

Wagnerian Darkness

by Peter Covington

Richard Wagner, the nineteenth century German opera composer and writer, started the tradition of turning the lights out over the audience so that they would focus and become absorbed in what was happening onstage. He wanted the audience to be carried along with the performance, and selective darkness was one of his most powerful tools.

Before Wagner, attending the theater and opera were much more an event for the audience members to see each other and to be seen in society. You might think of it as like logging on to Tinder in the modern day—as audience members spent the evening working their way toward others they found attractive, while vendors strolled through the audience selling snacks (or perhaps their bodies) before and during the action on stage.

Once Wagner turned the lights out, this chaos ended for the audience. Today, every school child knows the importance of silence and attention in a darkened theater.



Darkness can draw our attention to light, maybe especially in these troubled times. For example, the inability to visit loved ones during holidays seems like a huge darkness until our loved one appears on the screen of a Zoom call and joy fills our hearts. Even though the moment is much less than we

had hoped, it is much more than we had feared. The computer application has forced us to interact in new ways, feeling a need to share more intimately, more than polite surface conversation.

At Thanksgiving, my nephew shared his deep love of comic books and described several of the drawing techniques in ways I had not considered, and I heard about his struggles to imitate the style. I learned and enjoyed that interaction much more than our usual plastic light-saber fight when we see each other face to face, and there didn't have to be a winner or loser.

Darkness took away the other distractions. In the same way, learning to love Luis, my beloved, mostly via text, took away many of the varied distractions of dating, certainly the joy of physical intimacy or the difficulty of a bad mood. Still, in this way, we concentrated on the content of each other's hearts and minds. So it was both beautiful and frustrating—an experience helps make our physical presence together now better informed as well as a tremendous joy.

I imagine when Wagner turned off the light, there were patrons so angry that no one could see their new clothes that they missed the entire performance in grumpy sullenness.

While not every light is as bright as a stage, if we allow the darkness to help us focus on the light, we can see how both the darkness and the light are gifts from God.