

Wagnerian Redemption

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Teaching some Humanities to pre-seminarians, I have again chosen to introduce them to Richard Wagner, German composer of famous music-dramas, and one of the most interesting characters of modern times. Straddling most of the 19th century (1813–1883), he was certainly not the greatest man of his time, but he was surely its most comprehensive artist. For breadth and depth of his world-vision, he must rank alongside Dante and Shakespeare, but not for truth, because he held up the mirror to an age falling away from God. Here was his greatness, and his misery.

Here was his greatness, because there is no question that he had a real sense of the heights and depths of man, crying out for religion. His misery lay in the fact that he came up with a non-religious solution to that religious need. However his substitute solution has been enormously popular to this day, precisely because he seems to satisfy that religious need while leaving the real God, as modern man wishes, out of the picture. Hence the veritable cult of Wagner by “Wagnerians,” for whom his music-dramas can act as a substitute religion.

What is that solution of his? Basically, the redemption of a fallen world by love between man and woman. In each of the four great works of his maturity, “The Ring,” “Tristan and Isolde,” “The Mastersingers” and (with a slight variation) “Parsifal,” the basic plot is the same. Up against, primarily, a social structure and authority unable to adapt and therefore stranded in unreality, and up against, secondarily, a kind of underworld also resisting, there arises a hero to love and win a heroine, united with whom in redemptive love he brings about a revolution which, through their love, rescues society and restores reality.

In other words, the authority figure or figures are

ineffective and, if not themselves villains, at least seconded by villains, whereas if only the boy can find his girl, he and she will make everything happy ever after. Does anyone recognize the formula of numberless Hollywood films? Of course a good wife is a tower of strength to her husband and children (see Proverbs Chapter 31), but to rest the salvation of the world upon her shoulders is asking altogether too much – how long are households patterned primarily on Hollywood apt to last? Often not long.

Of course Wagner is not the sole source of Hollywood plots, but he is the main origin of a mass of its sub-Wagnerian music, and there is no denying the huge influence of that music and of Wagner's mythology on modern times. Boys and girls, take heed. Wagner is a great musician, but there is no substitute for the true God. People in authority are not automatically antiquated, or villains; and neither of you is the complete solution to the other's problems. You both need Our Lord Jesus Christ and the fullness of his Catholic Truth, and his sacraments.

Kyrie eleison.