

Articulations: Responses to Alain Badiou's *Five Lessons on Wagner*

Badiou's Wagner: Variations on the Generic

In his *Five Lessons on Wagner*, Alain Badiou describes the philosophical reception of Wagner—the “case of Wagner,” if you will—as nothing less than a “genre.”¹ Indeed, Badiou has put his finger on something. Ever since Nietzsche abandoned his defense of Wagner for star prosecutor, few texts on the philosophy of music have traveled far from the genre. In those cases where Wagner is all but absent, such as Jankélévitch's *Music and the Ineffable*, the absence is telling. According to Badiou, “Wagner created a new situation with respect to the relationship between philosophy and music . . . because he instituted a special kind of philosophical debate about himself that must inevitably also carry with it a broader debate about music . . . about mythology, theater, and so forth.”² We might say that Wagner found a new way for *music to make a claim on philosophy*. The case of Wagner, spanning from Nietzsche to Adorno and Heidegger to Lacoue-Labarthe, is philosophy's countersuit to this claim, with Wagner as the defendant.

Five Lessons on Wagner is written as a variation on the genre, a robust defense of Wagner's artistic and philosophical significance against his critics. But while correctly identifying the case of Wagner as a philosophical genre, Badiou also reduces it to something generic. To make the case for the prosecution univocal, Badiou spends his first three lessons summarizing and redescribing the arguments for the prosecution; but what results is a displacement of these arguments whereby they never quite resemble the original.

As an example, take Badiou's reading of Adorno. Instead of focusing on *In Search of Wagner* or “Wagner's Relevance for Today”—both texts that stand squarely in the genre—Badiou analyzes *Negative Dialectics* in order to discover to what extent Adorno's philosophy lays the ground for his criticism of Wagner. The reading focuses on Adorno's critique of the identity principle: if the identity principle brings about the unity of experience (in the Kantian sense) and the closure of history (in the Hegelian sense), then one must affirm moments of nonidentity that can resist unity and closure, since “the whole is the false”; the affirmation of nonidentity is an affirmation of difference; the concept (which grants the unity of experience) must give way to nonconceptual states, such as suffering, which register the effects of totality on the subject; in artworks, form, where materials are shaped into closure and unity, must be transformed into processes of becoming, that is,

transformed into the *informelle*. In Badiou's gloss, Adorno is suspicious of the identity principle's universalism, since it

consists precisely in the imposition of the One; that is to say, an imposition of identity whereby one thing can apply to everyone . . . [by] reducing everyone to the same insofar as the same is this universal norm. . . . The linked themes of the need for appreciating differences, the respect for otherness, the criminal nature of identitarian disrespect of differences, and the inevitably violent will to universal sameness are basic themes throughout *Negative Dialectics*.³

By focusing on the issue of nonidentity, Badiou makes Adorno resemble more familiar opponents such as Levinas and then deploys his standard objections. Like Adorno, "Levinas maintains that metaphysics, imprisoned by its Greek origins, has subordinated thought to the logic of the Same, to the primacy of substance and identity."⁴ It is for this reason that Badiou is "struck by how many contemporary themes [Adorno] had worked out an approach to early on," and how *Negative Dialectics* "anticipates by twenty years themes that have become perfectly commonplace in contemporary ideology."⁵ This damns with faint praise. By "contemporary," Badiou means the philosophy of difference, otherness, and multiculturalism—exemplified in contemporary political theory, the politics of tolerance, and neoliberal democracy. By making difference sacrosanct, contemporary ethics and politics undercut the possibility of identification with others around a political cause or event. Badiou's militant politics is cast in terms of immortality, greatness, and truth, not finitude, victimization, and relativism.⁶

For Badiou, the identitarian critique of *Negative Dialectics* is also at the heart of Adorno's critique of Wagner. Adorno makes nonidentity into a musical duty, affirming only music capable of resisting the forces of closure and unity, that is, *musique informelle*. Adorno's critique of Wagner is characterized as, partially, a response to Wagner's desire for unification—unification of the arts into the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, unification of the discontinuous recitative-and-aria opera into music drama, and unification of the musical syntax through the technique of the leitmotif. This critique of unity is mutatis mutandis taken as a central tenet in Badiou's summary of the prosecution: "Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe all agree in viewing Wagner as someone who forces musical unity upon a variegated mass, upon difference whose essential character of otherness disappears or dissolves as a result. . . . Unity in Wagner's music is ultimately in the service of a vision . . . of the nation in general and of the German nation in particular." Finally, "the melodic line [endless melody] ultimately subordinates all the differences to itself so that the One might reign supreme."⁷

In contrast to Badiou's summary, it is instructive to revisit Adorno's late essay, "Wagner's Relevance for Today."⁸ There Adorno reassesses Wagner's work, describing its importance to the Schoenberg school and its potential for new music. The essay

offers a qualified defense of Wagner against his critics. To Badiou's charge that *musique informelle* is Adorno's alternative to Wagnerian unity, I refer the reader to the following: "[In Wagner's music], the continuity is created, over long stretches, by an unconstrained redrawing of the dramatic curve from moment to moment," Adorno writes. "The intact diatonic tonal structure makes it possible to dispense with surface links. In this way, the music achieves a concreteness of the irregular that traditional music never dreamed of. This would remain prototypical for Schoenberg, for Berg, and for the most recent tendency: the trend toward structures that are free, yet dense . . . it would provide the ideal model for a truly informal process of composition."⁹ From what he says in the *Five Lessons*, Badiou would have to agree. He defends Wagner against the accusation that the composer "reduces the melodic line to a principle of continuity (cf. the theory of 'endless melody') whose paradigm is actually the artificial unity of lived experience," a false unity that must be understood in terms of Adorno's critique of the identity principle.¹⁰ In defense, Badiou will say that Wagner's music is not identitarian, since "*dramatic possibilities are created through the music.*"¹¹ Wagner's music transforms the dramatic situation onstage, breaking its totality through the creation of new possibilities. Like Adorno, Badiou finds in Wagner's music a resistance to closure. His compositional technique of leitmotif and "endless melody" is nothing less than "a step in the direction of a totality-free greatness."¹²

Why does Badiou get this wrong? He cannot plead ignorance, since he cites "Wagner's Relevance" in his text.¹³ Yet he mentions it only once in order to contest Adorno's reading of the "sentimental and trite" conclusion to *Götterdämmerung*. Badiou knows the essay, yet he disavows how similar he and Adorno really are about some central aspects of the case.¹⁴

The salient difference between Adorno and Badiou concerns the value of Wagner today. While Adorno's dialectical *Rettung* focuses on Wagner's musical techniques and the critical nature of art as *Schein*, Badiou focuses on the question of the "ceremony" and its relation to the event.¹⁵ In the final lesson Badiou turns to *Parsifal*, arguing that the subject of the opera concerns the possibility of creating a new ceremony. The ceremony in mind is not the ruined Christian ceremony—epitomized in Amfortas's hauling out of the Grail—but the possibility of a ceremony that will be a "sublation of Christianity."¹⁶ It will be a ceremony "in which the collectivity will represent itself to itself without transcendence."¹⁷ Readers of Badiou will recognize the philosophy of the event behind of all this, the event that creates a new subject as the repository of its effects. Because the event is neither a being nor a presence determining a situation from outside, it is without transcendence; rather, in its absolute contingency, the vanishing event makes possible the crystallization of a new collective subject that will nominalize the event and transform the given situation.¹⁸

Badiou turns to the operatic representation of ceremony, before attending to the ceremonial aspect of *Parsifal's* performance at Bayreuth. First he notes that Amfortas's ceremony in act 1 is repeated by Parsifal in act 3, which has the same

setting and “formal protocol.”¹⁹ Aside from the change of celebrant, the music plays a crucial role in transforming Amfortas’s ruined ceremony into Parsifal’s new possibility. The music is what differentiates two otherwise formally identical acts. But how? Midway through Badiou’s text he offers a subtle clue. He observes that, in Wagner’s texts, “the story always comes undone little by little: even though it may be completely narrative at the beginning, it gradually comes undone, as if it were being incrementally subjectivized under the pressure of the music.”²⁰ In Badiou’s philosophy, a subject is formed in the wake of an event. When an event occurs, a transformation of the situation is suddenly possible, and “that which had been without any formal value suddenly find[s] itself transfigured by an unforeseeable shift of the boundary recognized as form, even when de-formed, from what is relegated to formlessness.”²¹ A faithful subject is the body where the effects of an event are realized, where the form that emerged in the wake of the event is maintained and carried forth, despite all resistance. The Badiouian subject, which does not necessarily designate an individual but could be a whole community, is united around their attachment to the vanished event, holding it up as the absent center around which to coalesce.

The difference between the event and its realization shapes Badiou’s analysis of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth. While affirming Wagner’s creation of a new ceremony, Badiou also criticizes him for confounding Bayreuth with its realization. If *Parsifal* dramatizes the ceremony from within the ceremonial setting, its realization was not quite up to snuff: “Just think, with all the gussied-up bourgeois from around the world who were in attendance, the ceremony was ultimately pathetic! No one applauded at the end, everyone walked out of the theater without a word, and then they all went out for sauerkraut—what else was there to do?—commenting that ‘the tenor wasn’t so great.’ It is also possible to say that the priest wasn’t very good when Mass is over; *that doesn’t diminish the ceremonial nature of the ceremony.*”²² The purity of the ceremony as such can be separated from its realization. That is Badiou’s point: “In the case of *Parsifal*, the self-reflexive nature of the ceremony (the ceremony of the ceremony) discredited or passed judgment on the validity of the ceremonial proposition as such,” but that is no reason to dismiss “the validity of the ceremonial proposition as such.”²³ Even if the implementation failed, the proposition was nevertheless correct.

The lesson we learn from Badiou’s reading of *Parsifal* is that Wagner articulated the stakes of the ceremonial proposition, that is, the question as to whether a modern ceremony—a ceremony without transcendence—is possible today. Wagner, like his contemporary, Mallarmé, explores this question in the strongest possible terms. To be sure, Badiou is unequivocal that *Parsifal* fails to realize this ceremony—“in my opinion it does not succeed, from a formal point of view, in changing the ceremony into something new”—but that does not diminish the force of the proposition as such.²⁴ To achieve a modern ceremony requires something greater, a new event. “It could be said that an event today would be something that would make a ceremony possible. In this sense, *Parsifal* is prophetic in its own way: Will an event occur that

will make a ceremony possible?"²⁵ Despite the failures in implementation, *Parsifal* articulates what is in Badiou's eyes our current situation: the necessity and impossibility of a modern ceremony based on the event-to-come. This is a strange and fascinating lesson to have learned from *Parsifal*. It is one that posits a novel reading of *Parsifal* while assimilating it to the terms of Badiou's philosophical project.

But what criteria are to differentiate the supposed purity of idea (the "ceremonial proposition as such") from its accidents? "I think we need to make a distinction between what Wagner saw as his own greatness . . . and the place where his greatness really lies, namely, in the accomplishments that we can discern today."²⁶ But what is to prevent us from simply reading into Wagner's work the accomplishments we want to find? Where is the resistance to lie? (That was the point of Adorno's critique of the identity principle, after all.) The danger is one of tautology—of simply finding in Wagner the Wagner we want to find because of our fidelity to "redeeming the redeemer." This seems to me the great and troubling wager of Badiou's reliance on the faithful subject—that, in the end, fidelity to the event (whether already vanished or coming-to-be) trumps all other criteria. What matters the most is the positing of a "primordial statement" and vigilant adherence to it. By nominalizing the event it becomes a "commandment" that speaks to us "from the heights of the authority granted it."²⁷ To be sure, the authority granted is not a transcendental authority; it comes from the subject who remains faithful, or from the obscure or indifferent subject who tries to efface or ignore the consequences of the statement. And thus the circularity: the greatness of the event is only great for those who adhere to it, who assume its consequences. How are we to know where Wagner's greatness really lies? Without criteria, the answer is simply, "Because I said so." If the faithful subject believes it, then, for the faithful it is so.

In the end, Badiou's analysis of Wagner is not unlike his reading of Adorno and the genre of the case of Wagner before him. He makes a tautology of his interlocutors, to find in them what needs to be found in order to make them intelligible in his terms. This is double-edged: on one hand, his opponents end up as interesting as Badiou's philosophy is; on the other hand, they end up as reductive.

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NOTES

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1. Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London: Verso, 2010), 55.

2. *Ibid.*, 56.

3. *Ibid.*, 31–32.

4. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 81.

5. Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 27, 31.

6. According to Badiou, the "commonsensical discourse" of difference, which I am reading as including Adorno's commonplace and contemporary themes, "has neither force nor

truth.” (Badiou, *Ethics*, 20.)

7. Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 57–58.

8. Theodor Adorno, “Wagner’s Relevance for Today,” in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 584–602.

9. *Ibid.*, 592. Emphasis added.

10. Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 76.

11. *Ibid.*, 89.

12. *Ibid.*, 133.

13. *Ibid.*, 106.

14. To substantiate this claim, I mention a few of their shared views: (1) Both bemoan the present-day state of Wagner productions, albeit Badiou spends more time discussing particularly successful stagings. (2) Both must find a way to affirm aspects of Wagner’s work that are not those of unity, closure, totality. (3) Both seek to revisit the kernel of Wagner’s work in order to save its truth content or truth procedure. “Redeeming the redeemer” requires distancing Wagner’s own views from his possibilities or “relevance” today. Adorno’s anti-intentionalism always appears in the guise of the truth content of artworks, which is historical in nature but not beholden to historicism. Badiou’s anti-intentionalism comes across whenever he mounts his defense in the Wagner case. Wagner needs to be “updated” or “brought back again using different means” (Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 129, 83). This updated Wagner is not to be confused with the historical Wagner: “We need to regard Wagner as someone who said something about high art that can be understood in a different way today from how he himself understood it, or in a different way from those who constructed ‘the case of Wagner’ understood it” (*ibid.*, 83). (4) Both see Wagner’s faults. For Adorno, there is no dissolving of Wagner’s conflation of true and false, which makes the problem of staging Wagner today acute. “His truth content and those elements that legitimate criticism has found questionable are mutually interdependent. The uncertainty with which a self-conscious performance practice approaches him is caused, not least of all, by the fact that there is no way around this interweaving of the true and false in his work” (Adorno, “Wagner’s Relevance,” 596). For Badiou’s side, the knotting of true and false appears in *Parsifal* as the indeterminacy of two kinds of ceremonies, the restoration of an old order and the innovation of a new procedure. “There is no clear distinction between restoration and innovation, or between nostalgia and the creation of something new” (Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 156). “The real conclusion of [*Parsifal*]” is that “making a choice between

restoration and innovation wasn’t an easy thing to do, and the decision between nostalgia and the creation of something new had to remain suspended” (*ibid.*, 157). (5) Both critique the claim that Wagner imposes a new myth on the masses, or uses opera to aestheticize politics, to employ Walter Benjamin’s phrase. Badiou notes that *Götterdämmerung* ends with humanity onstage after the gods have departed. Thus, “what is at stake is not a mythological assertion with a view towards creating a new myth . . . nor is it the reconfiguration of the German people or the totalization of the arts” (Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 129–30). Adorno argues that “Wagner makes the case for myth, but accuses it through his creation” (Adorno, “Wagner’s Relevance,” 590). The aesthetic presentation of myth exposes myth as *Schein*.

15. On the relation of ceremony to the event, see Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 159.

16. *Ibid.*, 158.

17. *Ibid.*, 155.

18. Badiou’s focus on ceremony reflects his reading of Mallarmé, whom Badiou holds in high esteem. He reads Mallarmé on the future ceremony as prolepses of his philosophy of the event. *Parsifal* is also read in Badiouian-Mallarméan terms, producing another displacement. Just as Adorno (and the Wagner case) had be recast in terms of the “ethics of difference,” *Parsifal* has to be recast in terms of Mallarmé’s *Livre* so that Badiou can deploy his standard set of philosophical operations. Mallarmé assures us that, in a ceremony of the future, magnificence will unfold (*ibid.*, 150). But that future ceremony can in no way be the prolongation of the failed contemporary ceremonies of (according to Mallarmé) the concert hall, the Catholic Mass, or politics. The only way to attain a new ceremony is to go beyond religion, to “sublate” it into a ceremony analogous to religion but that will in no way be religious. This Badiouian-Mallarméan project is also identified as Wagner’s project. Furthermore, it is recast in Badiou’s own language: “Can there be a ceremony of the generic? That is exactly what Mallarmé is talking about” (*ibid.*, 150).

19. *Ibid.*, 153.

20. *Ibid.*, 96.

21. Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge: Polity Press), 83–84.

22. Badiou, *Five Lessons*, 158. Emphasis added.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*, 159.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 130.

27. Badiou, *Second Manifesto*, 84.