

The return of the original Ring lord

Epic, fantastic, dazzling, erotic - and coming soon to a stage near you. Jessica Duchen reports on the unlikely rise of Wagnermania as younger audiences revel in his power and magic

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The scene at the Royal Albert Hall on Monday was unforgettable: a capacity Proms audience cheering to the rafters for 10 minutes while the conductor, Antonio Pappano, and his team of stars from the Royal Opera's performance of Richard Wagner's *Die Walküre* stood on the platform in acknowledgement. Placido Domingo, in his first appearance at the Proms, had taken the role of Siegmund; Bryn Terfel played Wotan. The line-up was enough in itself to pack the hall several times over. But it was also a symptom of a wave of Wagnermania that has mounted steadily in the UK over the past couple of years.

Wagner (1813-83) has never been precisely out of vogue, but perhaps he has never been quite so in vogue as he is now. A combination of unprecedented accessibility and powerful advocates - Domingo, Terfel and Daniel Barenboim among them - has been bringing Wagner to new audiences. Over time, the increasing distance of the Nazi era that tainted his music for decades means that younger audiences can approach the operas with perhaps fewer negative preconceptions than their parents would have had.

Indeed, there seems to be a Wagner glut. For the first time, the Royal Opera House and English National Opera have found themselves presenting the operas of Wagner's Ring cycle at the same time, if in very different ways. Glyndebourne staged a Wagner opera, *Tristan und Isolde*, for the first time in 2003; a revival is planned in 2007, and intriguing prospects are in view for exploring early Wagner on period instruments in the not-too-distant future. Last year, Scottish Opera risked everything to present the Ring, a production that drew packed audiences and huge critical acclaim but almost put the company out of business. Welsh National Opera is to include a new production of *The Flying Dutchman* in its 60th birthday celebrations next season, with Terfel as the ghostly anti-hero.

A Wagner opera has always been a major event for any opera house. Seats are always costly, but sell out in a flash; critics always carp over productions that inevitably seem to be controversial, no matter their approach. None of that is new. What is new, however, is the way Wagner has begun to break through boundaries in an unexpected way.

Last year, ENO took the final act of its production of *The Valkyrie* to the Glastonbury Festival, where it played to a crowd 30,000 strong. And at the Royal Opera's Prom, audiences with strong legs could experience world-class Wagner for just £4. Among the seated concert-goers were plenty who had never heard the music before.

Aficionados with ready cash cross continents to hear the Ring and other Wagner masterpieces, and the annual Wagner festival at the composer's own specially-built opera house at Bayreuth has a waiting list for tickets as long as all the orchestra's arms put together. Tickets to hear Wagner can often seem not only unaffordable, but also unavailable. But make him affordable and accessible, and his force hits home. Where does Wagner's power come from? Why are so many people taking to his music when they might never have expected to?

The Russian conductor Vladimir Jurowski, the music director of Glyndebourne, suggests that Wagner is filling a cultural void. "I think it's symptomatic of our times that we want to seek out something that takes place on a massive scale, while our lives are reduced to the size of a microchip. People have an unconscious need to experience something larger than life, something of huge emotional force, when it's not possible in daily existence.

"This emotional world is missing in our times. In the 1920s to 1940s, the popularity of Wagner was perhaps explained by the epic dimensions of the time. Wagner was more an illustration of people's lives, while today it represents the missing element. Wagner is also extremely erotic - and again people can find in his music a substitute for what they miss in their own lives," Jurowski says.

Elaine Padmore, the director of opera at Covent Garden, agrees: "It's a fantastic antidote to the mindset of today. Contrary to the idea now that people can't concentrate for more than five minutes, can't take in complex ideas and need different things flashing in front of them all the time, Wagner presents huge spans of long, complex music and philosophy. It requires vast concentration and it hits your brain, your emotions and your ears with equal intensity."

David Pickard, the general director of Glyndebourne, found that "we had an audience for *Tristan* at Glyndebourne that was totally different from the audience for Mozart". He recalls "getting the bug" for Wagner in his teens and making a pilgrimage to the Bayreuth Festival when he was 17. "There were loads of young people there. Rather like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, once you've sat through the whole of Wagner's Ring you feel as if you've been through a huge emotional experience. At the end, there's a sense of an epic nature that's incredibly appealing, especially to young people." He suggests that the plethora of Ring cycles in Britain in the past few years may be more the result of music directors' aspirations than popular demand - "at some point, every opera house music director longs to do a Ring cycle" - but he agrees that the audience is ready to lap them up.

It's a coincidence, Padmore says, that Covent Garden and ENO are doing the Ring at the same time. "Deciding to present a Ring cycle means an enormous investment in every way, so you work towards it over a long period, and there comes a moment when you are ready to take it on. It's just happened to come

up at the same time for both houses, which means that after a number of years with no Ring in London, there are now two at the same time."

But a Wagner "clash" isn't the same as a clash for any other composer. "It probably sparks even more interest, having the two running concurrently," Padmore says. "The productions are very different - one is in English - * * and finding an audience is no problem because Wagner fans can't get enough of it. They're just thrilled to be able to go to two so close together."

Wagner aficionados do seem to be in the grip of an addiction beyond mere enthusiasm. But now it's becoming clear that Wagner can reach audiences far further afield than those already hooked - and the composer would have wanted to do precisely that. When ENO played Act III of *The Valkyrie* at Glastonbury, in its contemporary-set production by Phyllida Lloyd, it was, says ENO's director Sean Doran, not an attempt to popularise the opera but a way of responding to some of Wagner's own artistic ideals.

"Wagner started out as a revolutionary, standing on the barricades in Dresden in 1848 to fight for ideals he believed in, while taking five years away from composing to write the poem that formed the libretto for the Ring," Doran says. "The Ring was intended in part to draw a line under what he saw as bourgeois opera, and instead to write opera that would reach everybody, no matter their background, with Greek theatre as its model. Our Ring cycle, with its contemporary interpretation, helps to prove that Wagner is perennially relevant, and we should never lose sight of that relevance.

"We wouldn't have thought of taking anything else to Glastonbury. And that was an incredible experience, reaching an enormous number of people. It was a great example of 'trust your audience'," Doran says. "You don't have to talk down to anyone; you just have to make the opera accessible. Opera is a fusion of all the art forms, breaking down all the barriers between them. And audiences today, with their iPods, are very sophisticated musically, more than ever before, and are moving easily from one genre of music to another. Wagner is just bloody great music that can really get to you."

It certainly is - but all the same, it takes courage to go to Wagner for the first time. The operas are vast - most are more than five hours long - and there's always the dread that you won't like it. I remember approaching my first Ring cycle in 1990 at Covent Garden with trepidation. Going in to *Die Walküre*, I was convinced that five hours of Germanic ranting lay ahead; but I'll never forget emerging, after what felt like two minutes but was actually the whole of Act I, with the distinct physical sensation that I was floating upside down by the ceiling.

The music of that famous incestuous love scene contains such elemental power and staggering beauty that it seemed absolutely impossible not to be swept away by it. It's hard to imagine any musical experience of greater intensity. As Bryn Terfel says: "Wagner seems to have a quality that draws people in; and once you've encountered it, it's very difficult to let it go again."

Nor is it only the audience that feels the heat. For performers, too, Wagner's demands in terms of technical and emotional stamina can prove devastating.

Placido Domingo, fresh off the stage after his Prom performance and with his new recording of Tristan und Isolde about to hit the shelves, explained why he's never performed Tristan live: "I accepted to perform it, but discovered while preparing the role that it was incredibly taxing. I felt I could do it, but that if I did, it would shorten my career by several years, and probably some repertoire too. So I've only recorded it, and it will stay that way."

Terfel says: "Unless they've sung the [Wotan] role themselves, there's no way anybody could grasp exactly what it is you have to face. Even I didn't know what to expect when I started it. It would be interesting to see what people would feel if they had to learn and perform even just the second act of Die Walküre. It's not like Puccini or Mozart. Gone are the choral tableaux and the arias - it's pure drama from beginning to end."

As for the audience's reaction, Terfel finds that in Die Walküre "the third act draws unbelievable emotion from people you'd never expect to see in tears. I've seen the number of people who follow Wagner, and if the people who wait at the stage door at the end of the performance are a sign, it's very international. I've met people from every part of the globe, people you don't normally see at stage doors. They have a Wagner map, and they plan out their schedules and know exactly where they're going to go."

Wagner - his music, his life, his politics and his philosophies - is fascinating at every level, from the most academic to the most instinctive. It's said that more books have been written about him than anyone other than Christ. As a writer of great swathes of through-composed music-drama employing revolutionary harmonic language, he changed the course of musical history. Later composers struggled to break free from his influence. Canny politicians, however, harnessed the power of his music and used it to their own ends. Today, Wagner is still so strongly associated with Hitler and the Nazis - exacerbated by his descendants' direct enthusiasm for them - that he may never entirely lose the taint.

And here lies Wagnerphilia's opposite: Wagnerphobia, every bit as strong. There is no doubt that Wagner was a seriously unpleasant character. His anti-Semitic rant "Das Judenthum in Musik" (The Jews in Music) soured an image already scarred by apparent megalomania, financial irresponsibility and adultery. His anti-Semitism was far from rare in the 19th century, but it has attracted far more censure than the similar inclinations of composers such as Schumann, Chopin, Liszt and even Carl Orff, because, as Hitler's favourite composer, the great passion of Wagner's music came to symbolise the fanatical power of Nazi ideology.

Daniel Barenboim, the pianist and conductor who was born in Argentina but grew up in Israel, has probably done more than any musician to break through the ill-feeling surrounding Wagner's annexation by Hitler. "One cannot say, 'I hate Wagner because Hitler loved Wagner,'" Barenboim suggests. "This is simply not so. The Nazis used and abused him, creating a myth that Wagner was the forerunner of Nazi ideology. But this has very little to do with Wagner himself and a lot to do with the Nazis, in the sense that they took some of his writings, and not only his anti-Semitic writings. Wagner was a great German nationalist, and this is what they were looking for. After the Germans lost the

First World War, they found in Wagner the quality they needed to help rebuild the nation. The supremacy of the German race or the supremacy of German music and art - I don't think that was even in Wagner's mind."

Wagner's music is not officially banned in Israel, but it goes unplayed in concert halls there through a forceful emotional taboo. In 2001, Barenboim and his orchestra, the Berlin Staatskapelle, scheduled a performance of *Die Walküre* at the Israel Festival. The issue went to parliament and the Knesset decided it should be cancelled. The orchestra played Schumann and Stravinsky instead, but after the encore Barenboim addressed the hall directly, asking: "As a musician, I would like to ask my audience: do you want to hear some Wagner? If not, no problem. If you do, we have the music. And if you are angry, please be angry with me, not the orchestra and not the festival."

A 45-minute debate ensued. Some audience members were outraged, vociferously so. But about 90 per cent of the audience were in favour. Some 50 people left the hall, and once things quietened down, Barenboim and the orchestra played the "Prelude and Liebestod" from *Tristan*. The furore in the days afterwards appeared to have been started by people who were not actually at the concert.

Ironically, many of Wagner's strongest advocates were Jewish, notably the conductor Hermann Levi, the son of a rabbi, who took the podium for the first performance of *Parsifal*. Even Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism, was inspired by Wagner, especially *Tannhäuser*. But no Wagner has been played in Israel since Barenboim's concert.

These arguments will probably never go away. The scars of the Second World War are ineradicable; and those to whom the very idea of going to a Wagner opera is anathema are unlikely ever to be converted by the music alone. The Nazi association, however, grows ever more distant, and for a new generation of music lovers its role is diminishing - something that is almost certainly contributing to the flush of popularity.

What remains is Wagner's power. Attended with an open mind and open ears, he takes no prisoners. Once you enter his musical world, he's got you for ever. And as more people succumb to the Wagner magic, perhaps it's true that he provides the antithesis of modern life: a universe of meaning and beauty and intellect, so absent from the world around us. Like him or loathe him, we seem to need him.