

Role Play

Chris Walton is stimulated by a new study of Wagner's view of women

Eva Rieger, *'Leuchtende Liebe, lachender Tod': Richard Wagners Bild der Frau im Spiegel seiner Musik* (Artemis & Winkler: Düsseldorf, 2009). 295pp. €24.90. ISBN: 978-3-538-07270-1

Eva Rieger is already known to Wagnerians as the author of a biography that placed the much-maligned Minna Wagner in a more just perspective. She has recently also published a book describing Wagner's Alpine wanderings that puts new emphasis on an often forgotten, but highly important, aspect of his life during his Swiss exile. The book under review here, 'Richard Wagner's view of woman as reflected in his music', focuses as much on the music as it does on the man, investigating how his biography – more specifically, the women in his life and his relationships with them – had an impact on his works and is reflected in it. Rieger states at the outset that Wagner's view of the sexes was largely determined by the bourgeois society in which he lived. But she also makes just as clear that her aim is no one-sided confirmation of the unequal gender hierarchies so easily found in his music. Rather does she acknowledge the multiplicity of meanings in his work and aims to investigate 'how the relationship between the sexes is bound into the artistic processes' (p. 11).

Rieger begins by looking at the tradition of the affects and how Wagner in her opinion continued it in his music: how the masculine and feminine are connoted in the motifs of his characters, and how he continues existing conventions in instrumentation (which on the simplest level means using trumpets, trombones and horns for the heroic-masculine, woodwind and harp for the gently feminine). These issues are raised again throughout the book, though in a manner more subtle than the brief summary here might suggest. The book proper is roughly chronological, with one chapter for the early operas up to *Holländer*, then one each for Wagner's ensuing operas. The exception is *Parsifal*, which is dealt with in two chapters. Wagner's relationships with women, from Minna via Jessie Laussot, Mathilde Wesendonck and various passing liaisons down to the *Meisterin* Cosima, form a vital background to the different chapters.

Wagner's often contradictory needs and desires regarding the opposite sex are a recurring theme here. In his early days with Minna, he was drawn to the idea of 'free love', which is reflected in his early opera *Das Liebesverbot*. Not surprisingly, he soon balked at the prospect that this freedom might not apply to him alone ('free love' meaning implicitly freedom for man, monogamy for woman). He was thus seized by jealousy when Minna once planned to move elsewhere without him. And, as Rieger points out, even in *Das Liebesverbot* 'the basic outline is found of a view of man and woman that we shall find recurring in Wagner's later works again and again. Women are weak and passive but find their way to great strength when they are able to champion a man. In Isabella we already find pre-echoes of Senta and Brünnhilde' (p. 33). And of Irene too in *Rienzi*, as Rieger goes on to explain. Another of Wagner's fantasies that comes to the fore in his work is the notion of 'being loved by a woman for ever, unceasingly' (p. 47). The catalogue of Wagner's male fantasy wonderwomen continues with Elisabeth, who manages to desire Tannhäuser while not giving up her realm of innocence. Rieger repeatedly displays keen powers of perception, as in the case of



Mathilde Wesendonck in a portrait by Carl F. Sohn (1850) that reinforces the conventional image of Mathilde as innocent, passive muse

Mathilde and Otto in their villa on the other side, neither getting any either – must have been horrendously supercharged, what with everyone furthermore abjuring the sin of Onan. The Master must have had spunk just about coming out of his ears. No wonder he wrote *Tristan*. I mean, who wouldn't have? Rieger points out that the result of all this tension was a portrayal of a woman – Isolde – who openly shows her physical desire, something that was 'positively revolutionary' at the time (p. 106). And in *Walküre*, also written as an expression of Wagner's passion for Mathilde, Rieger notes a feminisation of Siegmund, who abandons his calling as 'hero' on account of his all-encompassing love for Sieglinde. In *Siegfried*, however, Rieger sees the relationship between the sexes as once more asymmetrical, for in order to love Siegfried, Brünnhilde has to give up all she has and all she was; she has to be 'tamed' (p. 186). And in *Götterdämmerung*, although she avenges her betrayal by aiding Hagen in his murder of Siegfried, Brünnhilde 'is denied an active role in the remainder of the plot [...]. Wagner accords this character the power of action, but one that may not extend beyond a certain boundary. At the end, she has to give up herself and thus fall back into the traditional role of woman' (p. 207).

Rieger sees *Die Meistersinger*, in particular the stance of Sachs towards Eva, as Wagner's response to his loss of Mathilde Wesendonck, which he turns around in order to interpret it as a deed of active 'renunciation' on his part (as opposed to being left in the lurch, which in fact he was). And *Parsifal* (whose prose sketch dates from 1865) continues this theme, she says, resulting in Wagner's 'denunciation of female sexuality' altogether (p. 230).

Ortrud, in whom she sees Wagner's horror of women who involved themselves in power politics.

The meatiest part of this book deals with *Tristan* and *Die Walküre*, both written under the influence of Wagner's love for Mathilde Wesendonck – a love that Rieger believes (rightly, to my mind) was never consummated. She also touches on a topic often ignored by Wagner scholars, namely the Master's horror of masturbation as something damaging to both psyche and body. According to Wagner (and here I concur with Rieger that we can believe him), both he and Mathilde ceased sexual relations with their respective spouses. He was obviously hoping this would prompt Mathilde to jump into bed with him at last, though he was wrong. The atmosphere on the Gablerstrasse – Wagner and Minna in their *Asyl* on the one side, neither getting any,

While not all Wagnerians (certainly not all male Wagnerians) will agree with everything that Rieger says, there is much here – all gender politics aside – that comes across as simply making perfect sense. She weaves biography and work skilfully together without descending into superficial comparison or adjusting the facts. Wagner's women pre-Cosima are today slowly getting the attention they have long deserved, and Rieger is to be commended for helping to rescue them from the shadowy existence to which the Master and his *hohe Frau* wittingly condemned them, and for showing us the intensity of their impact on his work.

Wotan's Missing Eye?

Jonathan Burton acclaims a definitive study of the Wagner tuba

William Melton, *The Wagner Tuba: A History* (edition ebenos: Aachen, 2008). 198pp. €24.
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