

Wagner, Sex and Capitalism

J.P.E. HARPER-SCOTT urges an ideological critique to supplement Laurence Dreyfus's *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse*



Siegmund and Sieglinde in carnal embrace. Painting by Mariano Fortuny y Madrazo (1928)

Wagnerian women

When it wanted to conduct an inquiry into the erotic qualities of *Tristan und Isolde*, the New York City public radio station WNYC invited the vintner and opera fan Natalie Oliveros onto its 'Evening Music' programme. After listeners had been presented with virtually all of the second-act love duet the presenter asked his guest what she thought about the sexual content of the music. 'It's what we call tantric sex,' she answered with a giggle, 'and I wonder if Richard Wagner himself could last like that. I think that every woman just once in their life would like to have that kind of passion and emotion and experience that kind of love that you hear in the music. I think he was probably a very giving lover.'¹ And what are her qualifications for saying this? Well, in addition to being a vintner, Oliveros, who is addressed on the show by her professional name Savanna Samson, is a hard-core pornographic actress with Vivid Entertainment, the world's largest producer of pornographic videos.

Is there any composer other than Wagner for whom the association with porn would not seem immediately ludicrous? Or, to put it another way round, is it only in Wagner that we can find such a suggestive parallel between tonal music whose functional control of desire and (denied) resolution is radically reduced to its fundamental elements (essentially a teasing focus on variously powered dominant chords) and an art form whose current dominant style similarly treats human bodies, and particularly female ones, literally as body parts, as partial objects of desire, many-holed machines for producing orgasmic outcomes from certain inputs conceived in orthodox fashion?² It seems that there is something naughty and at the same time very masculine about the erotics of both Wagner and mainstream pornography, and listeners to the WNYC show seem to be invited to be uncertain whether it is the music, the woman talking about it, or the combination of the two that is most meant to make their blood flow.

In a certain sense, Savanna Samson is a typical operatic woman. Within the masculinist-capitalist ideological space she inhabits, she is a sexual commodity serving the function of gratifying male desire at the same time as expressing male power over her. It is interesting that although she gives a woman's response to *Tristan*, focusing on what she sees as the sexual experience from a woman's perspective (one which in its tenderness and patience is entirely at odds with the obscene haste and functionality of modern pornographic film), that response is folded straight back into the ideology. Here is a woman who is up for it, available for purchase (\$29.95 a month from her website), and happy to present her male listeners with advice on how to impress a woman

¹ The full programme, which was broadcast in May 2007, can be heard online at <<http://www.wnyc.org/shows/eveningmusic/2007/may/03/>>.

² Žižek writes that in pornography, 'the woman's body is [...] transformed into a multitude of "organs without a body", machines of *jouissance*, while the men working on it are also desubjectivized, instrumentalized, reduced to workers serving these different partial objects'; Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, 1997; 2nd edn, 2008), 231. This is of course only the form that pornography has taken in (post-1950s) late capitalism. Nina Power has observed that 'this is very much unlike pornography at other points in history, such as during the French Revolution, where it was used as a way of attacking the monarchy and the established order. Similarly the prostitute of 18th-century novels is often a sort of organic materialist philosopher as well as a debunker of the hypocrisy of conventional society'; Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman* (Ropley, Hants, and Washington DC, 2009), 47.

like her sexually (be as tender a lover as she imagines Wagner to have been; physical appearance irrelevant). Many operatic women are judged according to their success in performing this kind of function, and criticised if they don't. Turandot is monstrous precisely because she refuses to submit to this purchase arrangement; the Dyer's Wife (in Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten*), who refuses to submit to pregnancy, is taunted by a chorus of her unborn children; Brünnhilde is placed defenceless and asleep behind the very effectively secured shop window of her fiery rock until any man who evinces the right purchasing power (fearlessness, in this mythic codification of the exchange) can take her away for his private consumption.

The erotic appeal of women as lovers, concubines, wives and mothers is intimately bound up with their ideological function as subservient helpmeets of a sexual, social or economic type. Sometimes, of course, but not often, composers, librettists and directors say something more subversive about the place of women; occasionally, as with Wagner, the presentation is ambiguous. The essential point, however, is that the erotic presentation of women in opera, and Wagner's not least, is always of greater significance than the mere physical or intellectual response to the erotic stimulus itself, because eroticism plays a far greater social role in the world than merely providing genital stimulation. The 'erotic impulse' in a composer who, through artists, philosophers and statesmen, has had a uniquely profound influence on modernity is therefore of considerable intellectual interest.

Acknowledging the erotic

Laurence Dreyfus's study *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (Cambridge, MA, 2010) is not the first book-length treatment of this issue to focus specifically on Wagner (Jean-Jacques Nattiez's *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation* (Princeton, NJ, 1993) had already investigated that territory), and not the first musicology to focus on erotics: the *Grove* article on 'Sex, sexuality' lists a couple of dozen of the most significant musicological contributions that followed in the wake of sociologist Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* in 1978.³ Dreyfus's book is nevertheless to be welcomed for encouraging sustained focus on this element of Wagner's work.

A preface and epilogue flank five main chapters with stylish single-word titles: 'Echoes' (on 19th-century responses to Wagner's eroticism), 'Intentions' (on what can be gleaned on Wagner's views of eroticism from his writings), 'Harmonies' (on erotic scenes in the mature operas), 'Pathologies' (on various forms of deviance, mostly not in the music) and 'Homeroitics' (literary and personal contexts that illuminate characters in *Tristan* and *Parsifal*). The book charts a course through 'the heatedly bisexual character [...] of [Wagner's] art which dispenses with any authentic masculinity' (Eduard Fuchs, quoted on p. 15) – a progression from morally questionable but at least mostly manly heterosexual erotics to a more 'diseased', unmanly, unGerman homosexual erotics. This plan enables Dreyfus to cover a lot of ground, although readers looking for a rigorous examination of responses of a stereotypically feminine type partly indicated by Savanna Samson – focusing perhaps on tenderness and patience in the sexual act

– will be disappointed: this is distinctly written from a male perspective. The obvious defence that both author and composer are male is undercut by Dreyfus's appeals to 'common humanity' (p. 7) and the experience of listeners rather than particular scholars; this failure to account for the subject position of half of humanity – made more obvious for the masculinisation of Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, of which more below – cannot so easily be explained away.

Dreyfus claims that an obsession with sexual desire was 'a kind of biographical leit-motive echoing incessantly throughout the composer's life' (p. 1), and it is in the area of biography that the book will achieve its main insights. Dreyfus poses an early question: given that music cannot so readily portray nudity, sex, and so on in the way that other art forms such as literature and painting can do, exactly how are we to conceive of it in erotic terms? It is a fine question, but I think that it is an error to omit the more fundamental preliminary question, 'What develops the definition of the erotic in a certain time and place?'

Dreyfus takes his lead in answering his question from the art historian Kenneth Clark, who insisted that any artistic nude that 'should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling [...] is bad art and false morals' (p. 7). Does this hold, I wonder, even if the nude in question is being raped, murdered or disfigured? Some forms of erotic art, such as the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe, which rejoices in showing genitals in mousetraps, whips inserted into anuses, and so on, would seem to suggest as much. To this extent Clark's view is postmodern because it denies the possibility that anyone could ever find any art unacceptable. To the postmodern relativist, one person's scene of torture is another's scene of erotic abandon, and it is wrong to make a moral judgement on the position of the Other. I am uncomfortable with Clark's blanket statement, but even allowing for exceptions we should admit the possibility (obvious to all but the pathologically dishonest) that art can *sometimes* turn us on, although Dreyfus suggests that we must draw distinctions between the erotic and the pornographic. I am not convinced that these categories are strictly separated in the way he would like to maintain, however. For him, pornography responds to 'the power of market forces and requirement of immediate arousal' and consequently 'tends to date quickly' (p. 8). This is the intended fate of all commodities under capitalism, of course, but Nina Power's work, already cited, demonstrates a much wider range of forms of political expression for pornography, potentially even within capitalist society: for instance, pornography that rejects the presumption of male consumption or resists the bewildering array of marketing classifications indicated by subgenres such as 'barely legal', 'lesbian' (for male consumption), 'mature', and so on.⁴ By contrast, Dreyfus writes, 'the definitions of eroticism in literature, film, or sculpture [...] have traditionally proceeded from a stylistic hierarchy reflecting operative views about idealized love, sexual behavior and public decency' (p. 9). I agree. Yet what are these 'operative views' except the same ideological frame that governs pornography?

It is not the case, as Dreyfus would like us to accept, that pornography is subject to the whims of the market whereas erotic appeal – some assumed universal response

³ See Jeffrey Kallberg, 'Sex, sexuality', *Grove Music Online*, ed. Laura Macy <<http://www.grovemusic.com/>>.

⁴ The *Wikipedia* entry reads like a restaurant menu: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_pornographic_sub-genres>.

that emerges from our 'common humanity' – is not. In mature capitalist societies everything, even natural things such as air or soil, or immaterial things such as thoughts, tend towards the status of commodities (this is why universities talk these days about 'intellectual property' to be exploited for the financial benefit of the institution: my own includes in its itemisation of 'intellectual property' to which it lays claim the 'know-how' associated with any academic work – it owns the thoughts of academics' heads). Consequently, any consideration of a pervasive set of cultural ideas – such as those embodied in the congeries of *the erotic* – that sidelines the historical and material conditions that determine the social relations mediated by erotic commodities is missing out on much that is both interesting and politically significant. The definition of what is erotically pleasing changes, often radically, from time to time and place to place, as a glance through the catalogue of the 2008 Barbican exhibition of erotic art of the last 2000 years demonstrates.⁵ While it is true that human beings have been stimulated by erotic art for millennia, that stimulation is radically conditioned by the cultural form of the society in which those individuals exist. Simply put: while the urge may be the same, the stimulus for it is radically contingent, a fact Dreyfus briefly acknowledges before passing on to other things (p. 16). The mere fact of this difference is relatively uninteresting but the repercussions of it are considerable.

Anti-postmodernism

Of course the author is perfectly aware that by unblinkingly observing key erotic indicators in Wagner's music the book will encourage some pesky readers like me to ask about the *burden* of this eroticism, and about the nature of the social relations between real human beings that its form serves to mystify. He therefore establishes the parameters of his investigation early on, specifically by explaining what he rules out.

Dreyfus believes that musicology lacks proper discussion of the erotic because, while literary scholarship and art history are awash with studies of eroticism, even the major musicological dictionaries (*The New Grove Dictionary of Music*, 2nd edition, and *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*) have no entries on eroticism. *Grove* does have an article on 'Sex, sexuality' by Jeffrey Kallberg, which Dreyfus finds 'overanxious not to overplay music's links with sexuality, whose categories, we are reminded, are always unstable, and "constructed according to power relations and discursive practices prevailing in every society"' (p. 15). This caution has made us 'a bit hamstrung in treating historical phenomena such as Wagner's erotics for which there is in fact ample (if anecdotal) psychological evidence from the present day suggesting that our responses *haven't* changed much over the last 150 years' (p. 16). Dreyfus's method will therefore be to leapfrog backwards over 20th-century scholarship so that we can 'listen to what historical voices – including Wagner's own – have to say' (p. 16).

It is a bold decision to circumvent a century of scholarly work, and one that opens Dreyfus up to stringent criticism. A justifiable response might be to ask why, if he will pay no attention to other scholars, anyone else should pay any attention to him. The tendency to disregard scholarship in order not to place limits on one's own

⁵ The catalogue contains many illustrations: see Marina Wallace, Martin Kemp and Joanne Bernstein, *Seduced: Art & Sex from Antiquity to Now* (London and New York, 2007).

interpretation is characteristic of performers (and Dreyfus is an enormously gifted one). The belief here is that reading the thoughts of others will somehow cloud and impoverish the originality of the individual. Yet scholarship, like everything else in human experience, is communal, and develops complexity and richness through interaction and mutual contribution. It is a mistake – even hubris – to refuse to engage with existing scholarship, some of which actually supports the interpretations offered in this book. I also think Dreyfus misrepresents Kallberg's position. There is no suggestion in the *Grove* article that we should not 'overplay music's links with sexuality'. Instead Kallberg explains that the idea of *sexuality* itself, meaning an identity rather than a behaviour, is demonstrably a modern invention and has been subjected to significant theoretical examination, most influentially in psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan and in sociology by Michel Foucault.⁶ Kallberg would, I am sure, welcome more focus on the relation between sexuality and music, with the proviso that the scholarship be sensitive to the complexity not only of the relation between the two (which is the heart of Dreyfus's concerns about the greater difficulty of talking about erotics in music as opposed to visual art or literature) but also of the cultural data embedded in the particular form of understanding that the sexuality in question makes concrete. Kallberg's short article actually represents level-headed scholarly advice.

We can construct a defence of Dreyfus's rejection of the barriers that he feels have been erected by relativistic postmodern scholarship, which is to say the modern form of musicology that took firm hold in the 1990s. These have tended to hinder attempts to argue from what would be summarily rejected as a 'universalist' position. But the defence requires more than mere refusal to engage: it needs theorisation. I shall therefore spend some time elaborating an argument that Dreyfus could have made, and which would have taken his study in quite different directions.

Existing scholarship, of which Kallberg offers a fair reflection, acknowledges that there is a plurality of views and experience, in the erotic as in everything else. This is a fact so banal that it barely counts as a thoughtful assessment at all, yet it is the cornerstone of postmodern theory, which denies all claims to truth, grand narrative, and the proposition that any position (western European, Bolivian, Chinese, whatever) is in some sense susceptible to being treated as a universal proposition. But it is unavoidably the case that it is impossible to comment on anything at all except from a particular, and potentially universalisable, position.

Postmodern denials of the possibility of truth claims such as 'Western democracy is the best form of government', which are clearly argued from a particular position, are born out of a fear that to make such truth claims is to fail to accept the validity of the Other (in practical terms it almost always means a non-Westerner). Scholars who pussyfoot around the obvious fact of historical and cultural difference therefore do so out of a commitment to good liberal ideas that are themselves a product both of

⁶ It is clear from chapter 5 that Dreyfus wishes to maintain the separation of behaviour and identity: with apparent approval, he summarises the position of Hanns Fuchs as being that a man who has sex with other men does not necessarily 'ask himself whether his love for a member of his own sex defines the kind of person he is' (p. 190).

European enlightenment values and of the dictates of capitalism.⁷ On one level it is natural to sympathise with this position. But it is nevertheless a universalisation of a particular historically contingent world-view. Postmodernists may not admit this, but we can confirm the suspicion by testing the limits of their tolerance of plurality. If the Other exhibits cultural behaviours that postmodern liberals find appealing, authentic, more attuned to nature, a good lesson to the consumerist West, and so on, they celebrate them; but when those cultural practices extend to forced marriage or clitoridectomy the tolerance disappears, revealing that the Other is accepted as such only when their Otherness conforms to Eurocentric standards of morality. The message is therefore 'We tolerate your difference, as long as you are the same as us'. And the 'us' is a historically particular culture for whom the novelty of the Other, which is the source of its appeal, is indistinguishable from an investment in the novelty-based commodity fetishism of capitalism. The 'revolution' of postmodernism, represented in musicology by the new emphasis on music as a cultural form (the 'new musicology' that Dreyfus seeks to avoid) is internal to the capitalist system and poses no challenge to it: on the contrary, it strengthens it by generating a new and ostensibly politically liberal and emancipatory form for it.

There are therefore good critical reasons for rejecting this postmodern approach, to find ways of answering such questions as 'Did Wagner have a revolutionary view of sexuality or was he just as ideologically invested in culturally determined forms of it as any of his contemporaries?' or 'Can Wagner's presentation of the erotic in his music clarify some of the relations between human beings we still see today, and perhaps allow an emancipatory critique not only of norms of sexuality and gender but also of the political arena that constitutes them?' For all its qualities – and they are many – the new form of musicology, with its interest in cultural factors such as sexuality, has been so readily accepted by the Anglo-American academy for the plain reason that it sits well with the ideological space inhabited by its initiates. A musicology that, like the music of Wagner, seeks to effect a social critique therefore needs to effect a Copernican revolution – which radically changes the framework – rather than a Ptolemisation – which simply complicates the terms without changing the fundamental outlines of the discipline.⁸ The 'new musicology' was a Ptolemisation insofar as it added substantial new complexities to the existing focus on scores and the making of editions, but it did not effect a Copernican revolution by acknowledging that the problem with the older musicology was not just its narrow positivistic basis but its failure to rise to a fundamental critique of the society that forms it. It is no accident that the 'new musicology' took hold at the time when the fall of communist states in Europe seemed to indicate the end of the alternative to Western democratic capitalism: now that the promises of greater prosperity and justice for all are proven to be lies (much of the world lives on a dollar a day, and even within rich societies such as Britain and the US, the gulf between rich and poor is as wide now as it was before the Russian Revolution), the time has arrived for a bolder intellectual shift.

⁷ The classic study here is Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1991).

⁸ This image is borrowed from the new preface to Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989; new edn, 2008), vii.



Tristan and Isolde: The Embrace. Painting by Gaston Bussière (1911)

So, Dreyfus makes the right rejection for the wrong reasons. After summarising the arguments he makes having cleared away recent scholarship, I shall proceed at the end of this review in a different but in some sense a related spirit. The second step that Dreyfus could have taken is, as should by now be clear, to counter the post-modern move in musicology by attacking it at its roots in its commitment to the liberal-democratic form of late capitalism, focusing specifically on the issue of the erotic. It may indeed be the case that in his 'erotic impulse' as much as anywhere else Wagner's music can be read today as a critique of the ideological space we share with him in modernity. In other words, it could be that the erotics that Dreyfus finds reveal Wagner's interrogation of the material and historical conditions that established the possibility of that form of erotic presentation in the first place, and which sustain it today.

Wagner's kinds of sex

Chapters 3–5 are the heart of the book, and I shall deal with them first before returning to the broader conceptual frame and my alternative. Although many of the issues raised here are familiar, particularly in chapter 4 some are treated in much greater detail than usual. The intention is to demonstrate (in chapter 3) by which musical means Wagner creates erotically potent moments and (in chapters 4 and 5) the ways in which Wagner's erotic explorations encompass queerer possibilities.

Two-thirds of chapter 3 are taken up with discussion of Wagner's two most obviously erotic works, *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan und Isolde*, in the course of which Dreyfus

presents a usefully illustrated gazetteer of the Venusberg music and the *Tristan* Prelude. In concluding his thoughts on *Tannhäuser*, so evidently full of erotic signifiers in the drama, Dreyfus makes an important point that I wish he had followed through more extensively: 'even in the presence of erotic objects – words, images, even voluptuous bodies – music drowns them out when it takes command of the erotic experience' (p. 91). This, after all, is what gives Wagner his special attraction (or danger, depending on point of view): his ability with the music alone to evince erotic responses. After the incestuous erotics of *Die Walküre* Act I, which Dreyfus suggests follow the ecstatic *Tannhäuser* model with a more adventurous harmonic language, he turns to *Tristan*, the one work in which an all-pervasive eroticism is generally acknowledged in the musical language (Dreyfus's relatively brief later thoughts on *Die Meistersinger*, *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal* trace later uses of the 'Tristan chord' or idiom, on which he suggests that their erotics depends). He also devotes a lot of time to tracing connections between Wagner's programme and the opera's Prelude before turning to the crucially important love scene of Act II. Here there is, *pace* Savanna Samson, no tantric sex, but the long-prepared and tragically unfulfilled perfect cadence in the last minutes of the duet, into which King Mark and his henchmen rudely break, represents a failure to represent the sexual climax literally onstage which is 'vital to *Tristan's* theme of unfulfilled desire' (p. 109).

This kind of failed cadence, where the singer does provide the correct resolution in the melody but the orchestra refuses to back it up, is actually a fundamental trick of Wagner's mature style. In general he reserves a cadence for voice and orchestra together – or this is the ambition – for the ends of scenes, in an attempt to avoid cadential oversaturation that would intrude on the flow of the drama. Moments where voice and orchestra both cadence, such as in Fricka's moral victory over Wotan in *Die Walküre* Act II, Scene 1, stand out meaningfully from their background: Fricka's cadentially reinforced resolution is immediately contrasted with Wotan's psychologically tortured monologue, which is structurally a long sequence of unresolved and gloomily sliding dominant pedals, closing into the final key of A minor only after a first failed attempt (on the first yell of 'das Ende!'). It would be wrong to suggest that this musical technique always indicates erotic longing, but I would have welcomed examination of the ways that music-linguistic details such as the treatment of the dominant induce an erotic response in the listener even when they are not in a sex scene. That would have provided an opportunity to test the long-standing thesis that Wagner's music, irrespective of dramatic referent, is morally corrupting.

Deviants

Chapter 4, 'Pathologies', extensively documents Wagner's passion for wearing (and draping his home in) silk and satin fabrics and dousing himself in delicate perfumes. In a world that lacked commitment to the idea of sexuality as identity rather than behaviour, this would be considered an interest rather than a fetish (a sexual focus on an ordinarily non-sexual object), but that world has gone. Consequently, since their revelation in 1877, and much to Wagner's chagrin, these titillating biographical details have encouraged predictable speculation about a range of pathologies. In fact Wagner has a claim to be the world's first named transvestite, since he was treated as a particularly vivid example of this behaviour in the book that coined the term, Magnus Hirschfeld's

Die Transvestiten (1910). These fabrics and perfumes find their way into stage directions and action in the operas, but the idea that they suggest a 'sickness' in Wagner, one originating in sensuous experience (albeit not of a sexual kind), is a more substantial issue. Nietzsche's strongly expressed antagonism to Wagner's music later in his life is offered by Dreyfus as the first of two pieces of evidence to support the chapter's central claim, that 'what is significant – and surprising – about critical responses to Wagner in the nineteenth century is that the most pronounced and violent reactions were provoked by his erotics, not his politics' (p. 117).

The connection between Wagner's sensuality and sickness is by now well established, but in the second half of the chapter Dreyfus puts it to different use as a reason to dismiss the anti-semitism of the composer and his music. He lays out his case against recent academic studies of Wagner's anti-semitism in terms that call history as his witness.

It is true that political anti-Semites in Germany and Austria beginning in the 1880s saw Wagner as a leading mentor for their movement, but it wasn't until after 1945 that the dominant portrait of Wagner as anti-Semite started to enter the popular imagination, and not until the 1970s that the topic entered academic discourse.

The implication here is that there is something trivially latterday about this scholarly obsession, but this is not as persuasive a sequence of dates as it might seem. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s (following the Arab–Israeli War of 1967 and the screening of the television miniseries *Holocaust* in 1979) that the issue of the West's complicity in genocide rose to the forefront of public consciousness in Germany and elsewhere in Europe (local factors influenced the timing).⁹ This does not therefore reflect recent academic fashion – as if that would mean much anyway: other academic fashions have included the acceptance of theories of evolution and relativity – but a shift in the ideological tectonic plates of the West, and one that is far from ignoble. But the argument goes on.

As surprising as it must be for anyone first exposed to Wagner in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century, the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of nineteenth-century writers, both virulent critics of Wagner as well as passionate advocates – Jewish as well as Gentile – refuse to see a serious threat in Wagner's anti-Judaism. (p. 157)

Here, unfortunately, we see the appeal to history and the rejection of modern scholarship expose Dreyfus's argument most brutally.¹⁰ The case he is trying to establish is impossibly problematic. It suppresses the crucial detail that we are not free, after Auschwitz, to view anti-semitism in the same lights as Wagner's contemporaries. If 19th-century critics were more bothered about peccadilloes of sexual behaviour than about hatred of an entire race of people, that merely reveals the high background level of anti-semitism in their society, in just the same way that modern US film censors' haplessness to tolerate high levels of bloody violence in films rated as suitable for children,

⁹ Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London, 2005; repr., London, 2007), 811.

¹⁰ The Epilogue asks, apropos of this, 'does one gain much by rejecting Wagner and his music?' (p. 220) but the question is false. The choice is not between rejecting Wagner's music on account of his anti-semitism or ignoring the anti-semitism in order to love the music. A better response is to reach an understanding of the internal contradictions of his anti-semitism as a means of both combatting it, even when it is concealed in ordinary discourse today, and enjoying Wagner's music the more.

while forbidding the display of uncovered genitalia or overtly sexy scenes except to adults, displays the cultural acceptance of violence (and vestigially puritanical attitudes to sex) in US society. Dreyfus's chosen historical witnesses are unreliable and the chapter's closing remark is a damp squib: 'just as it is foolish to read opera as serious philosophy, it makes little sense to treat music as deviant or as politically suspect' (p. 173). Operas, like all works of art, express different use values to different societies at different times. This is what makes them valuable and able to 'stand the test of time'. The Nazi inheritance cannot be written off as an aberration or a total misreading of the works, but neither does it limit all future uses of Wagner's music. Too great an emphasis on historicisation is as grave an error as too little. But, again, simply refusing to acknowledge a fact of recent history does not make it go away. The best recent rehabilitations of Wagner, those by Slavoj Žižek, do not deny the historical reality of the anti-semitic elements but demonstrate instead how the works themselves undermine that anti-semitism: so, instead of coming from a (Jewish) external source like Alberich or Kundry, the destruction of the world of the *Ring* or *Parsifal* comes from within, in the figures of Wotan (who initiated the process of doom by despoiling nature) and Titurel (whose demand for the Grail ceremony leads to Amfortas's unendurable suffering); or they point to the positive representation of Jewish archetypes such as the Wanderer (the Dutchman and Wotan).¹¹ The way to move beyond historicisations of Wagner's anti-semitism is not to dismiss them but to demonstrate through patient argument where they fail as interpretations on their own terms.

In the concluding chapter we are introduced to Wagner's friend Paul von Joukowsky and his talented male lover Pepino. Wagner wrote playfully to von Joukowsky about their shared interest in soft fabrics, and was evidently completely relaxed about the same-sex relationship. Dreyfus does not suggest that Wagner was gay but that, in Wagner's own words, homosexuality was 'something [...] for which I have understanding but no inclination' (p. 175). Like Elgar, who has been treated to a similarly nuanced interpretation by Byron Adams, the argument here is that sensitivity to this facet of human sexual experience simply provided additional artistic possibilities,¹² informed from the position of what Hanns Fuchs, author of *Richard Wagner und die Homosexualität* (1903), called 'der geistige Homosexuelle' (the homosexual in spirit; p. 189).

Dreyfus summarises Fuchs's attempt to set Wagner's 'homophilia' in a general artistic context, focusing particularly on *Tristan* and *Parsifal*. The first offers Brangäne's 'sexless homoerotic love' of Isolde (p. 206) and Kurwenal's and Mark's for Tristan: Mark 'loved Tristan so much that when his Queen died, he saw no need to remarry' (p. 209). These longings end tragically, yet 'none of these characters is deemed sick or perverse. To the contrary, their aspirations for love are noble and ennobling, for they reflect the mores of Romantic Friendship, values that Wagner esteemed in his own life' (p. 210).

¹¹ Žižek's interpretations of Wagner's anti-semitism are usefully summarised in the afterword to Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, tr. Susan Spitzer (London and New York, 2010).

¹² Byron Adams, 'The "Dark Saying" of the Enigma: Homoeroticism and the Elgarian Paradox', *19th-Century Music*, xxiii (1999–2000), 218–35, and Byron Adams, 'Elgar's Later Oratorios: Roman Catholicism, Decadence and the Wagnerian Dialectic of Shame and Grace', *The Cambridge Companion to Elgar*, ed. Daniel M. Grimley and Julian Rushton (Cambridge and New York, 2004), 81–105.

Similarly, Parsifal is a 'homosexual in spirit', who learns from Kundry's kiss the nature of the sexual sin which causes Amfortas's torment. Despite the anticipation created by the chapter title, 'Homoerotics', this chapter attempts no spectacular queer reading of Wagner's operas, such as, for instance, Philip Brett's early 'new musicology' readings of Britten.¹³ There is no reflection here, for instance, on the overtly homoerotic phallic imagery at the heart of the story: in *Parsifal* we have an old man whose wound can be healed only when an innocent boy sticks his spear into it. This spear is a phallic symbol that he took away from the magician whose potency it guarantees, at the same time causing the external phallic symbol of that potency – the magic castle – to fall flaccid to the ground. Not since the steel-hard youthful phallus of Siegfried broke the elderly wooden phallus of Wotan in Act III of *Siegfried* has such an obviously masculine power-play taken place, but now in *Parsifal* the older man's desire for the younger – his pressing existential need to be penetrated by Parsifal – is made into a central thematic element. Instead of attempting such a reading, Dreyfus's final chapter actually plays down the homoerotics, suggesting at last that although 'we have become expert at naming people's sexual identities, [we] rarely notice how, in so doing, rather a few blossoming Friendships are nipped in the bud' (p. 216). He is certainly right that the same-sex relationships Wagner presents (Brangäne–Isolde, Parsifal–Amfortas, ...), as well as those he enjoyed in his life (with King Ludwig II, Nietzsche, ...) were unbalanced, only partly reciprocated. But the Romantic Friendship thesis does not exhaust the range of forms of homoerotic expression in Wagner's music.

Rethinking the conceptual frame

One of Dreyfus's central theses is that Wagner had no clear view of what the erotic meant – either because he had broader erotic interests than we might imagine, including fetishism and homoerotics, or because he simply did not think the issues through with truly philosophical rigour. What follows, he insists, is that it is always a mistake for a critic to read much into the erotics at all. What we should do, I suppose, is just enjoy them. I do not find this satisfactory.

After laying out the methodological stall, Dreyfus considers the mixed responses of individuals whose interest in the erotic in Wagner's music he will use as a historic justification for his own. The problem with Wagner's sensualism, as critics saw it, was that the music was not simply 'designed to titillate or arouse, but proposed a philosophy of life and art' (p. 36). This crux of Dreyfus's argument is a vital point. Love it or loathe it, Wagner's contemporaries recognised in his music a proposition that moody sensuality and a rejection of societal norms of behaviour constituted a manifesto for real social change that was somehow grounded in forms of sexual expression. For the English in particular, who continued to hold these views well into the 20th century (they lambasted Elgar for his sissy Wagnerism and lauded Parry to the skies for his rugged outdoorsy masculine Brahmsianness), this proposal was an affront to empire. This view is recalled, bizarrely, in this year's Lurpak butter billboard adverts in the UK, in which some heartily buttered soldiers are dipped into a squelching soft-boiled egg. The caption reads 'Empires were never built on muesli bars', and the subtext is clear:

¹³ The article that started it all is Philip Brett, 'Britten and Grimes', *Musical Times*, cxviii (1977), 995–1000.

this touchy-feely liberal health-conscious diet you have all adopted is a bit limp-wristed – to be a masterful man you must take on as much cholesterol as you can in the form of butter and egg, and then take over the world. Ephemera such as these adverts are very revealing about the general state of ideological discourse: the positive invocation of empire, long under attack, unsurprisingly re-emerges in 2011 under the first Tory-led government for thirteen years.

Dreyfus constructs a picture of Wagner's early thoughts on sex, assembled from *Das Liebesverbot* and his encounter with the thought of Feuerbach, which culminates in agreement with Ernest Newman's assessment: 'He is no philosopher' (p. 53). There is evidence to support this view. Although *Das Liebesverbot* was ostensibly an opera written in opposition to dainty Biedermeier prudishness, Dreyfus demonstrates that actually in its pages 'the glorification of "free love" is in short supply' (p. 45). Partly this is a matter of musical language. Wagner was of course no fan of French or Italian musical styles, yet it is in precisely those styles that he writes music for the chorus that supposedly enunciates the 'free and forthright sexuality' (p. 46) whose victory is won at the end. Although perhaps not yet actively as opposed to this musical style as he would later become, it is reasonable of Dreyfus to suggest that 'in no way does Wagner's music take his subject matter seriously' (p. 46). (He draws an illuminating contemporary comparison with Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*.)

Dreyfus considers this irresolute support of the sexual revolution in *Das Liebesverbot* to be absolutely of a piece with the fact that the young Wagner 'saw his guilt-ridden sexual desires as a plague to be exorcised' (p. 49). A chief villain here appears to be Ludwig Feuerbach, in response to whom Wagner wrote that human beings yield 'not to a love for this or that particular object, but to Love in general' (p. 51). Such love 'is even indistinguishable from friendship', with the result that for Dreyfus Wagner had 'a baffling incoherence about the concept of Love', expressed in so much 'woolly thinking' (p. 53). Yet a conception of love that is universal and not particular, and which even if it finds sexual expression can nevertheless appear to relate closely to friendship, is perfectly consistent.

As the philosopher Alain Badiou stresses in his philosophy of love, a couple in love engages in a constant double movement (which he calls 'systolic' and 'diastolic', poetically echoing the beating of the heart) between an intimate realm and a public one.¹⁴ The intimate space is founded on what Lacanian psychoanalysis (and Schopenhauerian metaphysics) regards as a misunderstanding: each lover contains some inexpressible element that makes them desirable to the other, yet intimacy can never fulfil the desire and so eradicate the longing, just as eating a nicely poached egg can never prevent a person from wanting to eat again a few hours later: it is the nature of desire that it can never ultimately be satisfied.¹⁵ So there is the balancing motion out into the world,

¹⁴ For Badiou, love is one of the four *conditions* of philosophy, which alone make philosophy possible. His philosophy of love is expressed most clearly in Alain Badiou, 'What is Love?', tr. Justin Clemens, *UMBR(a)*, no. 1 (1996), 37–53, and Alain Badiou, 'The Scene of Two', tr. Barbara P. Fulks, *Lacanian Ink*, no. 21 (spring 2003), 42–55 <<http://www.lacan.com/frameXXI3.htm>>.

¹⁵ Dreyfus quotes Schopenhauer making a similar point on p. 68: 'Because the passion rested on a delusion [...] the individual falls back into his original narrowness and neediness, and sees with surprise that, after so high, heroic, and infinite an effort, nothing has resulted for his pleasure but what is afforded by any sexual satisfaction. Contrary to expectation, he finds himself no happier than before.'

where terms of that world – say, the necessary political and economic interactions between the love couple and their broader social group – are brought back to bear on the intimate sphere. The love process moves constantly inwards and outwards, systolic and diastolic (when it stops it dies), but what becomes clear is that the love relationship is constituted not solely by the individuals within it, for instance in bed, as a simple understanding of erotic attraction would have it, but equally by external society and history. So Wagner's 'woolly thinking' is in fact simply a reflection of the complexity of the love process, and one particularly well attuned to his political radicalism. If the image of a traditional erotic love is of two people staring into each other's eyes (the systolic movement), then the countervailing image of the couple staring out at some shared, fixed point (the diastolic movement) can be fitted perfectly, as Soviet poster-makers knew, to the image of a love at once personal and communal that derives its strength from a shared desire to found a new and better world. If Wagner's early thinking on sex and love seems to fail the test of a properly revolutionary free-love orgasm, it could be because the love he envisaged had a broader purview than the merely physical.

Dreyfus has no patience for this line of reasoning, as he declares after considering the lifelong influence on Wagner of the soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient: 'Wagner's promotion of a chaste higher love in his early works can be unmasked as a sham' (p. 60). In a diastolic–systolic understanding of love there is of course no need for chastity to make 'higher' (i.e. selfless, social, intellectual) love achievable, because the two spheres of intimacy and the world perpetually interact and mutually reinforce. Dreyfus labels Schröder-Devrient as 'quite the looming female vamp' (p. 55), an unfortunate locution that betrays a broader unwillingness to admit the possibility that she was simply a powerful woman.¹⁶ She called Wagner an *Ehekriüppel*, which Dreyfus variously translates as 'a hen-pecked husband' or 'the marriage cripple'. The latter is the only correct translation and admits of a more feminist interpretation. On the traditional chauvinist view of marriage a woman's role is not to take an equal part but to submit; any deviation from this behaviour in the form of attempts at verbal assertion is labelled 'hen-pecking'. It still seems necessary to make the obvious point that women are not poultry but of equal human stature to men. Many feminists (male or female), perhaps including Schröder-Devrient, are of the opinion that the institution of marriage itself is one of the chief means by which the social and economic power of men over women is maintained, and therefore when she said to the 32-year-old Wagner 'Oh, what do you know, you [marriage cripple]?', it is possible or even likely that she meant to suggest that his submission to the ideological commitments of marriage blunted his understanding of the experience of women. It is not the (hen-pecking) wife that is the problem for Wagner: it is the institution of marriage, and the social forms that it helps to sustain.

Consequently, when Dreyfus calls Schröder-Devrient the 'masculine' model for 'the encompassing female dominance of Kundry' (p. 57) there is again an uncomfortable double suggestion. First, it seems that women cannot be strong without sacrificing their 'nature' as (gentle, submissive) women, and becoming 'masculine'. Second, we

¹⁶ Slightly later he observes: 'Though quite the emancipated woman, Schröder-Devrient was anything but trivial' (*ibid.*), implying that it is trivial for a woman to wish to be emancipated. Dreyfus's feminist readers may be disappointed by such implications.

are implicitly to understand the sexual behaviour of Kundry not as the self-expression through physicality of a woman, but primarily from the male perspective as a kinky, woman-on-top heterosexual fantasy of domination (a domination that remains fantastic because all the real power resides with the man who, like Parsifal, can push the woman away and return to his serious manly business whenever he pleases). If Schröder-Devrient represented for Wagner an emancipatory female model, I think it is in the figure of Brünnhilde rather than Kundry that we find the most radical realisation of what the *Ehekrippel* learnt. More than that, in Brünnhilde – as a woman who after the loss of her divinity is thrust into a world in which her body, her erotic presence, constitutes her value in ineradicable ways – we encounter the possibility for a broader social critique of our own times.

Brünnhilde is always her father's daughter, the possession of a man, but it is not until the third act of *Walküre* that she enters obviously into the sphere of circulation that is reserved for women. In *Götterdämmerung* her struggle with this status that is granted her (as commodity) is the crux of the plot, the culmination of the cycle. It is also the cause of what could be Wagner's vision of a communist revolution that overturns the capitalist power relations of the Ring, that perfect symbol of the social power of capital.¹⁷

After Siegfried takes the Ring from Fafner, ends Wotan's power and wakes Brünnhilde, he gives the Ring to her as a sign of his love. When he returns in the guise of Gunther in *Götterdämmerung*, having been duped by Hagen's potion of forgetfulness, he forcibly takes the Ring from her and, although he does not directly have sexual intercourse with her (as the symbolism of his placement of his sword between himself and her, and Brünnhilde's testimony in Act III, Scene 3 both make clear), this is a rape scene that does not reach its climax. Rape was of course Wotan's plan for Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*. His original punishment for Brünnhilde's defiance of his order to kill Siegmund was to expose her, asleep, on a rock, to be taken (raped as she slept) by the first man to chance upon her. At her pleading Wotan agrees to surround her with a ring of fire, so that at least her rapist will be a hunk, but in kissing away her divinity and his ownership of her, he establishes her in the sphere of patriarchal exchange. Here is a sexual exchange of revolting power, and rather than being an exception to the rule, it is the disavowed obverse of the normal function of ordinary heterosexual erotic interaction between men and women.

Although commodification is the universal fate of women, under capitalism it takes new forms. When, centuries ago, a king handed his daughter to a foreign king in order to end a war, the purpose of the exchange appears quite obvious, but the exchange relation lurks unremarked under many other and more modern cultural treatments of women. The recent French ban on the hijab, for instance, is more complex than a liberal attempt to oppose the exclusion of women from the public space (on the usual

¹⁷ In Alberich we have a nice image of a capitalist who achieves the metabolic transformation of nature (the gold) through the labour-power of the Nibelungen in his underground factory-forge into pure capital, the form of appearance of his social power. 'The value originally advanced, therefore, not only remains intact while in circulation, but increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value, or is valorized [...]. And this movement converts it into capital'; Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, tr. Ben Fowkes, i (London, 1976; repr., London, 1990), 252. Marx was of course Wagner's close contemporary.

anti-Islamic lines that are advanced). The ban is actually imposed in line with a simple patriarchal law of capital, which is that women must display their goods, their bodies, so that men can decide whether to purchase (or steal) them.¹⁸ However nicely or nastily it manifests itself in its superficial appearance, the relation between men and women is fundamentally mediated by economics in the modern discourse of erotics.

Brünnhilde's fate as commodity is erotically fixed, as Wotan knows very well: it is simply as body to be consumed, not as an individual with an active role in the public sphere, that she is offered for consumption. Although Siegfried is drawn first to what appears to him a sleeping male figure on the rock, it is the sight of her breasts that awake new and, it turns out, revolutionary desires in him: in the comedy of his 'Das ist kein Mann!' we see him conflate his first conscious erection with the learning of fear – the fear of an entirely new world that confronts every individual who wishes to overturn the existing order. Dreyfus avoids much discussion of their long, ecstatic duet, fully as erotic as those for Siegmund and Sieglinde or Tristan and Isolde (whose rhetoric of two becoming one is repeated in the text). Yet here, perhaps more clearly than anywhere in Wagner, we see the confluence of erotic and political longing. The brave new world at the end of *Siegfried* – the two new human beings who found their own new ecstatic society – could have been the end of the cycle, were it not for the pre-existing complication of Siegfried's death to deal with.

In the final opera, Brünnhilde breaks the hold of exchange – of women, of rings, of all commodities – by throwing the entire edifice onto the bonfire. Freed from the lust for social power, Wotan can now die at peace; the capitalised form of the Ring, which embodies the raw materials and labour-power that made it, plus the surplus value that provides the social power, is returned to its source; and in the most Schröder-Devrientish spirit of all, Brünnhilde, the 'eternal feminine' whose commodity status is fixed by her erotic appeal and her exchangeability within the accounting system of marriage (where women feature as another item in the ledger, along with the house and its contents), sets fire to her commodified form.¹⁹ A new humanity looks on. It is often said that it is easier these days to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.²⁰ At the end of the *Ring* we get both.

It is the first erotic encounter with Siegfried, and the revolutionary fervour it inspired, that enables Brünnhilde at the end to destroy not only the figures who represent the old world (Wotan, Hagen, ...) but also the cultural and economic forms that govern them. Her sex made her a commodity but it was through a particularly Wagnerian form of erotic love that she saw how the fantasy of the erotic relation as conceived by modernity – and with it the economic structure which it both guarantees and is constituted by – could be destroyed forever.

¹⁸ See Alain Badiou, 'Behind the Scarfed Law, There Is Fear' (2004) <<http://lacan.com/islbad.htm>>.

¹⁹ Self-immolation has regained political currency since Mohamed Bouazizi responded to his economic marginalisation in Tunisian society by setting fire to himself – thereby contributing to the inspirations of the ongoing Arab revolutions.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson is already citing it as a commonplace in Fredric Jameson, 'Future City', *New Left Review*, n.s., no. 21 (May–June 2003), 65–79 (p. 76).

At the heart of Dreyfus's theory of Wagner's erotics there remains the perennial question of whether Wagner's use of Schopenhauer's philosophy of sex, which Dreyfus summarises on pages 61–72, lends Wagner's understanding coherence. The crux here is: 'if sexual desire (according to Schopenhauer) embodies the essence of the Will-to-live, it is nonsense to allow [as Wagner does in *Tristan*] sexual love to pacify the Will. It is like giving whiskey to cure an alcoholic, or pornography to treat a sexual obsessive' (p. 71). But here a Lacanian answer clarifies the relationship between this 'nonsensical thesis' (ibid.) and the broader emancipatory vision that Wagner had of love and sex. If sex really does condemn humankind to constant enslavement to the Will, it is possible by realising this, by 'traversing the fantasy' that sexual acts are the true goal of sexual desire, to reveal the empty basis of the fantasy – with emancipatory results. The realisation that ideological commitments are baseless, propped up only by currently existing cultural forms of understanding, encourages the radical hope that this system of understanding can be overturned, and that the individual human has no need of committing to existing forms but may, like Brünnhilde, freely establish an alternative possibility. Like Christians who return week after week or day after day to partake of the bread and wine of the Eucharist, constantly renewing their revolutionary moment, Wagner's erotic lovers could simply be re-encountering and renewing the revolutionary promise of the simultaneously 'high' and 'low', sensual and intellectual, private and political love–sex dialectic in ways that audiences today can still find a shock to the system. In sum, then, as fascinating as I find Dreyfus's unpicking of the complexity of Wagner's art and theory of sex and love, I think there is a greater consistency and a higher level of intellectual and political value to it than he is ready to admit.

