

consistently examines the notion of revision within the shifting contexts – whether historical, cultural or musical – of the works themselves. Each of the six chapters is scrupulously researched (the bibliography is refreshingly current) and carefully conceived, with an equitable division of musical analysis and historical context, accessible not only to scholars, but also to serious music students. The length of the book is also judiciously concise (perhaps also given its genesis as individual lectures) yet the author does not sacrifice the depth or force of his arguments. The ultimate significance of Parker's contribution is, in his own words, that of 'destabilization'; that is, it implores the reader to cast aside the long-held notion that revision is only a singular act on the road to perfection. Rather, we must be willing to set aside traditional ideas about the existence of a single *Urtext* and/or definitive authorial transmission truly to view any opera in an informed light.

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Simon Williams, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). 193 pp. \$85

Bertolt Brecht is one of the most pronounced opponents of Wagner's aesthetics. For him, *Gesamtkunstwerk* is 'witchcraft', which allures the audience into an 'emotional infection': that is, a total empathy with the emotions of the on-stage characters.<sup>1</sup> In terms of heroism, too, Brecht is radically separated from Wagner in that Bayreuth is inhabited by a host of apotheosized heroes, while for Brecht, 'Unhappy the land where heroes are needed'.<sup>2</sup> Heroism is the thematic focus of Simon Williams's book, which explores Wagner's *oeuvre* from the first completed opera *Die Feen* to the last music-drama *Parsifal*.

Before he analyses individual works of Wagner, Williams provides a typology of the heroes in the first chapter: the romantic, epic and messianic hero. The romantic hero 'has a deep reverence for nature, a tendency to respond to the world through feeling rather than rational cogitation, and the instance that the world can only be understood when viewed from a subjective viewpoint' (p. 8). Williams traces the origin of the romantic hero to Rousseau's 'natural man' ('l'homme sauvage'). He also characterizes a common romantic hero by an intense isolation from society, the most celebrated example of which is Goethe's Werther, and a ceaseless wandering for an unattainable goal, as Byron's hero in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In Williams's typology, the epic hero is endowed with an 'immense strength and courage' and is distinguished by 'the degree to which he corporealizes the most admirable of human traits', not by thought but by action (p. 15). Yet like the romantic hero, the epic hero remains alienated from society, for his heroic action is exerted 'only to the degree that he can stand outside social life', which Williams describes as a 'paradox' (p. 16). In contrast, the messianic hero is an active part of society and makes a tangible impact upon it. Williams's concept of the messianic hero is heavily borrowed from that of Thomas Carlyle, who envisioned the hero as a union of 'heroic charisma and energy with the material forces of society' who will lead society to utopia (p. 18).

<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964): 38 and 94.

<sup>2</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, trans. John Willett (New York: Arcade, 1994): 98.

Based on Cosima's diaries, Williams indicates that Wagner, near the end of his life, read Carlyle extensively and valued him almost as highly as Schopenhauer.

Chapters 2 to 5 are devoted to the analysis of major characters of individual works, which are chronologically divided into four groups: *Die Feen* and *Rienzi*, which Williams calls 'apprentice works'; *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*; the *Ring* cycle; and *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*. Williams identifies the male protagonists of the first two groups as romantic heroes, primarily characterized by their isolation from society. Some of them show other features of the romantic hero; for instance, the Dutchman is a Byronic wanderer, whom Williams associates with the protagonist of Heinrich Marschner's opera *Der Vampyr*, indicating their ironic kinship: the Dutchman longs for death to be liberated from his cursed wandering, while Ruthven yearns for life. Lohengrin is identified as a transitional figure between the romantic and epic hero in the sense that his personal romantic isolation as a supernatural figure is mitigated by his social mission to save Elsa. He is even 'on the verge of becoming the messianic hero', as the opera ends with the suggestion of a vision of a utopia (p. 57).

Williams reads Wotan as another character who traverses different realms of heroism: an epic hero in *Die Walkyrie* and a romantic hero in *Siegfried*. In his chapter on the *Ring*, Williams analyses its protagonists not only in light of his typology of heroism but also from the perspectives of the meaning of death in tragedy. He contends that, for the tragic heroes, death comes 'not as a defeat but as the consummation of a life' and that such heroes achieve true freedom when they will their deaths (p. 71). From this perspective, Williams interprets Brünnhilde as the only character in the *Ring* who is endowed with that capacity, surpassing the magnitude of Siegmund, Siegfried and Wotan. His discussion of other major female characters, such as Elisabeth and Senta, also focuses on their compassion-driven, self-sacrificial deaths, which is for him 'the most basic quality of all heroism' (p. 91). Considering this, it is puzzling when Williams proclaims that his discussion of the three modes of heroism is 'exclusively' devoted to Wagner's male characters (p. 3).

In the last group of Wagner's music-dramas, Williams finds the progressive development of messianic heroism, which culminates in *Parsifal*. He distinguishes Parsifal from Wagner's earlier male protagonists primarily by the fact that he first appears as a 'passive hero' – a nameless boy and a pure fool – and that he redeems the grail community not by his death but by his Christ-like saintliness. As in many works by Wagner, the central female character, Kundry, dies, but in Williams's view her death is different from that of Wagner's typical heroines in that it does not function as a sacrifice to redeem the male protagonists but represents 'the demise of female sexuality' (p. 141). Although Williams's interpretation of Kundry's character is common – shared by such scholars as Jean-Jacques Nattiez, who describes Kundry's death as the 'perishing of womankind'<sup>3</sup> – Kundry's relationship with Parsifal is more complex and symbolic for other scholars. Barry Emslie, for instance, argues that it is Kundry's kiss that imbues Parsifal with redeeming power, and in this respect he regards her as Parsifal's redeemer, 'the true albeit disguised Redeemer'.<sup>4</sup> The view that reads Kundry and Parsifal in the

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993): 291.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Emslie, 'Woman as Image and Narrative in Wagner's *Parsifal*: A Case Study', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3 (July 1991): 121.

context of the gender dichotomy is problematic, considering the androgynous character Wagner intended for Parsifal: 'neither man nor woman', the figure that has 'an almost feminine face adorned with a beard'.<sup>5</sup> Williams suggests the complexity of Kundry's character beyond the embodiment of female sexuality when he states that 'Kundry stands for something more powerful' (p. 137), but he does not elaborate on it.

Williams's final chapter focuses on the staging of Wagner after his death. For him, realistic production privileges external landscapes over the inner lives of the characters and, given this, it is 'particularly inappropriate' for the expression of the complexity of Wagner's heroism, whether romantic, epic or messianic (p. 151). Instead, Williams advocates minimalist staging, represented by Adolphe Appia's and Wieland Wagner's, on the grounds that it allows the audience to focus on the psychological depth of the heroic action. In Williams's view, the heroic ethos of Wagner's work became archaic in such revisionist productions as Patrice Chéreau's centennial production of the *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth, and the Stuttgart *Ring* produced between 1999 and 2000. He argues that Chéreau's *Ring* defies 'the entire hypothesis upon which Wagner's constructs of heroism are based' (p. 157). His view on the Stuttgart *Ring* is similar: it makes 'no allowances for heroism' (p. 167). In spite of their undoing of heroism, however, Williams's overall critique of these types of productions is positive, as he values hermeneutic enrichment of Wagner's music-dramas through unorthodox staging, and his book ends with a strong conviction of their immortal potency: 'The music-dramas continue to be compelling, even when theatre does all it can to repudiate their heroic dimensions' (p. 167).

Throughout the book, Williams applies the term 'music-drama' to all of Wagner's stage works beginning with *The Flying Dutchman*. In the standard studies of Wagner, however, the term is generally used for the post-*Lohengrin* period. In his essay 'Über die Benennung "Musikdrama"' (1872), Wagner rejected the term, which was not his own designation, and invited suggestions for a more appropriate name for his later stage works. Williams states in a footnote that his application of the term follows Wagner's (n. 6, p. 170). But since he does not reveal the source, it remains puzzling. Another elusive element of his book is the link he makes between Wagner's music-dramas and Samuel Beckett's theatre of the absurd. He contends that Wagner's heroes, from the Dutchman to Parsifal, share 'the underlying condition of life as repetition', which he regards as the basis of absurdism (p. 162). However, it seems to me that the formal distance between Wagnerian theatre and Beckett's is more prominent than what they share.

Occasional weakness and ambiguity in his argument, however, should not overshadow the merits of Williams's study. It sheds new light on Wagner's works by approaching them from the illuminating perspectives of heroism, exploring a host of literary theories that are not commonly consulted in musicological studies of Wagner. In addition to heroism, Williams's book touches upon intriguing issues that have attracted growing attention in recent interdisciplinary studies of opera: for instance, his discussion of death as the consummation of a life is fully explored in Linda and Michael Hutcheon's book *Opera: The Art of Dying* in the

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2 vols, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977): II, 499.

context of Western concepts of mortality, as manifested in opera.<sup>6</sup> *Opera's Second Death* co-authored by Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, also elucidates the meaning of operatic death; especially relevant to Williams's study is the section on 'The Death Drive and the Wagnerian Sublime'.<sup>7</sup> Yet unlike Žižek and Dolar's study, Williams's language is not too abstruse for non-specialists. Having evolved from the lectures delivered at the Bayreuth Festival between 1999 and 2000, *Wagner and the Romantic Hero* would appeal to general readers as well as scholars in various fields, including literary criticism, theatre and music.

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<sup>6</sup> Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002).