
BOOK REVIEW

Therese Dolan. *Manet, Wagner, and the Musical Culture of their Time*
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Reviewed by Rachel Orzech

As far as we know, Richard Wagner and Édouard Manet never met in person or communicated directly with one another. And yet, Therese Dolan's most recent book, *Manet, Wagner, and the Musical Culture of Their Time*, uncovers a complex and intriguing web of connections that link the composer and the painter through a fascinating network of art, music, literature, and politics. Dolan uses one of Manet's most significant paintings, *Music in the Tuileries* (1862), as a pivot point for a detailed examination into Manet's artistic networks and the ways in which his artistic, musical and literary colleagues and friends responded to Wagner's music. In particular, Dolan considers the failed and controversial staging of Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser* in Paris in 1861 as highly influential on Manet, his associates, and his *Tuileries* painting (created the year after the *Tannhäuser* affair). She not only reveals the connections between the artistic figures that appear in the painting, but also how they interacted through, and with, a painting and an opera. Dolan explains (p. 3):

In this study I view Wagner's *Tannhäuser* as the intersubjective site mediating the aesthetic experiences of Manet and many of the figures he depicted in *Music of the Tuileries* who were actively involved in defining the emerging characteristics of modernism in the arts. I am interested in how this interpretive community contributed to the construction of the notion of the interrelations of the arts and how Manet may have occluded discussion of the vexed aesthetics of the art, literature, and music of his time in his painting.

The book is organised systematically into seven chapters, most of which focus on an important cultural figure depicted in *Music in the Tuileries*, and that figure's connections with Manet and Wagner. Thus we have chapters on Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Champfleury, Gustave Courbet, Henri Fantin-Latour, and Jacques Offenbach: a veritable pantheon of the artistic world of mid-nineteenth-century Paris. This is, of course, rich material for a scholar of culture, and Dolan makes the most of it with meticulous research using extensive

and diverse primary sources. It is an extremely successful approach that reveals the many threads connecting two men who never met, yet who shared many of the same artistic ideas and were in contact with many of the same people. Indeed, it is surprising that this is the first time a researcher has taken the trouble to investigate all the networks hinted at in the painting, particularly given how much they have to offer, not just for art scholars, but also for those studying music, literature, and culture in nineteenth-century Paris in general.

Chapter 1 establishes the contextual background surrounding Wagner's time in Paris and the difficult Parisian reception of *Tannhäuser* during his second visit. For those familiar with the literature on Wagner's reception in France, this chapter offers no new information, but it does neatly summarise the relevant material to provide a backdrop for the discussions that follow. Chapter 2 introduces the first *Tuileries* protagonist: Charles Baudelaire. The poet and writer is well-chosen for an introduction to Dolan's premise, as he completes the artistic picture by connecting Manet the painter and Wagner the composer through literature. Baudelaire was a keen advocate of both artists, and his case allows Dolan to draw the first triangle in her ever-increasing artistic web. Parallels are drawn between the opposition to *Tannhäuser* and to *Music in the Tuileries*, yet while Dolan has carefully outlined the circumstances and contemporary debates surrounding Wagner's opera, she does not do the same for Manet's painting. The reception of Manet's work is perhaps assumed knowledge for art historians, but for readers coming from a musicological perspective, some more background information would have aided the comparisons.

The web is extended in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, as Gautier, Champfleury, Courbet and Fantin's connections with both Wagner and Manet are illuminated. Furthermore, Dolan also reveals interactions and relationships between Gautier and Baudelaire, Champfleury and Courbet, and Baudelaire and Champfleury, showing just how many interconnections existed between the figures in Manet's painting. Chapter 6 presents a figure who, in many ways, represented all that Wagner detested: Offenbach, a Jewish composer of light operetta who personified the frivolity and hedonism of the Second Empire. Unlike the previous chapters, much of the focus here is on difference and conflict between two figures, rather than similarity and parallels. This provides a welcome change from the slightly formulaic structure of the preceding chapters in which Dolan introduces the protagonist, reveals his connections with Manet and Wagner, and then draws parallels between the ways they approached their art. Some of these parallels are fascinating and worthwhile; for example, in Chapter 5, where Dolan likens Wagner's desire to express the drama of the psyche in his music rather than actual dramatic action to Fantin's interest in depicting inner states of mind rather than imitating real life. Others, however, seem a little forced and superficial; for example, in Chapter 7, where the elaborate backs of the wrought-iron chairs in the lower right-hand corner of *Tuileries* are described as 'variations on playful treble clefs' (p. 214), and Manet's manner of holding his walking stick in the painting is compared to that of a conductor with a baton (p. 223). In any case, the element of conflict introduced by the Offenbach chapter is a necessary contrast to all these parallels; after all, artistic conflict and discord are often far more revealing than similarity and agreement, and it is exactly this that has made Wagner so compelling for so many scholars from so many disciplines.

Chapter 7 is perhaps the most interesting and enlightening of all. Entitled 'Facing the Music: Manet and Wagner,' it pulls together and develops many of the ideas that have been hinted at throughout the book. In particular, Dolan's observations about Manet and Wagner's shared desire for pure expressivity, as opposed to narrative or imitation, are at the heart of

what makes this book important: its investigation into the shared artistic goals and ideals of two men who never met but who moved in many of the same artistic circles in which were circulated some of the most significant and progressive artistic ideas of the time. Manet and Wagner achieved their aims through very different means, yet they were striving for something very similar. Both were attacked for ideas and techniques that were later recognised as integral contributions to the birth of modernism.

The book includes extensive endnotes at the conclusion of each chapter, making the process of following up individual sources much easier than if the endnotes had been placed together at the end of the book. Unfortunately, original French-language versions of the numerous quotations given by Dolan throughout the book are not provided, most likely due to a lack of space. There are, however, some French quotations in footnotes for which an English translation is not provided, which may be rather unhelpful for a non-French-speaking reader. Strangely, too, the large bibliography mixes primary and secondary sources into one list. A study that relies so heavily on press sources should surely have a separate bibliography for primary sources. These quibbles are almost made up for, however, by the generous number of illustrations provided in the book: four beautifully produced colour plates in the middle of the book, and sixty-four black and white illustrations distributed amongst the chapters. The inclusion of this visual aspect to Dolan's study adds another dimension to her arguments.

Although Dolan is more than comfortable discussing music and literature, the discussions of painting technique and composition are the most masterly, and are totally free of jargon, making them a pleasure to read. The abundance of published descriptions and analyses of Wagner's music in existing musicological literature allows Dolan to avoid delving too far into the mechanics of the music. Where she does so, it is clear that she has a sound intuitive understanding of how the music works, and the effect it may have had on audiences. Occasionally, however, the music terminology used to convey this seems badly chosen; for example, more than once she reduces Wagner's music to 'sonic effects' (pp. 3, 111), where in fact she seems to be talking about Wagner's fundamentally revolutionary changes to harmonic language and conventions of operatic music in general. Similarly, she refers to 'traditional music' when discussing musical conventions that were rejected by Wagner (pp. 3, 84, 217). Dolan is at her best when she avoids discussing the mechanics of the music, which have been more than amply analysed by many a music researcher.

Besides these concerns, though, *Manet, Wagner and the Musical Culture of Their Time* offers a new perspective on two works of art—Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and Manet's *Music in the Tuileries*—that have been thoroughly studied from many angles, and whose influence has already been well recognised by scholars. In fact, although the title refers to 'musical culture,' the book goes well beyond this to look at the broader culture of the time. Dolan's innovative approach and scrupulous research offers a fresh look, not only at these works of art, but, more importantly, at the societies and cultural contexts in which they were created.

About the Reviewer

Rachel Orzech is a PhD student at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music and the University of Rouen, France. Her doctoral thesis, to be submitted in mid-2016, examines the reception of Richard Wagner in the Parisian press between 1933 and 1944. She tutors and lectures at the Conservatorium and co-ordinates the Editorial Committee of *Context*.