

Wagner and Beethoven

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In his autobiography *Mein Leben*, Wagner talks about the music that most impressed him as a boy. Weber's *Der Freischütz*, for instance, became an obsession and he took to staging his own performances of it at home in a marionette theatre that had once belonged to his father. Weber was an occasional visitor to the Wagner household and the family knew him well. But another powerful influence came when Wagner was just fourteen. 'Another work also attracted me just as strongly' he wrote: 'It was the overture in E major to *Fidelio*, in which the introduction gripped me especially. I asked my sisters about Beethoven and learned that news of his death had just been received. Still obsessed by the terrible grief caused by the death of Weber, this new loss of a great master who had just entered my life filled me with a strange anguish... I now wanted to learn more about Beethoven; I went to Leipzig and found on my sister's piano the music for *Egmont*; then I tried to get hold of some of his sonatas; finally I heard a symphony of the master for the first time at a Gewandhaus concert: it was the 'A major' symphony (the 7th). Its effect on me was indescribable. On top of this came the added impact of Beethoven's physiognomy as shown by lithographs of the time as well as the knowledge of his deafness and his solitary and withdrawn life. There soon arose in me an image of the highest originality, beyond comparison with anything. This image melded with that of Shakespeare: in ecstatic dreams I met both, saw and talked to them...'

We find numerous other accounts of Wagner's reactions to Beethoven: in his so-called 'Red Pocket-book' (begun in his early 20s) for instance, and in a novella called *A Pilgrimage to Beethoven* written in 1840 when Wagner was a young man living in Paris. In this story, he records an imaginary conversation in Vienna between Beethoven and a composer referred to simply as 'R'. In this conversation, Beethoven's words anticipate Wagner's own intended reforms in the field of dramatic music. 'I am no opera composer' begins Beethoven. 'That is to say, there isn't a single theatre in the world for which I'd willingly write another opera. Were I to make an opera after my *own* heart, everyone would run away from it; for it would have none of your arias, duets, trios, and all the stuff they patch up operas with to-day; and what I should set in their place no singer would sing, and no audience listen to. They all know nothing but gaudy lies, glittering nonsense, and sugared tedium. Whoever wrote a true musical drama would be taken for a fool....'

'And how must one go to work,' I hotly urged, 'to bring such a musical drama about?' 'As Shakespeare did, when he wrote his plays.' Then he went on: 'He who has to stitch all kinds of pretty things for ladies with passable voices to get *bravi* and applause, had better become a Parisian lady's-tailor, not a dramatic composer. ... Why shouldn't vocal music, as much as instrumental, form a grand and serious genre, and its execution meet with as much respect from the feather-brained warblers as I demand from an orchestra for one of my symphonies? The human voice is a far more beautiful and nobler organ of tone than any instrument in the orchestra. Couldn't one employ it with just the same freedom as these?' The fictional Beethoven then goes on to talk about the 9th symphony on which he is working, and his difficulty in finding a text that does justice to his ideas and to the music. The whole story is a fascinating statement of Wagner's views on writing opera at a formative stage in his creative life.

In his essay *A Communication to My Friends* of 1851, Wagner discusses Beethoven's symphonies; he devoted an entire essay to *Coriolan*, and elsewhere he attributes to Beethoven the concept of 'infinite melody' - a continuous flow of musical ideas rather than a patchwork of separate numbers. In his autobiography 'My Life', written between

1865 and 1880, there are many references to Beethoven; and in an essay of 1870 called simply *Beethoven*, Wagner talks about the link between abstract, dance-derived musical forms and musically conceived drama. Beethoven straddles that divide. In the diaries of his wife Cosima, which cover fourteen years of Wagner's life, there are more references to Beethoven than to any other person - not just any other composer, *any other person!*

In 1869, Wagner asked the publishers Breitkopf & Härtel for a copy of a 1823 portrait of Beethoven by Waldmüller. The portrait was criticized in the 19th century, but Wagner liked it and recognized in it, he said, a vision of an innermost musical world. At the time of its painting, Beethoven had been working on his Mass in D (the *Missa Solemnis*) and the Ninth Symphony. His biographer Schindler records the circumstances of his sitting for the portrait, and it is interesting to compare this record of Beethoven's actual behaviour with Wagner's fictionalized account.

'Waldmüller arrived' wrote Schindler, 'and was extremely courteous and deferential ... and as he began to work on the outline of the head and the background, the ill-tempered Beethoven became more impatient with every passing minute, fuming and foaming around the room, evidently still preoccupied with a composition, and continuously returning to his writing table in the adjoining room - sadly for the artist'. Apparently, Beethoven had been deeply annoyed from the start because Waldmüller had placed him facing the window with the light directly in his eyes. As a result, the sitting ended with a violent fit of rage from Beethoven, and Waldmüller never succeeded in obtaining a second sitting. It is precisely this which gives the portrait a spontaneous, rough-hewn appearance, quite unlike many of the detailed and finished portraits typical of this period.

Clearly though, Wagner looked past his hero's notoriously irascible behaviour to the genius beneath. In an autobiographical sketch of 1842-43, Wagner talks about the shattering experience of first hearing the incidental music to *Egmont*. Goethe's play tells the story of Count Egmont who was executed by the Spaniards for leading an uprising in the Netherlands in the 16th century – again, Beethoven's favourite theme of the heroism of a man condemned for having taken a strong stand against oppression. Beethoven might have written only a single opera, but in it, and in *Coriolan* and *Egmont*, we find the roots of Wagner's 'music drama'.

On his deathbed, Beethoven expressed regret at never having set *Faust* to music. But in 1809 he did set one of the songs from *Faust*: Mephistopheles' *Song of the Flea*. Wagner, as a seventeen year-old, took up the challenge of setting the same song, and it is fascinating to compare the two. When he was eighteen and studying with Theodor Weinlig, a distant successor to Bach at the *Thomaskirche* in Leipzig, Wagner wrote a sonata in A major which clearly took its inspiration from Beethoven. Piano sonatas were not Wagner's *forte*, as he soon realized, but this one is not bad for an eighteen year old.

You might recall the passage in Act I of *Tristan und Isolde* in which Isolde tells Brangaene the story of her first meeting with Tristan; that, having discovered the wounded stranger's true identity, she had raised the sword to kill him as he lay on his sick bed. But then he opened his eyes and gazed at her and at that moment they fell in love. Wagner writes this passage with string quartet delicacy, and by placing the viola above the violin and generating a rhythm through the slurred off-beat notes on the cellos, he conveys the weakening of Isolde's hand as she meets Tristan's glance. In the final movement of Beethoven's Quartet in A minor opus 132, we find the rhythmic model for the passage in *Tristan*.

As a teenager, Wagner had been given the score of Beethoven's E flat major Quartet opus 127, rhythmic echoes of which were to find their way into the score of Act II of *Tristan* thirty years later. Wagner drew inspiration from this in the wonderful passage beginning: *O come down upon us night of love, make me forget I live*. The time signature is different – 12/8 in Beethoven, 3/4 in Wagner - and of course Wagner introduces voices, but we hear the same gentle unfurling opening, the same rhythm, the same dialogue of overlapping phrases, and a chamber-music subtlety.

In later years, Wagner freely acknowledged his debt to Beethoven but explained it this way: 'I could not have composed in the way I have done if Beethoven had never existed, but what I have used and developed are isolated strokes of genius in my dramatic predecessors, allowing myself to be led by something other than opera.' It was Beethoven's rhythmic structures that provided the most useful models and constituted, in many respects, his greatest innovation.

Beethoven too drew on the models of his predecessors for *Fidelio*, and later operatic composers, even Italian composers like Puccini, took what they needed from Wagner. This really has been the history of western music until quite recently: learning from and building on existing practice. In *The Girl of the Golden West*, first performed at the Metropolitan in 1910, a four-note motive appears in the orchestra in the second act when the heroine Minnie decides to hide the wounded Dick Johnson. This is repeated a number of times. It is a reference to the famous motive that opens *Tristan und Isolde*, through which Wagner expresses the inter-relationship of suffering and desire. Now harmonized in E-flat minor, Puccini uses it to describe the pain of Minnie and Johnson that is part and parcel of their love. In the sketches for the final duet in *Turandot*, which remained unfinished at the composer's death, he made a strange personal note: '*Then Tristan*'. One can only guess at what he had in mind. Puccini, incidentally, was introduced to the music of Wagner as a student at the Milan Conservatory, and he attended the Bayreuth Festivals of 1888 and 1889. He once remarked: 'Nothing of Richard Wagner has died: his opera is the yeast of all contemporary music, and there is yet something to germinate, later, in happier artistic times.'

To return to Beethoven's Quartet in A, opus 132, a half a dozen bars elsewhere in that quartet influenced a passage in Act III of *Die Meistersinger*, and we can see, once again, what a rich source of ideas these quartets of Beethoven were for Wagner. The scene in question is the act three conversation between Sachs and Walther, before the latter begins to dream up his prize song. The particular phrase of Sachs begins '*Mein Freund! In holder Jugendzeit, ...*'. It seems to me that this music would make a very beautiful string quartet. Sometimes I like to ignore the words and try to imagine that the voices are instrumental parts. It is quite a revelation.

In *Meistersinger*, Wagner set out, quite deliberately, to demonstrate his mastery over existing musical forms. He often referred to the opera as his 'masterpiece' in the strict sense of that term. Of course it's not just an academic exercise but a work of genius, but it does demonstrate just how much he had learned from other masters. He follows the advice he puts into the mouth of the cobbler poet Hans Sachs, to embrace the new but respect the old and build upon it with inspiration. After *Tristan*, which was far in advance of its time and regarded by many as un-performable, Wagner felt the need to answer his critics by showing what he could do with the old forms: the chorale and fugue, of which J S Bach was the master, quintet, canon and counterpoint and, pervading everything, a solid sense of tonality after the tonal uncertainties and chromaticism of *Tristan*.

As a boy in 1830, Wagner had made a piano transcription of the *Ninth Symphony* for the publisher Schott, and he was given the score of the *Missa Solemnis* in return. He conducted the Ninth many times throughout his life, notably on the laying of the

foundation stone for the Festival Theatre at Bayreuth in 1872. This symphony had an extraordinary effect on him in his formative years and he described vividly his first encounter with it. 'On first looking through the score' he said, 'I was struck at once, as if by force of destiny, with the long-sustained perfect fifths with which the first movement begins: these sounds, which played such a spectral role in my earliest impressions of music came to me as the ghostly fundamental of my own life. This symphony surely held the secret to all secrets; and so I got busy over it by painstakingly copying out the score. Once, after having spent a night at this task, I remember being startled by the dawn, which affected me so strongly in my excited condition that I buried myself under the bedclothes with a loud shriek as if terrified by an apparition.'

A decade later, Wagner was to use the mysterious fifths of Beethoven's opening to create the howling, windswept fifths that introduce the overture to *The Flying Dutchman*, his first distinctively 'Wagnerian' opera. They appear again in Senta's Ballad in Act II, a piece of music that had an electrifying effect on me as a boy and contributed, as much as anything, to my interest in Wagner's music.

Wagner could not have written the *Dutchman* if Beethoven had not composed *Fidelio*, and there was a clear connection in Wagner's mind. The idea of a woman providing the means of a man's redemption – Goethe's 'eternal feminine' - is a central theme in both, and the first Leonore he saw on stage became his first Senta.

Wagner's early recognition of the unique qualities of the Ninth Symphony came not from hearing a performance but from his study of the score. Remember, in those days, there were many people who thought that Beethoven was not only deaf but mad as well. Goethe once heard Mendelssohn playing the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony on the piano and remarked: 'It is stupendous. Absolutely mad. It makes me almost fear that the house will collapse. And suppose the whole of mankind played it at once!' Beethoven's later works were so far removed from what people had been used to that they were inclined to dismiss them as ravings. But not the young Wagner! However, when he *heard* the ninth symphony for the first time at a rehearsal in the Leipzig Gewandhaus, he was confused and disappointed.

It was the performing custom at that time for instrumental works to be led not by a conductor standing in front of the orchestra but by the leader of the first violins from his desk or from the keyboard, even in a symphony. Louis Spohr describes how when Beethoven was conducting from the piano he crouched down lower and lower to show the degree of softness. If a *crescendo* entered he gradually rose again and at a *forte* jumped into the air. The thought of someone conducting a symphony from a piano – and playing along too – strikes us as very odd but it was common practice in the 18th century and continued into the first decades of the 19th. Only when singing was involved did a conductor stand in front to coordinate everything. On the day that Wagner attended the performance in Leipzig, the conductor happened to be a very popular local figure called Pohlenz who wielded a very imposing blue baton. Wagner recalled that the first three movements were played through by the orchestra in the manner of a Haydn symphony and, when the final movement approached, Pohlenz at last appeared. He then proceeded to conduct the fierce and shrieking fanfare with which this movement begins in a strangely limping $\frac{3}{4}$ tempo, rather like a waltz, and the young Wagner went home scratching his head. He began to wonder whether Beethoven had written nonsense after all. Only when he heard the symphony in a decent performance in Paris some years later, was he reassured that his first assessment had been right.

As Wagner took what he needed from Beethoven's example, so too did Beethoven draw lessons from composers before him. There were obvious forebears like Haydn and Mozart, but in opera he also learned from an unexpected source, the Italian composer

Luigi Cherubini who was born in Florence but spent his most productive years in France. Beethoven went so far as to describe Cherubini as the greatest living composer of dramatic music.

The Cherubini connection is relevant to *Fidelio*, which belonged to a tradition of so-called 'rescue' operas that emerged at the time of the French revolution. The play on which *Fidelio* was based was itself a dramatization of a real incident during the 'terror', in which a woman disguised herself as a man in order to rescue her husband from prison. Cherubini's rescue operas included one called '*The Two Days*' or '*The Water Carrier*'. It had a profound influence on the lighter parts of *Fidelio*. Cherubini's librettist was also the author of the libretto from which *Fidelio* was adapted, and Cherubini's score was a constant object of study for Beethoven, not only before the production of *Fidelio* but also throughout his life.

Already inspired by hearing the overture to *Fidelio*, Wagner was bowled over by the first Leonore he saw: Wilhelmine Schroeder-Devrient. 'When I look back across my entire life' he later wrote, 'I find no event to place beside this in the impression it produced on me. Whoever can remember this wonderful woman at that period of her life will certainly confirm in some fashion the almost demonic fire irresistibly kindled in them by the profoundly human and ecstatic performance of this incomparable artist. After the opera was over I dashed to the home of one of my friends to write a short letter in which I told her succinctly that my life had henceforth found its meaning, and that if ever she should hear my name favourably mentioned in the world of art, she should remember that she had, on this evening, made of me that which I now vowed to become. I dropped this letter at Schroeder-Devrient's hotel and ran wildly off into the night. When I came to Dresden in 1842 to make my debut with *Rienzi* and could often visit the home of this artist, who was amiably disposed towards me, she once surprised me by reciting this letter word for word. For it appears to have made an impression on her, and she had actually preserved it carefully.'

Schroeder-Devrient had performed Leonore in a rehearsal conducted by Beethoven in 1822, in performances conducted by Weber in 1823, and later she sang Adriano, Senta and Elisabeth under the baton of Wagner. To have been conducted by Beethoven, Weber and Wagner - can you imagine such a thing? Interestingly, it was her acting skills rather than vocal quality that attracted Wagner's praise, and he once admitted that 'she had no voice at all'. Nevertheless, he chose her to create the roles of Senta and Elisabeth because she was such an intelligent actress. Beethoven too had greatly admired her performance in 1822, although he had been completely deaf at the time. He was responding purely to her physical dramatization of the role. Her famous innovation was to speak rather than sing the final word in her threat to Pizzaro: '*Noch einen Laut, und du bist tot!*' [Just one sound and you are dead!] The terrific effect of this gesture, said Wagner, was the sudden and shocking return from the ideal world of music to 'the naked surface of dreadful reality'. The effect of Schroeder-Devrient's performance was to place *Fidelio* firmly in the context of the 19th century cult of domesticity. *Fidelio* became not so much an opera about politics as one about the ideal wife, whose love for her husband all but overwhelmed her own identity.

Commentators have often remarked about the unsatisfactory nature of *Fidelio* from a dramatic point of view, particularly its schizophrenic clash between high drama and the petty-bourgeois intrigue in the first act. Wagner subscribed to this criticism – his admiration for Beethoven was *not* uncritical. His analysis of the great *Leonore Overture* No 3 makes clear how he would have reshaped the opera if he had been in Beethoven's shoes. For him, the third *Leonora* overture encapsulated perfectly the main focus of *Fidelio*. His description of the overture went something like this: the beginning plunges us directly into the gloomy dungeon, its stillness broken only by the prisoner's moans for

freedom. The darkness is then pierced by the glance of an angel whose own freedom seems intolerable because it is denied her beloved. There follows the mounting resolve of the angel (who is in fact a loving woman) to tear down the prison walls. Finally, the last bolt falls, and redeemer and redeemed shout 'Freedom! Godlike freedom!' as sunlight floods the dungeon.

That's how Wagner saw the dramatic core of *Fidelio*. As far as he was concerned, everything else detracted from and weakened the opera. The fact that Beethoven himself recast it several times, wrote four overtures and was never entirely happy with it suggests that, instinctively, he knew there was a structural flaw but couldn't put his finger on what it was. Wagner's interpretation had the effect of restoring something of the opera's political muscle - its charting of the progress from oppression to liberation - which had been dissipated by its domestic focus in the mid-19th century. I have no doubt that, in this, Wagner was demonstrating his superior dramatic instinct. The spoken dialogue is also a serious problem, and there have been attempts, notably by Michael Balfe in 1851, to provide recitatives - a version that Wagner saw performed in London in 1855. Arthur Bodanzky composed recitatives for the Met's production in 1927 and Kirsten Flagstad used these when she sang her first Leonora there in 1936. Mahler greatly admired *Fidelio* but made substantial changes to it in order to reduce the *Singspiel* elements. It is to him that we owe the practice (rarely followed these days) of inserting the *Leonora* No 3 between the dungeon scene and the final tableau. Whether consciously or not, Mahler embraced Wagner's view of the *Leonore* overture as being a symphonic expression of the opera's true centre of gravity. As one critic has observed, Mahler made Beethoven Wagner's ancestor by transforming the *Singspiel* into a fully-fledged *Musikdrama*.

Wagner recognized that at the dramatic core of *Fidelio* was Pizzaro's tyranny, Florestan's suffering and Leonora's heroic action to free him. The doom-laden opening to Act II in the deepest, darkest, dankest dungeon, must surely have inspired Wagner when he came to write the music for the opening to Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, where we find the malevolent Hagen, whose heart is as black as Pizzaro's, brooding on the intended fate of Siegfried. Beethoven set his canon amidst the lighter passages of act one of *Fidelio*, but Wagner set his immediately after Hagen has been visited by Alberich, his father. Alberich exudes hatred and revenge, and urges his son to do his worst - and then vanishes into the pre-dawn darkness. Wagner's 'canon' isn't sung (unlike Beethoven's in Act I) but played by eight French horns, announcing, as it were, the dawning of a new and terrible day, the day of Hagen's triumph and Siegfried's death. There are numerous other Beethovenian touches in the *Ring*. The scherzo of the Ninth Symphony for instance finds an echo in the descent to Nibelheim in *Das Rheingold* as we hear the pounding rhythms of the enslaved Nibelungs working at their anvils.

Beethoven's music constantly inspired and rejuvenated Wagner to the end of his life. It was noted that sections of the String Quartet opus 127 sparked an uninhibited display of cheerful reactions; he danced, leapt about and teased his companions. Cosima recorded on 10 January 1883, barely a month before his death, that he twice came dancing in whilst Liszt was playing the *scherzo allegretto* of the Eighth Symphony.

I've talked about Beethoven's influence on Wagner, but what about Wagner's influence on Beethoven, or more correctly, on the way in which Beethoven came to be understood and interpreted. In fact, that influence was profound, and I can think of no better way to describe this than to quote Daniel Barenboim, virtuoso pianist and an extraordinarily thoughtful conductor of both Beethoven and Wagner. This is what he has to say on the subject in his *Parallels and Paradoxes - Explorations in Music and Society*: 'Wagner influenced the way the whole world, without exception, looked at the music that had come before him, the classics, mostly German or middle or central European music - Mozart,

Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, etc – without mentioning that of his contemporaries. ...and whether the conductors were Furtwängler, Weingartner, Bruno Walter, or even, in a way, Toscanini...they could not refrain from occupying themselves with these principles. The same goes for the instrumentalists, not only for orchestras...you see all these principles of slight modification of tempo, on through Schnabel, Edwin Fischer, Backhaus, etc. All this would have been unthinkable without Wagner's ideas. So, in this way, he influenced a whole history of interpretation of music, to the point that the reaction that came in this century...was an attempt to fight this. What we are experiencing now...with the revival of historical practices and playing on period instruments, is also, in fact – whether knowingly or not – a reaction against this Wagnerian concept of the continuity of sound....

Fifty years after the teenage Wagner composed his Symphony in C – a work that owed much to his infatuation with Beethoven - he conducted its first movement again, in Venice. It was the last music he ever conducted. The occasion was Cosima's birthday celebration on 24 December 1882. Their children and her father, Franz Liszt, were also present. The venue was *Teatro la Fenice*, to which they travelled in three gondolas from their apartments in the Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi on the Grand Canal. Wagner conducted the first movement of his symphony, and Liszt added his incomparable playing. Towards 11 o'clock, the party returned home. 'Venice transfigured in a blue light' Cosima recorded in her diary. 'The children enchanted with the evening, R. Very content!'

Peter Bassett