

Hannu Salmi:

The sudden increase of Finnish Wagner literature

LIFE AND WORKS IN THE GUIDANCE OF BARRY MILLINGTON

Barry Millington: *Richard Wagner – Elämä ja teokset* (Richard Wagner – Life and Works. The original title of the English book is *The Master Musicians: Wagner*). Translated by Jopi Harri, edited by Peter Häggblom. Suomen Wagner-seura r.y. (The Finnish Wagner Society), Turku 2003. xiv + 349 pp.

The Finnish Wagner Society has recently published an impressive work on Wagner which will certainly have a catching effect on the readership. Even though quite a lot of Wagner books have been currently published in Finland recently, there is not much to read. The newly published book, Barry Millington's *Richard Wagner – Elämä ja teokset* (Richard Wagner – Life and Works) is a necessary supplement to the existing works, because the latest standviews and interpretations should evidently also be available in Finnish. Thus one is certainly apt to wish that similar books on other remarkable artists and composers like Verdi, Chopin, and Puccini were published in Finnish in the forthcoming years.

As for Barry Millington's background, he is music critic for *The Evening Standard* and is specialized in the Wagner-theme. He has edited *The Wagner Compendium*, one of the best manuals in the field. Together with Stewart Spencer he has edited an anthology *Wagner in Performance* (Yale University Press, New Haven 1992), dealing with the reception history of Wagner, and a collection *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (Norton, New York 1987) which consists of new translations of Wagner's letters into English. The central point of Millington's energetic working is, however, *The Master Musicians: Wagner* (Oxford University Press) written in 1984 and published now in Finnish by The Finnish Wagner Society. However, the text concerned does not go back to so distant a time, because Millington revised and completed his text for the editions of 1992 and 2000. Millington has



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also rewritten passages for the Finnish version, particularly in the chapter treating the various productions of *The Ring* thus making the work an exemplar of a perfect Wagner-book for the Finnish reader. The work has not earlier been translated into any other languages.

On the whole, the title of the Finnish version, "Richard Wagner – Life and Works" is functionable, and after all much more illuminating than the laconic name of the original work. Millington really strives to depict first Wagner's life, and, after that, his works. In connection with Wagner, it is, however, well grounded to ask whether his life was a work too. His life was a creation which was consciously moulded to be equal to the image of a romantic artist. This was not only the goal of Wagner but also that of his predecessors and his protégés who later continued the making of his artistic image after the year 1883. One is not perhaps unable to completely shape this process on the basis of Millington's book because of the life-and-works -format. However, I experienced this format as being a significant standpoint. Millington seems to hint at the idea that also

Wagner's life and work are separable from each other. Of all the composers Wagner in particular has suffered from the fact that his life and works have been entwined to be an inseparable whole. Being enthused about Wagner easily becomes a two-part activity; if one has courage to express one's admiration and is enjoying the composer's works, one has, at the same moment, breathlessly to disparage all that the composer has done and what has been done in his name – not to mention the fact that as a person he was simply intolerable. In this specific situation one enjoys reading Millington's text. In a cool and analytical manner, the author is able to figure out that Wagner, as we all are, was a child of his own time. Despite this, his works are embraced by an irresistible attraction that is peculiar to great art which can and should be continuously interpreted.

At the scrutiny of Wagner's life and works, the "works" are mainly constituted by his operas which are presented in a chronological order. The very last short chapter of the book describes rarely performed, orchestral and vocal works by Wagner. It would probably also have been relevant to comprehensively illustrate Wagner as a critic, writer, poet, and dramatist, considering that Wagner, at the beginning of his career, first became famous basically for his literary works. The dramatic and poetic aspects are after all well treated in connection with music dramas, but Wagner's other literary activity remains fragmentarily described. This may be due to the structure of the treatment: part of Wagner's literary function can be found in the biographical section of the book, part in the analyses of the works in which the writings are described as background or sources of the music dramas. Thus, the writings of the Zurich period are included in the biographical section, whereas those of the Munich and the Tribschen periods are analysed later in connection with the works. For example, Wagner's series of

articles and the book *Deutsche Kunst und deutsche Politik* (1867-68) are treated in the descriptions of *The Mastersingers* “as a historical and political background,” even though the composer’s penning of these texts was clearly aiming for the achievement of a political influence in the vortex of the *Reichsgründung*. In this part there is also a mistake that I would like to point out. Such lapses are not frequent in the texts by Millington who is always conscientious. The author mentions that the text “Was ist deutsch?” came into being in 1865 (p. 257, original text p. 253). In fact, Wagner did not publish any writing under this name at that time. Instead, he privately sent Ludwig II the diary (Tagebuchzeichnungen 14.-27. September 1865) in which he treated the essence of Germanness and the measures the king should take. Later Wagner began to edit an article from the text concerned, but the work proved to be difficult, because the subject was too delicate. In the course of years, many versions came into being and were thrown to the dustbin. Not until the year 1878 did the text receive publicity in the *Bayreuther Blätter* under the title “Was ist deutsch?” This may seem to be a minor problem of dating, but the question is of an important writing and of an important phase, because the process of the German unification and the establishment of Wagner took place between the years 1865–1878. In addition to this, the text published in 1878 was essentially shorter, only a third of the diary which was penned for Ludwig.

Of course, I have to admit that I may have scrutinized Millington’s work even too much from the point of view of a scholar of Wagner’s political activities. Just this made me halt and think of the author’s surprising conciseness in the description of Wagner’s flirting with the new leaders of united Germany. In his private standviews, Wagner had strongly criticized Bismarck in the 1860s. The Iron Chancellor was a “poor imitation of the most unGermanic spirit” (p. 88, original text p. 81), “eine schlechte Kopie des undeutschen Wesens”, as he wrote to François Wille on 20 June 1866. The year 1871 changed the situational position, and Wagner even paid a visit to Bismarck in Berlin, which is not mentioned by Millington. In the description of Wagner’s life it would also have been interesting to focus attention on Wagner’s visit

to Russia at the beginning of the year 1863. Wagner greatly appreciated the success he achieved in St. Petersburg and Moscow and even seriously considered making tours in Russia at regular intervals. This would later be of great importance, because the Russian aristocracy generated a significant group of patrons for the successful establishment of Wagner in the late 19th and early 20th century. Because the purpose of Millington’s book is to be an introduction to the subject, it is perfectly well clear that it would have been impossible for the author to treat everything in the book.

It would be immoderate, however, to lay more emphasis on these points. The book has been elaborated with exceptional care and it is based on alert examination of latest Wagner studies. The book draws an excellent, well dated picture of the phases of Wagner’s life and his production. In a particular territory, the book, however, calls for an instruction for reading the text. Even though the book* contains a large number of footnotes, there are not always indications concerning the origin of the information given in the text. This is particularly due to the use of Wagner’s autobiography as a source. References to *Mein Leben* occur usually in passages where Millington makes a critical remark about Wagner’s autobiography and its reliability (for example that the idea of *Parsifal* did not after all come into existence on Good Friday). The fact is, however, that information grounded on the autobiography can be found almost on every page from the very beginning, even though the matter is not mentioned. In Wagner literature, there seems to be a common convention to refer to *Mein Leben* as a kind of archetype of unreliability. Having participated in the publication of the Finnish translation of this autobiography and having read it several times, I am more and more convinced that *Mein Leben* can, after all, be regarded as being a rather honestly written book: Wagner quite openly reveals his egotism, envy, passions, illnesses, and his megalomaniac dreams. What is important, is how to interpret the book. On the whole, it is not possible to use autobiographies as evidence of “what really happened”. Autobiographies reveal how the author wanted to see and describe his or her life. It has become characteristic of Wagner literature to criticise *Mein Leben* of its mis-

leading qualities despite the fact that the question is basically of an interpretation of a source. Millington’s book strengthens this myth, because possibilities to stress the unreliability of Wagner’s own testimony are conspicuously put forward, whereas “reliable” autobiographical information exploited in the text does not seem to deserve any specific mention.

Richard Wagner – Life and Works is a child of its time in the same way as its object. Most important is that the work comprises many innovating analyses. Wagner’s anti-jewishness is treated by Millington in light of the 19th century cultural climate in a many-sided dispassionate manner which also takes into account what happened later. Besides this, the analyses of works are also well-grounded and tenable. Millington excellently records both the musical and dramatic aspects. In certain passages, particularly in the treatment of *Tristan and Isolde* more emphasis could have been put on the interpretative side: the analysis ends with the study of tonal relationships as if the merits of the opera were more in the musical than in the dramatic areas.

On the whole, it is possible – without any doubts – to conclude that The Finnish Wagner Society has received through Barry Millington’s book a valuable contribution to the society’s production of publications. The book deepens and specifies the insights given about Wagner which was started by Peter Bassett’s book on *The Ring* in the year 1999. The fluent translation and make up of the book by Jopi Harri, and Peter Häggblom’s careful editing, have resulted a highly reliable handbook to be enjoyed by Wagner fans for years. In this beautiful hardcover, the text is enriched through plenty of pictures, which makes the book unreservedly even more outstanding than the original volume published in English. Millington has also newly indexed the book and dated the biography of sources for the Finnish edition, which allows the reader to make even a longer journey to the world of music dramas.

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* This comment is as relevant for the Finnish translation as well as for the original book (editorial comment).