Introduction

Richard Wagner (1813–83) was the architect of the industry that today bears his name. At first, this may seem like an unremarkable statement. We have come to expect that anyone intent on a career in the public sphere will engage in self-promotion, or hire specialists for that purpose. During the nineteenth century, however, this was not at all self-evident. Indeed, for certain professions, engaging too obviously in self-promotion might be regarded as inappropriate conduct and serve to tarnish rather than enhance an image.

Admittedly, Wagner was neither the first celebrity in history, nor the only one of his day, nor were most of the techniques and strategies he used to market himself either unique or unprecedented. Nevertheless, the case of Wagner is special. First, as opposed to most of the so-called "great masters" who became commodities, Wagner not only participated in, but pioneered his own merchandizing. Second, beyond creating a recognizable public persona, he also presented his works as distinct creations unlike all others. So dissimilar were these works to anything comparable that he claimed they belonged to a new category; he even invented a vocabulary to describe them. Building a special theater where they were to be performed exclusively constituted only the most visible gesture in a larger enterprise that stamped his works with the markings of a brand. In the realm of art, nothing quite like it had ever been undertaken. Third, and most significantly, he resisted and attacked those very forces of modernity that had set the conditions for self-promotion, celebrity, and product branding in the first place. This is the essential paradox of the Wagner industry, and one that lays bare the pervasiveness and inescapability of the market in modern times. Andreas Huyssen has called this phenomenon "the vortex of commodification," a remark he made specifically in reference to Wagner.[1]

Despite the far-reaching implications of the foregoing, Wagner's enduring significance can still only be explained by his colossal, endlessly fascinating, and powerfully emotional works which seem to offer renewed stimulation

[1] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 42.

and relevance to every generation. Yet Wagner acted as though quality alone was insufficient, as if to concede that "great art" could not speak for itself, or could no longer do so in the crowded and noisy marketplace of the emerging masses. And so, starting around 1840 when he was not yet thirty, he began to produce a vast body of supplementary texts, all designed in one way or another to increase his visibility in the public sphere, to present a carefully crafted version of himself, and to explain, defend, and promote his works to a variety of different audiences. But he did not stop there. He worked to destroy the standing of his direct competitors and, with the help of his supporters, transformed musical taste for generations. He wrote about himself in such a way that, even today, when we talk about Wagner, we adopt his language and use his imagery. Some of Wagner's writings were scandalous then, and are now; the response to them occasionally horrific. So, in addition to the music and the drama, Wagner the person, the public figure, the discursive agenda, the historical event and its repercussions continue to command the attention of cultural critics, historians, biographers, and journalists to an extent that cannot solely be explained by the magnitude of his theatrical works.

How do we account for Wagner's presence in the public sphere? Several of his contemporaries noted his apparently insatiable need to communicate. The French poet Catulle Mendès captures this with his description of a visit to the composer in Tribschen where he remarks that Wagner "talked, talked, talked … it was an unending flood."[2] Some interpreted Wagner's inability to stop talking as evidence of a mental illness, aspects of which could be discerned in the stage works themselves, a thesis tenaciously pursued already in Wagner's lifetime, though with unintended comic effect, by psychiatrist Theodor Puschmann.[3] While such a clinical diagnosis of Wagner's loquacious personality may be valid, it isolates the psychological motivation for his writings and other promotional activities from external, social, economic, cultural, or historical contexts and, thus, does not sufficiently address their content.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Wagner's first comprehensive and perhaps still his most perceptive critic, provides a bridge between psychological insight and historical context. Describing the theatricality which infused both his art and life, he epigrammatically called Wagner an incomparable "histrio," someone who "staged" everything, including himself. He diagnosed Wagner

[2] "il parlait, parlait, parlait! … un flot incessant," Catulle Mendès, *Richard Wagner* (Paris: Charpentier, 1886), 14–15.

[3] Theodor Puschmann, *Richard Wagner: Eine psychiatrische Studie* (Berlin: Behr, 1873) (appeared 1872).

as a psychological illness (*Wagner est une névrose*) who made music itself sick. But Nietzsche then makes the case that such is the quality of modernity itself: decadent, hysterical, neurotic, where mass success (*Massen-Erfolg*) is achieved only through showmanship and deception. Wagner is the modern "artist" *par excellence*: "only sick music makes money nowadays; our big theaters subsist on Wagner."[4] For Nietzsche, Wagner is like Franz Liszt and Victor Hugo, a sad comment on the times.

Historically, almost all of Wagner's efforts borrow or adapt practices that had already been in development by about 1800, meaning a generation or more earlier. For instance, the idea of public self-fashioning and the beginnings of celebrity culture are evident in the figures of Lord Byron and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, to name just two examples. Also around 1800, the habit of not only writing theoretically about the artwork, but anticipating its appearance with the aesthetic manifesto, came into being. The idea that the artist would need to "create the taste by which he is to be enjoyed," as William Wordsworth phrased it, was a direct consequence of what the philosopher Jürgen Habermas has termed the "structural transformation of the public sphere" in the eighteenth century, precipitated by the rise of journalism and the beginnings of what later came to be understood as popular culture.[5] Efforts by Wordsworth and, a generation earlier in Germany, by Karl Philipp Moritz and Friedrich Schiller, were a response to the economic success of what Germans call "Unterhaltungsliteratur" (leisure reading) and what Wordsworth referred to more colorfully as "frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse."[6] The book trade that peddled such works was scorned by a self-selected group of artists who sought to separate themselves from the mainstream by shunning profit and creating aesthetically more challenging literature that offered readers greater spiritual and intellectual rewards. Writing in part for an audience that did not (yet) exist, these authors embodied an "avant-garde" mentality before the term even came into use. In a larger sense, they were resisting emergent consumerist attitudes that had already been awakened by the new fashion industry as well as the phenomenon of the branded product, Wedgwood pottery being perhaps the most

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner*, ed. Dieter Borchmeyer (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1983), §5, §8, and §11; see also *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967).

[5] William Wordsworth, "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface (1815)," *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols., ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974), III: 62–84, here 80. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

[6] Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800)," *Prose Works*, I: 118–59, here 128.

obvious early case. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu examined this counter-culture as it emerged in Paris around 1840, the central figures being Charles Baudelaire and Gustave Flaubert.[7] Bourdieu's main argument is that their anti-market pose was in itself a marketing strategy, yet another example of Huyssen's "vortex." Both Bourdieu and Huyssen continue a line of thought already evident in the Marxist cultural criticism of Walter Benjamin – who was also fascinated by the example of Baudelaire – and Theodor Adorno, who saw precisely in Wagner the beginnings of what he termed the "culture industry."[8] In other words, all these thinkers argue that art and artists had become increasingly focused on the consumer.

Even if it is historically too soon to think in terms of consumerism, some economic sociologists like Colin Campbell and, before him, Neil McKendrick have argued convincingly that the late eighteenth century already manifests the practice of consumption, defined as the purchase and use of goods in response to momentary and transitory desires rather than to satisfy basic and permanent needs.[9] Consumption in this context refers to the pursuit of luxury, and self-indulgence in those things that are unnecessary – a long-standing habit of the aristocracy, but new to the growing mass of the middle classes. Similarly, for Donald Sassoon, whose enormous book also begins in 1800, "the story of culture" is the "story of production for a market" for the purpose of "cultural consumption."[10]

All of the above – public self-fashioning, celebrity, the aesthetic manifesto, avant-garde, fashion, the spread of journalism, the expansion of markets, the branded product – are but aspects of the broad changes sweeping England and the European continent, affecting every area of life and culture. Richard Wagner stands out as the artistic figure in the nineteenth century who fused all of these into a comprehensive struggle – ideological, theoretical, rhetorical, and creative – to establish for himself a self-contained niche in the opera market which he alone would control.

It was a tightrope walk. Like the Romantics who preceded him, Wagner vehemently opposed the modern view of the artwork as a commodity for speculation and profit. He, too, would write the aesthetic manifesto, try to

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford University Press, 1995).

[8] See Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: NLB, 1973). Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1991).

[9] See, for example, Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 17–31 and 60–5.

[10] Donald Sassoon, *The Culture of the Europeans from 1800 to the Present* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), xxi, xiii.

"create the taste by which he was to be enjoyed," and announced that he was composing for an audience that did not as yet exist. In all this, I am convinced that he was completely sincere. But that is not the point. Some of the claims he made, the inflationary language he used, the insistence with which he pressed them home, and the methods he used to promulgate them came precisely from the commercial world he was simultaneously vilifying. The contradiction raised eyebrows already then. One of his many opponents compared his methods to those of a town crier or "carnival barker."[11] Having rhetorically distanced himself from the sphere of profitable art, he nevertheless risked not being taken seriously by those who were nominally on his side of what Huyssen has called the "great divide."

The specter of trivialization continues to haunt Wagner and, I believe, accounts for the absence to this day of any book dealing with his self-promotion. Despite the massive number of works about him, which numbered over 10,000 already at the moment of his death in 1883, Wagner's critics have preferred to dismiss his public demeanor in psychological terms as evidence of megalomania.[12] Rather than viewing his actions as expressions of a flawed personality, I propose that we take seriously Wagner's efforts to craft a persona and to package his works. Most artists in modern times have had to market themselves. Wagner might just have done it better than anyone else.

The reluctance to consider canonical composers in terms of the market – a remnant of nineteenth-century sensibilities – has admittedly begun to erode. A recent book by Dana Gooley about Wagner's contemporary, Franz Liszt (1811–86), is exemplary in that Gooley wishes to resist the notion that Liszt's "virtuoso travels were largely an exercise in self-aggrandizement," noting that "we still lack an interpretation of Liszt's strategizing that does not reduce it to mere vanity."[13] Liszt's story is emblematic of the risks faced by musicians in the nineteenth century who promoted themselves, Niccolò Paganini (1782–1840) and Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791–1864) being two more examples. As opposed to the composer and violin virtuoso Paganini, who went to his death a media sensation albeit regarded as little better than a circus performer, Liszt withdrew from the carnivalesque spotlight that accompanied his public appearances in order to compose and conduct, because he wanted to be taken seriously. Meyerbeer, without question the

[11] W. J. S. E. [Julius Schladebach], "Das Palmsonntagsconcert," *Abend-Zeitung* (Dresden) April 16, 1846.

[12] Most recently, see Boris Voigt, *Richard Wagners Autoritäre Inszenierungen. Versuch über die Ästhetik charismatischer Herrschaft* (Hamburg: von Bockel, 2003).

[13] Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12–13.

most successful opera composer of his day, left himself vulnerable to attack for his calculated triumphs which were engineered by favorable previews in the press and claqueurs in the theater. Meyerbeer's demise in the opera repertoire of the latter nineteenth century may have been directly attributable to the unremitting attacks of Wagner and his allies, yet that did not stop Wagner from using some of the very same tactics. Perhaps one of Wagner's greatest accomplishments was his ability to promote himself and still to be taken seriously.

Meyerbeer, Paganini, Liszt, and Wagner were all responding to the times. Not unlike the eighteenth-century book market, the music market of the nineteenth century went through a similar transformation. Music historian William Weber has chronicled the emergence of the "modern music business" and has argued assiduously that, already in the nineteenth century, it should be examined as a "profit-seeking mass culture." While publication and retailing of printed music was "a burgeoning consumer business," not unlike the book trade, with "crafty merchandizing," the second area of the music industry – public concerts – operated on entirely different economies of scale, especially those performances that required full symphony orchestras, not to mention productions of grand opera. Concurrent with the increase in public concerts came the "commercial exploitation of the masters," meaning "dead great composers," like the recently deceased Ludwig van Beethoven and stretching back to Johann Sebastian Bach.[14] This exploitation is most evident in the stunning shift in concert programming which went from scheduling mainly contemporary to mainly "classical" works, a change in focus that still defines programming today. So, living composers were forced to compete not only against each other, but against the canonized.

Because Wagner chose the most expensive of musical genres – opera – he would lifelong be beholden to its economic imperatives. Nevertheless, because of his equally urgent literary aspirations, he in many ways brought the sensibilities of the author – both aesthetically and as a critic of modernity – to the table. So he united in ways that continue to seem contradictory, if not paradoxical, the public and necessarily publicized persona of a celebrity performer with that of the private, more introspective and contemplative author who shuns the world of media manipulation to preserve the integrity of the work, a persona which Wagner then shamelessly publicized

[14] William Weber, "Mass Culture and the Reshaping of European Musical Taste, 1770–1870," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 8.1 (1977), 5–22, here 6 and 15–16.

as such. Equally paradoxical, his works themselves: on the one hand meant to realize the Romanticist dream of unified art that would make man whole again, but on the other, works marketed as one-of-a-kind products that would guarantee precisely this effect – if you want to heal the world and feel good about it, buy Wagner.

How did Wagner go about making such claims, and what techniques did he use to make them so effectively? The following isolates five intersecting areas of activity – creation of a persona, public relations, development of a niche and brand, marketing embedded in the theatrical works themselves, and establishment of a hub and global network. One chapter is devoted to each of these, with special emphasis on a specific set of examples or episodes. To give the book a sense of structure, the examples and episodes are arranged chronologically over the five chapters. But this is not to suggest that one set of activities replaced the other. Wagner's efforts were ongoing in all areas, though some were emphasized over others at different times in his career. Despite the chronological arrangement, this is also not a biographical study, and biographical detail surfaces only when it is of particular relevance. Instead, the following engages in careful textual analysis of selected works by Wagner: prose essays, some correspondence, his autobiographies, journalism, as well as two of his operas.

These works reveal the extent to which Richard Wagner was his own press agent, his own manager, his own public-relations consultant. He pioneered his image as a leading cultural figure, creative genius, true German, inventor of a brand new form of aesthetic product. The Wagner industry today continues to rely on the astounding wealth of themes conceived, images shaped, and issues developed by Wagner in order to assert and retain the exclusivity of his brand.

1 Image

"I believe in God, Mozart and Beethoven."[1] These words begin the deathbed confession of "R … ," a fictional character of Richard Wagner's creation, the central figure in the novella "A Death in Paris." "R …" is a poor German expatriate musician who, in an earlier novella, had made "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven." Between these two short prose works, written and first published between 1840 and 1841, the twenty-seven-year-old Wagner fuses contemporary ideas and topoi with characteristics deeply ingrained in German cultural discourse to produce a figure both familiar and new. The poor, honest, German musician, who composes for the love of music rather than for monetary gain. Music as the transcendental art form. The great composers (Germans, of course) forming a divine succession. All these ideas, rich in signs, were then circulating. With sleight of hand, Wagner concentrates them into a single character, has him die on the printed page, only to reappear as the nucleus of the public persona Wagner adopted for the remainder of his career: therein lies the novelty. Richard Wagner's public image is a literary creation. Moreover, it is one of such complexity, so full of meaning, that it demands the careful unpacking to which the remainder of this chapter will be devoted.

The term "image" can be understood both visually and conceptually. Because the advent of photography coincided with Wagner's adult life, we have an even more accurate idea of how Wagner looked than we do of his illustrious predecessors like Mozart and Beethoven. Reproduced countless times on postcards, concert programs, posters, book and record covers, iconic and carefully posed photographs of Wagner, no less than the ubiquitous portraits of Mozart and Beethoven, determine our mental picture of the composer. Nevertheless, in the case of Wagner, these photographs cannot reflect some of the most enduring aspects of his public image: as "the most German of all composers," Beethoven's only legitimate successor, a misunderstood and embattled victim of libelous intrigues engineered

[1] "Ich glaube an Gott, Mozart und Beethoven," Richard Wagner, "Ein Ende in Paris," *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, popular edution, 16 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, n.d. [1911]), I: 114–36, here 135 (hereinafter *SSD*).

by a hostile, Jewish-controlled press, too good for Paris, the savior of European art, communicating only with friends of his art – the initiated – yet creating an art which would speak to the entire German Folk. These conceptual components of Wagner's image – too intricate to be conveyed by pictures alone – were all established textually and, more importantly still, by Wagner himself. This is where the case of Wagner is different from that of any composer, any artistic figure, predecessors and contemporaries alike, even those who wrote a great deal, like Carl Maria von Weber or Hector Berlioz. Wagner wrote and rewrote, enough to fill ten volumes in his own lifetime, later expanded to sixteen. His collected letters pack dozens more volumes, the project to publish a complete edition begun in 1967 and still underway. Attributed most often to a psychological need, the continuous flow of words from Wagner's mouth and pen has been described alternately as an urge to communicate (*Mitteilungsdrang*) or as the desire and ability to make a spectacle of himself (*Selbstdarstellungsvermögen*). Contemporary eyewitness accounts suggest that this was indeed a fundamental part of his personality. However, such verboseness also indicates the need to generate and control a discourse, what Robert Gutman refers to as Wagner's creation of "his own myth," but which is actually a far more involved issue and goes to the heart of this study.[2]

Wagner's musical-dramatic works have certainly become associated with the "myth" he created, making them possibly the most over-determined set of artworks in modern times. Wagner was the primary engineer of this association. However, rather than "myth," it would be more accurate to describe the result of Wagner's prose writings as a complex and disturbingly seductive amalgamation of poses, aesthetic theory, social commentary, ideology, woven amidst a colorful and suggestive autobiographical narrative. Many consumers of his artworks, then and now, have both identified and been identified with the ideas accompanying them, foremost the claim that his music dramas are exemplary expressions of the German spirit, a claim haunted by the specter of anti-Semitism. This is what has made enjoying Wagner such a forbidding exercise in the wake of the Holocaust. The lingering Wagner problem of the post-War period is a negative example which nonetheless testifies to Wagner's astonishing success at setting and controlling the discourse about his work. Wagner studies are beset by what I call "permalore," the Wagnerian version of permafrost: a narrative web of such glacial density that impedes alternative accounts. Wagner's version of

[2] Robert Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), xi.

his story and explanation of his work have traditionally been the starting points for anyone wishing to write about him.

Thus Gutman's term "myth" certainly addresses an aspect of the issue, but there is more to it. The same goes for his misperception that Wagner first began to go about inventing himself at the age of fifty-two, in 1865, with the dictation of his autobiography to his second wife, Cosima. This misses the mark by a quarter-century and suggests implicitly that Wagner was mainly interested in dominating how posterity viewed him. On the contrary, Wagner was in the first place concerned with controlling his own environment, his present. Moreover, while wanting like most people to influence how others perceived him, issues of control for Wagner were framed by specific and largely practical objectives. As a public figure and creative artist, control meant the suitable performance of his works together with commensurate recognition and acceptance by an audience: success in the marketplace. In this respect, Wagner's desires were no different from those of any other modern composer or artistic creator. However, the sum total of the ways in which he went about the task of generating, ensuring and maintaining his success were both unprecedented and, intuitively perhaps, remarkably sensitive to the market he was attempting to negotiate. Rather than "myth," the terms "persona" and "image" seem a more appropriate description of what Wagner undertook to construct, terms which denote the marketing rather than the psychological or literary dimension of his activities.

Without dwelling excessively on the murky science of long-distance psychoanalysis, it is hard to miss the personal and professional significance for Wagner of the approximately two and a half years he spent in Paris between September 1839 and April 1842 shortly before he turned thirty. Beset by failure, disappointment, and loss of control, this period is also witness to an exponential increase over previous years in the quantity of Wagner's prose writings and publications to levels he would sustain for the remainder of his life. Wagner's attempt to assert and maintain control through writing is as clear as is his move to use available media deftly to market himself, his ideas and, eventually, his works. Admittedly, nothing could have been further from his mind when he abandoned his conducting post and set forth from the provincial town of Riga to travel with his first wife, Minna, to the opera capital of the world.

The Paris music industry and its detractors

For a German, especially a German composer, going to Paris raised a number of issues. Since the late seventeenth century, the indisputable French