

Reflections on the Bayreuth Ring, *Sky Arts*, 30–31 July

It is a tragedy that the greatest Wagner conductor of our age has not conducted in a theatre pit for about two decades. Marek Janowski has boycotted the opera house in explicit protest at the clever-clogs nonsense that now generally unfolds on stage in this age of *Regietheater*.

Inspired by Janowski's sensationally good recording of the *Ring* in 1981 – the first one of the digital era, which Rob Cowan said on Radio 3 this week was still his favourite – in the mid-1980s Barbara and I drove all the way from Exeter to Paris to hear Janowski's *Tristan*. I can still hear Waltraud Meier's Brangäne in my head. We saw the same production a couple of years later in San Francisco, though it was nothing special without Janowski (or Meier). More recently we flew to Berlin to hear his outstanding *concert* performance of *Tannhäuser* in the Philharmonie. But opportunities to hear him seemed to arise less and less. So we were rather astonished to read that he had agreed to conduct this year's *Ring* cycles at Bayreuth, after Kirill Petrenko walked out in protest at Frank Castorf's 'trashy' production.

In conversation with Stephen Fry on *Sky Arts* before the cycle began, Janowski said that, nearing 80, he wanted one chance to experience the Festspielhaus, its orchestra, and its celebrated pit and acoustics. He agreed only to conduct a revival – he would have nothing to do with the antics of mounting a new production – and he would get on with his job in the pit, turning a blind eye to the hoop-la onstage. And once one saw the atrocious Castorf sets and funny business, one understood why.

Questioned by Fry about the dominance of *Regietheater* in Germany, Janowski said it appeared to have started in the early 1970s as reaction to the unrest that spread – especially among students – across Europe in 1968, and it took hold especially in East Germany (where such unrest was not allowed!). He had thought that *Regietheater* would eventually go away, but it had endured now for several decades.

I don't doubt that Janowski was correct about 1968 and Germany. It was followed by the foundation of the Baader–Meinhof Gang (or Red Army Faction) in 1970s, and Germany experienced more than two decades of sporadic home-grown left-wing terrorist attacks thenceforth. This coloured a good deal of German cultural commentary. But I think the

biggest immediate reaction to *les événements de mai* came in France, where they very nearly brought down De Gaulle's presidency. When I worked as a consultant for the Council of Europe in the 1970s (writing a book on *Cultural Policy in Towns*), the shock waves were still reverberating from France. The French elite had suddenly woken up to the phenomenon of *le refus ouvrier* – the working class's rejection, as they saw it, of traditional European 'high culture'. Under French leadership, the Council of Europe was busy advocating the abandonment of 'democratisation of culture' – that is, the attempt to popularise fine art, music and literature by making it available to the workers – in favour of what they called 'cultural democracy'. That involved attitudes of 'anything goes', trying to make everything 'relevant', and many attempts to *épater les bourgeois*. The likes of Castorf *épatant* the black-tied bourgeoisie in Bayreuth – and taking pride in the boos – appear to be a case of cultural lag still working itself out. I find such productions insultingly condescending. And I am reminded of one or two academic colleagues who, having been enthusiastic 1968ers, continued into the late 1980s to dress in jeans and denim jackets, delivering lectures designed to appeal to insurgent students. They failed to notice that the students were now reading the *Financial Times*.

Back to Bayreuth 2016: we had the wonderful sound emanating from the orchestra under Janowski, and some fine singing, alongside the distracting ugliness of Castorf's production. Yes, Wagner created the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. But for him the music and the drama were of greatest importance. Scenery and staging could help, but it should not distract from the music and drama, which *Regie* productions set in concentration camps, coalmines and scrapyards always do.

Barbara and I went instead to hear the last cycle of Opera North's concert performance of the *Ring* under Richard Farnes at the Sage in Gateshead (5–10 July). Superb. Pure music and drama without distraction. Prolonged and deserved standing ovation at the end. No boos. It ought not to have been better than Bayreuth, but *dramatically* it was.

Stephen Mennell

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