

Berwick – Upon Tweed Educational Association
‘Wagner for Beginners’
by Dr Richard Moore, creative writer and lecturer, Newcastle University
Friday 6th October 2017 – Study Morning 10 – 1.00pm

Content of Study Morning

There is no doubting Wagner’s huge influence on Western culture, even though he often failed to pay his creditors and is notorious for his anti-Semitic views. He it was who decided it would be a good idea at theatrical performances to turn the house lights down and watch a drama in the dark. He also built a radically new theatre at Bayreuth, to his obsessive specifications. Patronised by the fascinating ‘Mad King’, Ludwig of Bavaria, he also expanded the length, breadth, and height of music-theatre, changing its parameters forever.

Although Wagner was essentially an innovator, he was not as opposed to more traditional musical styles as is often claimed. He admired, for instance, *The Barber of Seville* and expressed a wish for more works in the same vein and he was not averse to the charms of the limpid melodic line of Bellini. Musicians usually hugely admire him, including those more known now for their lighter fare. An example is Sir Arthur Sullivan whose favourite opera was *Die Meistersinger*. At the premiere of *Iolanthe* (1882) the Fairy Queen was given a Wagnerian helmet and became a satirical Brünhilde type who could nonetheless gamble on gossamer and nestle in a nutshell!

It is a mistake to think that Wagner could not write tunes. Early works such as *Rienzi* are full of them and *The Flying Dutchman* is melodically extremely rich. One trouble is that Wagner's creative genius has been tainted by knowledge of his personality — by his overzealous references to militarism and nationalism, as well as his overt racist tendencies. It is not surprising that his works would later be adopted by Adolf Hitler to symbolize his notion of the Third Reich and that Wagner's music, to this day, is largely (not entirely) taboo in Israel.

Perhaps Wagner’s greatest achievement is the *Ring Cycle*, which in every sense is immense. The best approach is to take it slowly, find a translation and prepare to get lost in some of the most intoxicatingly sublime Romantic music ever composed. Essentially it is four very big operas, all linked together by the same story. In order, they are: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. Their impetus is the stealing of a magic ring from the dwarf Alberich, by Wotan, King of the Gods. The *Rheingold* meanwhile is the spirit of the nation, associated, as so often in the case of rivers, with the nation’s life-blood. Wagner took about 26 years to complete the whole thing, and it's easy to see why. His idea was that it should be a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' ('Complete Artwork'), a total synthesis of music and drama where they co-exist equally.

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Another Wagnerian innovation is the *leitmotiv*. Many of the characters, places and ideas in the *Ring* have their very own signature tune. Rather than being an excuse to eat up more composing time, the Leitmotifs act as a reminder about those characters. Occasionally Wagner changes them slightly to change how you feel about the person represented.

One good way of entering the Wagner world is by placing him in a wider context of German Romantic opera. Hence for this study-morning we shall also refer to Weber and even Offenbach who wrote an amazingly good *serious* Romantic Opera called *Die Rheinnixen*. Also on the agenda will be the showing of extracts from famous Wagner works and perhaps a peep at *Der Freischutz* by Weber which is the epitome of pre-Wagnerian German romantic opera. Finally (briefly) we shall consider Wagner's influence on literature, notably on T.S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*.

No study morning can do justice to the full range of the Wagnerian achievement but we offer a tempting slice. In addition there will be scope for your own views and suggestions. So, whether you know nothing about Wagner or everything (which is impossible) do come along to learn and to admire.

The study morning will be held at the Berwick Voluntary Centre, Tweed St, Berwick on 6th October. The morning will run from 10 – 1.00pm with a break for coffee.

The cost of the study Morning is £9 to include refreshments. Space is limited so early booking is recommended.

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