

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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Dolan, Therese. *Manet, Wagner, and the Musical Culture of Their Time*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 288. ISBN: 978-1-4094-4670-5

Anne Leonard, University of Chicago

Drawing on a wide swath of cultural history from a narrow sliver of years—the early 1860s in France—Therese Dolan greatly enriches our understanding of Manet’s canonical painting, *Music in the Tuileries* (1862), through a closer look at the aesthetic positions of the notables portrayed in it. Although the painting has not lacked for commentators in the 150 years of its existence, putting it in direct dialogue with Richard Wagner’s innovations in the realm of music-drama constitutes a bold, in some ways surprising, yet ultimately persuasive move.

Over the years, the title of “Wagnerian painter” has been variously distributed, whether to Courbet (following F.-J. Fétis who dubbed Wagner the “Courbet of music”), Fantin-Latour (whose subject matter often derived from Wagner’s operas), or even Puvis de Chavannes (described in Teodor de Wyzewa’s “Peinture wagnérienne” of 1886 as the master of emotional painting). While Manet did not paint Wagnerian scenes, Dolan sees him and Wagner joined in a common struggle against hidebound institutional traditions and outmoded artistic forms. She makes the claim for *Music in the Tuileries* as a “manifesto” painting—no less so than Courbet’s *Real Allegory* of 1855—and proposes that Wagner’s radical innovations in music paralleled and even fueled Manet’s own vision of a new, modern art.

The richness of Dolan’s book lies in the wealth of literary-critical, artistic, and musical perspectives it brings into view, enacting what she calls a “discursive relay” as it moves, chapter by chapter, from one cultural luminary to the next. Because Baudelaire was at Manet’s side during the making of this picture, it is his writings that have inflected most later interpretations of it. Dolan has done a great service in bringing other identified figures in the painting to vivid life (Gautier, Champfleury, Fantin-Latour, and Offenbach) and unearthing reams of contemporary criticism. Dolan’s sure command of the primary sources attests to long immersion in these materials, and she has an admirable gift for evoking the texture of Parisian life for a choice group of artists, musicians, and critics circa 1862: the struggles to bring around a recalcitrant public, the wars of words carried out in the press, and the very high aesthetic stakes this implied. It is also good to be reminded what a serious connection all the figures mentioned here had with music as well as art and literature.

While there is no doubt of Manet’s deep engagement with music, Wagner has been more often associated with a later generation of Symbolist painters, whose aesthetic goals were closely congruent. Wagner’s concern to express (in Dolan’s words) “inner psychic events, the soul’s inmost needs” (212) is not the sensibility that emerges from *Music in the Tuileries*, whose revolutionary surface and facture—most infamously, its “taches” and its empty center—are what prompted Clement Greenberg to call it the first modernist painting. Likewise, critics who tarred Wagner with a Realist brush often did so more from outrage (Realist was code for ugly) than from any nuanced understanding of what Realism in music might mean in relation to visual art. All the same, it is no accident that some of Wagner’s fiercest French partisans are clustered with Manet at the left of the painting: all are engaged in the contemporary debate over “the artwork of the future,” while on the other side of the canvas sits Wagner’s rival, Offenbach (the subject of an intriguing chapter of his own).

The music of the painting's title has always been problematic, as the source of it cannot be seen, and the crowds filling the gardens of the Tuileries do not seem for the most part to be listening very attentively, if at all. No one believes the music being played there in 1862 would have been by Wagner: concerts in the Tuileries usually featured military marches or light operatic fragments to the taste of the Emperor, and Wagner would certainly not have appeared on the program so soon after the fiasco of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opera in 1861 (a well-known episode recounted here in delightfully riveting detail). Yet as the painting suggests and Dolan's book affirms, even with the music as mere pretext, the people gathered under the trees to hear it (or not) are crucial signifiers of contentious and far-reaching cultural discourses that the politics swirling around Wagner only made more urgent.