

CHAPTER I

Paris

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Through gritted teeth, Wagner would have agreed: Paris should self-evidently be the first chapter in a book called *Wagner in Context*. But that admission would only have reinforced how, throughout his career, Wagner and Paris constituted a spectacular artistic mismatch. Wagner knew it; irrespective of whether they were detractors or supporters, Parisians knew it too. Hence, the composer's lifelong struggle with the city's artistic institutions, the instability of his various autobiographical accounts of Parisian life, and the battles over his posthumous reputation.¹ This chapter is about the Paris that Wagner knew and the artistic fissures he detected and created there. I begin in 1839 with the first visit of an impoverished composer following other foreigners to the holy grail of Paris opera houses and I end with the Paris instalment of the international scramble to mount *Parsifal* the moment the embargo on performances outside Bayreuth lifted in January 1914. Nevertheless, this chapter is not a biographical study shading into reception history. It is, rather, a guide to the musical spaces, traditions, and enclaves Wagner encountered or catalysed in a city whose ecosystem cemented international reputations while demanding significant compromise in return.

In travelling to Paris, Wagner did no more than countless other musicians – composers and performers alike – who saw it as the hub of international music-making at the highest professional level. Amid national operatic traditions that the Paris system nurtured via separate institutions (the Opéra-Comique; the Théâtre-Italien), the global success of French Grand Opera as a genre in which Italians, Frenchmen, and Germans demonstrably excelled, was alluring to say the least. Moreover, Germans were on the up at the Paris Opéra: after Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* of 1829, blockbusters had come from Meyerbeer in 1831 and 1836 (*Robert-le-diable* and *Les Huguenots*, respectively); in between, the Opéra

¹ The detailed twists and turns to the Paris premiere of *Tannhäuser* in 1861 are beautifully caught in Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), summarised at 10–12 and 169–75.

management had tried to adapt and appropriate Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in similar fashion. Arrival in 1839 must have seemed propitious, as everyone waited for the next sensation in this relatively new operatic tradition. Wagner well knew that *Rienzi* would have been a plausible contender, and its composition by a German would not have turned heads. Moreover, beyond the Opéra itself, the Beethoven craze was in full swing, and Weber's posthumous reputation was being fuelled by self-declared Romantics such as Berlioz.²

Yet among German artists, intellectuals, and musicians in Paris, only Meyerbeer was influential enough to make a difference (I'll come to publishers in a moment), and even he was more a repeat visitor than a real resident. Wagner's German network right up to the 1860s was considerably less starry: the librarian Gottfried Englebert Anders, the painter Ernst Kietz, the philologist Samuel Lehrs. All of them were misfits of one kind or another.³ In 1839 these were friends living, like the Wagners, in poorer parts of town. The Wagners initially lodged amid the grittiness of the market area around the Halle Centrale, an inauspicious arena from which to mount an assault on the heights of Parisian theatre.⁴ When they overstretched themselves to take a flat in the rue du Helder, near the theatre district, they found themselves close to an entirely different artistic society – that of the 'New Athens' area frequented by better-connected foreigners with access to aristocratic and high-bourgeois salon culture.⁵ Liszt, Chopin, and the exiled Heine were among them. For all his loyalty to his impoverished German friends, this was the level of Parisian expatriate culture to which Wagner needed to gain entry – not so much on account of its musicians, ironically, but on account of its higher-born *salonnières* and attendees. It was a lesson he would not forget when, in 1861, the Opéra management accepted a reworked *Tannhäuser* project following the personal intervention of Princess Pauline von Metternich with the Emperor himself.

The opera industry, its glittering national stages part-subsidised but still requiring managers with business acumen, had tentacles reaching to professional concert halls (*morceaux détachés* for benefit performances, and bravura variation sets for piano) and to modest petit bourgeois homes alike

² For an insight into this ferment, see *Berlioz on Music: Selected Criticism, 1824–1837*, ed. Katherine Kolb, trans. Samuel N. Rosenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³ Affectionately drawn as such in *ML*, 169–79, 502–5.

⁴ Halle Centrale: marked on Figure 1.1 by pairs of identical black squares, in the central arrondissement (1er) north of the Seine.

⁵ Nouvelle Athènes: on Figure 1.1, central segment of the 9ème arrondissement, indicated here by an arrow. The Wagners lived just east of the as-yet unbuilt Opéra quarter.

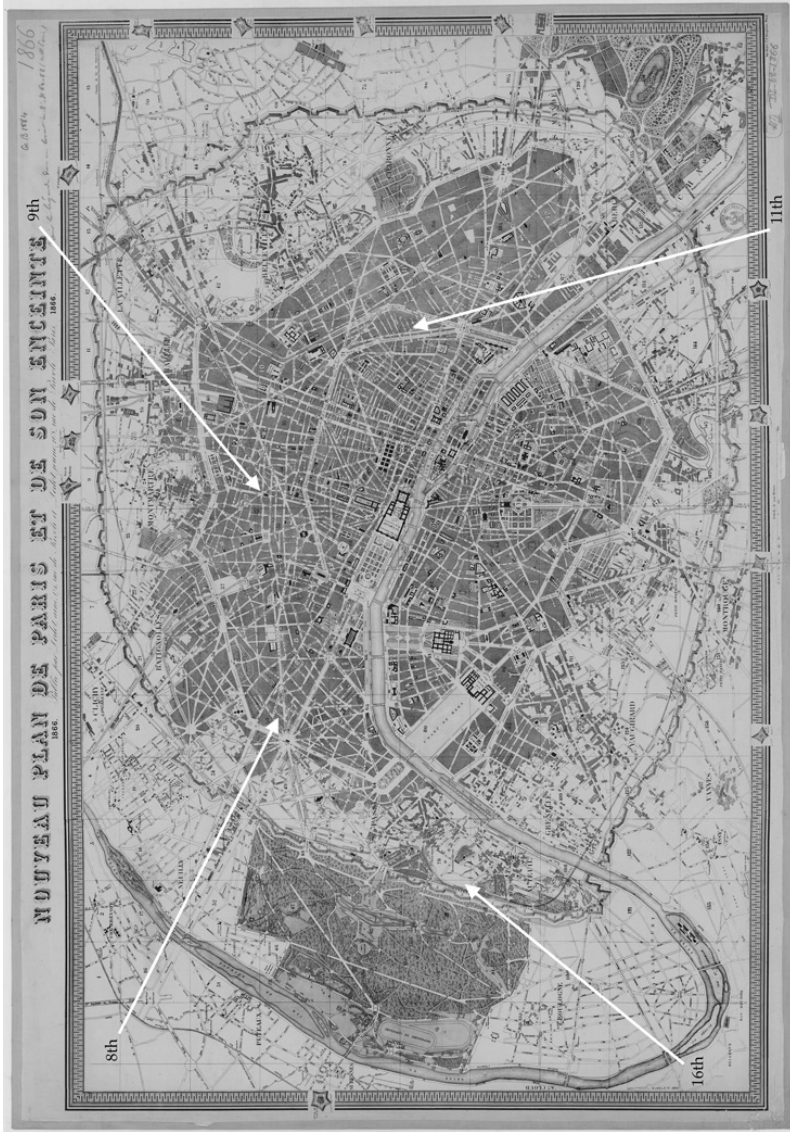


Figure 1.1 Map of Paris and its surroundings from 1866. Source: Gallica/Wikimedia Commons.

(the domestic flute and piano versions of *La Favorite* that drove Wagner to distraction). At its periphery there operated a secondary industry of operatic parodies, cobbled together to ribald amusement at the boulevard theatres and representing a send-up, a second consecration, or both. Paris was a city where indifference was infinitely worse than satire. An elite band of composers such as Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Auber, and Halévy was supported by a small army of jobbing musicians working for publishers at piece rates to help retain public interest in a core selection of operas – what became dominated by Grand Opera and known in France as ‘the repertory’. In Paris, Wagner would not become part of this ‘repertory’ until the 1890s. The system would have been unworkable without the energy of Parisian publishers, who acted as facilitators and publicists on the one hand, and as destroyers of the opposition on the other.⁶ In a pattern that endured throughout the nineteenth century, music publishers such as Heugel or the Escudier brothers created print ‘salons’ in the form of specialist music journals, sometimes running them in deficit because of their indirect value to the core business.

At one such journal, the *Revue et Gazette musicale*, Wagner encountered a further German expatriate in its owner, Moritz (who took the name Maurice on moving to Paris) Schlesinger, publisher of Meyerbeer no less, and for whom the Opéra’s repertory committee chair, Édouard Monnais, was the journal’s editor. Contacts like this were gold dust and might well have cemented a commission from the Opéra. But Wagner was not yet the Meister, and Schlesinger treated him as a normal underling – as a source of cheap labour for the publishing company (domestic arrangements, vocal scores, feature articles, and musical novellas that conveniently burnished the German Romantic image the publisher wished to present); the only help Monnais granted him was to facilitate the sale of his *Vaisseau fantôme* scenario to the Opéra’s manager Léon Pillet, for use by another composer (eventually, Louis Dietsch).

Words mattered in Paris – as much as music. The glue of Parisian society, including its cosmopolitan fringes, was (and remains) underpinned by linguistic fluency. Wagner faltered. Liszt’s French was more idiosyncratic than idiomatic but Marie d’Agoult’s literary skills made up for it; Chopin was entirely at home. Wagner’s French was inadequate.

⁶ On the 1830s press as a site of reputational assassination, see Shaena Weitz, ‘Propaganda and Reception in Nineteenth-Century Music Criticism: Maurice Schlesinger, Henri Herz, and the *Gazette musicale*’, *19th-Century Music* 43 (2019): 38–60; see also my *Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century France: ‘La Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris’, 1834–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 149–52.

Nevertheless, as translated by another of his German contacts, Duesberg, Wagner's stories of impoverished musicians, pilgrims, and sufferers in the cause of art attracted welcome comment, provided financial ballast, and acted as an emotional buffer from the realisation of how commercially driven and institutionally hidebound Parisian musical culture was (and how badly he needed to be able to milk it).⁷ At the same time, the need for an expatriate connection meant there was little Wagner could do to broaden his sphere of activity within journalism: Paris had no other suitable publishing house run by a German, and neither was there another Parisian journal with the same editorial eagerness for the kind of thinly veiled position statement Wagner was wont to write. In 1842, an embittered Wagner abandoned a Paris he envied and loathed but could not bend to his will; his compatriots Meyerbeer and Schlesinger became Jews first and foremost, with all the anti-Semitism that entailed. In his absence, the echo chamber of the musical press continued, not least at the *Revue et Gazette* via extensive theoretical essays by François-Joseph Fétis – but decidedly not to Wagner's advantage.⁸

The slowest Parisian musical arena to develop was also the one with the profoundest influence where Wagner was concerned: orchestral concerts. This was paradoxical: opera was both the national musical art form and the end point for the training of composers. The idea that the annual Prix de Rome in composition should require anything other than its crowning cantata (i.e. an operatic scene) was never successfully challenged before the prize itself was abolished in 1968. The orchestral concert life of the July Monarchy accordingly provided yet further access to opera: the fortnightly Société des Concerts du Conservatoire on Sunday afternoons specialised in Beethoven, but often included opera extracts – though in line with their general programming, the works from which they came tended to be older classics (Gluck, Mozart, at most Weber).⁹ As Parisian chamber and orchestral composers from Louise Farrenc and George Onslow to Berlioz knew very well, the performance of music by living composers usually demanded either networks of performer friends or energetic entrepreneurship from

⁷ For the stories, see *Wagner Writes from Paris . . . Stories, Essays and Articles by the Young Composer*, ed. and trans. Robert L. Jacobs and Geoffrey Skelton (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973); on Wagner's semi-concealed careerism, see Nicholas Vazsonyi, 'A German in Paris: Richard Wagner and the Masking of Commodification', in *The Idea of Art Music in a Commercial World, 1800–1930*, ed. Christina Bashford and Roberta Montemorra Marvin (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016), 114–29.

⁸ Ellis, *Music Criticism*, 206–18.

⁹ The classic though sometimes over-egged history is D. Kern Holoman, *The Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, 1828–1967* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

the composer concerned. Financial risk was an obstacle: France operated a 'Poor Tax' averaging 10 per cent on ticket revenues rather than profits, leaving regular risk-takers such as Berlioz howling with frustration at meagre profits turning into yet another deficit. Nevertheless, from the time of his *Roméo et Juliette* (1839), Berlioz learnt that playing a new concert programme (like an opera) more than once offered economies of scale and was also likely to result in greater press coverage; in 1860, Wagner emulated him in three concerts at the Théâtre-Italien which polarised opinion over the 'music of the future' but which via the lyrical responses of Jules Champfleury and Charles Baudelaire sowed the seeds of literary Wagnerism twenty years later.

In the concert hall the real impetus came shortly afterwards, from Jules Pasdeloup and his agenda for the democratisation of orchestral music via cheap concerts at the 5,000-seat Cirque d'Hiver in the working-class east of the city.¹⁰ It was a scene whose excitement in rehearsal was immortalised by John Singer Sargent in the swish of the amphitheatre curve and the terraces that spelled audience discovery and discomfort in equal measure. For some writers, this was modern concert-going, finally emancipated from courtly expectations over expensive subscriptions and evening dress, and with enough cheap seats to be genuinely accessible. The concept took hold such that for thousands of Parisians from the haute bourgeoisie to the artisan, Sunday afternoons meant Mozart and Beethoven mingled with the faint smell of sawdust. Increasingly, they also meant same-day competitions between the Concerts Pasdeloup and Colonne over Berlioz's orchestral and choral works. And at the Concerts Pasdeloup and Lamoureux in particular, they also meant Wagner – sometimes just preludes and choruses (and sometimes contested), but also entire acts presented in concert performance. Pasdeloup started in the 1862–3 season, racking up forty-three performances of Wagner by the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. After a hiatus until the 1873–4 season, riots greeted Wagner's reappearance (there are lively police files on Pasdeloup's concerts); another lull dates from around the time of the 1876 translation of Wagner's notorious anti-French skit *Une Capitulation*, and thereafter excerpts increase to thirty-two appearances across fifty concerts (two seasons, 1882–4).¹¹ After Pasdeloup's death in 1887, Charles Lamoureux at the

¹⁰ On Figure 1.1: western edge of 11ème arrondissement, indicated by an arrow.

¹¹ See Yannick Simon, *Jules Pasdeloup et les origines du concert populaire* (Lyon: Symétrie, 2011), esp. 93–6, 141–4. On *Une Capitulation*, see Thomas S. Grey, 'Eine Kapitulation: Aristophanic Operetta as Cultural Warfare in 1870', in *Wagner and his World*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 87–122.

Cirque d'Été on the Champs-Élysées became Paris's most prominent musical guardian of the Wagnerian flame, until his own death in 1899.

The paradox of that fact says as much about Paris as it does about Wagner. Until September 1891, when *Lohengrin* was premiered at the Opéra (the Palais Garnier), Wagner as a staged experience meant very little to its opera-going residents: a mere three performances of *Tannhäuser* at the Opéra (the old building, at the Salle Le Peletier), a respectable thirty-eight of *Rienzi* (under Padeloup) at the Théâtre-Lyrique in 1869, and a single performance of *Lohengrin* (under Lamoureux) at the private Eden-Théâtre in 1887. As has become Wagner-in-Paris folklore, those first and last runs were cut short by riots over the composer's compositional arrogance and his queue-jumping courtesies of German royal patronage (1861), and nationalist opportunism among political activists independent of the opera-going public (1887).¹² The *Rienzi* production, less musicologically attractive, bumped up against the continuing expectation that the Paris Théâtre-Lyrique, now subsidised, was intended to aid French composers rather than foreign ones.¹³ The brutal shock (for the French) of the six-week war that followed meant that protectionism crystallised into a nationalism from which it would take two decades, and something of a provincial revolt, to dig Wagner out.¹⁴

While Paris stages remained Wagner-free zones, a second paradoxical phenomenon emerged in the city: literary Wagnerism fuelled by Symbolist aesthetics and the idea of poetry as music. It was supported, perhaps inevitably, by a journal, the *Revue wagnérienne* (1885–8). The short-lived nature of the journal is deceptive: at the *fin de siècle* its influence would endure, and already in the 1880s its overlap with high-class (and amateur) Wagnerian salon culture was significant. It was also ostensibly non-commercial – one of a series of avant-garde *petites revues* of the belle époque financed by wealthy patrons and proudly parading their aesthetic independence from official culture. With poetry and essays by Stéphane Mallarmé and Édouard Dujardin, the *Revue* embraced Wagner as a poet first and foremost, quibbled over rival French translations of his operas, and followed salon activity such as Antoine Lascoux's 'Petit Bayreuth' evenings (which had started in 1876) – with exquisite discretion

¹² See Annegret Fauser, 'Debacle at the Paris Opéra: Tannhäuser and the French Critics, 1861', in *Wagner and his World*, ed. Thomas S. Grey, 231–4.

¹³ T.J. Walsh, *Second Empire Opera: The Théâtre Lyrique, Paris, 1851–1870* (London: John Calder, 1981), 251–5.

¹⁴ See Katharine Ellis, 'How to Make Wagner Normal: *Lohengrin*'s "tour de France" of 1891/92', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 25 (2013): 121–37.

as to the identity of certain high-born performers. Within this exclusive social stratum, where the comtesse Greffuhle, Madame de Saint-Marceaux, the Princesse de Polignac, and Judith Gautier all emerge as Wagnerian *salonnières*, direct contact with Bayreuth (presided over by Cosima, Wagner's second wife, after his death) is folded into the concepts of pilgrimage and cultish admiration, snobbery and elitism. A rare though still affectionate trace of gallic mischief within this milieu emerges in the piano quadrilles making up Chabrier's *Souvenirs de Munich* (1885) and the Messager/Fauré *Souvenirs de Bayreuth* (1888) – all three composers being Bayreuth pilgrims and members of the Lascoux and Polignac circles.

These exclusive spaces, reserved for initiates and guests, and mixing amateur and professional musicians, were encouraged by Haussmannised Paris with its wide avenues, monumental vistas, and spacious houses with substantial music rooms. While Lascoux hired the halls for his 'Petit Bayreuth', and Judith Gautier invited a mere 100 guests to the main hall of the Galérie Nadar (which could hold 600), other performances took place in private salons in either the recently created boulevard Malesherbes or rue Washington, the avenue Henri-Martin, or alternatively the historically aristocratic place des Vosges or place Vendôme.¹⁵ This posthumous address book outshone by some distance that of the 'Nouvelle Athènes' enclave of the 1840s; it was light years away from Wagner's first clutch of expatriate contacts.

When Wagner's music returned to the Paris Opéra in September 1891, the tide had definitively turned in his favour. To the despair of French composers patiently waiting their turn,¹⁶ the city's premier opera house played catch-up for the next two decades, prioritising Wagner opera over French works until the moment, on 4 January 1914, when *Parsifal* could be presented in lockstep with countless theatres across the world. There were more paradoxes in this Wagnerian renaissance, given the nature of the Palais Garnier in relation to the Salle Peletier (in which all Wagner's pre-*Ring* operas would in other circumstances have been premiered) and Wagner's own theatre at Bayreuth. For while Paris's old Opéra had a stage almost as large as its successor, the much larger footprint of the

¹⁵ See Myriam Chimènes, 'Élites sociales et pratiques wagnériennes: de la propagande au snobisme', in *Von Wagner zum Wagnérisme: Musik, Literatur, Kunst, Politik*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Manuela Schwartz (Leipzig: Leipzig Universitätsverlag, 1999), 155–97. The first three addresses in the 8ème and 16ème arrondissements of Figure 1.1 – streets as yet unbuilt in 1867, indicated here by arrows.

¹⁶ A perennial problem for the French, but acute from the 1880s and exacerbated by Wagnermania. See David Grayson, 'Finding a Stage for French Opera', in *Music, Theater, and Cultural Transfer*, ed. Mark Everist and Annegret Fauser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 127–54.

Palais Garnier was attributable to precisely the kind of space that Wagner abhorred and ensured was absent from the *Festspielhaus*: grand reception rooms for social mixing, people-watching, and display. It was not called a 'Palace' for nothing. In Paris, then, the vast majority of Wagner's operas found their belated consecration in a building designed to celebrate the sociability of Second Empire luxury – all marble and mirrors, balustrades and balconies.¹⁷ Alongside *Tannhäuser* from the old Salle Le Peletier, one opera was missing from this suite of Palais Garnier productions. An exploration of personal alienation, cursed existence, and the impossibility of homecoming, it was the work for which Wagner had sold the scenario to Léon Pillet back in 1841: *Le Vaisseau fantôme*. Emblematic, surely, of Wagner's lifelong unease with the city of light.

¹⁷ On the history of the Palais Garnier, see Frédérique Patureau, *Le Palais Garnier dans la société parisienne, 1875–1914* (Liège: Mardaga, 1991).