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WAGNER'S CASE RE-OPENED

Review of Alain Badiou (2010) *Five lessons on Wagner. With an afterword by Slavoj Žižek*. London: Verso, 239 pp.

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If modernism stands for the belief that modern man can and should create his own myths, and postmodernism expresses an incredulity towards such myths, or 'metanarratives', then it is perhaps inevitable that nowadays a certain incredulity towards such incredulity should take hold. In other words, a reevaluation of romanticism is now within the realms of possibility, a new twist in the 'dialectic of Enlightenment' – a dialectic that always already revolved around the relation between myth and Enlightenment, as Horkheimer and Adorno famously proposed. A resurrection of romantic configurations may break the deadlock into which philosophy seems to have been lured by postmodernism.

This may explain why we may now witness the philosophical rehabilitation of an epic figure from German nineteenth-century romanticism: Richard Wagner, the composer who mixed motifs from classical tragedy, medieval sagas, and Christianity in order to promote something like a

new artificial national religion. What is somewhat surprising though is that such a revival would be attempted by Alain Badiou – someone who studied with the intransigent Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, and is mostly known for his unorthodox notion of what constitutes 'truth', his association with the philosophy of 'the event', and his political affirmation of communism. His *Five lessons on Wagner* though is a book on aesthetics, on the philosophy of music and ultimately on the question of whether Wagner's music dramas are backward-looking paraphrases of Christian morality, or might be understood as entailing something like a forward-looking 'ontology of the present' – or perhaps, in a way, both.

*Five lessons on Wagner* is aptly titled, as it consists of a series of talks given at seminars on Wagner organized over the past ten years or so by the composer and critic Francois Nicolas, a friend of Badiou's.<sup>1</sup> The five chapters, or 'lessons', are thematically closely connected, and the aim of the book is quite complicated and ambitious. As it should be, given the paradoxical status of Wagner as someone fully out of time yet never out of vogue: in 2013, on the occasion of the composer's 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, no less than twelve different versions of the Ring cycle will be presented in German opera houses alone. It is worth mentioning, by the way, that *Five lessons* actually contains one more 'lesson' – the extra one contributed by Slavoj Žižek, another of Badiou's friends, and an equally inveterate Wagnerian. It is announced as an 'afterword' but is in fact a substantial essay of some 65 pages, close to 30 percent of the book.

This book is not for everyone. It does not aim to defend Wagner against those who simply dislike him for the supposed bombast of his music, the Teutonic appearance of most stagings of his works, or the Nazi sympathies that he attracted in the twentieth century. But because of its philosophical sophistication, neither is the book likely to be embraced by the average Wagner devotee. Or even the above-average – in the subtlety of its philosophical understanding of Wagnerian themes, it is light-years ahead of e.g. Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht's *Finding an ending* – both notable philosophers but naïve Wagnerians.<sup>2</sup> Rather, *Five lessons on Wagner* is directed against, or occasioned by, another French philosopher, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and his 1991 Wagner book *Musica ficta*.<sup>3</sup> In this book, four philosophical critics of Wagner – Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Heideg-

ger/Nietzsche, and Adorno – are taken to task not for being critical towards Wagner, but for not being quite critical *enough*. Such is the fascination exerted by Wagner that even these strenuous critics are still in his thrall, or so Lacoue-Labarthe feels (or so Badiou represents him feeling). Thus the task Badiou sets himself is a sort of ‘double bill’: he needs to answer both the already formidable critique of – especially – Adorno and Nietzsche (*‘er hat die Musik krank gemacht’*), and refute Lacoue-Labarthe’s even more stern indictment against Wagner as someone who fatally aestheticized politics, and therefore was the precursor of fascism. Badiou, in his own words, wants to represent the defence in this new trial of Richard Wagner (84).

This already complex purpose is complicated even further by a quite obvious, but not always sufficiently addressed problem: how to deal with what we might call the non-discursive dimension of Wagner’s art? Opera, of course, is more than simply what is said or sung – judging an opera merely by its libretto would be as odd as reviewing a movie solely on the basis of its subtitles. In most operas, both music and staging are much more important than the text. And although in the special case of Wagner the texts do in fact deal with complex philosophical and existential issues, it is generally recognized that his music is every bit as disconcerting and revolutionary as his libretti. And the staging of a Wagner opera is often an event of major cultural significance as well, as shown by the proverbial controversy surrounding the Bayreuth tradition, or for instance by how Hans Jürgen Syberberg or Christoph Schlingensiefel represented *Parsifal*.<sup>4</sup>

Badiou’s programmatic first ‘lesson’ might be summarized as the contention that although key elements in Wagner’s musical and dramatic style might be interpreted and connected in the way Lacoue-Labarthe does – to produce an image of Wagner as basically a proto-fascist, or a reactionary revolutionary – other ways of connecting these elements are also available, ways that allow for a more positive judgment on Wagner’s oeuvre. In fact, Badiou concludes that an idea of politics as aestheticization is present not so much in Wagner’s work as in Lacoue-Labarthe’s own mind (10). He identifies four central topics in the ‘construction’ of Wagner by critics such as Lacoue-Labarthe.

To start with, there is the role of *myth*. Wagner is charged here with fatally intertwining the structure and purpose of drama and opera with foundational, originary myth. Even those not very familiar with Wagner can easily identify the many mythical elements typically present in the staging of his operas, such as Gods, Norns, heroes, knights, love potions, spears, magic rings, and more generally the themes of love, resentment, intrigue, loss, sacrifice, and redemption. Even the music itself seems timeless, both in the technical sense of breaking free of the conventions and constraints of the period, and in the affective sense of touching upon the deepest and most unsettling emotions prevalent among human beings. Badiou’s defense here is to refer to the famous Chéreau-Boulez production of the *Ring des Nibelungen* at Bayreuth in the late 1970s<sup>5</sup> – a radically innovative version that presented a demythologized Wagner, situated in concrete historical time (basically that of capitalism), and conducted with more analytical subtlety than emotional power. For Badiou, this is proof enough that a non-mythological rendering of a play like the *Ring* is in effect not only possible, but also convincing, for many – although not for Badiou himself.

A second indictment against Wagner holds that he uses musical faculties and techniques in order to produce (mere) *effects*; in modern terms, he used technology in order to produce mass art. Badiou basically retorts that while Wagner’s music undeniably contains what one nowadays might call ‘special effects’, this detracts nothing from its subtly and versatility. The third and fourth count entail a connection between Wagner’s work and that of Hegel, as they hold that both aim at unification, and (therefore) necessarily imply totalization. Although the charge of totalization is of course easily linked to Wagner’s ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Badiou maintains that Wagner neither intended nor realized such totalization of art. The fourth accusation proposes that ‘difference’, especially the irreducibility of speech, is being negated by Wagner through the form of his music, that is to say, by his ‘endless’ melody whose function might be likened to Hegel’s *Geist*. Badiou however denies – famous passages like Isolde’s *Liebstod*, or Wotan’s farewell to Brünnhilde notwithstanding – that we are always or necessarily ‘drowned’ by Wagner’s music. In fact, Badiou argues more technically that the (in)famous Wagnerian *Leitmotif* is not primarily meant to ‘unify’

the music, but is rather to be conceived as a ‘non-descriptive, internal musical development with no dramatic or narrative connotations whatsoever’ (20).

Comparatively, the first ‘lesson’ is the easiest to understand without intimate knowledge of Wagner’s work, and that is why I presented it here at some length. After having ‘defused’ the charges by Lacoue-Labarthe, Badiou feels free to tackle some major themes in Wagnerian interpretation, and some major Wagnerian interpreters like Nietzsche and Adorno, in the remaining four ‘lessons’. His arguments run wide and deep across philosophy, music, theatre, and their history, and I can only mention two of the issues he touches upon: Wagner’s ‘endless melody’, and his aestheticization of politics.

The first issue implies two paradoxically related expressions of discontent: Wagner’s music takes forever, it goes on and on, it never ends – and worse, it *does* end, after all! This point is, not unwittingly, illustrated by the action in *Tristan und Isolde*, or rather the lack of it (120-121). Tristan’s wait in act III, Badiou confides with us, is without question the lengthiest wait in the history of art. A full three-quarter of the act (and Wagner’s acts are never short) is spent just waiting. The complaint – Adorno’s, for instance – here is not that it takes such a long time for Isolde to arrive (after which things unravel instantly: Tristan dies, king Marke arrives, Isolde meets her love-death); the complaint is rather that she *does* in fact show up. The modern, supposedly superior counterpart to this dramatic set-up is *Waiting for Godot*, also a long wait, but worth its while precisely because Godot does *not* materialize. In post-Hegelian, or Adornian, terms: self-realization now implies, or takes place through, waiting-in-vain (43). Here Badiou counters: instead of condemning Wagner for forcing unity upon the heterogeneity of music, for using difference only to postpone resolution, for dissolving the Other’s suffering in a rhetoric of compassion (77), should we not instead praise him for being the first to gloriously express ‘waiting in vain’ in music, for inventing a musical system that constantly delays resolutions (43) – for displacing discontinuity in such a profound manner that it came to act as a new figure of undecidability between narrative drama and music (69-70)? The fact that story and music indeed ‘come to an end’, that they move from a prefiguring Prelude to a

finale that both musically and discursively ‘resolves’ things, is less important than understanding what Badiou calls Wagner’s ‘own unique mode of fragmentation’ (84). Consider, for instance, that key figures like Tannhäuser, Tristan, Siegmund, Amfortas, and Kundry ‘all display a radical split that can be neither dialecticized nor healed – and this split is conveyed by (...) a music of heartbreak’, invented by Wagner (91). Or, as Žižek puts it elsewhere, the way that Kundry uniquely unites the devastating seductress and the angelic redemptrix.<sup>6</sup>

As to the second point, critics like Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe accuse Wagner of aestheticizing politics, as already mentioned. Especially with the *Bühnenweihfestspiel* Parsifal, it is claimed that Wagner would aim to impose a mythical configuration upon the masses, ceremonially ‘unifying’ them instead of politicizing aesthetics and opening up a space for real politics. The central question treated by *Parsifal* is therefore, according to Badiou in the fifth ‘lesson’: is a modern ceremony, a collectivity’s or community’s mode of self-representation, possible? (147) Should we not conclude, with the critics, that attempts to establish a new ceremony have always led to totalitarianism – to making the masses visible through myth, rather than allowing them self-representation? And that inversely therefore democracy should be defined as the ‘failure of ceremony’? (157-158). In defence of Wagner, Badiou argues that *Parsifal* is not only the creation of a new ceremony, but also a reflection upon the idea of such a creation; moreover, it is ambiguous what the new ceremony is: is it ceremony acted out in *Parsifal*, or the one acted out in the Bayreuth festival? He feels that Wagner did not so much attempt to establish a new ceremony, as indicate that the ceremonial question as such – that is, the decision between nostalgia and the creation of something new – necessarily had to be suspended (157). Ceremony, Badiou concludes, cannot replace politics, but neither can politics do without ceremony.

This point is nicely rephrased in Žižek’s Afterword: ‘Instead of dismissing the Grail brotherhood as a homoerotic, elitist, male community, is it not much more productive and urgent to discern in it the contours of a new post-patriarchal revolutionary collective?’ (165). What this Afterword adds to the book is, to remain within musical terms, an unmistakably virtuoso quality – a witty and masterful recapitulation of all the book’s themes, in

which next to all of Wagner’s operatic work a selection of Mozart operas is featured to dazzlingly show that these could figure as a kind of prequel to the musical and discursive preoccupations found in Wagner. One could thus be tempted to feel that the Afterword subtracts from, rather than adds something to the book: a sort of ‘anything you can do, I can do better and funnier’, leaving one wondering whether the Afterword doesn’t make the book itself superfluous. That is, until you realize that this is another case of one of Žižek’s pet philosophical figures, the Lacanian ‘objet petit a’: the Afterword stands for something inside Badiou’s book that is simultaneously more than it – both touching its core, and escaping from it. What better tribute could one get by way of an Afterword?

Indeed Badiou deserves some praise for this book – if not for the content of his arguments, then at least for his courage in biting the bullet and straightforwardly, rather than merely rhetorically, taking up Wagner’s cause against the current of criticism that is typically – or rather stereotypically – directed his way. Like Hegel, we neglect Wagner only at our own peril – a conclusion already drawn in a negative sense by Lacoue-Labarthe, but now reformulated in a positive way by Alain Badiou.

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<sup>1</sup> The lectures were given in French, and published simultaneously in French and in English. The French version is published as *Cinq leçons sur le ‘cas’ Wagner*, Editions Nous, Caen 2010; apparently this edition does not include the afterword by Žižek.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Kitcher, Richard Schacht, *Finding an ending. Reflections on Wagner’s Ring*. Oxford university press 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica ficta: figures de Wagner*. Christian Bourgois, Paris 1991. English translation: *Musica ficta*, Stanford university press 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Jürgen Syberberg, *Parsifal*. Film 1982, DVD-version 1999. Schlingensiefs *Parsifal* ran in Bayreuth from 2004-2007.

<sup>5</sup> The production by Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez ran in Bayreuth from 1976 until 1980. A DVD (2005) is available from the 1980 production.

<sup>6</sup> Žižek, “The everlasting irony of the community”, in: Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera’s second death*. Routledge, New York 2002, 162-163.

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