

Live Performances

The New *Parsifal* in Copenhagen

Our coverage of Keith Warner's new production of 'Parsifal' for the Royal Danish Opera in Copenhagen falls into three parts. First, the dramaturg, Barry Millington, outlines the production team's thinking about the work.¹ Second, the conductor, Hartmut Haenchen, examines the performance tradition of 'Parsifal'. Finally, Andreas Bucker assesses the production.

The *Parsifal* Problem

Barry Millington introduces the production

It is not without good reason that even many who admire the score of *Parsifal* inordinately find the work as a whole problematic. Never was uncritical veneration more dangerous. The ideology underlying the work is deeply suspect, even offensive to modern sensibilities, yet approached the right way, *Parsifal* can nevertheless offer one of the most enthralling and life-enhancing experiences to be had in the opera house.

The problems lie in three main areas, which can crudely be defined as sex, religion and race. On the face of it the work presents an insidiously patriarchal society in the community of Grail Knights. Kundry, the sole representative of womankind among the principal characters, embodies the female sex in terms of the stereotypically misogynist dichotomy of Madonna/whore. She leads men to destruction by tempting them sexually, but ends up drying the feet of the saviour hero with her hair. The fact that *Parsifal* makes use of Christian symbols and rituals such as the Eucharist has led some to the erroneous belief that it is a religious drama, as opposed to a drama *about* religion among other things. Finally, the work embodies the racist ideology of Wagner's later years, whereby he held that the superior, Aryan race was corrupted by the inferior ones (chiefly the Jews) but that a process of regeneration, through the agency of Christ's blood, could 'redeem' all.

This, in brief, is the *Parsifal* problem. But the closer we look, the more it becomes evident that the work actually stages its own critique of these problematic ideologies. Love, in the first place, is not merely a matter of sex but also of *Mitleid* or compassion. The latter is a theme that runs right through the work (from Gurnemanz chiding the Grail Knights for mistreating Kundry, and Parsifal for thoughtlessly shooting down the swan, to the bathing of Parsifal's feet). But more crucially, we should understand compassion as the other side of the coin from racial hatred. The compassionate principle in *Parsifal* acquires its force precisely as the polar opposite of Wagner's exclusionist world view. The redemptive love would not be what it is without the complementary malevolence. It's the grit in the oyster.

¹ This article appeared in Danish in the programme book for the Royal Danish Opera production and in English on the company's website: http://kglteater.dk/site/Alle_forestillinger/11_12/Opera/Parsifal.aspx.

Second, the male patriarchal structures of *Parsifal* are unmistakably challenged. The Grail community is seen to be degenerate and ripe for dissolution. Nor is Kundry the servile cipher she might seem: it is through her agency that Parsifal is able to achieve redemption, a process we may regard as self-enlightenment, whereby primitive male instincts are transformed into something more humane. True love between the sexes can only be based on freedom from coercion and oppression – the condition to which the redeemed community at the end aspires.

Third, for all his lifelong ambivalence about religion, Wagner is explicit (in the contemporary essay *Religion and Art*, for example) that it is the symbols of religion that he finds illuminating, not the dogma; by removing those symbols to the artistic sphere, he maintains, one can far more readily harness their potential. We know that other religious systems than Christianity – notably Buddhism – inspired Wagner too. But various religions have also promoted the idea of sex as evil, women as the devil. And just as religion through the ages has brought misery and guilt to the sphere of sexual relations, so Christ himself failed to dismantle the patriarchal structures by which society is defined. Could this charge be part of the signification of the exhortation ‘Redemption to the Redeemer!’?

Three quite separate worlds are invoked in this production. The first act deals with the mythic past: fundamental myths of all religions deal with the Creation, with divine revelation and the bringing of salvation from another sphere. Act II is characterised by personal myths: Oedipal relationships, Freudian longings, the Lacanian return to infancy, where desires are satisfied at the maternal breast but never subsequently achieved. The explicit acknowledgment of the Oedipal maternal longings awakened in Parsifal by Kundry’s seduction, several decades before the elaboration of Freud’s theories, are one of the many extraordinary aspects of *Parsifal*. The final act, with its uncharacteristic lack of narration, takes place very much in the present – though clearly we are on the brink of a transformation in the future.

The single set unifying these distinctive worlds takes the form of a giant cone-shaped tunnel, which at the beginning takes on features of a Victorian bathhouse – Marienbad (where, coincidentally, Wagner first read Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival* epic) was also an inspiration. Recalling Gurnemanz’s celebrated line ‘zum Raum wird hier die Zeit’ (here time becomes space), the tunnel crosses chronological boundaries and allows us to see Parsifal at various stages of his emotional development, from the infant in his cot to the adolescent ready for sexual experience. Here too Kundry, as befits the winged messenger of the Grail, condemned to endless reincarnation in punishment for her blasphemous mockery of Christ, can flit through the centuries, trailed by lookalike Flowermaidens.

The momentous issues at stake for us in the action of *Parsifal* can perhaps best be seen through the main characters.

Parsifal

The ‘innocent fool’ is indeed naïve, not to say something of an empty vessel. Clearly he has had traumatic experiences in the past, but has suppressed them from his consciousness. His purity is, therefore, not so much a congenital condition as a matter of personal volition. The mother- and father-figures to whom he is subject in Act II struggle over

him, the one offering sexual awareness (and hence spiritual enlightenment), the other a vindictively jaundiced view of women as evil and a questionable role model as the heroic slayer of all in his path. Though hailed as some sort of supernatural redeemer, Parsifal's example in fact teaches that self-enlightenment has to be achieved by each individual through compassion born of suffering. Not all are ready to rise to the challenge.

Kundry

Klingsor tells us that Kundry has roamed the centuries as Rose of Hades, Herodias (responsible for the death of John the Baptist), Gundryggia (the brutal warriorwoman) and as other species of primeval she-devils too. As Eve, and doubtless Lucrezia Borgia, Cleopatra, Lulu and other notorious ball-breaking femmes fatales all rolled into one, she is the incarnation of the convenient patriarchal view of woman as the cause of man's downfall. Trapped within this patriarchal structure, Kundry continues to do what she knows she oughtn't. She doesn't want to ensnare Parsifal, but she (falsely) believes that doing so will liberate her from her endless cycle of suffering. Klingsor's extraordinary insight 'He who braves you, saves you' is a moment of illumination for Kundry, providing her with a glimpse of her real path to salvation. The humble state of service to which she progresses in Act III need not be seen as the subservience traditionally forced on her gender so much as the result of self-denial, and therefore a liberation. Death too is not necessarily a defeat if you have been desiring it as long as Kundry has.

Gurnemanz

A wise, if slightly eccentric, spiritual guide, Gurnemanz is a seeker after the truth. He has only a partial view of things and his Act I Narration may be regarded as a debate between the imparting of verbal information and the discovery of truth. His recollections of Grail matters stretch back further than those of any other members of the Grail community, but his main function is to act as the facilitator of Parsifal's attainment of experience and enlightenment. He points out the error of Parsifal's shooting of the swan, leads him to the Grail Hall where he can see Amfortas's suffering and pushes him out roughly into the world.

Amfortas

The wound from which Amfortas suffers is, in Wagner's story, both a sexual wound and a symbol of racial contamination. Linda and Michael Hutcheon intriguingly suggested some years ago that the wound had syphilitic characteristics: it doesn't heal, it's worse at night, it's treated with baths and balsams, has a sexual component and is associated with flowers (cf. Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*, or flowers of evil). Syphilis was very much in the air, so to speak, in Wagner's day: Ibsen's *Ghosts* opened in 1882, the same year as *Parsifal*. While leaving open this possibility, we may also conceivably think of Amfortas's wound as psychosomatic: the physical manifestation of a mental condition. Certainly the 'bizarre erotics of suffering' (to borrow the Hutcheons' phrase) demonstrated by Amfortas rise to an exhilarating, almost orgiastic peak of intensity. The almost spiritual strength of that feeling begs the question of why people need religion – a question that fascinated Wagner throughout his life.

Klingsor

Traditionally portrayed as an evil sorcerer, a pantomime villain, Klingsor is actually a far more interesting figure. We may perhaps see him as an Ibsenite paterfamilias, maybe even a Jewish one with a circumcising knife. In his disgust for both women and the knights of the Grail who have not yet, like him, fallen prey to temptation, he believes that having made his sacrifice – he castrates himself as the only way he knows to cope with sexual desire – he is entitled to dominate women and indeed the world. But his aspiration to be lord of the Grail is tragic: like Amfortas and Titurel he is a failure, but therein lies his danger. Locked in an abusive relationship with Kundry (whose Semitic attributes are equally traditional), he vies with her for control of Parsifal as he approaches manhood.

The Grail itself is perhaps the most intriguing and potent of all mythic symbols. In the sources drawn on by Wagner it was variously a magic stone, a dish and the mystical cup used at the Last Supper. In more recent and popular usage it has come to be associated with any ideal just beyond human grasp. We may perhaps think of it as a symbol of an achievement, target or goal that always eludes the seeker. It may be a utopian political aspiration, a religious faith or any longing for a change of environment where the grass is greener. However virtuous the desire, though, such blind faiths may at best detract from the attainment of true self-knowledge; at worst they may become obsessive quests that end in failure, causing untold damage on the way.

‘Here time becomes space.’

Hartmut Haenchen discusses the historical tradition of conducting ‘Parsifal’

The words of Gurnemanz quoted in the title underline *Parsifal’s* unusual quality and dramaturgical structure: neither opera, drama, nor oratorio. A modern, dialectical, binary structure: part action, part reflection. The traditional concept of ‘action’ is suspended. Action and reflection are interwoven. Already for the Prelude to Act I, Wagner invents an exemplary, wholly new form for the entire piece – no longer, as in his earlier works, a musical synopsis but a way to develop thought during the musical silences. Tellingly, the Prelude begins with a pause, contains six instances of total musical silence and altogether six general pauses, thus setting out the work’s fundamental structural argument. The silence and the pauses have become the music’s determining factor. In these pauses the music continues to develop, unheard, a fact that becomes clear when the music continues without ever repeating the same thing again. In the pauses time and thought leap forward, a leap that can be heard in the ensuing music. This can only be made clear in the interpretation if the basic tempo and the relationship between tempi correspond to the composer’s fundamental ideas and if the production gives the music the ‘space’ for the ‘time’.²

² A longer version of this article, in which the author discusses tempo relations in connection with individual characters, appears in German on Professor Haenchen’s own website at <http://www.haenchen.net>.

Questions of tempo

A study of the performance history of Wagner's works reveals that a particular tendency for tempi was established over the first seventy years after their creation, a tendency that was continued from one generation to the next without any notable variation. Lists of performance durations have been compiled by the Richard-Wagner-Archiv in Bayreuth. These tempi, going all the way back to Wagner, were passed on without recording equipment. Since around the middle of the 20th century, coinciding with the exponential growth of the influence of the media, a new tendency begins to make itself felt, seeking extremes, moving demonstrably far from Wagner's original ideas. Judging by historical documents we can assume that the timings (giving an indication of the tempi) at the premiere were significantly closer to Wagner's intentions than the later extremes, which were too slow rather than too fast.

Of course many factors affect the tempo and these cannot be set out in detail here. No conductor can achieve exactly identical tempi night after night – certainly not in an artform such as opera. One must remember that there are several thousand different tempi in the whole of *Parsifal*, each linked by Wagner's corresponding instructions to form the performance's overall length. Yet since all the very fast tempi cannot be played much faster owing to technical restrictions, variations in tempo must occur in the medium to slower ranges. If we assume that today certain technical problems are easier to overcome in performance than they were in Wagner's day, then we must accept that the difference between Wagner's ideas on tempi and the slower performances that are customary today is even greater.

Only original sources form the basis of a judgment as to what constitutes the 'right' tempo. In our production in Copenhagen we are able for the first time in Denmark to take account of all annotations in our interpretation: the annotations of Wagner's musical assistants (Heinrich Porges, Julius Kniese), his conductor (Hermann Levi), his second Kundry (Marianne Brandt, whose commentaries have just been published by Stephan Mösch), his second Parsifal (Alois Burgstaller), later of Felix Mottl, who only heard *Parsifal* but did not assist, and of Franz Beidler as well as Cosima Wagner (her later comments cannot be taken uncritically). Thus on the basis of Wagner's original concept the general tendency in the performance of his works ought to be somewhat faster than at the premiere. A few examples make clear what mattered to Wagner.

Wagner, who as creator both directed and of course oversaw the musical performance, needed conductors who were unconditionally able and willing to engage with and realise his vision. The break with direct tradition occurred after Siegfried and Cosima Wagner's death and with the passing of the first and second generations of conductors. Siegfried Wagner had failed to ensure an ongoing succession. None of the later conductors, apart from Willibald Kaehler, had been an assistant at the festivals. We can see why the following years mark the disappearance of those oral and scattered written performance notes that can be traced back to Wagner himself. Performances by conductors who were not fully versed in the German language added to the confusion in performance practice since musical instructions such as 'sehr gehalten' (very controlled) were suddenly thought to refer to the tempi rather than the articulation.

Beside Toscanini, who belonged to this category and was one of the slowest Wagner conductors of all, stood the other great personality among Wagner conductors: Wilhelm Furtwängler. In contrast to the 'Bayreuth style' the latter turned his back on the equality of text, theatre and music and placed music distinctly in the foreground: 'the opera as a "whole", its structure, its meaning, is determined by the music, which thus takes its place as the pivotal point of the opera'. That the barefaced ideological abuse of Wagner's work in the fascist period also led to sentimental, pathetic and thus slower performances can unfortunately not be definitively proved by the Bayreuth timings of performances, since the record of the relevant timings is incomplete. Yet in this regard it should be noted that Furtwängler's interpretation of the *Ring*, from his first account of 1936, which still corresponded to the timings of the premiere, to his 1953 recording gained forty minutes in length! The recording also clearly shows that the instructions traditionally passed down from Wagner were barely taken into account and were in many cases diametrically opposed to those comments by Wagner that have now been reassembled. That Furtwängler's influence on many later conductors was seminal is without doubt. And the majority of later recorded and stage performances are slower than the premiere or the performances of the first seventy years after the creation of the works in question.

Yet alongside this line a second tradition can be traced, one that held faith with the original Bayreuth style. Richard Strauss, who assisted in Bayreuth in 1898, once remarked: 'It is not I who conducts *Parsifal* faster but rather you in Bayreuth who have got slower and slower. Believe me, what you are doing in Bayreuth is all wrong.' Gustav Mahler also spoke out against this tendency. Strauss suffered – with regard to the tempi of his own works when performed by others – a similar fate to Richard Wagner. (One need only compare the recordings under his baton with later recordings, which are almost without exception slower.) Strauss deeply revered Felix Mottl (assistant on the first *Ring* and conductor of the *Ring* in 1896). Although Mottl was often criticised for his 'slow' tempi (his entire *Ring* was just a minute (!) longer than Richter's) we can assume that the tempi were still very close to Wagner's intentions. Cosima wrote that 'Mottl was an exceptional stage conductor whose control of the relationship between stage and orchestra was masterly'. Thus he obeyed one of the central requirements of the Bayreuth style. Strauss felt he was Mottl's direct successor and he in turn has his own successors such as Clemens Krauss and Karl Böhm, all of whose timings remained slightly under those of the premieres of the works they conducted.

Finally there is the peculiarity of the 'invisible' orchestra pit as a result of which, because of the exceptional depth of the orchestral disposition, contact between individual musicians and the stage is impossible, so that a general tendency towards slow tempi has been noted in Bayreuth, aptly described by Wieland Wagner: 'This in large part is the reason for the slow tempi here in Bayreuth. One waits more or less unconsciously for the other and only decides to go on when he thinks he hears him.' It is generally known that Bayreuth's special and much praised acoustic is actually only fully functional in *Parsifal*. It is certainly also one of the reasons why Wagner uses a style that is far closer to chamber music for this work. In the earlier pieces, composed for other stages, but also in the *Ring*, which elaborates far denser structures than *Parsifal*, and especially in *Die Meistersinger* too, one is aware that the Bayreuth acoustic is by no means ideal since it blurs the contrapuntal element of these works.

The marked trend towards slower tempi in *Parsifal*, where there are only few fast tempi – which are broadly ‘tempo-neutral’ – can be irrefutably demonstrated. The 1882 premiere under Hermann Levi’s baton lasted 4:04 hours,³ in 1888 under Felix Mottl it was 4:15, in 1897 under Anton Seidl 4:19, and in 1901 under Karl Muck 4:27. In 1909 under Siegfried Wagner this tendency was reversed to some extent and the performance lasted 4:22 hours. In 1931 Arturo Toscanini set a record with 4:42 hours (38 minutes slower than the premiere), followed by a reverse tendency under Clemens Krauss in 1953 (3:44 hours), while James Levine in 1990 went to the other extreme again with 4:33 hours.⁴ What is astonishing is the fact that within one opera, tempo variations of nearly an hour are thinkable. If we compare this with the entire *Ring*, in which variations consist of ‘barely’ three-quarters of an hour (over approximately 14 hours of music) the extremes over four hours of music are truly extraordinary, while clearly underlining my contention as to the reasons for this slower trend.

Let us, however, go back to the sources. In a letter written before the first Bayreuth *Ring* in 1876 Wagner said to the conductor of the premiere, Hans Richter:

Friend! It is essential that you come to all the piano rehearsals. Otherwise you will not get to know my tempi and then it will be more than problematic in the orchestral rehearsals when I do not want to be discussing the tempi with you for the first time in order to catch up, to the detriment of the whole. Yesterday, particularly with Betz [singing Wotan], whom in piano rehearsals I always got to follow the liveliest tempo, we never got beyond the sluggish [...]. I also truly believe you are too inclined to beat crotchets throughout, which always holds up the flow of the tempo.

In another place he writes: ‘It was only in these moments that I had humbly to admit what was driving me to despair [...] to my horror I realised that the conductor, although I believed him to be the best, and whom I know still, was yet unable to keep to the correct beat – despite frequent previous success – because he was incapable of knowing why it must be conceived in this way and in no other.’ Cosima wrote in her diary on 21 November 1878: ‘Richard laments again: “After I am gone not one person will know my tempo!”’ And finally Cosima reports in her diary: ‘This evening we heard the Prelude of *Parsifal*; friend Seidl played and R. had to speak at length about the tempo as S.’s was too slow, or rather wrong: R. said you cannot designate a tempo, every piece must be played in its own way; certainly there are pieces whose tempi must be enormously sharp and taut but one must know which ones, this must be taught by masters, this is why he wanted to found a school.’

These documents make clear that Wagner was primarily concerned that the tempi should not get too slow. His assistant Heinrich Porges confirms the same thing at the premiere of *Parsifal*. He records in his notes: ‘No unmotivated hesitation or delay was allowed unless it arose from the specific nature of the situation’ and shortly afterwards he reported of Wagner ‘that he abhors any mere individualistic caprice, however brilliantly this might be expressed’. The aforementioned assistants on the first performance of *Parsifal* have passed on a wealth of commentaries which allow us to see this work in

³ For a properly comparable duration today one must deduct about three minutes to account for the machinery involved in the Transformation Music of the first act, for which Humperdinck had to write some extra bars (later omitted).

⁴ The duration of Haenchen’s own performance on 22 March 2012 was 3:55 (ed.)

a different or clearer light. The commentaries include changes of text, rhythm, pitch, dynamics, expression, language, articulation, linguistic emphasis, production notes, clarifications of the content, tone colour, questions about vibrato (notes to singers and to the orchestra about whether to use vibrato or not) and questions of balance between singers and orchestra.

For our purposes here the comments about tempi which have been added to the original score are of great value. We find that ninety tempo notes have been added, of which sixty-two require faster and only twenty-eight slower tempi. The majority of the later notes, on the other hand, are concerned with clarity, for example 'do not rush' or 'fast but not too fast to maintain clarity'. What truly goes to the heart of the interpretation are notes that are diametrically opposed to those in the printed score, for example in the Prelude of Act III during the first great climax, the score is marked 'restrained and becoming broader'. Wagner changed this during rehearsal to: 'Not too much ritardando. Too much breadth here would render the character of the melody incomprehensible.' His constant exhortation 'without pathos' shows clearly that under the influence of conductors such as Furtwängler or Toscanini a picture of Wagner has grown up that is wholly opposed to Wagner's ideas. We meet another fine example during the Love motif in Act III when Kundry brings the water, where Wagner notes: 'more agitated than adagio'. Thus he reverses his own instructions in the score. On the other hand 'clarity' was one of his favourite words during rehearsals. Again and again he emphasised the importance of the little notes, since – in his words – the large ones would look after themselves. Wagner also answers the question whether the 'exposition' of the leitmotifs should always be in the orchestra: 'such repetitions of the main themes are only to be played as accompaniments'. Pierre Boulez is credited with having followed the Richard Strauss tradition in order to redress the image of Wagner the master of pathos. I was lucky enough to be a *Hospitant* [a guest attendee at rehearsals] during his work on the *Ring* in Bayreuth in the 1970s.

With regard to *Parsifal* we have available to us a wealth of new information, thanks both to studies of the sources – which have been made accessible once again – and to a score which corrects countless printing errors. I am convinced that our choices of tempo will render the binary character of the piece: reflection and action. The above-mentioned comments by the assistants are not only a great influence but led me to produce a complete set of orchestral materials since there are none in print for the new edition. Moreover, by marking the bowing I have been able to establish a difference between 'endless melody' on the one hand and storytelling music on the other, as Wagner repeatedly demanded.

Instruments

Studying the sources also led me to practical decisions about how to bring out certain ideas of sound in performance. 'Offstage thunder machine' reads Wagner's original score. This begs the question of what kind of machine Wagner meant. There is an old tradition in theatres that a large thundersheet be kept backstage for the purpose, sometimes combined with a large drum. Other conductors seek electronic solutions. In search of Wagner's ideas on sound, Dr Christa Jost, editor of the *Walküre* volumes of the new Complete Works of Richard Wagner, has managed to find the original instru-

ment, though no longer in working order, in one of the the Bayreuth festival scenery stores. Now we can answer the question of Wagner's ideas on sound. It is a giant apparatus covered with a vast hide and worked by a mechanism similar to that of a pedal timpani. The pitch is thus adjustable and the machine is 'played' by various wooden drumsticks and operated by a series of valves and a crank whose tempo can be altered. For the Amsterdam *Ring* production in 2005 the challenge was to recreate this machine. The Netherlands Opera has kindly made available a recording of this machine for our *Parsifal* production. The resulting sound clearly shows that Wagner was thinking of a musical instrument – similar to a giant drum – integral to his sound world rather than a technical process or the metallic sounds of a thundersheet.

We also try to get closer to Wagner's vision in building the sound for the bells in the Transformation Music in Act I. At the premiere Wagner used four different large tam-tams but complained of their inaccurate pitch while on the other hand sneering at the glass bells used in Munich: 'such Polyphemic cheese bells as they have in the theatre in Munich would be the right thing', Wagner said mockingly. And elsewhere:

After a talk with experts about how to produce the right bell sound we agreed that this would still be best imitated by *Chinese tam-tams*. So where can such tam-tams be obtained in the largest numbers and with the best selection? We thought: in London. Fine, but where do you get the best selection? Of course: at Dannreuther's. So: do see, dear friend, if you can track down four tam-tams which – at least approximately – can produce the following tones:



It's worth noting that – in order to bring out a deep bell tone, these instruments must be struck only *softly* on the edge, while if struck hard in the centre they give a bright and quite unserviceable sound. So – see what you can do!

Thus it is also clear that he really wanted the deep tones. Later Cosima had the so-called '*Parsifal* bells' built, which until now have been used as the standard in performance after a previous attempt to cast real bells, which was apparently unsuccessful. The 'bells' commissioned by Cosima consist in principle of outsized piano strings which are struck, but lack anything of the more diffuse tam-tam sound. We're attempting to find Wagner's idea of the sound made by the tam-tam while also meeting the more precise demands of pitch by combining various gongs with tam-tams and piano strings. The importance of pitch to him is made clear in a telegram dated 12 July 1882 to Eduard Dannreuther: 'A kingdom for a tam-tam! With an accurate concert pitch C.'

Wagner was rare among composers in his interest in developing the instruments of his time and in introducing new ones (for example the Wagner tubas, the fuller sounding viola which Hermann Ritter developed to Wagner's approval, or the alto oboe to replace the cor anglais which was too weak for Wagner's tonal palette). In addition to those he had made were those that had been recently invented such as the bass clarinet. It would therefore be a complete misunderstanding of history to perform Wagner on the instruments that were in the orchestras with which he worked. He was, like Berlioz in France, among those who wanted to replace the old

instruments with new ones and even accepted the disappearance of the sound, much loved by him, of the natural horns. In Dresden he had already managed to introduce two valve horns for the court orchestra: thus the Dresden score of *Tannhäuser* lists two natural horns and two valve horns. In the later editions, when enough modern instruments were available for all the musicians, he used four valve horns. How bothered he was by the question, and how drastic he regarded the lack of horns, can be seen in his article about the performance of the Beethoven symphonies:

here alone he was so pitifully limited by the natural horns and trumpets whose technical capacities were only just being mastered in his time [...]. I do not need to reveal to today's musician the evils touched upon here of the orchestral instruments at Beethoven's disposal, for he easily avoids them in the now common usage of the chromatic brass instrument.

Among the flutes he preferred the lighter sound of the conical flute, which was more capable of modulation, but laid great weight on the fact that the instruments should be equipped with ring valves to increase their sound. It is, however, striking that Wagner uses the flute relatively little compared to the rest of the woodwind section.

Wagner's repeated demands for a large string section also related to the instruments of the day, whose strings (apart from the deep ones) were still catgut. By reading his comments about violas we can glean that he wanted a fuller sound, closer to that of the modern instrument. In this context one should note also that tuning developed throughout the 19th century in an upward direction but in a far from consistent way from region to region. While in Munich in 1870, concert A had reached 435.4 Hz, in London it was already way above today's concert pitch at an extreme 455.1 Hz. So there is no absolute historical pitch for Wagner. We can only speculate that Wagner was influenced by the Dresden tuning which before he left was still considerably lower than the Munich concert pitch. If today we are tuned to 444 Hz, this corresponds to the midpoint between the tunings that were the norm in the second half of the 19th century.

To sum up his wishes on this point I want to quote one of Richard Wagner's somewhat exaggerated rehearsal notes from 1876 which came to light during study of the sources on performance practice: 'Tuning is nothing. The main thing is and remains knowledge.'

Translated by Emma Warner



A reconstruction of Wagner's original 'thundersheet', used in the Copenhagen performance