

*Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation.* Ed. by Nicholas Vazsonyi. pp. vi + 248. (University of Rochester Press, New York and Woodbridge, 2002, £60, ISBN 1-58046-131-X.)

This collection of essays (it is not a conference proceedings) promises an unusual degree of diversity: at one extreme, a brief but sagacious contribution from Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau called 'Richard Wagner's Cobbler Poet' whose insights include the comment that 'it will have been beneficial if the singer [of the role of Sachs] availed himself of the opportunity to lie down during the intermission before Act III' (p. 55); at the other extreme, from Lydia Goehr a further instalment of the cultural-philosophical analysis of *Die Meistersinger* that she began in the second chapter of *The Quest for Voice: Music, Politics, and the Limits of Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998). In fact the diversity is not as great as might at first appear. Nicholas Vazsonyi is a Germanist, not a musicologist, and in-depth responses to Wagner's musical procedures and compositional strategies are not much in evidence, except, up to a point, in the contributions of the two musicologists involved, Thomas Grey and Eva Rieger. That is not to say that the historians and linguists ignore the music, but their concerns are fundamentally textual and contextual, and most of them are drawn to the topic that the editor's introduction identifies when he writes that a 'satisfactory resolution' of the debate about who and what Beckmesser represents 'seems unlikely, as the disagreement centers not so much on Richard Wagner—who was unquestionably an anti-Semite—but on the way in which a work of art should be read' (p. 10).

The prominence of this topic is the main difference between the present volume and the Cambridge Opera Handbook on *Die Meistersinger* (1994), edited by John Warrack and written by him with contributions from Lucy Beckett, Michael Tanner, and Patrick Carnegy. But the last decade or so has seen considerable critical and scholarly activity in the areas represented by such publications as *Richard Wagner im Dritten Reich* (Munich, 2000), *Richard Wagner und die Juden* (Stuttgart, 2000) and *Deutsche Meister—Böse Geister? Nationale Selbstfindung in der Musik* (Berlin, 2001), as well as by Dieter Borchmeyer's *Richard Wagner: Ahasvers Wandlungen* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 2002). The concluding bibliography assembled by Vazsonyi is commendably complete and informative, though it is regrettable that he did not make more effort to harmonize the many biblio-

graphical references of his authors, especially with respect to English translations of German texts.

Vazsonyi's own introductory survey of the field shows an exemplary alertness to the work's ambiguities: 'when read carefully, *Die Meistersinger* often seems to undermine or at least question the arguments it so boldly and emphatically presents' (p. 5): and he provides an efficient summary of its contents, as well as some basic historical context for the materials to come. The first of the three main sections, headed 'Performing (in) *Die Meistersinger*', includes the essays by Goehr and Fischer-Dieskau already mentioned, alongside an interview with the director Harry Kupfer and a lavishly illustrated piece by the conductor Peter Schneider. Schneider's discussion of thematic materials in terms of a handful of basic interval patterns might seem naive, and finishes almost as soon as it starts, but, in connection with his eminently practical references to matters of texture and tempo, it bears witness to an intimate acquaintance with the details of the score and an enthusiasm for the work undiminished by the travails of rehearsing and conducting actual performances. Kupfer also has an abundance of practical experience, though—to put it mildly—his approach to the opera is several degrees more dogmatic than Schneider's, as in its claims about Eva's 'infinite brazenness' (p. 46). There is little sign of complexity and multivalence here.

The inclusion of Lydia Goehr's chapter in this section reflects her concern with the topic of performance in the work's subject matter, especially with the rehearsal and repetition of songs. Here we are soon confronted with 'one particular philosopher preoccupied with repetition, namely Adorno, because for him, repetition works for or against our musical understanding and for or against our social freedom, and that awareness sustained his life-long critique of Wagner' (p. 58). Goehr's own interpretative comments grow out of her response to Adorno's, but are usually more illuminating, as when she observes of Sachs's final strophes: 'what becomes obvious in this monologue is that there is nothing obvious about the significance of the *Preislied*, and that it is the shattering of this obviousness that is intended to shift our response to the song from being one of blind satisfaction to one of critical reflection on the future of art' (p. 62). Goehr herself shatters the obviousness of the general idea that Wagner wrote *Die Meistersinger* in pursuit of immediate success, 'to receive quick applause', by adding that it represented his desire 'to prepare the

audience to listen to his already composed *Tristan*' (p. 67). Her arguments in support of this idea are too intricate to be usefully engaged without extensive quotation, not least because some very basic assumptions are involved: *Tristan* as 'anticonventional', *Meistersinger* as 'conventional' (p. 68), for example. Yet this is a refreshing as well as thought-provoking interpretation, free of the rather contrived narrowness that characterizes some of the more specifically historical studies that follow.

Lutz Koepnik surveys the important topic of the relation between what the stage showed and what the audience saw at a time of new developments in stagecraft, and in theories of vision. He makes rather heavy weather of what he calls 'the orchestration of sight in *Die Meistersinger*', which 'was bound up with much more comprehensive ruptures in modern visual culture, ruptures that effected the reconfiguration of spatial perception, the institutionalization of a decentered observer, and the concomitant emergence of new realist codes of seeing' (p. 88). Such prose risks decentering the reader, but Koepnik also makes some useful observations, complementing Goehr's, about the ways in which Walther is able to 'win' the contest, and about the highly ambiguous issues concerning 'the refeudalization of bourgeois culture' (p. 95) that are involved in that victory. The favoured cultural-historical topic of 'crowds and power' arises here, and remains central to subsequent chapters which address the opera's appropriation by the Third Reich. David B. Dennis reports that extensive research has failed to reveal any contemporary evidence that 'the opera itself was explicitly used to motivate actions against Jews, or, more broadly, to create a cultural atmosphere that encouraged people to do so' (p. 101). In addition, his investigation 'has uncovered no evidence that Nazi cultural politicians, or their volkish forebears and associates, referred in public discourse to the character of Sixtus Beckmesser as Jewish, or to his fate in *Die Meistersinger* as foreshadowing National Socialist policies against Jews' (p. 103). Dennis does not consider the probability that no National Socialist who gave the matter serious consideration was likely to want to risk implicating a much-loved, intensely nationalistic Masterwork in the obscene specifics of the Final Solution. But he concludes that 'the main political connotations that National Socialist reception drew from the opera had to do with social relations within the volkish *Gemeinschaft*, not treatment of those whom the Nazis considered outsiders' (p. 115), and is more inclined to find 'parallels between Nazi assessments of Sachs

and the *Führer-Prinzip* that underlay both ideology and bureaucracy of the Third Reich' (p. 117) than to regard the characterization of Beckmesser as an incitement to condone the Holocaust.

What he calls 'The Beckmesser Controversy' is also dealt with at length by Hans Rudolf Vaget, whose essay involves a more explicit engagement with the music-based claims of Barry Millington and Marc Weiner (with Adorno, Hartmut Zelinsky, David Levin, and Paul Lawrence Rose all available as back-up). Vaget gives an efficient summary of the disagreements in this area among musicologists and others, and concludes that 'it is simply erroneous to argue, as Weiner and Levin appear to do, that we can and in fact ought to distill from the polyvalent and equivocal language of the music dramas a message as narrow and simplistic as the hatred of Jews' (p. 199). But Vaget is not claiming that no anti-Semitic elements of any kind made their way from Wagner's thinking and literary work into the music dramas: 'like most ambitious creators, Wagner aspired to broad, even universal acceptance, and therefore took pains to keep any overt indication of his very particular anti-Jewish obsession out of his operatic work. By and large he succeeded in this. In two instances, however, with Beckmesser and with Mime in Acts I and II of *Siegfried*, he was unable or unwilling to mask completely the affinity of his portrayals to his publicized views on Jewry' (p. 203).

In summarizing the matter thus, Vaget shares the conclusions of Thomas Grey, whose 'Masters and their Critics: Wagner, Hanslick, Beckmesser, and *Die Meistersinger*' continues the analysis he began in *Wagner's Musical Prose* (Cambridge, 1995) and in 'Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* as National Opera (1868–1945)' (in Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (eds.), *Music and German National Identity* (Chicago and London, 2002); reviewed above, pp. 285–95 at 289). Grey's mastery of nineteenth-century sources is evident throughout this fine essay, and he provides particularly vivid evidence for the perceptiveness and balanced sanity of Hanslick's writings on Wagner down the years. There is plenty of material about Wagner's musical characterization of Beckmesser to indicate what other factors, apart from the anti-Semitic, were involved. Grey also points out that while certain objections to early productions of *Die Meistersinger* can be linked to anti-Wagnerian sentiments prompted by the republication of *Das Judentum in der Musik*, 'in most of these cases there is no evidence that the audiences were reading any thematic link between the opera

itself and the content of the *Judaism* brochure' (p. 184).

While the polarized arguments about Beckmesser which exploded in the 1990s now show signs of running out of steam, Eva Rieger finds a new stick with which to beat the composer in her essay called "'I married Eva': Gender Construction and *Die Meistersinger*". Rieger notes that 'the love between Sachs and Eva, as well as his renunciation of it, is missing in the initial sketches from 1845 and 1851', but 'became important the moment Wagner experienced and suffered from his passion for Mathilde Wesendonck' (p. 215); further, music scholarship, dominated by masculine values, has persistently 'underplayed its significance'. This reading of how musicology might have imitated the attitudes and limitations of Wagner himself gains support from Peter Höyng's imaginary conversation with the composer, courtesy of the internet, which is quite deftly done, especially in its use of such resounding generalizations from Wagner's essays as this: 'all serious artists interpret the nature of things and do not become imitators of what they perceive as reality' (p. 131). But the best complement to Rieger's study here is Klaus van den Berg's account of '*Die Meistersinger* as Comedy', which provides salutary reminders about the work's 'utopian' distance from 'reality', and also about those traditional elements from commedia dell'arte, Shakespeare, and Molière which help to illuminate the characters of Sachs and Beckmesser. Van den Berg doesn't entirely escape heavy-handedness, arguing that 'making Beckmesser fail not once but twice' not only 'heightens the audience's comic response' (as Bergson's theory decrees) but also 'desensitizes them to the physical and psychological anguish of the ridiculed character' (p. 159). This high-handedly excludes any compassion for the victim of such ridicule that individual audience members might feel, and by and large it is difficult to believe that van den Berg has had much contact with the music—for example, he reductively describes the third-act Prelude as 'melancholy' (p. 162). His all too decisive conclusion is that 'laughter in *Die Meistersinger* does not function to restore and heal, but rather "malfunctions" to ostracize and wound' (p. 163). Why the absolute either/or? No doubt because, as Thomas Grey wisely observes, 'the historical truths hardest to accept are those that are fundamentally ambiguous' (p. 189).

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Giuseppe Verdi: '*La traviata*'. *Schizzi e abbozzi autografi/Autograph Sketches and Drafts*. Ed. by Fabrizio Della Seta. Trans. by Julian Budden. pp. 211; Pls. 9; critical commentary pp. 185. (Istituto nazionale di studi verdiani, Parma, 2000–2. ISBN 88-85065-17-1.)

Promised in the introduction to the critical edition of *La traviata* (Chicago and London, and Milan, 1997; I reviewed it in *Music & Letters*, 80 (1999), 355–8), this sumptuous publication is a splendid successor to Carlo Gatti's *L'abozzo del 'Rigoletto'* (Milan, 1941), hitherto the only large-scale facsimile of Verdi's preliminary manuscripts. Although *La traviata* lacks the type of full-length draft that survives for *Rigoletto*, the present publication offers a far greater variety of material than Gatti's landmark volume: in addition to replicas of the manuscript leaves that meticulously duplicate every smudge and irregular edge, photographic plates of ten pages from the autograph score, and a lengthy introductory essay in Italian and in Julian Budden's insightful English translation, '*La traviata*'. *Schizzi e abbozzi autografi* also includes a diplomatic-interpretative transcription of each of Verdi's sketches and drafts—the first ever published for a complete opera by any composer—together with a separate bilingual volume of critical commentary.

There are reasons beyond the recent centennial commemoration of its composer's death why the publication of extensive and largely unfamiliar sketch material for *La traviata* should be met with enthusiasm. While this opera's widespread popularity rests in no small part on its reputation as a vehicle for star sopranos, it is also known as a laboratory for experimentation with formal convention, ambience, and dramatic tone. That the 39-year-old Verdi could create *La traviata* in a matter of weeks, while at the same time completing *Il trovatore*, in many ways its stylistic opposite, has long been a source of amazement. Gatti's *Verdi nelle immagini* (Milan, 1941) includes an astonishing facsimile outline of the first act of *La traviata*, with crude plot synopsis, sporadic vocal text, near-familiar melodies, and compositional reminders, all pre-dating the creation of the libretto. Further such glimpses into the maestro's workshop have been frustratingly few in number, making any publication of *Traviata* sketches, let alone one with such exemplary supporting materials, a key to understanding the genesis not only of this opera, but also of the other works of Verdi's middle period and beyond.

The facsimile pages are beautifully repro-