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Dragana Jeremić-Molnar, Aleksandar Molnar:
MIT, IDEOLOGIJA I MISTERIJA U TETRALOGIJI RIHARDA VAGNERA:
PRSTEN NIBELUNGA I PARSIFAL

*(Myth, Ideology And Mystery In Richard Wagner's Tetralogy:
The Ring Of The Nibelung And Parsifal)*
Belgrade, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2004, pp. 476
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The book *Mit, ideologija i misterija u tetralogiji Riharda Vagnera: Prsten Nibelunga i Parsifal* is the first study dedicated to Richard Wagner in the Serbian language. Coauthored by young musicologist Dragana Jeremić-Molnar, MA, and sociologist Aleksandar Molnar, PhD, this is a very complex and layered text based on an intricate network of musicological, theatrological, philosophical, esthetical, poetical and theoretical sources.¹ As the authors drew mainly from archival material (sources), the result is a provocative, critically and polemically shaped scientific discourse, not only compared to Wagner's art itself and the outlook that was often enough controversially exemplified through that art, but also in relation to numerous and diverse interpretations and readings of works by this creator.

The authors focused their research on Wagner's versatile artistic, political and theoretical activities on a utopian project of the world's regeneration, on identifying "the potential of Wagner's tetralogy to morally affect the audience" through the interaction of its mythological, ideological and mystery factors and conceived the book in accordance with the task thus set. Although the said contentual components of the tetralogy were designed as respective bases for three extensive parts of the book, they are interconnected throughout the study: the authors apostrophize the dialectic of myth and ideology as a "vital nerve" of Wagner's tetralogy, the music text as compensation for the progressive loss of clarity of its mythical-ideological component, and the introduction of mystery into the tetralogy's network of contents as Wagner's escape from his own confrontation with the decline of expressive powers of (absolute) music and as a result of his desire to intensify "the religious charge and religious (self)intelligibility of the entire tetralogy". By consistently layering and interweaving specific questions relative to three fundamental problematic planes of the study, the text was shaped gradationally, and it is only in the final chapter that the ultimate social and political consequences of their (inter)actions are revealed. At the end of the book there are two supplements mentioning the fundamental factors of the tetralogy, analyzed on the example of fragments of the drama *Achilles* and the music drama *The Mastersingers* – followed, after the usual listing of references and illustrations, by very useful indexes of names, characters from mythology and works of art, and by a subject index.

¹ The impressively extensive bibliography (521 entries) includes works written from 1832 to 2004.

What is particularly important for understanding the study of Dragana Jeremić-Molnar and Aleksandar Molnar is the introduction. By comparing Wagner's tetralogy with the Dionysian – as the artist's direct model for the dramatic treatment of myth and its structuring, and contrary to available interpretations of the relationship between Wagner's tetralogy as the “modern equivalent” of the most significant antique dramatic form and the form itself, the introduction explains the mythological and ideological reasons for adding the music drama *Parsifal* to the tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*. In other words, the reader is challenged, already on the first pages of the text, to make not only a formal-structural, but also a fundamental extension of Wagner's *magnum opus* and to approach it in an unconventional, different, and indeed, new way.

On the initial basis so established, three main segments of the study are developed. The part *Teatrološka obrada mita (A Theatrical Treatment of Myth)* examines the relationships between antique dramatic heritage and its revival in Wagner's creative-theoretical project (subchapters *Dionisijska tetralogija /Dionysian Tetralogy/* and *Vagnerova tetralogija /Wagner's Tetralogy/*). Therefore, the authors first analyze the antique model – functionally delimited by two important coordinates (by its thematic foundation in myth and by reasons for canonizing a seemingly incomprehensible combination of three tragedies and a satiric dance into a composite form), and then its 19th-century reception, instigated by Johann Gustav Droysen's translation of Aeschylus's works (1832). The complexity of Wagner's views of antique dramatic tradition and its mythical basis is explored from three main angles: from the standpoint of the composer's (self)positioning in the world of myths and in the process of mythologizing political reality by accentuating a dialectic between the German people as “the principal creative subject” of myth and “the great spirit” (Wagner himself); from the viewpoint of the manifold problems he was facing while adopting the tradition of Dionysian tetralogy; by considering the implications of such an action for the thematic and formal components of the tetralogy and its genre determination.

The second part of the study (*Ideološke metamorfoze Vagnerove tetralogije /Ideological Metamorphoses of Wagner's Tetralogy/*) is dedicated, it seems, to the most intricate layer of Wagner's work. For, during the twenty-six years of writing the tetralogy (1848-76), Wagner was exposed to numerous vital, political and intellectual influences that marked, in different ways and with different intensity, his work on *The Ring of the Nibelung* and *Parsifal*. According to four basic ideological influences on Wagner's thought and, consequently, four main ideological layers of the tetralogy (optimistic vitalism, anarchistic nihilism, pessimistic quietism and militant anti-Semitism),² the second part of the study explicates the genesis and transformations of the composer's ideological orientations, as well as their impact on the treatment of mythic material. In this chapter, the authors interconnect complex

² Authoritarian nationalism, to which Wagner became inclined in his later days, did not manifest itself in the tetralogy.

semantic layers and details of literary text with dominant metatexts of German culture in the second half of the 19th century. Thus, they point to a significant (and semantic) difference between the composer's initial intentions (at the beginning of work on *Siegfried's Death*) and the ultimate, somewhat tangled, outcome of a quarter of a century of work which then ensued; in other words, the causes – which were at first entirely unplanned by Wagner – of expanding the original text and the changes he made in it, actuated by turnabouts in his ideological views.

The third part of the study (*Muzika misterije /The Music of Mystery/*) examines the role of music in the mysteries of Wagner's tetralogy. The authors designate dramatic characters (choir and singers) and instrumental accompaniment as the main "music agents" of music's mystery effect. Having chronologically surveyed the role and importance of the said music agents, first in Dionysian mysteries and then in the development of opera (as an attempt to restore the antique tragic model) as far as Wagner's tetralogy, and, finally, in the tetralogy itself, the writers of this book explore the discursive powers of the medium of operatic music and music (tonal) content itself. Wagner's attitude to choral singing as an agent of the mystery effect is thus analyzed in the double key of musical effect: (1) by elucidating the initially progressive weakening of Wagner's belief in the possibilities of the effect of choir in music drama (from early operas to his realization of the limitations of the powers of /absolute instrumental/ music at the end of *The Twilight of the Gods*) and the subsequent turnabout (in *Parsifal*) thereof and (2) by explaining Wagner's idea of "the original tonal structure of folk song" as an ideal of sonority of a choral ensemble in opera. The mysterious powers of (absolute) music are examined similarly: (1) by distinguishing between esthetical-metaphysical and compositional-empirical notions of music in profiling its relationship to drama and (2) by pointing out the implications of a consistent leitmotivic structuring of both instrumental and vocal ("infinitely melodized") parts for the power of music to achieve (in both of the mentioned forms) the intended effect. In addition to the previously mentioned mythological-ideological arguments, this chapter also offers a musical (sonic) argument for the necessity of incorporating *Parsifal* into the tetralogy which, after all, was crucial to determining its mystery effect: bearing in mind the semantic opacity of the instrumental choir at the end of *The Twilight of the Gods*, "in his last work... Wagner continued to search for a music that *leads to the world of essences*." First he touched the doors to that sacred world with two "unsuccessful mysteries" in act 3 of *The Valkyrie*, and then he opened them by introducing two mysteries into the music-dramatic flow of *Parsifal*, thus solving the problem of uniting choral and instrumental media into a joint mystery performance, which had been posed long before. However, as the authors conclude, "the second mystery of *Parsifal* proves to be... the final mystery": in it the dead god Votan is "*reborn* in keeping with new (anti-Semitic) requirements of the modern epoch". The end result of interaction of mythological-ideological-mystery factors is revealed, as suggested at the beginning of this review, in the same way: "Wagner's tetralogy has become a first-class medium through processes of de-Christianizing the modern German elite and stimulating its... susceptibility to mythic messages of *purely human essence*."

With their study *Mit, ideologija i misterija u tetralogiji Riharda Vagnera: Prsten Nibelunga i Parsifal*, Dragana Jeremić-Molnar, MA, and Aleksandar Molnar, PhD, have offered an interpretation which, although “not aspiring toward exclusive correctness and completeness”, certainly occupies an exclusive position in Serbian scientific circles. This study deserves the special and equally serious attention of the readers, not only for being the first Serbian-language book about this great composer, but also for its broad and systematic insight into Wagner’s rich, controversial and provocative work (and activity).

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac