

Ryszard Wagner

Szkic Krytyczny (Kiev, 1909)

This work has been critically assessed in two recent articles:

‘Where the King Spirit becomes manifest’: Stanislaw Wyspianski in search of the Polish Bayreuth by Radoslaw Okulicz-Kozaryn in *Wagner in Russia, Poland and the Czech Lands*, ed. Stephen Muir & Anastasia Bellini Johnson, Leeds University, 2013

and

Polish Reception of Wagner by Magdalena Dziadek in *A Romantic Century in Polish Music*, ed. Maja Trochimczyk, Los Angeles, 2009

For this reason I decided that it was worth republishing as a primary source.

Here is what he had to say about this period of his life when he wrote his memoirs (unpublished) in the late 1950s, followed by an extract of an article concerning music and nationalism from 1960 and a short note from his daughter’s biography.

It was in my family’s tradition that we, the young ones, should acquire knowledge of foreign countries and peoples and consequently it became a routine with me to spend some time every year in Austria, Hungary, Switzerland, Italy, France, Germany. And it was then that I fell, head over heels, under that phenomenal genius, Richard Wagner, composer, poet, writer, dramatist, and philosopher in once person, a man who transvalued all values hitherto supreme in music, poetry and musical drama. It is only natural that the attitude towards this reformer might have either been that of unbounded admiration, or – of unbounded hostility.

Wagner, Nietzsche and my Generation

A striking example of these attitudes, in their both aspects, may be found in Wagner’s contemporary, Frederick Nietzsche, who, first paid Wagner enthusiastic homage and next attacked him with particular venom. In Nietzsche’s morbid imagination Wagner rose to the status of a modern Minotaur demanding his yearly quota of young boys and girls to be devoured in Bayreuth, Wagner’s den of depravity, meaning by this that, by ensnaring people, especially the young generation, with charms of his music and poetry, Wagner was destroying their morals to wit – morals as established by Nietzsche himself. As for myself I was only too delighted to be ‘devoured’ quite a few years in succession in Bayreuth, the Prinz Regenten Theatre in Munich and other temples of Wagnerian culture.

Wagner and Nazism

There sprang another curious, if not entirely stupid accusation forwarded Against Wagner in much later days, that of being a kind of a spiritual forbear of Nazism. Nietzsche – with his ideas of

superman, free spirit, eternal recurrence, dangerous living – yes, by all means. But Wagner? No. The *Nibelungen Ring*, that massive and utterly pessimistic creation, was an adaptation by Wagner, in music and verse, of an ancient Scandinavian Saga; its music is prevalently sombre, gloomy, but such is the general trend of the Saga. But let us take Wagner's other master-pieces, such as his early *Tannhauser* ending on the chords of triumph of the spirit over the man's material body! What about that touching incarnation of forgiveness, King Mark in *Tristan and Isolde*? Is not Hans Sachs, that central figure in the *Meistersingers*, an embodiment of self-sacrifice? Whilst the whole structure of the *Parsifal*, Wagner's final creation, reposes on deeply Christian foundations.

I had yet another reason for admiring Wagner: he became so moved by the tragic outcome of our war with Russia in 1830-31 that he conceived the idea of a musical drama with Kosciusko as its hero. Soon, however, another champion of freedom caught his imagination, Rienzi, and he left *Kosciusko* unfinished, but gave expression to his Polish sympathies by composing an impressive Overture *Polonia*. This episode is seldom mentioned by Wagner's biographers, especially the German ones.

In an article written entitled Patriotism – The Driving Force of these Composers (*Sunday Press*, 26 June 1960) he begins by asking

Can music be regarded as an art akin to a nation, as a means of expression capable of interpreting differently the spiritual and emotional features dividing nations into separate groups of individuals?

This question has been widely discussed and re-discussed under all kinds of aspects particularly by the extremely rich literature on music of the 19th century.

By accepting a correlation between music and nationalism one would, of course, be bound to try to answer another question which is: what are the ways and sound channels through which a composer may successfully attempt to give expression to national feelings in music?

The simplest answer to it could be – by a discriminating use by the composer of the inexhaustible deposits of folk-music.

But there also exist much deeper approaches to that question, those, for instance, which were advanced by Richard Wagner whose tremendous personality as a composer, poet and writer simply saturated the whole of music, drama and verse of the 19th century.

His thesis is based, roughly speaking, on two assumptions, the first of them being easily acceptable: music's true mission, says Wagner, must be found in its limited possibilities to express fundamental human emotions such as: love, passion, ecstasy, valour, despair, joy, sadness, resignation and so on; any other subjects not deriving direct from those emotions are unworthy of being interpreted by music. His second assumption is much more involved:

Of all the European languages, contends Wagner, German is the only one which preserved its affinities with the primordial words and sounds through which primitive man, unspoiled

by the intricacies and conventionalities of civilisation, was expressing his basic emotions like those just quoted.

Thus, he concludes, it is the German language which lends itself best to being expressed and illustrated by music, which through its supreme mission of interpreting that language, is supposed itself to become Germanic.

To achieve an organic fusion of the spoken word and music in his music dramas Wagner, being himself an outstanding poet, embarked upon the task of ‘rejuvenating’ the German verse by an inspired use of onomatopoeia and alliterations.

He goes on to compare other nationalities, French, Polish and Russian, and comments that Wagner’s “whole theory of a Germanic music becomes, obviously, open to scepticism”.

His daughter wrote in his biography

I wonder if this was the reason that the first opera he ever took me was to Tannhäuser – and I was only thirteen! I remember being totally out of my depth, and even more so when next day, I was instructed to put down on paper, the story as I saw it. But it did leave one lasting memory – the aria O Star of Eve has remained one of my favourite pieces of music. (*An Unusual Diplomat* Krystyna Dobrzynska-Cantwell, London, 1996 p. 31)

(The images are scans of photocopies of a copy held by the National Library of Poland, Warsaw. There is also a copy in the National Library of the Ukraine)

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