

organ compositions are in print, and Helge Gramstrup has recorded a CD of *St Paul* and *The Saviour's Seven Words on the Cross*.

Gustav Helsted's (1857–1924) output for the organ was far smaller than Malling's, even though he worked as an organist from 1891, where he was appointed organist at the newly inaugurated Cavaillé-Coll organ in the Jesus Church in Valby, until his death in 1924, when he had become Malling's successor as cathedral organist in the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen. In his article 'Gustav Helsted ved orglet' (Gustav Helsted at the Organ) Peter E. Nissen partly occupies himself with the Cavaillé-Coll organ and its significance for Helsted and Danish organ culture in general, partly with the changing musical circumstances that caused a leading church musician like Helsted to produce only two major organ works out of an output of 33 opus numbers. His background was the concert music, which is mirrored in the organ pieces *Phantasy in E minor* (Op. 16) and *Sonata in D Major* (Op. 29), which are both analysed. In them, Peter E. Nissen traces the influence of Franz Liszt and César Franck. Like Malling, Helsted was brushed aside after his death, as was his pupil Rued Langgaard.

Finally the book contains a revised excerpt of Jørgen Hansen's MA dissertation *Johan Adam Krygell (1835–1915). En værkefortegnelse med en kort biografi til en afdekning af en komponists økonomiske forhold i København i slutningen af forrige århundrede* (Johan Adam Krygell (1835–1915). A work-list with a short biography in order to uncover the economic circumstances of a minor composer in Copenhagen at the end of the last century; University of Copenhagen, 1990). The title accurately sums up the contents of the article. Krygell was a provincial, apparently awkward and hardly a man of the world, but an industrious church musician, who was employed at St Matthew's church in Vesterbro in Copenhagen from 1880 until his death. His limited success in his own time is partly explained with his lack of ability to make connections with important people. The thesis – and this article – contains the most substantial evaluation of his life and a detailed list of his many compositions for the organ.

Mikael Garnæs



Nila Parly, *Absolut Sang. Klang, køn og kvinderoletter i Wagners værker*

Copenhagen: Multivers, 2007

364 pp.

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DKK 389

Nila Parly has taken on an impressive project and written an impressive book based on her Ph.D. thesis of 2005. In the wake of many years of research and writing about Wagner's operas and music drama she has dared to come out with another book and another angle on the works of the controversial composer. Wagner always provokes very strong views and opinions, and this book is no exception.

The intention of the book is twofold: 1) to save the reading of Wagner's women characters and his operas from the traditional feminist stance which, briefly stated, concludes that Wagner's women always die and are repressed as women, and that this is an indication of Wagner's repressive, patriarchal attitude to the role of woman; and 2) to interpret Wagner's operas and music dramas with a clear focus on the women, their musical *Gestalt* and their active role in the constitution of the drama by way of their musical, textual, and visual-dramatic 'agency' in the operas.

In thorough, but selective and focused analyses, the author interprets the music and singing of the principal female characters in the major operas: Senta in *Der Fliegende Hol-*

*länder*, Elisabeth and Venus in *Tannhäuser*, Elsa and Ortrud in *Lohengrin*, Brünnhilde in *Der Ring des Niebelungen*, Isolde in *Tristan und Isolde*, Eva in *Die Meistersinger* and Kundry in *Parsifal*. She also points out dramatic, expressive, and structural interconnections among the women characters in the different operas.

Against this background she is able to construct a coherent, quite convincing argument about the creative role of women and Wagner's position in the 'woman question'. To do so, she consults and re-reads Wagner's own writings: his letters, *Mein Leben, Oper und Drama*, and other works. She also discusses the most important interpretations and theoretical discussions of Wagner to date, including those of musicologists, but also those of recent literary, psychological, psychoanalytical, and other traditions: Carl Dahlhaus, Carolyn Abbate, Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Slavoj Žižek, and others.

The analyses and interpretations are mainly close readings of the scores (texts, notes, remarks); but the author also considers the sounds of the characters' voices – that is, how the scores and the Wagnerian voice tradition define how those voices are to sound. And this brings me to some of the problems and the main objection to certain difficulties in the book: 1) the obscurity of the ontological status of the works (objects) analysed; 2) the lack of an explicit account of what the author is doing (the method actually used) and of the underlying theories; and 3) the resulting analytical-interpretative discourse, which unintentionally and perhaps unconsciously results in a closure of the dynamic meaning-production of the operas and the readings of it – a tendency in fact to produce a fixed meaning instead of an analytically open process in a theoretical productive discourse of her own.

The intention is to convince the reader of certain statements and conclusions (meanings, i.e. signifiers, *énoncé*) drawn from the analyses of the operas – as the author herself has been convinced; an intention clearly revealed by the increasing frequency of various qualifying phrases like 'in my view', 'I find', 'I mean', 'personally I (rather) think', 'I do not mean', 'personally I find' and so on, throughout the book. According to the author the analytical process is the difficult but creative way to distil out this operative 'meaning', gradually formulated as the "essence" of the Wagner work, (pp. 243, 235–36); that is, a concept of the score as an authorized, ideal, and essentialist conception of 'the work' and its meaning.

How attendance to a performance of the operas would operate and work is something the author implicitly addresses by installing 'the audience' as an explicit reference point, a witness to semantic, interpretative 'truth' (pp. 187, 195, 235). But this 'audience' is by no means real or concrete; it is entirely virtual (imagined), although this is never stated or commented on by the author. This notion of the 'audience' might have been given a theoretical basis by theories of reception aesthetics (Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Umberto Eco) and their notion of 'the implicit recipient', but the author does not do so.

Furthermore, the discursive style of the analyses has a tendency to mythologize the composed musical *Gestalt* of the singing women characters as their own 'compositional activity', interpreting this as if it is some living manifestation of real women's characters and enabling a feminist reading of those characters (behind Wagner's back!). Even though the author admits that they should be understood as acting on behalf of Wagner himself, this undermines the stringency and authority of the analytical discourse and leaves the impression of a seductive and over-creative interpretation – one that is nevertheless mainly well argued and documented in the score.

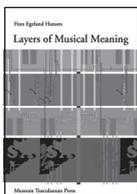
This kind of hermeneutic-structural interpretative analysis has a long and strong tradition behind it in musicology, but here it is combined with the latest feminist-inspired opera and narration-theory tradition (Abbate) powered by a strong, but sometimes too literal, bombastic and emotive discourse on female and male in all aspects of life: in opera, in music, in Wagner, in his and our society, and in 'the audience'.

If Nila Parly – on the basis of the score – can read a feminine ending into the first two forte fortissimo staccato semiquavers of the *Trauermusik beim Tode Siegfrieds*, then you can interpret anything as feminism. On the CD interpretation I have (Georg Solti, 1965/97 Decca) I clearly hear the two sounding semiquavers as equally stressed, physically shocking enunciations of death and sorrow, physically affecting and phenomenologically arousing me (the CD listener). Whether this would also be the case for a real opera audience is a matter for the theory of the sounding, performed opera – which would by its nature take a quite different theoretical point of departure where the closure of semantics and meaning is not the main focus.

However, the most original and important achievement of the book is that Nila Parly has managed to focus on the singing women's voices and their articulation ('enunciation') in the tension between text (language) and music as decisive for the understanding of these women characters. The project is important in relation not only to Wagner himself, but also to the understanding of the historical and current reception of Wagner.

The book's title, which means *Absolute Song*, used as a concept for this 'voicing', is problematical and perhaps misleading in relation to Eduard Hanslick's concept of 'absolute music', which he developed precisely in opposition to Wagner's musical aesthetics. An alternative would have been to consult Roland Barthes' classic text, *The Grain of the Voice*, which – inspired by Kristeva and by Benveniste's linguistic enunciation theory – investigates at quite another theoretical level the intertwined voice production of music *and* language as the most profound and complicated creative source for human articulation of body and mind.

Ansa Lønstrup



Finn Egeland Hansen, *Layers of Musical Meaning*

København: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006

333 pp., music exx.

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DKK 300

The purpose of the book is clearly stated in the preface: there are 'two approaches to music in need of both supplementary and corrective reflection'. The truth value of hermeneutic interpretations cannot be determined, and structural analysis is not meaningful unless one pays close attention to the underlying codes. The normative character of Egeland Hansen's undertaking is evident throughout, but his attitude towards the two domains is different. Whereas analysis is supplied with a basic theory as well as with inventories of things that he considers necessary to make music inherently meaningful, various attempts to establish extramusical content are severely criticized – the reader cannot but get the impression that hermeneutics is a futile activity beyond remedy.

The reason for this condemnation is the author's strong adherence to positivistic principles – 'positivism' taken as a neutral term within the theory of science, of course, not as a trigger of irrational conditioned reflexes. He holds that theories (and by extension findings in general) should be falsifiable, and that unverified results amount to nil in scholarly work. When applied to musical hermeneutics, this guiding rule is bound to yield negative results and – so it seems to this reviewer – practitioners of musical analysis have to be careful not to get into credibility problems as well. It does not emerge as altogether clear whether Egeland Hansen's no-nonsense criterion of meaningfulness, strictly implemented, is entirely reason-