

Introduction

No composer's works have had quite the same extraordinary after-life that Richard Wagner's music dramas and theoretical writings have done. After causing controversy all over Europe by denouncing contemporary theatre as corrupt and demanding social and artistic revolution in a series of inflammatory essays written after his participation in the 1849 Dresden Uprising, Wagner went on to change the face of opera with the composition of his seven 'music dramas'. It is of little significance that Wagner's political aspirations fell by the wayside, for there was revolution enough in the *Ring* to generate a public outcry, no more so than in Russia, where the most conservative critics at first saw the composer as nothing less than a musical Antichrist. Despite the success of his concerts in St Petersburg and Moscow in 1863, when Wagner became the first musician in Russia to conduct facing the orchestra, the Imperial Theatres tried to resist the production of his music dramas for as long as possible. Such was the clamour for tickets to the performances of the *Ring* in 1889 given by a German touring company, however, that in 1900 the Mariinsky Theatre finally succumbed to the inevitable, and began staging the first Russian production of the work. The Russian opera-going public now abandoned their favourites in the French and Italian repertoire as their enthusiasm for Wagner deepened; during the 1909–10 season seven works by Wagner were performed at the Mariinsky Theatre, and by 1914, performances of his works took up a quarter of the total number of performances in the preceding season. All further performances of his works were banned when Russia entered World

War I, however, thus bringing pre-revolutionary Russian Wagnerism to an abrupt end. During that time, however, Wagner had caught the imaginations of the Symbolist writers and their fellow musicians and artists, and exerted a profound influence on their creative works. Astonishingly, Wagner continued to exercise a hold over Russian minds during the first decade of Soviet power, when he was promoted as a paragon revolutionary artist by Anatoly Lunacharsky, the first Communist director of culture. During the early 1920s, when Moscow became the centre for artistic innovation, Wagner's works (particularly *Rienzi*) were enthusiastically staged once more, often in newly politicised versions, and designed by leading artists of Russia's avant-garde. The cultural revolution, however, dictated a shift in the official attitude to Wagner, whose other Janus face (the one looking towards mysticism, pessimism and reaction) could no longer be ignored. The new 'critical' outlook on Wagner meant that productions of his works now had to be justified ideologically, and could show only Wagner's hatred of capitalism, his optimism for the socialist future of mankind, and his identification with the rebellious masses. Hitler's rise to power in the thirties only accelerated Wagner's disappearance from opera repertoires and concert programmes. Yet the Nazi–Soviet Pact was to bring a late but rich bloom to Soviet Wagnerism: Eisenstein's production of *Die Walküre* at the Bolshoi Theatre in 1940, which was beyond doubt the most radical and innovative staging of the work to take place anywhere in Europe before World War II. The experience of producing Wagner's opera made a profound impression on Eisenstein, and he later acknowledged that it had been of prime importance to his experiments with colour film.

The story of Russia's long involvement with Wagner's music and ideas thus not only adds a small, but interesting and previously unexplored chapter to the composer's biography, but (particularly in the case of Meyerhold and Eisenstein) contributes very significantly to the history of Wagner stagings, and even that of opera production as a whole. Wagner's ideas also exerted a lasting influence on leading practitioners of

Introduction

3

Russian Symbolism and many other artists and musicians during Russia's 'Silver Age'. What is particularly noteworthy about Wagner's influence on Russian culture is perhaps not the fact that it was so pronounced, but that – incredibly – it persisted until the end of the 1930s, where it had its final flowering in Eisenstein's production of *Die Walküre*. It is extraordinary that the ideas of a Romantic nineteenth-century composer should still be bearing fruit well into the twentieth century, by which time the heyday of the modernist movement had already long passed.

With the exception of Serov, most nineteenth-century Russian composers endeavoured, but mostly failed, to remain impervious to Wagner's imposing presence. The Balakirev circle, for example, both sensed and feared his colossal talent, but their intense desire to remain true to the precepts of Russian realist art which Stasov had instilled in them, coupled with an awareness of the relatively undeveloped state of Russian music, led to insecurities which often manifested themselves in the form of violent invectives directed against Wagner and his reforms. Cui, as the weakest of the group, was the most insecure: accordingly, his diatribes against Wagner were the most highly charged. Musorgsky, on the other hand, the greatest of the five, and also the most sure, had little need to expunge the fear of Wagnerian influence from his mind by means of vituperative attacks, for he was making discoveries of his own about opera and drama. That the hostile stance of the Balakirev circle was little more than a mask which hid quite different feelings is revealed by the cataclysmic effect that hearing the *Ring* had on Rimsky-Korsakov in 1889. Borodin too clearly harboured a furtive affection for Wagner's works. Tchaikovsky's feelings about Wagner, on the other hand, were complex. There was much he did not at first understand in Wagner's music (as his articles about the *Ring* demonstrate), but his almost obsessive desire to hear the composer's works, and discuss them in his writings – a habit maintained until his death – together with his late enthusiasm for *Parsifal*, combine to show that one should not be at all categorical about characterising his antipathy to Wagner. As often, it is a case of

reading between the lines. At the end of the nineteenth century, when it was no longer possible to pretend that Wagner was really a second-rate composer with nothing to say, Russian composers all succumbed to his influence for a time: Glazunov, Prokofiev, Rakhmaninov, Skryabin and even Stravinsky, who took the scale of the Wagnerian orchestra to its limits in *The Rite of Spring* before reacting violently against it. Skryabin was the most deeply affected by Wagner, but given his links with the Symbolist movement, this was only to be expected. The influence that Wagner exerted on Blok, Bely and Ivanov, however, proves that the Symbolist Wagner had very little to do with the nineteenth-century composer Wagner that the Russian public flocked in droves to hear. All three writers were primarily attracted to the composer by his creative methods based on myth and symbol, which they believed were intimately connected to their own attempts to reveal the deeper realities behind the world of appearances. Each writer essentially responded to different aspects in Wagner's work, however. For Bely, it was the purely rhythmic element of Wagner's music which most excited him, and which he linked with the idea of Eternal Recurrence. Even a cursory glance over Bely's own writings will reveal how important the concept of rhythm was to him. In Wagner Bely prophetically divined the element in music which would increasingly come to the fore in the twentieth century. The structure of the Wagnerian music drama also strongly affected his own creative methods as he grappled with ways to achieve the emotional profundities of Wagner's musical leitmotifs by similar means in his prose fiction. Like Ivanov, Bely also believed that Wagner's symbolism made him the true founder of the Symbolist movement, but he did not share Ivanov's misguided belief that Wagner's music dramas also forecast the future development of Symbolism into universal mythmaking. Ivanov shared Blok and Bely's reverence for the *Ring*, but was transported most by *Tristan und Isolde*, in whose themes of love and death, joy and suffering he found echoes of the Dionysian myth which formed the core of his work. He also found evidence of Dionysian inspiration in the musical language of this work, whose chro-

Introduction

5

maticism and apparent formlessness seemed to him to symbolise primordial chaos. Like Bely, Ivanov intuitively divined the future of musical development; it was precisely the premonition of the disintegration of musical form which can first be discerned in *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner's most innovative work musically speaking, which most attracted him in Wagner's music. On the other hand, Ivanov fell prey to all the aspects of Wagner's dramatic theories most vulnerable to criticism in believing that the creation of a synthetic, music and myth-based drama that would unite artist and spectator in the act of holy creation was both realistic and feasible. In fact he went one step further than Wagner in his call for the revival of ancient tragedy in the form of the Dionysian rite, for Wagner was always careful to stress that a return to Greek drama was not a part of his programme for the 'art-work of the future'. All three Symbolists at some point in their careers engrossed themselves in theorising on 'what was to come', visualising an ideal future in which both society and art would be an organic whole, as a reaction to the collapse of society, religion and aesthetic values which they saw taking place around them. Their receptivity to Wagner's theories shows that these writers were as much Romantics as they were Symbolists. Like the French Symbolists, they were drawing on the same German sources of inspiration, but it is vital to recognise that they did so not indirectly through their earlier French counterparts, but directly, and principally from artists such as Wagner, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, replacing European 'decadence', as they did so, with their own brand of Solovyovian mysticism. As for Blok, he had always been much more interested in the human aspects of Wagner's *Ring*. He did not waste his time prophesying the Dionysian future of culture, nor did he share Ivanov's conviction of the hierophantic role of the poet. But even he towards the end of his life began to abandon the hard-won realism of his later style in favour of hopelessly idealistic visions of future synthesis. It is in fact an extraordinary phenomenon that not only Blok, but also Bely and Ivanov, Skryabin, Meyerhold and Eisenstein – the Russian artists on whom Wagner's ideas had the greatest impact – all at some point in their lives

began to preach the idea of synthesis: an organic art which would bring people together in a condition of all-embracing unity, as Wagner had dreamed. The question must be asked: what is it about Russian culture that makes its artists so receptive to, and uncritical of, all-embracing models? Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to suggest that there is a link between the enthusiasm of Russian artists for Wagner and the enthusiasm of Russian political activists of the same period for his compatriot Karl Marx, who, shortly before the composer sat down to pen his aesthetic tracts, was formulating an equally all-embracing solution to the problems of society, which ultimately hailed from the same source of German Idealism.

This study shows that Russia was peculiarly sympathetic and susceptible to Wagnerian ideas; certainly no other culture seems to have taken the composer's writings on art to heart as they did in Russia. Whilst France has been traditionally the country which is supposed to have taken Wagner for its own, that perception may now have to be substantially revised. The opinion was expressed on more than one occasion that Russia was bound to find in Wagner a kindred spirit. Several critics thought that Russia was far more likely to understand and appreciate Wagner than any other nation, whether as a result of its 'thirst for religious art', as Sergey Durylin believed, or the tendency it shared with Germany towards 'pessimistic idealism' and 'depth of feeling', as Viktor Kolomiitsov contended. Lev Kobylinsky-Ellis, meanwhile, placed not only the salvation of Russian Symbolism in Wagner's hands; he became convinced that Wagner's works were also capable of redeeming the entire Russian nation. It is peculiarly pertinent, in this light, to discover that singers such as Ershov had a way of 'Russifying' Wagner's heroes, because they found features in them common with the decidedly Slavic world of Dostoevsky's heroes (Tannhäuser as 'the sinner', Siegmund as 'the sufferer' etc.). Although Abram Gozenpud has rejected the idea that there was anything more than a superficial similarity between the themes of Dostoevsky and Wagner, in his biography of Ershov he nevertheless found it apposite to quote from Marietta Shaginyan's salient description of the quite natural

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Introduction

7

transformation of Wagner's heroes from the *Ring* into holy fools, with whom Russian audiences could immediately identify. All this suggests that, as Emil Medtner so strongly believed, the affinities between German and Russian culture run much deeper than might previously have been supposed.

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PART I

Wagner and nineteenth-century Russia

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CHAPTER I

Reception and performance history, 1841–1863

RUSSIA ENCOUNTERS THE ‘MUSIC OF THE FUTURE’

Wagner’s name first appeared in the Russian press in June 1841, when the journal *Repertuar russkogo teatra* published a translation of his important early essay ‘Über die Ouvertüre’.¹ This article had originally appeared only six months earlier in the *Revue et gazette Musicale* in Paris (where Wagner was based at the time), and its translation into Russian is something of a mystery, for nothing seems to have been known about this obscure 28-year-old composer in Russia at this time.² Indeed several decades were to go by before further Russian translations of writings by Wagner were issued. Wagner started properly coming into the public eye in Russia in 1842, when newspapers started to report on the première of *Rienzi* in Dresden,³ but most Russians remained completely unaware of who he was until the early 1850s, when news of his notorious aesthetic theories began to spread abroad.

It was at concerts, rather than in the opera house that Wagner’s music was first heard in Russia, and for very specific reasons. Opera in St Petersburg and Moscow under tsarist rule was government controlled, and repertoires were dictated by the extremely conservative tastes of the nobility, who were at that time in the grip of ‘Italomania’.⁴ The Russian public thus flocked in their thousands to hear the fashionable and prestigious Italian Opera in Petersburg, to whose further glory the Imperial Theatres Directorate devoted vast sums of money, while patronising the Russian Opera, on the other hand, was thought rather *infra dignitatem*, a situation which persisted until

the 1880s. Years of neglect and under-funding by the Government had led to a distinctly moribund state of affairs; singers were paid a pittance (unlike their Italian counterparts) and productions were lack-lustre. It was therefore quite unthinkable that the Russian Opera should tackle radical and demanding new works by comparatively unknown composers such as Wagner, when it could barely cope with the existing repertoire.⁵ It was even more unlikely, however, that Wagner's serious teutonic dramas should ever find a home amongst the often frivolous works on offer at the Italian Opera. Any chances of the Imperial Theatres Directorate even contemplating the production of a work by Wagner must have receded still further when Wagner took part in the 1849 Dresden Uprising, and went on to pen several lengthy and controversial treatises, calling, amongst other things, for social revolution and the abolition of all class-ridden artistic institutions, of which the Italian Opera was a glaring example.

Wagner's suggestions that the Royal Court Theatre in Dresden (where he had been kapellmeister since 1843) be nationalised and run democratically had not endeared him to his employers. Coming to the conclusion that the theatre was a 'mirror of a reactionary society that had first to be changed if he was to realise his artistic aims',⁶ Wagner had increasingly become involved with left-wing politics, writing articles and speeches in which he openly called for revolution. And it was at some point in 1848 or early 1849 that he made the acquaintance of the great anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, one of the few Russians ever to make any real impression on him. Wagner found Bakunin's demand for the total destruction of all civilisation rather alarming, but he was nonetheless mesmerised by his titanic energy.⁷ When rioting began in Dresden in May 1849, Wagner became directly involved in the famous Uprising, but (unlike Bakunin) he managed to escape arrest by fleeing to Zurich, where he began nine years of exile. It was here that he began to formulate his ideas for transforming opera into music drama; for the next few years, he stopped composing music in order to write several lengthy treatises, the most important of which are *Art and Revolution* (*Die Kunst und die*