

# *Introduction*

*David Trippett*

If histories of Western music were written according to individual influence, Richard Wagner might be taken as the context against which all others can be defined. Such is the breadth of his presence in nineteenth-century studies. Friedrich Nietzsche called him ‘the bad conscience of his time’, while Thomas Mann put it in microcosm in 1933: ‘Steeped in sorrows and grandeur, like the nineteenth century he so perfectly epitomizes – thus does the intellectual figure of Richard Wagner appear to me.’<sup>1</sup> So opens Mann’s most influential essay on the composer. One would be forgiven for assuming, like Mann, that to map the various contexts of Wagner in 2023 is tantamount to mapping the cultural and intellectual riches of a version of nineteenth-century Europe itself, with the world on its fringes. From Gilgamesh to spa culture, Aeschylus to blood alcohol measurement, horn resonance to Sanskrit poetry – the potential array defies coherence, raising the question of whether it is really Wagner’s historical persona making encyclopaedic claims (via the unity we ascribe to his subjectivity) or the legions of writers who have woven, and continue to weave, his reception history.

Even in an age of aspirant ‘global’ histories, ever more sensitised to the spaces of power and hegemony, it is uncontroversial to say that no historical musician has been treated to such close scrutiny, quantitatively speaking, in terms of source material. This results partly from the rich documentary legacy. From the intimately curated conversations of *Cosima’s Diaries*, the ‘Brown Book’ diary entries (1865–82), correspondence in thirty-five volumes, three autobiographies, and a third ‘complete’ edition (if first critical one) of his writings in process (*Richard Wagner Schriften* [2013–28]), the wealth of source material resembles a feast, and the challenge has been to sift as often as to uncover. At our feast, recurring

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, ‘*The Case of Wagner*,’ *Basic Writings*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 612. Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. Allan Blunden (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 91.

questions of philological method highlight the crucial role that rigour has played in pockets of Wagner's reception history. Against fears of basic inaccuracy or ignorance, the vast mosaic of contemporary articles and reviews assembled by Helmut Kirchmeyer between 1967 and 1996 is emblematic: a pre-digital, nine-volume *Situationsgeschichte* in pointillist pursuit of the contemporary *Wagnerbild*. It tests the idea that one could piece together well-nigh every Wagner review printed between 1842 and 1852 to form a 'complete' documentary history. But such data streams are theoretically infinite for historical contexts. In terms of influence and ideas, the extravagant tapestry of Wagner's legacy and its seemingly untrammelled contexts will consume ever more terabytes in this vein. For a project like *Wagner in Context*, then, the risk resembles that of the ambitious cartographers imagined by Jorge Luis Borges in 1946. Their science of map-making became so intricate, we recall, as to require a map on the same scale as the empire being mapped. Adapting Borges to Mann, for readers to absorb the century's cultural and intellectual contexts would take the same sixty-nine years that Wagner himself spent living it.

This might be a reason *not* to pursue contextual studies. After all it sets up a strange relation between sign and object (map and real thing-in-the-world), and if nothing is to be lost to history, it also fails to distinguish between major and minor events – for Walter Benjamin, an inexplicable proposition except as the psychology of Judgement Day.<sup>2</sup> Another reason to object would be the lingering assumption that Wagner's works are to be somehow 'explained' by their contexts, a tricky if not entirely discredited notion. Cosima is our surest witness to Wagner's own amusement at this. She wondered how the 'miracle' of *Tristan* Act 3 could have been completed in a simple hotel room (Hotel Schweizerhof), without carers. Wagner sets her straight: 'people have no idea how divorced from experience and reality these things [are] . . . when the German emperor exclaims, "How deeply Wagner must have been in love at that time," it is really quite ridiculous. – If that were so,' he mocks, 'I should now be writing *Parsifal* on account of my connections with the Christian Church, and you would be Kundry!'<sup>3</sup> The point about contexts is that they start to flicker with insight only when they run deeper than biography. As though to highlight this – that is, the tension between the autonomy of art and a work's contextual interpretation, Paul Bekker pointedly inverted the life–works paradigm,

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 254.

<sup>3</sup> *CD* 2: 158 (28 September 1878).

once common to music histories, by claiming in 1934 that Wagner had an affair with Mathilda Wesendonck in 1858 *because* he was writing *Tristan*, not vice versa – as the life–works brigade might have assumed. For this reason, while the works are not ignored in the present volume, dedicated studies thereof are largely absent. As an intellectual stance, this reinterprets the claim that Wagner’s works themselves *change* with time, as Adorno argued in 1963, where their lasting relevance lies in how one ‘relates to a work of art not merely . . . by adapting it to fit a new situation [in the present], but rather by deciphering within it things to which one has a historically different reaction’.<sup>4</sup> Such a hermeneutic well runs infinitely deep, but here Adorno’s work-centric perspective arguably becomes the flipside of contexts studies once focus shifts to the new, contextual perspectives from which critical interpretation can occur. Such work–context relations become as a rabbit/duck illusion, in other words, even if Adorno would never have sanctioned abandoning the dialectic in this way.

Against such quibbles, the possibility of excavating new, sedimented connections and broader comparisons means there may be good reasons for pursuing contextual studies of Wagner in particular. To begin with the obvious: not only does his spectre haunt European accounts of nineteenth-century cultural life, his works continue to be programmed throughout the world’s opera houses today, they form the sound track to computer games, promote internet memes, and support a rich array of approaches to intellectual currents within the study of nineteenth-century musical culture and its historiography. Even so visceral and tragic an event as the unfolding war in Ukraine (2022–) offers a reminder that contexts for appropriation exist in the here and now: a ‘shadowy Russian mercenary group’ calling itself the ‘Wagner Group’ – so named after Neo-Nazis’ popular fascination with Hitler’s musical interests – has fought alongside the Russian army since 2014, granting them greater operational strength and plausible deniability for war crimes allegedly committed, before being disbanded after a military coup in 2023;<sup>5</sup> this is pitted against the so-called ‘Mozart Group’, a US-led military training centre whose *modus operandi* is directly counter: ‘to build sustainable capacity in the Ukrainian military’.<sup>6</sup> In this clash of musical emblems, good and evil find one-dimensional forms of expression, as comprehensible for media broadcasters (morally) as they are simplistic and uncritical (historically). What – we may

<sup>4</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Wagner’s Relevance for Today’, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 586–7.

<sup>5</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-60947877](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-60947877).

<sup>6</sup> Website (inactive) [www.themozartgroup.com/](http://www.themozartgroup.com/), last accessed 1 September 2022.

wonder – would the Satie Group entail? Like borrowed flags, these tatty battlefield personae beg the question of how reception contexts engineer and amplify such different moral valences, and what role is played by the signs and nodal gateways of modern media in their dissemination.

In this volume, contexts of biography and reception sit alongside one another, with the book dividing into six subsections: *place; people; politics, ideas & bodies; life, language & the ancient world; music & performance; reception*. One reason for pursuing these as separable categories is to ask how common and uncommon contextual knowledge is to be simultaneously framed for historians, where the supporting epistemes arise, and if and why they fall away. It offers a chance to reconcile the questionable method of seeking a direct identification with historical agents in context (Max Weber's so-called *Verstehen* school), with what Carl Dahlhaus once called a 'detached approach in which the past appears progressively more enigmatic and alien the better it is understood'.<sup>7</sup> In short, contextual studies animate this paradox, in which a desire to understand agency in context sits alongside an understanding where distance increases with proximity.

But in all this method, is there anything new under the sun? As early as 1854, Franz Liszt noted proudly that 'there is already a "Wagner literature" – I have contributed to it myself.'<sup>8</sup> Twenty-eight years later, when Wagner received the first volume of Nikolaus Oesterlein's *Katalog einer Richard Wagner-Bibliothek*, the composer himself dismissively chortled: 'now I can relish all the fuss and bother that'll be made about me fifteen years after my death'.<sup>9</sup> By 1937, however, the quantity of literature accruing led Ernest Newman to begin his four-volume biography defensively by anticipating the 'superfluity' of yet another contribution to the field.<sup>10</sup> Newman's caveat – ostensibly polite throat-clearing – was widely parroted; but given the lack of scholarly rigour in much of the writing about Wagner

<sup>7</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. J.B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Franz Liszt to Eduard Liszt, 29 March 1854, Gotha, in *SLRW*, 355. Helmut Kirchmeyer corroborated Liszt's statement by reprinting 3,257 periodical publications that appeared prior to 1855. See *Situationsgeschichte der Musikkritik und des musikalischen Pressewesens in Deutschland; dargestellt vom Ausgabe des 18. Bis zum Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 4 'Das zeitgenössische Wagner-Bild' (Regensburg, 1967).

<sup>9</sup> *CD* 2: 887 (11 July 1882). Translation by John Deathridge.

<sup>10</sup> Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4 vols. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 1: vii.

over the course of the twentieth century (a flipside of the composer's notoriety), the vastness of the literature rapidly became a misleading cliché. Dahlhaus eyed the problem as one of quality as early as 1971, opening his study *Richard Wagners Musikdramen* with the withering statement that 'the literature on Wagner is legion'. And – as though warding off would-be contributors – he deemed the majority of it worthless: 'compounded of wide-ranging, historic-philosophical speculation, insatiable delight in the minutiae of his life, however far-fetched or trivial, and a curious complacency when it [comes] to the study of the music'.<sup>11</sup> Such sentiments were amplified during a hiatus that saw the founding of the *Sämtliche Werke* project, where the much-needed, rigorous empiricism from scholars such as John Deathridge and Egon Voss successfully reoriented the *Wagnerbild* away from 'scores of mediocre biographies'.<sup>12</sup>

To respond to this (increasingly historic) scene, we need first to refine the scope of what context studies can accomplish. On the one hand, the chapters envisioned here provide a way of ordering the social and intellectual architecture coincident with Wagner's historical life. Take spatial zones: the early Zionists in Germany who felt inspired by *Tannhäuser* as they dreamed of Israel; the promise of migration to America as the harbinger of modernity; German constructions of India as originary; or the export of Wagner's works (and sets) to Buenos Aires, St Petersburg, Mississippi, and New Orleans. All hint at the geographic sightlines that extend beyond the comparatively thin 'trans-national' walls of central Europe. The impulse to investigate contexts in their own right offers licence for historians to focus straightforwardly on the armature holding up existing narratives built around places of cultural dominance, in other words. The same goes for people: from canonical minds, as in the giants of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer, to the socio-domestic discourses on femininity, sexuality, Cosima, the role of women, and the genuine if explicitly inglorious legacy of family matters. On the other hand, by drawing out and defining the contexts within which Wagner lived and worked, we can ask how he aligned with or deviated from others' behaviour and beliefs in, for instance, taking frequent water cures and attitudes to health and the sentient body, to vegetarianism and animal rights, theories of race and constructed languages, hopes for a utopian state, or epics from Gilgamesh to the Iliad.

<sup>11</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagners Musikdramen* (Velber: Friedrich 1971), 1.

<sup>12</sup> John Deathridge, 'Cataloguing Wagner' *The Musical Times* 124 (1983): 92–6, here 92.

Finally, the contexts of *Wissenschaft*, spanning the present-day distinction between the sciences and humanities, lend credibility to the view of Wagner as a voracious bookworm and loquacious interlocutor who frequently evades narrowly musical discussion. It is indicative that, in 1849, he planned to launch a wide-ranging journal entitled *Of Art and Life (Für Kunst und Leben)*: ‘remove everything that reeks of “music journal,”’ he told his intended co-editor Theodor Uhlig, ‘conceive the undertaking only in general terms: art and life’.<sup>13</sup> It was in this intellectually generous guise that he engaged an astonishing number of fields and topics: from metallurgy and train travel to chemistry and evolution, from Shakespeare and Calderón to Indo-European philology and historical linguistics, from histories of Italy and Germany to myths Nordic, Celtic, Indian and Greek. Scrutinising this array gives new meaning to the famed descriptions by Hanslick of Wagner’s youth as that of a ‘many-sided dilettante’, and indeed to Mann’s infamous transformation of this into a reasoned critique of the mature composer in 1933 (unleashing an initial wave of opprobrium, whose intensity – for Adorno – indicated the truth of Mann’s assessment). For Nietzsche, too, Wagner ‘was very close to enjoying the perilous pleasure in the superficial tasting of one thing after another in the intellectual realm’. His only hint for future historians, to whom it falls to supply narrative coherence, was the claim that Wagner attained his naivety only in adulthood, finding ‘youth late in life’.<sup>14</sup>

Our present age has no shortage of apparent contradictions that can resonate with nineteenth-century contexts: global horizons set against nationalist retrenchment; internet (cf. telegraphic) connectivity ensuring ‘narrowly local conditions from which [people] can escape neither in reality nor in their imagination’;<sup>15</sup> technological transformations in online music and VR that have failed to dislodge the analogue performance culture of Wagner’s works within essentially nineteenth-century opera houses. To explain these simply as the texture of an extended reception history requires a degree of presentism, the view that only the present and its values are real, which is hardly a method for assessing Wagnerian contexts today. It would be futile to confuse the historical Wagner with his contexts in the ongoing present as they continue to map new territories. Mann knew this. ‘What view would Richard Wagner take of our present problems, needs and tasks?’ he asked

<sup>13</sup> Wagner to Uhlig, 21–22 November 1849, 27 December 1849, in *SB* 3:165–9, 194–200, here 198.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 200.

<sup>15</sup> Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* [2009], trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), xv.

(disingenuously) in 1933. “That “would” is empty and chimeric, a conceptual nonsense.”<sup>16</sup> Breaking from these methodological limitations, forward-looking questions about Wagner abound, and this volume has sought to embrace them. To read old myths through new media has become a signal gesture of the late Friedrich Kittler, and is here refracted through the tropes of noise and warfare. To read the erotic potential of video game music through a Wagner-Schopenhauer nexus presents new vistas for evaluating digital artforms. And to re-evaluate the modern Anthropocene and climate crisis through Wagner’s writings on bodies and climate in 1849, to explore the affordances of formats and fidelities in sound recording, or the personal costs to actors of the most corporeal tendencies within *Regietheater* is to open up new perspectives on the means by which we engage with Wagner and his works in the present. Such accounts arguably recontextualise Alain Coubain’s bold assertion from 2010 that ‘we are on the cusp of a revival of high art, and it is here that Wagner should be invoked’. The prediction? ‘[H]igh art has once again become part of our future.’<sup>17</sup>

In reading through the following forty-two chapters, readers are invited to play with the lens of our historical focus in this way. It is, in effect, the reverse of José Ortega’s description from 1925 of viewing a garden through a glass window, where our eyes can focus on the greenery outside *or* the window-as-frame, but not both at once.<sup>18</sup> His concern was the fate of modern art, mine is the opportunity for reframing the methods historically associated with Wagner studies. By drawing together an international, multi-lingual team of scholars, and refocussing our perspective dynamically between biographical persona in the foreground to newly visible contexts in the background, unfamiliar details become new points of orientation, harbouring their own integrity, and with them comes the possibility of a newly dynamic history.

<sup>16</sup> Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner* (London: Verso, 2010), 82–3.

<sup>18</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanisation of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 11.

