Richard Wagner (1813–1883): An Overview of His Writings

The magnitude of the Wagner phenomenon ever since the second half of the nineteenth century cannot be explained solely in terms of the propagation and increasing success of his operas: the composer also made his reputation with theoretical texts, often fiercely polemical ones, which have given rise to innumerable debates and done much to condition the reception of his works for the musical theatre.

In terms of writing, Wagner was one of the most prolific composers in Western music history, and he saw himself as an intellectual and poet as well as a musician. His relationship to theory and aesthetic thought was nevertheless ambiguous. There is certainly something Faustian in the attitude of an artist so fascinated by speculation, for whom there could be no art without deep reflection. Consider this passage from a letter to Eduard Hanslick dated 1 January 1847: “Do not underestimate the power of reflection; the artwork produced unconsciously belongs to epochs far removed from our own: the artwork of the most cultivated age can only be produced consciously”. In this light, Wagner belongs to a German intellectual tradition that, since at least the second half of the eighteenth century, has seen German culture as a latecomer, German novels, plays, operas as products of an imported culture, naturalised on German soil only through a work of long reflection: in that sense, artistic creation is inseparable from theory.

Paradoxically, however, Wagner’s art seeks always to give the illusion of naturalness. The idea that the understanding (*Verstand*) must be neutralised as an organ of aesthetic perception for the benefit of feeling (*Gefühl*) is central to his essay *Oper und Drama*. This idea Wagner later complemented (in *Über die Bestimmung der Oper*, *The Destiny of Opera*, 1871) with the surprising notion of “fixed improvisation” (*fixirten Improvisation*): though sedulously thought out and prepared down to the smallest details, the theatrical representation must give the illusion of total spontaneity. This explains why Wagner’s copious theoretical essays so rarely treat of music in technical terms and concentrate almost exclusively on questions of an aesthetic, philosophical, or ideological order: Wagner prefers aesthetics to musicology. Like the orchestra hidden in the pit at Bayreuth, the purely technical side of creation must be dissimulated; Wagner indeed sees it as more of an obstacle than a gateway on the path to understanding a work.

It nevertheless remains difficult if not impossible to construct a critical, informed approach to Wagner’s work without taking into account his writings, which are always fruitful to put into contact with his music-dramas, even if only to demonstrate the gulf, sometimes considerable, between theory and practice.

Wagner himself oversaw the publication of a massive ten-volume anthology of his essays and literary writings, the *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (1871/83). This was republished and expanded several times prior to 1911–14, when Breitkopf & Härtel released the sixteen-volume *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen (Volksausgabe)*, still the most complete anthology pending completion of the historical-critical edition launched in 2013 by the University of Würzburg (*Richard Wagner – Schriften – Historisch-kritische Gesamtausgabe*). Schematically, one can say that Wagner's writings come in four kinds: 1/ literature in the narrow sense (opera librettos both finished and unfinished, some fiction and poems); 2/ theoretical essays, reviews, and metatexts (prefaces, mainly); 3/ correspondence; 4/ autobiography. For more detail on the editorial situation, see the entries for each of the major works.

Literary writing: Wagner wrote the librettos for all thirteen of his operas, as well as fourteen unfinished librettos or dramas. With the thirteen operas, one must distinguish between the version of the "poem" (as Wagner called it) found in the score and the separately published libretto: the discrepancies are numerous, especially in the spelling and stage directions. The German anthologies generally reproduce the text of the printed libretto, while the those of the scores feature in the *Wagner Gesamtausgabe* (Mainz: Schott, 1970–); the version edited by Egon Voss (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983–2005) gives the former plus the variations in the score. The librettos have been adapted innumerable times into various languages, demonstrating a range of approaches – librettos designed to be sung (such as those made by Alfred Ernst in French), "poetic" translations (those by Victor Wilder, for instance), more literal translations (as seen in the magazine *L'Avant-Scène Opéra*). Only the French version of *Tannhaüser* was realised under the composer's control (in collaboration mainly with Charles Nuitter), and his French was in any case rather shaky.

The librettos that Wagner never finished, or set to music, are partially included in the *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* and now exist in a critical edition, the *Wagner Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe B, Bd. 31 (Mainz: Schott, 2005). They have been published in French, under the direction of Philippe Godefroid, as *Richard Wagner, les Opéras imaginaires* (Paris: Librairie Séguier Archimbaud, 1989), which however presents some philological problems.

Theoretical writings and essays: Wagner's corpus of essays includes no fewer than 212 texts of varying lengths, ranging from articles for the press to the imposing systematic essay on aesthetics *Oper und Drama* (641 pages in the first edition). Schematically, five major phases emerge within this output: the early, Romantic writings (1834–41), which promote Italian lyricism; the political texts of the revolutionary moment (1848–9); the famous "Zurich writings" (1849–51), dedicated to the reform of opera; the mature aesthetic essays, marked by the influence of Schopenhauer and a reassessment of the relationship between text and music (1871–9); and finally the later political and religious texts (1865–83), in which Wagner often gave rein to his Francophobia and disconcerting anti-Semitism. The only French translation of the complete essays was realised under the direction of

Jacques-Gabriel Prod'homme (1907–25), in thirteen volumes unfortunately marred by numerous errors and approximations. In English, one can refer to William Ashton Ellis's eight-volume *Richard Wagner's Prose Works* (London, 1893–9).

Correspondence: The publication of Wagner's letters is an endless labour; unpublished documents are regularly discovered, making it hard to achieve an absolutely complete monumental edition in paper. Such an enterprise was nevertheless undertaken in 1975 by the Deutscher Verlag für Musik, and taken over by Breitkopf & Härtel in 2001. Proceeding naturally enough in chronological fashion, the project is anticipated to reach thirty-five volumes. No. 25 (with letters from the year 1873) came out in 2017. There is no systematic French translation of this correspondence. As it is, one must refer to some of the numerous anthologies published to date.

Autobiography: Wagner left three autobiographical testaments of varying importance, in which he often indulged in an interesting game of rewriting history, occasionally turning to his great literary models (Goethe, Hoffmann, Wackenroder) to better idealise his own trajectory. The first of these documents is a brief *Autobiographische Skizze* covering the years 1813–43; the second is a notebook entitled *Das braune Buch. Tagebuchaufzeichnungen 1865 bis 1882* ("The Brown Notebook / Journal for 1865–82"). The latter, a compendium of scattered notes, was first published in 1975. The third and most famous is *Mein Leben*, a narrative ending with 1864. Written between 1865 and 1880, this was published only in 1911 – or, rather, a "revised" version by Cosima Wagner was published; a complete critical edition by Martin Gregor-Dellin arrived in 1963. Also pertinent is Cosima's *Journal* (1869–83), known to have been written under the Meister's watchful eye (indeed partly from his dictation), and which carries on from the events related in *Mein Leben*.

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