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### Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity*

Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2019

Jennifer Rushworth

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## REFERENCES

Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press, 2019, 201 p.

- 1 In writing this book, Jeremy Coleman joins a conversation about a French Wagner that has illustrious precursors: above all, Friedrich Nietzsche, for whom — as Coleman notes in the first line of his Introduction — “Wagner’s only true home was in Paris” (p. 1). Coleman takes this Nietzschean aphorism as his starting point for an exploration of Richard Wagner in Paris, culminating in a consideration of the Paris *Tannhäuser* debacle of 1861. From a structural and a chronological point of view, therefore, Coleman offers us a pre-history of Wagner in Paris, challenging the typical critical focus on 1861 as the most famous Parisian episode of the composer’s life. Coleman encourages us to look backwards, and this backwards glance entails a further shift in attention, from Wagner’s afterlife to Wagner’s life. Such a move is both radical and difficult, especially in the case of Wagner in Paris, given the complex and passionate reception history of Wagner’s music in France. In turning away from reception history, Coleman is knowingly going “against the grain” — a phrase he borrows from Walter Benjamin for the subtitle of his Introduction — in comparison to the present expansion of reception studies across many different disciplines. Justifying this decision, Coleman cites Daniel K. L. Chua on reception history as “bleach[ing] the object in order to interpret its meaning with the ever-changing hues of time [...]. Music is forced to turn white as though it had no political meaning of its own, in order to survive the colourful context of its reception”.<sup>1</sup> While this opposition between history and reception history seems rather stark, Coleman is highly successful in showing the rich and varied colours of

Wagner's life in Paris. In so doing, Coleman challenges not only the reception of Wagner and received criticism on Wagner which has largely neglected this Parisian hinterland, but also Wagner himself, whose autobiographical projection Coleman at one point describes as "egocentric fantasy" (p. 67) and approaches throughout with the necessary caution.

- 2 The book is divided into three parts, with the first and last parts devoted to Wagner's physical presence in Paris at two different moments in time (1839-42 and 1859-61 respectively). The middle section, in contrast, focuses on Dresden and Zurich between 1842 and 1852, suggesting a less literal interpretation of Wagner in Paris. As Coleman shows, Wagner can be in Paris from a distance, whether through his correspondence, through his work on translation, or thanks to his Parisian supporters back home (if we follow Nietzsche's definition of Wagner's *Heimat*). Through all these travels, we see Wagner in a number of different guises, not only as a composer, of course, but also as an editor and a translator. Across these different activities, one striking aspect of Coleman's narrative is the emphasis on collaboration. This collaboration may be fraught and prone to failure, but it suggests, nonetheless, how Wagner's work was informed by dialogue with other people, specific individuals who may have been largely forgotten but whose role in Wagner's life Coleman unearths as a side effect of his primary focus.
- 3 Chapter 1 charts the events from Wagner's arrival in Paris in September 1839 up to his first articles in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, with a focus on the French translation of Wagner's *Liebesverbot*. Coleman already shows how nationalism and internationalism are inextricably intertwined — one of his book's key themes — since the desire both to be recognized in one's native country and to promote German music requires success abroad, particularly in Paris. Yet, in a further twist, Coleman also explains that in the case of *Liebesverbot* Wagner felt the subject matter and the music to be more appropriate for a French than a German audience (see p. 23), thus casting doubt on the assumed "Germanness" of Wagner's music.
- 4 In this chapter, the layers of translation are densely packed: from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, then the German version of that play, to Wagner's *Liebesverbot*, that opera in French prose translation, and finally its French versification. Coleman seems most interested in the aspects of that opera that are (to borrow Rebecca Walkowitz's phrase) "born translated": that is, the parts specially written for the French version, including, for instance, a new scene in Act 1. He also analyses in detail the changes to melody and ornamentation necessitated by the production of a singing translation, taking the example of Claudio's Cavatina Act 1 No. 2. For Wagner, translation means changing the music as well as the words. Coleman challenges the typical hierarchy of original and translation, by explaining not only, in the case of the Ballad to *Le Hollandais volant*, that "German and French versions of this would-be audition number co-mingled from the start of the work's composition" (p. 32) but even that, according to Wagner commenting on *Liebesverbot*, "my music looked much better in its new French texts than in its original German" (p. 40).
- 5 Finally, translation already emerges in Chapter 1 as a highly collaborative activity. First, there is Wagner's French teacher Henriot, who corrected Wagner's prose translation of *Rienzi*. Then there is Théophile Marion Dumersan, who "prepared" a "good draft of Wagner's French prose translation of *Liebesverbot*" (p. 26), and also versified three audition numbers. Most well-known is the poet Émile Deschamps, who

versified Wagner's French prose translation for audition numbers of *Le Hollandais volant*.

- 6 Chapter 2 could have been titled "Weber in Paris", and shows us a different aspect of Wagner as writer and translator: Wagner the journalist, writing articles on the French production of *Le Freyschütz* (1841) both for French and German audiences. Here Coleman has a wonderful set of textual materials: an article in three different versions in two languages, French and German, and which include a back translation from French to German because of a loss of the German original (a different sense of how something can become lost in translation). Here we see Wagner alert to different audiences, and a bridge between France and Germany. Fellow bridge-builders include the editor Maurice Schlesinger and two more translators, Heinrich Joseph Maria Duesberg and Wagner's wife Cosima, although the latter's contribution is somewhat downplayed.
- 7 Chapter 3 continues to challenge assumptions about translation, offering us further examples of German and French versions that coexist and undermining any sense of an original. We learn, for instance, that Wagner strangely created his own competition, by selling the French-language scenario of *Le Hollandais volant* to Léon Pillet in July 1841. This script inspired the opera *Le vaisseau fantôme* by Pierre-Louis Dietsch (premiered on 9 November 1842), so that Wagner's own *Der fliegende Holländer* (premiered on 20 October 1842) had an uncomfortable French twin that Wagner was eager both to claim and to deny. We also learn about Wagner's version of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide*, where again Wagner relies on the work of other translators such as Friedrich Ferdinand Brissler, but also makes a range of amendments which include writing new sections and changing the ending: a radical form of translation indeed. Chapter 4 then shows us how Wagner managed to maintain his presence in Paris, even from afar, to a great extent thanks to the intercession of Franz Liszt. It also shows us Wagner again grappling with translation, as he tried to have Liszt's French text published in German, and worked with Hans von Bülow and Karl Ritter on this project.
- 8 As Coleman's book moves towards its conclusion, it reaches more heavily trodden territory, including the question of Charles Baudelaire on Wagner (Chapter 5) and the Paris *Tannhäuser* (Chapter 6). Innovatively, however, Coleman suggests that concert performances of extracts of Wagner's work may have had more influence on Baudelaire (and others) than the complete, staged production of *Tannhäuser* (March 1861). On the continued theme of collaborative translation, in Chapter 6 Coleman draws on the work of Carolyn Abbate to note that at least five individuals, plus Wagner himself, were involved in creating a singing translation of *Tannhäuser*.
- 9 This meticulously researched book will evidently make a significant and exciting contribution to Wagner studies, but ought also to attract the attention of scholars in French studies and, above all, in translation studies. Coleman asks his reader to rethink what we understand by translation and to consider the effects of translation on music as well as words. He also paves the way for a new and highly desirable shift in focus from obsession with the individual to an understanding of both music and translation – and other art forms, in their wake – as collaborative endeavours. In this regard, Coleman's study of one canonical composer concomitantly brings to light forgotten figures who were part of Wagner's intellectual, transnational networks and who deserve further study.

- 10 Most broadly, this book also contributes to an ongoing theoretical reassessment of what we mean by failure. Coleman writes in the opening sentence of his conclusion that “[t]aken as a whole, Wagner’s relationship with Paris from the beginning until 1861 amounts to a series of failures” (p. 169). Yet his book also shows the richness and variety of these so-called “failures”, and their formative impact on Wagner as on others around him. All in all, then, Coleman’s patient excavation of Wagner in Paris is immensely fruitful, a delightful balance of the archival and the theoretical, and sets an excellent methodological example for interdisciplinary studies.
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## NOTES

1. CHUA Daniel K. L., *Beethoven and Freedom*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 28; cited in COLEMAN, *Richard Wagner in Paris*, p. 7.
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## AUTHORS

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