



Review

Recepción de Richard Wagner y Vanguardia en las Artes Españolas. Mitos y Materialidades.

Paloma Ortiz-de-Urbina and Tomas Macsotay, editors. Madrid: Dyckinson, 2024.

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The *Wagnermania* that swept Europe and the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century arrived relatively late to Spain (the first complete opera by Wagner staged on Spanish soil was *Rienzi*, performed in Madrid in 1876, the same year *Der Ring des Nibelungen* premiered in Bayreuth). In the late 1800s, Spain was looking for answers that could explain, on the one hand, the loss of the nation's geopolitical relevance (the last remains of the once mighty empire, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines were “lost” in 1898, after the Spanish American War) and, on the other, the challenges posed by the rise of nationalism, in Catalonia particularly. Similarly, Spanish intellectuals (such as those associated with the *Generación del 98*) were searching for an aesthetic that could establish an agreement between traditional Spanish values and the innovations brought by the era of industrialization and its subsequent social modernization. The answer to their quest came by way of Wagner, whose musical revolution epitomized the artistic turmoil of the late romanticism and paved the way to twentieth-century avant-garde movements.

To understand the reception of Wagner's music means to acknowledge his influence in politics, which reached far beyond Germany and lingered long after his lifetime. His revolutionary composition techniques and stage innovations helped articulate, intellectually and emotionally, the anxieties that many Catalans felt in their struggle for cultural autonomy, even their longing for an independent nation. Such messages spread from the stages of the opera theater (the *Liceu*), the cafés, academic circles, and elsewhere, and may explain why the success of Wagner in Catalonia was so markedly strong. The “cult to Wagner” functioned as a catalyst for the formation of progressive attitudes within artistic circles in Catalonia, where the *modernisme* of the early twentieth century was influenced, among other things, by Wagner's notion of Myth. It also led to a restructuring of the idea of spectacle and to the development of an avant-garde approach not only in music, but also in literature, the plastic arts, cinema, theater, dance, and virtually every type of artistic discipline.

This book is the result of an ambitious initiative by its two editors, Paloma Ortiz-de-Urbina and Tomas Macsotay, who procured the participation of as many as twenty scholars of diverse fields to work collaboratively on a project that examines the reception and influence of Wagner's music (and persona) through a truly multidisciplinary approach. It is arguably the first comprehensive study on Wagner's reception published in Spain, and it is aimed at rediscovering (or re-reading) the work of some of the many artists who were influenced, one way or another, by the composer. Because of its approachability, it reads like one of the many books which, under the title of “Companion [to a composer]”, are so popular among English-speaking musicians, scholars, teachers, and students.

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As the editors explain in the introductory pages, there is not a single reference to the phenomenon of Wagner in Spain in the whole *Wagnerforschung*, the vast area of international research devoted to the composer.² Spanish scholarship on Wagner is not necessarily scant in comparison to that of other nations', so there must be a reason for this neglect. It could be that Spanish historiography has typically focused on the study of Wagner's early reception relying solely on reports by music critics. Archival work is of course necessary, but, in the case of Wagner, not sufficient to adequately assess his legacy on some of the Spanish artists who were directly influenced by him, like Antoni Gaudí or Luis Buñuel, to name two of the most celebrated. This book fills that void, and, to some extent, repairs that neglect.

Eduard Cairol, one of the contributors, rightly claims that Wagner's significance is not nearly as pervasive today as it was in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when much of the musical world gravitated around the composer, his presence being kept alive by the disputes between his supporters and his detractors. Scholarly work in Spain started with Felip Pedrell, who first addressed the notion of *Zukunftsmusik* in his pioneering 1868 essay, "La música del pervindre" ("The Music of the Future"). In the following decades, the presence of Wagner in Spanish scholarship and in the press became ubiquitous, in correspondence with the sensational appeal that his operas elicited among music lovers. The premiere of *Parsifal* at Barcelona's Liceu on New Year's Eve, 1913, the first authorized performance outside Bayreuth, is often cited as an example of that enthusiasm. By the time the "Golden Era" of Wagner started to fade in the years following the First World War (in Spain and elsewhere), his music had left an indelible mark. This explains why most chapters revolve around issues that took place during the heyday of his popularity (although some deal with current ones, like those by Cairol, Daniel Barba, Fernando Zapaín and Alfonso Lombana). In any case, and regardless of the topic discussed, this group of scholars have demonstrated that insightful studies on music reception can still shed some light and give answers, from a contemporary perspective, to matters past and current. The premise of this book may in fact be that Wagner, once a herald of modernity, is still relevant in the age of post-modernism.

Some chapters are more comprehensive and far-reaching than others. It is something to be expected from a book with so many participants. Similarly, the profusion of chapters revolving around similar topics (late nineteenth-century Catalan folk revival, modernism, etc.) makes it inevitable that some contents overlap slightly. Fortunately, the authors' perspectives are diverse enough to avoid redundancy.

The book is divided into seven sections, each containing between two to three chapters. In the first section, "Wagner in Spanish Literature," Ortiz-de-Urbino reviews all the scholarly sources on Wagner available in Spanish, some of which had already been exhaustively compiled by her in previous work ("Análisis de la huella de Richard Wagner en la literatura Hispana: hacia una metodología del estudio de la recepción musical en la literatura"; "Analysis of the Traces of Richard Wagner in Hispanic Literature. Towards a Methodology for the Study of Musical Reception in Literature"). She proposes a useful methodology for the study of musical reception in literature (applicable to other composers) and recommends a multidisciplinary theoretical approach on reception that includes letters, newspaper and journal articles, and even translations of the composer's books, essays, and librettos (*Dichtungen*), a method she calls "creative reception." In the next chapter, Sacui Cao explores the traces of Wagner in the poetry of the greatest promoter of modernism in Spain, the Nicaragua-born poet Rubén Darío ("La huella de Richard Wagner in Rubén

² Ortiz-de-Urbino, Paloma, and Tomas Macsotay, *Recepción de Richard Wagner y Vanguardia en las Artes Españolas. Mitos y Materialidades* (Madrid: Dyckinson, 2024), 14.

Darío: *Prosas Profanas y Cantos de Vida y Esperanza*”; “The Mark of Richard Wagner in the Poetry of Rubén Darío: *Prosas Profanas and Cantos de Vida y Esperanza*”). Cao’s does not limit the scope of her research to the discovery of explicit references of Wagnerian topoi in the poems of Darío. Instead, she examines the ways in which the poet used those references as expressive resources, including the allusions to Nordic mythology and symbology, as well as the use of poetic techniques seldom found in Spanish poetry (but common in classic German poetry), like alliteration. Cao also notes that Darío sought a poetic ideal that implied the fusion of poetry and other art forms, an idea akin to Baudelaire’s exploration of synesthesia, which, in turn, was related to Wagner’s notion of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The second section of the book, “Wagner in the Plastic Arts,” examines the influence of Wagner on several notable Spanish painters. In “Richard Wagner y su recepción por los artistas españoles, 1876-1914” (“The Reception of Richard Wagner by Spanish Artists, 1876-1914”), Lourdes Jiménez Fernández discusses the works of three staunch Wagnerites fascinated with Wagnerian iconography: Mariano Fortuny (1838-1874), Raymundo Madrazo (1841-1920), and Rogelio de Egusquiza (1845-1915), all of whom made a pilgrimage to Bayreuth at one point in their lives (Egusquiza, who developed a friendship with Wagner, painted a portrait of the composer, now held at the Prado Museum in Madrid). Jiménez explains that the influence of Wagner on these painters was filtered by French symbolism, a technique they applied and reimagined in their work. Eduard Cairol (“Wagner-Brossa-Tàpies: Una conexón catalana”, “Wagner-Brossa-Tàpies: A Catalan Connection”) examines the influence of Wagner in the works of one of the foremost avant-garde Catalan painters of the late twentieth century, Antoni Tàpies, who, in 1989, illustrated the book by poet Joan Brossa entitled “Carrer Wagner” (“Wagner Street”). Juan Bejarano, in “La concepción wagneriana de la obra de arte total en *Boires Baixes*” (“The Wagnerian Notion of ‘Total Work of Art’ in *Boires Baixes*”) further explores the connections between the plastic arts and the total work of art as seen in an ambitious “book/artifact”, *Boires Baixes* (issued in 1902) that resulted from the collaboration of several artists, including the composer Enric Granados.

In section three, “Wagner and Architecture,” Teresa-M. Sala offers a reading of the iconography of Barcelona’s main concert hall, the *Palau de la Música Catalana* (“Una lectura del Palau de la Música Catalana como *Gesamtkunstwerk*”; “A Reading of the Palau de la Música Catalana as *Gesamtkunstwerk*”). Built in 1908, at the height of Wagner’s popularity in Barcelona, the *Palau*’s ornamental symbology sets the tone, character and rhythm of the building in a sonorous experience for the listener/viewer. In the words of Sala, the combination of scenes from *The Valkyrie* and elements of Catalan folk symbology produces a “luminous and sonorous architecture.” Mireia Freixa’s contribution, “Arquitectura y wagnerismo. Una construcción historiográfica” (“Architecture and Wagnerism. A Historiographic Construction”) is one of the longest and most ambitious chapters. Freixa suggests that the influence of Wagner on Gaudí’s style has been a historiographic construction. This claim questions the assumptions of many authors, including that of American author Alex Ross, whose recent book on Wagner implies that.³ In “La tesis del ‘estilo wagneriano’ de Gaudí: una compleja recepción en Francia y Cataluña” (“Thesis on Gaudí’s ‘Wagnerian’ Style: A Complex Reception in France and Catalonia”), Tomas Macostay examines the cultural impact that the 1880 Barcelona premiere of *Tannhäuser* had on the rise of Catalan *modernisme*, particularly on two of its representatives, Gaudí and Luis Domènech i Montaner, architect of the *Palau de la Música*

³ Alex Ross, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

Catalana. According to Macostay, the influence on Gaudí was symbolic and abstract, whereas on Domènech i Montaner it was direct and representational.

In “Wagner and Scenography” (section four) Daniel Barba and Fernando Zaparaín discuss the controversial 2007 production of *The Ring of the Nibelung*, with sets by the avant-garde Catalan theater company *La Fura dels Baus* (“El Anillo de *La Fura*: la actualización de la ópera al espacio escenográfico digital”; “*The Ring of La Fura*: Updating an Opera to a Digital Stage Space”). The production, commissioned by the opera theaters of Valencia and Florence, used innovative technology and an immersive digital media that blurred the boundaries between stage and seating space, “forcing” the audience to become participative and to stay alert throughout the performance. With this new reading of the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *La fura dels baus* proves that Wagner’s revolutionary ideas are atemporal and therefore remain relevant in the twenty first century. In “La propuesta de tatro lírico catalán de Adrià Gual: aproximaciones y distanciamientos respecto al drama musical wagneriano (“Adrià Gual’s view of modernist Catalan theater: Approximations and Dissimilarities to the Wagnerian Drama”), José Miguel Pérez Arco traces the pioneering staging of Gual’s 1899 play *Blancaflor*, which included incidental music by Enric Granados. Gual was a promoter of the *Teatro líric català*, a dramatic form born in the context of the Catalan *Renaixença*, the “rebirth” of regional culture as a defense mechanism to counteract what many saw as an overwhelming presence of traditional Spanish musical genres (especially zarzuela) in Catalonia. For certain sectors of the Catalan nationalistic movement, there was a need for a type of musical theater that, inspired by Catalan folklore and *modernisme*, appealed to the tastes of Catalan theater aficionados in Barcelona, where there already was a large Wagner following. Gual encouraged authors associated to the *Teatro líric* to apply Wagnerian formulae, including the use of Leitmotiv and the division of plays into three acts instead of one (as was the norm in the zarzuela subgenre known as *género chico*, in vogue at the turn of the century).

In “Wagner in Music and Dance” (section five) Magda Polo explores the efforts by Catalan composer Josep Rodoreda in introducing the music of Wagner in the avant-garde circles of Barcelona in the early twentieth century (“La recepción estética de Richard Wagner en Josep Rodoreda i Santiagós”; “The Aesthetic Reception of Richard Wagner in Josep Rodoreda i Santiagós”). Like many other Catalan artists associated with the *Renaixença*, Rodoreda proposed a link between progress and Wagnerism: to believe in progress, he claimed, meant to believe in Wagner’s *Zukunftsmusik*. José Ignacio Suárez Cura contributes with a stimulating (for its originality) view of the analogies between Wagner and the Spanish Baroque poet Luis de Góngora (“Wagner, el poeta de los sonidos”; “Wagner, the Góngora of the Sound”). According to Suárez, the poet’s literary style was criticized by its extravagance, excessive elaboration, twisted syntax, elitism, inapproachability, and disdain for classical principles—the exact same words Wagner’s detractors used to describe (and censure) his music. To this purpose, Suárez examines the writings by late nineteenth-century music critics like Emilio Arrieta (1821-94), Antonio Peña y Goñi (1846-96), Francisco Asenjo Barbieri (1823-94) and José María Esperanza y Sola (1834-1905). In “La huella de la *Gesamtkunstwerk* en la danza española: *Le Tricorne*: un ballet de arte total” (“Traces of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Spanish Dance. *Le Tricorne*: a Total Work of Art Ballet”), Laura Murias explores the traces of *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Diaghilev’s 1919 setting of Manuel de Falla’s *Le Tricorne* (known to English-language speakers as *The Three-Cornered Hat*). Murias claims that the choreography of the ballet was conceived as a realization of Wagner’s concept of “total work of art,” partly because dance conjures that idea better than any other artistic discipline, for it blends plasticity, movement, and music.

In “Wagner and Cinema” (section six), Laurent Guido discusses the use of Wagner’s music in Luis Buñuel’s first two films, *Un Chien andalou* (1929) and *L’Age d’or* (1930) in “Entre el mito y la

fantasmagoría: el empleo de la música de Richard Wagner in las primeras películas de Luis Buñuel”, “Between Myth and Phantasmagory: The Use of Richard Wagner’s Music in the Early Films by Luis Buñuel”). Guido points out that French critics of the 1920s saw in the cinema a realization of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* due to its unique ability to blend different arts. Elsewhere, Guido establishes a connection between Wagner and Buñuel based on their similar approach to the notion of myth, both in its representation and its deconstruction. In “La impronta de Wagner en el cine de habla Hispana: de Luis Buñuel a Guillermo del Toro” (“The Footprint of Wagner in Spanish Cinema: from Luis Buñuel to Guillermo del Toro”), Alicia Yelo cleverly identifies a similarity between Wagner’s treatment of lust and love (which ultimately results in death) in *Tristan und Isolde* and in Buñuel’s *L’Age d’Or*. Elsewhere, Yelo also discusses the soundtrack of Guillermo del Toro’s acclaimed 2006 film, *El laberinto del fauno*.

In the last section of the book, “Wagner in the Press and in Translation,” José Javier Torija sheds light on the ways late nineteenth-century Spanish press covered, criticized, and disseminated Wagner’s political beliefs (“La construcción de la narrativa política de Wagner por la prensa Española, 1843-1874”; “The Construction of Wagner’s Narrative Politics in the Spanish Press, 1843-1874”). Early reporting on Wagner primarily consisted of reprints from European sources, especially from French newspapers. While those early writings tended to revolve around musical matters, in later years critics veered toward nationalism—an issue that resonated strongly in the minds of many Spaniards at the time, particularly in Catalonia.

Early translations of the librettos of Wagner’s operas were particularly problematic, in part because German and Northern European mythology was foreign to most Spanish opera lovers at the time. Patricia Rojo Lemos addresses this issue in “La recepción de los mitos wagnerianos: análisis de fuentes hemerográficas y de las traducciones al español de los libretos de Wagner entre 1875 y 1914” (“The Reception of the Wagnerian Myths: Analysis of Press Sources and of Spanish Translations of Wagner Librettos between 1875 and 1914”). Alfonso Lombana reflects on his recent translation of Wagner’s cycle in “Traduciendo *El anillo*: precisiones y sensaciones,” (“Translating *The Ring*: Precisions and Sensations”), shedding light on the challenges that the translation of the poem of *The Ring* poses on present-day translators.

Although the shortcomings of this book are few, it needs to be noted that there are some small mistakes in the edition, mostly referring to dates and titles, as well as some small typos, likely the result of editing in haste. Wagner’s reception in Spain is, and will remain, a bottomless area of study. This volume covers a great part of it, but there are still some areas for research that can be pursued. For example, the always slippery issue of Wagner and politics, including the reception of his music and writings in the context of nationalism and antisemitism—an ever-present topic in current studies on the composer around international circles—deserves even more attention than has been given in this book. May this study work as a steppingstone toward future studies on Wagner by Spanish scholars.

Albo, Francisco Javier. “Review: *Recepción de Richard Wagner y Vanguardia en las Artes Españolas. Mitos y Materialidades*. Paloma Ortiz-de-Urbina and Tomas Macsotay, editors. Madrid: Dyckinson, 2024.” *Diagonal: An Ibero-American Music Review* 10, no. 1 (2025): 82–86.