Richard Wagner

* 22 May 1813 in Leipzig, Germany  
† 13 February 1883 in Venice, Italy

Composer, writer on music, conductor

"When mixing the races, the blood of the nobler male is spoilt by that of the less noble female: the masculine suffers, its character declines, while the women gain as much as enables them to take the place of the men". (Richard Wagner, The brown book. Entry of 23 October 1881.)

Profile

Wagner's notions of gender were influenced by the gender dichotomy and gender hierarchy that had been propagated since the Enlightenment. At the same time, he succeeded in creating strong female figures on stage, such as Brünnhilde. He assigned women more powerfully emotional, human characteristics on account of their supposedly “inborn” ability to love. As a child of his time, Wagner adopted nineteenth century notions of femininity and masculinity as natural and antithetical in character. But just as he broke away from the bourgeois norms of his times – for example, by including an incestuous pair of twins in his Ring of the Nibelung – so too did he overcome the boundaries of the gender roles of his day, creating weak men and strong women in his operas. Thus we find in his work both the normative conception of gender, and occasions when this is undermined.

In his private life, Wagner remained dependent on women. He married Minna Planer in 1835. As an actress, she was able to offer him valuable suggestions about stage practice, and she remained the person to whom he was most closely attached until his flight from Dresden, when she initially refused to follow him into exile. In Zürich, Wagner fell in love with Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of his patron Otto Wesendonck. Mathilde remained the greatest (unfulfilled) love of his life, and is regarded as having inspired him to the particular beauties of the first act of the Valkyrie and of Tristan and Isolde. In Cosima von Bülow he found a woman who was willing to commit adultery for him, who enabled him to complete his tetralogy The Ring of the Nibelung, and shielded him from the hostility of the outside world (a hostility that also arose because of their relationship).

In his book Opera and drama, Wagner connoted music as feminine and the text as masculine (corresponding excerpts from this work are documented under “Material”).

Cities an countries

Wagner's life was turbulent, and this was reflected in frequent changes of residence. He spent longer periods of time in his house in Tribschen near Lucerne, where he lived happily with Cosima von Bülow (later Cosima Wagner) and then in Bayreuth, where he realized his dream of erecting his own festival theatre.

Biography

Born in Leipzig, the youngest of nine children. His father was Friedrich Wagner (1770-1813), his mother Johanna (1774-1848). Richard never got to know his father. The family moved to Dresden in 1814; Johanna returned to Leipzig in 1828, where Wagner began his music studies in 1830. Initial attempts at opera ensued. He was active in several places as stage director, composer and conductor. Engagement with Minna Planer in 1835, who worked as an actress but abandoned her career for him. In 1837 Wagner travelled to Riga to work at the theatre there; his wife Minna followed after. Debts subsequently compelled them to leave Riga in a hurry. They moved to Paris, where they lived in extreme poverty because Wagner was unable to manage the money he earned. In 1842 they relocated to Dresden, where Richard took on the post of Court Kapellmeister. His opera Rienzi brought him his first big success. His participation in the abortive Dresden May Uprising in 1849 meant he had to flee into exile in Switzerland. There he wrote his major texts (Art and Revolution, The artwork of the future, Opera and Drama) and worked on his Ring of the Nibelung. He was unable to attend the world première of Lohengrin in Weimar. In 1858 his love for Mathilde Wesendonck became generally known and he moved to Venice (without Minna) in order to complete Tristan and Isolde. In 1861 performances of his Tannhäuser in Paris resulted in scandal. He lived in Vienna from 1861 to 1864, where he endured immense money problems. These might have resulted in his imprisonment, had he not been saved by King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who subsequently gave him generous financial support and covered his existing, large-scale debts. Wagner moved to Munich, where he plunged into political adventures and endeavoured to influence Ludwig II. At this point, Wagner was compelled to leave the city. He set up house instead in Tribschen near Lucerne, where he was later joined by Cosima von Bülow (1837-1930). They married in 1870 after the birth of their son Siegfried, which meant that all three of Wag-
Wagner's children (Isolde, Eva and Siegfried) ought to have borne the name of von Bülow; however, only Isolde was later denied recognition as Wagner's child, since she had been born in 1865 in Munich, when Cosima was still living with her then husband Hans von Bülow. In 1872 the family left Switzerland for Bayreuth, where Wagner resided until his death. There he built his festival theatre and his private house "Wahnfried", which was renovated in 2015 and turned into a museum with an archive attached.

Appreciation
Wagner was repeatedly inspired by his relationships with women. In 1854 he interrupted work on his Rheingold in order to sketch the first act of his Valkyrie. This composition sketch contains in total 17 abbreviations that demonstrate his love for Mathilde Wesendonck, e.g. "O.w.i.d.l.!” ("Oh wie ich dich liebe!", "Oh how I love you!"), "S.m.g., M.!" ("Sei mir gut, Mathilde!", "Be good to me, Mathilde!"), "L.d.m.??" ("Liebst du mich??", "Do you love me??"), "D.b.m.a.!!" ("Du bist mir alles!!", "You are everything to me!!"). Seven such abbreviations are given where Sieglinde and Siegmund look at each other – suggesting that Richard and Mathilde themselves exchanged yearying glances on the evenings when they came together with their spouses. In Mathilde Wesendonck's archives there is a note to her in Richard Wagner's hand: "May the poor orphan child be shown mercy! I now have to find it a foster mother". He thereby described the opera Valkyrie as his joint "child" with Mathilde, now wandering bereft. And a second quotation added to the composition sketch was similar: "What a wonderful birth of our sorrowful child! Do we have to live like this, then? Of whom could it be demanded that he should abandon his children? May God stand by us poor people! Or are we too rich? Must we alone help ourselves?" The Mastersingers, too, were influenced by his love for Mathilde Wesendonck. He resumed work on this opera after having made Hans Sachs forgo the love of Eva, and he wrote to Mathilde of this change to the plot. And a second quotation added to the composition sketch was similar: "What a wonderful birth of our sorrowful child! Do we have to live like this, then? Of whom could it be demanded that he should abandon his children? May God stand by us poor people! Or are we too rich? Must we alone help ourselves?" The Mastersingers, too, were influenced by his love for Mathilde Wesendonck. He resumed work on this opera after having made Hans Sachs forgo the love of Eva, and he wrote to Mathilde of this change to the plot. And a second quotation added to the composition sketch was similar: "What a wonderful birth of our sorrowful child! Do we have to live like this, then? Of whom could it be demanded that he should abandon his children? May God stand by us poor people! Or are we too rich? Must we alone help ourselves?"

Reception
There have been repeated attempts in the Wagner literature to downplay the importance of women in Wagner's life and work. Martin Gregor-Dellin's comprehensive biography contains numerous derogatory remarks to this end. Many an author has erroneously placed Wagner's political convictions centre-stage. But Wagner utilized politics only for his own purposes, namely in order to secure performances of his works and to promote his artistic beliefs. Marketing and disseminating his oeuvre was always the primary aim of Wagner's activities. In 1983, Dieter Schickling published his book Abschied von Walhalla. Richard Wagners Erotische Gesellschaft (Farewell to Valhalla. Richard Wagner's erotic society), which covers interesting aspects, but remains far removed from any consideration of gender issues – and the same can be said of the symposium held in Bayreuth in 1997 entitled "Fraugengestalten und Frauenstimmen bei Richard Wagner" ("Female characters and female voices in Richard Wagner"), whose papers were published in book form in 2000, edited by Susanne Vill.

Repertoire
The art of characterization in Wagner's operas displays a well-nigh breath-taking variety. We find virile, heroic figures such as Siegfried, noble men like King Marke, artful schemers like Loge and effete figures such as Erik or Gunther. The same can be said of Wagner's female characters, ranging from Brünnhilde, whom Wagner endows with empathy, to the malignant Ortrud. Examples of his different male types can be seen in Tristan (from Tristan and Isolde) and Wotan (from the Ring). Tristan has to die because he has allowed himself to be drawn into a nocturnal world of complete physical gratification. As is well known, the woman does not merely figure as a being who possesses "femininity" (which is variable from one culture to another) but is also a mirror of male identity, even of male creativity. It is thus natural that the alarming aspect of sexuality (the danger of being overwhelmed by it to the point of perishing) was culturally assigned to woman, inasmuch as she was herself regarded as a creature of nature. However, anthropology has long pointed out that the two realms of "nature" and "woman" are situated on a lower degree than culture, which is symbolically and historically associated with man. Isolde requires of Tristan that he give up his identity as a faithful vassal of King Marke; for her sake he abandons his mas-
culine world and is thereby doomed.

Wotan’s spear is the phallic symbol of his power and authority and also of his manhood. Although he fails as a god, he is afforded dignity in his music: the sonorous Valhalla motive is his, and even sounds when he is absent and only his name is mentioned. In Wagner’s late work Parsifal, which is a summation of his hitherto experience, Kundry is the only woman in the whole work. In the second act, she does everything in her power to try and seduce Parsifal, and in the third act she sings only two words: “dienen – dienen” (“to serve – to serve”). She kneels down to wash the feet of the hero, dries them with her hair, and dies afterwards. Parsifal is surrounded by the male society of the Grail, who celebrate him as their hero and leader. One could hardly find a more apt way of depicting the definitive exclusion of woman from culture. At the same time, Wagner’s anti-Semitism plays a role here, for Kundry is Jewish. She thereby represents a dual danger to the realm of the Grail: she has “impure blood”, and at the same time her sexuality disrupts the union of male knights. Thus it is not male desire that determines the plot; it is woman who is culpable.

In the whole of the Ring there is no character whose music is more thoroughly life-affirming and optimistic than Siegfried. Wagner allows him to “adopt ever wilder, ever more masculine characteristics” (Laurence Dreyfus in Dreyfus 2011, pp. 83 and 81). Siegfried continually gives an impression of power and strength; he plays with bears that he manages to tame in wondrous fashion, he forges a sword that makes him even more powerful, he slays a dragon, kills the hated Mime, shatters Wotan’s spear and goes through the fire as the strongest hero of all times. In Twilight of the gods he is only led astray by means of a magic potion, which means he himself is to be regarded as impure and good. A total of six motifs are assigned to the youthful hero, of which all begin with an ascending leap of a fourth or a fifth. These are: the Siegfried, horn, sword, forging, youthful strength and work motifs. No other character in the Ring is afforded such a positive masculine identity – his motifs convey a sense of determination and certainty of victory. Later, in Twilight of the gods, the solemn, grandiose hero motif will appear for him too.

Sieg mund, on the other hand, is a thoroughly “atypical” man. He is the only male character in the whole Wagnerian cosmos who is ready to give up his life for a woman. Marion Recknagel has pointed out that integrating sensitive, “empfindsame” traits in the male character was seen in the eighteenth century not merely as a deficient sta-

Sources


Dreyfus, Laurence. „Siegfrieds Männlichkeit“. In: Tobias Janz (Hg.), Wagners Siegfried und die (post-)heroische Moderne. Würzburg, 2011. S. 75-104.


A conference entitled “Wagner – Gender – Mythen” ("Wagner – gender – myths"), organized by the Institute of Music at the University of Oldenburg, took place in November 2013. For more on this, see https://www.uni-oldenburg.de/musik/forschung/kulturgeschichte/symposien/wagner-gender-mythen/ The conference proceedings are in the process of being published.

Research

Older literature on “Wagner and women” is useful today only as a source for reception studies on the topic of “the masculine image of Wagner”, for it places Wagner uncritically at the centre of things, arranging the women in his life around him instead of treating them as independent beings. Gender research has meanwhile bade farewell to theories of victimhood such as Catherine Clément postulated in 1992 in her study of women’s roles in opera, in which she characterized women as eternal victims because they often have to suffer grievously and must die at the end. Gender research aims to achieve a more balanced picture that considers all parameters of opera. The approach taken by Carolyn Abbate is important here. She is of the opinion that song, as an “authoritative voice”, is able to detach itself from the intentions of the composer and can acquire an independent function of its own. Nila Parly has taken this further, assigning a positive aspect to the singing of women, for Wagner in particular gave them grandiose roles. Taking the music as her starting point, Parly has developed often complex, comprehensive analyses of Wagner’s female roles. Although Parly is not a gender researcher, her book is a treasure trove for controversial discussions, also and especially in the field of gender roles.

Need for Research

While it has often been popular in Wagner biographies to delve into the women in his life, there has hitherto hardly been any investigation of femininity and masculinity as they are staged in Wagner’s works. Even today, many researchers regard any scholarly effort to find fruitful links between life and work as amateurish and speculative. Carl Dahlhaus was among the most stringent in this regard, while Laurenz Lütteken is one of the youngest musicologists to have adopted this stance. It is simpler to rely on harmonic analyses of musical works or to discuss Wagner’s writings and thereby gracefully avoid the “woman” topic, not least since examining the private life of a composer smacks somewhat of voyeurism. But there are also many other approaches that serve to exclude women. For example, in both his writings and his music (such as in The Mastersingers of Nuremberg), Wagner claimed a close relationship between masculinity and nationalism. In historical terms, nationality had always been bound up with masculinity, signifying both patrilineality and an exclusively male claim to leadership.

The role of women in Wagner’s life has rarely been dealt with appropriately in the relevant literature. Thus Mathilde Wesendonck is often regarded merely as an appendage and an admirer, not as an author in her own right. To this day there is still no biography of Cosima Wagner that situates her in her own time, contextualizing her behaviour, without resorting to gossip. Wagner’s texts often contain erotic allusions and should be analysed more precisely. His fetishistic, feminized predilections have until now merely been the stuff of indignation or fascination, but ought to be seen in relationship to his oeuvre, in the light of our current understanding of cross-dressing and queer studies. In this regard, Laurence Dreyfus has made a highly promising beginning (Dreyfus 2010).

In racism studies, it has often been pointed out that racism and sexism are situated close to each other. Wagner’s anti-Semitism has already been analysed sufficiently; researchers have preferred, however, to ignore or overlook his sexism, usually claiming that Brünnhilde’s humane qualities and strong voice serve to place her on an equal level with men – inferring in turn that no inequality between the sexes can be heard or perceived here.
However, this is by no means the case, since Wagner only assigned his female roles the power of love because he took the ideology of the nineteenth century as his starting point, assuming that “good” women are born to love (and nothing else). When Brünnhilde makes herself independent of her father, she enters immediately into a dependent relationship with Siegfried, whose praise she sings at the close of the Ring. In the characters of Elsa and Ortrud in his Lohengrin, Wagner utilized the polarized image of women that was common in his time (the “femme fatale” and the “femme fragile”).

If we accept that creating gender does not happen in isolation, but that it unfolds and is practised in a “performative act” – thus in everyday, concrete actions – then deconstructing gender in cultural artefacts assumes great importance. Whereas the linguistic articulation of gender relations has already often been analysed, the analysis of their articulation in musical language remains in its infancy. But when he wanted to express something, Wagner did so in his music with great subtlety in its detail. More work is necessary in this regard. Kordula Knaus once remarked that it is a mistake in feminist research to derive things from music that are constructed culturally and thus might be altered (Knaus 2002). But the gender-related aspects of his work were consciously used by Wagner in the very hope that they would be “felt and understood”, as he himself remarked. Only when we have also perceived and understood how Wagner did this will we be able to construct a degree of critical distance to it.

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