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Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), 201 pp. ISBN 9781783274420

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In his remarkable 1851 polemic, *Opera and Drama*, Richard Wagner characterized Paris as ever-hungry, impatient for the new, and as a city where an ambitious young artist might thrive; indeed, as the 'great devourer of all artistic tendencies'.[1] But such an image also suggests that the city might just as easily chew up and spit out a young composer. It is not surprising that Wagner, at this point living in Zurich, had such contradictory feelings about the French capital. *Opera and Drama* was written in the aftermath of what Jeremy Coleman, in his fine, detailed study of the composer's fraught relationship with the city, characterizes as his 'second assault' on Paris. Having fled the aftermath of the Dresden Uprising of May 1849, in which he had been implicated, Wagner was now a political exile. Like Odysseus searching for Ithaca or perhaps condemned, like the tragic hero of his own 1843 opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, to journey the earth for eternity until the spirit of music finally redeems and releases him, Wagner needed a new home, and so it was that he heard the Sirens of Paris calling. While lodging with the composer Franz Liszt in Weimar, the pair plotted the city's conquest, and, as Coleman describes, drew up plans for 'nothing less than the future of art in the wake of political failure'.[2]

Wagner planned to stage *Tannhäuser* (1845) in the French capital. This opera, with its central character of Venus in her palace of the Venusberg, was a fitting subject for a city he would spend his life both fascinated with and repulsed by. The production, however, did not take place and he would have to wait until he next resided in Paris between 1859–1862 for it finally to happen. The 1861 *Tannhäuser* has gained an almost mythic status, and still, as Coleman points out, dominates the study of Wagner's relationship with Paris. It has also become central to research into subsequent *Wagnérisme* and to its influence on decadence and modernism. Coleman's book, however, seeks to decentralize this event, and in so doing, provides a much-needed nuanced and comprehensive study of Wagner's fraught relationship with Paris over the composer's career. This, in turn, necessarily gives greater context to the 1861 *Tannhäuser*. As Coleman points out, Friedrich Nietzsche – Wagner's one-time close friend – continually remarked that the composer's true home was in Paris, and indeed, even provocatively wondered whether Wagner was German at all, regarding him as intricately bound up with French decadence. Coleman tackles this view through an original and refreshing study of Wagner's own translations. Rather than revisiting established narratives about Wagner's failures in the city, Coleman continually returns to the composer's writings and, persuasively, to the intricacies of his music, with numerous musical examples. This method provides a thought-provoking analysis of what translation might mean as it charts the conflicts in Wagner's work between his claims for music's vital and universal essence and his contradictory desires to meet the demands of Parisian cosmopolitan tastes. Inspired by Franco-German political thought, Wagner perhaps sought a trans-national form of translation that fitted in with his fundamentally exiled outlook, a state of communication apt for his status as a homeless European wanderer, as an exile in search of his Bayreuth, and as a composer of music that, to paraphrase the man himself, was constantly in a process of transition. In charting Wagner's battles with translation between German and French, Coleman interrogates the composer in terms of 'the dialectical interconnections between the global and the local, between the national and the international, between the universal and the particular' (p. 11).

The first chapter studies Wagner's initial residence in Paris from 1839, when he arrived with considerable ambition, keen to make his mark upon the European centre of music, but also

as a young German radical émigré. Coleman takes issue with Wagner's later autobiographical writings, which suggest his move to Paris was a result of financial need. (Wagner tends to mythologize such events, often seeking to present himself in a heroic light.) Rather, Coleman argues, Wagner arrived in Paris with the express aim of conquering the capital by staging his still relatively unknown comic opera, *Das Liebesverbot* (1836) or 'The Ban on Love', a loose two-act adaptation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. Yet despite the composer's ambition, Coleman ultimately detects a certain resistance to Paris' possibilities and attractions, with Wagner perhaps identifying more with his opera's central character, the puritanical German governor Friedrich (Frédéric in the French translation), rather than with the pleasure-seeking citizens of Sicily, where the opera is set. Despite his need to succeed in Paris, translating his work and interpolating new material that would directly appeal to French tastes, Coleman sees Wagner attempting – in contradiction – to retain the vestiges of German distance and authority amongst the deleterious effects of Parisian consumerism.

Chapter Two deals with Wagner's articles about the first performance in a French translation of Weber's opera *Der Freischütz* in 1841 and discusses how he became embroiled in ideas about translation at a time when his own sense of identity was shifting as he developed as an artist. Attacking the replacement of the opera's spoken words with recitatives by Hector Berlioz, written to suit French tastes, Wagner claimed that the opera had become disfigured, was misunderstood, and that its innate Romantic, sentimental German character needed salvaging from French demands. Wagner's own articles also became victims of these same needs, with their references to 'German individuality' deleted so as not to upset the French readership. Thus Wagner began to question whether the heart of German opera could ever be truly translated, while also – contradictorily – believing in an idea of true musical performance as a translation that could somehow reach beyond particularities towards a composer's true intentions, and so capture truth itself by reaching into 'the mine in which the glimmering jewel lies buried' (p. 52).

Chapter Three discusses Wagner's success with *The Flying Dutchman* in Dresden in 1843, which, despite its original conception as an opera to appeal to French tastes (it had been conceived in Paris and partly written in French), he marketed in German nationalist terms. Anxious about the influence of foreign models on the opera, Wagner stated that he had abandoned the 'modern template of operatic numbers and turned instead to legend', claiming that the opera's poetic sense was innately German (p. 75). Coleman details the changes that Wagner made to the orchestration to reflect the demands of German orchestras. He interestingly positions this discussion alongside the composer's issues with a version of the Dutchman legend in a two-act opera performed in Paris in 1841, which had actually originated in a French-language draft he had sold in Paris when he realized that *The Flying Dutchman* was unlikely to premiere in the capital. Wagner feared comparisons, not least negative ones, with his own final version, should the Paris *Dutchman* be presented first, and Coleman neatly presents the wanderings of the anti-hero of Wagner's completed opera as an image of the travails of the work itself.

It is the third part of Coleman's book, which details Wagner's final attempt to besiege Paris with his 1860 concerts and the 1861 *Tannhäuser* production, that will provide the greatest interest for decadence studies. The narrative of 'failure' that surrounds the latter is one of fascination for decadence, given its interest in irresolution, incompleteness, and collapse, although the word 'failure' needs to be qualified in the light of the production's success in finding a central place in fin-de-siècle cultural history. There is, as Coleman points out, a 'formidable' amount of scholarship on the Paris *Tannhäuser*, but he suggests that the usual narrative – that the opera failed and that Wagner was wronged by the 'frivolous' Paris establishment – needs to be reassessed with considerable caution, not least because Wagner himself contributed to the 'dense web of mythology' both around himself and around the production (p. 6). Secondly, he argues that Charles Baudelaire's *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* (1861) has been routinely misread. The pamphlet's text is not concerned with the production but with the series of three concerts that Wagner produced in Paris the previous year. Although he had been writing his pamphlet on-and-off since

these concerts, Baudelaire finally completed it on the same day as the opera's second performance (18 March 1861), which, as Coleman suggests, was surely in order to capitalize (in the financial as well as the cultural sense) on the production's notoriety. Coleman claims that Baudelaire was 'largely indifferent to the [1861] production' as there is 'no indication' that he 'attended either of the first two performances [of the opera]' (p. 149), and from this position he then weaves an interesting and perceptive interpretation. The concert series of 1860 included the overture from *Höllander*, the *Tristan* Prelude, and selections from *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Through a discussion of Baudelaire's layered treatment of *Lohengrin*, Coleman analyses how the poet draws parallels between what he considers to be different 'translations' of this opera's music into language; these include his own comments, but also those of Liszt (whom Baudelaire quotes at length), and Wagner's programme notes. Coleman suggests here that Baudelaire is concerned less with the music as part of an opera and more with the metatextual 'lacuna' between music and attempts to describe it in language, and, thus, finding a common, *a priori* source for his own comments and the corresponding descriptions of Liszt and Wagner. Indeed, Baudelaire then asks us to dispense with the "'aid of a stage production, of decor, of the embodiment of the imagined characters in living actors, and even of the sung word"' (pp. 150–51), to turn away from the trappings of theatrical production and focus on the musical space. Coleman argues that Wagner's music had a profound effect on Baudelaire not in spite of the absence of theatre, but because of it.

Such a view asks us to reassess Baudelaire's reaction to Wagner's music, not least – as Coleman points out – because of the curious points of correspondence between *Les Fleurs du mal* and the composer's music that the poet misses. Baudelaire barely mentions, for example, the Prelude of *Tristan und Isolde*, despite the obvious relationship of this music's themes to his own poetic sensibility. In these latter stages, Coleman essentially wishes to disentangle Wagner from the literary responses to his music, the significance of which may have become 'disproportionate to the actual discursive influence or representativeness that these figures [i.e., Baudelaire, etc.] wielded at the time' (p. 143). Although this view might be arguable, the book nevertheless provides a welcome and perceptive revision of Baudelaire's response. Additionally, by decentralizing the Paris *Tannhäuser* and charting Wagner's changing relations with Paris, Coleman enables us to see the Paris *Tannhäuser* not only as a signal of radical change, but also in terms of ongoing processes of cultural exchange and translation. In this, Coleman's study provides a significant contribution to Wagner Studies. Setting aside established forms of reception history, some of which have sought to present the composer's relationship with Paris in the potentially reductionist terms of rivalry and ambition, Coleman instead foregrounds Wagner's intentions as seen through his music. What emerges instead, despite and indeed because of the contradictions and ambiguities, is a focused, precise and geographically inspired portrait of the composer in the city.

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[1] Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd, 1892–1899), II, p. 75.

[2] Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), p. 105. All subsequent page references are cited parenthetically in the text.