

Daniel H. Foster, *Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks. Cambridge Studies in Opera.* Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xx, 377. ISBN 9780521517393. \$95.00.

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[Preview](#)

There are several studies about Wagner and the classics, but Foster does an extremely fine job of combining classical knowledge with musicology and philosophy of the nineteenth century. This book, therefore, is important for students of various disciplines and provides much information in a dense, sometimes difficult text.

Foster observes many similarities in the thought of Hegel and Wagner but must admit that Wagner rarely quotes or refers to Hegel's main works (p. 6-7). That makes some of his conclusions tricky, since they rely on the assumption that Wagner had a thorough knowledge of Hegel. In contrast, Wagner often refers to Schopenhauer, a philosopher he adored, but who was no Hegelian at all.

Foster starts by sketching some general information about the composer's relationship with antiquity. Wagner did not study Greek thoroughly but read classical texts in bilingual or translated editions. He was largely influenced by Johann Gustav Droysen's historical studies from which he gained the idea of Greek politics as an example of esthetics. Latin had less value in Wagner's eyes and was too much the forerunner of the Romanic cultures he despised and considered as imitators only. Three appendices give a summary of Wagner's readings of classical authors, classicists, and other scholars.

The interest in the classics had its dubious sides, since Wagner always feared the influence on German culture from abroad (including by Jews). Therefore, he approached the classics through German scholars like Droysen. An important consequence was that Wagner did not write operas based on classical themes (like so many forerunners or after him Richard Strauss), but created a German ambience. As Foster makes clear in a later chapter, the gods of *Das Rheingold* have their counterparts in Greek mythology (pp. 94-97). Wotan is like Zeus (bad husband, father of many children), Fricka is like Hera (angry and jealous wife), Erda is like Gaia, even in her form, Loge is similar to Prometheus and Freia is a pendant of Aphrodite. Brünnhilde can be considered as Hermes Psychopompos (of Siegmund and Siegfried) and messenger (of Wotan).

This book is a triptych, having three large sections: I on epic, II on lyric, and III on tragedy. Many readers will be surprised by this order, since operatic drama and tragedy seem real sisters. But Foster is right to start with epic: the *Ring* is a real epic, a form sought by Wagner following Hegel. The genre includes a story, *Sittengeschichte*, culture and the like, providing didactic material for the reader. Since war is an important theme, epic is ideal for Wagner's subject matter – and Homer's *Iliad* has a paramount status. The Dorians, as defined by Karl

Otfried Müller, are like the harsh and heroic Germans of Wagner's work. War serves high goals, and we see the struggle of Siegfried against Hagen, and of the gods against Alberich and his dwarfs as combats between the Good and the Wicked. Foster reveals correspondences between Homer and Wagner. So, Odysseus' wound is similar to Siegfried's weak spot (pp. 46-47). In both cases a boar is in the game.

Formally, Wagner's music has its epic character in the shape of the *Leitmotive*, the length and the use of repeating phrases or parts of phrases. The orchestra leads the development of the plot and makes announcements like the messenger of Greek tragedy. Foster explains the invisible position of the orchestra in Bayreuth's Festspielhaus in this way: it does not share the action (p. 67). This sounds a bit too simplistic to me, since Foster also stresses the orchestra's importance in announcements by means of musical themes. Besides, this technical peculiarity was not yet worked out before Bayreuth. He correctly makes clear that the listener is led by the orchestral music before seeing the action and hearing the singing on stage.

Foster, who has many more compelling things to say about this subject, warns us not to identify the *Leitmotive* too simplistically with the formulaic verses in epic (p. 77), and illustrates his point by analyzing the Walhal motif that changes in the course of the Ring Cycle. Foster's nuanced discussion may be valid, but I see no difficulty in comparing the two, for several musical motifs do not change at all and even remind us of previous mentions within the four operas.

I like Foster's characterizations of the Greek-like protagonists of the four operas. See the gods mentioned above. Siegmund becomes an epic Hegelian hero who suffers for his nation in great altruism. I would even say that he is a tragic hero as well, although his individual strife is subordinate to that of his kinsmen.

Part II is on lyric: the operas have a lot of lyrical elements for which Foster seeks parallels in various works. This section has some in-depth discussions of Hegel's and Wagner's visions of the lyric. For both Pindar, for instance, represents the poet who hails his patron, but also himself (see especially chapter 7). In Wagner, Siegfried is a lyric hero, featuring in 'his' opera between the epic *Die Walküre* and the dramatic *Götterdämmerung*. His individuality and personality are worked out in detail. If Foster's comparison is valid, we see a Doric form of lyric, in which the individual has national(istic) as well as highly personal traits. He acts like an Orpheus by understanding nature and freeing people (Brünnhilde). Foster cannot avoid tackling the question of the father (Siegmund) unknown to Siegfried, whose search is similar to Wagner's quest for – indeed – Wagner or his mother's second husband Geyer who might even be a Jew (p. 150; Wagner's anti-Semitism is discussed many more times). As we know, in many more operas Wagner introduces people with an unknown or unclear background (e.g., Parsifal answers Gurnemanz' question about his parents a couple of times with 'Das weiss ich nicht'). Here the antique parallel could be worked out still more.

Sometimes Foster makes long excursions to return at last to his original argument, but all in the hope to make his reasoning clearer, which is not always so evident. I refer, as an example, to chapter 4 on the adaptation of didactic poetry in the shape of *gnomoi* as a means to bring myth into the 'reality' of the opera. A similar lengthy *excursus* is that on Orpheus in chapter 6, who serves as the model of Siegfried as the liberator. Siegfried, moreover, understands the animals and lives with them in pure harmony. The simile, however, does not stand in all aspects: Brünnhilde does not return to Hades, and Siegfried's later fortune has its causes in other vicissitudes. This lack of full parallelism exists for most comparisons (not only those

made by Foster), which is no serious problem in the analysis of a multi-faceted masterpiece like the Ring, but it weakens the argumentation of the author.

Another section that has little antiquity in it is chapter 8, where we get a brilliant analysis of Siegfried's behavior in nature, including explanations of Fafner and of Siegfried's *Bildung*. Dark sides of Wagner's personality come to the fore in the treatment of Mime and Alberich (and later Hagen) as emblems of Jewish threats to German society. The slaughter of Fafner in the shape of a 'Wurm' is put against Apollo's struggle against Python at Delphi, in which C. O. Müller's interpretation of the victory of light over darkness is followed. Here an interesting and not immediately clear aspect is tackled, viz. the French opera as the hidden agenda of Wagner. Fafner incorporates this monster that threatens German music. By drinking Fafner's blood Siegfried takes up the good aspects of this form of opera.

As to drama in part III, Hegel's and Wagner's interpretation of tragedy as expression of nationality and nationalism dominates the discussion. A long description of Greek drama is deemed necessary: Foster seems unsure of his readership and so provides the essential parameters. *Götterdämmerung* is the opera that, most of all, includes elements of tragedy. It has a negative plot and the end announces the beginning. Indeed, whoever has the fortune to hear and see the whole cycle within a short time span hopes that after the last notes of *Götterdämmerung* *Das Rheingold* may immediately start! Wagner's pessimism is fed by Schopenhauer rather than the early revolutionary ideas. Again, French opera is the culprit: Gunter and Gutrune represent the unmanly character of this theater genre. They waste Siegfried. Hagen stands for the Jew. The end is a complete disaster, but with a little bit of hope, for the Rhine daughters possess again the Rhine gold.

A theatrical genre not often associated with Wagner is that of Greek comedy: there is little to laugh at (even in Wagner's 'humoristic' *Die Meistersinger!*), but Foster recognizes elements like the derision of protagonists, the change of order, and the specific function of the chorus. He adopts a comparison made by Theodor Adorno: the comic elements are like those in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*: everything is made ridiculous, *Schadenfreude* predominates. I fail to see this sort of humor in Wagner's work (except, perhaps in *Meistersinger*), which is too serious to step back some moments and to introduce a touch of irony.

Foster concludes with references to Thales (water is the principle of life) and Heraclitus (destruction by fire) to connect the beginning and end of the Ring Cycle. Even within the operas similar beginnings and endings could be seen. The waning divine order makes place for human government that destroys the world.

This brief presentation of Foster's book may reveal the reviewer's bewilderment and admiration: we see many new facets of Wagner as composer as well as writer of the Ring (and other operas to a lesser degree). It all remains speculative, though based on sound knowledge and courage.