

## Appreciating Wagner with Decorum

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*Note from author Hoogland, himself Chief Sophie Editor:* This article appears in the column “*Uit het hart,*” or “From the Heart, a natural place for discussing issues close to your heart, about things that concern you a lot. Sometimes also about things of which you’re not really proud. A single example: I am a great fan of Richard Wagner’s music. I don’t really feel good about that, for can you really appreciate Wagner’s music with decorum?”

Wagner evokes resistance at many fronts. The man was vain; he considered himself above the law; he thought of himself the centre of the world; he was forever unhappy about lack of appreciation; he created megalomaniac operas that, according to his own claims, could only be staged in his own theatre; and was declared an anti-semitic. In addition, it was really difficult to consider his operas as anything but a modern form of paganism, even “Parsifal,” the one often described as the “most Christian.”

And then there’s Wagner’s family. This family still owns Wagner’s specially built theatre with the mansion, *Wahnfried*, associated with it on the “*Grune Hugel*” at Bayreuth in southern Germany, where even now the annual *Festspiele* is held in July and August. For anyone interested in the intrigues that surround this family, reading Jonathan Carr’s *De Wagnerclan* (Amsterdam, 2009) is a must, a real life soap opera with its darkest pages the years before, during and immediately after World War II.

Why then do I still want to write this piece on Wagner? In the first place, because I happen to have a weakness for his operas. That is not because of the text or the action. In general I find the texts bombastic and the story not always convincing in a dramatic sense. No, it is the music and the superb control over the orchestra as a musical instrument. Wagner is able as no other to make music that is both beautiful and that can at the same time underline the stories of his operas in a convincing manner. Wagner’s ideal is *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an art form that appeals to all the senses and utilizes every art form, whether music, literature, plastic arts and drama. With all of this, in a certain sense Wagner is the founder of modern phenomena like the film and the musical film, as well as the light shows of rock concerts and other combinations of art forms.

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<sup>1</sup>Jan Hoogland, “*Kun je met goed fatsoen van Wagner houden?*” Jan H. Boer, Transl. *Sophie* 3/2013, pp. 26-27.

The second reason for this writing about Wagner is the more ordinary occasion that Wagner is born on May 22, 1813. That is exactly 200 years ago today. So, I am writing this exactly 200 years later to the day. The year 2013 is thus a Wagner year. In this column I like to write about events that have some relevance to current circumstances.

### **In Good Company**

A third reason I write about Wagner as a Christian philosopher could be that I thus move around in illustrious company. No one less than the Herman Dooyeweerd always honoured in this magazine has set the tone for me. In 1915, two years after the first centennial of Wagner's birth, he wrote an articles under the title "The Disconsolation of Wagnerianism."<sup>2</sup> In the bibliography of the 21-year old Dooyeweerd, this is one of his very first publication in the monthly magazine called "*Structure: Monthly in the Service of the Christian World-and-Life-View of and for the Youth,*" published under Dooyeweerd's name.<sup>3</sup>

The first thing that strikes me with respect to this article is that Dooyeweerd seems so much at home in Wagner's operas. He cites from *Tristan under Isolde*, de *Ring-cycle* which comprises four extensive operas, and the *Parsifal* all over the place. Upon your first reading you immediately get the impression that Dooyeweerd has heard these operas several times already in his youth. But how can that be? He did not have access to the technology we use today to listen regularly to these operas. Even if he had one of the very first gramophones ever produced, it still would have been impossible for him to have listened to these Wagner operas, simply because they would be way too long for the records of those days. Radio had not even been established. Thus, Dooyeweerd could have known these operas only by attending performances or from the written texts.

How different things are today. I own a set of CDs with all the known Wagner operas. I listen to them especially during my vacation, usually with discman and headphone. Thus as I listen to certain passages from the *Ring des Nibelungen*, I still see the landscape of Camp Stortemelk on the island of Vlieland, where I often camped, before me. That's where a decade ago I listened to the entire opera cycle under the awning of my tent with the text on my lap. Dooyeweerd had no access to such possibilities. This raises the question whether the people of previous generations were able to play music

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<sup>2</sup>"De troosteloosheid van het Wagnerianisme."

<sup>3</sup>"Opbouw : Maandschrift in dienst der Christelijke levens-en wereldbeschouwing, van en voor jongeren," (1915, pp. 97-112).

as it were “in their head” by merely reading the text, but without all that modern equipment.

## **Wagnerism**

The second thing that strikes me about that article is that it is the first time Dooyeweerd discusses an “ism”—Wagnerianism. Combatting “isms” later became his trademark. Apparently that inclination developed early in his life. However, his article is not so much about Wagnerism--or Wagner veneration by his admirers—as it is over Wagner and the intentions of his music.

This brings me to the central focus of this article: Dooyeweerd pits the hope or consolation Wagner offers against the hope of Christian faith. In that contrast Wagner’s music is without comfort, consolation or hope. Actually, his music is a sort of artistic, aesthetical reflection on the Enlightenment. With the disappearance of the gods (*Gotterdammerung*) humans have to take their lot in their own hands. But are humans ready for that? And how do people react to the fate that overcomes them?

The focus of Wagner’s perspective on art appears to be that, now that humans can no longer find their redemption in religion, they must now seek it in art. In the terminology of the later Dooyeweerd one can probably speak of “aestheticism.” In his article he analyzes the dichotomy in Wagner’s worldview between western activism and eastern, especially Buddhist, resignation. Where he rejects the Christian idea of redemption, he replaces it with the redeeming significance of death. Wagner wants to break through the world of appearances with his music by evoking a longing for eternity in music—an eternal melody. Herewith music expressed the irrepressible longing for continuous happiness. Wagner looks like the prophet of folk wisdom: “Possession (of anything in life) is the end of its pleasure.” Continuous happiness continues to exist exactly in its unrealizable longing. This sentiment comes to expression in the reality of drama in the unavoidable and fateful death of those we love.