

BOOK REVIEW

Rachel Orzech. *Claiming Wagner for France: Music and Politics in the Parisian Press 1933–1944*

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Reviewed by Leslie Sprout (eBook)

Rachel Orzech's *Claiming Wagner for France: Music and Politics in the Parisian Press 1933–1944* draws on two overlapping areas of musicological research. The first is French reception of Wagner from the composer's early Paris sojourn (1839 to 1842) to the present day. Passionate debates in the French press over Wagner and *wagnérisme*—his adulation by various French musicians, writers, and artists—intensified during times of military conflict between France and Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Orzech's book builds on the substantial existing scholarship on Wagner reception in France up to the First World War and adds to the growing scholarly work (mostly, but not exclusively, in French) in the second area: musical life in Paris during the Second World War.

During the Occupation, Nazi propaganda officials took as a given the superiority of German music and promoted its performance in France to justify Germany's leading role in the New Europe that Hitler was seeking to create. The Germans used the Paris Opéra as a showcase for Wagner, performed mostly by visiting German companies but sometimes jointly with French musicians in symbolic enactments of Franco-German collaboration. Not to be outdone, the Vichy government poured unprecedented amounts of public funding into the performance of French music in the nation's capital, touting Claude Debussy, with a tinge of defensiveness, as "*notre Wagner* [our Wagner]".¹ Meanwhile, the four main French orchestras in

¹ Yannick Simon, "'Claude de France', notre Wagner. Le culte de Debussy sous l'Occupation", *Cahiers Debussy*, 30 (2006): 5–26.

Paris continued to programme Wagner's music in concert at roughly the same rate as before the war. Occupation-era contestations over Wagner differed from those in earlier Franco-German conflicts in two crucial ways. First, by 1940 the French public had long ceased to object to Wagner on nationalistic grounds. There was no consensus, as there had been during the First World War, that Wagner's music should not be performed by French musicians—not even in the clandestine Resistance press. Second, the Germans now controlled the debate, for their Propaganda Ministry exercised veto power over the repertoire of the Opéra and censored the French press. Both of these factors complicate how we might assess whether the use of Wagner as Nazi propaganda in occupied Paris found traction among the French.

Orzech's book makes a persuasive case that the first of these Occupation-era differences can be traced back to the interwar period. Indeed, her book's originality lies in her decision to begin her exploration of Wagner's reception in occupied Paris not with the French armistice with Germany in June 1940 but in 1933, when Hitler's rise to power in Germany coincided with the *cinquantenaire*, or fiftieth anniversary, of Wagner's death. The result is a detailed view of how attitudes in France towards Wagner's music differed not only from the First to the Second World War, but also how those attitudes manifested in the French press in what might be considered two phases of the Second World War: from 1933 to 1939, when a democratic France had a front-row seat to the Nazification of Germany, and from 1940 to 1944, when Paris was occupied by the German military. From 1921 to 1939, Wagner's operas averaged between 13 and 28% of all operas performed at the Paris Opéra, with the peak occurring in 1933 during the *cinquantenaire* (p. 31). In Chapter 1, Orzech studies the press response to the Wagner *cinquantenaire* celebrations in France, during which critics were keen to put a positive spin on Wagner's famously antagonistic relationship with France. They recast Wagner's early struggles in Paris, in Orzech's words, as 'enlightenment through hardship' (p. 41), listed his many French admirers during his lifetime (Charles Baudelaire, Judith Gautier), and stressed how what critic Pierro Porro called 'the stupid cabal' of *Tannhäuser* in 1861 was something for which 'France has ... done its best to make amends' (p. 39). While a minority on the far right saw kinship with Wagner's, and Hitler's, antisemitism, most mainstream critics were appalled by the Nazi appropriation of Wagner in Germany. They praised, and echoed, Thomas Mann's insistence that Wagner's music was made not just for Germany, but 'for the larger world' (p. 61).

Nazi appropriation of Wagner is on full display in Chapter 2's examination of Franco-German cultural diplomacy in 1933 to 1939, culminating in the Week of German Arts at the Exposition universelle in September 1937, during which Germany presented stunning performances of Wagner's operas by the Berlin Staatsoper. Given that reconciliation between France and Germany was an attractive goal to many in France—and what better than a shared love of the same composer to unite the people of the two nations—the Germans used French enthusiasm for high-quality productions of Wagner as an opening to display what the Germans saw as their cultural superiority. Orzech overplays her hand, however, when she interprets French critics expressing admiration for these German performances as having 'uncritically internalized the idea of German cultural superiority' (p. 96). She cites as evidence admiring reviews such as Charles Tenroc's of Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting *Tristan* at the Paris Opéra in 1935: 'we must recognize the superiority of these German performances ... just as Debussy's and Fauré's styles are the monopoly of French performers, and as that of Verdi is that of Italian singers' (pp. 84–85). Yet Tenroc's review is a statement of national pride in French music and musicians, as

well as one of admiration for a renowned German conductor. Orzech's claim at the chapter's end that 'these kinds of attitudes in the Parisian press ... were to pave the way for the rhetoric of Franco-German cultural collaboration under the Occupation' (p. 96) is already on shaky ground.

Similar issues mar Chapter 3, which follows French critics' voyages to the heart of the Nazi cult of Wagner in Bayreuth from 1933 to 1943. They saw first-hand the politicisation of the annual festival at the hands of Winifred Wagner (widow of Wagner's son, Siegfried) under the influence of Hitler and the Nazi Party. Orzech notes that Parisian critics were less likely to object to the Nazification of Wagner in their accounts of the Bayreuth Festival than in their reviews of the 1933 *cinquantenaire* performances in Paris. She concludes without evidence that this difference is due to their 'susceptibility to the lure of fascism and Nazi aesthetics' (p. 129). Yet in Bayreuth the critics had a different agenda: to provide detailed eyewitness reports of Nazi appropriation on the ground in Germany for French readers back home, rather than to defend the right of French musicians to perform Wagner in France. Orzech ascribes emotions—'attraction', 'confusion', 'repulsion'—to French critics that are not expressed in the passages she cites, and occasionally misleadingly cites, from their reviews. When Paul Achard proclaims that, 'on coming out of the last performance of the masterpiece of masterpieces ... I am ready to raise my right hand to swear and say Heil Hitler!' he has not, as Orzech claims, been 'carried away by [the] successful implementation [of the politicisation of art] at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus' (p. 117). Before Orzech's quote, Achard reports that it is Hitler's intention to ban performances of *Parsifal* anywhere except at Bayreuth that he is saluting; her ellipses replace the words 'I approve of this project'. Why? Because, Achard explains next, only the Bayreuth Festival is capable of 'staying purely faithful to the intentions of the master': Wagner.² Achard's language is appalling, even for 1933, but his topic is performance practice, not political indoctrination, just as it was for Tenroc and the French critics reviewing visiting German musicians in Paris. As in Chapter 2, Orzech claims that 'this deep-seated attraction to aspects of Nazism surely contributes to ... the way in which German authorities were able to successfully implement the programs of Franco-German cultural collaboration' (p. 122). In fact, only a minority of French critics openly admired Nazism in their Bayreuth reviews, and, as Orzech herself demonstrates in Chapters 4 and 5, Occupation-era cultural collaboration gained little traction in France beyond the few critics who were already true believers.

We now arrive at the second Occupation-era difference in Wagner reception in France. Orzech is careful in her introduction to acknowledge that 'the Occupation-era press ... brings its own set of challenges for researchers' (p. 24) and that, due to German control and censorship, 'care needs to be taken in the interpretation of these sources' (p. 26). Surprisingly, she chose not to consult a rich source of behind-the-scenes contextualisation of German control: the archives of the German Propaganda Ministry in France. In Chapter 4, she provides a compelling summary of the ambivalence the French felt about foregoing Wagner after the September 1939 declaration of war against Germany, and of the French eagerness to resume performing Wagner in 1940 after the armistice was signed. She also reports on German censors' tolerance of dissenting views among French critics, who felt at liberty to complain when French orchestras performed Wagner rather than music by French composers, even when they were reviewing concerts that were part of German-sponsored propaganda events. But she inaccurately characterises the

² Paul Achard, 'Impressions de Bayreuth', *Comœdia*, 28 August 1933, 1–2.

dissenting critics as not just 'supportive of cultural collaboration', as she did in her introduction (p. 26), but 'supportive of the regime' (p. 168). The difference is critical. Marcel Delannoy and Arthur Honegger were pilloried after the war for giving favorable reviews to German cultural productions in collaborationist newspapers as if nothing in Paris had changed, but neither ever joined Lucienne Delforge in supporting the regime itself. These types of distinctions matter even more in Chapter 5, which covers Wagner performances at the Paris Opéra, mostly in German by visiting German companies. Orzech correctly notes that the 'formulaic nature' of most French reviews of German productions, such as a 1941 *Tristan* by the Berlin Staatsoper, 'suggests that much of the basic content was dictated by authorities directly to the journalists' in regular press briefings, and that only a few French critics (in this case, Louise Humbert) had 'taken on the collaborationist enterprise with energy and vigor' (p. 196). It thus comes as a surprise when, in the last sentence of the book, Orzech describes overall French reviews of this very production as 'consistently rapturous praise' (p. 219). As for the impact of German propaganda, the Occupation-era press—even the clandestine newsletters she cites—only tells part of the story. German propaganda archives reveal that, in the relatively freer southern region, French audiences openly protested performances of visiting German musicians, as occurred in May 1942 in Lyon and Marseille, where the French police had to use tear gas on the crowds.³ I doubt these audience members would agree with Orzech's assessment that 'the German approach in the matter of culture was one of subtle seduction, not blunt propaganda' (p. 212). For the record, among symphonies by Haydn and Schubert, Clemens Krauss and the Berlin Philharmonic performed the overture to *Tannhäuser*.

Orzech's book is an important contribution to studies of French Wagner reception and Franco-German cultural exchange, from Hitler's rise to power in 1933 through the *drôle de guerre* in 1939 and early 1940. She highlights parallels between Wagner performances by German musicians as Nazi cultural propaganda in Paris at the 1937 Exposition universelle and at the Opéra during the Occupation. Certainly there were French critics whose admiration for these performances spilled over into attraction to Nazism and antisemitism. But they were just as much a minority during the Occupation as they were in the 1930s. There is little evidence that Germany's musical propaganda convinced anyone else of France's cultural inferiority. Here is what we do know. French audiences consistently embraced Wagner before, during and after the Second World War. French critics openly admired high-quality German performances of his music in Paris in the 1930s and, apart from a few zealots, dutifully parroted German-provided words of praise for them during the Occupation. Some French people chose concerts by visiting German performers as sites of public protest against Nazi Germany when and where they could, in southern France before the German military occupied the entire country. For careful readers, Orzech herself provides much of the needed evidence. Sometimes, however, one has to read between the lines.

About the Author

Leslie Sprout is professor of music at Drew University and author of *The Musical Legacy of Wartime France* (University of California Press, 2013). Her scholarship focuses on music, modernism, and national identity in twentieth-century France. Her work has been published in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, the *Journal of Musicology*, and the *New York Times*.

³ Karine Le Bail, *La musique au pas. Être musicien sous l'Occupation* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2016).