

## Book Reviews

### *Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*

**Jacobshagen, Arnold, ed.** *Verdi & Wagner: Kulturen der Oper*. Cologne: Böhlau, 2014. 340 pp. €39.90 (hardcover).

This volume is one of the countless publications to mark the 2013 Wagner and Verdi bicentennial, but one of the few to try and address both composers equally. As such, it is a welcome addition. The book is rooted in a *Ringvorlesung* held at the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz in Cologne, and so one of its attractions is that the chapters began their lives as lectures to students, thus making them on the whole more accessible and readable than a lot of scholarship from Germany tends to be. The guiding concept for the lecture series seems to have been that the topic of each lecture would need to address both Verdi and Wagner, and as equally in terms of space and emphasis as possible.

Appealing as this idea is, in practice it makes for uneven chapters almost across the board. One thing this book perhaps unintentionally highlights is that one is either a Verdi scholar or a Wagner scholar, very rarely both. So chapters frequently force authors to go into areas where they are clearly out of their depth. Another hallmark of this book is that it is written largely by musicologists for musicologists. Not that all the chapters are about musical analysis. Musicology has by now also expanded its horizons in the direction of cultural studies, so there is potentially much in this volume to interest the readers of *German Quarterly*. The problem, however, is that while the musicological discussions are often exciting and even original, the ones that focus on extra-musical cultural issues tend to recycle existing scholarship, and not even particularly well.

One of the few exceptions is Martin Fischer-Dieskau's eloquent discussion of the two composers in their capacity as conductors. A lot more is generally known about Wagner, especially since he had such an immense impact on the art and science of conducting in the twentieth century, an impact that is even more astonishing when one considers how rarely Wagner conducted, comparatively speaking. But Fischer-Dieskau pays equal attention to Verdi, who was no less confronted with orchestral practices—mostly in Italy—which were woefully inadequate for the performance of the new repertoire. Fischer-Dieskau nicely retraces the discussion about the new role of the conductor and the tension between, on the one hand, being merely an executioner and, on the other, an interpreter and even co-creator in the realization of the score.

By contrast, Michael Walter's welcome chapter on politics largely builds on Roger Parker's and Philip Gossett's more recent work on Verdi which has worked to largely debunk the most enduring myths about this composer and his symbolic and actual role in the unification of Italy, revealing Verdi to have been a lot less political and politically savvy than we have been told, and further that the supposedly instantaneous transformation of the "Prisoners' Chorus" from *Nabucco* into a national anthem did not actually happen until about two decades

after the premiere. But for all this, Walter does little more than restate. More problematic still is Walter's discussion of Wagner's politics which emphasizes the younger more revolutionary man and ignores the older more nationalistic one: a favorite move of some scholars trying to counter the Nazi appropriation. His approach to *Das Judenthum in der Musik*, also in this vein, disturbingly characterizes it as an essay which is "nur" concerned with the failures of contemporary musical culture (66), and he describes Wagner's antisemitic attack as "wenig fein." Not only does Walter render harmless one of the most controversial essays of the nineteenth century, but he fails to engage or even cite any of the vast scholarship on the issue published in the last decade or two.

Johannes Schild has the plum assignment of writing about the one mature comedy by each of these composers, *Die Meistersinger* and *Falstaff*. In many respects, this essay is representative of the whole book both in its strengths and weaknesses. Since Schild is in the first place a composer and conductor, the essays are strong on musical and musicological detail and thin on scholarship. This is not necessarily a bad thing, and Schild has some marvelous observations about structural and musical similarities and differences between the works, though his knowledge of Verdi in general and *Falstaff* in particular seems more substantial than that of Wagner which once again affects the balance of the essay. When it comes to Wagner, however, he bafflingly cites Curt von Westernhagen without comment and clearly unaware of his place in Wagner studies. Moreover, he shows an utter misunderstanding of some key dramaturgical moments in Wagner, for instance, when he states that Tristan and Isolde fall in love with each other the moment they drink the potion (126–27).

Jean-François Candoni begins his chapter on "Verdi, Wagner und die französische Grand Opéra" promisingly. The centrality of Paris for both composers remains an under-researched topic. Especially Wagner's indebtedness to the genre combined with his constant rhetorical distancing from it remains one of the unresolved contradictions if not ironies of his compositional career. But again things go downhill with the Wagner section which, after the obligatory discussion of *Rienzi*, in a section titled "Spuren der Grand Opéra in Wagners Musikdramen der späteren Perioden" misrepresents the issues involved in the *Tannhäuser* debacle in Paris (103), and completely avoids any mention of *Die Meistersinger*, which represents the most obvious nod to French Grand Opera despite its fervent proclamations of being "the most German of all operas" (to quote Goebbels).

Perhaps my favorite chapter was Wolfram Breuer's "Zeitabläufe und 'musikalische Zeit' bei Verdi und Wagner." This was an at times slow-moving and at times rather superficial and hasty treatment of the ways in which both composers manipulate the sense of time in their compositions. Nevertheless, Breuer addresses a wide array of time categories and often provides some absolutely stunning observations that are well worth the effort of reading. But maybe this chapter sums up the final assessment of this volume as a whole. A book born of good intentions with some marvelous insights, but more so for the musicologist than for the cultural historian.

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