

# Man, monster & myth

No other opera composer seems to inspire such extremes of love and hate as Wagner.

**Jessica Duchen** talks to a leading academic, a renowned conductor and a prominent politician and asks why people respond so intensely to his music

**M**y life-long suspicion of Wagner began to waver a decade ago, when I went to my first *Ring Cycle* and came out of *Walküre* practically walking on the ceiling. More recently, *Meistersinger* at Covent Garden and *Tristan* at Glyndebourne induced the kind of highs that I had imagined only came with banned substances.

Then the trouble started. Reading Bryan Magee's fascinating *Wagner and Philosophy*, I noted that he regards *Parsifal* as Wagner's greatest achievement; it followed that if I wanted to get into Wagner, I would have to see *Parsifal*. The nearest I could find was in Cardiff. Off we went on a visit to Welsh National Opera.

The disappointment was out of all proportion to anything except the numbness of beholds confined for six hours to the upper balcony of the New Theatre. It was nothing to do with WNO, but I just didn't 'get' *Parsifal*. As my husband remarked while we slunk home, 'What's the point of reading Schopenhauer if you don't like the music?' Back rushed every prejudice I've ever had about Wagner: the Misogynistic, Domineering, Anti-Semitic, Egomaniac Beast of Bayreuth.

And yet, and yet... Could this same abominable individual have created a work of such warm, wonderful humanity as *Meistersinger*, or reached Nirvana at the end of *Tristan*? And why does Wagner induce such extreme reactions at both ends of the spectrum? Why such highs and lows? Worldwide highs and lows at that - a branch of the International Wagner Society has even been established in Thailand! I decided to seek guidance from people who know Wagner better than me and, through them, look at ways of rethinking this engorged monster of a genius for the 21st century.

**F**irst stop, King's College, London University, where professor of music Laurence Dreyfus has recently given a startling series of public lectures on 'Wagner and the Erotic Impulse'. I asked Dreyfus how he was initiated into Wagner.

'At Juilliard, I roomed with a pianist who was an arch-Wagnerian,' Dreyfus recounts. 'Every few months he'd gather a few friends together and lis-

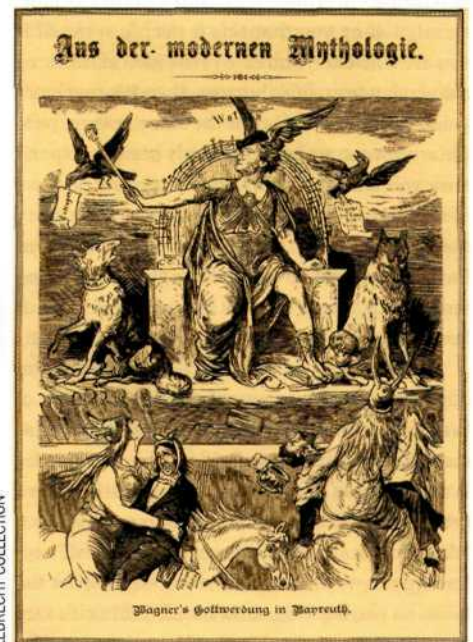
ten to the *Ring Cycle* without a break for about 23 hours. They used to throw me out of the flat. Of course I was intrigued, being 17 and homeless for a day! I went out, got the scores and started listening... Later, I went through an anti-Wagnerian phase, mainly for political reasons, and wrote a diatribe attacking Wagner for a course in political theory at university. But afterwards, when I put on the Prelude and Liebestod from *Tristan*, I was smitten again and wrote a postscript saying that maybe I had to revise everything because the music is so bloody marvellous! How can this be, that there's this person whose ideas are so unsavoury and yet writes this unbelievable music that makes you feel as if you have access to the inner life of the world?'

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- Professor Laurence Dreyfus

Daniel Barenboim in his sunlit office at the Berlin Staatsoper, describes that feeling as 'more intense than life'. Our extreme responses, he suggests, have a historical precedent: 'In ancient Greece,' he says, 'people held opposite views about music: on one hand, some felt it created order and therefore was positive and healthy for the human being; yet others regarded music as something that drove people to irrational acts out of passion and was therefore very dangerous. Wagner epitomises both of those responses and maybe this is why you get these extreme reactions.'

The Houses of Parliament are probably the closest thing in the UK to the gothic architectural excesses of Neuschwanstein Castle, and here I caught up with Tory MP Michael Portillo, who



A contemporary cartoon showing Wagner's apotheosis in Bayreuth

once made an excellent documentary for the BBC about the issue of power in Wagner, especially the *Ring cycle*, a work he travels the world to see. How does he account for Wagnerphilia and Wagnerphobia? 'It's opera that takes itself very seriously,' Portillo responds, 'and if you feel that it takes itself more seriously than it merits, that's going to set you against it. On the other hand, if you accept that it should be taken seriously, you're going to be serious about it yourself. It is grand and it tends to be bombastic, which can be offensive to some people; others just love it because they feel great whenever they hear it.'

'Also, because Wagner so often thought about yearning and about feeling unsatisfied,' he goes on, 'he writes that into the music, particularly using chromatic harmonies, so that again and again we don't reach the resolution in the music that we expect. That may go on for a whole act, an hour and a half - and all the time your stomach is being churned up by this sense of yearning. That may make you love it, or on the other hand it may make you feel very sick! I think it's true that even if we didn't know anything about Wagner, if we didn't know who'd written the music and had stumbled across it in an attic, we would probably have the same strong reactions because of the music itself'

Dreyfus agrees that the seriousness of Wagner's 'musical project' has much to do with our response. 'There is this urge in the music to say it all. He doesn't like to be confined by genres. The whole idea is that he's not writing opera but dramas: text and music coming together with gesture and scenic action, concerning the most

momentous things in the world, the vision of what humanity is all about. His sense of the musical project can be difficult to stomach, for a variety of reasons. Some people genuinely feel that music should be entertainment, and Wagner is constantly telling you that *this is deeply serious*. If you are a listener who enjoys the idea of music as a diversion from life's horrors, then Wagner's not going to be your man. For the same reason, people who want art to be a deeply serious experience will tend to take Wagner seriously because of its metaphysical pretensions. There's a story about Stravinsky going to hear *Parsifal* at Bayreuth and all he could think about was going outside for a fag! He was desperate to get out because he hated the whole idea of art as religion.'

I'm in good company, then, on *Parsifal*. But of course there is no way of skirting the issue of Wagner's anti-Semitism and our resulting prejudices against him. How far does this account for Wagnerphobia - and how far should it? 'I heard once that there have been more books written about Wagner than anyone else except Jesus Christ!' says Barenboim, the man who has dared to break the taboo on playing Wagner in Israel. 'I think it's very important to remain objective,' he continues. 'The question of phobia because of Wagner's association with the Nazis has very little to do with Wagner and a lot to do with the Nazis - in the sense that they took some of his writings, and not only the anti-Semitic writings. Wagner was a great German nationalist and this is what they were looking for after the First World War to rebuild the nation. So this association should not be really considered

work philosophically - it's all over the map. But that's how great works of art are.'

It could even be that we listeners are screwed up about Wagner, because Wagner was so screwed up himself. As Portillo puts it, 'He started the *Ring* as a Marxist revolutionary and finished it as a devout monarchist. But that's one of the things that makes it so interesting: so many ideas are taken from so many different stages of a man's mind and his development, and partly because I think in many ways he was genuinely confused.'

So Wagner was a flawed, muddled-up human being, just like the rest of us? 'There is this childish urge in all of us to have our artistic models obey superhuman laws of morality,' says Dreyfus. 'We want them to be perfect; if they make us feel angelic, we want them to be angels. And guess what? They never are. They're flesh and blood. We have to grow up in our views about music, face the facts about ourselves - we're not perfect either! - and about people who are creative, and to look at what they do best, which in this case is how Wagner writes music. What I've been trying to do is to "redirect traffic" away from the purely politicised view of Wagner, back to the 19th-century aesthetic concerns that we should really be noticing.'

It is time, then, to reassess Wagner for a new century? Daniel Barenboim clearly thinks this is the case on the interpretative side. 'Wagner interpretations in the mid-20th



A caricature of Wagner by André Gill, published in 1869 in the satirical magazine L'Eclipse

when we discuss Wagner's merits and therefore whether there's a phobia or not. The Nazis used and abused him, creating the myth that Wagner was the forerunner of Nazi ideology.'

Dreyfus adds: 'The personality of Wagner has been vastly trumped up since the Second World War. He's a very difficult character - but most composers were fairly difficult and we don't habitually judge the others by the same yardstick. Franz Liszt's essay on *The Israelites*, for example, says far worse things than Wagner does: it talks about ethnic cleansing. That's not to minimise Wagner's views on the Jews, but in some ways these were very contradictory because of his practice. I'm

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century and for a number of years afterwards were influenced by Nazi aesthetic taste,' he says. 'In many recordings of Wagner operas from this time, you constantly hear a broadening of tempo to create a sense of grandiloquence, this great idea of the supremacy of German music and art, or race, or whatever. I don't think this was even in Wagner's mind. In fact, Wagner wrote what is still one of the best books about music, *The Art of Conducting*, where he speaks exactly about not only

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sure I wouldn't have been very happy in his presence; yet huge numbers of people were deeply attracted to being around him because of the kind of artist he was. That included Hermann Levi, his *Parsifal* conductor, who was the son of the chief rabbi of Giessen.'

Wagner, says Dreyfus, was full of such contradictions. 'The *Ring* is deeply confusing because it begins with the Feuerbachian view of saving the world through love - but then Wagner reads Schopenhauer and has to rethink it, with different kinds of music. Already in the 1870s Nietzsche was well aware of this and saw it as a major contradiction in the works. The *Ring* doesn't really

the tolerance of, but the *necessity for* flexibility of tempo, where the "melos" of the music moves forwards or backwards. It means anything but using the music for grandiloquent effects.'

On the political side, Portillo feels that it is 'still too early' for a reassessment of Wagner as far as Second World War survivors in Israel and elsewhere are concerned. But perhaps the heart of the matter is more universal than Wagner alone. Dreyfus says: 'I think we need to reassess what we want to make of great music, and what role it can play for us as a consolation for the true lousiness of the world outside. It's not religion; it's not going to provide all the answers; but it's going to change one's life. And it's very important to allow great music to do that. If that's ideology, I'll put my hand up and say that's what I believe in.'

Then he advises me that the best way to 'get' *Parsifal* is absolutely not to sit through a performance. Instead, go to the piano, 'the 19th-century home entertainment centre', and play the *par.j* score; experience for yourself, from the inside, the miraculous morphing of the harmonies, the interweaving of the leitmotifs, the evolving sense of line on the biggest time-scale of any existing piece of music.

By coincidence, I have a gorgeous old German hardback piano score of *Parsifal*. Normally it sits on a shelf, looking beautiful. Time, perhaps, to get it down, take a new approach — and give that poor, crazy, mixed-up Wagner another chance. ©