

Wagner and the Wind Quintet

Jeremy Polmear talks to Richard Blackford about his *Portrait of Hans Sachs*, featured on the CD 'Oboe Divas!'

Where are you with Wagner? Do you agree with Richard Blackford, the arranger of a 'Portrait of Hans Sachs' for wind quintet based on themes from *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, that "in musical terms he is the heaviest drug I know"? Or perhaps you are more with Rossini's attributed opinion that "Wagner has lovely moments but awful quarters of an hour" Whichever way you tend, read on - Richard's piece delivers the Wagnerian goods, and lasts less than ten minutes.



I asked Richard how it came about. "It was for Bernard Levin's 60th birthday. I was faced with the challenge of what to give the man who has everything." Richard had known the celebrated writer and critic for twenty years, and had written the music for three of his TV series. "He was a great Wagnerian, we had been to Bayreuth together. I knew *Meistersinger* was his favourite opera, and that he identified very much with the character of Hans Sachs."

Richard wrote the piece in three days ("I write a lot of film music, so I am used to writing on Thursday what I hear on Saturday"), got a group together from the Royal College of Music, positioned them behind a curtain in an alcove of the restaurant at the birthday celebration, and after the first course clinked a glass. The curtains opened, the quintet was performed, and all eyes were on Bernard Levin for his reaction. For once, the great wordsmith was floored. "Again," was all he said.

Bernard Levin died in 2004, and the quintet was played at his Memorial by members of the London Conchord Ensemble, including Emily Pailthorpe. Emily is featured on the latest CD I am producing on the Oboe Classics label, *Oboe Divas!*. The other Diva is Elaine Douvas, principal oboe at the New York Metropolitan Opera. In putting the CD together Emily and Elaine were looking for something to complement virtuoso arias and duets from operas by Handel, Delibes, Donizetti, Mozart, Rossini and Beethoven. Knowing that Elaine was doing a run of *Meistersinger* at the Met, Emily suggested that Elaine and the Met players should record it for the CD, which is how I first came across this remarkable work.

Remarkable, you might say, in that it exists at all. How can you possibly play Wagner's endless melodies and thick, dark scoring on a wind quintet? Richard wasn't daunted: "I knew I could only fit a small group into the restaurant. I wanted to feature the big vocal quintet in Act 3, so I checked to see if it could be played by five contrapuntal voices, and it could." But only if they all played most of the time. Richard achieves thick textures by thick scoring, so it's not surprising that his players commented that the piece was hard on both breathing and lips.

And the writing tends to be in the lower register, making it a tough quintet to perform successfully. Which the New York players do, and their version actually comes in two minutes longer than the 'official' eight and a half minutes of the piece. "I really like the

slower tempos,” said Richard. “It allows the music to breathe and expand, when you have performers of this calibre.” The players had just finished a run of *Meistersinger* when they recorded the piece, so maybe the ghost of conductor James Levine hovered over the session. And their ability to blend well is especially valuable in this kind of music. Specifically, Elaine Douvas’ oboe control, ensemble, sound, and musical shaping impress me more every time I listen to the track.



I asked Richard how much he had added to the material, and he modestly replied “It’s just Wagner, really.” What he has done is skilfully to re-order Wagner’s material (which the composer himself did all the time) to create the portrait of Hans Sachs. The music starts with a solo bass clarinet - Sachs himself, in all his nobility and humanity. (This is the only departure from a standard wind quintet line-up). Then comes Eva’s theme. She is the ‘prize’ in the Mastersinger’s song contest, and she is in danger of being won by the pedant Beckmesser (interrupting, on bassoon) at the expense of her true love Walther. We hear Walther’s competition song, rejected because it breaks too many of the Mastersinger’s rules of musical composition.

At one point Eva suggests that the older Sachs himself wins her, but he understands the rightness of the young lovers being together (Sachs’ compassion is included in the music), and he helps Walther to transform his song so that, while still breaking the rules, it wins out of sheer beauty; we hear it after the final moving vocal quintet.

However, there’s one thing that always bothers me about performing Wagner’s music - his anti-Semitism. I raised the matter with Richard. “No-one can dispute Wagner’s greatness, and his insight into the human psyche. He’s a paradox - you can’t reconcile his racism to his musical greatness.” This was a paradox Bernard Levin was willing to live with.

What has struck me about this remarkable quintet is the solidness and security of its sound-world, which previously I thought you had to add a piano to obtain. We have moved a long way from Malcolm Arnold’s *Three Shanties*, fine in its own way though that piece is. This quintet can provide a superb contrast of mood in a concert programme for any serious group. For example, on the *Oboe Divas!* CD it comes between a Handel Aria from his opera *Ariodante*, and a 19th Century ‘Duo Brilliant’ on themes from Rossini’s *William Tell*.



The quintet also makes great teaching material. It can be used to explore the technical challenges of blending, balance and control that are so important in learning to play in an orchestral wind section – a skill sometimes underplayed in our music colleges. And it is a creative challenge, too, in finding the musical intention needed to re-create Wagner’s music; to get it to glow with the warm-hearted and generous spirit of Hans Sachs.

Illustrations: The real Hans Sachs (1494-1576), woodcut (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg)
Met players, L to R: Anthony McGill, Brad Gemeinhardt, Elaine Douvas, Daniel Shelly, Stefán Ragnar Höskuldsson
Richard Blackford, www.blackford.co.uk

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The CD *Oboe Divas!* can be obtained from www.oboeconcerts.com