Paris and the Awakening of Wagner's Nationalism

Jelisaveta Mojsilovic

University of Arts in Belgrade

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Abstract

At the beginning of his career, Richard Wagner (1813–1883), was considered a universal composer—a true cosmopolitan. However, indigence, the “bad” tastes of the Parisian audiences, and poor relationships with the managers of French musical institutions had a huge impact on Wagner’s perception of foreign music. Furthermore, the representatives of Parisian music life were indifferent to foreign composers, particularly those of German nationality, and were wary of themes related to German culture. This paper explores Wagner’s first stay in Paris, from 1839 to 1842, through analysis of his writings during that time. A comparison of Wagner’s texts written before his time in Paris and those written after his return to Saxony reveals an emotional intensification towards the German tradition, foreshadowing its zenith in his mature writings and his unconditional turn towards the German tradition.

Keywords

Richard Wagner, Paris, nationalism, German culture, reception history

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Jelisaveta Mojsilovic

Year IV – University of Arts in Belgrade

Introduction

In 1834, Richard Wagner wrote *Die deutsche Oper* (On German Opera). It was the first of many texts in which he critically reviewed and compared music by French, Italian, and German composers. In this article, he criticized German education, calling it the “German devil,” while openly favoring Italian and French music and reflecting on the paradox that “French music acquired its tendency from Gluck, who, albeit a German, has had far less influence on ourselves than on the Frenchmen.”¹ The key sentence of *On German Opera* is the final one, where Wagner concludes that “he will be the master, who neither writes Italian, nor French—or even German.”² From this, it is evident that Wagner considered himself a cosmopolitan composer—at least in 1834.

1. Richard Wagner, “On German Opera,” in *Prose Works*, Vol. 8, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 55.

2. *Ibid.*, 56.

This attitude is also evident in his correspondence with Giacomo Meyerbeer. In Wagner's first letter to the composer in February 1837, he advocated universality:

I cannot forbear to add that in you I behold the perfect embodiment of the task that confronts the German artist, a task you have solved by dint of your having mastered the merits of Italian and French Schools in order to give universal validity to the products of that genius.³

Evidently, Wagner admired Meyerbeer because of his openness to different musical traditions. Written evidence of his own inclination to diverse national schools can also be found in his *Überdeutsches Musikwesen* (On German Music) from 1840, written shortly after he moved to Paris and published in the journal, *Revue et gazette musicale*. In this essay, Wagner explained his views on German music to a French audience and praised French musicians: "No two nations can be imagined whose brotherhood could produce greater and more perfect results for art than Germany and France."⁴ However, three years later, Wagner declared: "For the first time I saw the Rhine—with hot tears in my eyes, I, poor artist, swore eternal fidelity to my German fatherland."⁵ It is impossible to miss his change of tone in his depiction of Germany. Although many

3. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1987), 42–43.

4. *Ibid.*, 569.

5. Richard Wagner, "Autobiographic Sketch," in *Prose Works*, Vol. 1, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 15.

events in Wagner's life influenced the alteration of his nationalistic views, the one of greatest importance was his stay in Paris from 1839 until 1842.

The difference between Wagner's texts written before his time in Paris and those written after his return to Saxony reveal an emotional intensification towards the German tradition, foreshadowing its zenith in his mature writings. In this essay, I analyze his experience in Paris as the motivation for his unconditional turn towards the German tradition. I examine Wagner's texts—both those mentioned above and those written later in his life—as well as secondary sources to contextualize Wagner's stay in Paris.⁶

Wagner's Approach to the Paris Scene

In 1838, as a result of several conflicts with the theatre manager in Riga and a desire to leave the theatrical world of his youth, Wagner decided to move to Paris and make his mark at the center of European opera music. The decision to move to

6. The most valuable of Wagner's publications for my purposes were the autobiographical and programmatic text, *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde* (Communication to my Friends) written in 1851; *Oper und Drama* (Opera and Drama) from 1852; and the autobiography *Mein Leben* (My Life) that he commenced writing in 1865 and finished in 1880. For secondary sources, I used the biography written by Carl Dalhaus and John Deathridge, *The New Grove Wagner*, and that by Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*. For better understanding Wagner's texts, the interpretation by Jurgen Kuhnel was very useful: *The Prose Writings*. In his essay, "Marketing German identity: Richard Wagner's Enterprise," the scholar Nicholas Vazsonyi used Wagner's texts from Paris in a different context, which will be explained in the following sections.

Paris was highly logical given that he envisioned the opera *Rienzi* (which he began to draft in 1837) for “the most glorious scene”—Paris.⁷ From the beginning of his journey to France, Wagner was confronted with numerous problems, including a lack of financial means and illegal border crossings. Nevertheless, these obstacles did not discourage him from pursuing the “large field where all of my ambitious desires will be fulfilled.”⁸

The Paris in which Wagner arrived in 1839 was that of the July Monarchy (1830–1848), ruled by Louis Philippe. In the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century, the French capital was the centre of the operatic world; success there was a great achievement.⁹ Because of the popularity of opera in Paris, there was also a relatively secure income for composers who had their works performed there.¹⁰ Thus, as noted by Wagner's biographer Ernest Newman, “it was no wonder...that the eyes of the ambitious and impecunious Wagner were turned hungrily on this combination of Mecca and Klondyke.”¹¹ Full of ambition, Wagner had high expectations for the Parisian musical scene. For him, at that time, Paris was the place where he could accomplish all that he

7. Richard Wagner, *Moj život*, trans. Snježana Knežević and Višnja Stahuljak (Zagreb: Zora, 1966), 160. *Rienzi* is a grand opera in five acts, modeled on the French opera.

8. *Ibid.*, 173.

9. Barry Millington, *Wagner* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1984), 22.

10. Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner, Vol 1: 1813–1848* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 258.

11. Wagner, *Moj život*, 171.

once dreamed of. Before he traveled to Paris, Wagner's only French contacts in the city were the librettist Eugène Scribe and the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer. Wagner sent Scribe a draft of *Rienzi*, as well as a score for *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love).¹² Soon after that, Wagner decided to leave his position at the theater in Riga and move to Paris; however, the praise from Scribe was merely the trigger for his pre-established intentions.¹³

Once in Paris, Wagner tried to establish contacts with three institutions, only two of which were operatic: the *Théâtre de la Renaissance*, managed by Antenor Joly; and *Grand Opera*, managed by Léon Pillet. The third, the *Conservatoire de Paris*—with an orchestral conductor François Antoine Habeneck at the head—was dedicated to concert performances. Their conductor was especially fond of works by German composers.¹⁴ Wagner was recommended to Joly and to one of the most prolific playwrights in Paris, Théophile Marion Dumersan, by Meyerbeer. Dumersan agreed to perform the *Christopher Columbus* overture and to set *The Ban on Love* at the Théâtre de la Renaissance, and Habeneck agreed to perform the *Columbus* overture, as it was the only instrumental work Wagner had to offer for public performance.¹⁵

12. Ibid.

13. Wagner, "Autobiographic Sketch," 12.

14. Wagner, *Moj život*, 187.

15. Ibid., 190.

Wagner's Inability to Reach the Paris Scene

The main hindrance to Wagner's success in Paris was the lack of vocalists willing to perform his compositions; most rejected him because they thought that the "language of his works will not be appropriate for the Parisian audience."¹⁶ He also had difficulties getting his instrumental works performed; Habeneck rejected Wagner's *Faust* overture—which would later become the first movement of the *Faust Symphony*—because he felt that Wagner had already received sufficient attention. As such, the work did not appear on the programme for some time.¹⁷

In the spring of 1840, largely due to Meyerbeer's assistance, Wagner found some singers who were willing to participate in a forthcoming audition for a Théâtre de la Renaissance production of *The Ban on Love*; however, it did not come to fruition as the theatre closed soon afterwards. Distraught, Wagner concluded that this not merely a coincidence, but that he had been betrayed by those who had made him promises.¹⁸ After the closure of Théâtre de la Renaissance, Wagner hoped—without apparent cause—that *The Ban on Love* would be performed at the *Grand Opera*, even though he did not have the support of its new manager. In his autobiography, *My Life*, the composer wrote that his friends later revealed that Meyerbeer knew about the adversity at Théâtre de la Renaissance.¹⁹

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 191.

In *My Life*, Wagner did not mention the letter that he wrote to Meyerbeer on January 18, 1840. In this letter, he states that Dumersan informed him of a conversation with the manager of Théâtre de la Renaissance, who admitted that he refused Wagner because:

1. He was a German, and young French composers would be highly indignant to see the Renaissance opening its doors to yet another German composer; that—2., he would not give operas that had not been expressly written for his theatre and its singers, that—3., he never gave operas in translation, nor was allowed to do so,—that 4., German music in general was too heavy and learned for his theatre.²⁰

From this statement, one may conclude that the representatives of Parisian music life were indifferent to foreign composers, particularly those of German nationality, and were wary of themes related to German culture. While waiting for the Parisians to overcome this prejudice, Wagner composed a draft of another opera inspired by his travels—*Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman). Although he was hoping to perform it in Paris, he decided, instead, to offer the piece for performance in Germany.²¹ Presumably, he had few reasons for this decision—practical (monetary), and changing attitude towards Paris besides his burgeoning nationalism.

20. Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 64.

21. Wagner, “Autobiographic Sketch,” 8.

Wagner's poverty in Paris affected his work. In order to earn money, he often had to put his compositional efforts aside for more profitable jobs, including editing operas by Italian composers and arranging pieces for piano and string quartets, which he later referred to as "harmful work" that was detrimental to his career.²² He also worked as a journalist, writing articles for the *Revue et gazette musicale*, where he recounted the various injustices he endured in Paris. Ernest Newman described Wagner's circumstances as follows: "The galling contrast between wealth and luxury of Paris and his own poverty and subservience deepened his doubts about a state of society in which men like him were condemned by the accident of birth and fortune to play forever the part of the under-dog."²³

Many other writers have since reflected on Wagner's ill-fated "Paris period." For instance, in his essay, "Marketing German Identity: Richard Wagner's Enterprise," Nicholas Vazsonyi, provides an interesting perspective on Wagner's articles in the *Revue et gazette musicale*. Vazsonyi claims that, by associating his poverty and hardship in Paris with his German nationality, Wagner propagated German attributes in his articles for the *Revue* (as opposed to the French ones):

His professional failure, accompanied by financial hardship and misery, well documented by Wagner himself, awakened feelings of homesickness and patriotism. The psychological-emotional reaction,

22. Ibid.

23. Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 257.

described in all of his autobiographies and repeated in most biographies, distracts from the ways in which this narrative came to define his image. In this tale, to be German was to be poor, to be honest, genuine, to do things for their own sake, and not to be interested in success or commercial gain. To be a German artist was to be willing to suffer for that art, to martyr oneself for it. Wagner was all of these; thus he and the art he produced were “truly” German. Fortunately for Wagner’s image, Paris made him a martyr.²⁴

Vazsonyi further points out that Wagner’s writing for the magazine was his central profession in Paris, and provided compensation, both in the financial and intellectual sense of the word, for his inability to stage his own works at the time. Wagner himself stated in his autobiography that he started writing for the press due to a lack of financial means. Although this could have been the main reason as to why he started writing for the *Revue*, Vazsonyi gives equal weight to the ideological reasons for his writing. Vazsonyi’s argument is incomplete, though, as he fails to mention Wagner’s imprisonment for debt, which—as evidence of utter financial disaster—would have strengthened his argument that “Wagner’s main intention was to ideologically shape his Paris sufferings.”²⁵ Wagner’s imprisonment, shortly before his departure from Paris, is mentioned in a letter by his wife, Mina,

24. Nicholas Vazsonyi, “Marketing German Identity: Richard Wagner’s *Enterprise*,” *German Studies Review* 28, no. 2 (2005): 15, www.jstor.org/stable/30038152.

25. *Ibid.*, 20.

to their friends.²⁶ However, Wagner himself never related this detail of his life in his letters or articles, perhaps accounting for its omission from Vasonyi's study. Perhaps Wagner wanted to blame his financial failure in Paris on his German nationality, but simultaneously maintain his dignity.

Wagner's Attitude towards the French Audience

When he first arrived in Paris, Wagner wanted to conform to the taste of the French audience; however, after the public failure of *The Ban on Love* and *Rienzi*, his attitude changed drastically. In 1842, he grew more and more frustrated and started to criticize Parisian mediocrity, blaming it directly for his misfortunes. One of his main resentments was directed against Meyerbeer, whom he described as an impostor in a letter to Robert Schumann.²⁷ Wagner stated his views on the poor tastes of French audiences from the stance of a German composer: "We Germans delude ourselves dreadfully about the liberal tastes of Paris audiences... But Paris is large; why should one not be able to find 200 people who can acquire a taste for Beethoven's symphonies at the Conservatorie?"²⁸

26. Editorial addition to *My Life*, by the editors of the autobiography, Snježana Knežević and Višnja Stahuljak. See Richard Wagner, *Moj život*, 200.

27. Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 52–53.

28. *Ibid.*, 53. Although Wagner despairs here at the lack of acceptance for German composers in Paris, the Conservatory orchestra evidently did perform music by Beethoven; Wagner heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in 1840, performed by the Conservatory orchestra in brilliant acoustic conditions. The performance left a great impression on Wagner, and materialised in the story, "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven," one of

From this letter, it is evident that Wagner's experiences in Paris deluded his earlier belief in the open-minded nature of Parisian audiences.

Wagner believed that Parisian art connoisseurs did not understand art—or rather, his art—and that this was one of the main problems with the cultural life of Paris. Wagner discusses this in *Opera and Drama*:

In Paris, however, that great city where the most educated connoisseurs and critics can even yet not comprehend what distinction there can possibly be between two famous composers, such as Beethoven and Rossini, excepting mayhap that the one turned his heaven-sent genius to the composition of Operas, the other to writing Symphonies,—in this splendid seat of modern music-wisdom was still to be drawn up a wonderful fresh lease of life for Opera.²⁹

When Wagner wrote *Opera and Drama* in 1852, he was disappointed by his Parisian experience. The entertainment value of the French opera was far beneath what Wagner considered artistic. To him, it seemed that French operatic productions were solely concerned with financial profits, and

the most poetic texts from his Parisian years. However, Wagner was not Beethoven, and compared himself instead to Hector Berlioz, who found it increasingly difficult to achieve recognition for his music in France. Although the orchestra found time on their programmes for the works of Beethoven, they did not make the same effort for less-established German composers.

29. Wagner, *Opera und drama*, 34.

that this devalued traditions and stagnated culture. Wagner wanted to earn a living, but he did not want to compromise his artistic integrity. By writing *Opera and Drama*, he criticized every composer who supported Parisian ideology.³⁰

Instead of Conclusion

During his stay in Paris, Wagner learned that his opera *Rienzi* would be performed in Dresden's opera house. This news instigated a longing for his native land, which he described in *A Communication to My Friends*:

It was the feeling of utter homelessness in Paris, that aroused my yearning for the German homeland; yet this longing was not directed to any old familiar haunt that I must win my way *back* to, but onward to a country pictured in my dreams, an unknown and still-to-be-discovered heaven, of which I knew this thing alone: that I should certainly *never* find it here in Paris.³¹

Here, Germany becomes the object of indefinite longing; there is a sudden rush of fiery, lustful patriotism that Wagner had not expressed before.³²

After three years, a disheartened Wagner left Paris in the spring of 1842. He travelled to Dresden via Thuringia

30. Ibid.

31. Richard Wagner, "A Communication to My Friends," in *Prose Works* Vol. 1, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 307.

32. Ibid., 313.

where he saw the Wartburg Chateau and noted: “How unspeakably homelike and inspiring was the effect upon me of this castle, already hallowed to me!”³³ This experience sparked Wagner’s interest in German mythology, the investigation of which furthered his interest in German traditions and culture.

The text, *A Communication to My Friends*, written a decade after he left Paris, includes numerous statements about his stay there. Before its publication, however, Wagner was exiled from Germany for his role in the Dresden uprising of May 1849. He eventually fled to Switzerland, travelling through Paris to get there.³⁴ This second stay in Paris coincided with the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848–1849, allowing Wagner to see the achievements of the Revolution firsthand.³⁵ As Eduard Hanslick states, the composer hoped that “the victory of the revolution would bring a complete rebirth of art, society and religion, a new theater, a new music.”³⁶ However, the absence of this rebirth triggered a second wave of disappointment for Wagner, who blamed the French for failing to realize his expectations and further embittering his relationship with France.

33. Ibid., 316.

34. Spencer and Millington, *Selected Letters*, 409.

35. Under the influence of Revolution, Wagner wrote the text *Die Kunst in die Revolution* (Art and Revolution).

36. Rüdiger Krohn, “The Revolutionary of 1848–49,” in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. John Deathridge (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 568.

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