

## Wagner in German Philosophy

IGRS German Philosophy Seminar, January-June 2012

-Philosophy is neither scientific procedure nor the thought-poetry to which positivism, with a ludicrous oxymoron, would like to degrade it, but is a form just as much mediated by, as separate from, that which is different from it. Its hovering nature is nothing other than the expression of what is inexpressible about philosophy. Therein it is truly the sibling of music. This hovering is scarcely capable of being put into words; this may have caused the philosophers, with the partial exception of Nietzsche, to gloss over it. It is more the prerequisite for the comprehension of philosophic texts than its definitive characteristic. It originated historically and may yet fall silent, just as music threatens to do. (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*)

In this seminar series, we will think about music as posing a philosophical question. What is music, what is the significance of music, how is music related to truth? We will do this by investigating and discussing Wagner's controversial place in philosophical thinking since Nietzsche. Wagner is perhaps the most self-consciously philosophical of the great composers. He was a metaphysician whose philosophy was essentially music, the symphonic opera. He had a profound influence on the development of music after him. He deliberately set out to create a new foundation for European culture. His music has been of particular interest to several of the most central figures in German – and wider European – thought since Wagner's time: Nietzsche, Bloch, Adorno and today Lacoue-Labarthe, Badiou and Žižek. For all of them, the relation between the philosophical interpretation of culture and the status of metaphysical questions – in a word, the relation between myth and reason – leads them to engage with Wagner. In the context of English letters, G.B. Shaw's highly influential interpretation of the Ring cycle has to be mentioned as well. Wagner invents mythologies, but also deconstructs myth. His music oscillates between liberation ('Feuerbach') and redemption ('Schopenhauer') and gives us those two extremes as a choice but also as inextricably linked together. Wagner confronts us with the question of the nature and purpose of the 'human' and its place in contemporary culture as an open question. But: Wagner not only eludes and inspires, he also bores and disgusts. It is impossible to mention Wagner without addressing what Bloch called the 'gute Stube', the nauseating aesthetics of bourgeois hypocrisy, as well as the currents of nationalism, racism, (crypto-)fascism that have been such a big part of European culture since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and continue to be so today. Europe as a historical project becomes a nationalistic phantasmagoria (Adorno) in Wagner's operas. That is why, as Bloch wrote in 1929, it is far easier to talk about Wagner than to find ways to inherit his works in performance.

In Wagner and perhaps even more in his reception in European culture, we see a dressed-up nakedness, the flickering light of a broken neon-sign 'Motel', that leaves us wondering what to say about it; leaves us wondering what it is or signifies. That wonder remains after the thought has crept into our minds that it is, perhaps, our own nakedness, and certainly our own Europe, that we are looking at. But the idea that, with that verdict, not all has been said, and perhaps the most important has not been touched upon at all, does not go away. So what is going on? We will address that question by close-reading and discussing selections from philosophical texts about Wagner,

which can be grouped according to a number of, I hope to show dialectically related, interpretative strands:

- a. Wagner's self-understanding. Music as the pure expression of the will: Wagner's music and Schopenhauer's metaphysics.
- b. Wagner and the consequences. Music and Europe as a national-historic project: Wagner and European Nihilism – What is it in Wagner's music that has made it liable to perversion and what is Wagner's relation to nihilism and to the idea of Europe?
- c. Salvaging Wagner. Music as the 'utopian art par excellence' (Bloch): Wagner's formal language breaks open tonality, the closed form of the *Lied*, and melody; his music stays true to his revolutionary beginnings despite the later mythology (Bloch). But even his mythology 'annuls the consolations of mythology' (Badiou), Wagner's music sounds into openness and here lies its distinctiveness as an art-form: "Es ist ein Überholend-Unabgeschlossenes in der Musik, dem noch keine Poesie genug tut, es sei denn diejenige, welche die Musik, möglicherweise, aus sich entwickelt. Die Offenheit dieser Kunst zeigt zugleich, auf besonders eindringliche Art, dass auch für die Inhaltsbeziehung der anderen Künste noch nicht aller Tage Abend gekommen ist." (Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*.)

The first session will be devoted to a general introduction and to establishing ways of working for the duration of the seminar series. A precise schedule of readings will be determined then. By way of introduction, participants can read Brian Magee's monograph as well as Ernst Bloch's text „Richard Wagner und die Musik des Weltwillens“ and Slavoj Žižek's essay "The Politics of Redemption. Or why Wagner is worth saving" (the latter two are available in Pdf-format).

#### Readings:

Ad a)

Richard Wagner. *Beethoven*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1953. Originally published in 1870; the text is readily available on the internet.

Arthur Schopenhauer. „Zur Metaphysik der Musik“ (Kap. 39, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung II*). Frankfurt: Insel Verlag 1996 (Hrsg. Wolfgang Freyherr von Löhneysen). Originally published in 1844.

Ernst Bloch. „Richard Wagner und die Musik des Weltwillens“. In: *Leipziger Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Philosophie 1950-1956*, Bd. 4. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1985.

Ad b)

Friedrich Nietzsche. *Der Fall Wagner. Ein Musikanten-Problem*. In: *Kritische Studienausgabe* Bd. 6 (Hrsg. Colli, Montinari). Berlin: DTV/De Gruyter 1988. Originally published in 1888.

Friedrich Nietzsche. „Der europäische Nihilismus. Lenzerheide, den 10. Juni 1887“, with Manfred Riedel's essay „Nietzsches Lenzerheide-Fragment über den Europäischen Nihilismus. Entstehungsgeschichte und Wirkung“. Zollikon-Zürich: Kranich Verlag 2000.

Theodor W. Adorno. „Versuch über Wagner“. In: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 13. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 2003. Originally published in 1952.

Slavoj Žižek. “The Politics of Redemption. Or why Wagner is worth saving”. In: *Lacan: The Silent Partners*. London: Verso 2006.

Ad c)

Ernst Bloch. „Rettung Wagners durch surrealistische Kolportage“, in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit (Gesamtausgabe Bd. 4)*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1962. Originally published in 1935.

Ernst Bloch. „Paradoxa und Pastorale bei Wagner“, in *Literarische Aufsätze (Gesamtausgabe Bd. 9)*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1965.

Theodor W. Adorno. „Wagners Aktualität“. In: *„Ob nach Auschwitz noch sich leben lasse“. Ein philosophisches Lesebuch*. Hrsg. Rolf Tiedemann. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1997.

Alain Badiou. *Five Lessons on Wagner*. London, Verso: 2010. (with Žižek’s Afterword.)

**Background reading:**

George Bernard Shaw. *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung’s Ring*. London, 1898.

Brian Magee. *Wagner and Philosophy*. London: Penguin 2001.

Andrew Bowie. “Pro and Contra Wagner” in: *Music, Philosophy and Modernity*. Cambridge: CUP 2007.

Benjamin Korstvedt. “Wagner’s animal lyricism”, in: *Listening for Utopia in Ernst Bloch’s Musical Philosophy*. Cambridge: CUP 2010.