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Wagner's Relevance for Today

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Wagner's Relevance for Today

This essay is drawn from a lecture given in September 1963 during the Berliner Festspielwochen.

Of the countless aspects with which Wagner's work presents us, I select one at random, as is unavoidable for the lecture form: the question of Wagner's relevance for today, of the perspective of present-day consciousness toward his work—assuming that one can speak generally of such a perspective. What is meant is advanced consciousness: consciousness that is equal to the Wagnerian oeuvre and that itself occupies an advanced standpoint in its development. Almost thirty years ago I wrote a book, *In Search of Wagner*,* of which four chapters appeared in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1939. The entire book did not appear until much later, in 1952, shortly after my return to Germany. Today I would formulate many things in the book differently. Its central problem, that of the relation between societal aspects on the one hand and compositional and aesthetic aspects on the other, might have to be argued more profoundly within the subject matter than it was then. But I am not distancing myself from the book, nor am I abandoning the conception. With regard to Wagner the situation has changed generally. Therefore,

* A translation by Rodney Livingstone was published in 1981 (London: NLB).
[All footnotes are the translator's.]



Tannhäuser, Hoftheater Munich, 1861; drawing by Michael Echter

I would like to present—not as a revision of what I once thought, but as a way of taking into account what has newly come to our attention about Wagner—some divergences from the old text.

We have gained distance over the past thirty years. Wagner no longer represents, as he did in my youth, the world of one's parents, but that of one's grandparents instead. A rather commonplace symptom: I can still remember quite well from my childhood how my mother lamented the demise of Italian vocal art that was caused by the Wagnerian style of singing. Today that style is itself beginning to die out; it is exceedingly difficult to locate any singers who are up to it. The well-known and hypocritically criticized system of guest singers, by which a handful of the most famous Wagner singers are lent around, so to speak, from one new production to the next, is not just an aberration. The opera is beginning to regress to precisely that phase that had shown itself, in light of Wagner, to be outdated. Wagner no longer possesses the boundless authority of the earlier time. But what rose up against that authority was not so much a critically interventionary consciousness, in disagreement with the triumphal lord, as a reactive one: the ambivalence one feels toward a formerly beloved object

that must now be consigned to the past, whatever the cost. At any rate, we have gained much freedom toward Wagner as an object of consideration: the affective tie to him has loosened.

If, thanks to this freedom, I may now make some comments about the historical changes in the attitude toward Wagner's art, I cannot ignore the political aspect. Too much catastrophe has been visited on living beings for a consideration that purports to be purely aesthetic to close its eyes to it. Yet the position of consciousness toward Wagner may also change politically. The form of nationalism that he embodied, especially in his work, exploded into National Socialism, which could draw on him, via Chamberlain and Rosenberg,* for its rationalization. With the integration of nations into blocs this is no longer so immediately threatening; therefore it also begins to recede in the work. However, one must not overestimate this. As the National Socialist potential continues to smolder within the German reality, now as then, so it is still present in Wagner. This begins to touch on the most serious difficulty he affords for present-day consciousness. The stormy applause that one may still encounter following a performance of, say, *Die Meistersinger*, the self-affirmation of the public, which it hears from within Wagner's music, still has something about it of the old virulent evil; the question of whether and how Wagner should be performed can be separated only wrenchingly from the acknowledgment of such demagoguery. At an earlier time I attempted to localize this demagoguery precisely in the purely musical-aesthetic form. But, if I am allowed to express myself so personally, perhaps my criticism has now earned me the right to emphasize what has outlasted it. My own experience with Wagner does not exhaust itself in the political content, as unredeemable as the latter is, and I often have the impression that in laying it bare I have cleared away one level only to see another emerge from underneath, one, admittedly, that I was by no means uncovering for the first time. At any rate, the private objections to Wagner's person and way of life

* Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927), author of the racialist *Die Grundlagen des 19. Jahrhunderts* [Foundations of the Nineteenth Century]; Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1946), anti-Semitic ideologue and author of *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts* [The Myth of the Twentieth Century]. In 1930s Germany, Rosenberg's book was second in popularity only to *Mein Kampf*.

that are still all the rage have something unspeakably subaltern about them; anyone who drags them out gets sweaty hands. If I, too, previously included his person among the subjects under discussion, it was because I was thinking of his social character—the private individual as the exponent and locus of social tendencies—not of the individual in his psychological arbitrariness, upon whom so many people imagine they are qualified to pass judgment. If the connection is not made between the power of artistic production that was concentrated in him and the society, whatever accusations are made against him are pure philistinism, not far removed from the contemptible genre of fictionalized biographies. It is well to remind ourselves, as a corrective, of the great biography by Newman*—anything but semi-official—which justifiably emphasized how dishonest was the indignation over Wagner's extravagance, for example, in view of the fact that during all the years he spent in emigration the theaters earned a fortune at his expense, while he had to do without.

The merely aesthetic anti-Wagnerianism rode the tide of the so-called neo-Classical movement—politically not at all progressive—which is linked primarily to the name of Igor Stravinsky. This movement is not only chronologically passé; it also suffers from internal exhaustion. As the perceptible sign of its capitulation, the late Stravinsky himself made use of the very technique against which his movement had originally honed its polemical edge: that of the Schoenberg school. This has to do not only with the mood of the times, but also with the deficiency that is intrinsic to neo-Classicism; its historical impossibility becomes a compositional defect. The tendency that is now emerging in opposition to neo-Classicism, and exposing by contrast the decorative weakness that is implicit in the latter, is producing many things that have more to do with Wagner than with those individuals who for the last thirty or forty years have enjoyed playing the role of his opponents. The second Vienna School, that of Arnold Schoenberg, which exercises a decisive influence on the most recent contemporary music, took Wagner as its immediate point of departure. This was precisely one of the things people used to like to criticize

* Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4 vols., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933–47.



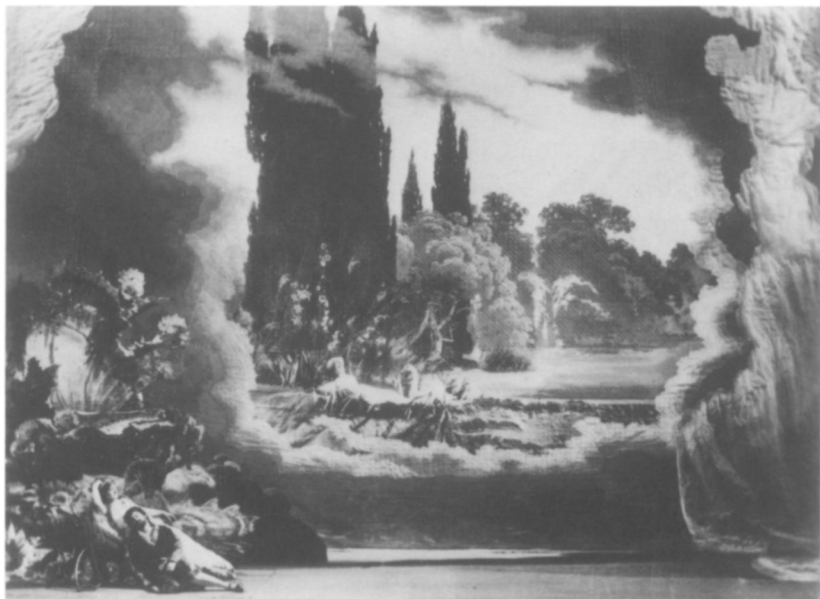
Tristan und Isolde, Bayreuth, 1886; drawing by Carlo Brioschi

in the very early Schoenberg as a cheap way of discrediting the mature musician.

But what has changed about Wagner, in the interim, is not merely his impact on others, but his work itself, in itself. This is what forms the basis of his relevance; not some posthumous second triumph or the well-justified defeat of the neo-Baroque. As spiritual entities, works of art are not complete in themselves. They create a magnetic field of all possible intentions and forces, of inner tendencies and countervailing ones, of successful and necessarily unsuccessful elements. Objectively, new layers are constantly detaching themselves, emerging from within; others grow irrelevant and die off. One relates to a work of art not merely, as is often said, by adapting it to fit a new situation, but rather by deciphering *within* it things to which one has a historically different reaction. The position of consciousness toward Wagner that I experience as my own whenever I encounter him, and which is not only mine, is even more deserving of the appellation “ambivalent” than the earlier position—an oscillation between attraction and repulsion. This only points back to the Janus-like character of the work itself. Undoubtedly, every art of significance exhibits

something like this, Wagner's especially. As progressive and regressive traits are intertwined in his work, so also in his reception. After what has occurred, it is self-evident that one assumes a defensive position toward him politically. This was true even beforehand and has remained so in view of the possibility of a reawakening of the powers that, like their patron goddess Erda, should better have gone on sleeping. In this regard, reality takes precedence over art. Still open is the question of how the appropriate defensiveness relates to the possibility of performing Wagner. One cannot, by the way—and here I touch on something central—simply imagine that it is possible to separate out the ideological element in Wagner and hold on to pure art as a kind of purified substrate. For the demagogic, the proselytizing, the collective-narcissistic gesture reaches right into the inner complexion of his music; here the suspect element is amalgamated with its opposite. But on the other hand—and this is a part of the ambivalence of the position of consciousness—among those resisting Wagner we find all those individuals, even today, who have simply not kept up musically. Among them is his greatest critic, Nietzsche. The anti-Wagnerian movement, the first large-scale incidence of *ressentiment* against modern art in Germany, has formed a fatal alliance with folk music (so-called) and young people's music, devotees of recorders and the like; their preferred tactic has been to compare him unfavorably with newly unearthed composers like Heinrich Schütz and to mobilize against him forces that would counter his highly differentiated and complex art with stupefaction. There is something like a right-wing, petit bourgeois opposition to Wagner. It may be that he was resisted by a good bourgeois element, namely, insistence on the responsibility and autonomy of the individual, but also by a bad one, a stuffy and dense narrow-mindedness to which Wagner is unalterably opposed. His music is free erotically to a degree shared by very few other things that were ever admitted into the German pantheon. Orthodox opinion, very early on, responded to this aspect of Wagner by committing the sin of self-righteous purity.

Ambivalence is a relation toward something one has not mastered; one behaves ambivalently toward a thing with which one has not come to terms. In response to this, the first task at hand would be, quite simply, to experience the Wagnerian work fully—

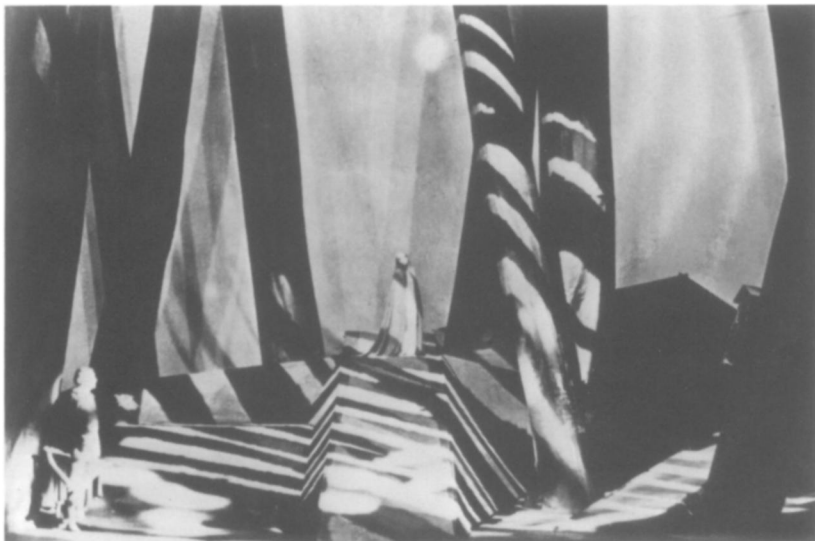


Tannhäuser, Bayreuth, 1891; Cosima Wagner, director; Max Brückner, set designer

something that to this day, despite all the external successes, has not been accomplished. *Tristan*, *Parsifal*, the most significant elements of the *Ring* are always more praised than truly appreciated. It is grotesque that in the *Ring*, then as now, *Die Walküre* still plays the most prominent role, on account of such selections as “Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond,” or Wotan’s farewell and the firestorm—in other words, on account of what in Vienna are called *Stückerl*, or little numbers. As such, they fly in the face of the Wagnerian idea. The incomparably greater architecture of *Siegfried*, in contrast, has never quite found its way into the public consciousness. At best, the opera-going public suffers through it as a cultural monument. The works of Wagner that have failed to win the appreciation of the public are precisely the most modern ones, those the most boldly progressive in technique and therefore the farthest removed from convention. Their modernity should not be misconceived as superficial, as a matter of the means they employ, simply because they make greater use of dissonances, enharmonic and chromatic elements, than the others. Wagnerian modernity is of a different order; it towers decisively over everything it leaves in

its wake. Wagner is the first case of uncompromising musical nominalism, if I may use the philosophical term: his work is the first in which the primacy of the individual work of art and, within the work, the primacy of the figure in its concrete, elaborated reality, are established fundamentally over any kind of scheme or externally imposed form. He was the first to draw the consequences from the contradiction between traditional forms, indeed the traditional formal language of music as a whole, and the concrete artistic tasks at hand. The contradiction had already made itself felt, rumbly, in Beethoven, and in essential ways generated his late style. Wagner, then, realized without reservation that the binding, truly general character of musical works of art is to be found, if at all, only through the medium of their particularity and concretion, and not by recourse to any kind of general types. Therefore, contrary to the opinion of the mass-distributed book on Wagner by Hans Gál,* Wagner's criticism of the opera carries very great weight, both theoretically and artistically. It must not be trivialized by the simplistic assertion that Wagner was just another opera composer, basically no different from others, who had come up with some secondary theories to use for his private propagandistic purposes. His verdict that opera was childish, his desire that music should finally come of age, cannot be repealed. Opera, as a form, is something historically emergent and transitory. Merely to locate Wagner's place within the genre is to deny the dynamic that is inherent in the history of this form. It is no accident that number operas, when they occur today, as in the *Rake* of Stravinsky, are possible only in a refracted mode, as stylization. Even anti-Wagnerians who return, in this manner, to the number operas recognize or acknowledge, in the irony with which they resurrect the numbers and set pieces, that the verdict Wagner imposed on such categories remains in force. He clearly faced the contradiction between the general and the particular in music, which until then had been crystallizing in mere unconsciousness, and his *ingenium* made its incorruptible decision that nothing general should exist, except in the extreme of particularity.

* Hans Gál (1890–1987), Austrian composer and teacher. An English translation (by Hans-Hubert Shonzeler) of Gál's *Richard Wagner* was published in 1976 (London: Stein & Day).



Tannhäuser, Landestheater Darmstadt, 1930; Renato Mordo, director

This, however, touches not only the form but also the content of Wagner's art. In him, the artistic consciousness of an antagonistic, internally contradictory world was radicalized. The traditional forms are as poorly adapted to this artistic consciousness as fossilized relations are to critical insight. In this sense, what he did was productive. More than that. In the introduction to Hegel's philosophy of history, which has become popular under the title *Reason in History*,* I found this sentence: "Mere desire, the wildness and brutality of the will, has no place in the theater and the sphere of world history." This theorem of Hegel's, who was not only aesthetically but also philosophically a classicist, is one to which Wagner did not adhere. In this, Wagner, who in his youth, before he converted to the ideas of Schopenhauer, is known to have been decisively influenced by Feuerbach, was quite the revolutionary Young Hegelian. His music shudders with the unrelieved violence that lives on today

* Volume 1 of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* [Lectures on the Philosophy of History] was titled *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte: Einleitung in die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* [Reason in History: Introduction to the Philosophy of World History]. It is not identical to the compilation published in English by Liberal Arts Press as *Reason in History* (New York, 1953).

in the world order. One can raise all imaginable sorts of objections to the Wagnerian mythology, exposing it as cheap and phony, as a romanticism of false beards and bull's-eye windows. Nevertheless, in comparison to all more moderate, detachedly realistic or classicist art, his work—especially the *Ring*—retains its decisive truth in this mythological moment: that in it violence breaks through as the same law that it was in the prehistoric world. In these thoroughly modern works, prehistory persists as modernity itself. This splinters the facade of the bourgeois surface, and through the cracks there shines enough of what has only now become fully evolved and recognizable to suffice as proof of Wagner's relevance for today. Admittedly, his gesture, the thing his music is arguing for—and Wagner's music, not merely his texts, is always arguing for something—is a gesture in favor of mythology. He becomes, one might say, an advocate of violence, just as his principal work glorifies Siegfried, the man of violence. But when, in his work, violence expresses itself in pure form, unobscured, in all its terror and entrapment, then the work, despite its mythologizing tendency, is an indictment of myth, willingly or not. This is shown by Siegmund's indescribable emigré-music in the opening passages of the second act of *Die Walküre*. Richard Strauss is the source of the divinatory statement that Wagner strove to deliver us from myth by means of the leitmotif. One might conclude from this that the leitmotif—quasi-rational, identifying, unity-creating—brings to a halt the blind, diffuse, and deadly ambiguity of myth, which Wagner's surging sound reproduces. Through self-consciousness, myth becomes something qualitatively different; the imaginative recollection of destruction marks its boundary.

That Wagner makes the case for myth, but accuses it through his creation, may provide the key to his dual character. His immediate relevance for today is not of the species of merely artistic renaissances. It approaches us from the vicinity of something unfinished, like many things from the nineteenth century, a prime example being Ibsen. This can be illustrated by a series of examples, several of which I shall adduce. First, Wagnerian harmony. Gál's book denies its relationship to modern harmony, to atonality, in stark contradiction to the fact that modern harmony was developed by Schoenberg, after *Verklärte Nacht*, as a continuation of Wagner's. It is self-evident that Wagner was not atonal, and it



Siegfried, Bayreuth, 1952; Wieland Wagner, director and set designer

would never have occurred to me to assert anything of the kind. All the tones and their combinations, even at their most daring, for example in *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, can be explained in accordance with the traditional teachings of harmony. At issue is a tendency, a potential—not what one finds literally in the notes, but what they tend toward—and this, indeed, has decisively to do with atonality. The preponderance of each particular harmonic event over harmonic reference points, over triads and seventh chords, presages what will later come into its own as a consistent atonality that completely does away with the reference points. In Wagner dissonance preponderates qualitatively, if not yet quantitatively. It has more power, more substantiality than consonance, and this points compellingly in the direction of the new music. On various occasions, Heinrich Schenker,* in his books, accused Wagner, whom

* Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) was the author of several works on harmony and counterpoint. His *Harmonielehre* was first published anonymously in 1906. There is an English translation by Elisabeth Mann Borgese (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

he could scarcely abide, of having destroyed the *Urlinie*, the basic line, despite his use of correct harmonic procedures. Schenker, in his odd terminology, means only that the skeletal structure of the entire musical progression along orderly steps within the usual functional harmony of thoroughbass and corresponding melody is lacking. The observation is correct, but Schenker's emphasis is wrong. As a retrograde proponent of the power of skeletons, of abstract generalities in music, he failed to hear precisely in the supposed destruction, the emancipation of music from its merely skeletal, abstract organization toward an organization located in its specific forms, the irresistibly new element that was the precondition of everything that was to come. The feeling of leaving solid ground behind, of drifting into uncertainty, is precisely what is exciting and also compelling about the experience of Wagnerian music. Its innermost composition, the thing one might, by analogy to painting, call its *peinture*, can in fact be apprehended only by an ear that is willing to cast itself, as the music does, into uncertainty. Here we may state that what is relevant for today is precisely what went unrecognized then and was therefore neither understood nor appreciated.

I would like to elaborate on this principle by means of a technical detail; for it is impossible to speak—rather than gossip—about artistic phenomena if one does not at least provide a perspective on their concrete technical complexion. It has become customary to emphasize the principle of the sequence in the mature works of Wagner; I myself did so at one time. By sequence is meant the repetition of abbreviated motifs—in Wagner the leitmotifs—on a higher level, generally with dynamic, intensifying effect. The spinning out of the music, its essential fiber or texture, thus works more or less with the repetition of given elements, in contrast to the essential technique of Viennese Classicism, which, borrowing Arnold Schoenberg's term, can be called the technique of developing variation. But however many sequences there are in Wagner, they by no means represent the sole principle; and above all, they themselves are already varied, frequently and with great subtlety, in themselves. A perfect example would be the famous beginning of *Tristan*, two sequencings of one model. By the third extension of the sequence, it is already varied—minimally, but in a harmonic-modulatory sense decisively—in comparison with the

original model, and only thus is it led back to the *forte*-entry in the reformulated dominant of the tonic A-minor. The sequence principle in Wagner is by no means a crutch. It follows from the chromaticism, the prevalence of the minor second that pervades the entire musical material, at least in the works of the type to which I am referring. On the one hand, the sequence principle is intended to create the context that has vanished as a result of chromaticism, i.e., the abandonment of articulation by harmonic steps that carry a different weight. But on the other hand—and this shows the close and modern way in which Wagner conforms to his own material—chromaticism itself embodies something not altogether dissimilar to the sequential principle; the repetition of the smallest intervals corresponds to the repetition of individual musical events as they follow each other within the sequence. The identity of the elements in the sequence, which follow one another, is very closely related to the identity of the chromatic steps. Thus even the principle of the sequence is not a mechanical thing, as we musicians may conclude all too hastily; it is much more profoundly connected to the problems and tasks of the internal organization of Wagner's music than I was capable of comprehending thirty years ago.

In other of Wagner's works, it is true, things work quite differently; in these—the less chromatic works—the sequential principle plays no central role at all. The understanding of Wagner that is due and would be relevant for today would have to inquire into their structure. In *Die Meistersinger*, extensive musical differentiation is combined with a general absence of chromaticism, and frequently with a deemphasizing of sequences in favor of a colorful variety of individual forms. The continuity is created, over long stretches, by an unconstrained redrawing of the dramatic curve from moment to moment. The intact diatonic tonal structure makes it possible to dispense with surface links. In this way, the music achieves a concreteness of the irregular that traditional music never dreamed of. This would remain prototypical for Schoenberg, for Berg, and for the most recent tendency: the trend toward structures that are free, yet dense. The idea of a unity of constantly changing situations, which in Wagner still oriented itself to the requirements of the dramatic action, has, to this day, not been fully realized. It would provide the ideal model for a truly informal



Götterdämmerung, Staatstheater Kassel, 1974; Ulrich Melchinger, director

process of composition utilizing characteristic models that would be both differentiated from each other and necessarily complementary. In Wagner, naturally, nothing of the kind is yet present in pure, developed form, nor is it intended. The dramatic action was more important to him than the constructive structure, but the objective tendency toward the latter is unmistakable.

These complicated structural matters, which I have barely touched upon, bring me to the problem of so-called form in Wagner. It would be good to start with a bit of terminological order, without, however, overemphasizing it in a pedantic way. Many musical concepts, including the concept of rhythm, but particularly that of form, are used ambiguously and are often twisted to such a degree that they come to mean everything and nothing. If Wagner did away with given, familiar forms in opera such as the aria, recitative, or ensemble, it does not therefore follow that his music has no form, that it is, as the nineteenth century stridently complained, formless. This objection remains petty and reactionary, even if validated by the authority of Nietzsche. What is true about it is that peculiar sensation of floating—that the music has, so to speak, no solid ground under its feet. In Wagner, form grows aerial roots; he reacted allergically to that element within it that the restorationist language of the twentieth century would call ontological. But mu-

sic that appears to swing back and forth in the air, as if held in the hand of an invisible puppeteer, has something static about it, just as Wagner's supposedly so dynamic sequential principle terminates in a feeling of eternal sameness. In the most recent music, which draws so near to painting and the graphic arts, the trend toward the static becomes quite marked—here, too, something is fully realized that Wagner had envisioned earlier.

The accusation of formlessness misses the point by confusing everything that is not oriented toward traditional forms with lack of organization. In fact, without following any abstract scheme, Wagner's music is organized, articulated, architectonically thought through in the highest degree. It was the great accomplishment of Alfred Lorenz,* who is undeservedly forgotten, to have been the first to see this. To deny that there is a formal problem in Wagner, as Gál does, is simply an expedient way of eliminating, or resolving, the problem by ignoring it. No sooner had the orientation toward given formal norms disappeared than the task of organizing music compellingly in and of itself became inescapable. True, the formal types that Lorenz proposed, the bow or arch form and the concept of the bar†—to which he surely gave too much emphasis, even if it is not completely unimportant in Wagner—are themselves much too abstract: mathematical, graphlike outlines that fall short of Wagner's developmental principle and thus of a material theory of musical forms. As a particular case in point, the art of transitions, which Wagner equated with the art of composition, cannot be adequately explained by diagrams. The task of the Wagner interpretation that is needed would be to describe, down to the details, how his forms, without borrowing, express, develop, and create themselves with compelling necessity from within. This occurs perhaps most splendidly in *Siegfried*—an unbroken ascending curve, further articulated so that each of the three acts contains

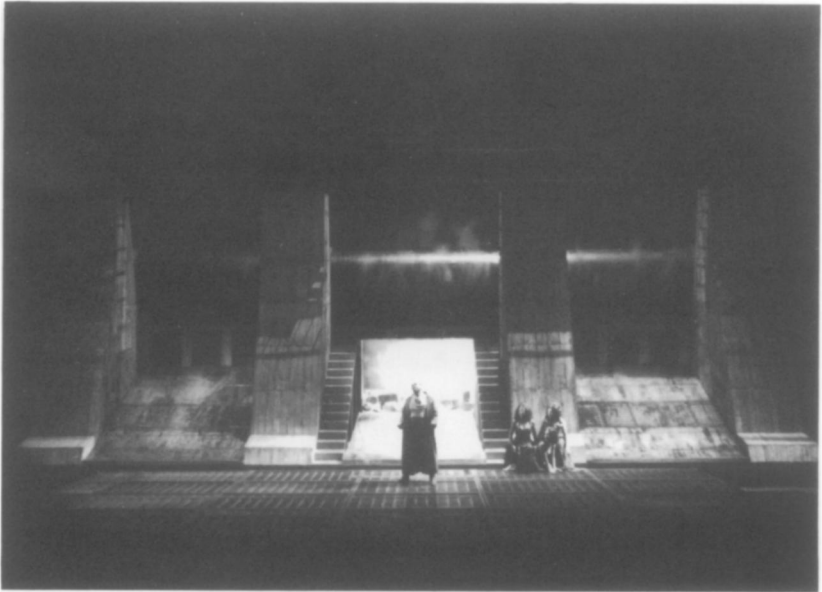
* Alfred Lorenz (1868–1939) is the author of *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner* [The Secret of Form in Richard Wagner], 4 vols., Berlin: Hesse, 1924–34.

† Lorenz's term *Bogenform* (bow or arch form) denotes a musical form that is roughly symmetrical, i.e., ABA or ABCBA. The "bar" stanza is the formal strophic design, AAB, based on German medieval Minnesang. Lorenz's analysis of the extended use of this form in *Die Meistersinger* was influential in reestablishing its importance for later composers as well.

an additional ascent, the strongest of these in the third act: altogether, probably the high point of Wagner's oeuvre. I would like to make the heretical suggestion that someone should attempt a separate production of the third act of *Siegfried* by itself, so that viewers could devote themselves to it with complete concentration; not until then will we be able fully to comprehend the riches it contains.

In connection with form I would like to say a few things about color and orchestration. Wagner's mastery as an orchestrator is unquestioned even by his opponents. The idea of extended instrumentation* has long been recognized in Wagner: translating the most delicate network of the composition into a correspondingly delicate network of instrumental colors and clarifying it in the process. The orchestration, the tone colors, become a means of making the course of the musical events visible down to its most subtle details. To this extent it already creates form. But this must be further elaborated. Wagner's art of orchestration does not exhaust itself in small-scale effects; it also answers the large-scale formal problem I have described above. Perhaps one can say that whatever Wagner did away with, in terms of general schemes, he replaced with the wholly new, thoroughly individualized dimension he gave to orchestration. Color itself became architectonic. For this, too, *Siegfried* offers perhaps the best example. Even the pitch levels, high and low, are articulated in the course of the music in such a way that in the individual acts, as in the work as a whole, an uplift in the music corresponds to a rise in the pitch level. What Wagner achieves in the differentiation of color through its dissolution into the tiniest elements, he complements by combining the smallest values constructively to create something like integral color. His tendency is to take the tone, once it has been broken down into minimal units, and create great tonal surfaces, like unbroken fields; to take the fragments into which the sword has been shattered, as Siegfried says in the enigmatic sword songs, and forge them back together into great homogeneous units. Only infinitesimally small elements can be combined flawlessly into such wholes. Anyone who is familiar with the formal problems of painting will have no trouble recognizing the relationship this musical duality

* *Ausinstrumentieren*, also translated as "integrated instrumentation."



Götterdämmerung, Bayreuth, 1976; Patrice Chéreau, director

of differential and integral techniques bears to impressionism. The unbroken tonal surface based on the breaking down of tones is one of the most important characteristics of Wagner's method: the creation of totality by means of its reduction to minute models of the particular, which then, because they approach liminal values, can be combined continuously into one another; indeed, properly speaking, they actually generate the great dense tonal surfaces. This is what lends Wagnerian sound its rounded, enveloping quality, the phenomenon that I have referred to, using a philosophical term, as totality, and that one might, from a technical point of view, better call the tonal surface. No other composer knows it in as unbroken and richly nuanced a way as Wagner. The integral tonal surface, the melding of differentiated tones into fields, is another thing that has attained its first full realization today in the idea of the incorporation of tone into the total musical construction.

Wagner's orchestration also makes evident how many of the prevalent objections against him either always missed the mark or have been rendered obsolete by history. Our parents accused him of being noisy; the complaint, oddly enough, has continued

to accompany the history of the development of modern music. As it happens, word has gotten around that the covered orchestra in Bayreuth was hardly meant to encourage noise. But here, too, it would be better to begin at the extreme, with the noise itself, to emphasize the creative brilliance of Wagner's sound in those instances where it stands in opposition to the mean of moderate enjoyment, and simply cannot be listened to with delectation. At times, Wagner mobilizes extremes of loudness. Not often; anyone who knows the scores knows how sparing he is with the *fortissimo*. But when it does turn *fortissimo*, then in fact something happens resembling a protest against the moderate cultural consensus Wagner denounced in the knights of *Tannhäuser* and ridiculed in the guilds of *Die Meistersinger*. Barbarism can no more be equated with loudness, in his music, than the representation of myth can be equated with the direct expression of barbarism. Barbarism ceases to be barbaric through its reflection in great art; it becomes distanced, is even, if you will, criticized. Where Wagner goes to the extreme, it has a precise function: the objectification of the chaotic, undomesticated element that his works confront unreservedly. The violence of Wagnerian sound, where it occurs, is the violence of its content.

Wagner's peculiar transcendence vis-à-vis culture—he always stands simultaneously above and below it—is one of his eminently German characteristics. But anything that has such an integral aesthetic function as the sound described above finds in this its inner justification, becomes intrinsically beautiful. On recent occasions (for example, at a compellingly melodious performance of *Die Götterdämmerung* by Karajan in Vienna), I have noticed something remarkable: in the final act of the *Ring*, the only passages that seem noisy are those that are not resolved compositionally, in which the musical events do not fully correspond to the volume of sound—such as, for example, the overextended and compositionally uneventful climax of Siegfried's funeral march. The latter would seem altogether problematic; it is not coincidental that it recalls Liszt. The conquest, following Wagner, of extreme positions of musical expression and construction has, as it were, justified his loudness after the fact; it is no accident that works on the threshold of the new music, such as Schoenberg's *Gurrelieder* and Strauss's *Elektra*, with their tendency to triple *fortissimos*, show

an affinity to Wagner. At the same time, however, his own art of orchestration is never heavily applied. Everywhere the phrase is transparent, everything can be heard, in contrast to a number of works from Strauss's middle period. If it is true that in Wagner the art of orchestration and tonal color is subordinated to the creation of the compositional fiber, then this implies that its goal is not murkiness or overblown sound but the clear representation of the musical events, which, because they are no longer self-explanatory within an overall scheme, require additional means for their clarification. Only by hearing Wagner from this perspective does one hear him correctly. He is already guided by the instrumentational ideal of clarity, which later led via Mahler to Schoenberg and the new music. It follows from the principle of the tonal realization of the musical structure. The *Siegfried Idyll*, which introduces the themes of the third act in *Siegfried* in a soloistic, chamber music setting, provides the proof by example. Light is even shed on certain eccentricities of Wagner's composition that arouse displeasure nowadays: for example, the overly long narratives, the tendency toward musical loquaciousness. In view of the difficulty inherent in reducing the rich content of the *Edda* Siegfried narrative to theatrical form, the repetition of things that occurred beforehand and are already known (in narratives like Wotan's lengthy excursus in the second act of *Die Walküre*, or the repetition of long-familiar items in the riddle scene between Wotan and Mime in the first act of *Siegfried*.) seem superfluous. Nor can we ignore the bothersome and discomfiting quality of certain long speeches, including Gurnemanz's tale of Amfortas and Klingsor, which are perhaps necessary from a dramatic point of view. There should be no prejudging the question whether contemporary Wagner interpretation should not finally decide to edit passages such as these when the harmonic structure allows it, despite the collective howls of the cultural keepers of the Grail. But if, in the process, such extraordinary things as that speech of Wotan's to Brünnhilde were to be sacrificed to the red pencil, it would only confirm the difficulty of the position of present-day consciousness toward Wagner: namely, that as I have said, what is magnificent in his work cannot be cleanly divided from what is questionable. One can scarcely be had without the other; his truth content and those elements that legitimate criticism has found questionable are mutually

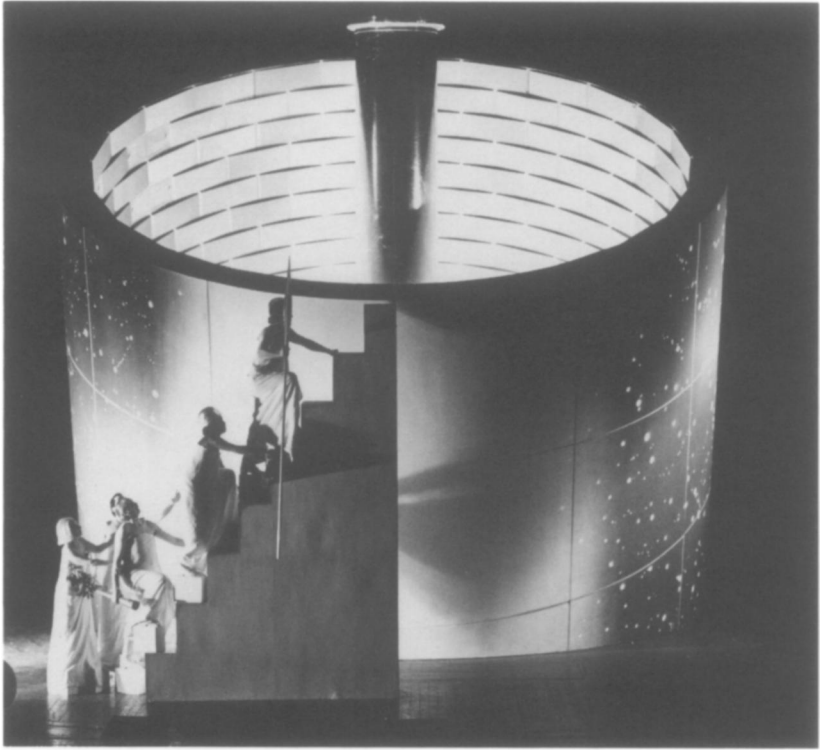
interdependent. The uncertainty with which a self-conscious performance practice approaches him is caused, not least of all, by the fact that there is no way around this interweaving of the true and the false in his work. In any case, it was Wagner's profound sense of form that created those narratives. The fundamental conception of the *Ring* is not actually dramatic, but correlative, narrative, like the original from which it was taken. If one wanted to draw out the paradox, one might speak, in regard to the entire *Ring* and other works of the mature Wagner, of epic theater—although the rabid anti-Wagnerian Brecht would not have wanted to hear this and would be at my throat. Wagner's instinct sensed clearly that epics—in which subjectivity, the free individual human being, does not yet exist but arises only as the antithesis to fate—do not permit dramatization in the true sense. In this Wagner was cleverer than Hebbel, who thought himself so much cleverer and was so much better educated. But the epic tendency does not merely follow from the content. One could, after all, object that Attic tragedy also concerned itself with epic materials and that it succeeded in translating them wholly into the dramatic form. The entirety of the *Ring*, which was conceived after all as a chef d'oeuvre and which one must begin by accepting as such, has something predecided, predetermined about it—a consequence of the Schopenhauerism in which its entire musical fiber is steeped. Step by step, what was to be expected and cannot happen otherwise is fulfilled. If in Hegel history meant progress in the consciousness of freedom, then in Wagner, who sided with Hegel's antipode, Schopenhauer, the *Ring* was a phenomenology of the spirit as fate. Consequently his work lacks the element of freedom, of openness, that constitutes drama. From Senta's ballad to the great narrative of Gurnemanz, the work is therefore interlarded with reports and ballads, sometimes in the manner of the great lieder art of the earlier nineteenth century. (I note only in passing that so far as I know the extremely productive inquiry into a relationship between Wagner and certain songs of Schubert has not been undertaken.) The narratives signify that what is occurring is reported truthfully, that it already existed as something predetermined. This points once more to the insight that Wagner's music, which—in contrast to traditional music that works with solid, extant forms—defines itself as dynamic, as continually in a state of becoming, ultimately turns static, in the final



Der fliegende Holländer, Bayerische Staatsoper, 1981; Herbert Wernicke, director and set designer

analysis because its absolute dynamism lacks the other, antithetical element against which it could become genuinely dynamic. One would have some difficulty identifying, in Wagner's music, contrasting themes in the sense of Beethoven. A related element is the music's organization into fields. We know from studying logic that without solidity there can be no dynamics, that where everything flows nothing happens; the peculiar convergence between the philosophy of Heraclitus and that of his antipodes, the Eleatics, speaks to this fact.

In Wagner unceasing change—both an asset and a liability—ends in constant sameness. This is already embodied in his most striking musical material. For chromaticism—the principle par excellence of dynamics, of unceasing transition, of going further—is in itself nonqualitative, undifferentiated. One chromatic step resembles another. To this extent, chromatic music always has an affinity to identity. If a bit of speculation in the mode of the philosophy of history is allowed—and I would be the last to gainsay

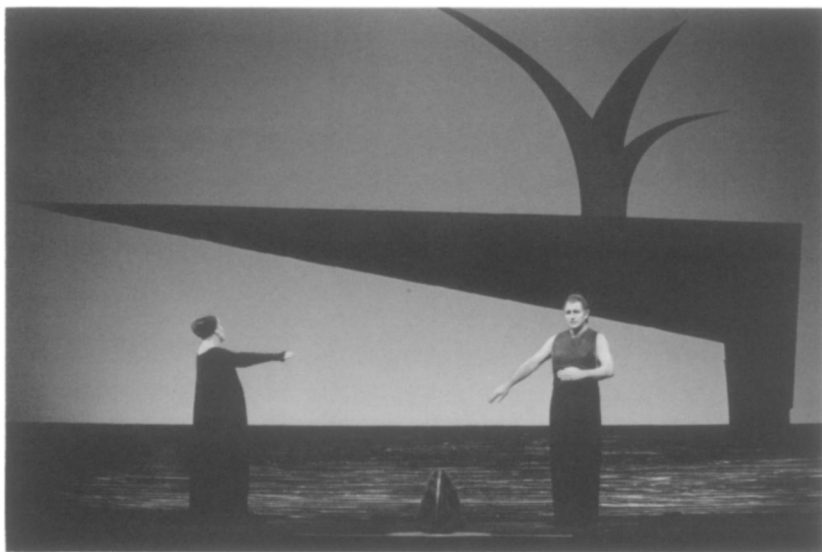


Das Rheingold, Frankfurt, 1985; Ruth Berghaus, director

it—one might go so far as to surmise that Wagner's compositional process prophesied the dawning horror of the transition from a society that had reached the apogee of its dynamism to one that had again turned rigid, become utterly reified: a new feudalism, to use Veblen's term.

Also in this context, I would like to treat another dubious element in Wagner that again substantiates the close relationship between what is inadequate and what is grandiose in his work. I am again thinking of *Die Götterdämmerung*. It can hardly be denied that its final act is weak, falls short of its subject. Wagner conceives no music of world destruction adequate to the one he prophesies. It falls off, fails to fulfill the expectation of the maximal catastrophe that it has aroused, despite the gruesomeness of passages like Gutrune's scene before the corpse is brought back. Thus, for example, to take only the most obvious example, Brünnhilde's final

song is infinitely weaker, somehow fractured, when compared to the fairly analogous one of Isolde. I used to explain this evident weakness as a result of the leitmotif-machine, the necessity of working with the preexisting, decades-old motival material, which the fully developed compositional style of the late Wagner has left far behind. But that is too superficial. The circular, inescapable nature of the conception of the tetralogy—already indicated by the word *ring* in the title—excludes from the start everything qualitatively different, even where it would have been required aesthetically at the critical juncture. Something similar was already going on in the *Meistersinger* quintet, where Wagner's sense of form tells him he needs to break out of the circle, so he launches into an indescribably melodic thought that does not derive from the machinery; however, he does not spin out the new idea in a logical manner, doesn't pursue it along the lines of its dynamic force, but instead busies himself once more with the already rather shopworn themes from the complex surrounding the *Preislied*. The same things that I have just described for you a bit sketchily in the third act of *Die Götterdämmerung* are quite literally valid for great philosophy, specifically Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, to which I have referred elsewhere. The last chapter of this work is called "Absolute Knowledge." The unwitting reader, who has chewed his way through the *Phenomenology*, hopes that in the end absolute knowledge will actually be revealed in the identity of subject and object, and there he will finally have it. But when one reads the chapter, one is sorely disappointed and, what's more, can imagine the scorn Hegel felt for such extravagant hopes even when kindled by his own philosophy. Absolute knowledge proves to be little more than a kind of recapitulation of the foregoing book; the quintessence of that motion of the spirit in which it purportedly came to itself without the absolute itself ever having been expressed, since, if one follows Hegel, the latter was, in fact, never capable of being expressed as a result. In short, musically speaking, it is a reprise, with the element of disappointment that characterizes all reprises. So, too, in *Die Götterdämmerung*. The absolute, redemption from myth, even when it takes the form of catastrophe, is possible only as a reprise. Myth is catastrophe in permanence. What does away with it brings it to fulfillment, and death, which is the end of the bad infinite, is at the same time absolute regression.



Parsifal, Hamburg Staatsoper, 1991; Robert Wilson, director and set designer

If I have succeeded in giving at least some sense of the fact that the aesthetic weakness here is bound up with the core conception, which is of something circling within itself, fatefully self-contained, foreclosing the realization of the thing it nonetheless promises, then it is possible to understand why Wagner's so-called aesthetic errors are not correctable at will. It is not an individual weakness of Wagner's that is responsible for them. They can be criticized only by stepping outside the bounds of aesthetics. To talk about errors may sound pedantic, but as soon as one speaks of truth, in regard to artworks of the highest order, one must also speak of error: otherwise one takes them to be nonbinding. Wagner's aesthetic weaknesses spring from the metaphysics of repetition, from the idea that "This is the way things are, and always will be; you don't escape, there is no way to escape." This leads to the problem of performing Wagner today, about which I would like to say a few words at least. The problem is antinomical. What is true of the narrative passages and of the third act of *Die Götterdämmerung* is true of everything that is hard to bear in Wagner. The problem is deeply embedded in the heart of the thing itself. If one removes the bothersome element, one violates the work, is forced to go be-

yond it, and with every step one takes this leads to discrepancies, friction, unsatisfying effects. But if one does not remove it, one is not only succumbing to antiquarianism, but is compelled to show all sorts of things—and by things I mean not only lilac bushes,* but music, from sequences to entire formal elements—that are no longer possible as they stand. Finally, attempts to flee from such antinomies into the timeless—the idea of which, it is true, is suggested by Wagner's mythology—are hopeless. Everything in Wagner has its temporal core. Like a spider, his mind sits amidst the powerful web of nineteenth-century exchange relationships. Even the subtly seductive Spitzwegian† quality of the second act of *Die Meistersinger* has its function within the whole; it belongs to the almost irresistible but contaminated attempt to invent a mythological recent past for the German people, on which they could then become intoxicated. For this reason the surrealistic attempts at a resolution are perhaps adequate after all, despite the outdated character of the surrealism of the '20s and '30s. They attempt not to mythologize Wagner in the sense of timelessness, but to explode his temporal core, to show Wagner himself as in the grip of history or, as we nowadays say all too readily, to alienate him. I like Max Ernst's idea: to have King Ludwig II amusing himself in the cave of the Venusberg. The latest parodistic and aggressive interpretation of the second act of *Die Meistersinger* in Bayreuth—I have not seen the production myself—seems to be in a similar vein. If it is true about Wagner that no matter what one does, it is wrong, the thing that is still most likely to help is to force what is false, flawed, antinomical out into the open, rather than glossing over it and generating a kind of harmony to which the most profound element in Wagner is antithetical. For that reason, only experimental solutions are justified today; only what injures the Wagner orthodoxy is true. The defenders of the Grail shouldn't get so worked up about it; Wagner's precise instructions exist and will continue to be handed down for historians. But the rage that is unleashed by such interventions proves that they strike a nerve, precisely that layer where the question of Wagner's relevance for

* A reference to the lilac monologue in the second act of *Die Meistersinger*.

† Carl Spitzweg (1806–1885), painter of grotesque characters.

today is decided. One should also intervene without question in conspicuously nationalistic passages like the final speech of Hans Sachs. In the same way, one should liberate the musical dramas from the stigma of the disgraceful Jewish caricatures Mime and Beckmesser—at least through the accents set by the production. If Wagner's work is truly ambivalent and fractured, then it can be done justice only by a performance practice that takes this into account and realizes the fractures instead of closing them cosmetically.

It should be asked whether Wagner's relevance for today, as I have attempted to illuminate it from widely divergent angles, isn't, in the familiar phrase, merely artistic, something that is ultimately confined to technical matters. The concept that is implied here of a technique separable from truth content is shallow. But I would like to address the truth content directly. If there is a formula to be found for it, it would be a music that is dark despite all its color and that points to the calamitous fate of the world by representing it. Even the barbaric aspects of Wagner's work are an expression of this: the culture that is shattered there the way Siegfried breaks the anvil of Mime's smithy is not yet a culture at all. Truly the world spirit behaved like the Wagnerian unfolding of total negativity. Even today there is nothing of more serious concern than this; this is why Wagner remains a serious matter. This is affirmed, for the last time perhaps, by the profound affinity between the poetic texts—whether or not one considers them successful—and their compositional realization. Such affinity has not been achieved by any art in the grand style since then. Music became specialized, and it is music's curse, from the point of view of the philosophy of history, that the process of specialization cannot be reversed at will, and yet impairs the relevance and authenticity of the resulting works. The fractures in the Wagnerian work are themselves already the consequence of a claim to totality that is not contented with the specialized artwork, in which Wagner, too, participated through technology. His artistry, his craft, those traits that already enchanted Nietzsche, should be held up in contrast to dull handiwork in order that we might again learn everything from them. In Wagner they serve a vision of the whole that criticizes not only the opera of former times, with its division into different jurisdictions, but also society, with its division of labor, its guilds and orders, as it

exists down to the present day. When the whole of history is shown as circling within itself, as something within which history has not yet begun, it protests wordlessly against this very fact. His friend Bakunin heard this within him when he listened to the *Holländer* and said: "That was only water, what must this music become when one day it deals with fire!" That Wagner could not succeed equally in the representation of fire is itself a piece of metaphysics; driven by its own metaphysics, his music took itself back into itself. But because it does not, in the end, realize what it has promised, it is therefore fallible, given into our hands incomplete, as something to be advanced, unfinished in itself. It awaits the influence that will advance it to self-realization. This would seem to be its true relevance for our time.

Translated by Susan Gillespie