

Wagner in Concert

Throughout his turbulent life, Richard Wagner regularly did battle with the dragon called Insufficient Funds, and controversy was his constant companion. However, the difficulties he faced were often of his own making. He deliberately turned his back on the operatic practices of his day in the belief that opera deserved a more serious, more exalted place amongst the arts. His was a titanic struggle but, in the end, he had the greatest influence on opera since Monteverdi, and an impact on music generally and even on literature and the visual arts, that continued well into the twentieth century.

Sir John Barbirolli once observed that: '...as prime inspirer and founder of the modern school of conducting, I think we can safely point to Wagner'. The impact of Wagner's conducting technique can be gauged by the following account of a concert rehearsal in Moscow in 1863. The observer was the Russian teacher and academic Nikolai Dmitrivich Kashkin, and the program consisted entirely of works by Beethoven and Wagner himself.

'Wagner amazed everyone at the beginning by standing in front of the orchestra. Before that time, conductors in Russia, as in the rest of Europe, used to stand in the first row of the orchestra facing the audience, but Wagner stood in front of the orchestra, turning his back to the auditorium, and it seemed so natural and sensible that everyone has done the same ever since.

The whole of the Fifth Symphony was played through almost without correction, for the orchestra was electrified by the presence of a European celebrity and played extremely carefully. Apart from that, Wagner's gestures were so well thought through that the players immediately understood his intentions. It should be pointed out, however, that Wagner's manner of conducting was extremely idiosyncratic, and he often did not beat time at all, but traced, for example, a large crescendo with a slow raising of his right hand over the course of several bars, while lightly indicating the tempo with the wrist of his left hand.'¹

Wagner's involvement with the concert platform had begun at the age of seventeen, with the first (and only) performance of his overture in B flat, nicknamed 'the Drum-beat', at the Altes Theater in Leipzig. To the mortification of the would-be composer who had approached his work with Beethovenian high-mindedness, the performance was an embarrassment, leaving the audience more startled than impressed. However, with a resilience that was typical of him, the boy (for such he was) submitted another overture, redolent of Beethoven's *Coriolan*, for performance at the Leipzig Gewandhaus the following year. This attracted favourable attention and a second performance was given a few months later. Over the next eight years, half a dozen of his concert overtures, a piano sonata and a symphony were performed in Leipzig, Prague and Riga. Thus Wagner's life-long involvement with the concert platform, either as composer or conductor, took flight.

From the mid-1850s, Wagner used concert performances to introduce the music of his stage works to audiences across Europe and, more prosaically, to raise money and win supporters. Concerts during his Zürich exile after the Dresden uprising of 1849 consolidated his relationship with Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck, who were to be so important to the creation of *Die Walküre* and *Tristan und Isolde*.

¹ Stewart Spencer's translation in *Wagner Remembered*, Faber and Faber, 2000.

He conducted eight concerts in London between March and June 1855, one of which was attended by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. Most of Beethoven's symphonies were performed during these concerts, together with music of Weber, the prelude to *Lohengrin* and - at the Queen's request - the overture to *Tannhäuser*. In a letter to his wife Minna that begins 'Gracious me, dear Minnikins...', Wagner reported that during the *Tannhäuser* overture the Queen and Albert had 'got quite worked up...[and] at the end ...applauded me most warmly'. This display of enthusiasm was followed by a long conversation during the interval in which the Queen treated him 'with the most uninhibited friendliness' despite the fact that, as he noted, he was a man wanted by the police in Germany for his revolutionary activities and was also under suspicion in France.

During three concerts in Paris in January-February 1860, attended by Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Auber, Gounod and Ambroise Thomas, Wagner conducted excerpts from *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin* and *Tristan und Isolde*. Jules Massenet, who was the timpanist in the orchestra, later recalled that 'The music had had such a powerful effect on me that I had burst into tears'.

In addition to the Moscow concert of 1863, Wagner conducted several concerts that year in St Petersburg, with 130 musicians from the Imperial Orchestra at his disposal. Russian audiences were amongst the first to hear the 'Ride of the Valkyries' and the 'Magic Fire' music, as well as the forging songs from *Siegfried* and the prelude to *Die Meistersinger* - all parts of works still in progress. It was in St Petersburg too that Wagner, for the first time, combined the prelude and the conclusion (*Verklärung*) of *Tristan und Isolde* in what was to become standard concert practice. There were also concerts that year in Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Karlsruhe and Breslau.

Between 1871 and 1875, Wagner conducted more concerts – mainly of excerpts from the *Ring* - in Hamburg, Cologne, several times in Berlin (including in the presence of the German Emperor), Vienna (several times) and Budapest. There was a significant performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony at the Margravial Opera House in Bayreuth in May 1872 (on an extremely wet day) to mark the laying of the foundation stone for the new Festival Theatre. As a seventeen-year-old boy, just a few years after Beethoven's death, Wagner had made a complete piano transcription of the Ninth Symphony which he then offered to the music publisher Schott, who sent him in exchange the score of the *Missa solemnis*.

In 1877, twenty-two years after his first London concerts, Wagner returned (now with his second wife Cosima, *née* Liszt) for a series of six concerts. The venue this time was the Albert Hall, that cavernous memorial to the Prince Consort who had died in 1861 from typhoid, the same affliction that had struck down Wagner's own father during the siege of Leipzig and Battle of the Nations against Napoleon, when Richard was just six months old. Conducting duties were shared between Wagner and Hans Richter who, nine months earlier, had conducted the first complete performances of the *Ring* at Bayreuth. Members of the Bayreuth cast and an immense orchestra of 170 players took part in the concerts, which included the 'Ride of the Valkyries' and 'Wotan's Farewell' from *Die Walküre*, the forging songs and 'love duet' from *Siegfried*, the duet from Act Three of *Lohengrin*, excerpts from *Götterdämmerung* (which made a tremendous impression), the *Meistersinger* prelude and various marches. The Prince of Wales attended, and Wagner was received by the Queen at Windsor. The concerts were an artistic triumph but they were also expensive. The net profit was just £700, barely a tenth of the deficit incurred in building the Bayreuth theatre and mounting the first Festival.

Wagner's last appearance on the concert platform was entirely a labour of love. 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 in Venice to which they travelled in three gondolas from their apartments in the Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi on the Grand Canal. Wagner conducted his Symphony in C, composed fifty years earlier in homage to Beethoven and Mozart. 'I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven' Wagner had once written in a short story from Paris. His faith in God might not have withstood close scrutiny, but his devotion to the other two was beyond question.

Fittingly, Liszt added his incomparable playing on that evening at La Fenice and, towards 11 o'clock, the party returned home. 'Venice transfigured in a blue light' Cosima noted in her diary. 'The children enchanted with the evening, R. very content!' Six weeks later, in Venice, Wagner died.

So, how should his impact on the concert hall and opera house be judged? Daniel Barenboim who, in addition to a long career as a soloist and a conductor of the symphonic repertoire, has conducted all of Wagner's mature stage works, is in no doubt:

'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....

The study of Wagner – Wagner's music – was of great help to me, not only in eventually performing his own works, but in understanding many, many other styles of music....his writing on the Beethoven symphonies and on conducting in general had a great influence on my whole way of looking at his music and of playing it....[But] his talents and his genius went far beyond composing music.²

² Daniel Barenboim and Edward W. Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*, Bloomsbury, 2003.