

ACT zeitschrift für musik & performance

**Richard Wagner, Louis de
Fourcaud, and a Path for French
Opera in the 1880s.**

Marie-Hélène Benoit-Otis (Chapel Hill, North Carolina)

Abstract.

*In a much-quoted interview with Richard Wagner conducted by the French critic Louis de Fourcaud in 1879, and published in different versions in 1880, 1884, and 1886, the composer allegedly advised the French to write operas drawing on their own legendary sources. Contemporary works such as d'Indy's *Fervaal*, Chausson's *Le Roi Arthus*, and Massenet's *Esclarmonde* suggest that Fourcaud's interview did indeed have a profound impact on the Wagnerian movement in France. However, a close examination of the sources reveals that his text owes much less to Wagner than scholars have previously assumed: in fact, evidence suggests that the most important part of the interview (that is, the advice to French composers) was added by Fourcaud himself after Wagner's death.*

Zusammenfassung.

1879 führte der französische Musikkritiker Louis de Fourcaud ein Interview mit Richard Wagner, das er dann 1880, 1884 und 1886 in verschiedenen Versionen veröffentlichte. In diesem viel zitierten Interview soll Wagner den französischen Komponisten geraten haben, Opern auf der Grundlage ihrer nationalen Legenden zu schaffen. Zeitgenössische Werke wie d'Indys *Fervaal*, Chaussons *Le Roi Arthus* und Massenets *Esclarmonde* weisen darauf hin, dass Fourcauds Interview einen tiefen Einfluss auf den französischen Wagnerismus ausübte. Eine nähere Untersuchung der Quellen zeigt jedoch, dass der Inhalt dieses Textes weniger von Wagner stammt, als Musikwissenschaftler bisher vermuteten; dokumentarische Belege weisen darauf hin, dass der wichtigste Teil des Interviews (d.h. die Ratschläge an die französischen Komponisten) nach Wagners Tod von Fourcaud selbst hinzugefügt wurde.

Marie-Hélène Benoit-Otis, "Richard Wagner, Louis de Fourcaud, and a Path for French Opera in the 1880s," in: *ACT – Zeitschrift für Musik & Performance* 3 (2012), no. 3.

Richard Wagner, Louis de Fourcaud, and a Path for French Opera in the 1880s

At the end of October 1879, the French art and music critic Louis de Fourcaud (1851–1914),¹ a well-known Wagnerian, traveled to Bayreuth in order to meet Richard Wagner.² Five years later, in 1884, he published an account of his interview with the famous composer. In this article, widely read in France, Wagner is quoted as follows:

Le premier souci d'un compositeur français décidé à s'arracher à l'ornière doit être de se procurer un poème simple, humain, expressif, et surtout, conforme au génie de sa nationalité. [...] J'ai expliqué dans mes ouvrages théoriques quelles raisons militent pour les sujets légendaires, où les héros sont affranchis des pressions contingentes, des petitesesses, des l'intérêt et de la politique. Cela est dit pour la France comme pour l'Allemagne, et pour tous les pays imaginables. Puisez donc dans vos légendes, qui sont innombrables, et d'une richesse infinie. Lisez donc vos poèmes du moyen âge, vos chansons de geste, voire vos romans de chevalerie; ils forment le plus pur trésor de vos archives intellectuelles. [...] Les Roland, les Arthur, les chevaliers de la Table Ronde, les paladins de vos anciens auteurs populaires ont éminemment la taille épique et lyrique et les idées qu'ils incarnent – idées de droit, de justice, de loyauté, de charité, d'amour qui sont, au premier chef, de celles qui portent à chanter.³

This oft-cited interview represents one of the key moments in French Wagnerism,⁴ and it had a deep impact on French opera composers at the end of the nineteenth century, as we see in works such as Ernest Chausson's *Le Roi Arthus* (for which the composer wrote a libretto based on the Arthurian legend), Vincent d'Indy's *Fervaal* (whose action takes place in the Cévennes, the birthplace of the composer-librettist), and Jules Massenet's *Esclarmonde* (partly based on a medieval French novel).⁵ But

1 For a brief bio-bibliography of Louis de Fourcaud, see Laure Schnapper, "Fourcaud, Louis (de)," in: *Dictionnaire critique des historiens de l'art actifs en France de la Révolution à la Première Guerre mondiale*, ed. Philippe Sénéchal and Claire Barbillon, accessible through the website of the Institut national d'histoire de l'art, <http://www.inha.fr/spip.php?rubrique347> (accessed 15 May 2009).

2 I am deeply grateful to Jean-Jacques Nattiez, whose profound knowledge of the Wagnerian literature helped me to complete the arguments presented here; to Knut Holtsträter, who drew my attention to an essential source and granted me access to it, allowing me to refine my arguments; and to Tim Carter, who made invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this text and edited the final version.

3 Louis de Fourcaud, "Richard Wagner et l'opéra français," in: *Bayreuther Festblätter in Wort und Bild: Gesammelte Beiträge deutscher, französischer, belgischer, schweizerischer, spanischer, englischer, amerikanischer und italienischer Schriftsteller und Künstler mit Facsimiles aus den Original-Partituren Richard Wagners*, ed. Central-Leitung des Allgemeinen Richard Wagner-Vereins, Munich 1884, p. 42f. Hereafter cited as "Richard Wagner et l'opéra français" (1884).

4 See, for example, Steven Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle: Wagnerism, Nationalism, and Style*, Oxford 1999, p. 78 and p. 321f; Cécile Leblanc, *Wagnérisme et création en France, 1883–1889*, Paris 2005, p. 355f; Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "L'univers wagnérien et les wagnérismes," in: *Musiques: Encyclopédie pour le 21^e siècle 4: Histoires des musiques européennes*, under the direction of Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Arles 2006, p. 1242f; François de Médicis, "Tristan dans *La Mer*: Le crépuscule wagnérien noyé dans le zénith debussyste?" in: *Acta musicologica* 79 (2007), p. 228. The interview is also mentioned (although not cited explicitly) in Cécile Leblanc, "Le wagnérisme musical en France," in: *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Wagner*, under the direction of Timothée Picard, Arles 2010, p. 751; in addition, two later versions of Fourcaud's text are listed in the *Dictionnaire's* bibliography, p. 2349.

5 See Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle* (see nt. 4), in particular, p. 77f; for more details on *Le Roi Arthus*, see Marie-Hélène Benoit-Otis, *Ernest Chausson, "Le Roi Arthus" et l'opéra wagnérien en France*, Frankfurt 2012, especially pp. 52–57.

if Wagner's advice to French composers as reported by Fourcaud undeniably contributed to the evolution of the Wagnerian movement in France, several pieces of evidence that have been neglected until now raise serious doubts about its authenticity. Did Wagner really say what Fourcaud wrote in 1884? That is the question I will address in this article.

Some bibliographical problems

The starting point of my investigation was a simple observation: as far as I know, all recent books and articles that cite, mention or comment upon Fourcaud's interview with Wagner use indirect, incomplete or even inaccurate references that seldom allow the reader to read the original text. This confusion prompted some careful bibliographical research.

It appears that all the authors of the past decade or so who mention Fourcaud's interview with Wagner quote it by way of two sources, each of which is highly problematic, albeit for different reasons: the book *Richard Wagner: Vues sur la France*, edited by Gustave Samazeuilh in 1943,⁶ and the first volume of Léon Vallas' biography of Vincent d'Indy, which appeared in 1946.⁷ Both texts place great importance on the interview, and at first glance both seem to be trustworthy firsthand sources. But a closer examination reveals that they must be treated with caution.

Samazeuilh's *Richard Wagner: Vues sur la France* is a collection of essays on the general subject "Wagner and France;" it includes writings by Wagner himself about his experiences in France, as well as articles by late nineteenth-century French authors who, for the most part, strongly favored Wagner's works. In such a context, it comes as no surprise that Samazeuilh decided to include in this volume a reprint of Fourcaud's interview with Wagner as it appeared in 1884. The reprint would be flawless, were it not preceded by the following: "Publié en 1886, par les *Feuilles de Bayreuth* et reproduit fragmentairement par le *Ménestrel*."⁸ Both of these statements are misleading: Fourcaud's interview with Wagner appeared neither in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, the monthly journal founded by Hans von Wolzogen for the benefit of visitors to the Bayreuther Festspiele, nor in *Le Ménestrel*, a weekly brought out by the Parisian publisher Heugel. In fact, it appeared in a special volume entitled *Bayreuther Festblätter in Wort und Bild*, published in 1884 and reissued in 1886, which has nothing to do with the *Bayreuther Blätter*, despite the similarity of the titles; it was then partially reprinted in *Le Gaulois*. Apparently, Samazeuilh confused two periodicals, generating a double bibliographical error.

Léon Vallas' biography of Vincent d'Indy, published in two volumes in 1946 and 1950, presents a more subtle and complex problem. Here, we find bibliographical

6 *Richard Wagner: Vues sur la France*, ed. Gustave Samazeuilh, Paris 1943.

7 Léon Vallas, *Vincent d'Indy*, 2 vols., Paris 1946–50.

8 Fourcaud, "Richard Wagner et l'opéra français," in: Samazeuilh, *Richard Wagner* (see nt. 6), p. 54.

information about Fourcaud's interview with Wagner that is almost complete and accurate. Vallas describes the publication history of Fourcaud's interview with Wagner in the following terms:

Louis de Fourcaud avait fait imprimer une première fois le texte dans *Le Gaulois* du 5 janvier 1880. De nouveau, le 17 juin 1884, il en fit publier les termes, mais en allemand, par les *Bayreuther Festblätter* [...]; une nouvelle fois il les redit en français dans un article, *La Revanche de Wagner* [...], publié par *Le Gaulois* du 13 janvier 1886.⁹

Vallas seems to be confusing the *Bayreuther Blätter* with the *Bayreuther Festblätter*, as Samazeuilh did before him; the precise publication date he indicates (17 June 1884) also gives the impression that he treats the book as if it were a journal, but in fact, this detail simply shows that he consulted the 1886 re-edition of the *Bayreuther Festblätter* instead of the first edition of 1884.¹⁰ Furthermore, Vallas wrongly assumes that Fourcaud's article was published in German. Whereas the *Bayreuther Blätter* was a German-only periodical, the *Bayreuther Festblätter* included contributions in French, Spanish, English and Italian, as indicated in its subtitle (*Gesammelte Beiträge deutscher, französischer, belgischer, schweizerischer, spanischer, englischer, amerikanischer und italienischer Schriftsteller und Künstler*); in its pages, Fourcaud's interview with Wagner appears in French.

These bibliographical errors are minor, but they do not constitute the most problematic aspect of the passage that Vallas devotes to Louis de Fourcaud's interview with Wagner. Vallas includes a long summary of its contents, in which one can read, for example, the following:

Devant l'assurance rayonnante du maître allemand, Louis de Fourcaud [...] n'avait guère hésité à lui poser des questions précises: "Que feriez-vous si vous étiez compositeur français, comment agiriez-vous? De quels éléments de réforme feriez-vous usage?" Alors des lèvres de Wagner était tombé cet oracle: "[Le] premier souci [du musicien de théâtre]? Se procurer un poème simple, humain, expressif, conforme avant tout au génie de votre nation. De préférence, un sujet légendaire: récits français, poèmes du moyen âge, chansons de gestes, romans de chevalerie. [...] Comme personnages, des types nationaux: les Roland, les Arthus, les chevaliers de la Table Ronde, les paladins des anciens auteurs populaires; ces héros, incarnations admirables du droit, de la justice, de la loyauté, de la charité, ils ont éminemment la taille épique et lyrique." Wagner avait conclu: "Sur un poème vraiment français, si vous ne vous inspirez que de la vérité des mœurs, vous ferez de la musique vraiment française. [...] Ayez des drames simples et substantiels, semblables à de grands tableaux intéressant les hommes de votre musique et leur parlant d'eux-mêmes; animez-les d'une musique que vous tirerez, non de votre mémoire, mais de

⁹ Vallas, *Vincent d'Indy*, I (see nt. 7), p. 294.

¹⁰ In this version, which is otherwise extremely similar to the original 1884 edition, Fourcaud's article is signed in his handwriting and dated "17 juin 1884." See Fourcaud, "Richard Wagner et l'opéra français" (see nt. 3), p. 42f. Hereafter cited as "Richard Wagner et l'opéra français" (1886).

votre intelligence des situations, de l'âme de vos héros, des événements de votre fable, et vous ferez pour la France ce que j'ai fait."¹¹

Although this passage undoubtedly corresponds to the spirit of Fourcaud's interview with Wagner, it does not correspond to the letter, for despite Vallas' use of quotation marks, he presents anything but exact quotations. In fact, Vallas freely summarized and rephrased the versions of Fourcaud's text that appeared in the 1884 and 1886 *Bayreuther Festblätter* and in the January 1886 issue of *Le Gaulois*.¹²

The genealogy of an interview

It turns out that the three versions of the interview mentioned by Vallas are not identical. This detail has gone unnoticed until now, but once put into context, it becomes a matter of major importance.

Vallas gives three bibliographical references for the interview: an article that appeared in *Le Gaulois* on 5 January 1880,¹³ the *Bayreuther Festblätter* article of 1884 (reissued in 1886),¹⁴ and another article in *Le Gaulois* that was published on 13 January 1886.¹⁵ If we are to believe Vallas, these are three reprints of the same text, but the reality is a little more complex.

The primary version of the interview (at least from the standpoint of Wagner's advice to French composers) is the text published for the first time in 1884 in the *Bayreuther Festblätter in Wort und Bild*. This is the version reprinted by Samazeuilh in 1943; it also forms the core of Fourcaud's 1886 article, "La revanche de Wagner." The latter was written in the context of the lively controversy surrounding a performance of *Lohengrin* planned by the Opéra-Comique for 1886 (a performance that ultimately did not take place precisely because of that controversy).¹⁶ In his attempt to defend Wagner against the revanchard accusations he faced by French patriots who had not forgotten the humiliations of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71, Fourcaud used excerpts from his 1884 interview in order to show that the composer was, in fact, highly supportive of French art.¹⁷ His first and last lines make the point clear:

11 Vallas, *Vincent d'Indy*, I (see nt. 7), p. 293f.

12 Vallas' modified quotations are also found in some recent publications that cite Fourcaud's interview through Vallas' book. See, for example, Leblanc, *Wagnérisme et création en France* (see nt. 4), p. 355; the author does not mention Vallas; nevertheless, she takes up the whole content of the passage he devotes to Fourcaud's interview with Wagner. A similar case can be found in the writings of Vincent d'Indy, edited by Marie d'Indy and published under the title *Ma vie* (see below). Here, Marie d'Indy quotes Fourcaud's interview with Wagner as paraphrased by Vallas in order to support her thesis that Wagner made similar remarks to d'Indy; unfortunately, Wagner's precise words to d'Indy are not documented. See Vincent d'Indy, *Ma vie: Journal de jeunesse. Correspondance familiale et intime (1851–1931). Choix, présentation et annotations de Marie d'Indy*, Paris 2001, p. 360.

13 Fourcaud, "Richard Wagner," *Le Gaulois*, 5 January 1880.

14 Fourcaud, "Richard Wagner et l'opéra français" (1884 and 1886, see nts. 3 and 10).

15 Fourcaud, "La revanche de Wagner," *Le Gaulois*, 13 January 1886.

16 See, for instance, Huebner, *French Opera at the Fin de Siècle* (see nt. 4), p. 16f.

17 The publication of this article, in which Fourcaud rails vigorously against the anti-Wagnerians, gave way to an open exchange of letters with the anti-Wagnerian Juliette Adam; these letters, which appeared in *Le Figaro* and *Le Gaulois*, illustrate the political stakes of the debate. See Juliette Adam, "La question Wagner," *Le Figaro*, 15 January 1886, and Fourcaud, "La question de *Lohengrin*," *Le Gaulois*, 16 January 1886.

Je veux aujourd’hui [...] esquisser les idées du maître à l’endroit de la musique française. [...] [J]e prie nos lecteurs de juger si l’homme qui parlait ainsi cherchait, réellement, à nous imposer ses formules. Nous avons fort à gagner à méditer ses enseignements, et je me refuse à croire que notre dignité nationale soit intéressée à ce que nous repoussions ses chefs-d’œuvre.¹⁸

Here, Fourcaud openly asserts a political agenda, which was already present (although in latent form) in the *Bayreuther Festblätter* version of his interview: his goal is to reconcile the French to Wagner by showing that Wagnerism and French nationalism can go hand-in-hand. This was certainly not obvious to the French after the publication in 1873 of Wagner’s satirical play *Eine Kapitulation*, translated into French as early as 1876,¹⁹ in which Wagner made light of the sufferings of the besieged Parisians during the Franco-Prussian War. The play caused a scandal in France, as well as a particularly intense wave of anti-Wagnerism.

From the first *Bayreuther Festblätter* edition in 1884 to the article in *Le Gaulois* in 1886, Fourcaud’s intentions are constant, and even if the formulation changes slightly, the content of his interview with Wagner remains unmodified.

Fourcaud’s first article in *Le Gaulois*, published on 5 January 1880, is a very different matter, however. This is the only report of the interview that appeared during Wagner’s lifetime, and it does not contain a single word of the advice that the composer purportedly gave to French opera composers. What, then, is this first version of the interview about? Fourcaud first explains the circumstances of his trip to Bayreuth, obviously to justify his visit to the controversial author of *Eine Kapitulation* to his countrymen (a recurring preoccupation in Fourcaud’s writings on Wagner in the 1870s and 1880s).²⁰ Then follows a detailed and enthusiastic description of Wahnfried and of Wagner himself, as well as a brief biography of the composer that focuses on his Parisian years. All of this takes up two of the three columns of the article. The last column gives an account of what Wagner actually said to Fourcaud during the interview. According to Fourcaud, the composer spoke first of *Parsifal*, which he was currently completing for its planned premiere in Bayreuth. Fourcaud then begins to come to a close, directly quoting a long passage from Wagner:

18 Fourcaud, “La revanche de Wagner” (see nt. 15).

19 In October 1885, *Eine Kapitulation* was also briefly presented in the *Revue wagnérienne*, by an author who signed the initials “E.D.” (probably Edouard Dujardin). This text, as well as an anonymous “Chronique” that preceded it, was clearly intended to demonstrate “la parfaite et essentielle bonhomie” of Wagner’s play; see “Chronique. Richard Wagner et les Parisiens: Une capitulation,” *Revue wagnérienne* 1 (8 October 1885), p. 225ff; and Richard Wagner, “Une capitulation: Comédie à la manière antique,” *Revue wagnérienne* 1 (8 October 1885), p. 228–34; the quotation is on p. 228.

20 In an article published in October of 1876, Fourcaud even feigns to adopt an anti-Wagnerian argument, probably hoping to show its absurdity by exaggeration: “Jamais nous n’aurons assez de sifflets pour M. Wagner, qui est Prussien, et de son état l’insulteur à gages de notre patrie!” The article, signed “Spectator” [Louis de Fourcaud], was entitled “Le scandale d’hier” and appeared in *Le Gaulois*, 31 October 1876. According to Rocheblave, Fourcaud’s biographer, with this article Fourcaud inaugurated “cette autre carrière spéciale de critique wagnérien en France, qu’il poursuivra contre vents et marées avec une conviction, un savoir, et une autorité qui grandiront sans cesse”, Samuel Rocheblave, *Louis de Fourcaud et le mouvement artistique en France de 1875 à 1914*, Paris 1926, p. 51.

D'ailleurs, on ne me jouera jamais communément chez vous. Ma musique est trop allemande. Je tâche d'être de mon pays aussi profondément que je le puis. Il est dangereux de me chanter sans mes vers: ils sont le complément indispensable de mes déclamations mélodiques. Que n'existe-il à Paris une scène internationale où l'on interprète dans leur langue les grandes œuvres célèbres à l'étranger?²¹

Fourcaud cannot resist the opportunity to mention the scandal caused by the performances of *Tannhäuser* in Paris in 1861, again quoting Wagner:

On me suppose des rancunes? Des rancunes! Et pourquoi? Parce qu'on a sifflé le *Tannhäuser*? Est-on bien sûr de l'avoir entendu tel qu'il est? Auber le savait, à qui j'avais conté mes doléances. Que voulez-vous? Le moment n'était pas venu de la musique sincère. Pour la presse, je n'ai pas eu à m'en plaindre autant qu'on a dit: je n'ai pas fait de visites aux journalistes, comme Meyerbeer; mais Baudelaire, Champfleury et Schuré n'en ont pas moins écrit les plus belles choses qui aient été écrites sur mon compte. Vous le voyez, je ne suis pas aussi mécontent qu'on l'affirme.²²

These two passages just quoted are the only ones in the 1880 version of the interview in which Wagner mentions French music – or at least music in France. This is a far cry from the interviews published in the *Bayreuther Festblätter* and *Le Gaulois* in January 1886, and from the advice to French composers that Wagner allegedly conveyed to Fourcaud. The 1880 article appeared about two months after Fourcaud's encounter with Wagner, at a point when Fourcaud could still remember clearly Wagner's words and might have been anxious to represent the composer faithfully, given that Wagner would have been able to read the article since he was still living. Of course, these elements are not sufficient in themselves to assert with a reasonable degree of certainty that the 1880 version of the interview is the only one that is authentic. Nonetheless, they raise doubts about the contents of the later articles, which, as we shall see, come into question in other ways.

In fact, the summary that Fourcaud gave of his interview with Wagner in his 1880 article is confirmed point by point in Cosima Wagner's diaries, in which she carefully noted every event of her husband's life. On 29 October 1879²³, she wrote:

Abends Besuch eines Mr. de Fourcaud, Redakteur des "Gaulois," welcher vergeblich nach München gereist ist, um Tristan und Isolde zu sehen – R. sucht ihm auseinanderzusetzen, 1^o wie er keine Rancune gegen die Franzosen wegen des Tannhäuser's habe noch haben könne, 2^o wie seine Werke in Frankreich nicht aufzuführen seien, und wie die Franzosen, um sie kennenzuler-

²¹ Fourcaud, "Richard Wagner" (see nt. 13).

²² Fourcaud, "Richard Wagner" (see nt. 13).

²³ According to Cosima Wagner's diaries, Fourcaud's visit to Wagner took place on 29 and 30 October 1879, and not on 26 and 27 October of that year, as Fourcaud has it ("Richard Wagner et l'opéra français" [1884 and 1886, see nts. 3 and 10], p. 42), as does Vallas (*Vincent d'Indy*, I [see nt. 7], p. 292) and Rocheblave (*Louis de Fourcaud et le mouvement artistique en France* [see nt. 20], p. 276).

nen, nach Deutschland wohl kommen müßten. R. spielt das Vorspiel zu Parsifal.²⁴

We find here all three elements that are mentioned in the last column of Fourcaud's 1880 article: *Parsifal*, Wagner's music in France, and the *Tannhäuser* scandal in 1861. Of course, we cannot exclude the possibility that Cosima, for one reason or another, missed part of the conversation between Fourcaud and Wagner; but this perfect correspondence between two accounts written independent of one another implies a high probability that both are accurate.

Cosima's diaries also supply additional information on Fourcaud's encounter with Wagner. We learn, for example, that there was not one interview, but two: Fourcaud came to Wahnfried again the following day, after the conversation on *Parsifal* and Wagner's music in France. On 30 October 1879, Cosima wrote: "Unser Gallier kommt, Abschied zu nehmen, versäumt aber den Zug, bleibt zu Tisch und überrascht durch seine Fragen, u.a.: 'Maître, aimez-vous Raphael?'"²⁵ Then, the next day, she records: "Gestern wollte der *fragende Franzose* wissen, an welchem Werke R. am meisten hing, R. sagte, er wisse es nicht, vergäbe sie bald, den Parsifal könnte er vielleicht nennen, weil er diesen unter den günstigsten Umständen geschrieben."²⁶

Adapting Wagner

All this certainly demonstrates that Fourcaud asked Wagner many other questions, but not that any of them were related to the future of French opera. Indeed, there is a strong argument to suggest that the thoughts on French opera that Fourcaud attributes to Wagner were added by the critic himself in the version of the interview he published in the *Bayreuther Festblätter*. Wagner died on 13 February 1883 and thus was no longer available to confirm the authenticity of Fourcaud's text. Fourcaud himself implied in this new version of the text (perhaps as a form of pre-emptive self-defense) that he was working from memory.²⁷ Moreover, Fourcaud's "interview" with Wagner now bears striking resemblances to Catulle Mendès' (1841–1909) famous fictitious dialogue between a young winner of the Prix de Rome and an old Wagnerian ("Le jeune Prix de Rome et le vieux wagnériste"):

LE PRIX DE ROME. – Il faut que le drame musical soit fondé en France!

LE WAGNERISTE. – Certes, il le faut. Mais par quel moyen?

LE PRIX DE ROME. – Étudions l'homme nouveau! Appropriions-nous son génie, sa manière

LE WAGNERISTE. – Arrêtez! Si vous ouvrez dans cette pensée une seule partition de Richard Wagner – fût-ce *Lohengrin*, fût-ce le *Vaisseau fantôme*, – vous êtes perdu pour la musique française. Dans le domaine de l'art, on n'égale qu'à la condition de différer, et, en outre, de tous les modèles que vous pourriez vous proposer, Richard Wagner est précisément le plus dangereux.

²⁴ Cosima Wagner, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, vol. II, 1878–1883, München 1977, p. 433.

²⁵ Wagner, *Die Tagebücher* (see nt. 24), p. 434.

²⁶ Wagner, *Die Tagebücher* (see nt. 24). The emphasis is Cosima Wagner's.

²⁷ Fourcaud writes: "Ses discours, ingénieux jusque-là, prirent soudain un tour si frappant que chaque phrase s'en grava dans mon souvenir," in: "Richard Wagner et l'opéra français" (1884 and 1886, see nts. 3 and 10), p. 42.

LE PRIX DE ROME. – C'est vous qui dites cela?

LE WAGNERISTE. – Moi-même. Il est l'Allemand par excellence! [...] Mais vous, créateur, n'empruntez rien à une personnalité qui n'est pas, qui ne peut pas être la vôtre.[...] Admirez, n'imitiez pas.²⁸

In order to produce an equivalent of Wagner's music drama in France, and in a French spirit, it is necessary, according to Mendès' *vieux wagnériste*, to rely on native sources of inspiration:

LE WAGNERISTE. – Les chansons de geste, avec leurs héroïques aventures d'amour et de bataille, vous offrent par centaines d'admirables sujets. Lisez nos romans de chevalerie, qui vivent encore dans l'esprit populaire. [...] En agissant de la sorte, vous ferez œuvre véritablement nationale, et le public vous comprendra, car il retrouvera dans votre drame, issu du cœur même de la nation, la vie, l'enthousiasme, la gaiété, tout ce qui constitue la personnalité de la race française.²⁹

These sources are, of course, very close to those promoted by Fourcaud in the *Bayreuther Festblätter* version of his interview with Wagner. In sum, to quote Mendès' ideal as expressed by the young winner of the Prix de Rome, "le drame musical en France serait une œuvre où l'inspiration française, profondément française, se développerait selon les lois empruntées au système wagnérien."³⁰

Several authors have already noted the remarkable similarity between Fourcaud's interview with Wagner and Mendès' fictitious dialogue. Indeed, Léon Vallas pointed it out in 1946 and tried to explain it by suggesting that Mendès must have perused Fourcaud's interview before he wrote his own dialogue, which therefore could present "transposées, développées, les idées même du maître allemand."³¹

Vallas' argument appears convincing if we consider the best-known version of Mendès' text, published in the *Revue wagnérienne* on 8 June 1885, roughly a year after the 1884 version of Fourcaud's interview with Wagner (in the first edition of the *Bayreuther Festblätter*). But this does not work out as well as Vallas (and other scholars³²) might have thought: in fact, the 1885 version of Mendès' dialogue is a reprint of an article that Fourcaud had probably known for almost ten years.

As François Lesure pointed out,³³ Mendès' fictive dialogue was actually published for the first time on 28 August 1876 in *Le Gaulois*³⁴ as the conclusion to a series of fourteen articles on Wagner's works that Mendès published on the occasion of the

28 Catulle Mendès, "Le jeune Prix de Rome et le vieux wagnériste," in: *Revue wagnérienne* 1 (8 June 1885), p. 132.

29 Mendès, "Le jeune Prix de Rome et le vieux wagnériste" (see nt. 28), p. 133.

30 Mendès, "Le jeune Prix de Rome et le vieux wagnériste" (see nt. 28), p. 135.

31 Vallas, *Vincent d'Indy*, I (see nt. 7), p. 295.

32 See, for example, Leblanc, *Wagnérisme et création en France* (see nt. 4), p. 356.

33 François Lesure, "Le 'Jeune Prix de Rome' de Catulle Mendès," *Cahiers Debussy*, new series, 6 (1982), p. 36–40.

34 Mendès, "Le jeune Prix de Rome et le vieux wagnériste (dialogue familial)," *Le Gaulois*, 28 August 1876. In addition to the famous version that appeared in the *Revue wagnérienne* in June 1885, Catulle Mendès reprinted his fictive dialogue in the volume *Richard Wagner*, Paris 1886, p. 273–91.

very first Bayreuther Festspiele.³⁵ Fourcaud had been a regular contributor to *Le Gaulois* at least since the previous March,³⁶ and it is highly unlikely that such a convinced Wagnerian as Fourcaud could have ignored an article on Wagnerism published in the pages of the daily newspaper in which he was trying to establish himself.

In other words, Fourcaud had probably known Mendès' *vieux wagnériste* for over three years when he met Wagner in 1879, and the influence went not from Fourcaud to Mendès, as Vallas would have it, but rather in the other direction. This is further indicated by the fact that throughout his entire career as a journalist and music critic, Fourcaud repeatedly expressed similar ideas about Wagner in his writings. For example, in early 1878, under the pretext of commenting on a performance of *Lohengrin* at Brussels' Théâtre de la Monnaie, he wrote:

Nous ne souhaitons aucunement qu'on imite le titan de Bayreuth, mais qu'on le suive. Il est Allemand, il écrit pour des Allemands des choses allemandes; soyons Français, écrivons pour les Français; mais approprions-nous la féconde théorie qu'il a mise en pratique. [...] Il ne vient à l'esprit de personne – en France du moins – d'imiter sa manière. La tendance de l'école [wagnérienne française] est plus élevée et plus légitime: elle cherche à profiter des enseignements de son art et à fonder, en dehors de toute exagération, le véritable drame lyrique français.³⁷

This passage, written eighteen months before Fourcaud's meeting with Wagner, takes up in substance Mendès' fictitious dialogue (published another eighteen months earlier), and at the same time, it clearly announces the advice to French composers presented by Fourcaud in the *Bayreuther Festblätter* version of his Wagner interview (1884 and 1886). Similarly, the obituary which Fourcaud published in *Le Gaulois* a few days after Wagner's death provides additional evidence as to the paternity of the ideas on French opera that he attributed to Wagner in 1884. Here, Fourcaud recalls his 1879 conversations with Wagner in terms that match what he had reported in *Le Gaulois* in January 1880. At the end of the obituary, however, and speaking in his own name, Fourcaud directly addresses French composers:

Vous avez mieux à faire qu'à pasticher Wagner; vous avez à l'admirer et à vous inspirer sincèrement, non de ses pratiques, mais de ses idées. Nous voulons des faits et du mouvement; nous n'accepterons le symbole qu'inhérent à la réalité. Soyez véridiques et réalistes en musique autant qu'il sera en vous. Choisissez des drames nets aux passions largement humaines, aux ac-

35 This series continued for approximately one month, from 27 July to 28 August 1876, and featured the following articles: "Richard Wagner et l'Anneau de Niebelung [sic]," 27 July 1876; "L'œuvre de Richard Wagner," 4, 6, 8, 10 and 14 August 1876; "Les fêtes de Wagner," 15 and 16 August 1876; "Le festival de Bayreuth," 17–18 August 1876; "Le festival de Bayreuth: L'Anneau du Niebelung [sic]," 19 August 1876; "Le festival de Bayreuth," 21 August 1876; "Le festival de Bayreuth: L'Anneau du Niebelung [sic]," 23 and 24 August 1876. Mendès reused some of the materials in these articles for his 1886 monograph *Richard Wagner* (see nt. 34).

36 See Henri de Curzon, *Bibliographie générale de l'œuvre de Louis de Fourcaud*, Paris 1926, p. 5 et passim. See also Rocheblave, *Louis de Fourcaud et le mouvement artistique en France* (see nt. 20), p. 36.

37 Georges [Louis de Fourcaud], "Lohengrin à Bruxelles et le wagnérisme," *Le Gaulois*, 2 March 1878.

tions simplement mais franchement nouées. Le meilleur moyen que vous avez de vous conformer aux leçons du maître, c'est de faire pour notre nation ce qu'il a fait pour la sienne.³⁸

Only in 1884, then, did Fourcaud merge his 1879 conversations with Wagner and his own views on French opera, views which he shared with Catulle Mendès and a number of other French Wagnerians. From this moment on and until his death, Fourcaud regularly took up these same ideas, sometimes attributing them to Wagner, but most of the time speaking for himself. Thus, in his very first article for the *Revue wagnérienne*, published in February 1885 under the title “Wagnérisme,” Fourcaud claimed that Wagnerians should admire Wagner without copying him: “Le point est de s’assimiler sa doctrine et de constituer le drame lyrique français avec autant de force et d’indépendance qu’il a constitué le drame musical de l’Allemagne.”³⁹ Two years later, in 1887, he took advantage of his column entitled “Musique” in the newly founded *Revue indépendante* to paraphrase at length the 1884 interview, first quoting what Wagner had allegedly said:

L’auteur de la *Tétralogie* m’a fait, une fois, le très grand honneur de m’exposer comment, à son avis, les Français devraient chercher à écrire leurs drames lyriques. [...] Wagner estimait, d’abord, qu’il conviendrait de s’inspirer le plus possible de notre vieille histoire légendaire et de faire paraître sur la scène nos Olivier, nos Roland, nos Arthur, nos Merlin, tous “héros à la taille épique et lyrique. [...] Ayez des drames simples et substantiels, semblables à de grands tableaux intéressants les hommes de votre race, et leur parlant d’eux-mêmes; animez-les d’une musique que vous tirerez, non de votre mémoire, mais de votre intelligence des situations, de l’âme de vos héros, des événements de votre fable, et vous ferez pour la France ce qui doit être fait.”⁴⁰

Fourcaud then concluded in his own voice: “Le mieux, en fin de compte, est de feuilleter les vénérables recueils de notre poésie nationale. Nous ne serons jamais si aisément nous-mêmes que sur notre propre terrain – le propre terrain de nos aïeux.”⁴¹

This nationalistic topos, which is omnipresent in Fourcaud’s output,⁴² plays a particularly important role in the book on Wagner he was preparing up until his death (in 1914) and completed by the musicologist Henri de Curzon using several articles, manuscripts and unpublished lectures by Fourcaud; the results were published in 1923.⁴³ The 1879 interview with Wagner is frequently mentioned in this book, but most of the time, Fourcaud expresses his views on French opera directly,

38 Louis de Fourcaud, “Richard Wagner,” *Le Gaulois*, 15 February 1883.

39 Louis de Fourcaud, “Wagnérisme,” *La Revue wagnérienne* 1 (8 February 1885), p. 8.

40 Louis de Fourcaud, “Musique,” *La Revue indépendante* 2 (January 1887), p. 44f.

41 Fourcaud, “Musique” (see nt. 40), p. 45.

42 The theme can also be found in the following articles, to mention but two: Fourcaud, “Introduction,” in: Alfred Ernst, *Richard Wagner et le drame contemporain*, Paris 1887, p. xi; and Fourcaud, “Tannhaeuser,” *Le Gaulois*, 14 May 1895.

43 Louis de Fourcaud, *Richard Wagner: Les étapes de sa vie, de sa pensée et de son art (1813–1883)*, Paris 1923. On Curzon’s work (which is not commented upon in his foreword to Fourcaud’s book), see Rocheblave, *Louis de Fourcaud et le mouvement artistique en France* (see nt. 20), p. 292.

without using Wagner as an intermediary. For example, in the very first chapter, entitled “Orientations préliminaires,” Fourcaud cites the interview in the version published in 1880, and then draws his own conclusion:

[Q]uiconque remonte aux sources de l’art pour son pays, y remonte, en fait, pour tous les pays, et, quelles que soient les formes particulières de ses ouvrages, on en voit sortir des leçons d’universelle portée.[...] Le wagnérisme bien compris nous détachera de toutes les routines, nous induira à vouloir être logiquement nous-mêmes, et réveillera en nous, avec l’indépendance native, le désir d’un style expressif, pur d’imitation.⁴⁴

Moreover, it is certainly no coincidence that Henri de Curzon chose to conclude the last chapter, “À Bayreuth,” which had been barely sketched out by Fourcaud, with the following questions taken from an article in *Le Gaulois*:

Je voudrais savoir pourquoi l’on semble croire que la leçon wagnérienne induit quiconque la veut suivre à se germaniser, alors que Wagner nous enseigne comment, à quelque nation qu’on appartienne, on peut *et l’on doit* exprimer sa nation et servir son génie?

Je voudrais savoir pourquoi, la musique se manifestant en tout pays suivant un caractère distinct, la France, qui possède un si typique trésor de chansons populaires, aurait besoin de chercher sa matière musicale en dehors de son propre fonds et de son propre cœur?⁴⁵

Conclusion

That Fourcaud’s very last book begins and ends with the expression of his desire to reconcile French nationalism and Wagnerism confirms once again that this theme was a central preoccupation with a music critic who was a convinced patriot as well as a committed Wagnerian. But the fact that he clearly (it now seems) distorted the content of his interview with Wagner to suit his own agenda does not mean that the interview should be discarded altogether as a source on French Wagnerism. While it needs to be treated with the greatest methodological care, the text obviously had an influence on the French Wagnerians, who expressed no doubts about its authenticity. The interview even aroused enthusiastic responses among French composers, as Paul Dukas’ article, “L’influence wagnérienne,” first published in *La Revue musicale* in October 1923, demonstrates:

Louis de Fourcaud nous a rapporté dans la *Feuille de Bayreuth* de 1886⁴⁶ une conversation avec Wagner sur ce sujet: entretien dont la haute portée fait que l’on s’étonne qu’il n’ait pas été plus souvent reproduit. S’adressant indirectement aux jeunes musiciens français, l’auteur de *Parsifal* leur prodigue des conseils excellents avec une clarté, une bienveillance, une élévation de vues et

44 Fourcaud, *Richard Wagner: Les étapes de sa vie* (see nt. 43), p. 12.

45 Fourcaud, *Richard Wagner: Les étapes de sa vie* (see nt. 43), p. 470f; in a footnote, Curzon states that this passage is taken from Fourcaud’s article “Avant le Crépuscule des Dieux,” *Le Gaulois*, 20 October 1908.

46 Dukas refers here to the 1886 re-edition of the *Bayreuther Festblätter* (see nt. 10), which seems to have circulated in France much more widely than the original 1884 edition.

une délicatesse admirables. Il y mêle les définitions les plus lumineuses comme celle-ci, de la différence du génie des deux nations: “L’Allemand aime l’action qui rêve, le Français le rêve qui agit,” et il conclut par cet inestimable conseil qui lève tous les doutes sur son prosélytisme personnel: “Ne soyez d’aucune école et surtout pas de la mienne!” Après cela, qu’il y ait eu en France des compositeurs wagnériens, on n’en peut pas, vraiment, rendre Wagner responsable.⁴⁷

If Fourcaud’s interview cannot be used to support any conclusion about Wagner’s ideas on French opera, it nevertheless remains an important witness to the French Wagnerian movement and to its reflections during the 1880s on music drama “après Wagner.”⁴⁸

47 Paul Dukas, “L’influence wagnérienne” (1923), in: *Les écrits de Paul Dukas sur la musique*, Paris 1948, p. 659.

48 The expression is borrowed from Debussy, who believed in the necessity of developing French opera “après Wagner et non pas d’après Wagner” (“after Wagner, and not in imitation of Wagner”). See, for example, Claude Debussy, “Pourquoi j’ai écrit Pelléas,” in: *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, ed. François Lesure, Paris 1987, p. 63.