

Wagner and Italy



The magic garden

The meeting of two cultural traditions: a musical genius inspired by the classical Italian landscape.

BY JOACHIM FEST

The variety of Richard Wagner's personal and artistic ties with Italy are known to everyone who has even the slightest acquaintance with the German musician's biography. During his life he had become extraordinarily famous in this country. His fame was due to that brand of Southern enthusiasm and sense of awe for a foreign element – so thoroughly Germanic – that characterizes his music. His numerous journeys in Italy and his long stays there during the latter years of his life made him, along with Verdi, the most beloved, if indeed not popular, musician of his time. He wrote the second act of *Tristan* in Venice; he passed the autumn of 1876 in Naples and Sorrento; he was again in Naples for many months in 1880 and then went to Palermo where he finished *Parzifal*. He finally returned to Venice in September of 1882 and there, in Palazzo Vendramin, died on the 13th. of February in 1883. It is furthermore well known that Wagner and Italy were joined by a bond of reciprocal artistic influence. The uncontested predomi-

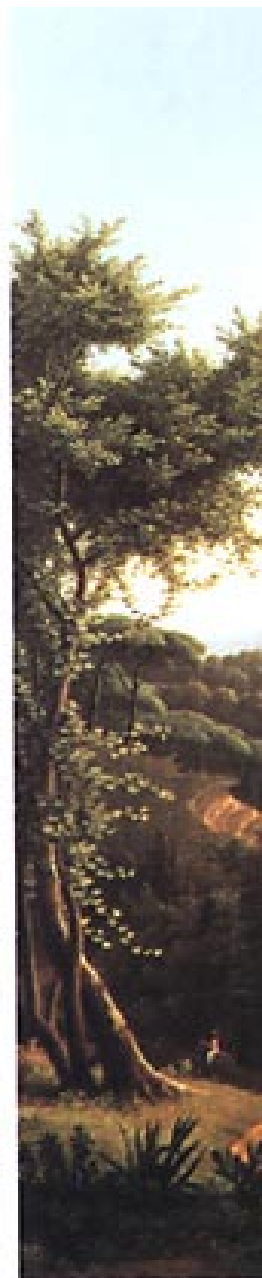
nance of Italian opera in the theaters of the 1830s did not fail to exercise a certain power on Wagner and his contemporaries. He felt that the vivacity and warmth typical of Italian opera were sufficient to grant success even to operas completely lacking in musical genius. The motif of star-crossed love which Wagner employed in an effort to exploit the communicative impact of Italian opera is to be considered in such a context. It is certainly not a theme belonging only to Italian opera, considering that the *Rienzi* displays a strong French influence and that his youthful opera *The Fairies*, while closely bound to Romantic and German taste, moves between both models and reveals the influence of both countries. But Wagner soon freed himself from any external influences. When he was twenty, in an article appearing in the "Elegant Society Journal", he stated that in order to become a true master it was necessary to distance oneself from both Italian and French musical styles – in fact from German style too – and to give life to new musical forms. Those very forms later came

to be defined as the “music of the future”. And yet Italian music never ceased to satisfy that particular sensibility for an effect which was so typically Wagnerian. He once said with a note of reproach to an assistant in Bayreuth who had confessed to knowing Rossini’s overture to the *Gazza Ladra*, “My dear sir, only Beethoven surpasses Rossini.” Similarly, after playing some Bellini motifs on the piano, he made the following observation which Cosima relates in her diary: “In spite of the banality, one finds true passion and sentiment. These songs can be moving only if the right singer is found to interpret them. This music has taught me what Brahms and his friends never learned and I’ve known how to preserve it in my melody.” He didn’t then hesitate to add in this same context that which differentiates his music from that of the Italian master: “Having played the prelude in C minor - Cosima’s diary continues - he affirmed in reference to the melodies whose passionality we appreciated, “This is pour le monde, but this (the prelude) is the world.”

Yet it is often thought that Verdi’s later works, particularly *Otello* and *Falstaff*, are far and above the Italian opera tradition and contain elements of Wagnerian musical drama. In reality there are good reasons to assert that Verdi as well as his contemporaries from start to finish followed different paths than Wagner. Even though from a purely technical point of view they achieved results similar to those of Wagner, and in spite of the many points they shared, he remained an isolated figure. That “measured distance...from the world” of which he spoke after having heard the prelude to *Tristan* for the first time may very well apply to his relationship with his contemporaries and their work for years to follow. Yet in spite of the admiration Wagner received in Italy, this country never experienced a true form of Wagnerism as was seen in varied fashions in England and France. The few possible exceptions in Italy were Gabriele D’Annunzio, a few critics and the librettist Arrigo Boito. And yet Wagner’s romantic pessimism was the forerunner of motifs and typical roles central to the European Decadentism which found such fertile ground in Italy where it manifested itself in original and derivative forms.

Just a few years after Wagner’s death Verdi was trying to dissuade young Italian composers from any involvement in Wagnerism. He stated, “While the Germans, starting with Bach and all the way to Wagner, write operas like real Germans – all we need – we who are descendents of Palestrina, would commit a musical crime to imitate Wagner.” In retrospect, once a few imitative and long forgotten musicians are excluded, Verdi’s warning was unnecessary. He himself was well aware that the insurmountable contrast between plasticity and abstraction, between instinct and speculative delving were sufficient to distinguish him from Wagner. Furthermore, all Italian music of the 19th century was characterized by a hint of the lovely tones reminiscent of those of the accordion. Wagner, on the basis of com-

pletely different concepts, developed an art which was free from outside influences, complex, well constructed, rich in ideas and references and modelled with a kind of tyrannic will-power. Therefore any question of similarity or imitation is somewhat beside the point. Wagner and his contemporaries had little more in common than the mere fact of being contemporaries. If we analyze further evidence we may confirm the thesis that Wagner’s ties to Italy seem to hide a strong lack of real affinity and that his predelections for Italy have little value beyond – with the exception of early works – an example of the taste for tourism in his time. A somewhat more complex note could be introduced by the desire for escape that, from Goethe onward, represents the major motive for many Italian voyages. His very first stay in Venice concerns a need for escape. The same may be said of the trip with Cosima in 1868 that contributed to the decision to break ties with Hans von Bulow. Again in the autumn of 1876 when Wagner, wearied and determined to “never again” repeat the experience of the first Bayreuth Festival, left for a rather long stay in Naples and Sorrento in order to “never again hear nor see anything of the world – especially of our horrible operatic theater” – as he wrote to Ludwig II. In fact Richard Wagner was seeking in Italy what had long been the goal of the traveler’s quest in that land. The great creator of myths took part, like everyone else in that bourgeoisie myth of an Italian journey, in search for a milder climate, beauty and a simpler way of life. “Les doux accents d’Italie” was one of his often repeated phrases. Furthermore, in Italy he sought relief from nervous ailments that gave him no rest. He suffered from shingles, angina pectoris and gastric pains. His psychosomatic tendencies were such that as soon as he began planning a trip he felt that he was recovering from whatever physical complaint was afflicting him in that moment. Evidence in his letters, in other autobiographical materials and Cosima’s diaries reveal that the great artistic heritage of Italy meant relatively little to him. He never hesitated to bypass noteworthy sights when the necessities of travel left him little time. This seems all the more revealing when we consider his



excitable nature and sensitivity to every kind of impression. He would react passionately to such impressions and often made amusing or bizarre comments on sights seen from even a great distance. Likewise he rarely was left indifferent by any artistic experience. Yet his observations on the Brera Museum in Milan, the Cathedral and Leonardo's Last Supper could very well be for their banality the notions of the most hurried

traveler on one of today's guided group tours. Among his few memorable comments are those he made on the Sistine Chapel and Michelangelo's Last Judgement. However the musician's interest in the fresco results from a closeness to his own work - the true term of comparison for every kind of experience: "It's like in my theater. You understand that there's nothing to joke about." We often get the impression that his judge-



Alexandre Hyacinthe Duncuy, Naples Viewed from Capodimonte (Naples, Capodimonte Museum). On pages 56-57, another classic view of Italy: The Grand Canal of Venice by Frans Veruloet (Naples, Capodimonte Museum). On pages 58-59, Heinrich Doll, model for the first scene from Tannhauser, «The Valley of Wartburg Castle» (1866). On page 53, Portrait of Richard Wagner by Franz von Lenbach (1874).

ments are influenced by the readings that so captured his attention, and Cosima's diaries seem to clearly reveal that Italy, though so rich in beauty, left only a dim trace on Wagner.

In general we can affirm that during his Italian sojourns, Wagner, with the exception of his work and illnesses, has more to say about what he read rather than what he saw. He was probably unable to familiarize in

the least with the particular Mediterranean expressiveness of either the figurative art or the music. He felt estranged from the taste for stylization, for the decorative, for that rhetorical pleasure to be found in the quest for beauty, because in these there is no trace of the "terrible birth pangs" that were part of his working method and which were evident in the finished works. Furthermore, he habitually affirmed that the Latin influence had a mortifying effect. This consideration was probably more reasonable than the many, and often exaggerated, aphorisms that he was so fond of uttering in order to impress his audience. Paradoxically he often kept to himself during his Italian sojourns. He loved to transform his quarters immediately after moving in. He once draped his house in heavy curtains and turned it into that sort of alchemist's laboratory he felt he needed to work on his compositions. The total effect was a strange mixture of flight from reality, inebriation and calculation. Beyond his projects and notes, he also carried his own ambience with him and avoided the streets, squares and people. Strangers were only rarely able to make his acquaintance. He felt no need to face reality and, indeed, every contact tired him to the point of weakening his creative powers. He had an incredible ability to withdraw from the events which surrounded him, to such an extent that he was able to draft the first notes of *The Meistersinger* in a dingy boarding house and then finish the composition shortly after in the Hotel Voltaire in Paris. As he himself asserted, he didn't need the world to complete his work, but maximum solitude and the most retired life possible - "then I want to look about and see what face the world shows me. Until then I'll stay here all alone in my universe of dreams and bursting with life."

However, considering Wagner's personality more closely, we realize that this isolation is not so deep rooted and that the situation may be quite different than it first appears. It was not by mere chance that he decided to retire to Venice to work on *Tristan*. He loved the surreal atmosphere of the city. What he once said about St. Mark's could be applied to the entire city with its atmosphere of unreality: "It's sheer magic every time you look at it...it's as if it could vanish during the night." Something of this magic has become part of *Tristan*. - more than the other operas - no matter how he may have seen things through the dark red drapes with which he had lined his salon. "An instinct of art" is the best way to define the ability to grasp what he found beyond his drapes - an instinct he used to enrich his own art. Nietzsche said that Wagner gave a language to nature in such a way that even speechless elements were able to express themselves; thus it seems that Wagner fulfilled

the hidden desire of "the dawn, woods, fog, abyss, mountain peaks, night storms and moonlight" to become sound and music. We could add to the list of what are, in effect, Romantic conceits: the interplay of colors, dissipation, marble, decadence, fireworks, disguises and vertigo. In any case the city's rare magic, the blend of refinement, eroticism and decadence, as well as the enigma of beauty and atrocity all helped to weave the tragic fabric of *Tristan* in an incredible way. And while *Tristan* is structured according to the German Romantic canon, the dream which Wagner was "able to transform into sound", as he himself wrote, made possible a music far ahead of its time, as it remains to this day. It was due to this instinct of art, capable of structuring an ever more tightly knit and well patterned fabric from the most fleeting impressions, that in La Spezia Wagner, feverish and exhausted, was able to find



the leitmotif for the overture to the Rheingold and in Venice in front of Titian's painting of the Assumption of the Virgin he reached the decision to compose the Meistersinger with the towering figure of Hans Sachs. It is common knowledge that Wagner often presented the fruits of his strenuous efforts as if they were the results of a sudden inspiration experienced in a moment of violent illumination. His Good Friday magic comes to mind, which he himself admitted was something of a hoax, or in his own words, "the whole thing was a set up." However, there is something in his work that belies this taste for artifice and allows a glimpse of the true workings of Wagner's exceptional genius. The enchanted garden of Klingsor in Parsifal is not based on reality but on a fantasy vision (revised and elaborated a thousand times) which only at a second glance reveals any source in reality – a reality particularly close

to the composer's imagination. On May 26th of 1880 Wagner and Cosima left Amalfi to visit the mountain village of Ravello, located on a high cliff overlooking the sea. And there in the Ruffolo Palace – a large Arab-norman structure with walls and towers facing on to a panoramic terrace with fountains, niches, stone benches and rose gardens – he rediscovered that fantastic image of a world worthy of the knights of the Holy Graal - the kingdom of Klingsor. His original idea was that the garden was located in some region of Moorish Spain. However, upon seeing the Ruffolo villa, both surprised and proud to find a similarity between reality and his poetic imagination, he wrote in the guest book, "the enchanted garden of Klingsor has been found!". Two years later while working on the final draft of Parsifal he stopped in Palermo and there in the Villa Tasca gardens, abounding in tropical plants, exotic flowers, murky ponds and bizarre flora, he encountered an image of the Klingsor gardens that was even nearer his fantasies than that in Ravello. The Tasca family, with whom Wagner had a close friendship, has kept his reaction to the gardens alive in the family tradition. To this day, in the shade of the garden with its profusion of colors that cover the entire spectrum from pastels to the most aggressive hues, visitors may experience the same sensations as those which Wagner once felt. Such sensations correspond much better to the image the musician had formed than those offered by the fairytale charm of Ravello that nevertheless suggested an atmosphere of intimacy and courtly elegance worthy of the world of knights in armour. While Ravello had the quality of a gossamer tapestry, the kingdom of Klingsor was a world of more licentious fables shrouded in the mystery of seduction and forbidden desires. And Wagner thought that Kundry should appear naked on stage like a Titian Venus. According to Cosima's notes, Richard Wagner went to visit that garden every day. The "Magic Garden", as she calls it in a highly evocative description, with its lush foliage offered a concrete representation of a long lost epoch. From the first draft Wagner considered Parsifal his final work with which he would bid farewell to the world, as he wrote to Ludwig II in January of 1883. The heartrending idea of a consecrational festival that inspired the staging of Parsifal arose from a need to give maximum exposure to an opera destined by the author to be the synthesis of an entire life as it drew to a close. Even though the genesis of the opera is in many ways closely bound to the composer's stays in Italy - Naples, Salerno, Ravello, Palermo and Siena where the cathedral had brought Wagner "to tears" – the most significant city in this period of his life was Venice. In mid-September of 1882 he rented for several months



the mezzanine of Vendramin Palace – eighteen rooms for his family, servants and guests. This sojourn may have originated in a simple desire to flee the annoyances of Bayreuth or the harsh Franconian winter. And yet the hypothesis that he hoped to end his days in Venice is entirely credible as a final theatrical gesture in a life lived as one endless *mise en scene*. Venice was indeed the city of Tristan – a city remarkably in tune with Wagner's state of mind, which in that period was pervaded by a sentiment of greatness and power on the wane. He was obsessed by the idea of relentless decline. Recurring thoughts of death which assailed him shortly after his arrival and much more incessantly than in the past must be viewed in light of his state of mind in this period. Once again the black gondolas began to startle him as they had in the past. He delighted in feigning death to shock those around him or sometimes he would horrify everyone by singing the refrain of a popular tune – "Harlequin you must die." Titian's *Assumption* continued to fascinate him. He had once observed that there was nothing in music as well composed as this painting. He would often sit in the little garden of Vendramin Palace and then have Luigi the gondolier take him to Saint Mark's Square where he would sit on a stone bench at the Doge's Palace, a hand pressed to his heart, his head outstretched, to watch the passing crowds. He would exclaim, "It's lovely living near such things", but would then add, "Someday you will find a cadaver here." Analyzing the contrast and connection between his need to be alone and that taste for the effects of crowds so typical of the composer, Nietzsche had defined Richard Wagner an artist who "loves above all else to stay closed up in decrepit old houses" and create his masterpieces. In his final days this image coincided closely with the writer's idea, though in varied forms. Forbidden love is another major leitmotif throughout Wagner's work from the earliest to the final operas. As Peter Wapnewski points out, in every opera there is at least one character who suffers the torments of an impossible passion and tries to break its bonds by means of renunciation or transgression. Without jumping to conclusions we cannot doubt the importance of this theme at various times in Wagner's life. Matilde Wesendock and Judith Gautier are only two of the more significant figures in an experience destined to continuously repeat itself, and even his union with Cosima seemed tainted by an aura of forbidden love. She was well aware of this sensation that their love was unsanctioned and she consequently suffered pangs of guilt and regret. There is an infinite irony that approaches the limits of the grotesque in the fact that in the final hours of Wagner's life this recurring theme reemerged, at least in small part, to hasten the composer's death. He had met Carrie Pringle, a young and extremely attractive singer, a few months earlier in Bayreuth and signed her on as a soloist in the part of a flower maid. After her debut Wagner was extremely excited and flattered to participate with Carrie



and her friends in a reception held at Wahnfried, and apparently made no secret of his admiration for Miss Pringle. Cosima who ignored or feigned indifference on such occasions, nevertheless wrote a month later in her diaries that "Richard says he misses the flower maids and that he was unable to fully express his satisfaction to them even though he had shouted 'Bravo' louder than anyone else in the audience." Several points seem to support the hypothesis that at the beginning of February, when Hermann Levi was at the Vendramin Palace to discuss with Wagner the casting of the next festival, Carrie Pringle's name was brought up. She was then living in Italy and had sung at the Scala in Milan. According to biographers Levi may have had instructions to invite her to Venice. Richard Wagner was probably thinking of her the night before his death when he spoke of the nature of the Ondines who try to conquer men's souls. This comment was a foreshadowing of the closing sentence of Cosima's diaries



– “I love them, these inferior natures of the abyss, these yearning natures.” According to Wagner’s daughter Isotta, he and Cosima had a violent argument the following morning. The cause of the argument was most likely Wagner’s invitation to Miss Pringle. Wagner closed himself in the studio immediately after the dispute and, contrary to custom, decided not take part in the lunch. Cosima in the meantime played Schubert’s Ode to Tears next to the studio. Shortly after, while the family was at lunch, the news arrived that Wagner had collapsed on the floor and was near death. Wagner died around 3 a.m. and Keppler, the family doctor, wrote in his report that the emotional strain of the argument may have hastened his end, but he did not want to place too much importance on this conjecture. Up until that time Wagner had found a way of sublimating his forbidden love in his work. Indeed all his work is, to a considerable degree, an expression of his urge to flee from the realities of a life in which he found no

outlet for his deepest desires. “Enfin, je fais la musique du Parsifal”, he had written to Judith Gautier when he had begun to understand the vanity of this passion as well. In this state of physical and spiritual exhaustion, and overcome by the horrible prostration he had written of in one of his last letters, he felt for the first time that the ways of escape had been closed to him – “I now lack the art to achieve greatness.” This idea was probably instrumental in destroying what little vital force was left to him. There is little certain about Wagner’s death, only the suppositions which Keppler was unwilling to confirm. And yet Wagner’s life, as for that matter his work, unfolds in conjectures rendered more stimulating and indeed embellished by a deliberate addition of ambiguity. Ultimately we are left to rely on hypotheses in our search for consistency. Certainly whatever we may have been led to believe in Wagner’s biography is most likely false. In fact, every detail is shrouded in uncertainty and ambiguity – sometimes to a high degree and sometimes at the most banal level. He was a master of secrecy, evasiveness and falsification – far more than anything we may find in the Italian fashion of deception with its taste for ostentation and ingenuous wish to impress. We are left with the impression that he was compelled to shatter everything into mysterious fragments. Thus even his

greatness never has an entirely decisive tone but, rather a constantly meditative strain which often betrays a note of desperation. When speaking of music in the final days of Wagner’s life, Cosima notes that in her opinion the Italian melodies developed in harmony with the air and the sky. Wagner’s response helps us to understand his state of alienation. He loved to live in such an environment. He also was aware of the degree to which his surroundings fascinated him, but had long since lost touch with those surroundings and over the years this loss had become irrevocable. He had become “extraneous” and said of this vast distance which separated him from the world and placed him in diametric opposition to it that, “everything must be concealed and only then will it resonate with another reality that has nothing to do with the physical world, everything must be concealed.”

Translated by Albert Bell

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