

Richard Wagner on the Practice and Teaching of Singing

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Weber and Beethoven were still alive when Wagner was a teenager, and their long shadows, together with those of Mozart and Marschner fell on all his early projects. His first completed opera *Die Feen*, composed in 1833 when he was just twenty years old, was never performed in his lifetime but, even if it had been, it wouldn't have sounded as good as it does in the best recorded versions we know today. The type of singing familiar to Wagner was far from ideal, and many German singers of his era were poorly trained and had unsophisticated techniques. His sternest critic, Eduard Hanslick had something to say on the difference between German and Italian singers at that time: 'With the Italians' he said, 'great certainty and evenness throughout the role; with the Germans an unequal alternation of brilliant and mediocre moments, which seems partly accidental.' Wagner had to entrust his major roles to inadequately trained singers in many cases, which must have been challenging to say the least. He worked hard to improve matters, pouring much time and energy into the preparation of performances. 'I do not care in the slightest' he once said, 'whether my works are performed. What I do care about is that they are performed as I intended them to be. Anyone who cannot, or will not, do so, had better leave them alone.'

David Breckbill has written that 'The differences between the singing which Wagner knew and that which we hear today are considerable. In his day, the best singing was far from straight-toned ... but the continuous vibrato which has long been an element in present-day operatic singing [designed to project and colour the voice] was entirely foreign to him.' Wagner died in 1883, long before the invention of sound recording, but three of his chosen singers made recordings when the technology was in its infancy. One was Hermann Winkelmann who created the role of Parsifal in 1882. His voice was recorded in 1905, as was the voice of Marianne Brandt who was Waltraute in the 1876 *Götterdämmerung* and Kundry in the 1882 *Parsifal*. The third, and vocally most assured, even in later life, was Lilli Lehmann who also became a famous teacher. Her book of 1902, published in English as 'How to Sing', is still available in print and online, and her account elsewhere of the 1876 *Ring* rehearsals gives us a glimpse of Wagner's skill and energy as a stage director. He selected her for the roles of the Rhine Daughter Woglinde, the Valkyrie Helmwig and the Voice of a Woodbird in the first complete *Ring*. During her long career she sang 170 roles including Isolde and Brünnhilde, and was equally at home with Mozart and Bellini. One of her surviving recordings was made in 1907 when she was 59. Obviously, her voice is more mature than it had been in Wagner's time, but her performance of 'Du bist der Lenz' from Act I of *Die Walküre* is a fascinating record, especially since it is more than a century old.

The transition to a warmer, more emotive sound since Lilli Lehmann's time may have been influenced by Italian operatic practice, especially after radio and phonographic recordings brought the ringing tones of Italian singers into homes throughout the world. Sir Roger Norrington, champion of the so-called historically informed approach to performance, asserts that the fashion for vibrato arrived with Hollywood, aerodynamic car design, radio, ocean liners and the early days of flight. I wonder though, if was also perhaps a continuation of the allure of all things Italian in opera, exemplified by an historic preference for Italian libretti

and even Italian stage names. Ludwig Leichner for instance, who sang the role of Hans Sachs to Wagner's satisfaction, was better known to his audiences as Raphael Carlo. Opera companies from London to Rio de Janeiro, including the court opera in Dresden where Wagner spent part of his youth, were designated Italian opera companies and, in the second half of the 19th century, Wagner's works were customarily sung in Italian in non-German speaking countries. In *Mein Leben*, Wagner records a discussion on the subject that he had with Queen Victoria and Prince Albert during his visit to London in 1855. When *Lohengrin* was first performed in Australia in 1877 it was sung in Italian, prompting Wagner to urge the singing of his works in English - in English-speaking countries. Would he have approved of a continuous vibrato in the modern style? Adherents of the historically informed approach say no, because the written evidence is that he treated vibrato as a special effect, restricting its use in his scores to specific functions. They also insist that continuous vibrato constrains dramatic flexibility and impedes a vivacious delivery of the text – both issues of considerable importance to Wagner. It would have been unfamiliar to him but my sense is that, as with everything else to do with performance, he would say that dramatic need, not inflexible rules, should dictate musical expression.

'Dramatic need' – now there is something that Wagner came to appreciate in one particular woman whom he first saw in his youth. In *Mein Leben* he recounts the story of the formative theatrical impression made by the dramatic soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient. His recollection was that she had been performing the role of Leonora in *Fidelio* in 1829 and a few years later he saw her again in Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*. It was not her voice as such that impressed the young Wagner but her ability to take on the whole dramatic persona of her character through a combination of music, clear delivery of text and acting. His ecstatic reaction has no parallel in his writings: 'When I look back across my entire life' he said, 'I find no event to place beside this in the impression it produced upon me'. Later he was to have some misgivings about the actual lyrical capacity of her voice, but he dismissed these in favour of the larger significance of her theatrical personality. In his 1872 essay '*On Actors and Singers*' he admitted: 'No! She had no 'voice' at all; and yet she knew how to work her breath so beautifully and to project with such a truly feminine soul that one ceased to think any more about singing or voices at all! ... 'My entire understanding of the actor's mimetic art I owe to this great woman, a lesson that allows me to view truthfulness as the essential foundation of that art.' He noted the extraordinary effect created by her innovation of speaking rather than singing the final word in her threat to Pizarro: 'Just one sound and you are *dead!*' The terrific effect of that gesture, said Wagner, was the sudden and shocking return from the ideal world of music to 'the naked surface of dreadful reality'.

Clearly, the encounter with Schröder-Devrient set the benchmark for his ideal singing actor, or is that acting singer? She had performed Leonora in front of Beethoven himself in 1822 when she was just 18. It is reported that Beethoven was not at all happy about his exalted heroine being entrusted to 'such a child'. But her father Friedrich Schröder was an accomplished operatic baritone, and her mother Sophie was one of the most celebrated German actresses of her day, famous especially for her depiction of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. She coached her daughter, and so the young Wilhelmine was trained in that combination of singing and acting that appealed so much to Wagner and, as it turned out, to Beethoven. The latter had attempted to conduct the dress rehearsal but since he was almost completely deaf at that time, it descended into chaos. Persuaded to watch the performance from the front row of the audience, he was transfixed by Wilhelmine's characterisation and, afterwards acknowledged that he had found his Leonora. In 1823 she was conducted by Carl Maria von Weber, and subsequently she created the roles of Adriano in *Rienzi*, Senta in *The*

Flying Dutchman and Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser* for Wagner. To have been conducted by Beethoven, Weber and Wagner – who can imagine such a thing?

Not everyone shared Wagner's rhapsodic reaction to Schröder-Devrient's performances. Those who were not impressed were invariably opposed to sacrificing the traditional emphasis on beautiful singing, and they were usually out of sympathy with Wagner's priorities generally. The English music critic Henry Chorley criticised Schröder-Devrient for her tendency to 'attitudinize', as he put it, and for being one among hundreds 'who have suffered from the ignorance and folly of German connoisseurship ... which made it penal to sing with grace, taste, and vocal self-command because such were the characteristics of the Italian method'. He also went on to describe the music of *The Flying Dutchman* as extravagant and crude, and *Tannhäuser* as a work of pretension that left him blanked, pained, wearied and insulted. Clearly people like that were never going to see eye-to-eye with Richard Wagner, and there were plenty of them. There still are.

It is interesting to compare Wagner's views on the connection between acting and singing with Verdi's remarks on a proposal to engage the soprano Eugenia Tadolini for the role of Lady Macbeth in Naples in 1848. Verdi was quite clear that for this role he wanted dramatic authenticity rather than beauty of delivery. 'Madame Tadolini has a wonderful voice, clear, flexible and strong, while Lady Macbeth's should be hard, stifled and dark. Madame Tadolini has the voice of an angel, and Lady Macbeth's should be that of a devil.... The most important numbers in the opera are the duet between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and the Sleepwalking scene.... And these two numbers definitely must not be sung. They must be acted and declaimed, with hollow, masked voices.'

Amongst those who have questioned Verdi's motives was Birgit Nilsson, a radiant Lady Macbeth, who claimed that Verdi was having an affair with another singer at the time and so wanted to present Tadolini in a poor light. 'What lovely-voiced singer with any self-respect' said La Nilsson, 'would take on a role in which her voice should sound as hard and hoarse as a devil's?' With all due respect, I suggest that what motivated Verdi was not the desire for wilful distortion of the voice, which would be just as arbitrary as the most mellifluous rendering regardless of context, but truth of characterisation; and in pursuing this goal he was close to Wagner's aesthetic values.

Because of the Schröder-Devrient experience, we can understand why Wagner went to such lengths to achieve convincing acting and to avoid a situation where singing became detached from the other aspects of stage craft. He really was after a total work of art. This isn't to say that he didn't value beautiful singing – singing that cultivated a beautiful tone – he did, greatly; along with a firm vocal line and precision in musical detail. It's just that such singing was not an end in itself for him. He wanted flexibility and conviction of utterance that simulated heightened speech. 'In my operas' said Wagner, 'there is no difference between phrases that are 'declaimed' and 'sung,' but my declamation is at the same time song, and my song declamation.' In his vocal style, the melodic accent always falls on the proper accent of each word, and this certainly helps with clear enunciation. He emphasizes important syllables by dwelling on them, and when *Tannhäuser* was first staged in Dresden, he actually had the words of the text copied into the parts of all the orchestral players, so that they could follow the phrasing of the singer. It would be a mistake to assume that Wagner cared more for the orchestra than he did for the voice, which is one accusation often levelled at him. On the contrary, he once remarked that 'the human voice is the oldest, the most genuine, and the most beautiful organ of music - the organ to which alone our music owes its existence.' In

describing the relationship between singer and orchestra in *Tristan*, which is the most musically driven of all his works, he begged the reader to observe how, in the third act, the gigantic orchestra seems to disappear, or, more correctly speaking, becomes a constituent part of what Tristan is singing.

The orchestra as ‘a constituent part of the song’ sums up Wagner’s intentions very well. Consider an especially beautiful example of how this merging of orchestra and voice works to create the impression of a single sensory experience. The second act of *Tristan* is an apostrophe to the night and to that ‘unity of being’ which lies beyond the world of illusion, yearning and suffering – the harsh world of ‘day’. Almost everything in *Tristan und Isolde* is viewed from the perspective of the two lovers, including the warning call of Isolde’s maid Brangäne - more lullaby than alarm as it floats through the night. We hear it, so to speak, through the ears of a man and a woman for whom no world exists beyond themselves. The total effect is ravishing.

There were at least five occasions on which Wagner set out to improve standards of performance through formal education and training. The first occurred when he was a young man in Dresden in the 1840s, occupying the position of second Kapellmeister at the Saxon court. He proposed some entirely reasonable reforms to the conditions and payment of the Royal orchestra but ran up against the insecurities of his superiors and the resentment of others. He then submitted a ‘*Plan for a National German Theatre for the Kingdom of Saxony*’ in which he advocated the removal of the theatre from the control of the court, the creation of a democratic association of dramatists and composers which should elect the director and determine artistic policy, and the foundation of a theatre workshop to train young artists, producers and technicians. Again, nothing was done and this report was left to gather dust. The whole experience was an early and depressing brush with bureaucracy, and fed the fires of his revolutionary inclinations.

His next attempt at major reform came in Zürich where he had fled after the failure of the 1849 Dresden uprisings. He wrote a paper entitled ‘*A Theatre in Zürich*’, calling on the town fathers to reshape their theatre from top to bottom. He insisted they should hire singers who were also trained actors; train them on a year-round basis; actively recruit German poets and composers to develop works; limit performances to no more than three per week (so that singers would not be burned out by exploitation); and found a Commission of Theatrical Affairs to govern the institution. As always he conceived his plans in the context of a reformed world of opera. In Zürich, he drew parallels between what he wanted the theatre to become and folk-like activities such as village festivals and the singing societies in German towns. This was too novel for the staid burghers and, again, nothing came of it, but the seeds of *Die Meistersinger* were being sown in his mind even at that early date.

He wasn’t discouraged, and the next opportunity to do something came in March 1865, when he was living in Munich under the patronage of the young King Ludwig II. The king commissioned him to prepare a report ‘*On the Foundation of a German Conservatoire in Munich*’. Once again Wagner called for a school in which singers would be better trained in the theory and practice of music than was usual at the time. He urged the development of performance and production practices for an individually German art. But exclusivity was never part of his plan. After all, he had had considerable experience of conducting the operatic and symphonic works of other composers. Between the ages of 20 and 23 he had conducted or prepared no fewer than seventy-seven operas by most of the major operatic composers of the 18th and early 19th centuries – German, French and Italian. Like Hans

Sachs he was aware that tradition and inspiration are not mutually exclusive but mutually enriching.

Incidentally, the term that has come to be applied to Wagner's mature operatic style – '*Musikdrama*' – was not coined by him, or even officially sanctioned by him. He used a variety of descriptions: 'drama', 'stage festival play' and so on, but deliberately avoided a single generic classification. In his essay of 1872 entitled '*On the Designation Musikdrama*' he acknowledged that others were using this term but he was unwilling to adopt it. He did though distinguish his works from debased traditional forms of 'opera'. If you think 'debased' is too strong a word, then remember what the operatic world had been like in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The 'stars' in the whole system were the singers, and they could make or break a production. It was the heyday of the volatile *prima donna*, and none was more volatile or more *prima donna* than Caterina Gabrielli. One contemporary writer described her as 'the greatest singer in the world... certainly the most dangerous siren of modern times, having made more conquests than any woman breathing.' She had a power that modern leading ladies can only dream of. If she were in a bad temper, which was often, she'd only hum her arias. It was commonplace for singers at that time to bribe the press and pay for *claqueurs*, and by 1830 in Paris an agency had been established to provide any number of *claqueurs* ordered by theatre managements or individual singers. Wagner fell foul of them in 1861.

By the time of *Lohengrin* in 1850 and, certainly, by *Tristan* in 1865, the centre of gravity had begun to shift. Gone were the days when even composers were at the mercy of headstrong singers, who would count the bars of music allocated to various roles and either demand extra ones to outdo their rivals or just insert additional music themselves. Rossini once complained that while he didn't mind some changes, 'to leave not a note of what I composed – even in the recitatives – well, that's unendurable'.

In respect of Wagner's proposals for a school in Munich, he argued the need for a new type of poetic text that took account of the particular attributes and constraints of the German language – so different from the Italian. From such a text, he said, would emerge a dramatic, declamatory vocal line, often un-lyrical and un-vocal to the point where the human voice was treated almost as an instrument of the orchestra. The committee charged with giving effect to Wagner's report met once or twice, scratched its collective head and decided that his proposals were too expensive. So that was that. They might also have had trouble dealing with his daunting prose style, and one wonders whether the lengthy report was actually read to its conclusion.

Tristan und Isolde was performed in Munich in June of 1865, having been completed six years earlier and already declared un-performable in Vienna after seventy-seven rehearsals. Wagner came to regard his first exponent of the role of Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, as a model interpreter of his works, and was hugely impressed by his intelligence, artistry and musicianship – notwithstanding his corpulence. Schnorr, who was just 29, had been borrowed from the Dresden court theatre. His wife Malvina (who was eleven years his senior and from a Brazilian family) had come too to perform the role of Isolde. Towards the end of the first series of performances, Schnorr felt unwell. There was a fourth performance of *Tristan* on 1 July, and then he participated in a staging of *The Flying Dutchman* and in a royal concert at which he sang excerpts from *Siegfried*, *Die Walküre*, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Meistersinger*, none of which had been staged at that point. He and Malvina returned to Dresden where he attended a rehearsal of *Don Giovanni*. The next day he fell seriously ill,

and on 21 July he died. Rumours spread that he had died from the exertions of the role. Talk of a '*Tristan* curse' resonated with the gullible because of the length and strangeness of the work and Tristan's harrowing delirium and death on stage. It was a case of life imitating art. It seems most likely though that the overweight tenor had died from rheumatic complications which caused a stroke. Schnorr's death at 29 was a calamity that Wagner lamented for the rest of his life. He was, in the composer's view '*the*' singer, and we can add his name to that of Schröder-Devrient as having had a profound effect on Wagner's concept of how his roles should be performed. In this case it was the tenor's musicianship and intelligence rather than his physical gestures that delivered a convincing portrayal of the role. Clearly there was more than one way to give a totally convincing performance. It is fair to say that Wagner learnt as much from his singers as they learnt from him.

When in 1872 Wagner laid the foundation stone of his festival theatre - not in Munich as the king had wished but in the provincial town of Bayreuth - he also began work on a long essay entitled '*On Actors and Singers*'. In this he elaborated his ideas on the fundamental importance of gesture, mime and improvisation, and he lamented the disappearance from the modern theatre of a true improvisatory art which, in his view, only survived in elements of popular culture. The salvation of dramatic art, he concluded, lay in the selfless collaboration of the dramatist and the singer or actor.

The improvisatory quality of Wagner's staging comes out very clearly in the detailed records made of rehearsals for the first *Ring* in 1876. It was noted that all the things Wagner did at the rehearsals created the impression of having been improvised. He kept changing his mind from day to day, altering not only blocking, stage movement and gestures, but also the musical tempi. Needless to say, this drove the singers mad but he was giving effect to his own maxim about improvisation. He sought to liberate the singer and never to impose his own personal characterisations. He believed that every artist of stature brought something inimitable to a role, and he only stepped in when he came upon a lack of understanding or superficiality. His only demand was that the singers abandon their personal identities to the role.

In respect of the technicalities of singing, Wagner coached his performers in declamation, intonation, phrasing and dynamics, and urged the greatest clarity in presenting a character's emotions. His famous last instruction to his cast before the first *Ring* performance was: 'Clarity! The big notes will take care of themselves; the small notes and the text are the main things.' Audibility of words was a recurring problem, and Wagner's view was that the orchestra should support the singer as the sea supports a boat - rocking but never upsetting or swamping. It was a point he made over and over again, and one that today's conductors and composers would do well to heed. Despite the huge size of the *Ring* orchestra, in the main it supports and punctuates rather than overwhelms the vocal line. In *Parsifal* Wagner achieved near perfection in combining maximum orchestral expressiveness with vocal clarity.

In 1877, a year after the first Bayreuth festival, Wagner began looking again at the prospect of establishing a school for the training of singers and actors and the development of other theatrical skills. He contributed an article to the local newspaper, *Bayreuth Leaves* that had been set up to support the festival. This article, entitled '*Proposed Bayreuth School*' was a thoroughly practical statement of arrangements, outlining courses of study for the years 1878 to 1883. He intended to supervise personally the activities of the school, which would be open to male and female graduates of existing music schools, or singers and musicians who had reached an equivalent level. Students would have to commit to remaining in Bayreuth

each year from 1 January to 30 September, and the academic year would be divided into three terms. During the first year, 1878, the dramatic works of German composers other than Wagner would be studied under the guidance of a special singing-master. Given the pre-determined level of vocal expertise, the focus of the course would be on interpretative and performing skills. Piano studies would also be undertaken by experienced pianists, which would lead to the conducting of orchestral performances. It was hoped that sufficient instrumental musicians would be available during the final three months to form an orchestra or, failing this, that musicians on holidays from the court orchestra would be able to fill any gaps. During the second quarter, attention would be paid to string-quartet playing. How interesting that Wagner felt that the four 'voices' of a string quartet had something to teach human singers about expressive relationships! Throughout the year there would be lectures focusing on cultural, historical and aesthetic matters towards an appreciation of German performing styles.

In the second year, 1879, a similar course would be followed, but now the focus in the last term would be on Wagner's own dramatic works, particularly his earlier operas. The third year, 1880, would culminate in complete stage performances of the earlier works - if possible *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. *Tristan und Isolde* and *The Mastersingers* would follow in the fifth year, 1881; *The Ring of the Nibelung* in 1882, and the first performance of *Parsifal* in 1883. He recognized that not all those who enrolled for the first year would still be involved in the sixth, but he hoped that a sufficient number would continue from year to year to form a nucleus of experienced students who might be able to assist with teaching and serve as models for later intakes.

A feature of this scheme that strikes me as particularly interesting is that Wagner intended to train students in the performance of his works and employ them in the festival theatre, including for a second performance of the *Ring* in 1882 (six years after the first) and the premiere of *Parsifal* planned for 1883. He was determined, it seems, to prepare up-and-coming singers, répétiteurs and conductors in a music school environment rather than rely on the ad hoc engagement of outsiders in the traditional way. It was an audacious plan that crystallised once it was clear to him that another festival could not be mounted in 1877. Now he would create a cadre of especially prepared singers and instrumental musicians. After all, his motivation for the Bayreuth experiment from the outset had been to present ideal performances in ideal surroundings, using singers who truly understood his intentions. This was what would distinguish Bayreuth from other opera houses. While many of his singers for the first festival had been the best available, the reality was that they had come from busy careers in the wider world of opera, were wedded to old habits which were not easily thrown off. He was particularly annoyed by the attention-seeking Franz Betz, his Wotan, who had been peeved that he could not take curtain calls whenever he wished and had, as Wagner noted, hammed up his part in some places, especially at the beginning of the *Valkyrie*. Wagner was inclined not to invite him back and, for his part, Betz declared that he would not come anyway.

To his great regret, Wagner was unable to proceed with his school and create the model productions he desired. The first Bayreuth Festival had left an enormous deficit, which was hardly surprising given that the composer had not only staged the huge four-part *Ring* for the first time but had also built an entire theatre in which to perform it. There was no way he could mount a new festival in 1877, and so he set about giving concerts in the hope of raising funds. When these concerts generated only modest returns, other ideas were floated, including the sale of the entire enterprise to either the Imperial or Bavarian governments, or

relocating the Festival to Munich. These ideas came to nothing and he eventually released the *Ring* for general performances throughout Europe. This would at least generate royalties, but any hope of creating ideal performances seemed gone forever. The financial crisis was finally settled in 1878 with the intervention of the King who arranged for the Munich Court Theatre to pay royalties until the debt was wiped out.

It was during those testing times after the first Festival that Wagner contemplated one of his more extraordinary solutions. He would sell his house and the theatre in Bayreuth and move to America. At various points during his life America loomed as an attractive prospect or was suggested to him by admirers in the United States. He wrote to a supporter in July 1877 that if nothing came of his plans for a financial solution then he would wash his hands of his Festival and go to America and would never return to Germany. A financial solution was found and Wagner was soon fully absorbed in his composition of *Parsifal* which, in July 1882, received its premiere in Bayreuth with great success. His health deteriorated and in February 1883 he died in Venice without having set foot on the North American continent or having brought to fruition his plans for a music school.

In Act 3 of *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, which is itself a giant demonstration of the art of singing, Hans Sachs gives Walther von Stolzing a lesson in how to construct an ideal song and, in the process, Wagner gives *us* a lesson in how songs should be written and sung. The text is perfectly clear; the musical expression mirrors the spirit of the words, the orchestra is part of the song and, as Wagner put it, his declamation is at the same time song and his song declamation. There is also a masterly lesson in how to set conversations to music.

Wagner's efforts were titanic and his achievements remarkable, and hand in hand with those achievements went a passion for educating singers and everyone else concerned with the production of opera. Clearly, for him, one crowded lifetime was far too short.
