

### A View from the Pit

Roger Allen appraises the reflections of one of today's leading Wagnerian interpreters

Christian Thielemann, *My Life with Wagner*, tr. Anthea Bell (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 2015). 267 pp. £25. ISBN 978-0-297-60855-4

There can be little doubt that the conductor Christian Thielemann (b.1959) is one of the most prominent and influential figures in the Wagnerian firmament today. From his debut in 1985 conducting a concert performance of *Rienzi* to his appointment in 2015 as only the second ever Musikdirektor of the Bayreuth Festival, he has emerged as what might be seen as the latest in a long line of Wagner conductors extending back through his mentor Herbert von Karajan and his admired predecessors Hans Knappertsbusch and Wilhelm Furtwängler to such legendary figures as Hans Richter, Hans von Bülow and thus to Wagner himself. Or that, at least from the evidence of his book, is how Thielemann would like to be regarded. Thielemann was born around the time of the building of the Berlin wall and raised in a comfortable middle class (*gut-bürgerlich*) suburb of what was then West Berlin. He rather darkly tells the reader that he is of the generation that was 'supposed to hate German music and particularly that of Wagner' (p. 7). He does not elaborate, in fact there is little in the way of biographical information throughout the book, but there is an unsettling sense here of the social and political mores that scarred the life of the divided city and drove him on in his ambition. It was Thielemann's encounter with Herbert von Karajan, then at the height of his prestige and influence as Europe's musical power broker, that proved decisive: although Thielemann did not win the 1985 Karajan conducting competition, it was sufficient that Karajan was impressed.

Thielemann's narrative will primarily be of interest for the first-hand accounts of the workings of the Bayreuth Festival – that not altogether comfortable synthesis of period performing space, composer shrine, plutocratic meeting place and experimental operatic laboratory. The descriptions of the peculiarities of the Festival Theatre and the mechanics of the preparation of Wagner operas at Bayreuth are among the most engaging in the book. In the quirkily entitled chapter 'Cobwebs, Solemnity, Sausage Salad: Bayreuth and its Green Hill', Thielemann acts as our personal guide. The reader is solemnly encouraged to imagine the theatre itself as a living entity: 'It breathes, it listens, it looks at you. And it is on its guard. You must be wide awake when you set foot in it, and you must be able to abandon yourself to it' (p. 55). Or as the Brothers Grimm might have said in a rather more succinct manner, 'Grandmother, what big eyes and ears you've got'. As Thielemann warms to his subject this familiar theme of German Romanticism is further invoked in the description of the orchestra pit ('Der mystische Abgrund'). We are told to imagine 'the smell of the wood, the pitch darkness [...]. Wagner's music has settled deep in the pores, fibres and crevices of the pit; you feel as if it has actually impregnated the old timbers' (p. 60). The Brothers themselves, in one of their more metaphor-laden tales of the old German forests, could not have done better. We are taken down, as if into Nibelheim, into the bowels of the theatre itself; but once we are there among the heavy brass (carefully avoiding on our descent the overweight

players with long hair seated on the back desks) we are reminded of the quotidian: it comes as no surprise to learn that the orchestra pit is an uncomfortable working environment; that the peculiarities of the legendary acoustic are not always favourable to the conductor and can cause considerable problems of ensemble and balance.

It is this mix of factual description spiced with personal reflection and anecdote based on first-hand experience that gives this book its considerable appeal. There is also a good deal of sound, practical, common-sense advice for aspiring young conductors. Thielemann is at pains to dispel any notions of the conductor as Romantic genius who arrives on the podium fully formed, awaiting for 'Wagner's torrents of sound to wash around you' (p. 99). All good performances are grounded in the workshop, in the craft of conducting, which is gained through the experience of being a Kapellmeister. Thielemann is uncompromising on this point: only through hard study and rigorous apprenticeship in the practicalities of the opera house does the conductor acquire the skills and stamina to tackle complex Wagner scores – or any scores for that matter. There are also some hard-hitting observations about the increasing commercialisation of music and its effect on artistic endeavour. The chapter 'What makes a good Performance' is unsparing in its criticisms of contemporary operatic culture and the ever-increasing demands made on singers: 'On principle, I am convinced that specialisation costs more than we get out of it' (p. 119).

In his guided tour of the conductors' Hall of Fame, Thielemann unsurprisingly reserves his most generous praise for his predecessors Hans Knappertsbusch and Wilhelm Furtwängler. Although he does not explicitly say so, it is clear that he considers himself to be the keeper of the flame; yet he is also appreciative of the work done by Pierre Boulez to remove layers of accretion and for the achievements of, among others, Daniel Barenboim and the now little-known Horst Stein. He identifies conductors who have not succeeded at Bayreuth but discreetly does not ascribe specific failings to individuals. It really all depends on whether the omnipresent Festspielhaus takes to you or not! His affection for the late Gudrun and Wolfgang Wagner is genuine, as is his admiration of the current festival director, Katharina Wagner; but the notion of the Bayreuth company forming a Utopian summer gathering in which all individual egos are sublimated to the greater artistic good seems somewhat far-fetched in the context of the internecine blood-lettings, territorial banishments and artistic disputes reported in the press and online as the public face of Bayreuth. Richard Wagner did not achieve such an ideal state in 1876 and it is unlikely to exist now. Not everyone can view the situation from such lofty heights as the Kapellmeister-in-Residence, who after all has his own reasons for being grateful to the status quo. The true state of affairs probably lies somewhere between the two extremes.

Thielemann intriguingly describes ideology in Wagner as a 'Very German Subject'. If so, his is a very German take on the problem. There is nothing polemical and little that is unexpected. The familiar tropes are all here: it is not disputed that Wagner gave the growing anti-Semitic movement of his time an aesthetic face; he finds no evidence of anti-Semitic caricature in Wagner's works; he is strong in his defence of Wagner against the more strident assertions of critics such as Hartmut Zelinsky and asks the entirely reasonable question whether such critics are violating Wagner's works over again (p. 91). It is refreshing to read of Thielemann's high personal regard for Mendelssohn and

his identification of Mendelssohnian influences in Wagner's own music, e.g. the motivic resemblance between the *Rheingold* Prelude and Mendelssohn's overture *The Fair Melusine*. He says little about Bayreuth's Nazi past, although he is frank in his admission that the 'Festival has a certain amount of leeway to make up in the matter of "coming to terms with the past"' (p. 93). The English translation of the German word 'Nachholbedarf' as 'leeway' is problematic – 'catching up to do' is closer to the meaning of the German text and subtly different in nuance to the notion of freedom or flexibility implied by the use of 'leeway'. As the translator notes, the German term 'Vergangenheitsbewältigung', enclosed in scare quotes in the German text and translated as 'coming to terms with the past', has connotations of a cover-up. Thielemann is frank in his criticism of Wolfgang Wagner for cancelling at short notice the exhibition announced for the centenary of Winifred Wagner's birth. It is to be hoped that the historical investigation of the Nazi period on the Green Hill commissioned by the current Festival directorship (p. 94) will eventually bring some evidence-based historical clarity to this charged territory.

Part III is a summary of Wagner's operas from a conductor's point of view. There is little in the way of critical engagement with the operas or fresh interpretative insight; but in an autobiographical account this is not really to be expected. It is a particular strength that in his preamble Thielemann stresses the importance of Wagner's early pre-canonical works in understanding his development. It is often forgotten that Wagner completed three works before *Der fliegende Holländer*, including the seldom-performed *Rienzi*. Thielemann quite rightly asks why these works are given so little attention. His survey of the canonical operas is of interest chiefly for the insights into orchestration, casting problems and the practicalities of performance in Bayreuth. As a mixture of opera guide and anecdote it has something of the character of an appendix to the main text and is only partially successful; there is little here about the works themselves that cannot be acquired from published guides or good programme notes. Like many conductors (Furtwängler, for example) he is impatient of an over-theoretical approach, as is apparent in his curt dismissal of arcane attempts to 'analyse' the Tristan chord. 'I think that rummaging around in the theoretical toolbox shows mainly our own inadequacy' (p. 195). Amen to that!

As is to be expected, there are some provocative questions arising from direct experience of the works from the podium. Does Isolde die at the end of *Tristan*? Thielemann does not think so. Is the *Verklärung* a form of transfiguration or actual corporeal death? It is not clear (p. 193). This is a problem that intrigued the late Reginald Goodall, as it does the present reviewer. Thielemann's personal selection of recordings is noteworthy: many of the classics are here but also some of the less familiar, for instance Knappertsbusch's earthy 1955 Bayreuth performance of *Holländer* with its wonderfully stomping sailors and 'tempi fit for a cathedral' (p. 164). Unsurprisingly, there is a strong preference for live performances, culminating in Furtwängler's strongly cast but technically problematic Rome *Ring* of 1953 (p. 237). Refreshingly, this most German of conductors does not exclude colleagues from outside what might be termed the 'German' tradition. Special praise is reserved for Boulez's revisionist *Parsifal* recorded live in Bayreuth in 1970 (p. 249).

We are told in the Acknowledgements that this book is based on strands of conversations subsequently woven into a text by Christine Lemke-Matwey. The English trans-

lation successfully reproduces this conversational style and the text is generally very readable, though there are some unfortunate lapses. This English version of the book, presumably translated from the revised edition of 2013, became available in spring of 2015, at which point Thielemann's performances of Katharina Wagner's new production of *Tristan* at the Bayreuth Festival in the summer of 2015 were some weeks hence; yet the performances are described as already having taken place (p. 114)! The German text shows that this is a simple misidentification of the future tense. It should read: 'In 2015 I will conduct *Tristan* in Bayreuth.' More serious are errors of the type that often occur when the translator is unfamiliar with the subject matter. We are told that the rising young politician Adolf Hitler visited the Bayreuth Festival for the first time in 1923 (p. 93). This is impossible: the Festivals ceased during the First World War and did not resume until 1924. The German text quite correctly describes Hitler's visit to Villa Wahnfried on 1 October 1923 when he also met Houston Stewart Chamberlain. The translator has wrongly assumed that the name of Wagner's villa, at that time the residence of Cosima, Siegfried and Winifred, is synonymous with the Bayreuth Festival itself. The poor standard of proofreading results in some unfortunate errors: e.g. *Tristan* was composed in 1858/9, not 1958/9 (p. 194); it did not take Wagner from 1862 to 1967 to compose *Meistersinger* (p. 203).

This book is above all a personal record. The implications of the title are direct and nothing if not tendentious: *My Life with Wagner* (Mein Leben mit Wagner) simply adds two words to the iconic title of the composer's own autobiography. This might just smack of hubris; although in fairness it must be said that in spite of the occasional moments of self-regard, hubris is not generally a feature of the book, which for the most part is direct in approach and appealing in its enthusiasms. The reader who wants to know more of the world of Wagner in performance will find much to enjoy here. There are some wonderfully vivid descriptions: the image of Karl Böhm combating the heat of the orchestra pit by conducting with his feet in separate bowls of cold water adds a new visual dimension to his recordings of the *Ring* and *Tristan* (p. 60). It is not always easy to identify the difference between factual report and anecdote; but perhaps that is, as we are told somewhat implausibly, because 'it is all part of the family atmosphere and tradition. Anyone who doesn't go along with that, whether out of fear or arrogance, usually drops a brick' (p. 63).