

RICHARD WAGNER'S OPERAS IN 21ST CENTURY BALTICS: THE SAME WAGNER OR ANOTHER?

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Abstract

Celebrating the anniversary 200 of Richard Wagner, also the opera theaters of the Baltic States have paid the tribute to the great German composer and thinker by staging several operas, and even a full „Ring” cycle at the Latvian National Opera. Apart from the anniversary, the question of how the ideas of Wagner are interpreted nowadays arises, starting from his concept of the total work of art (Gesamtkunstwerk) and ending up with the stage director as the new author, who recreates the story in a postmodern way, adding new contexts and interpretations to the initial ideas. The paper will analyze particularly the “Ring” cycle in Riga performed fully after a 100 years break, questioning the existing stereotypes related to Wagner’s music and personality that impede to be open for new interpretations and the complex semantic density created by the stage directors. The main aspects will concern the general problematics of the contemporary productions of so called “classical” operas in terms of representation and reception, the postmodern approach to the opera direction, mostly represented by combination of the mythical and archetypal structures of Wagner’s original works with the contexts and references to the modernity and the history of the 20th century, thus re-creating the Wagner’s story in new dimensions to be perceived by the modern opera goer able to uncover different layers of the meanings depending on his knowledge and experience. Also the question of why Wagner is/might be topical nowadays will be discussed.

Keywords: Wagner, opera, postmodernism, contemporary productions, contexts, interpretation

Introduction:

In 2013 the bicentenary of the great German composer Richard Wagner is celebrated throughout the world. This anniversary is marked by numerous productions of Wagner’s famous operas, such as “Tannhäuser”, “Lohengrin”, “Parsifal” and, of course, the “Ring” cycle consisting of “Das Rheingold”, “Die Walküre”, “Siegfried” and “Götterdämmerung” and considered to be the *opus magnum* of his life completed during a quarter of century. 21st century brings postmodernism on the scene of opera theatres more than before, challenging both the critics and the audiences with new stage directors’ interpretations full of contextual and symbolic references to the 20th century socio-historical past uncovering the sources of today’s cultural relativism, questioning the values and reflecting the interplay between the art and the society through opera audiences. Apart from being a composer and author of all librettos of his own operas, Wagner was a progenitive thinker, who widely expressed his theoretical views regarding opera and art in general, which cannot be overlooked. The complexity of the hermeneutics of the contemporary productions of Wagner’s operas is rooted in the multi-layered structure that comprises all symbolic density included in the music and libretto by Wagner himself and different contexts basically chosen by the stage directors and represented mainly in visual symbols making a “collage” of the original material and director’s interpretation. We will see it further in the examples of “Ring” cycle productions by

the Latvian National Opera. But, first of all, let us make a historical excursus about Wagner's relation to the Baltic region.

I.

In the light of 2013 – the bicentenary year of Richard Wagner and 2014 – the year of Riga in the status of European Cultural Capital, Riga has taken the opportunity to emphasize the right to the status of a “Wagnerian city” as Richard Wagner spent two years of his early career (1837.-1839.) in Riga, conducting in Riga German theatre of the time. Among his works from Riga period, the song “Der Tannenbaum” and the libretto of the opera “Rienzi” on Roman tribune should be mentioned. Despite one might say that young Wagner was forced to come to Riga since he was run out of money in Königsberg, which is true, yet, considering the mobility of the time his stop in Riga for few years should not be underestimated at least in terms of contribution to the local musical life and the consequences in terms of development of so called Wagnerism around the Baltic sea in the 19th century and the attitude towards Wagner's musical heritage throughout the 20th century, when the territory of the Baltic States was a battlefield between Russian and German troops in two world wars, and 50 years of Soviet era. The topic of Wagnerism in Baltic States and Scandinavia is widely discussed in the recent and exhaustive research made by Finnish scholar Hannu Salmi (Salmi, 2005) and previously partially covered by Rosamund Bartlett's writings on Wagner's impact on Russian literature and culture, especially Russian symbolism, as well as on changing ideological perspectives in Russia since the end of the 19th century up to the 90ies of the 20th century (Bartlett, 1995). However, since the beginning of the 21st century a new wave of Wagnerism seems to be forming provoked by the bicentenary of Wagner and also by the accessibility to newest opera productions and Wagner's operas among them via periodically available HD transmissions from renown theatres, such as Metropolitan opera New York, Royal opera Covent Garden or Teatro alla Scala, as well as via satellite TV (i.e. *Mezzo*) and DVD recordings.

Statistically, since the millennium the opera theatres of the Baltic States have staged around 15 productions of Wagner's music dramas, including few concert performances and ballet projects based on Wagner's music.

Latvian National Opera	Lithuanian National Opera	Estonian National Opera
<p>“Der Fliegende Holländer” (2003/Andrejs Zagars, LV) Ring cycle: “Das Rheingold” 2006, revival 2013/Stefan Herheim, DE) “Die Walküre” (2007/Viesturs Kairiņš, LV) revival scheduled for 2015 “Siegfried”, (2008/Viesturs Kairiņš, LV) revival scheduled for 2016. “Gotterdammerung” (2011/Viesturs Kairiņš, LV) Full cycle performed in Riga Opera Festival in June, 2013.</p> <p>Other Wagner operas scheduled:</p> <p>“Rienzi” scheduled for 2014/Kirsten Dalholm, DN) “Parsifal” scheduled for (2015/Andrejs Žagars, LV)</p>	<p>“Der Fliegende Holländer” (2004 /Francesca Zambello, USA) “Parsifal” (concert performance) – 2004/cond. Gintaras Rinkievičius “Die Walkure” (2007/Eimuntas Nekrosius, LT) “Parsifal” – guest performance of the Mariinsky Theatre (2009/ Valery Gergiev, director Tony Palmer, UK) “Tristan and Isolde”, a ballet to the music by Richard Wagner 2012/ chor. Krzysztof Pastor, PL “Lohengrin”, (2013/Andrejs Zagars, LV) <i>A co-production between the LNOBT and the Slovak National Theatre</i></p>	<p>“Tannhäuser“, concert performance in Tallin, Pärnu and Tartu (2003.) „Tristan und Isolde“ (2008/Neeme Kuningas, EE) „Parsifal“ (2011/Nicola Raab, DE) „Tannhuser“ (2013/ Daniel Slater, UK)</p>

Considering the resources required for Wagner's music dramas, starting from orchestra musicians, conductors, and singers ready for Wagner repertoire and ending up with the stage directors brave enough to take the challenge, main opera theatres of the Baltic States in the latest decade have proved to be able to handle Wagner. If we see the names of stage directors involved, the balance between local and invited stage directors is proportional: we have 4 Baltic stage directors and 4 invited directors. Riga seems to be the leader in number of Wagner productions and deserves an additional bonus for full "Ring" cycle staged after 100 years, thus justifying its status as "Wagner's city" among Baltic capitals. By the way, after the Second World War, Riga was the first city in USSR where the operas of "ideologically controversial" Richard Wagner were allowed.

All Baltic productions have been staged more or less within a framework of postmodern aesthetics, some of them by the approach of re-creating the story in another chronotope and modifying the plot (i.e. "Das Rheingold" in Riga, "Lohengrin" in Vilnius", "Tannhäuser" in Tallin) that is typical for the *Regietheater* or director's theatre, one of the most widespread postmodern stage direction practices nowadays, particularly in Europe. *Regietheater* is one of the currently flourishing and dominating flows in contemporary opera productions all over the world. Accordingly, the question, whether this trend is sustainable phenomenon or just a temporary fashion, should be put. Has the so called "classical opera" come to the end? As for Wagner's operas, it can be argued, that the *Regietheater* has begun in the middle of the 20th century with experimental minimalist and very symbolic productions by the famous composer's grandson Wieland Wagner, who rooted his concepts in the theories by Adolph Appia and continued by the "French revolution in Bayreuth", namely, the legendary centennial Bayreuth Ring cycle staged by Patrice Chéreau and conducted by Pierre Boulez in 1976. Therefore the *Regietheater* is not necessarily a swearword when talking about opera as far as the idea behind it is to tell an old story in a new way, applying supposedly associative contexts and symbols to bring closer the plot and the audience. No doubt, the stage director in a way has become a new author of the opera, but from the ethical point of view his right to distort the original whole of text and music should be questioned. The big question is what makes a new interpretation different from misinterpretation, especially without set ideological frame? For instance, Rosamund Bartlett who had researched widely the performance and reception history of Wagner's operas in Russia has come to a paradoxical conclusion:

"[...] although Russia's fascination with Wagner had persisted far longer than that of other European countries, it was now something which definitely belonged to the past. It was extraordinary enough that a nineteenth-century composer could exert a hold over Russian creativity as late as 1940, but it was only natural that Wagner's influence should diminish once it became clear that the utopian dreams of an ideal art for the masses which would transform the new socialist society would never become a reality. It is no coincidence that Russian Wagnerism died with the end of Stalinism." (Bartlett, 1995)

Wagner's music dramas are challenging due to their symbolic complexity of the plot and it's relation to the score, due to the existing historical traditions of production and due to different well-settled stereotypes and prejudices about Wagner's music in the audience, both Wagnerians and unprepared spectators, making the second group even more risky in terms of reception, since it is not able to understand the irony, humour and paradoxes often included in post-modern Wagner productions. However, we have to be careful, when we deal with ignorance and trivialization in stage director's concept, when he claims that the plot is old-fashioned or hardly understandable which might be the case of "Lohengrin" staged by Latvian stage director Andrejs Žagars in Vilnius. Relocating the epic story of the plot to the beginning of the 2nd World War (1940) in Vilnius, using the Cathedral of Vilnius for set design and transforming Lohengrin into a commando, who sings "Mein Lieber Schwan..." to a warplane, Žagars claims to "*present to the audience a very vivid, human story. I had no wish to tell a*

story about divine entities and super-humans. My goal is to help people enjoy the magic of Wagner's music without any disturbance." (Zagars, 2013)

As for the supposed prevalence of music over other compounds of opera, there is a paradox about Wagner's music dramas precisely described by the distinguished Wagner scholar Barry Millington:

"But that centre of gravity [of Wagner's works] is itself disputed. If you ask many a passionate Wagnerian what means most to them, they will say 'the music'. They would be content to banish all visual and theatrical distractions, the better to immerse themselves in the warm bath of voluptuous sonorities. Stage production is at best an irrelevance for such people, at worst an irritating distraction. Wagner himself would have been appalled by such self-indulgence. For him, the music drama was a vehicle to make a statement about the world around him and about how it could be improved. The music acted as the fuel to fire the engine." (Millington, 2013)

So, the idea that music should rule and everything else should be subject to it, is not really correct, despite a great deal of the emotional effects of Wagner's operas undeniably is created by his highly symphonic and fascinating scores. What makes Wagner's music dramas topical apart from the bicentenary of their author today? Maybe it is the mood of the liberal 21st century without fixed system of values, including cultural values, when the routines prevail over the ideals. In terms of art, maybe it is longing for "ideal art" that can change people and to wake the emotional side of fully rationalized life. Yet, the concept of "ideal art" in relation to Wagner's heritage is covered by different stereotypes in terms of expectances of the audience. At least, such a hypothesis can be based on mainly negative reactions in the society after the premiere of, for example, "Götterdämmerung" by Viesturs Kairiņš in Latvian National Opera, where he ironically portrays Brünnhilde and Siegfried as hippies – a representation of "the other" - among the mass, whose dresscode is conditioned Soviet 70ies and where Siegfried meets his death from Hagen's spear, which is used during the "haunting scene" as a spit for sausage roasting.



Generally, main reproaches of the audience are directed to the new interpretations by stage directors, since they open new dimensions and largely deal with collective past traumas and grotesques of today's reality (for instance, Frank Kastorf's Ring in Bayreuth festival this year, where the Rheingold is represented as oil and the rest of the plot rotates around the war for oil resources) But, nevertheless, the stage directors are responsible for the "engine", if we use a term chosen by Barry Millington, of the production, the drama, the changeable part of opera performance and the guarantee of the sustainability and long-term development of the

genre. In case of Wagner's operas, whether the production complies with the concept of the "Gesamtkunstwerk" or the total work of art, the synergy of all arts in a musical drama or distorts it partially or completely is stage director's choice and responsibility. The stage director must be ready to compete with his message and story with Wagner's self-created fundamental mythological system based on German and Scandinavian myths and legends. Let's see different examples of how stage directors reflect on the topic. Famous Lithuanian stage director Eimuntas Nekrošius at the time of staging "Die Walküre" in 2007 has stated the following:

"I can't understand the world of contemporary opera productions, everything there is broken and distorted. Opera is losing its sanctity. No one has a right to violate the tradition, because traditional opera has so much charm. Of course, we are living in different times now, so we have to clean off the dust, brush away the spiders' webs – all this needs to be done with great care. [...] The most important task given for every opera director is to let the music flow. It is so hard to restrain yourself, to have limits. It is important to keep the moderation. Music in itself is very eloquent - the director only accommodates it with the visual space. Director is the translator of music." (Nekrošius, 2007)

Latvian stage director Viesturs Kairiņš, who has interpreted last three of the "Ring" cycle operas in Riga, in his turn, to the question about the "end problem" of the "Götterdämmerung", the supposed apocalypses, where the world of gods and men dies in flames and flood, but nothing alike happens in his production, where it all ends with a choir singing a mute anthem behind all dead bodies of the main characters, says:

"If I see a burning rock, it seems to me an artificial property. The total work of art by Wagner today can be, of course, interpreted as a synergy of technologies involved in opera production like, for instance, video and similar visual effects, but I feel the Gesamtkunstwerk more as connection in manner of thinking. Despite the high-quality expensive burning rock on the stage, I would opt for emotion caused by the relationship of the protagonists. I am interested in translations of Wagner's works, of how can we percept his ideas today". (Lusina, 2011)

What we see here, both stage directors use the word „translation" to describe their job for Wagner's opera productions. Opera critic Michael Amundsen, writing about the recent Daniel Slater's production of „Tannhäuser" in Estonian National opera puts the question slightly modified: „Wagner's music is undeniably sublime, but are the moral sentiments of his works relevant to contemporary life?" (Amundsen, 2013). The stage directors choosing the postmodern approach to make an opera production often try to reach the audience and translate the archetypical models of relationship and resolve, for instance, the perpetual contradiction between power and love using the symbols familiar to their contemporaries.



Despite the opinions of the aforementioned directors differ, we can both agree to the statement of Nekrošius that classical operas, and especially Wagner, should be dealt with great care, and also to Kairiss that excessive props like Viking helmets, furs and burning rock in video do not necessarily mean the fulfilment of author's intentions. The translation here runs deep into the constantly transforming space of symbols and meanings, and contexts. Stage director of Wagner operas in 21st century should be a creative translator, who creates new meanings adds new contexts without losing core ideas of Wagner, which have nothing to do with one or another fixed period of time. We (including stage directors) cannot turn back to the end of the 19th century and to see Wagner's music dramas in a way he and his contemporaries saw it, because we cannot ignore our historical and cultural experience that covers more than 150 years after Wagner and exclude it from our perception. Certainly, there are more successful "translations" and failures among contemporary opera productions, including Wagner operas, but none of them deserves a self-righteous judgement that "this is not Wagner" before deeper semantic and semiotic analysis, considering the contexts applied by the stage director and their impact to the general message of the production.

Conclusion:

The contemporary productions of Wagner operas in the 21st century are mainly interpreted via postmodern approach adding new contexts to the archetypal stories. Drama or stage version of the opera is the only changeable compound of the opera genre that ensures the sustainability of the genre in terms of expectancies of opera goers, at the same time attracting new audiences. Wagner's operas today are mainly interpreted via *Regietheater* or director's theatre that allows adding of different meanings and contexts to the original plot, bringing it closed to the audience through recognizable symbols and values.

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