

Paul du Quenoy. *Wagner and the French Muse: Music, Society and Nation in Modern France*

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Reviewed by Rachel Orzech

At the end of his 'Introduction' to *Wagner and the French Muse: Music, Society, and Nation in Modern France*, Paul du Quenoy states (p. 7):

If the reader comes to the last pages having learned that the music, ideas, and phenomenon of Richard Wagner have formed a long-lasting fixture of French cultural life, I would be pleased. But if there should be a deeper realization that culture could in at least one case transcend the nasty political divisions of our unhappy world, I would be ecstatic.

Du Quenoy frequently uses words such as 'transcendence' and 'universality' to describe the appeal of Wagner's music in France and the ways in which Wagner reception has intersected with the Franco-German political relationship over the last 170 years. The book's purpose, he writes, is to 'explore the diffusion of the Wagnerian phenomenon across one of the greatest political fault lines in modern history: the long-standing antagonism between Germany and France' (p. 2). Yet given the historical and political complexities of such an antagonism, and the fact that it underwent significant changes and developments over the period surveyed by du Quenoy, his insistence on the ability of art to 'transcend' politics seems to be at odds with his subject matter. If there is one composer whose reception has always been deeply tied up with political debate and controversy (particularly in France), surely it would be Richard Wagner.

Wagner and the French Muse is structured chronologically, making it easy for a reader to choose a particular period of interest on which to focus, or to trace the evolution of Wagner reception in France over time. In this sense, the book has some use as a basic chronological outline of the history of Wagner reception in France, particularly for students who may be interested in the subject, or may need a starting point from which to find existing literature on this topic. Du Quenoy's writing style is clear and engaging and he provides numerous quotes and anecdotes to colour the writing and maintain a reader's interest. The disadvantage of this kind of approach is that the author rarely allows himself to analyse an issue or event in much detail, or to draw out interesting themes that may occur or evolve across the different time periods in question. Each issue or event is introduced, fleshed out with a few quotes and some support from secondary literature, and then the author moves on. The book is divided into six short chapters, with the first two devoted to the reception of Wagner in France during his lifetime; the other four are divided according to the dates of the two world wars. The last chapter ends in 2009, allowing for some reflection on French Wagner reception in our own time and its possible future directions. An adequate bibliography is provided, including an impressive list of primary sources; the list of secondary sources is more limited. The index is useful for locating people, events, organisations or works, but does not extend to ideas or movements. Four illustrations—all from 'the author's collection'—are included, with varying degrees of success: all are quite small and one is very blurry, which suggests that they were chosen for their availability rather than their ability to illustrate the text.

Du Quenoy justifies his chosen topic convincingly in the 'Introduction.' He is correct in his assertions that studies on Wagner and France tend to be focused on short time periods and to be limited to one aspect of Wagner reception (pp. 3–4); there is no single study in English that gives a comprehensive overview of the Wagner phenomenon in France and how it has changed over time. In this sense, a book claiming, as du Quenoy's does, to look at French Wagner reception over the *longue durée* and to draw some broader conclusions than those that have already been made, is a welcome addition to existing scholarship in this area. Yet *Wagner and the French Muse* is somewhat disappointing in this respect, for two main reasons. The first is that du Quenoy has a tendency to provide well-written summaries of the existing literature on Wagner and France, rather than building upon that literature and presenting original research to fill out the parts of the picture that have not yet been studied in much detail. For instance, Chapter V: 'Honeymoon to Bayreuth: In Peace and War, 1918–1944,' covers both the interwar period—a time of vigorous debate over national identity in France—and World War II, during which France was occupied by German forces. There is very little available research

on Wagner reception during this period (little at least in English) and it seems a shame that du Quenoy does not take the opportunity to examine more thoroughly a period when Franco-German relations developed in such a dramatic manner. This fifth chapter concludes with the following statement (p. 162):

a de-nationalization of the performing arts characterized wartime attitudes toward German music in general and Wagner in particular. For better or worse, it was the submersion of the Wagnerian tradition into a larger 'European' cultural context that defined the approach of many Frenchmen to the German composer's legacy up to and during World War II.

It does not appear to have occurred to du Quenoy here that overt manifestations of Franco-German cultural tensions would have been unlikely during World War II, given the fact that France was under German occupation. In fact, earlier in the chapter, du Quenoy actually quotes recent scholarship that demonstrates the existence of a kind of cultural occupation which was imposed by the Germans to 'pacify the French' and 'weaken their sense of national identity' (p. 154). Thus to see this as evidence of the 'de-nationalization' of cultural discourse seems to miss the point.

A second source of disappointment was the oversimplicity of the book's conclusion, to which I have already alluded. The importance of a work that draws broad conclusions about the French reception of Wagner against a background of long-standing Franco-German political tensions is undeniable, yet when the main conclusion of that work appears to be that those tensions did not ultimately have a significant impact on reception, questions must be asked either about the premise of the book, the depth of its research or the validity of the conclusion.

Other research conducted on the French reception of Wagner suggests that the opposite of du Quenoy's conclusion is true. Jane F. Fulcher and Katharine Ellis have both produced fascinating analyses of the ways in which Wagner's music and ideas were used by diverse ideological groups in France in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to define and debate French political and musical identities and to envisage musical futures.¹ Marion Schmid has written of the French press campaign against Wagner during World War I and the ways in which Wagner became a 'pawn' in French cultural and aesthetic debates.² Research into the 1861 *Tannhäuser* debacle and the 1875 publication of *Eine Kapitulation* similarly argues for a view of French Wagner reception as highly political.³ Of course, du Quenoy does not ignore events such as these, but he ultimately concludes that the fact that the French continued to listen to and perform Wagner's music during and after these controversies indicates that the music transcended politics. For example, he argues that the publication of the French translation of *Eine Kapitulation* had little impact on French Wagnerians: 'Nation, state, war, personality all stood

¹ Jane F. Fulcher, 'A Political Barometer of Twentieth-century France: Wagner as Jew or Anti-Semite,' *Musical Quarterly* 84.1 (2000): 41–57; Katharine Ellis, 'Wagnerism and Anti-Wagnerism in the Paris Periodical Press, 1852–1870,' *Von Wagner zum Wagnérisme: Musik, Literatur, Kunst, Politik*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Manuela Schwartz (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 1999), 51–83.

² Marion Schmid, 'À bas Wagner! The French Press Campaign against Wagner during World War I,' *French Music, Culture, and National Identity, 1870–1939*, ed. Barbara L. Kelly (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 77–91.

³ See, for example, chapters on both of these events in Thomas S. Grey, ed., *Richard Wagner and his World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

powerless before the appeal of Wagner's music and the spiritual heights of its enjoyment' (p. 64). Yet this statement directly contradicts the findings of existing (and more in-depth) research on the French response to *Eine Kapitulation*; Steven Huebner and Thomas S. Grey, among others, have argued that Wagner's anti-French farce had a profound impact on French musical life.⁴ In this context it seems difficult to justify du Quenoy's conclusion about the powerlessness of earthly concerns such as nationalism in the face of the spiritual power of Wagner's music.

Du Quenoy's professed 'ecstasy' at the prospect of separating art from politics remains puzzling. Throughout the book he maintains that, despite the entanglement of Wagner and politics in France, Wagner's music triumphed because people kept listening to it. But perhaps people continued to listen to Wagner for the very reason that it *engaged* with politics rather than operating in isolation from it. This proposition would entail considering 'politics' in a broader sense than du Quenoy seems to do, encompassing more than simply relations between France and Germany. Nevertheless, it is perhaps a more productive and interesting way of examining the fascinating, complex and ongoing relationship between Wagner and the French.

⁴ Thomas S. Grey, 'Eine Kapitulation: Aristophanic Operetta as Cultural Warfare in 1870,' *Richard Wagner and His World*, 87–122; Steven Huebner, 'Introduction,' *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style* (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 1–22.