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Verdi, Wagner, and Politics in Opera. Bicentennial Ruminations

Mitchell Cohen

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Position Papers Series

Verdi, Wagner, and Politics in Opera. Bicentennial Ruminations

Mitchell Cohen

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Abstract

This paper is composed of a series of reflections on some aspects of the relation between politics and opera. It focuses on Verdi and Wagner. This year marks the bicentenary of both composers and Mitchell Cohen, a professor of political science at the City University of New York compares the political ideas in operas (and in other writings) by both composers. Both men are identified with nationalism, but their nationalisms were radically different.

Keywords

Verdi, Wagner, bicentenary, opera, politics, nationalism

Verdi, Wagner, Politique et Opéra. Ruminations bicentennaires

Résumé

Cet article est composé d'une série de réflexions concernant quelques aspects de la relation entre la politique et l'opéra. Il se focalise sur les compositeurs Verdi et Wagner dont on fête le bicentenaire cette année. Mitchell Cohen en tant que professeur de science politique à la CUNY, compare les idées politiques des opéras et d'autres écrits de deux compositeurs. Malgré le fait que les deux s'identifient au nationalisme, leur pensée représente des formes de nationalisme radicalement différentes.

Mots-clés

Verdi, Wagner, bicentenaire, opéra, politique, nationalisme

Talk of Verdi and Wagner abounds in this bicentennial year of the two composers. Compared countless times, these rivals and contemporaries were born within months of each other in 1813 and their prodigious creativity spanned tumultuous decades. Their operas, sources of admiration and argument in their time, are staples of the repertoire world-over. (Wagner disliked “opera” as a characterization of most of his work; I will use it anyway for simplicity’s sake). And disputes carry on, complicated by the mythologies that swathe both men.

Debates raise, almost inevitably, questions about their politics. Wagner participated in a failed revolution in Dresden in 1849 and Verdi served as a senator in unified Italy. Their names are linked often to nationalism, and while that is appropriate enough many caveats are needed. Wagner grew up as a subject of Saxony; Verdi was a French citizen, born in the Duchy of Parma and Piacenza, then annexed to France. Their later years were in, respectively, newly unified Germany and new unified Italy, both latecomers to nation-state formation that later turned fascist. But no serious person would draw a line from Verdi to Mussolini. It is a much more tortuous matter when it comes to Wagner and Hitler. One famous story, believable although its veracity is highly doubtful, has Hitler declaring to a friend that his vocation in life was inspired by a performance of an early Wagner opera that he saw as a young man: “In this hour it all began.” Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes is often interpreted as proto-fascist in various ways and even if the Führer did not utter those words, he was not shy in linking his own spirit to that of the composer. Still, Hitler’s Reich and operas written by Wagner in the previous century are hardly the same things. The issue at stake – the relation between Wagner in his own context and Wagner in his afterlife – is real enough but needs to be approached in circumspect, multidimensional ways. Yet also and always with a certain queasiness: it must be assumed that there is a problem and that it is morally impossible to place yourself in an aesthetic bubble in order to admire the music and avoid the content (or at least some of it) of the operas. After all, the finale of Parsifal, Wagner’s last opera, celebrates a community made pure and whole through blood; all aliens are dead. Staged first in 1882, it can easily be interpreted as an anticipation of bad things to come.

In short, there are appropriate, uncomfortable questions that ought to be posed but there are also unedifying questions that are raised and start quarrels a little too often. It may be asked legitimately if Wagner’s world-view (or world-views since his thinking, despite a certain consistency, mutated in various ways) helped to prepare the 20th century’s catastrophes. Beyond opera, he published a great deal about political subjects and, loquacious man that he was, pronounced loudly on them as well as on his philosophical and artistic bents. People paid him heed as the enormously talented proponent of a totalizing project. He wanted it so. And sycophantic circles nurtured by him and devoted to his “ideals” outlived him, contributing rancid and potent cultural flavors to the Third Reich.

Yet obvious and serious issues of historical cause and effect must also arise in any claim that a man who died in 1883 was “responsible” for events a century later. Moreover, arguments about the extent to which Wagner’s most noxious views are embedded in his artistic works, a hotly (but not always frankly) contested matter must also be taken into account. I think those views are in fact there and this is what makes Wagner and his works so challenging. Absent his musical and dramatic genius, he would be remembered mostly as a fulsome 19th century crank who had some interesting aesthetic notions but expatiated fervently on many more dodgy or dangerous ideas across more than one domain.

Verdi and Wagner’s politics – and, indeed, their respective nationalisms --were different in kind. Verdi was a liberal and a romantic. Unlike Wagner, he did not opine in public in essays and pamphlets; his political sensibilities appear in his operas and some letters. They suggest that his liberalism became increasingly complex as his populist inclinations became more muted over decades -- an expression, perhaps, of his growing admiration for Cavour. The confrontation between idealism and realism in his Don Carlos (1867), based on Schiller’s play, is perhaps the most formidable illustration. The opera’s idealists (the Infante Don Carlos and his friend the Duke of Posa) prove inept politically and are overwhelmed by the harsh but lonely realist (Spain’s King Philip II) – who is victorious but miserable.

Wagner's totalizing approach to the world, expressed perhaps most famously in his aspiration to create "the total art-work," was complicated by the jumble and re-jumble of views he held at different moments of his life. Here is a partial list of his political muses: nationalism, republicanism, anarchism, humanism, federalism, total community, racism, fierce anti-Semitism, loathing for the French, hostility to commerce. He was often more excited than coherent when he spoke about these things. Placed in context, it is possible to appreciate at least some of his views while being repelled by others. The problem is that they often blur into one another, both in his writings and in his operas. It is easy to sympathize with his antagonism towards the often-damaging role of commerce in art or with his the hope that a democratic republic might supplant scattered German principalities run by hereditary, authoritarian princes and insufferable nobles. Figures more attractive than Wagner shared such views; and there were many anarchists and humanists who did not share his venom towards the French or the Jews or some of his other crazed enthusiasms. (I leave aside more theoretical matters: anarchy doesn't rest easily with a republic; humanism ill-suits prejudice).

Any student of political thought will be struck by the predicament of Wotan in The Ring of the Nibelung. The very laws he needs in order to rule trap this one-eyed king of the Gods. Or consider another question raised by Wotan's quandaries: must personal intimacy – love -- be sacrificed to wield power? Philip II, in Don Carlos and Wotan have binds in common, even if their fates differ. Philip loses love and his son and is left with an unhappy but unchallengeable exercise of power, bolstered by ideology (in the form of the Church); he deems all this to be painful necessity. Wotan, having lost his son and two daughters, negates his own will and his world – indeed, the whole world – goes up in flames, again out of necessity. Verdi was a man of determined anti-clerical spirit. Wagner's character had the relentless force of an apocalyptic prophet. Prophet of what? He boasted in a diary: "I am the German Spirit." Yet he also insisted that he was in quest of "the purely-human." The problem: "purely human" and German were often indistinguishable for him, this easily suggests that that the non-German ought to be regarded as not truly human.

It is claimed often that Wagner's politics and philosophy changed radically in the aftermath of the 1849 upheaval, that he left behind the Feuerbachian humanism that had once inspired him and in its stead embraced Schopenhauerian pessimism. (He remained a revolutionary in music, indeed became increasingly more of one). There is truth, but only partial truth in this claim. He was enamored of nationalistic myth before and after 1849; there is also persistence in his strained political voice throughout his life. As George Orwell once said (in a different context), records may change but the record player can remain the same.

There is something particularly suggestive in contrasting the starting and end points of Verdi and Wagner's careers. Verdi's first success, Nabucco, staged in 1842 in Milan, still overwhelms audiences with "Va pensiero," its famous chorus of Hebrew slaves in Babylonian captivity: "Fly, thought, on golden wings/ go and settle upon the slopes and the hills/ where, soft and mild, the sweet airs /of our native land smell fragrant;/ Greet the banks of the Jordan/ and Zion's toppled towers; Oh, my homeland, so beautiful and lost." Set in a time and at a place far from 19th century Italy, this riff on a biblical verse by librettist Temistocle Solera combined with Verdi's musical imagination to create a Risorgimento anthem.

Its ache for ancient Jerusalem was really a surrogate longing for a new Rome. At the same time it expressed universalist aspirations; "Va pensiero" can still resonate as the song of any oppressed people. It can also engage lesser (if important enough) concerns. In Rome in 2011, on the 150th anniversary of Italian unification, Riccardo Muti stopped a performance of Nabucco after "Va pensiero," denounced Silvio Berlusconi's cultural policies and invited the audience – most of whom, it seems, knew the words -- to join the chorus in an encore. The impact in the theater was overwhelming, at least by evidence of the extended clip that can be seen on Youtube.

If, at a key moment, popular yearning focuses – is given a voice -- in Nabucco, Verdi's last opera, Falstaff (1893), displays humanity in other, different ways. The opera is funny, bubbly and without political claims. Its music is often ranked as his most sophisticated and its birth came after Verdi's last

and best librettist, Arrigo Boito, made an appeal to the aged Maestro. Your most important artistic triumphs have taken the form of tragedies, Boito pointed out. Leave us laughing, he proposed. And so yearning (among other qualities) takes very different shape in the Verdi-Boito version of Shakespeare's portly, aging knight who makes a fool of himself in pursuits of well-heeled matrons. At the end Falstaff will join everyone in laughing at himself and at the foibles of the human race. Seen (and heard!) as a whole, Verdi's life's work has a humanist depth lacking in Wagner. Also a more human compassion. Human beings are, after all, not pure and so there is no "purely-human." Certainly, it is better to laugh at and with Falstaff than to aspire to an ideal Siegfried.

Wagner's first success, *Rienzi*, staged in Dresden in 1842 and based on a recent English novel, was about an attempt to unify a homeland -- Italy, although in the 14th century. If Verdi's protagonist in *Nabucco* becomes, finally, the People-in-Chorus, *Rienzi*'s protagonist is a populist *Duce* who fails. He begins with wholesome intentions and a belief in law; by the end he is overwhelmed by a series of foes: himself (or rather his own increasing power and acclaim), his aristocratic enemies, a calculating church and, most important, the very *Volk* he tries to inspire -- but which turns on him. *Rienzi* goes up in flames in the finale. (Wagner had a fondness for purifying incinerations). The closing image in Wagner's last work, *Parsifal*, is of a rejuvenated and totalized collectivity. The Knights of the Grail, bonded in and rejuvenated by blood after years of decay, are finally at home thanks to *Parsifal*. This redeemer is a "fool made wise by compassion"; and he has triumphed over the evil, self-castrated magician Klingsor. Lying lifeless before the Grail is Kundry, the single individualized female presence in the work -- a conflicted temptress who has been Klingsor's instrument against the chaste knights and who is called a "female wandering Jewess" in Wagner's diaries.

The music that permeates with this corrupt salvation has almost incomparable, ethereal beauties. In many ways, they are the culmination of the composer's gifts and his desire, as he once put it, to emotionalize the intellect. A crucial difference between Verdi and Wagner is evident if we consider that Verdi does leave us smiling, albeit with a wrinkle of sadness at a foolish knight,

while Wagner leaves us with sanctimony, albeit sanctimony that is as exquisite as it is malignant. John Falstaff could never have been a knight of Wagner's Grail. His blunderings are all too human and besides, he can laugh at himself. It is impossible to imagine any figure in *Parsifal* discerning humor in the human condition (although Kundry does have an "accursed laugh").

Laughter never seemed to integrate well into Wagner's "purely-human." He complained, Franz Liszt reports, that Nietzsche didn't like his jokes. Two twentieth century musicologists who agreed on little did concur on this point. Carl Dahlhaus spoke of Wagner's "untrustworthy" sense of humor and Theodor Adorno observed that Wagner's attempts to stir laughter usually required injury to someone. Perhaps the classic case is that of Beckmesser, in Wagner's one mature "comedy," *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. When this character sings -- he is the town clerk and the keeper-of-the-rules for the guild of mastersingers -- he makes an excruciating fool of himself. He mangles German words and music. (Some critics argue that this figure was intended to evoke anti-Semitism by satirizing rigid devotion to laws at the expense of love and by making fun of synagogue music through overly florid song). Yet another example of Wagner's "humor" was "A Capitulation." This short, scabby farce, which Wagner fancied was written in the spirit of Aristophanes and did not set to music, ridiculed suffering Parisians during the Franco-Prussian war. It was, he thought, vengeance for having to endure three years of painful failure in Paris -- three decades earlier.

Contemporary interpretations of operas by Verdi and Wagner frequently place their actions in locales and times remote from their creators' initial conceptions. These succeed occasionally but often -- very often -- they do not. Sometimes they are throttled by directorial hubris, sometimes they drown due to weighty historical burdens (Wagner's case) and sometimes they are simply ruined by the desire of opera houses to attract audiences by means of cheap notions of 'relevance' or overblown visual displays. (They could, by contrast, try to attract them by the quality of an opera). Spectacle is intrinsic to opera but it can be too spectacular. And here a well-worn question arises: to what extent should a stage work be remade for either artistic or political purposes? (I

leave aside commercial reasons). A recent controversy in New York having nothing to do with Verdi or Wagner can serve as an illustration.

In 2011, a Broadway-bound production of Porgy and Bess was altered from the original in a variety of ways, including its ending. Rebukes thundered and not only from critics. Stephen Sondheim sent an irate letter to The New York Times protesting the hubris of those responsible. The audience, he suggested, ought to be warned ahead of time that it was not seeing the “real” thing. Was a sin against a masterpiece in the making? A violation of creative writ or rather of a libretto and a score?¹

Not so long before, Daniel Barenboim declared in similar spirit in a lecture that it was not just inappropriate aesthetically but unethical to perform a work except as imagined by its originator (or as close as an artist can get to the originator’s conception). But something is not quite right about this contention. If an able musician strives to reach deeply into Beethoven’s or any great imagination, the yield may indeed be a remarkable performance. Perhaps it is what makes Barenboim so great a musician, both as a conductor (of Wagner in particular) and as a performer (of Beethoven among others). Yet his remark slides too easily, even thoughtlessly, between aesthetics and ethics. After all, interpreting, reinterpreting, or misinterpreting an opera or any musical composition is not of the same province as, say, murder. It is possible to speak metaphorically of a sonata butchered or mugged by a bad pianist but unless you dwell entirely in an artistic bubble, aching ears aren’t quite equivalent to a prone corpse. (Besides, a composer may reinterpret his or her own work and so intention can be a tricky category).

Perhaps it would be better to speak of engagements both with both a composer’s musical imagination and with various readings of it. In any event, all performances are interpretations in one way or another and while you can delve in profound ways into the internal structure of Beethoven’s music you cannot email him to check if you got it right (although it may be obvious to a listener if you got it wrong). When it comes to opera, where words as well as music are involved, many other matters are joined, not least when addressing Verdi and Wagner. Verdi composed to librettos written by others (although his hand helped to

re-craft them). Wagner wrote his own “poems,” as he styled them. Both had forceful opinions about how to stage their works, although a desire for successful theater – that is the point, after all -- gave them some flexibility often absent in many of their devotees and an intelligence frequently lacking in those who are, by contrast, too plastic. In fact, productions – librettos, scores, staging -- have been subject to fiddling and alteration since opera’s beginnings at the turn of the 17th century. Scholars still debate whether or not Monteverdi composed the stunning love duet between crazed emperor Nero and his new empress at the end of the first great political opera, The Coronation of Poppea (1642). Or was it composed by someone else for a revival some years later?

Political rationales for alternative staging of operas have been many, and they range far, from circumventing censorship to a desire to make a contemporary comment. (Restaging can also have plural motives at once.) Verdi’s A Masked Ball provides perhaps the most famous case of changes compelled by censors. Based on an earlier French work, it portrayed the assassination of an 18th century Swedish king in his own opera house. The violent demise of a European royal on stage was unacceptable to the powers-that-were and when, after legal tussles, the first night took place in Rome (instead of Naples, whose opera house had commissioned it) the unfortunate target became the governor of colonial Boston. Presumably, viewers in Rome in 1859 made some associations that had little to do with New England. Distance of place or time allows many possibilities.

Wagner never altered the locale of his finished works. In some of his operas the locale is essential to his concept. He did, however, draw from sources of varied origin and he sometimes melded surroundings. Although set by the Rhine, you will find more of early Norse mythology than of the 13th century German epic, the Song of the Nibelungs, in Wagner’s Ring; and you will find that Wagner’s distinctly mid-19th century preoccupations (which he took to be timeless) permeate The Ring’s four components, and make them into a whole in important ways.

Yet again, that simple, uncomfortable reality always intrudes: productions of Verdi’s works don’t have to cope with the same legacies – rightly

1. I imply no judgment of the production since I did not see it.

or wrongly conceived -- as do productions of Wagner. One response to the Wagner problem was fashioned by his grandson Wieland. After World War II, he sought to use timelessness – or supposed timelessness – and placelessness to save his grandfather’s works from Hitler’s celebration of them and from the role of the Wagner family and the Bayreuth festival, founded by the composer for his own works, in the Third Reich. Minimalism -- abstract shape, color, light and Greek-like robes – replaced misty mountains and Teutonic paraphernalia in most of his productions. The artistic success of this radical departure was equaled perhaps only by the 1976 centennial production in Bayreuth of The Ring by Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez. Its spirit was, however, very different from Wieland’s: the tetralogy became an anarchist’s parable, taking cues from Wagner’s youthful politics. It did so without changing the score or “poem” but by providing an evocative and provocative range of stage images that spanned from industrializing capitalism to romanticism. So a hydroelectric dam driven by gold replaced gold shining in German Nature’s Rhine; and so the rocky heights on which Wagner set the famous “Ride of Walkyries” looked much like a Caspar David Friedrich painting. This Ring was booed at first. Winifred Wagner, the composer’s notoriously pro-Nazi daughter-in-law merged personal aesthetics with personal politics when she declared her desire to shoot Chéreau. The production is now considered, quite rightly, a compelling achievement of expansive imagination.

Consider, by contrast, the Paris Opéra’s current, bicentennial Ring. The “Ride of the Walkyries” takes place in a morgue. The half-goddess-warrior-maidens, all in white-uniforms, whoop their famous “Hojotoho!, Hojotoho!” while they wipe down a parade of naked, blood-covered men passing before them. These soldiers, killed in battle, are bound for Valhalla and we are to conclude, I suppose, that war and warrior ethics are pretty bad since men bleed and die before they become as heroes. This insight is not quite novel, even if the heavy-handed setting and staging are. Perhaps the director, Günter Krämer, was thinking of Theodor Adorno’s proposition that the way to save Wagner is to violate him in production. Yet when an anti-war statement induces giggles and chortles, as this staging does inevitably, then moral indictment dissolves in entertainment (or so it seemed to me). Directors, especially German

directors, seem to struggle compulsively with 20th century history through Wagner operas. It is a legitimate effort – and there is certainly nothing wrong with showing contempt for or mocking martial bluster -- provided the resulting stage concept doesn’t seem late night comedy for TV.

That last point ought to be a platitude.

Setting-at-a-distance of Verdi and Wagner has another potentially important significance; it is a particular dimension of nationalist minds. Benedict Anderson, in his influential study Imagined Communities, argues that while nations as political entities and sources of identity were objectively modern phenomena, products of converging processes in roughly the 15th through the 18th centuries, nationalists usually regard them (certainly their own) as ancient. After all, the majority of European populations in the 13th century were illiterate serfs who spoke patois and had no “national” identification with – or much knowledge of the existence of -- counterparts 100 kilometers away. The “Risorgimento” (resurgence) often implied the rebirth of an ancient Italian nation-state that had never existed. Verdi, to be fair, was not preoccupied by historical methodology or by making overarching philosophical statements about the history of nations. He accepted the Risorgimento myth, although his operas usually were not directly about ancient Roman forbearers (Atilla of 1846 is an exception). A few are set in different Italian locales in the late Middle Ages, across territories that would one day make up Italy. The Hebrew slaves singing “Va pensiero” are not ancestors of the Italians; they are Verdi and Solera’s stands-in for their own contemporaries.

Wagner set several operas in places he associated with Germany writ large: the Wartburg Castle, the Rhine, Nuremberg. Believing that myth not history yields truth, he proceeded to mythologize each of them. And he imagined a temporal continuity flowed within his Volk through centuries and places. Yet while he imagined himself to be its culminating Geist, choruses rarely give voice to “the People” in his mature operas. A major exception, one in which nationalism is most evident, has a “real” historical setting: The Mastersingers. Wagner believed, however, that his Volk long predated 16th century Nuremberg; the Reformation and its consequences were, for him, essential chapters in its development. He was concerned

that this Volk achieve proper self-consciousness, finally like him and Parsifal in Bayreuth.

The two bicentennials are already giving rise to reconsiderations (and many new productions) together with reflections about the relations among politics, history and opera or, more broadly, culture. My fragmentary considerations here raise certain kinds of questions and they are hardly exhaustive since they address one dimension of the two composers. Musicologists, naturally, would offer other emphases, although in recent decades “new musicologists” have looked to political, sociological and historical contexts and dynamics in addition to more strictly formal musical ones as explanatory tools. A host of methodological, aesthetic and political arguments are inevitable consequences when the subject is opera --- itself, a mixed genre.

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