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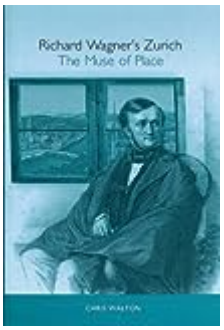

Chris Walton. *Richard Wagner's Zurich: The Muse of Place.* New York: Camden House, 2007. xii + 295 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57113-331-1.

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Putting Wagner in His Place

Chris Walton's study of Richard Wagner's Zurich years starts with a veritable bang. After quoting Wagner's unflattering characterization of Zurich as "devoid of any public art form," Walton retorts: "He lies, of course. Zurich in 1849 was neither devoid of art nor populated by the simple; nor was he unknown in it" (p. 1). This dry remark sets the tone for the spirited introduction as well as the entire book that endeavors to "uncover not merely 'Wagner's Zurich' and 'Zurich's Wagner' but also, above all, 'Zurich in Wagner' " (p. 5). In doing so, Walton seeks to redress an imbalance that dogs the majority of Wagner biographies, not just those dedicated to the Zurich years. All too often, Wagner's own writings, particularly his notoriously skewed autobiography *Mein Leben* (1870-1880), are taken at face value, so that everything is seen through his self-serving perspective. This stance makes any city he ever set foot in–whether Riga, Bayreuth, or even cultural centers such as Dresden and Munich–appear as if it were a nonentity before the arrival of the "Master." Walton, in contrast, takes Wagner's writings and tests them against local sources, thus giving those previously regarded as "distant, insignificant satellites" (p. 3) orbiting the Wagner sun a life of their own. As former head of the Music Division of the Zentralbibliothek ZÃ¼rich, Walton was of course in an ideal position to unearth little-known details about Zurich's musical life, and much of the present book echoes his previous studies published more locally and in German. However, Walton is not the only scholar to advocate a new look at Wagner's Zurich. In the same year Eva Martina Hanke's *Wagner in ZÃ¼rich, Individuum und Lebenswelt* (2007) appeared, which explicitly subscribed to a cultural historical approach. If Walton and Hanke took notice of the others' endeavors, their books sadly do not show any cross-fertilization beyond Hanke's quotation from Walton's earlier German publications. Thus an opportunity of combining the best efforts of Wagner scholarship for the benefit of English- and German-speaking audiences has been missed.

Walton's book is divided into ten chapters of differing length. The first two, "Wagner's Zurich" and "Zurich's Wagner," offer compact and strictly chronolog-

ical overviews of the development of music in Zurich on the one hand and Wagner's activities in the Swiss city from 1849 to 1858 on the other. The latter feels rather breathless, since its main purpose is to set the chronological framework for more systematic explorations of individual topics in the latter part of the book. The first chapter, however, is a highly informative account of Zurich's cultural and political history from the Reformation through the upheavals of the Napoleonic era to the eve of Wagner's arrival, demonstrating at every turn how closely politics (whether conservative paternalism or nineteenth-century liberalism) and culture were intertwined. As Zurich adhered to the strict branch of Zwinglian Protestantism, even singing in church was only grudgingly admitted in 1598. Theatrical performances were banned altogether, and as late as the eighteenth century, the appearance of touring theatrical companies made the ecclesiastical and city authorities nervous. This situation left the cultivation of music to several private societies of amateurs that merged in 1812 to form the semi-professional "Allgemeine Musikgesellschaft ZÃ¼rich." Despite the lack of musical patronage of court or church, musical education in Zurich reached a high standard thanks to Enlightenment ideas, for example, in the "Zurich Singing Institute" and choral societies founded by Hans Georg NÃ¤geli. Theatrical life took an upturn in 1837 when actress and dramatist Charlotte Birch-Pfeiffer became director and staged contemporary operatic works. She also brought composer and conductor Franz Abt to Zurich. Abt was essentially the city's "music baron" (p. 31) when Wagner arrived there–sufficient reason for the jealous Wagner to disparage Abt as an artistic failure. Despite these cultural activities, Walton admits that, with regard to "the public manifestations of art … Zurich was still heavily provincial," though by no means the blank slate that Wagner makes it out to be (p. 34). Zurich's main attraction, however, was its liberal and intellectually radical climate, unique in post-1848 Europe.

The next two chapters are rather short and consider Wagner's relationship with "the place" from unusual vantage points: in particular, the creative stimuli the composer found in his new surroundings. "Weathering Storms" engages with Wagner's enthusiasm for nature and its possible influences on his operas. After debunking (once again) the "Good Friday" myth surrounding the conception of *Parsifal* (1882), Walton describes Wagner's trips into the Swiss Alps, where he might have found inspiration for some depictions of nature in the *Ring* cycle, such as the storm in *Die WalkÃ¼re* (1870) and BrÃ¼nnhilde's bare mountain in *Siegfried* (1876). Walton also conjures the unusual phenomenon of the "Rigigespenst" (Rigi ghost), a reflecting bank of cloud, surrounded by a rainbow halo that Wagner, according to a letter by his stepdaughter Natalie, saw for the first time in 1850. Walton links this apparition with the rainbow bridge in *Das Rheingold* (1869)–though the Nordic sources alone would have sufficed for the image–as well as the staging of the final scene of *Der fliegende HollÃ¤nder* (1843), and adds a few thoughts on the latest developments in stage technique that Wagner might have encountered in Paris and Zurich. Chapter 4, "The Life Aquatic," similarly investigates the influences of Wagner's fondness for "taking the waters" on his artistic output. The composer was an ardent follower of hydrotherapy as practiced in the spa Albisbrunn to alleviate his manifold illnesses; and it was there that he drafted the libretto of *Rheingold*–not an unsuitable choice for an opera whose first scene is set entirely underwater. Walton discusses Wagner's intestinal troubles, the cures he sought for them, and their relationship with the composition process without embarrassment, arriving at the conclusion that "Wagner's bowels and his muse seem to have existed in a strangely symbiotic relationship" (p. 98).

Chapters 5 to 7 are again brief and sketch Wagner's closer environs in Zurich, starting with an exploration of the city's lively print culture in "Publishing in Zurich." Wagner's large-scale theoretical works, *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849), *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1850), *Oper und Drama* (1851), *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* (1851), as well as the notorious *Das Judentum in der Musik* (1850), were all printed in Germany, which seems to be sufficient reason for Walton not to discuss them beyond the short surveys he offered in the second chapter. Instead, he focuses on some of the smaller articles and program notes that Wagner published with Schulthess and Kiesling of Zurich in the context of the other products of these publishers; a list of his writings including reviews might have been helpful here. Walton also speculates about the ways in which Wagner's presence in Zurich affected music publication, as he established the contact between Hector Berlioz and the firm of Rieter-Biedermann.

Chapter 6, "Colleagues and Competitors," with the intriguing subtitle "The Men Who Weren't There," gives ample space to musicians whom Wagner either mentions only briefly (and mainly negatively) in his memoirs, or whom he "forgot" to mention altogether, despite the many points of contact and mutual obligation that Walton demonstrates. Besides Abt, choral conductor Ignaz Heim and his wife Emilie (who frequently sang Wag-

ner's works), as well as composers Fanny HÃ¼nerwadel, Theodor Kirchner, Wilhelm Baumgartner, and Johann Carl Eschmann are all introduced in short biographical vignettes. Walton also points out several similarities between passages in Wagner's operas written in Zurich and songs by Kirchner and Eschmann. Although these observations are framed by careful considerations about borrowing and creative influence, they are not wholly convincing and smell slightly of the "reminiscence hunting" of the nineteenth century. The following chapter, "Composing in Wagner's Footsteps," then traces influences in the opposite direction by introducing the handful of "New German" composers active in Zurich after Wagner left the city. However, despite the efforts of Albert Rudolph FÃ¤sy (a Lisztian rather than a Wagnerian) and Heinrich Schulz-Beuthen, Walton has to admit that Zurich generally "gravitated back to a Schumannian/Mendelssohnian aesthetic" (p. 154) as soon as Wagner left, making Zurich an early Johannes Brahms stronghold. Brahms frequently visited Zurich after Wagner's departure and met the same people; this activity may, however, been due to the limited number of musical enthusiasts in Zurich rather than mysterious subconscious urges to tread in Wagner's footsteps, as Walton implies.

The three final chapters are easily the most arresting and intriguing for both general readers and Wagner specialists. Chapter 8, "Wagner Conducts," shows how Wagner's presence changed concert life and concert programming in Zurich, pushing it towards more professional and "modern" forms by constantly demanding more orchestral players and more rehearsal time. The Allgemeine Musikgesellschaft was not unhappy to invest large sums in musicians and to let Wagner pick and choose the program, since ticket sales rocketed whenever he was billed to conduct. Unfortunately Walton reveals very little about how Zurichers reacted to Wagner's compositions and his unusual conducting style; the latter is discussed only in an ingenious merger of Wagner's tract, *Ãber das Dirigieren* (1869), with a corresponding passage in *Mein Leben.* The chapter gains in strength when Walton discusses the original sources surviving in the society's archives: fragments of Wagner's arrangement of *Don Giovanni* created in 1850, and orchestral parts of symphonies by Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven, as well as a Christoph Willibald Gluck overture, which were used for his concerts. Walton scrutinizes the scribes and expression markings in loving detail and demonstrates convincingly that Wagner advocated great fidelity to the musical text as well as flexibility in execution, particularly a fluctuating tempo. These findings are again related to his own compositional practices. The chapter is rounded off with a useful table of Wagner's concert, theatrical, and domestic performances in Zurich.

In the final two chapters, Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck take center stage. Walton does his best to dispel several pervasive myths: that of Otto as a simpleton who stupidly kept supporting an extravagant composer who cuckolded him, and that of Mathilde as a mere sounding board for Wagner's creative genius. Otto emerges as an astute and cosmopolitan businessman who might have been glad to assist the fugitive Wagner because his own brother Hugo, a liberal and member of the Frankfurt parliament in 1848-49, had to leave Germany. Walton's speculations regarding Otto's more private reasons for supporting Wagner are less convincing. Although it is no doubt rather peculiar that he asked his second wife, whose real name was Agnes Luckemeyer, to call herself "Mathilde" like his first wife and his only sister, the idea that Otto and Wagner were united in an inclination to incest sounds rather far-fetched. Walton admonishes himself not to be carried away by "increasingly unlikely speculation," but proposes immediately afterwards that "Otto tolerated his wife's infatuation because, in fact, he shared it" (p. 197). Nevertheless, the biographical re-readings of *WalkÃ¼re* and *Tristan* (1865), if such things have to be done at all, offer intriguing glimpses of a completely different understanding of Wagner's works. The final chapter is dedicated to "Voicing Mathilde: Wagner's Controlling Muse." Walton makes a strong case that her creative and intellectual capabilities have been unjustly underrated in favor of portraying her as a purely erotic stimulant for the composer. According to Walton's persuasive analysis of their relationship through letters, memoirs (notably, the often overlooked testimony of Wagner's stepdaughter, Natalie) and the creative work of both, Mathilde was a self-possessed, strong-willed woman who exerted considerable control over the men and women around her. In Wagner's case, part of the control lay precisely in her refusal to yield to his desire for a complete "Vereinigung"–a rather elegant solution to the perennial question that appears in any account of the Wagner-Wesendonck relationship. In enriching and changing our picture of Mathilde, Walton also gives satisfaction to a marginal figure, her Italian tutor Francesco de Sanctis, who normally appears in the Wagner literature only as Mathilde's "Mediterranean flirt," but who was in fact a professor of Italian literature with revolutionary credentials and a profound grasp

of Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy–quite a rival for Wagner. By stressing Mathilde's interest in Sanctis, Walton puts the famous "Morning Confession" of April 1858, which ultimately forced Wagner to flee Zurich to avoid an open scandal, into a quite different light, "less like a love letter than an attempt … to justify oneself with regard to an argument that one has lost badly" (p. 228). The chapter closes with a sensitive discussion of Mathilde's literary works, which are, according to Walton, "an echo of the dialogue that she and Wagner enjoyed" (p. 237). In any case, although the life of the Wesendoncks was no doubt enriched and changed by Wagner's presence in Zurich, Walton makes it abundantly clear that they were intellectuals and human beings in their own right.

In the brief conclusion, Walton reiterates his conviction that the exiled composer could not have come to a better place to complete his transition from Dresden *Kapellmeister* to musician of the future. He may slightly overstate his case. Walton's Zurich–and Wagner's Zurich–of the 1850s undoubtedly emerges as a highly interesting and stimulating place that shaped the Wagner we now know, but no doubt a prolonged stay in London, Paris, or even Dresden would have shaped an interesting (albeit different) Wagner as well. Despite the many sources examined, Walton's detailed account leaves some figures in a hazy half-light, for example, the community of exiled intellectuals (if Wagner had little to do with them, the "why" would surely have deserved attention) or a central figure such as Minna Wagner. Nevertheless Walton's study gives an excellent "feel" for the place, introduces the average Wagnerian to many enlightening facts about musical life in Zurich, rights several wrongs of previous Wagner scholarship, and leaves the reader with several intriguing, highly speculative, though not always entirely convincing new ideas about Wagner's creativity.