Wagner expert Barry Millington**, she believed women could only fulfill themselves through suffering, and was determined to sacrifice herself on the altar of Wagner's genius. She abandoned poor old Hans, with whom she had had two daughters; then, in an echo of her own chaotic upbringing, bore Wagner three illegitimate children (Isolde, Eva and Siegfried – each named after a Wagnerian character); only marrying him once Von Bülow had consented to a divorce in 1870, and thereafter put up with her new husband's philandering. That same year she was the recipient on her birthday – which she celebrated on Christmas Day – of the so-called **Siegfried Idyll**; inspired Parsifal (which Nietzsche hated, arguing that the Francophone Cosima has corrupted Wagner's German-ness); and played a key role in the mid-1870s in getting the Bayreuth festival off the ground and making a success of it after a financially disappointing first season.

Cosima was 24 years younger than Wagner, and outlived him by almost half a century, dying at the age of 92 in 1930. She devoted her life after Wagner's death in 1883 to keeping the Wagnerian flame alive, honing the festival at Bayreuth into a celebration of the 10 works that became canonical – the four operas that make up the Ring Cycle, plus Tristan und Isolde, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, the Flying Dutchman, Meistersinger and Parsifal.

She was fanatical about following the Master's stage directions – Bernard Shaw, a keen Wagnerian, derided her as the "chief remembrancer" – and was equally pathological in her antisemitism, laying down a template that would discredit Bayreuth for decades. Cosima has had her fans over the years – they have emphasised her wide artistic interests and argued that Wagner's wayward genius relied on her sound business sense – but the writer Philip Hensher is not one of them. "Wagner was a genius, but also a fairly appalling human being," he wrote in 2010. "**Cosima was just an appalling human being**."

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/feb/13/azwagnerccosimo?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

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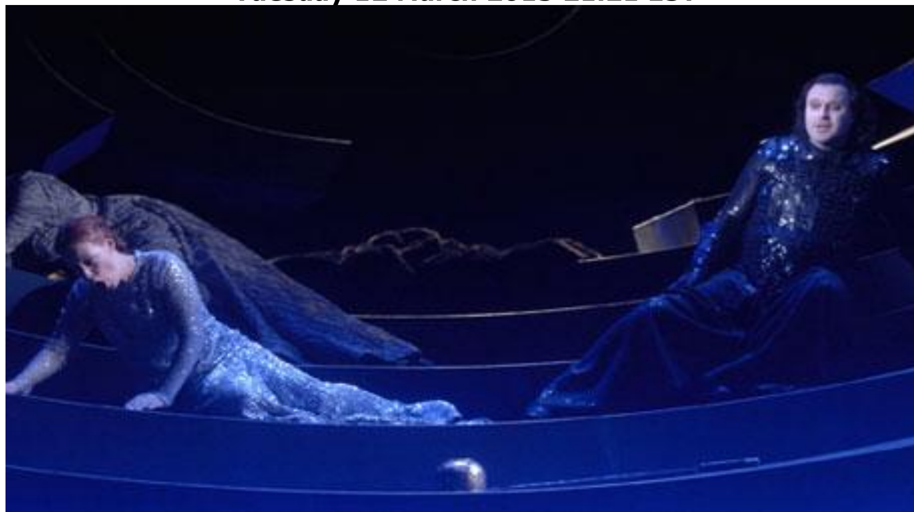
D is for death

Along with sex and love, it's death that completes the trinity in Wagner's operas, from the *Ring* to *The Flying Dutchman*

Tuesday 12 March 2013 21.21 EST



Blue notes … Tristan and Isolde find the ideal union after death. Photo: Mike Hoban

D is for **Death**. Wagner's attitude to death is distinctly unhealthy. If he influenced Hitler in anything, it was in the idea of death and destruction as cathartic (as at the **end of Götterdämmerung).** Wagner, the apotheosis of romanticism, was looking for perfect love but never quite finding it. Or, rather, only finding it in death. Thus Isolde can finally consummate her union with Tristan in her **ecstatic Liebestod** after his death. Similarly, after Siegfried has been killed by a duplicitous world, Brünnhilde martyrs herself to cement their union and redeem humanity.

Sex, love and death form a trinity in Wagner's operas. "My own body longs to share the hero's holiest honour," cries Brünnhilde as the logs are piled on her funeral pyre. "Feel my bosom, how it burns. A bright fire fastens on my heart, to embrace him, to be one with him in the intensity of love." Did this emotional outpouring turn Hitler's head? He staged his own Götterdämmerung in his Berlin bunker as if it were a Wagnerian epic, even marrying Eva Braun the day before the two of them committed suicide. The ultimate Liebestod.

D is also for the mysterious **Dutchman** in **Der Fliegende Holländer** (The Flying Dutchman), the first of Wagner's mature operas, and the one with which he said he ceased to be a **concocter of operatic texts** and became a poet. Premiered in Dresden in 1843, it draws on the ancient tale of the captain of a ghostly ship, doomed to sail the seas forever unless he finds a woman who will be faithful to him.

We are back in sex/love/death territory. The Dutchman is looking for the perfect union with an adoring woman. He believes he has found her in Senta and they swear eternal love, but, overhearing her talking to her former fiance, he thinks she has betrayed him and resumes his wanderings. The hysterical Senta throws herself off a cliff, the ghostly ship suddenly vanishes, and the **opera** ends with the couple ascending to heaven in each other's arms. For Wagner, the happiest of endings – death and transfiguration.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/mar/12/azwagnerdeath?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

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E is for winsome heroines

From Eva and Elsa to Elisabeth
– Wagner liked his heroines winsome, and beginning with E

Wednesday 27 March 2013 04.54 ES

E is for **Eva, Elsa and Elisabeth.**

Wagner definitely had a thing about the letter E as far as his winsome heroines are concerned.

Eva Pogner is the love interest in **Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg**, fought (or rather sung) over by the noble Walther von Stolzing and the comic stereotype Sixtus Beckmesser, **Wagner's revenge on music critics**. Eva is an archetypal Wagnerian heroine – beautiful, desirable and entirely forgettable. Eva is also the name Wagner gave to his second (illegitimate) daughter with the then **Cosima von Bülow,** and of one of his great-granddaughters, **Eva Wagner-Pasquier,** today joint director of the Bayreuth Festival with her half-sister Katharina Wagner.

'A winsome heroine with a knight fixation' … Annette Dasch as Elsa in Wagner's Lohengrin at Bayreuth, July 2010. Photograph: Michaela Rehle/Reuters

Elsa, the heroine in **Lohengrin**, is more interesting: a medieval noblewoman with a knight fixation. After being accused by her evil guardian Telramund of murdering her brother Gottfried, she summons up the knight of her dreams to protect her honour. He arrives on a boat **pulled by a very large swan**, and asks only one thing – that she never asks his name. This is fine at first, but when they get married it naturally starts to bother Elsa. When she at last poses the fatal question, Lohengrin says the pernickety rules governing the Knights of the Grail have been broken and he has to go home, and poor Elsa drops dead. But at least Gottfried returns, released from the curse of Telramund's witch-like consort Ortrud, who had turned him into … you guessed it … a swan.

In **Tannhäuser**, Elisabeth also performs the role of sacrifice, dying so that her knightly lover – the eponymous Tannhäuser – can be redeemed after spending a dirty weekend in Venusberg. The **opera** combines the Eurovision elements of Meistersinger with the courtly romance of Lohengrin. It's a preposterous confection, but as usual with Wagner the magnificence of the music more than makes up for the absurdities of the plot.

E is also for **Erda, the earth goddess in the Ring cycle**, who is not at all winsome. She is wise, tough, all-seeing and usually wrapped in Miss Havisham-style gauze. She is the mother of Brünnhilde and possibly of the latter's eight Valkyrie sisters – the text is inconclusive. She is also indisputably mother of the **three Norns**. How she has managed to produce so many children while spending most of her time asleep is another mystery.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/mar/26/azwagnereheroines?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

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F is for Die Feen

Wagner disliked his first opera, but it has many redeeming qualities including a delightful overture: not bad for a 20-year-old

F is for **Die Feen** (The Fairies), the first **opera** Wagner completed, at the age of just 20. It is an everyday story of fairy folk, with a libretto by Wagner based on **Carlo Gozzi's** play La Donna Serpente (the Serpent Woman, though Wagner wisely chose to dispense with the serpent).

The plot is romantic mumbo-jumbo. Ada, a well-connected fairy, has fallen in love with Prince Arindal. Everyone in fairyland is suspicious of the union and mortal-land has descended into chaos in Arindal's absence, but the pair are gloriously happy together until (prefiguring **Lohengrin**) Arindal breaks the rules by asking Ada who she is. Boff! She disappears and he's suddenly pitched into a wilderness.

Ada reappears in Act II and sets Arindal various tests, all of which he fails, leading Ada to be turned to stone and Arindal to be driven insane. Despite his feeble grasp on what might loosely be called reality, Arindal pursues Ada to the underworld, defeats a variety of demons, and (shades of **Orpheus**) uses the power of song to free his beloved from her entombment. They return to fairyland, the fairy king grants Arindal immortality, and there is general rejoicing.

Wagner came to dislike the opera, probably because he felt he had been leaned upon on by his bourgeois relatives to produce a defence of marriage, and it was never performed in his lifetime. But the **overture is delightful** and there are winning passages elsewhere. Critics have noted the influence of Weber, but there is

also much that is characteristic of the mature Wagner: the testing of the lover; the Brünnhilde-like willingness of Ada to renounce immortality for love; magic shields and swords; a transformation wrought by art. It is also significant that Wagner had already decided to be his own librettist. The ego had landed.

Die Feen is rarely staged in opera houses – maybe Covent Garden should give it a whirl – but it gets the odd concert performance, and a recent one by the Chelsea Opera Group received largely enthusiastic notices. **Martin Kettle, writing in the Guardian,** said it "will never be a repertoire piece, but it is a unified work with some powerful and accomplished music". For all the nonsense in the libretto, Die Feen has been unjustly neglected and deserves a director who can sprinkle some fairy dust over it.

F is also for **Fasolt** and **Fafner**, the two truculent, gold-fixated giants in the Ring cycle, and for **Froh** (god of spring), **Freia** (goddess of youth and beauty) and **Fricka** (goddess of marriage, wedded to Wotan and a right nag), all of whom have walk-on parts in the Ring.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/apr/04/azwagnerfdiefeen?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

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G is for Gesamtkunstwerk

The total integration of music and drama was Wagner's artistic credo, and it revolutionised opera - Friday 19 April 2013 00.30 EST

'A unitarian form for the whole artwork' … Wagner's Lohengrin in Bayreuth. Photograph: EPA

G is for **Gesamtkunstwerk**. Wagner couldn't spell it – he wrote "Gesammtkunstwerk" – but he knew what he meant by it, and the word could be said to sum up his entire aesthetic philosophy once he had decided to cast off what he came to see as the shackles of Italianate **opera**. It means "total work of art", and Wagner introduced the term in 1849 in a series of essays in which he decried the fragmentation of the arts and argued it had been downhill all the way since the Greeks.

He was especially critical of the way opera had become a vehicle for showy effects rather than a deep, unified statement of cultural truths. "In opera, hitherto, the musician has not so much as attempted to devise a unitarian form for the whole artwork," he wrote in **The Artwork of the Future**. "Each vocal piece is a form filled out for itself, and merely hung together with the other tone pieces of the opera through a similarity of outward structure. The disconnected is peculiarly the character of operatic music."

The working out of Wagner's vision in these essays led directly to the Ring cycle – he was sketching Siegfried as he wrote them – in which he gave up writing operatic "numbers" and sought to integrate music and drama. "Wagner claimed that in traditional opera, music, which should be the means, had become the end, while drama, which should be the end, was merely the means," explains Michael Tanner in his **pithy, provocative book on the composer**. "His revolution in opera, as opposed to all the other revolutions which he hoped to effect, was to be the placing of music and drama in the right order."

It was this integration of music and drama that George Bernard Shaw, one of Wagner's most influential early proselytisers, most admired. "There is not a single bar of '**classical music**' in the Ring … that has any other point than the single direct point of giving musical

expression to the drama," he wrote in **The Perfect Wagnerite.** Shaw said Wagner was not striving for musical effect "any more than Shakespeare in his plays is driving at such ingenuities of verse-making as sonnets, triolets and the like." There could be no higher praise.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/apr/18/azwagnergesamtkunstwerk?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

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H is for Hitler

The association with Nazi anti-semitism taints Wagner's music for many. Is that fair, asks Stephen Moss?

Wednesday 8 May 2013 20.43 EST

Hitler meets Winifred Wagner, the composer's daughter-in-law. The two were close friends.

H has, unfortunately, to be for **Hitler**. No programme note about a Wagner performance is complete without **an analysis of the question of whether he was anti-semitic** (yes, undoubtedly), an influence on Hitler (yes, probably, in some difficult-to-define way), and thus a Nazi (absolutely not). On the latter point, it would be mad to condemn Wagner for a movement that came to power 50 years after his death, however much we might speculate on the ways in which the nationalistic strain in his thinking fed into Nazi notions of pure, organic German nationhood.

The beauty of the Ring is that it can withstand a Hitlerian reading – Siegfried as stormtrooper; a revolutionary reading - Siegfried as subverter of the established order; a green reading - Siegfried as child of the forest standing up to the forces of industrial capitalism. Like all great art, it is many-sided, and the preoccupation with the links between Wagner and Hitler has become hackneyed.

For sure, the young Hitler idolised the composer. "Hitler's passion knew no bounds," **writes Ian Kershaw in his great biography of the dictator**. "A performance could affect him almost like a religious experience, plunging him into deep and mystical fantasies." But many of us have that feeling when we listen to Wagner, and it doesn't mean we want to invade Poland. And Hitler loved art and architecture, too, so perhaps the whole artistic establishment stands condemned.

Hitler was a fantasist, and Wagner's epic creations fuelled those fantasies, but that doesn't mean the latter can be held responsible for Nazism, even if he did supply much of the soundtrack in the 1930s when Hitler was a devoted pilgrim at Bayreuth. Hitler may also have had Götterdämmerung in mind as Berlin burned in the spring of 1945. But during the war it seems he preferred to be **charmed by The Merry Widow** rather than intoxicated by Lohengrin. Hitler had always adored that operetta, but has anyone ever accused Franz Lehár of laying the ideological foundations of the Third Reich?

H is also for Eduard Hanslick, the music critic, friend of Brahms and champion of "pure music" who became Wagner's arch-enemy in the 1850s, and for **D**ie Hochzeit **- The Wedding),** Wagner's first stab at

writing an **opera**. It was begun in the early 1830s, when Wagner, barely 20, was studying at the University of Leipzig, but abandoned because his family found the subject matter – the death of two lovers whose relationship is thwarted by social pressures – unsavoury.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013may/08/azwagnerhhitler?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

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I is for Isolde

Stephen Moss explores Wagner's heroine from perhaps the most significant musical work of the 19th century

Thursday 23 May 2013 01.01 AEST

Nina Stemme as Isolde in Glyndebourne's 2007 production of Wagner's masterwork.

Photograph: Tristram Kenton for the Guardian

I is for Isolde, the greatest female figure in the Wagnerian canon (some might choose **Brünnhilde**, but she seems to me more symbol than flesh-and-blood character). The seven-minute Liebestod (love-death) at the end of Tristan und Isolde never fails to move, and it is almost worth sitting through the tedious first act of the **opera** to hear it. (I jest! **Tristan und Isolde** is a gripping opera, and perhaps the most significant musical work produced in the 19th century.)

The peculiar thing about the opera is that the back story – war, slayings, the murder of the Irish princess Isolde's betrothed by the Cornish knight Tristan, her determination to kill the latter, her failure to do so, the way she healed Tristan's wounds and kept his identity secret – is more interesting than the story itself, which revolves around the pair not quite being able to make love despite drinking a love potion (substituted by Isolde's lady-in-waiting Brangäne for the poison with which Isolde intended to kill both Tristan and herself as they journeyed to Cornwall, where she was to marry boring old King Marke). But let's not complain. If Wagner had done what he did with the Ring and got so interested in the story that he felt the need to recount everything, composing backwards from Siegfried's death, we would probably have ended up with half a dozen operas and had to spend a week in the theatre. At least T&I weighs in at a breezy four and a bit hours.

The opera was written in the 1850s and inspired by Wagner's infatuation with **Mathilde Wesendonck**, the wife of one of his patrons – the composer was never shy of pursuing his friends' and colleagues' wives. It is not known whether Wagner consummated his passion for Mathilde, but it is tempting to assume not, so overwhelming is the sexual yearning in the opera, a yearning that can only be fulfilled in death – hence that devastating Liebestod. The work was completed in 1859 but not premiered until June 1865 in Munich, courtesy of **Ludwig II of Bavaria** who supplied the money. Who said Ludwig was mad?

Undated clip of Birgit Nilsson performing the Liebestod

Tristan und Isolde is based on the Arthurian legend **Tristan and Iseult**, a favourite romance in early medieval French poetry. The ideal Isolde is flame-haired, fiery, indomitable yet vulnerable, stern yet tender, and a standout dramatic soprano. It is a huge dramatic and musical challenge. The all-time greats in the role are **Kirsten Flagstad** and **Birgit Nilsson**.

Powerful modern interpreters include **Waltraud Meier** and **Nina Stemme**. You can hear it **live at the Proms or on Radio 3** on 27 July.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/may/22/azwagneriisolde?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

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J is for Jews

Even by the putrid standards of his day, Richard Wagner was a virulent antisemite

Friday 14 June 2013 01.31 EST

Pride and prejudice … an artificially coloured photograph of German composer Richard Wagner in 1871. Photograph: Stefano Bianchetti/Corbis

J is for Jews, a controversial subject that cannot be ignored. While we may reject a mechanistic link between **Wagner and Hitlerism**, there is no denying the composer was a virulent antisemite. Nor is it any defence to say that antisemitism was widespread in the second half of the 19th century – one of the arguments offered by Wagner expert Barry Millington in his recent book **The Sorcerer of Bayreuth**. Even by the putrid standards of his time, Wagner was appallingly prejudiced, egged on in the last part of his life by his wife **Cosima,** who if anything was even more antisemitic than her husband.

In 1850, Wagner wrote a long, rambling and repulsive essay titled **Das Judenthum in der Musik**, variously translated as Jewishness in Music, Judaiasm in Music, and Jews in Music. It was published in Neue Zeitschrift für Musik (New New Journal of Music), and **reproduced in revised (and unapologetically expanded) form in 1869.** The essay argued that because Jews always live outside a society, they can never produce authentic art but merely skitter across the surface. "The Jewish musician hurls together the diverse forms and styles of every age and every master," wrote Wagner. "Packed side by side, we find the formal idiosyncrasies of all the schools, in motleyest chaos." He singles out Mendelssohn and Meyerbeer for particular obloquy. Incredibly, Wagner had been an acolyte of Meyerbeer a few years earlier, and the latter had given him help with his early work.

The prompt for his attacks may have been personal – this was a low point in Wagner's life and he resented the success others were enjoying – but the essay encapsulates one of his key philosophical tenets. He believed authenticity in art depended on the artist being able to engage with and articulate the feelings of the community, the "volk". That was why he admired Greek art, which he saw as embodying communal feeling. By contrast, he argued that because Jews were outsiders and even spoke the language as foreigners, they could never represent the community in which they lived. Jewish artists, he concluded, contributed towards "our modern self-deception", and "**Judaism** is the evil conscience of our modern civilisation".

Some have argued that Wagner's villains – Beckmesser in Meistersinger, Alberich and Mime in the Ring – are representations of Jewishness. The contention is hard to prove either way, which is fortunate for Wagnerians or these works would truly be tainted. Millington makes a clever, if perverse, case for Wagner's antisemitism being crucial to him artistically because it gave him a context in which to define German-ness. "Wagner's output acquired its distinctive characteristics precisely because of his antisemitism," he concludes. This is intended as a defence, yet it is one that makes it all the

more necessary we see Wagner's rebarbative essay for what it is: a racist tract that no amount of contextualising can redeem.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/jun/13/a-to-z-of-wagner-j-is-for-jews?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

K is for Kundry

The wild woman of Wagner's final opera, Kundry is the female equivalent of the Flying Dutchman

Saturday 13 July 2013 01.14 EST

Stuart Skelton as Parsifal and Jane Dutton as Kundry in Parsifal at English National Opera, 2011. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

K is for Kundry, the "wild woman" central to Wagner's final **opera**, **Parsifal.** She is the ultimate dual woman, both the devoted messenger of the Grail knights and a dangerous seductress in the power of another K, Klingsor, a failed knight now determined to undermine the order, which is charged with looking after the goblet from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper and which was then used to collect his blood as he died on the cross. Kundry has been condemned to live forever because she mocked Christ at the crucifixion, and she now desires only death and redemption.

Parsifal was premiered at Bayreuth in the second festival in 1882 (the year before Wagner's death). It brings together many of the themes of his previous music dramas. The rootless Kundry is the female equivalent of the Flying Dutchman, except in her case she can find redemption only when she encounters a man who is able to resist her. Klingsor is an Alberich figure, embittered, twisted and determined to destroy all that is good in the world. Parsifal is another incarnation of Siegfried, the "pure fool" whose noble deeds can save the world.

The character of Kundry, an amalgam of several female figures in the Grail myths, was crucial to the evolution of Wagner's conception of the opera. "Parsifal has occupied my thoughts a great deal," he wrote to his muse Mathilde Wesendonk in 1859, more than 20 years before it was completed, "and one particular creation, a demonic woman, is dawning upon me with ever greater life and fascination."

Mihoko Fujimura as Kundry in Parsifal, staged at Bayreuth, July 2008. Photograph: Eckehard Schulz/AP

Her meeting with Parsifal in Klingsor's magic garden in Act II is the central confrontation in the opera. The kiss with which she attempts, unsuccessfully, to woo him unlocks his compassionate feelings towards Amfortas, the keeper of the Grail and one of Kundry's previous conquests, and makes possible everything that follows – the restoration of the holy spear to the knights, the healing of Amfortas, and Kundry's longed-for death.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/jul/12/atozofwagnerkforkundry?guni=Article:in%20body%20link

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L is for Lohengrin

Lohengrin, the key opera in Wagner's transition from romantic composer to creator of vast music dramas, is radiant, lyrical and moving

Wednesday 31 July 2013 02.21 EST

L is for **Lohengrin**, the **opera** that - in the prelude to Act III - bequeathed the world the "Here Comes the Bride" theme. Here, the bridal chorus is played in honour of the ill-fated union of Lohengrin, knight of the Grail, and Elsa, daughter of the late Duke of Brabant.

The death of the Duke has prompted a crisis in the land - we are in downtown Antwerp in the late 10th century. Gottfried, the boy-heir to the dukedom, has disappeared (turned into a swan by the evil Ortrud), and his sister Elsa is accused of his murder by the man she was betrothed to marry, Friedrich von Telramund, who has renounced Elsa to marry Ortrud and now has designs on Brabant itself.

Telramund demands that Elsa name a champion to fight for her honour. She relates a dream in which she has seen a knight. Twice she calls for him to come to her aid, but no one comes. Then, on her third appeal, Lohengrin appears in a barge pulled by, you guessed it, a swan.

Lohengrin fights with Telramund and has him at his mercy but spares his life - otherwise this would be a one-acter. Lohengrin and Elsa agree to marry, but he lays down one condition – she must never ask who he is or where he comes from. Ortrud immediately spots the chink in his gleaming armour and plants a seed of doubt in Elsa, which leads her on the couple's wedding (k)night to ask the fateful (indeed fatal) question.

Lohengrin tells her he is a knight of the Grail, but that now the secret is out he will have to leave, though not before killing Telramund, and then summoning the power of prayer to defeat Ortrud's spells and turn the swan back into Gottfried, at which point Elsa (one of Wagner's dispensable women) collapses and dies.

As usual, the plot sounds ludicrous, but Lohengrin - the key opera in Wagner's transition from romantic composer to *sui generis* creator of vast music dramas - is radiant, lyrical and moving. Along with Die Meistersinger, it is probably the best place for the Wagnerian wannabe to start.

L is also for **Das Liebesverbot** (The Ban on Love), Wagner's second opera and the first to be performed. A comedy (not Wagner's forte) based on Shakespeare's Measure for Measure, it was a fiasco when it was premiered in 1836 and never thereafter performed during Wagner's lifetime. It's wonderful to listen to its febrile, Rossini-esque overture and contrast it with what Wagner was to become.

Lohengrin at La Scala. Photograph: Monika Rittershaus/AP

There are plenty of other significant Ls - Liebestod, Leitmotif, Ludwig II of Bavaria, Loge, but we have to draw the line somewhere so reduce these to a Liszt.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/jul/30/a-to-z-of-wagner-l-is-for-lohengrin

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M is for Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Wagner's sunniest opera, stands outside the rest of the late-Wagnerian canon, being about real people rather than gods, knights and sorceresses

Tuesday, 13 Aug 2013

M is for Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Wagner's sunniest **opera** (if you ignore the dodgy political statement so beloved of the Nazis at the end) and a work that to some degree stands outside the rest of the late-Wagnerian canon, being about real people rather than gods, knights and sorceresses.

Wagner conceived the idea of a comedy about the cobbler-poet Hans Sachs and the mastersingers of Nuremberg – an artistic guild that held Eurovision-style song contests – in 1845, but didn't do anything about it until 1861 when he offered it as a sop to his publisher, who was buckling under the weight of the Ring. He wrote it through the 1860s while juggling other projects and dealing with his complex private life, and it was premiered in Munich in 1868, meeting immediate acclaim.

It is in many ways a reversion to the early Wagnerian style, with arias and choruses rather than the integrated music-drama approach he had favoured from 1850 on. It is still vast in scale, running to four and a half hours, but more conventional than Wagner's other late works and enduringly popular in opera houses, with a rousing overture that is frequently played in concerts.

The opera tells of the travails of Eva Pogner and Walther von Stolzing, a young knight with whom she has fallen in love. The problem is that her father has promised her hand in marriage to the winner of a song contest to be held on Midsummer Day (you have to ignore the sexist absurdity on which the work is premised). Walther sets out to learn the mastersinger's art and join the guild, but is thwarted by Sixtus Beckmesser, the pernickety old chief judge who intends to win Eva for himself. Beckmesser contemptuously rejects the beautiful but rule-breaking love song Walther has written in his attempt to join the guild.

Johannes Martin Kranzle (Sixtus Beckmesser) and Gerald Finley (Hans Sachs) in Wagner's Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Photograph: Tristram Kenton

Walther and Eva try to elope, but are stopped by the wise Sachs, who tutors Walther so he can write a new prize song that retains the spirit of his original while obeying the form required by the mastersingers. Beckmesser purloins the song but makes a complete hash of it, leaving Walther to show how it should be sung. The people declare him victor, Beckmesser is humiliated, and the happy young couple can now wed. Hurrah!

Hans Sachs, a Schopenhauerian hero and Wagnerian alter ego who could himself have wed Eva if he hadn't been so sensible about the age gap (he says at one point that he doesn't want to be like old King Marke in Tristan und Isolde), then delivers a peroration in praise of Germany's cultural tradition, telling Walther all artistic innovation should come within that framework.

"Beware! Evil tricks threaten us," Sachs warns. "If the German people and kingdom should one day decay under a false, foreign rule, soon no prince will understand his people any more, and foreign mists with foreign vanities they will plant in our German land; what is German and true no one would know any more, if it did not live in the honour of the German masters." It is an extraordinary coda to the opera, seized on by German nationalists in the 1870s and by Nazis later, and remains a curious note on which to end what is supposed to be a tale of love fulfilled.

http://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/aug/08/a-to-z-wagner-meistersinger-nurnberg

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N is for Nietzsche, Nibelungs and Norns

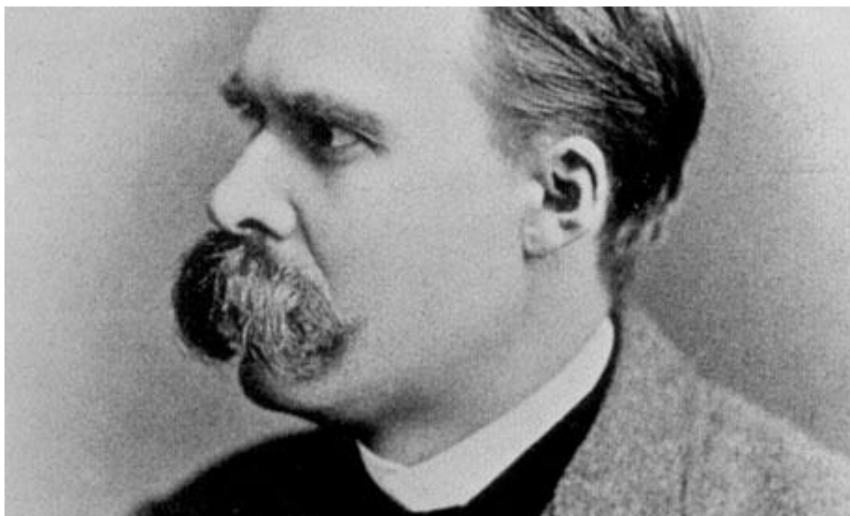
N is for the philosopher who went from being one of Wagner's staunchest supporters to one of his sternest critics.

Wednesday 14 August 2013 01.28 AEST

N is for **Nietzsche**, the German philosopher and near-contemporary of Wagner who went from being one of the composer's staunchest supporters to one of his most outspoken critics. Friedrich Nietzsche met Wagner in Leipzig in 1868 and became a close ally, but the relationship soured and the philosopher was ostracised after the publication in 1878 of **Richard Wagner in Bayreuth**, which while still admiring of the composer's work was less than complimentary about Wagner the man.

After the composer's death, Nietzsche and the composer's widow,**Cosima**, descended into open warfare. In 1888 he published **The Case of Wagner: A Musician's Problem**, in which he attacked the composer's anti-semitism and reliance on folklore, following it soon after with an even more explicit attack, Nietzsche Contra Wagner, which lamented the **religiosity of the composer's later works**.

Nietzsche especially objected to the nihilism of late Wagner, with what he saw as its parroting of **Schopenhauerian** pessimism and asceticism. The essence of life was to resist the inevitable sorrows, to rise above them - "**What doesn't kill you makes you stronger**," in Nietzsche's famous formulation - not to submit to them for some greater good.



Objecting to the nihilism and religiosity of Wagner's late works... Friedrich Nietzsche, and moustache. Photograph: Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

N is also for **Nibelungs**, the race of dwarfs who live in the subterranean world of Nibelheim in the Ring cycle, and for **Norns**, three daughters of the earth goddess Erda who have a walk-on (or more usually sit-down) part in the Ring, where they are engaged in weaving the rope of destiny. The rope suddenly breaks in Götterdämmerung, and that's the end of their role – they can no longer foresee the future because the structured and predictable world of the gods is about to be replaced by the chaos of human existence.
http://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/aug/13/stephen-moss-a-to-z-of-wagner-n-is-for-nietzsche-nibelungs-and-norns

- to be continued ......

This article exemplifies the result of post-World War Two German re-education – arrested development – moral and intellectual decline culminating in a perverse and infantile guilt-trip!

Wagner no hero, descendant says

Simon Morgan, May 22, 2013

German composer Richard Wagner with his wife Cosima. *Photo: Getty Images*

As the musical world lavishly celebrates Richard Wagner's bicentenary, the composer's great-grandson insists he is no spoilsport by denouncing the German master as a narcissist, woman-hater and an anti-Semite.

''I'm not out to make people feel guilty. It's not my wish to have Richard Wagner banned. I'm just not one of the adulators, the incense-burners,'' Gottfried Wagner told AFP in an interview.

There is no mistaking who Gottfried is descended from. The resemblance is striking: the same prominent nose and high forehead that have marked most of Wagner's descendants.

But the 66-year-old musicologist, writer and lecturer sets himself apart from the other members of the sprawling Wagner clan by refusing, as he sees it, to sweep under the carpet the darker side of one of history's most controversial composers.

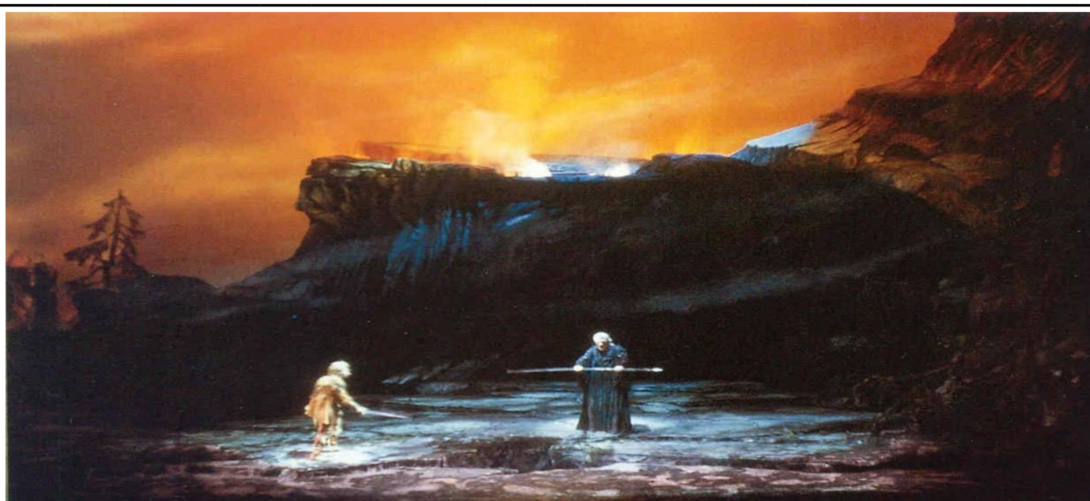
The son of the late Wolfgang Wagner - the patriarch who ruled over the legendary annual music festival dedicated to 10 of the composer's operas for nearly 60 years - Gottfried learnt the price of rebellion early.

''I was carted off to boarding school for spraying red paint'' on the famous bust of Richard Wagner by Arno Breker, Adolf Hitler's favourite sculptor, Gottfried says.

The bust still stands in the park in front of the legendary Festspielhaus theatre, built to Wagner's own designs in Bayreuth, southern Germany, which remains

a place of fervent pilgrimage for Wagner lovers and aficionados.
''I was classified as difficult. But I stand by what I did even today,'' even if the act of vandalism was more a gut reaction than a planned intellectual protest, Gottfried says. ''I saw him as a threat.''
Ever since, Gottfried has been seen as the black sheep of the Wagner family, which was cemented by the 1977 publication of his autobiography *He Who Does Not Howl with the Wolf*.
In it he called for the voluminous private correspondence between Hitler and the Wagner family dating from 1923 until 1945 to be made public, as well as 27 rolls of private film footage, all still kept under lock and key.
And in his latest book, *You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me,* released this year to coincide with the bicentenary, he examines the deep-rooted anti-Semitism and misogyny that runs through the composer's works.
''It's not about spoiling [Wagner] for people. But there is nothing to be gained from whitewashing him and idealising him. Massive personalities such as Richard Wagner are not untouchable,'' the composer's great-grandson says.
In addition to his 13 completed operas, Wagner was a prolific writer and theorist.
One of his nastiest publications was an anti-Semitic pamphlet *Judaism in Music,* which he first published under a pseudonym in 1850, but then revised and released under his own name in 1869.
Wagner's oeuvre ''includes a whole range of racist and sexist writings'', Gottfried says.
''He developed his own racial theories, too. Obscene racism. And with our knowledge today, we can't just ignore it and say 'it's all just beautiful music'.''
After Wolfgang Wagner's death in 2010, the running of the prestigious month-long Bayreuth Festival - the waiting list for tickets is at least 10 years - fell to Gottfried's sister Eva Wagner-Pasquier and half-sister, Katharina.
But Gottfried, who wrote his doctoral thesis on Kurt Weill and other composers branded ''degenerate'' by the Nazis, says he never wanted any part in the highly-publicised battle for control of the festival.
''I made that clear very early. There was never any question for me that I would take over from my father. I want to retain my independence. I see my stance as an ethical one. I refuse to be an actor in a soap opera,'' he says.
Gottfried says he has no truck with those he describes as Wagner's ''apologists'' who refuse to acknowledge the role the composer played in paving the way for Nazism in Germany.
German conductor Christian Thielemann, the Bayreuth Festival's unofficial musical director, contends in his own recent book entitled *My Life with Wagner* that music is per se non-political.
But Gottfried is dismissive of such statements. ''Wagner uses tonalities in a very concrete context. Not by chance. It always has a message,'' he says.
He sees a direct link between Wagner's music and the lust for political power.
Hitler himself was a regular visitor to the festival and a personal friend of the Wagner family.
Modern politicians still vie for attention on the red carpet at Bayreuth's glitzy opening night.
''It's all about self-adulation. That's what brings people to Bayreuth and what Richard Wagner delivers par excellence. Bayreuth will always be political,'' Gottfried says. ''And if [the German] Chancellor Angela Merkel is there, you can't just say it's all just about beautiful music.''

AFP
http://www.canberratimes.com.au/entertainment/music/wagner-no-hero-descendant-says-201305212jyr7.html#ixzz2ckKC1ave


A basic lesson in life – a weary Wotan unsuccessfully tries to stop exuberant Siegfried = generational change