A Hundred Years of Wagner's Ring

David Blackadder

When a stage work of exceptional length and complexity not only survives for 100 years, but grows in popularity despite virtually insoluble problems of presentation, it is appropriate to mark the centenary by asking why this should be. Wagner's cycle of music dramas, The Ring of the Nibelung, is spread over four evenings and the uncut music requires between 14 and 16 hours for performance. To say that the appeal of the work reflects a general hankering after the larger than life merely touches the surface of the matter and it is necessary to grasp the extraordinary richness of The Ring. Apart from its musical grandeur it has a notable intellectual content, a wide emotional range, a potent symbolism and a capacity to involve the spectator in ways which he may hardly realise during or after the performance.

The literature concerning Wagner in general and The Ring in particular is very extensive and different commentators have sought and found different kinds of evidence for pronouncing the cycle a work of genius and a landmark in Western cultural achievement. English speaking commentators have been prominent beginning with Bernard Shaw who published his handbook to The Ring, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, in 1898. This is now felt to be a curious mixture of good sense and nonsense, the latter arising from Shaw's own attitudes and limitations. He was a social crusader and a dramatist who felt that stage works must have a serious underlying purpose even when dressed up as comedies, and the message of the piece should be perfectly clear. It is hardly surprising that he saw the first three parts of The Ring as an intricate but perfectly comprehensible allegory concerning the evils of capitalism, the exploitation of the poor and the mechanism of revolutionary change. His detailed analysis, though ingenious, now seems over-tidy and glib. Too much is explained away and the rich depths of the work unplumbed. The final evening of The Ring, Götterdämmerung or Dusk Falls on the Gods, evidently annoyed Shaw and some consideration of his views is a convenient preparation for what follows. (For those unfamiliar with the details of the story it is only necessary to appreciate that Wagner's resolution of the whole cycle of events hinges upon the apotheosis of redeeming love represented by the self-immolation of Brünnhilde.)

Shaw regarded the last evening as mostly very fine grand opera

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but emphatically not music drama. He drew attention to the undisputed fact that the libretto was written backwards after which the music was composed forwards, the whole compositon being spread over more than 25 years. Wagner at the height of his musical powers had thus to cope with his earliest and, in Shaw's view, weakest libretto. Shaw felt that the opera represented a betrayal of the lofty thinking of the earlier parts of the cycle, and that it failed to resolve the tangle which the characters had got themselves into by the end of the third evening. The redeeming power of love was held to be an unacceptable solution, indeed a non-solution, to the gigantic social questions posed by the preceding events. To Shaw the closing scene of Götterdämmerung was merely vague meaningless comfort of the kind which can indeed ease an intolerable situation but only for those sufficiently deluded by its appeal.

This is certainly very serious criticism. Should we hesitate to award the status of great art to a work which is suspected of dispensing vague comfort? Writing about the Sixth Symphony of Tchaikovsky Martin Cooper makes no bones about this. 'The immense popularity of the symphony as a whole is eloquent commentary on what the general public in all countries look for in music–a reflection, magnified and dramatised, of its own unhappiness and frustration, combined with a purely emotional message of vague comfort'. As it happened, Shaw not only disliked vague comfort in general but considered the example in Götterdämmerung to be rather poor stuff of its kind, likening one passage near the end to the pet climax of a popular sentimental ballad. However, quality apart, the really important question is whether Shaw erred in condemning the resolution of The Ring on grounds of vagueness. Edward Norman has made a pungent comment which throws some light on Shaw's attitude. 'The real vice of intellectuals is that they reduce everything to arguments and propositions. They even rationalise their emotions and call them ideas.' Theologians once appeared to be similarly affected. Shaw attempted the impossible and failed; the reason for his failure will become apparent.

On the musical plane in particular, Ernest Newman's prodigious labours and writings on Wagner must have helped many people to grasp the distinctive features of The Ring. (See especially *Wagner as Man and Artist (1914)*, and *Wagner Nights (1949)* He was particularly good in his exposition of Wagner's extraordinary skill in providing stage works with musical and dramatic cohesion of a quasi-symphonic kind. It cannot be assumed that this skill is obvious to all, even to all musicians. For example, in the course of an interesting little book on Beethoven *(Beethoven 1927)* J W N Sullivan had occasion to compare the Eroica Symphony with the heroic element in Wagner. 'The comparative tawdriness of Wagner's music is not due to any difference there might

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be in the imagined situations, but to the comparative poverty of his inner resources.' Sullivan evidently had no dramatic sense and could not see beyond classical sonata form. Newman made no such mistakes. In addition to his insistence on cohesion he provided a fine treatment of another of Wagner's distinctive skills, the ability to create an absolutely distinctive mood or colour for a whole scene. All in all Newman's writings probably constitute the best armchair preparation for the music of The Ring. The fact that some preparation is necessary need not cause surprise. By dint of monologue and recapitulation Wagner the librettist was anxious to make the story clear, but Wagner the musician was much inclined to credit the listener with trigger responses to the significance of quite inconspicuous musical details. I spoke recently to a man, otherwise intelligent, who expressed dissatisfaction with Siegfried and, in answer to my question concerning his state of preparedness for the performance, told me in all seriousness that he had read the programme notes carefully! Shaw and Newman typify writers emphasising the allegorical and musical aspects of The Ring but both admitted the need for preparation by the spectator.

Robert Donnington's book, *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols,* first appeared in 1963 and has already reached a third edition. The Preface to the most recent edition is important and the whole work is an exceptionally valuable guide to Wagner's use of symbol. As part of his technical vocabulary Donnington uses terms like ego, self, shadow, animus and anima, as developed by Freud and Jung in their exploration of depth psychology. Donnington now admits that he could have managed perfectly well without these terms but considers that their convenience outweighs any disadvantage associated with their unfamiliarity to the general reader. In any event he explains the terms as they occur and he is a good deal easier to follow than Jung himself. A longish quotation from Donnington's Preface is unavoidable as it sets out his aims in writing the book so clearly. 'Thus "to bring the unconscious part of human nature into consciousness" implied for Wagner not that intellectual awareness which constitutes analytical consciousness, but that wonderfully glowing and suggestive half-light which constitutes artistic consciousness. The artist leaves his "deep and hidden truth" half-veiled and half-revealed, for two very good reasons. One is that even to himself it may remain very much of a riddle; the other is that the light of altogether naked truth would be unsupportable, if ever it were to be attainable. But here there is a built-in safeguard. The naked truth is not attainable. We cannot openly reveal what we do not openly know; and there is no knowing beyond those twilight regions where consciousness dims and the illimitable unconscious increasingly takes over. But it is just at the farther edge of the twilight regions that the half-light of artistic consciousness may glow so hauntingly, showing to our feelings and intuitions what our reason and commonsense will never grasp.

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An even better, because more general, term for this is symbolical consciousness. The veil by which the truth of things may be half-concealed and half-revealed in a work of art is a veil of symbols. We may take them literally at their face value, which is part of their meaning, and we may in the very same act take them symbolically, which is another and more important part.'

To some people this emphasis on symbol may appear perfectly natural and proper while others might require convincing of its enormous importance in human affairs. Even if we try, foolishly and of course unsuccessfully, to squeeze out symbol from our lives it will always creep back. Indeed symbol is intrinsic and spontaneous. Ordinary men and women may enliven their superficially prosaic lives by writing snatches of poetry occasionally to catch and focus an experience or emotion. Any unwillingness to share their creations, even with those who love them, is not really for reasons of shyness but because the symbol seems too precious, too fragile and too personal. Small children sometimes produce strangely moving or disturbing pictures which they are absolutely unwilling to discuss. As Ernest Newman remarked, our name for the necessities of the heart is poetry. We all need it, we all have it but few of us can articulate the appropriate symbols and fewer still can share them effectively. It is the business of truly great artists like Wagner to make the symbols available. Robert Donnington's achievement lies in his ability to make us see and appreciate the extent to which all that is in life is in The Ring. By understanding the predicaments, thoughts and actions of the characters we recognise ourselves and become better equipped to organise our own affairs. Many examples could be cited but Donnington's analysis of Wotan's blind obstinate fury at the disobedience of his favourite daughter Brünnhilde must be painfully familiar ground to most people.

It was mentioned earlier that Shaw was dissatisfied with the closing pages of Götterdämmerung, but Donnington's closely argued analysis of the scene makes as much 'sense' of the resolution as seems possible at the present time. Perhaps the present generation is actually quite well attuned to the idea of heroic self-sacrificing love triumphing over the squalor and pettiness of the old order. Only the most literal minded spectator would make the mistake at this point of seeing the events as being primarily concerned with the visible characters present on the stage. We are concerned here with nothing less than the healing of the human psyche as it finds equilibrium and wholeness at last through transformation. The fact that Wagner himself was unsuccessful, even contradictory, in explaining his resolution in plain words is not at all surprising. Plain words simply do not serve for the task, and Shaw's failure to grasp the significance of Brünnhilde's immolation arose from his preoccupation with purely verbal communication heightened, but no more, by the music. What is almost incred-

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ible is the way Wagner advanced so far along the paths of what we would now call psycho-analysis. He did this by the flowering of his uncanny artistic intuition.

There might appear to be some danger of taking the whole Wagner business too seriously, of Wagnerolatry in fact. In his slim and lucid book *Aspects of Wagner* (1968) Patrick Magee has devoted a section to this interesting topic. He argues that Wagner's enormous appeal derives from the fact that the stage works give expression to things which are unconscious, because repressed, in most of us. Magee goes on to say that this repression, which is part of life and part of the personality of every human being, constitutes the level to which Wagner addresses himself. What might appear to be an excessive addiction to Wagner is thus better seen as a delighted recognition of something exceedingly important and meaningful. In any event a great work of art can only be taken seriously, and the greater and more authentic it is the more we stand to gain by opening ourselves to its influence. If we treat it cynically or flippantly so much the worse for us. Irreverent mirth is, of course, perfectly compatible with a basically serious attitude, or perhaps reverent mirth would be a better term. Anna Russel's take-off on The Ring is tediously unfunny because it is based on ignorance, whereas the description of a horse race at the Valhalla Race Course by Bernard Miles is quite another matter.

Having mentioned Wagnerolatry I should like to express my view that Wagner's failings are remarkably few and tend to be concentrated on the technical side where he makes unreasonable demands of stagecraft, not to mention the stamina expected from the performers. The total realisation of Wagner's own intentions with respect to staging is plainly impossible and he must have realised as much even when he would not admit it. Nevertheless Patrick Magee is probably right in hoping that the next generation of Ring productions will show a move towards more real and naturalistic settings. We must certainly bear in mind Wagner's famous remark to the effect that he had created the invisible orchestra (that at his own theatre in Bayreuth being out of sight of the audience) but wished he could invent the invisible stage. Writing in 1951 Richard's grandson Wieland said: 'Today we must admit that the stage can at best provide only a sparse reflection for the eye of what the orchestra pit is triumphantly conveying to our ears.' The main thing surely is to strive for a staging that does no violence to the symbols embodied in the music. Far better to have a modest straightforward production than one in which brilliantly conceived effects draw attention to themselves and so take the spectators' concentration away from the real centre of the act of communication.

Whether the symbolism of Brunnhilde's immolation can be made ever richer in future productions one can hardly guess, but it is enough to find the resolution satisfying after the fashion

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of a religious mystery or truth. The centenary of The Ring is an opportunity for reassessment and celebration, yet it is also a reminder that great art can make us whole and that is what religion is all about. The Christian has perhaps a criterion for great art which the non-believer cannot share, or which the non-believer would describe so differently as to make it virtually a different criterion. Great art can produce the odd but unmistakable feeling associated with the act of faith, truth which is intuitively yet surely experienced.

That The Ring endures because it is great music is more than a half-truth but because it was conceived as a stage work we must do the best we can with the virtually insoluble problem of putting it on stage. It is temptingly easy to talk about music in purely musical terms and yet if it is indeed part of life as an intuitive outpouring of symbol it must be possible to demonstrate, after a fashion at least, the connection between great music and the tissue of human experience. The staging of The Ring, unless grotesquely inadequate. helps to establish this connection. On a multiplicity of levels, some explicit, some deeply buried, Wagner is constantly engaging our thoughts and emotions, confirming our fears and loves, and stimulating us to aspire towards wholeness and a better state of understanding what we are.

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