

Passion or Fashion? British Female Wagnerites ‘Out and About’ Around 1900

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In 1897, Miss Gertrude Hudson, writing under the pseudonym ‘Israfel Mondego’, asked ‘Is Wagner a passion or a fashion?’ The question arose in a humorous reflection entitled ‘Buggins at Bayreuth’, written from the standpoint of an assumed male identity and included in a volume of essays entitled *Impossibilities – Fantasias* (see right; the essay is reprinted in full on page 40).¹ From a convenient window onto the Bürgerreuther Strasse, Hudson observed the daily procession to the shrine of the Festspielhaus, and concluded that typical ‘Wagnerians’ were not just attractive pensive youths and egotistical male music critics but predominantly females of mixed nationalities. Paying attention to appearance and style, she conjured up a scene of ‘a fair sprinkling of large Teutons in squash hats and spectacles’, along with ‘most charming and quaintly attired’ ladies with ‘hair worthy of some attention’. ‘Thank Heaven!’ she added, ‘there were a few pretty girls, musical students for the most part, I should think.’² Israfel noted the collective air of solemnity and paradoxically linked the self-conscious earnestness to the devotees’ acceptance of Siegfried’s famous Act III confusion. ‘When Siegfried, who had never set eyes on woman, mistook Brünnhilde for his mother – a very pardonable supposition under the staged circumstances – no one smiled.’



Feminising Wagnerites

Hudson went on to ally herself not with such ‘Wagnerians’ as with the ‘Wagnerites’, a less sympathetic term which she used immediately after referencing Max Nordau’s opinion from his widely read critique of contemporary culture, *Degeneration* (1892; English edition 1895). She cited Nordau’s claim that ‘the dark auditorium’ was ‘Bayreuth’s chief attraction to the average being’, continuing self-deprecatingly, ‘For we Wagnerites are mostly of an uncertain age, and not as lithe as we might

¹ Israfel Mondego (Gertrude Hudson), *Impossibilities – Fantasias* (London, 1897).

² *Ibid.*, 44–5.



Aubrey Beardsley's pen-and-ink drawing 'The Wagnerites', published in *The Yellow Book* in October 1894.

wish.³ Twisting Nordau's condemnation of Wagner followers as 'decadents' into a positive, she commented further that this did 'not preclude Erotomania', implying a connection contemporary readers would likely have made to British artist Aubrey Beardsley's recently published drawing 'The Wagnerites' from the magazine *The Yellow Book* in her evocation of the scene, a response to the subject which relates to the query, whether 'passion or fashion', and suggests, perhaps, both (see left).⁴

According to Hudson, the largely female audience was prevented from responding erotically by being crammed into the theatre in a way that restricted behaviour to certain social conventions (a reference to the strict expectations of the Bayreuth Festival Theatre): 'And we are severely arranged in tiers, decorous as sardines.'⁵ Hudson's account also interpreted

what went on in the intervals as part of a performance. Exiting the theatre presented the opportunity for 'us' 'to study each other in the open space around the theatre'. Hudson was very clear to separate herself out from those with knowledge and from musical critics; she is on the side of idealism and against facts, proud to be 'Wagnerian as the musical amateur alone can be' and notes that she was among 'sweet types' in the theatre who were hardly to be linked with 'the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley'.⁶ Also in 1897, another woman writer, Margaret Armour, the translator that year of the *Nibelungenlied* into English, had responded to Beardsley with an assessment that rec-

³ Ibid., 46.

⁴ This image is the dominant depiction around today of women experiencing Wagner at the *fin de siècle*, the period around 1900, and appears in every account of British Wagnerism, such as on the cover of Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford and New York, 2002). This has been the case for many decades. It featured for example as the front cover of the 1964 Dover reprint of George Bernard Shaw's influential *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring* (London, 1898), and now still sold in its fourth edition; this has solidified a new connection between those almost contemporaneously published texts unintended by Beardsley or Shaw.

⁵ Mondego, *Impossibilities* (note 1), 46.

⁶ Ibid., 52.

ognised his work as 'masterly', but disliked that 'certain grossness which revolts one even in his treatment of inanimate things' which 'gets free rein in his men and women, notably in those of *The Yellow Book* period'. He is a decadent, she confirmed, because he gloats upon ugliness 'and must add to it'.⁷

Over time, Beardsley's most relevant image has been read in several ways. Drawn from memory after his visit to the Paris Opéra in 1893, this probably was not intended as a celebration of deeply moved fans absorbed in the music, but was, more likely, a satire on women and the few effeminate males consumed by *Tristan und Isolde* – the opera named in the bottom right hand corner of the scene. Hudson's reference to the illustration suggests that she wanted to stress the negativity of the depiction, as did Armour. Are these eroticised women really prevented from indulging their passions by the context? Overwhelming sexual sensations appear rather to have stupefied these exhausted, if richly attired *femmes fatales* and enervated the token intellectual bald-headed male, feminised by implication of his location among them. A feminist reading, such as that of Brigid Brophy, is that the women are all 'collectively Isolde' and unashamedly, without embarrassment, 'gulping the love potion'!⁸

The effect of viewing Beardsley's women from behind in backless and décolleté gowns could also have linked them to prostitution, for contemporary viewers mindful of the long familiar trope of unaccompanied women in the theatre seemingly making themselves available for viewing, and perhaps more. Seeing some figures in profile and looking around also serves to bring the viewer of the drawing into the scene, suggesting that joining in might be an option. Emma Sutton comments that some of the attendees were perhaps more interested in the reactions of others at this site of 'erotic tension' than the stage action, which is not made visible by Beardsley. The name of the drawing confirms the emphasis on audience members who almost figure as performers. The opera title is situated rather carelessly like an abandoned programme fallen from a trembling hand. The participants appear to be older women – not innocent girls consuming the Wagnerian vision of idealised love – which consequently adds to the feeling that they are being mocked.⁹

Additionally, the large numbers of women out and about, socialising at opera, theatre and concerts, mostly unaccompanied, suggested a takeover of public culture that transformed theatres and concert halls into newly safe and even 'respectable' spaces. Henry Finck's interpretation of female presence as an aspect of the feminisation of musical culture exemplified this: 'I have been a musical critic for twenty years, and whenever I look about me in a concert-hall [...] the audience rarely includes more than four or five men to a hundred women.'¹⁰ That cultural moment of change in the context of the emancipation of 'new' women could also be another of Beardsley's targets. Overall, ambiguity may well be the point in keeping with the satirical spirit on which Beardsley was drawing, which Sutton has argued 'permits contradictory readings that

⁷ Margaret Armour, 'Aubrey Beardsley and the Decadents', *The Magazine of Art*, xx (January 1897), 10.

⁸ Brigid Brophy, *Black and White: A Portrait of Aubrey Beardsley* (London, 1968), 32.

⁹ Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley* (note 4), 99.

¹⁰ Henry T. Finck 'Woman's Conquest of Music', *The Musical Standard* 18 (30 Aug. 1902), 130.

either condemn or relish this form of Wagnerism', making this vision 'either a scathing critique' or 'an amused commentary on disjunction between audience and art-work'.¹¹

Moral concerns about Wagnerian encounters

Wagnerism had a particularly strong following in Britain by the 1890s.¹² The effects of Wagner's music on listeners was a topic of considerable debate there around 1900 and especially as enthusiasm became widespread among amateurs. Discussions about Wagner as either a rebel or an establishment figure developed his posthumous reputation. The musical press in England was full of commentary about the huge appeal of Wagner, but with arguments variously supporting and questioning whether attendance at performances showed genuine interest in the works. *The Musical Standard* declared 'every living musical person is a Wagnerian!'¹³ It reacted against an anti-Wagnerite critic from another paper who claimed that two-thirds of the audience observed at 'The Proms' were 'acting': 'the majority of those who profess worship are followers by fashion' as the 'Wagner cult' was about 'the keeping-up of appearance'.¹⁴ While audiences for Wagnerian opera, and wider consumers of Wagner's music in concert and chamber versions in various settings in Bayreuth and elsewhere, were not only female, nevertheless, concerns were frequently expressed about the consequences for women enthusiasts of overdoing such consumption.

Sociologist Michel Foucault suggested that overt exposure to sex was considered dangerous in the context of late-Victorian patriarchal society. In his theoretical revisioning of Victorianism in the mid-1970s, he overturned its ingrained reputation for uncomplicated prudishness with his 'repressive hypothesis'.¹⁵ His argument, which has been extremely influential on reassessment of 19th-century women's lives and other cultural dimensions of western industrialised society, was that attempts to control sexuality by suppression actually evinced obsession. This double-bind defined the nature and role of sex as a secret that everyone knew to be present, for example, in Nordau's *Degeneration*. That exhaustive study, which appeared in English in the year of Oscar Wilde's trial, detailed everything Nordau considered wrong with contemporary life and contained numerous references to the perceived degeneracy present in erotic works of art. Yet the book was ostensibly quite reluctant to discuss eroticism. Nordau even wrote in a footnote to the section on 'the Richard Wagner cult': 'I dwell [...] on principle as little as possible on this subject' which echoed an earlier footnote that this 'delicate subject' was unsuitable 'in a book intended primarily for the general educated reader'.¹⁶ In fact, Nordau was quite explicit by implication about his opinion of effects Wagner could have on women, ironically twisting a negative into a false positive and suggesting that the men in charge of such women be on the alert:

¹¹ Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley* (note 4), 99–100.

¹² Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English* (London, 1979).

¹³ Anon., 'Our Contemporaries: Unfair to Music Lovers', *The Musical Standard* 22 (10 Sep. 1904), 169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 168–9.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Vol. 1), transl. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth, 1976).

¹⁶ Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London, 1895), 182 and 168.

How unperverted must wives and daughters be when they are in a state of mind to witness these pieces without blushing crimson, and sinking into the earth for shame! How innocent must even husbands and fathers be who allow their womankind to go to these representations of 'lupanar' incidents!¹⁷

In that wider context which constructed Wagner enthusiasm as a social 'problem', even 'mania', erotic response to the music-dramas was presented, at least outwardly, as controllable. In a book of essays *Affirmations*, published in 1898, a particularly evocative example of this was provided by the philosopher and sexologist Havelock Ellis, writing under the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche, who consistently associated Wagnerism with feminine consumption.¹⁸ Both fear and a sense of the internal exultation of embodied psychological release are represented in Ellis's proposal that Wagner opera might operate as a form of sex education for the young. His notion that modern art can compensate for the loss of past ritual exemplifies Foucault's reading that erotic arts offered a means for the release of inhibition:

We have lost the orgy, but in its place we have art. Our respectable matrons no longer send out their daughters with torches at midnight into the woods and among the hills, where dancing and wine and blood may lash into their flesh the knowledge of the mysteries of life, but they take them to *Tristan*, and are fortunately unable to see into those carefully brought-up young souls on such occasions.¹⁹

Ellis's response is not dissimilar to that observed and recorded by Wagner himself concerning reactions to the overture to *Tannhäuser* decades earlier, which suggests there was acceptance without question that Wagner's music overwhelmed women's emotions and effected unruly physical response: 'They had to resort to sobbing and crying [...] only after this sorrow had given vent to itself in tears came the comfort of the greatest, most exuberant joy.'²⁰

George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* also appeared in 1898 and was influential in the way it politicised both Wagner's works and the fellowship of followers. The emphasis Wagner placed on women as strong characters was important to Shaw, who saw these heroines as role models and encouraged women to adopt them, for example, saying: 'Let me assume for a moment that you are a young and good-looking woman. Try to imagine yourself in that character [...]'²¹ A few pages later the Rhinemaidens – 'thoughtless, elemental only half real things' – are compared to 'modern young ladies'.²² But his guide seemed targeted at educating gentlemen. Shaw suggested exclu-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 181. Reference is being made to the Lupanar of Pompeii, which is the ruins of a brothel. This remark is quite similar to the moralising caution expressed by Luise Buchner quoted by Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner's Women* (Rochester, NY and Woodbridge, 2011), 6.

¹⁸ Havelock Ellis, *Affirmations* (London, 1898). Here, Ellis is drawing upon early Nietzschean ideas. Whereas Ellis suggested the value of Wagner for the sex education of the young, Nietzsche came to see Wagner's relationship to femininity as suspect. Laurence Dreyfus, *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (London and Cambridge MA, 2010), 123 discusses Nietzsche's subsequent volte-face to see 'Wagner's erotics' as embodying an 'enfeebling' message. See also Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley* (note 4), 95–6.

¹⁹ Ellis, *Affirmations* (note 18), 115.

²⁰ Cited and discussed by Rieger (note 17), 7.

²¹ Shaw, *Perfect Wagnerite* (note 4), 17.

²² *Ibid.*, 20.

sion from the category of 'true Wagnerian' anyone who may be so devoted 'merely as a dog is devoted to his master [...] reverencing his [Wagner's] superiority without understanding it', such as the 'ordinary citizen [...] visiting the theatre to satisfy his curiosity or his desire to be in the fashion'. This is stated in 'Preliminary Encouragements', where the anticipated reader is explicitly referred to as male, but also as joining an 'inner ring of superior persons'.²³ Six months before Shaw's booklet was published, the English critic Vernon Blackburn had included an account of the attraction of *Parsifal* in his 'appreciations', which identified women's Wagner passion as stronger than men's. Blackburn distinguished between 'many men' and 'all women' in discussing the 'worship' and 'adoration' of Wagner.²⁴

In his concluding pages, Shaw repeated the contrast he perceived between 'earnest disciples' or 'idle globe-trotting tourists' and actually blamed a certain category of women, specifically 'energetic subscription-hunting ladies', for encouraging tourism.²⁵ Judging from this text, it seems women could only become perfect Wagnerites in learning from aspects of the behaviour of female characters, so long as they did not ape the dress sense and hairstyles that Shaw condemned. Furthermore, Shaw's socialist agenda expressed itself in frustration that the 'only qualification required from the visitor is money'. Perhaps when he explained how Londoners were pricing out the local folk 'on whose behalf Wagner turned out in 1849', making the Festival Playhouse 'less Wagnerian in its character than Hampton Court Palace', and the summer theatre 'of the highest class', he was commenting on the 'women of means' travelling to Bayreuth in large numbers.²⁶

Clarifying the meaning of characteristics assigned to the identities of both passionate and fashionable Wagnerians as depicted in literary, philosophical and artistic representations depends on understanding the perspectives and personalities of those authors and artists. Attention needs to be paid to their social position and life experience, and their editorial power to influence understanding of the construction and perpetuation of stereotypes and permutations of the female as listener, audience member, tourist and fan.²⁷ Investigating attitudes in a diversity of texts helps unravel the nature of the cultural construction of Wagnerism and helps tease out paradoxes present in established familiar representations which have contributed to the manufacture of its history. The selection of evidence of the nature of British women's engagement which follows, questions the dominance of those male-authored representations which tend to be recycled as typical Wagneriana by presenting a counterbalance to build knowledge of women's perspectives and contributions.

Feminine passion as fashion

Observations of audiences reported in reviews and news articles, memoir, travel literature and arts journalism can offer authentic impressions, but are not necessarily

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ Vernon Blackburn, *The Fringe of An Art: Appreciations in Music* (London, 1898), 159.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 133–4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 134–5.

²⁷ Beardsley was a co-founder of *The Yellow Book* in which 'The Wagnerites' appeared and therefore had editorial influence there.

unbiased or straightforwardly documentary. Such sources convey Wagner fandom colourfully as present experience not past history. They also confirm subjective aspects such as awareness of tradition, perceived connections to other worlds and feelings of independence and liberation. Glamour, prejudice, humour, psychological identification and desire for freedom unfold from re-reading accounts of experience in popular and specialist print sources. These can also be read to illustrate how the collective cultural discourse operated performatively to both reflect and to shape the Wagnerian experience, even for those who were not personally able to access live performances.

Alex Ross has recently produced a comprehensive study of Wagnerism,²⁸ billed as a journey of discovery which traverses a very wide range of sources across disciplines, builds on existing research on the phenomenon²⁹ but highlights alternative Wagnerisms, including feminist ones. With respect to women's engagement, Ross has observed how men appeared to 'need to reduce Wagner's women to purely sexual creatures' commenting that 'male writers were mesmerized by the spectacle of female Wagnerism, believing that it revealed something essential about the state of womanhood'.³⁰ Although Ross appears only to focus one per cent of his book specifically on 'Women and Wagner', female experience actually permeates much of the Wagner reception he selects, over an approximately seventy-year timespan. He is particularly intrigued by the notion, expressed in a range of primary and secondary literature, that women might understand Wagner better than men, that beyond 'the realm of male reverie, women made Wagner their own'.³¹

One area in which much research has already occurred into the roles and representations of women, and on which Ross draws, is the analysis of Wagnerian opera as a trope and stylistic device in literature.³² In the spirit of *Gesamtkunst*, Wagner's works inspired much creative elaboration and subjective readings that are present in all types of writing, especially imaginative literature.³³ This has received a lot of critical

²⁸ Alex Ross, *Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music* (London, 2020). This was reviewed by Heath Lees in *The Wagner Journal*, xiv/3 (Nov. 2020), 72–9.

²⁹ Particularly, David Large and William Weber, eds, *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics* (Ithaca, NY 1984).

³⁰ Ross, *Wagnerism* (note 28), 288 and 286.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 288. It is important to note that although Ross does not ignore the origins or cultural location of any sources in identifying experiences, British and North American literary references are mingled with those from other national contexts in his frame of reference. Additional to detailed end notes (which relate by page and not by number to his quotations), and separate to the published book, is a lengthy essay annotating bibliographic sources to stimulate further research: <https://alexrossmusic.typepad.com/WagnerismBibliography.pdf> (accessed on 21 July 2021). Ross acknowledges his work as an impetus to further study. Tracking who was known in which circles and what was read where could more closely identify commonalities and underline differences in cultural experience and resulting social significance. Several other American scholars have looked in depth into North American musical society and women's roles and participation, notably, Joseph Horowitz and Marian Wilson Kimber. Emma Sutton's work continues to be an excellent source for understanding women's roles in British Wagnerism.

³² See for example: Raymond Furness, *Wagner and Literature* (Manchester, 1982) and Michael Allis, 'Wagner and Literature: New Directions', Special Issue, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 1/4 (2014).

³³ Rieger draws attention to the fact that in Wagner's oeuvre 'both his writing and his music' are 'suffused with subjective experience and influenced by it': Rieger, *Wagner's Women* (note 17), 2.

attention because women responding to Wagner featured prominently in many story-lines and because many women novelists were attracted to the topic.³⁴ Sutton's work on Virginia Woolf has traced inspiration from specific Wagner operas into particular novels and she has analysed the texts as also critiquing Wagner's works as well as representing them.³⁵

Fictionalisation is revealing of the ideological constructs of the time and a valuable source to trace influence from Wagner; it may tap into authentic experience but it is creatively reshaped to serve the purpose of the story. Laurence Dreyfus has argued that listeners invested 'their most intimate desires and private suffering' in the 'love-sick artist' dimension of high Romanticism perceived in Wagner's 'erotics'.³⁶ This is certainly a core aspect of women's experience reflected in Wagnerian-inspired storytelling. Dreyfus also emphasises how essential it is to take note of the discourse offering 'extended representations of erotic stimulation, passionate ecstasy, and the torment of love' which he believes is suppressed in much academic writing.³⁷ Romantic literature offers a direct route to this kind of expression, but it is also present in some of the critical responses by women, such as the philosophical prose writings of Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), who also wrote short stories. A writer not considered a musical expert by the definition of her day, Lee was nonetheless highly motivated to investigate the nature of women's passion through her work on psychological aesthetics.

Determining the extent to which British women, such as Lee, were instrumental in shaping the nature of Wagnerism involves biographical research into the life experiences of actual women that recognises women's work was frequently limited by an exclusionary context and the study of sub-textual personal commentary within female-authored writing, such as critical aesthetic responses by women writing about themselves and their experience and about those of other women. Judicious use of reviews of books and accounts by men are also useful for recovering women's activities. The presence and popularity of Wagner among female opera-goers can also be investigated further in material evidence concerned with travel and tourism, the conditions for consumption and material products such as gifts, guidebooks and commentaries.



Vernon Lee
(drawing by Sargent).

³⁴ Ross deals extensively with Wagnerian fan fiction especially that which was entertaining. A recent article by Crescent Rainwater analyses one novel from 1896 by a populist writer not mentioned by Ross. 'Netta Styrett, Nobody's Fault, and Female Decadence: The Story of a Wagnerite' (*Journal of Victorian Culture* xxv/2 (2020), 185–99) offers a new angle, showing how women writers were able to do more than appeal to popular taste by producing salacious Wagnerian-inspired plots. Rainwater argues that women writers were able to use Wagner's music to support fashioning a female decadence that challenged misogyny based on their experience of consuming the actual music in public concerts and participating in elite culture.

³⁵ Emma Sutton, *Virginia Woolf and Classical Music: Politics, Aesthetics, Form* (Edinburgh, 2014).

³⁶ Dreyfus, *Erotic Impulse* (note 18), 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

The lure of Bayreuth

Wagner tourism and its associated industries became a social process that connected 'personal memories with shared identities'.³⁸ The journey to Bayreuth was a rite of passage for many types of tourists. Some regarded themselves as following in the footsteps of the original 'friends of the arts': those whom Wagner had called his 'Freunde' were in fact artistic supporters whom he considered as 'independent-minded men and women who display an aristocracy of taste that separates them from the mainstream'.³⁹ Travelling to Bayreuth was an experience taken very seriously and was extremely meaningful to many, whether first-time visitors on a rite-of-passage induction, frequent traveller-tourists or those identified as 'passionate pilgrims'. It was the tourists themselves who gave meaning to their activities even when participating in the performance of established roles and joining in with organised events that constructed what was fashionable.

There were many reasons for going. 'Any account of the Festival which omits to mention the social side is in reality no account at all, or at best a half account' reported *The Monthly Musical Record* in 1897: '[...] it is not for the performances that one goes to Bayreuth'.⁴⁰ Critic John Runciman described Bayreuth as 'the vogue, the craze of the hour' and commented how the English were 'rushing there': 'they think everything they hear and see there unapproachably fine'.⁴¹ Ross briefly covers women at Bayreuth with an emphasis on the American experience, but notes two informative points relevant to the British. Young women made 'expeditions' in groups and were particularly encouraged to see *Parsifal* because its Christian angle was considered 'morally improving' and promoted as such. In support of travel-planning, Ross quotes the British writer R. Milner Barry and her 'plain and unvarnished recital of our adventures, in the hope that it may prove useful to other unprotected females desirous of hearing Wagner's operas performed to perfection in Bayreuth'.⁴²

Grim humour pervaded accounts by male journalists confronted by groups of women at large, who, seen en masse, were rather threatening in their joyful independence. Praised as coming from a 'born humorist', G. W. Steevens's remarks on Bayreuth from *Things Seen: Impressions of Men, Cities, and Books* (1900) are extracted by an anonymous reviewer in *The Musical Standard* who was presumably male, due to the focus on questionable female behaviour and the impressions of men's fashions.⁴³ Because this was a review of a book, two writers were involved and so the misogyny is strengthened as the emphasis is doubled. In spite of this, there is valuable information here about what women were doing out and about.

³⁸ Leonieke Bolderman and Stijn Reijnders, 'Have you found what you're looking for? Analysing tourist experiences of Wagner's Bayreuth, ABBA's Stockholm and U2's Dublin', *Tourist Studies*, xvii/2 (2017), 166.

³⁹ Nicholas Vazsonyi, *Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand* (Cambridge, 2010), 129.

⁴⁰ Italianophile, 'At Bayreuth. [From our special correspondent.]', *Monthly Musical Record* 27 (1 Sep. 1897), 201.

⁴¹ John F. Runciman, 'The Bayreuth Pilgrimage', *The Saturday Review* 82 (8 Aug. 1896), 134.

⁴² Ross, *Wagnerism* (note 28), 289.

⁴³ Anon, 'Steevens on Wagner', *The Musical Standard* xiv (14 Jul. 1900), 28.

Steevens's starting point that 'Four girls and a woman to one elderly and weary looking man was the proportion' leads to extracts from impressions that are highly disparaging for instance of those women enjoying the hospitality of the town: 'In the aspect of most ladies there is something that rebukes me. There is a look of high purpose in their eye as they order lunch.' Preferring that Rhine wine is appreciated 'as if it came out of the Grail', he comments about 'one jolly red faced dame', who 'in a Jubilee ribbon' is clearly British, 'seems to feel that a country where you can get a pint of wine for a shilling is one that she has neglected too long': 'What is she doing in Bayreuth, I wonder?' Women offering musical opinions are treated no better, such as an 'earnest eyed young lady' who is reported to comment that the Good Friday music at the end of *Parsifal* is very pretty compared to the rest without 'very much tune in it'. Apparently more musically knowledgeable women cannot escape derision such as the far too numerous 'generally unmarried' type of English 'girl [...] twenty-five to thirty-five [...] with her accurate knowledge, and her impassive ways, and her prim pale face [...] with a kind of brain voice, an excellent voice to sneer in': 'She goes to the theatre and comes out saying "I wonder why Vogl can't attack his notes cleanly," and "Such a pity they made such a muddle of the 'Feuerzauber'." When she recognises a motive she labels it with its name in an audible whisper. She knows all the scenes by their Christian names, so to speak, and talks of "the Ritt" as if she went out shopping to it. She never laughs – only gives a sort of cough, half disdain, half pity.'⁴⁴

What would educated musical women readers of the magazine such as Gertrude Hudson, who was a contributor, have made of this review? Its impression of women tourists is similar to that of an article 'Bayreuth Types' from a few years earlier and has an equally exclusionary agenda. Yet, although it is noted as 'extraordinary how English girls will drink beer at Bayreuth' the liberation of women compared to a comment about their likely behaviour in London is actually recognised – 'I suppose in London they never think of drinking beer at all'. By commenting separately on a 'band of Englishwomen' of 'the "cathedral" type' – 'English girls' and 'British Wagnerians' from the invented location 'Huntingchester' – the author implies that only men can be 'Wagnerians'. The women are the only ones quoted discussing performance, but that is not enough to characterise them as Wagnerians. One of these is described as a 'female critic' who he observed was 'evidently considered an authority on musical matters'. 'Holding forth' as she 'ate some chocolate [...] "It is too much" said she, "it is too much [...]. *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* I like, but *Parsifal* is going too far'. The quotation is addressed to a man, but his description as 'evidently [...] not enjoying himself' and 'in the middle of a furtive yawn' puts her in her place, as does the mocking conclusion: 'Of course, he agreed.'⁴⁵

Hudson was a prodigious traveller who included music in all of her travel writings.⁴⁶ Her work exemplified how the passion for Wagner among women of a certain class was a sign of growing independence. It is not known whether she travelled

⁴⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁵ Anon, 'Bayreuth Types by One Who Has Seen Them', *The Musical Standard* 47 (18 Aug. 1894), 123.

⁴⁶ Margaret D. Stetz has discussed how Hudson mirrors and matches the arts she experienced in Britain with those overseas in *Worldwide Pre-Raphaelitism*, ed. Thomas J. Tobin (New York, 2005), 171–84.

dressed as a man or 'queered' her experience only in writing, adopting an apparently 'male' perspective and a gentlemanly narrative voice. Hudson included the tourist scene in writing of Bayreuth. On her 'daily pilgrimage' moving around the town she is particularly interested in 'the Wagner shops' and reports the purchase of 'a fine Rembrandtesque photo-gravure of the Master, and likewise a green statuette' plus a piano score of the complete *Ring*.⁴⁷ This experience led her to exclaim breathlessly:

Bayreuth is all given up to Wagner [...] Wagner! Wagner! Wagner! All the pictures in the shops are Wagner, and Wagner's artists, and Wagner's operas; all the books are Wagner, or about Wagner; all the music, of course, is Wagner; all conversation is Wagner, and all silence breathes – Wagner. Bayreuth is the finest example of the impression of a personality on a place that I know.⁴⁸

Music critic Marion Scott's 'A Woman's Notes on Bayreuth' written a few years earlier had introduced to readers the additional activity of a guided tour of the theatre about which she remarked how 'we imagined ourselves taking part in it all'. She also presented an educated woman's view of the Bayreuth performance of the *Ring* cycle favouring it against that from 'poor old Covent Garden last year' and made some detailed comparative points.⁴⁹

Several memoirs by society women referenced trips to Bayreuth in the company of other women. Hostess, philanthropist and political wife Lady Constance Battersea was careful to name-drop in reminiscing on 'Travels Abroad' in highlighting her 'first memorable visit to Bayreuth' in August 1892: 'I recall setting off in great spirits with my two very pleasant travelling companions, Marie de Rothschild and the present Lady Derby, then Lady Alice Stanley.'⁵⁰ Chris Walton has observed that women's passion for Wagner did not exclude feminists, who 'admired his female characters for both their agency and their frequent refusal to bow to convention'.⁵¹ Biographical studies drawing on letters, diaries and other evidence are a source for identifying such supporters as Millicent Garrett Fawcett, the feminist politician,⁵² and Annie Horniman, the theatrical pioneer, both of whom were visiting Bayreuth from the 1880s, with Horniman attending most summers until at least 1928. In August 1906 she cut a liberated figure, arriving there on a man's bicycle. She enjoyed the beer, meeting old friends and making new ones.⁵³ Horniman shared her Wagnerism regularly in correspondence with the Irish dramatist and poet W.B. Yeats.⁵⁴ Annie's brother, Emslie Horniman, gifted a 'Wagner girdle' (see overleaf) to his wife, Laura Plomer.

In 1901, L.G.M. (Lilian Grace Mary) Praeger recorded her audience observations, distinguishing different attitudes among the female Wagnerites. She noted disapprov-

⁴⁷ Mondego, *Impossibilities* (note 1), 51.

⁴⁸ Op. cit.

⁴⁹ M.S., 'A Woman's Notes on Bayreuth', *The Outlook* 4 (August 1899), 109.

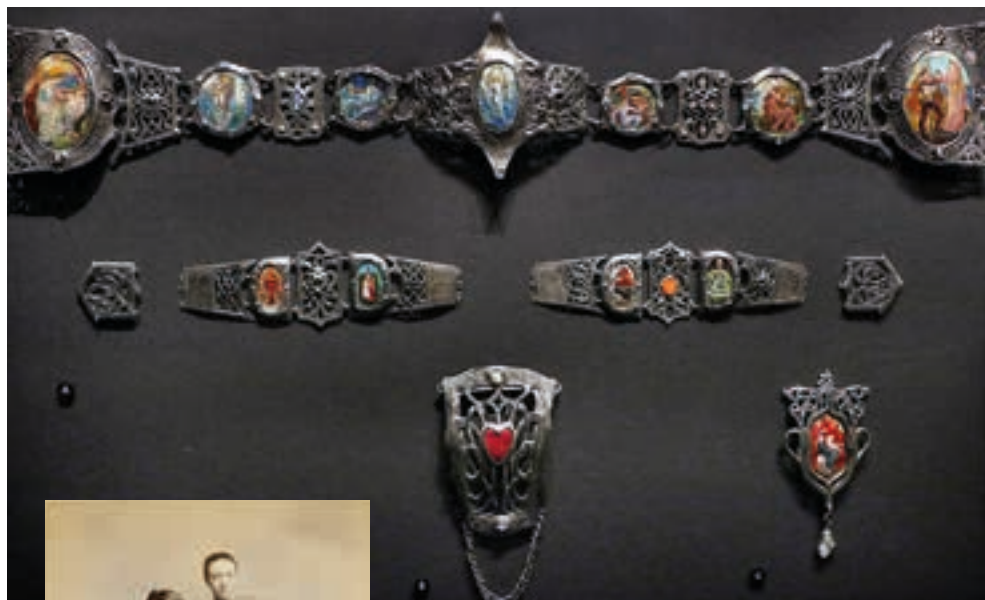
⁵⁰ Lady Constance Battersea, *Reminiscences* (London, 1922), 94.

⁵¹ Chris Walton, 'Gender and Sexuality', *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen*, ed. Mark Berry and Nicholas Vazsonyi (Cambridge 2020), 237.

⁵² David Rubinstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Garrett Fawcett* (London and New York, 1991), 77.

⁵³ Sheila Gooddie, *Annie Horniman: A Pioneer in the Theatre* (London, 1990), 94.

⁵⁴ William F. Blissett, 'George Moore and Literary Wagnerism', *George Moore's Mind and Art*, Graham Owens, ed. (Edinburgh, 1968), 64–5.



Above: The Wagner girdle: an elaborate ornamental belt made of small steel plaques inlaid with gold and precious stones showing scenes of the death of Tristan, Lohengrin, Siegmund and Sieglinde, the Rhinemaidens, Fafner, Tannhäuser, Tristan and Isolde with the love potion. It was specially made, with the additional pieces shown, between 1893 and 1896 by the London-based enameller Alexander Fisher. The Girdle is in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum. Photo Kotomi Yamamura

Left: Laura Plomer (on the floor) with the Horniman siblings c. 1880. Horniman Museum

ingly, to lady readers of *The Queen*, 'the prejudice shown by so many people to Wagner and all his works', and she asserted her authority in saying that she had attended 'sixty-nine representations at Bayreuth'. She added that 'each one as it came was a fresh and eloquent lesson in all that is pure and good and great'. Acknowledging that 'in so large and cosmopolitan an audience as that at Bayreuth, there are persons on whom the effect of the dramas varies considerably', Praeger praised a 'physically helpless' old lady, 'a great invalid' who was 'for several successive festivals present at every performance' with opera glasses 'mounted on a long stick'. Praeger formed the impression of an 'indomitable will'. This woman is contrasted with two others: 'a fashionably dressed lady and her daughter, obviously wealthy' who grew 'more and more visibly bored' throughout the *Ring* cycle. The mother is described as 'long suffering' and Praeger noted: 'Fortunately, people of this type seldom repeat the journey to Bayreuth.'⁵⁵

Having first experienced Wagner opera in London in her youth (the 1890s), and continuing to attend new productions regularly in London, Virginia Woolf finally

⁵⁵ L.G.M. Praeger, 'The Bayreuth Festival', *The Queen*, *The Lady's Newspaper* (10 Aug. 1901), 242.

visited Bayreuth in 1909 with her friend Saxon Sydney-Turner – ‘a fervent Wagnerian’, according to Quentin Bell. The visit is recorded in his biography of Woolf. They saw *Parsifal* and *Lohengrin*, but Bell described only her shopping. Instead of Wagner souvenirs, she bought ‘a penholder’ with a ‘good stiff nib’, and a parasol. He stated that the visit overall was quite a stressful social experience for her companions, as Woolf encountered ‘Germans who seemed to her distressingly ugly, old family friends from England whom she would rather not have met, lodgings and meals that aroused no enthusiasm’.⁵⁶ Woolf’s ‘Impressions at Bayreuth’ were published in the *Times* that month and written from the perspective of the amateur.⁵⁷ Seeming comfortable with that designation, she accepted the difficulty of attempting music criticism, which she described as being ‘in an ambiguous state’, noting ‘how little words can do to render music’. Woolf chose to use the third person plural as suiting the observational aspect of the piece. It may also signal a reluctance to reveal or an inability to disclose any more personal subjective response from the people among whom she found herself:

The seats in the great bare house in Bayreuth are packed with them; they have a secret belief that they understand as well as other people, although they seldom venture an opinion; and, at any rate, there is no doubt that they love music. If they hesitate to criticize, it is perhaps that they have not sufficient technical knowledge to fasten upon details; a criticism of the whole resolves itself into vague formulas, comparisons, and adjectives. Nevertheless, no one can doubt that the audience at Bayreuth, pilgrims many of them from distant lands, attend with all their power.⁵⁸

At home versus abroad

Discussion about the relative standards of Wagner concerts and productions abroad or at home featured regularly in the music media. The first Bayreuth Festival was in 1876, but it was reported that the standard was not very high. For British audiences, London was already established as a vital site for Wagnerian experience like the successful festival at the Royal Albert Hall in May 1877.⁵⁹

One of the attendees was Mary Gladstone, the musically cultured daughter of politician William and an early enthusiast, who had been attending available Wagner concerts since 1872; she commented how ‘enthusiasm on the whole [was] very great’.⁶⁰ Further to this there were productions of 1882 and the Covent Garden ‘Wagner Nights’ of the 1890s. An anonymous author, described



Programme cover of the May 1877 Wagner Festival at the Royal Albert Hall.

⁵⁶ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols (London, 1972), i/148–9.

⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, ‘Impressions at Bayreuth’, *Books and Portraits: Some Further Selections from the Literary and Biographical Writings of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Mary Lyon (New York, 1981), 18–22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

⁵⁹ This was a series of orchestral and vocal concerts. Wagner made his third and final visit to London to conduct alongside Hans Richter.

⁶⁰ Phyllis Weliver, *Mary Gladstone and the Victorian Salon: Music, Literature, Liberalism* (Cambridge, 2017), 85.

as an anti-Wagnerite, and a father, reported on a Covent Garden Richter concert in 1893 and referred to his own daughters as 'Wagnerians': 'You have no idea how emotional these Wagnerians can be when you contradict them.' This source reveals how these young women were not only committed Wagnerites but instrumental in educating the author. In the light of his daughters' despair at his 'ignorance' in writing previously about *Tristan und Isolde* he recalled how they had made him learn the motifs of *Die Walküre* by heart before attending, and then tested him! His commentary on the performance is written as a message to his daughters, who accompanied him:

Brünnhilde is, I should think, the earliest example in the history of the world of the 'emancipated female'. The ties of paternal affection are as naught to her; she follows her own impulsive moods just as it suits her; and no doubt Wagner meant to show in her ultimate fate what punishment always follows on the heels of those who are disobedient to their parents. There is quite a refreshingly Miss-Edgworthian touch in this enforcement of the moral of obedience to elders, and I hope my daughters took the lesson to heart.

Unconverted and agitated that the 'whole story is immoral' and the 'dramatis personae [...] are not at all respectable', the author declared. 'The Lord Chamberlain ought to step in, if family life in England is to remain intact.'⁶¹

But by 1901, the reputation of Bayreuth had risen and Edward Baughan described performances there as more authentic due to its setting amid nature and declared the Covent Garden audiences 'artificial', with passions too 'exaggerated'.⁶² In the spirit of Baughan⁶³, Gertrude Hudson declared that 'Spring's Bayreuth is in Covent Garden', but yearned for the performance conducted by Felix Mottl she had seen in Bayreuth in preference to the London Richter production: 'I would rather spend my intervals between acts in the dark enchanted pine woods of Bavaria than in the Strand.'⁶⁴ The soprano Milka Ternina's voice gave her a hint of that longed-for setting in its 'full black-bird quality that suggests the pine forests and mountain streams of the real Bayreuth'.⁶⁵ In her 'Bayreuth in Autumn', Hudson again revelled in Bayreuth nostalgia, but suggested that as 'every flower of music-drama [...] has been successfully transplanted', there is 'really no reason why we should undertake a long and tedious journey when we can get the same music at home'.⁶⁶

Womanly appreciations

In his theoretical writings, Wagner stressed the collective nature of spectatorship. The audience experience was an essential part of how the *Gesamtkunstwerk* functioned.

⁶¹ Anon, "'Die Walküre": Our Anti-Wagnerite is Still Unconverted', *The Musical Standard* 45 (8 Jul. 1893), 25.

⁶² Edward A. Baughan, 'Some Reactions', *Monthly Musical Record* 31 (1 Aug. 1901), 368.

⁶³ I have written elsewhere suggesting that Hudson parodies E.A. Baughan quite directly in a number of articles. See: Charlotte Purkis, "'A theme with many variations": Gertrude Hudson, Musical Criticism and Turn-of-the-century Periodical Culture', *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1890s–1920s: The Modernist Period*, Faith Binckes and Carey Snyder, eds (Edinburgh, 2019), 78–91.

⁶⁴ Israfel, 'Bayreuth in Spring', *Musical Fantasies* (London, 1903), 195.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶⁶ Israfel, 'Bayreuth in Autumn', *Musical Fantasies* (note 64), 199.

In his study of sonic modernity, Sam Halliday expressed this intention built in to Wagner's works not just to 'depict or prescribe social cohesion' but to 'actually create it, in his audience'.⁶⁷ Distinct customs and practices developed, and spectators, such as those visiting Bayreuth, were intentionally unified by the egalitarian semicircular auditorium layout of the Festspielhaus. Such 'shared audition' as a collective experience which joined people 'together in listening communities' was supported by educational initiatives.⁶⁸ For many people, to be a true Wagnerite and to appreciate Wagner fully relied on the acquisition of prior knowledge. Education through the stimulation of appropriate 'appreciation' tools consequently grew in importance. It was required at least to appear to be well-informed. Guides and manuals proliferated as a means to bridge passion and fashion in the name of culture. British women were professionally active as translators and commentators. Annie Horniman assisted her friend William Ashton Ellis in his translation of Wagner's prose works and in editing *The Meister*.⁶⁹ Henrietta Corder translated libretti with her husband Frederick Corder, composer and conductor. Women made significant contributions to the supply of interpretative publications, as sole authors as well as working in collaboration with men. Reviewers were positive and unconcerned that the authors were female. This presented quite a different perspective from the negative press commentary about women as tourists and audience, suggesting that in the more specialist sphere of music appreciation women were accepted as significant contributors to Wagner culture.

Musical Opinion's special feature on Wagner books in 1906 praised the latest 'series of excellent small manuals by Miss A. Cleather and Mr. Basil Crump'. Comparison made with the many other Wagner manuals being 'steadily issued' stated how these 'come very well out of it'. Although 'dealing sparingly with "leading motives"' – seen as a negative – 'they combine biographical, historical and musical notes in a very felicitous manner' – a positive example of their 'discursive treatment' – which will satisfy many readers. The reviewer then referred to books by two other women that were well-established to supplement their volume on the *Ring*: Miss Weston 'on the legendary side' and Miss Winworth 'on the musical'.⁷⁰ Jessie L. Weston's work *The Legends of the Wagner Drama: Studies in Mythology* was out in time for the Bayreuth Festival in 1896 for the 20th anniversary of the *Ring*. Freda Winworth had intended her *The Epic of Sounds: An Elementary Interpretation of Wagner's Nibelungen Ring* to come out for the same occasion but publication was delayed to 1897. The *Musical Standard* reported subsequently that Winworth's book had been 'largely bought by visitors to Covent

⁶⁷ Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (Edinburgh, 2013), 78.

⁶⁸ Sophie Fuller and Lloyd Whitesell, eds, *Queer Episodes in Music and Modern Identity* (Illinois, 2008), 30.

⁶⁹ Sutton's *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (see note 4) was an important marker for historical recognition that 'a considerable proportion of Wagnerian scholarship [...] was by women', 94. *The Meister* was a journal produced by the English Wagner Society between 1888 and 1895, edited by William Ashton Ellis, assisted by Edgar Frederick Jacques. It specialised in articles about Wagner and in English translations of his writings, with performance reviews. Some issues were timed to come out on significant Wagner dates.

⁷⁰ R.J.D. 'Wagner: Books and Critics', *Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review* 29 (Aug. 1906), 824.

Garden',⁷¹ perhaps prompted by an excellent review in the *Musical Times*: 'It is just the kind of resumé that Wagnerian pilgrims to Bayreuth should put into their pockets; and those who stay at home will derive much information from Miss Winworth's succinct and lucid account of a complex work.'⁷²

The power and purpose of imperfect listening for emancipated women

Christian Thoreau's in-depth study of guides has concluded that 'the educational ambition of the Wagnerians acted as a catalyst for and a driving force of the explanatory movement'.⁷³ Types of appreciation were often being contrasted at the *fin de siècle*, for example, by Baughan, who in 1898 discussed the range of possible responses to the *Parsifal* prelude: 'The difference between the standpoint of popular and expert criticism is that one concerns itself only with the emotional content of the music and the other with the way in which that content is expressed.'⁷⁴ The relationship between this distinction and gender politics is also illuminated by new perceptions of the power of music breaking through in decadent women's writing.⁷⁵ In 19th-century discourse, women 'supposedly responded through immediate emotional experiences' and 'were said to allow the music to wash over them' in accordance with where femininity was considered to be situated 'on the passive side of the masculine–feminine dichotomy'.⁷⁶

It is too simplistic to construct female Wagnerites merely as followers of fashion who gave in, helplessly, to their passions. If women's involvement in Wagnerism is treated only as suspect, much is missed about the nature of Wagnerian reception around 1900. Vernon Lee expressed what it felt like to be exhausted from attending Wagner opera in 1911 and focused on her own perception in a state of 'exasperated lassitude'.⁷⁷ She sought to analyse 'emotional effects', potentially combining Baughan's 'content' and 'way' that it is expressed.⁷⁸ Describing herself as part of the 'semi-musical majority', and adding 'myself, yourself, ourselves' as a way of bonding with knowing readers, the 'passionate pilgrims' she had observed at Bayreuth, Lee went as far as to accuse Wagner of imprisoning his audience!⁷⁹ There is no way out except into one's own mind and its desires, which Lee seemed to avoid expressing in the first person to encourage the communal sharing of her subjectivity with that of the imagined others:

But there is no door for Wagner, or, like the door of the Bayreuth theatre, it is opened only at the end of the act. Attentive or inattentive, able to follow or not able to follow, your mind is imprisoned in that Wagner performance as in the dark auditorium,

⁷¹ *The Musical Standard* 9 (25 Jun. 1898), 403.

⁷² *The Musical Times* 38 (1 Sep. 1897), 619.

⁷³ Christian Thoreau, 'Guides for Wagnerites: Leitmotifs and Wagnerian Listening', *Richard Wagner and His World*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (Princeton, 2009), 143.

⁷⁴ Edward Baughan, 'The Deluge of Emotion', *The Monthly Musical Record* 28 (1 Jun. 1898), 126.

⁷⁵ See Emma Sutton "'Restless Mystical Ardours": decadence and music', *Decadence: A Literary History* ed. Alex Murray (Cambridge, 2020).

⁷⁶ Laurie McManus, *Brahms in the Priesthood of Art: Gender and Art Religion in the Nineteenth-Century German Musical Imagination* (Oxford, 2021), 54.

⁷⁷ Vernon Lee, 'The Religious and Moral Status of Wagner', *The Fortnightly Review* (May 1911), 89, 533 and 868–85.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 869.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 877 and 868.

and allowed to divagate from the music only to the stage; not the literal stage of indifferently-painted lath and pasteboard, with its stout, bewigged heroes and heroines brandishing spears and drinking horns, but the inviolable stage of your own emotions, secretly haunted by the vague ghosts of your own past and your own might have been, by the vaguer fatamorgana figures of your own scarce conscious hopes and desires.⁸⁰

Wagner has 'played havoc with our possibilities of musical attention'. His music 'is described as emotional by the laity, but above all things as "interesting" – which means in this case, the reverse of emotional – by musicians'.⁸¹

By means of this critical response, for Lee among others exploring the power of sound, Wagner's music had become a catalyst or 'medium of self-analysis'.⁸² It was able to function as object and subject. A few years earlier, Lee had discussed music's impact as 'states of violent feeling [...] all manner of mysteriously compounded, totally unsayable and unlocalizable tensions and relaxations, massive and diffuse sensations'. She was reviewing a selection of current books on aesthetics under the title 'The Riddle of Music'. Music, she suggested, is capable of producing an overwhelmed state of being. Having the capacity to 'stir our nerves and fill and flood the deepest seats of life'⁸³ it also 'speaks to many of us the secrets of our very heart and life, secrets which are the more precious that they are our own'.⁸⁴ In this review article Lee coined the term 'imperfect listening', defining a process which fostered an 'extremely personal' approach.⁸⁵

Lee continued to devote energies to solving the riddle of Wagner. From 1907 she distributed large numbers of questionnaires to seek to distinguish the perceptions of listeners from hearers. Listeners can seem 'musically passive' but may have very active 'fancies', as she put it years later in the 1932 book published from this research. *Music and Its Lovers* documented unique responses from individual spectators of Wagner opera.⁸⁶ By opening up the territory explored from confronting passion and fashion in this article I hope to have shown that women experienced Wagner in many different ways around 1900 and decided for themselves how his work was relevant. If many of these women were imperfect Wagnerites, it clearly left them open to being challenged, and changed, by their Wagnerism.



⁸⁰ Ibid., 877.

⁸¹ Ibid., 876.

⁸² Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville VA, 2003), 216.

⁸³ Vernon Lee, 'The Riddle of Music', *The Quarterly Review* 204 (January 1906), 214–5.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 216.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 226.

⁸⁶ Vernon Lee, *Music and Its Lovers: An Empirical Study of Emotion and Imaginative Responses to Music* (London, 1932), 149.