

## Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Jean-Jacques Nattiez. *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation*. Translated by Stewart Spencer. Princeton Studies in Opera. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. xx, 359 pp. ISBN 0-691-09141-2 (hardcover)

Stephen McClatchie

Numéro 15, 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014406ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014406ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

### ISSN

0710-0353 (imprimé)

2291-2436 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

McClatchie, S. (1995). Compte rendu de [Jean-Jacques Nattiez. *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation*. Translated by Stewart Spencer. Princeton Studies in Opera. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. xx, 359 pp. ISBN 0-691-09141-2 (hardcover)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, (15), 184–189.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1014406ar>

musicological thought" (230). With their emphasis on the hermeneutic level of historical explanation, Tomlinson cites Iain Fenlon's *Music and Patronage in 16th-Century Mantua*, Anthony Newcomb's *The Madrigal at Ferrara*, and his own *Music and the End of the Renaissance* as examples. Particularly significant in Tomlinson's position is his criticism of the eurocentricity of musical analysis, a methodology that has been, and continues to be, part of the musicologist's strategy. The discussion of Monteverdi's "Sfogava con le stelle" (4th madrigal book, 1603) and the "Lament of the Nymph (eight madrigal book, 1638), is a fascinating, if at times, abstruse application of the ideas expressed throughout the book. A more extended coverage (in terms of repertory) could serve to illuminate and further confirm Tomlinson's position.

*Music in Renaissance Magic* is not an easy book. Indeed, its thorough and effective manipulation of primary and secondary literature, coupled with the application of postmodern critical writing, requires careful, thoughtful reading. In its forward (and backward) looking critical exegeses, it represents an exciting, important example of new musicological scholarship. It challenges all of us who aspire to write meaningfully about all musics to reconsider our long held assumptions, and to break down barriers through dialogues with "other" distant – past and current – neglected voices.

Gordon E. Smith

Jean-Jacques Nattiez. *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation*. Translated by Stewart Spencer. Princeton Studies in Opera. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. xx, 359 pp. ISBN 0-691-09141-2 (hardcover).

In early 1854, Wagner opined to August Röckel that "the true human being is both man and woman," and concluded that "it is the union of man and woman, in other words, love, that creates (physically and metaphorically) the human being."<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez contends that the figure of the androgyne – essentially the fusion of opposites – was central to the interpretation of both Wagner's prose writings and musical works. Nattiez's book is devoted to the exploration of the significance (both literal and metaphorical) of the figure of androgyny "in Wagner's works and theoretical writings when seen within the context of the texts, the composer's life, and the age in which he lived" (xiii–xiv). But it is more than that: it is the embodiment of androgyny itself.

1 Letter to August Röckel, 25/26 January 1854. Translation from *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, ed. and trans. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: Norton, 1987), 303.

*Wagner Androgyne* first appeared in French in 1990,<sup>2</sup> and now, in Stewart Spencer's unobtrusive translation, forms part of the Princeton Studies in Opera series. For the English edition, Nattiez has taken the opportunity to correct some small errors in the original, as well as to add two short sections to the sixth chapter. The first appendix of the French edition (a translation of Wagner's unpublished first prose sketch for *Wieland der Schmied*) was dropped from the English translation, but fortunately is now available in both German and English (translated by Spencer) in the journal of the British Wagner Society.<sup>3</sup> Happily, the other appendix was carried over into the translation. This lengthy (19 pages; 301 items!) list of Wagner's prose works is a simplified version of an unpublished, detailed catalogue currently being assembled by Nattiez, and for which all Wagner scholars wait in expectation.

Apart from the figure of androgyny, Nattiez's central argument is that one ought to read Wagner's works as "artistic metaphor[s]" of the "theoretical construct[s] elaborated in tandem" with them (91). While this is not a new point to make with regard to Wagner, seldom has it been elaborated with such admirable thoroughness and clarity. Since, in his prose writings, Wagner often turns to myth to illustrate a theoretical point, Nattiez is quite right to regard the composed myths (the music dramas) as fair game for metaphorical mining. Such an approach ought to give pause to those who would excuse "Wagner the artist" while condemning "Wagner the man/writer"; Nattiez thus breaks a lance for those who would argue against the still-powerful notion of Music, pure and transcendent.

Nattiez demonstrates Wagner's intertwining of theory and practice quite brilliantly in the first section of the book, in which he reads both *Wieland der Schmied* and the *Ring* as a metaphorical reenactment of Wagner's conception of the history of music. Through a paradigmatic reading of *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849), *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849), "Das Judenthum in der Musik" (1850), *Oper und Drama* (1851) and *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde* (1851), Nattiez shows how the tripartite structure of Original Unity/Lost Unity/Unity Regained underlies each of these works, and then elegantly superimposes Wagner's own gendered terminology, revealing that the theoretical relationship between poetry and music is reflected – in the music dramas – in the relations between man and woman. To cite only two of many similar instances: in *Oper und Drama*, Wagner writes that "this poetic seed is the poetic intent, which provides music, that gloriously loving woman, with the subject

2 The original volume was reviewed by Marie-Thérèse Lefebvre in this journal, no. 12 (1992): 135-40.

3 *Wagner* 15 (January 1994): 3-23.

matter that she must bear";<sup>4</sup> or, "if I wish to demonstrate that music (as a woman) must necessarily be impregnated by a poet (as a man), then I must ensure that this glorious woman is not abandoned to the first passing libertine."<sup>5</sup>

In the second part of *Wagner Androgyne* Nattiez addresses, from a broader perspective, the relationship(s) between music and poetry in Wagner's theoretical writings. Since, as Nattiez demonstrates, Wagner's direct preoccupation with the concept of androgyny was largely between 1848 and 1860, the question arises whether or not we are justified in seeing this notion as helpful in explicating Wagnerian theory in general. Not surprisingly, Nattiez answers in the affirmative. To him, the figure of androgyny is a "central symbolic figure" for Wagner, and provides a metaphor by which one can understand Wagner's various conceptions of the relationship between poetry and music. Nattiez's work suggests that the notion of androgyny can provide an alternative, non-evolutionary plot through which one can come to terms with the shifting relations of music and poetry in Wagner's thought.

Individual chapters in this section chronicle Wagner's thoughts in his writings before 1848, between 1851 and 1873, and from 1878 until his death. Nattiez argues that Wagner's androgyny passed through three distinct stages: first, a male-dominated androgyny symbolised by the figure of the poet impregnating music with his fertilising seed in *Opera und Drama*; second, a female-dominated androgyny whereby music (consistently gendered as female by Wagner) metaphorically gives birth to drama—in other words, the female role shifts from lover to mother; and third, an asexual, or neutral androgyny described in the late writings and in *Parsifal*. According to Nattiez, this latter androgyny suppresses every kind of division, whether sexual, racial, cultural, or aesthetic, but Nattiez's arguments in this section seem rather less developed and consequently less convincing, than in earlier sections. Certainly, I find "equality" an odd claim to make about the elitist and misogynistic Grail Knights in *Parsifal*. Nevertheless, Nattiez's survey of nineteenth-century writings about androgyny and the relation of the sexes makes for fascinating reading, and his comments about Wagner's encounter with Schopenhauer and its influence on both *Tristan* and Wagner's 1870 *Beethoven Festschrift* are both perspicacious and unexceptionable.

Nattiez replaces the ambiguity of such quintessential Wagnerian preoccupations as poetry, music, and drama with the harmonising yet equally ambiguous figure of the androgyne, but in so doing merely substitutes one transcendental

4 Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen* (Leipzig: Walter Tiemann, 1907), 4:102-3.

5 Letter to Liszt, 25 November 1850; *Selected Letters*, 220.

signified for another. He argues that Wagner's definition of drama undergoes a distinct shift between 1851 and 1870 – that is, between *Oper und Drama* and *Beethoven* – but does not point out that, for Wagner, the valorisation of “drama” in *Opera und Drama*, and of “music” in *Beethoven* can both be taken as a metaphorical expression of presence, of the idealistic *Ding an sich*, the paradoxical quest for the representation of which preoccupied Wagner consistently throughout his prose writings. After 1854, when he had been exposed to Schopenhauer's philosophy, he could equate music with the will – another metaphor for presence – and still regard drama as the goal for which to strive. In other words, the “music” idealised by Wagner in *Beethoven* is of a different order than the phenomenal music of the music dramas themselves, which Wagner described as being “subservient” to the drama in *Opera und Drama*. Schopenhauer describes the will as both the origin and the subject of music, but by equating music with the will, by regarding it as a copy of the will, Schopenhauer implicitly admits of two types of will, or music: that which Nietzsche called the “indecipherable” – the unknowable *Ding an sich* – and its paradoxical copy as phenomenal music. This point is too little recognised by many of Wagner's erstwhile critics, and calls into question many of the explanatory “plots” proposed to account for Wagner's shifting theoretical stances. In other words, Nattiez is correct to propose some overarching paradigm to enfold the multiplicity of Wagner's writings (the figure of the androgyne), but I would suggest that it ought to be a metaphysical, rather than a metaphorical one.

All this, of course, does not invalidate Nattiez's image of the androgyne. There are many, many different ways to theorise the relation of music and text, from Aristotelian mimesis to the poststructuralist psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan (the mirror stage) or Julia Kristeva (the *chora*). But once the androgyne becomes a metaphor for Nattiez, rather than a symbol grounded by Wagner's own evocation of it in his writings, it loses something of its persuasive power for the reader and becomes more unabashedly figural.

Nattiez moves away from the genetic, historical, and philological orientation he had adopted in the first two sections, in order to explore other different types of exegeses able to explain Wagner's androgyny in the third. Here the notion of androgyny shifts yet again, now becoming a symbol for the plurality of meanings inherent in what he calls “androgynous hermeneutics.” Successive chapters apply the interpretative paradigms of Freud (Wagner as repressed-homosexual-transvestite-incestuous-masochist), Jung, structuralism, Marxism, and feminism to Wagner and his works, but Nattiez ultimately finds each unsatisfactory owing to its hermeneutic promiscuity: each is fundamentally ambiguous in its explanatory power. In other words, they can prove virtually

anything. Nattiez demonstrates how these ahistorical and atemporal modes of explanation are essentially romantic in their search for totality, but this section of the book suffers from a loss of focus, inevitable according to Nattiez's professed purpose, but nevertheless disorienting for the reader.

Nattiez's discussion of androgynous hermeneutics is intended to sound a cautionary note for those musical scholars interested in applying the philosophy of deconstruction to musicology and music theory. On the surface, his book seems to owe much to the non-totalising stance of poststructuralism. Nattiez is a very playful writer, full of tricks, feints, and dodges (one particularly significant piece of play is found in the chapter on structuralism). His writing is extremely self-reflexive and he invests little in his positions, preferring recourse to Paul Veyne's notion of "plot," as a chosen, constructed mode of explanation.<sup>6</sup> He continually disarms the reader, often openly admitting the inadequacy or provisionality of a mode of argument, and thus makes criticism of the book very difficult; it somehow seems beside the point to take issue with individual details since Nattiez himself often presents both sides of an argument.

But this typically postmodern "play" masks a suspicion of the interpretive excesses that result from the androgynous hermeneutic practices which Nattiez discusses, whether these be Freudian, Jungian, structuralist, or poststructuralist in nature. Nattiez argues that you cannot simply say what you want, that it is possible to construct a hierarchy of possible plots, chose between them, and even reject some as simply wrong. This is not to say that there is one single transcendental "truth," for Nattiez all too clearly recognises the provisional nature of all scholarly inquiry when he suggests that successive plots will, over the course of time, be modified, affirmed, or denied, and thus mark the "cumulative advance of knowledge." Rather, Nattiez posits what he terms a Hermeneutics of Construction as the only possible approach for the age of deconstruction: "plurality of meaning invites us to *construct* interpretations on the basis of explicit, reproducible, and contestable criteria" (290).

The great strength of *Wagner Androgyne* lies in the first section, where Nattiez uncovers the centrality of the theme of androgyny for Wagner, and demonstrates, in masterly fashion, the interpenetration of Wagnerian theory and practice. But the concept of androgyny is itself androgynous, and shifts uncomfortably in Nattiez's text between that of the symbolic and idealistic male-female figure of the androgyne, and that of a synonym for ambiguity. Throughout the book, androgyny moves from a literal theme in Wagner's

6 See Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Epistemology*, trans. Mina Moore-Rinvulcri (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1984).

writings, to a symbol of the shifting relationship of music and poetry in Wagnerian theory, and finally becomes a metaphor for the hermeneutic impulse itself: for meaning, and its treatment/abuse by twentieth-century literary criticism. Nattiez suggests that the re-emergence of the figure of the androgyne in the late-twentieth century is a consequence of postmodernism, of the reawakening of that romantic search for the androgyneity of totality which will save us from that failure of unitarian, all-embracing explanations which condemns us to continually construct interpretations knowing all the while that one day they will be disputed and superseded. If this is so, it is demonstrated nowhere more clearly than in the androgyny of *Wagner Androgyne*.

Stephen McClatchie

Jésus Aguila. *Le Domaine musical : Pierre Boulez et vingt ans de création contemporaine*. Paris : Fayard, 1992. 506 p. ISBN 2-213-02532-0.

La création musicale et la diffusion de la musique contemporaine en France se trouvent depuis longtemps associées à des sociétés musicales, pour la plupart nées des revendications de jeunes compositeurs et, par conséquent, tributaires de certains principes esthétiques. Ces sociétés avaient pour objectif de défendre les orientations des nouvelles générations contre un certain conservatisme véhiculé par les compositeurs plus âgés et des institutions telles que la Schola ou le Conservatoire. Ainsi, la Société Nationale (constituée en 1871 par César Franck et Camille Saint-Saëns), la Société Musicale Indépendante (fondée en 1910 par Maurice Ravel et Charles Kœchlin), la Société Triton (née en 1932 et dirigée par Pierre-Octave Ferroud) et enfin le Domaine musical (créé en 1953 par Pierre Boulez) ont favorisé l'essor de nouveaux courants musicaux en France, en marge des grandes sociétés symphoniques et des grandes institutions d'enseignement. Entre 1953 et 1973, le Domaine musical, principale société musicale d'avant-garde de l'époque à Paris, a donné en concert 460 œuvres de plus d'une centaine de compositeurs français et étrangers. Son rôle dans la diffusion et la défense d'œuvres issues du postwebernisme a profondément marqué l'évolution de la musique française.

L'ouvrage de Jésus Aguila retrace l'histoire et les fondements de cette société et analyse le rôle joué par son principal fondateur, Pierre Boulez, dans l'élaboration de ce panorama très particulier de la musique contemporaine qu'offrait le Domaine. Professeur à l'Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, Jésus Aguila a soutenu sa thèse de doctorat à l'Université de Paris IV-La Sorbonne en 1990. C'est cette thèse intitulée « Histoire du Domaine musical (1953–1973) : la pensée boulézienne et son institutionnalisation » qui, remaniée, est