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ARNOLD WHITTALL

WAGNER'S GREAT TRANSITION? FROM *LOHENGRIN* TO *DAS RHEINGOLD*

Wagner died in Venice on 13 February 1883: so the post-Wagnerian period has now become the post-Wagnerian century.* It is a century which has been more concerned with criticism, biography and, latterly, manuscript study than with analysis in the full and fundamental sense of that term: and this is scarcely surprising in view of the difficulties which the analysis of Wagner presents. The best analytical results during this first century have been achieved by those who, in totally different ways, have made the most consistent efforts to be comprehensive. Ernest Newman's essentially literary commentaries and Alfred Lorenz's formal segmentations and comparisons of the later works may be, and often are, arraigned for their superficialities and over-simplifications; but their critics have not so far succeeded in replacing them with anything as stimulating or as wide-ranging. Perhaps that will be possible only after a second century of Wagner studies devoted to painstakingly detailed analysis, using appropriately rigorous and sophisticated techniques. It will then be for the third century of Wagner studies to attempt the great synthesis between detail and totality! Yet even the most cursory consideration of exactly what those techniques might be reminds us of the work that remains to be done with respect to music with which analysts have so far made the most conspicuously constructive progress: music without texts, symphonic music. Nearly fifty years after the death of Schenker we still await those comprehensive studies of symphonic music which will make definitive statements about the connections, if any, between structural fundamentals and stylistic evolution, and between the technique and the quality of a composition: in fact, we still await truly critical analytical accounts of individual composers, and of historical periods. Small wonder, then, that a subject in some ways more demanding — the analysis of large-scale compositions with texts — should be in an even more primitive state, and it is not the purpose of this paper to attempt a great leap forward, proposing comprehensive new theories from which more sophisticated techniques may eventually emerge. Rather, the object is to consider certain essential features of

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Wagnerian procedure which no worthwhile theory can afford to ignore, and to do so by comparing the two particular works which span what is commonly seen as the 'great divide' in Wagner's development.

Lohengrin is usually classified by musicologists as the last of Wagner's romantic operas, *Das Rheingold* as the first of his music dramas; and this classification is based on the observation that while *Lohengrin* contains significant anticipations of the later musico-dramatic practices, *Das Rheingold* is remarkable for its freedom from echos of the old operatic style. According to this view, therefore, the two works cannot be said in any sense to enshrine a gradual transition from romantic opera to music drama, and the reason is not hard to find. They are separated by five and a half years of essay writing and abortive sketching — sketching which, as the published passages from *Siegfrieds Tod* indicate, could perhaps have produced a work more genuinely transitional than either. In the event, *Das Rheingold* followed hard on the heels of the theorising of *Oper und Drama*, and as a result it may well be more distant in manner and method from *Lohengrin* than all the later music dramas from *Die Walküre* to *Parsifal*.

Putting *Lohengrin* and *Das Rheingold* directly alongside each other underlines several very basic differences: between a subject which connects history and legend and a subject which offers a personal gloss on a well-established myth; between a subject which is enacted almost entirely before a public of human beings and a subject which contains no such public dimension; between a work in three separate acts and one in four linked scenes; between a self-contained work and one which forms the Prelude, or Preliminary Evening, to a large trilogy. In these terms, too, all talk of transition seems futile, since there are scarcely any significant similarities between the two works, beyond the well-nigh universal dramatic themes of the conflict between good and evil, the lust for power and the problems of the powerful, and the hazards which beset relationships between men and women.

The analytical commentaries which conclude this paper are not designed to contradict the received orthodoxy that *Lohengrin* and *Das Rheingold* are fundamentally different, not just in matters of subject, but in text and texture. Yet there are also important similarities, especially in the spheres of harmony and phrase structure, and the balancing of differences and similarities strengthens the argument that Wagner's years of theorising did not result in works which severed all connections with the past in either their poetry or their music: rather they made possible the creation of new and more far-reaching connections with more appropriate and potent traditions.

Those years of theorising, from 1848 to 1853, were not simply a period of tranquil, uninterrupted meditation on the current state of German opera. Soon after completing *Lohengrin* Wagner drafted the text of a new drama, called *Siegfrieds Tod*, and wrote an accompanying essay, 'Der Nibelungen-Mythus als Entwurf zu einem Drama'. But when his involvement in political events drove him into exile in Switzerland in May 1849, his dissatisfaction with German society and its artistic institutions crystallised, and he felt what he later

described as a 'great obstacle' to instinctive creation.¹ As Wagner saw it, German opera was debilitatingly dominated by outside influences, whether from France or Italy, and he found it easier to counter these, in the short term, through literary rather than musical composition. He wrote two major essays, 'Die Kunst und die Revolution' and 'Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft', in 1849; the following year he made an abortive attempt to begin the composition of *Siegfrieds Tod*. This was the point at which the *Ring* began to grow, and in 1851, besides completing the essay 'Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde' and the treatise *Oper und Drama*, he wrote the text of 'Der junge Siegfried' and made a few musical sketches for it. By now, Wagner realized that the Nibelung drama needed to grow still further and began to dream of regenerating German opera through a four-part stage work which would be performed in special, Festival circumstances. Between 1851 and 1853, with the far-reaching technical ideals of *Oper und Drama* fresh in his mind, Wagner drafted the texts of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, and then further revised the poem of the complete tetralogy.

As Wagner formulated it at the time, the problem with German opera was not purely musical, to do with excessive dependence on French or Italian models, but extended to the choice of subject-matter and the nature of texts. He came to realize that what he called the 'perfect opera' could be achieved in two ways: by 'a complete transformation of the poet's role'²: and by channelling 'into the bed of music drama the great stream which Beethoven sent pouring into German music'.³ The transformation of the poet's role would be achieved by the use of subject-matter drawn from myths and sagas, and by the use of verse forms less narrowly poetic than those which predominate, for example, in *Lohengrin*, with their regular stress patterns and neatly matching end-rhymes. As for Beethoven, Wagner found particular stimulus in the profoundly simple thematic material and powerfully progressing yet explicitly unified variation form of the Ninth Symphony's finale. For Wagner, the great defect of all earlier opera, even of such a revered work as *Don Giovanni*, was 'looseness, lack of cohesion': it was 'all so lacking in integration'.⁴ So the cohesion and integration — tonal as well as thematic — of Beethoven's symphonic processes were to provide the crucial musical impulse for the new drama, although this impulse was itself powerfully affected by more recent developments, especially the Lisztian brand of symphonic integration in programme music.

Given the radical ways in which Wagner's ideas had developed during the five and a half years since the completion of *Lohengrin*, and the stages through which the complete, definitive poem of the *Ring* had passed before work on the actual composition of *Das Rheingold* was begun, it is scarcely to be wondered at that the text of *Das Rheingold* should be a fully-fledged example of Wagner's new poetic style, in its general avoidance of end-rhyme and its consistent use of *Stabreim*, alliteration. Regular rhyming couplets can be picked out at random from almost any page of the *Lohengrin* libretto — for example (to choose those with four stresses per line):

Des Reinen Arm gib Heldenkraft
 des Falschen Stärke sei erschlafft! (Act I Scene 3)
 or
 Dass meines Jammers trüber Schein
 nie kehr' in deine Feste ein! (Act II Scene 2)
 or
 Seht da den Herzog von Brabant!
 Zum Führer sei er euch ernannt! (Act III Scene 3)

But in *Das Rheingold* I can find only one such couplet, Woglinde's incantation in Scene 1:

Nur wer der Minne Macht versagt
 Nur wer der Liebe Lust verjagt

and even that couplet has prominent alliteration as well as the rare end-rhyme. Important though a detailed study of textual style and structure therefore is for the proper analysis of these works, it seems unlikely that it will provide much useful material for comparison based on significant similarities — the kind of comparison which would enable us to argue that there are genuinely transitional elements in both texts. I will not therefore pursue this matter as an independent topic, but rather examine the connection between poetic and musical form (although it is worth pointing out that the poem of *Lohengrin* is not completely lacking in metrical flexibility, and not completely fixated on end-rhyme; even so, there is considerable difference between its moments of blank verse and the verbal style of *Das Rheingold*). In the commentary to his transcription of the sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod*, Robert Bailey has equated 'the central flaw in the music of *Lohengrin*' with 'Wagner's almost complete avoidance of triple meter': whereas, of course, triple metre is very prominent indeed in *Das Rheingold*. Bailey considers that 'this shortcoming in the music was undoubtedly a direct outgrowth of writing poetic texts almost exclusively in iambs and trochees' — that is, regular successions of short-long and long-short feet.⁵ It may therefore be illuminating to examine the one section of *Lohengrin* which does use triple meter, to see whether any features are present here which contrast with those in sections based on the more characteristic duple or quadruple patterns.

The section in question is the King's prayer and ensemble before the brief fight between Lohengrin and Telramund in Act I Scene 3. If we start with the text itself we can find nothing exceptional, nothing to suggest triple rather than duple metre. There are eight lines of eight syllables each, in regular iambs, with a rhyme-scheme which is, admittedly, slightly irregular (ababccdd):

Mein Herr und Gott, nun ruf' ich dich,
 dass du dem Kampf zugegen sei'st!
 Durch Schwertes Sieg ein Urtheil sprich,
 das Trug und Wahrheit klar erweist!
 Des Reinen Arm gieb Heldenkraft,
 des Falschen Stärke sei erschlafft:
 So hilf uns, Gott, zu dieser Frist,
 weil uns're Weisheit Einfalt ist!

Wagner's setting (Ex. 1) skilfully varies its own accentual and rhythmic patterns, even if the result, aesthetically, has about it a hymn-like sententiousness rather than a Sarastro-like sublimity. The setting in the King's solo section is almost entirely syllabic, and Wagner's basic model is that of four bars per line, with rhythmic predictability and monotony avoided in three ways: by the varied rhythmic profiles of the phrases themselves; by the insertion of one-bar links between eight-bar units; and by the use of a four-bar coda repeating the last line of text, so that the total length is 38 bars, not 32. Nevertheless, there is a regularity and balance which is in keeping with the song-style of the music and has nothing to do with the choice of triple metre: that choice may well have come about simply because Wagner felt that a solemn music like that of the Pilgrims' Hymn in *Tannhäuser* was appropriate here: there are indeed similarities. Passages in *Lohengrin* with duple or quadruple metre but with a similar text structure (eight-syllable line in rhyming couplets) have a comparable regularity, both in the simpler arioso style of Lohengrin's own first solo in this scene, 'Nun sei bedankt, mein lieber Schwan!', as well as in Telramund's belligerent outburst of challenge, 'Welch Zaubern dich auch hergeführt!'. Only in passages closer to recitative than song (Telramund's narration in I/1, or various places in II/1) is such regularity completely set aside, in text and music alike. But when, as is predominantly the case, Wagner's text offers regular metre and end-rhyme, then Wagner composes within the framework of that regularity, and would doubtless still have done so even if he had used more triple metre. He is flexible, but not in essence disruptive: and it is therefore significant that what is generally felt to be the most impressive and expressive melody in *Lohengrin*, the orchestral form of the theme which accompanies the exit of Elsa and Ortrud in II/2, should fill its sixteen bars without a thumpingly regular cadencing after each second or fourth bar-line. The conclusion seems to be that breadth, which this melody has in abundance, was a more fruitful quality for Wagner to develop in later works than the kind of short-breathed, cadentially predictable simplicity of the Bridal Chorus, even though it could be argued that the chorus has more of a forward-looking motivic process than does the Act II melody.

It is not possible to find in *Das Rheingold* a passage with a regular, end-rhymed text and a lack of alliteration for the purposes of direct comparison with King Henry's prayer. Ideally, for the transition argument to work, we would need a passage in duple time with such a text, and duple time would need to be as exceptional in *Das Rheingold* as triple time is in *Lohengrin*. But if we set aside the differences of text form, we can find a song-like passage in a combination of duple and compound time which, like King Henry's Prayer, is built in two parts: a 'model' (in this case 16 bars), and a consequent section that is essentially developmental, like the ensemble which follows the prayer in *Lohengrin*. And since the 'model' part of this episode, Mime's lament from Scene 3, has a perfectly regular phrase structure, in common with many other song-like episodes in the work, it seems undeniable that Wagner was perfectly capable of using regular, duple phrase structure if he wanted to, however regular or irregular the metrical basis of his text.

Ex.1 *Lohengrin*, Act I Scene 3

The King

Mein Herr und Gott, nun ruf ich dich, dass du dem Kampf zu-
My Lord and God, I call on Thee, Ask-ing Thy pres - ence

- ge - gen sei'st! Durch Schwer - tes Sieg ein Ur - theil sprich, das
at our strife! Speak forth thy sen - tence through the sword, Let

Trug und - Wahr - heit klar er - weist! Des Rei - nen
truth and - false-hood clear - ly show. Give him who's

The second of my basic themes is 'the evident differences in the character and content of the orchestral material which supports the vocal lines'. As far as King Henry's prayer is concerned, the accompaniment is of no wider motivic significance than is the melody itself: it is pure accompaniment, and while a thematic analyst could discover some connections between the Prayer music and other elements in the work, it could scarcely be argued that the accompaniment here gives more consistent attention to those motivic elements than does the vocal line. By contrast, the vocal line for the first 16 bars of Mime's lament is itself a simple descant to an equally simple motivic exposition

Arm gkb Hel - den - kraft, des Fal - schen Stär - ke sei er - schlafft:
 pure he - ro - ic strength From false - hood take a - way the might.

so hilf uns, Gott, zu die - ser Frist, weil un - sre
 So help us God this time of times For all our

Weis - heit Ein - falt ist, weil un - sre Weis - heit Ein - falt ist!
 wis - dom is but vain, For all our wis - dom is but vain!

p *rit* *dim* *p* *rit* *p* *pp* *p*

— even though, in this case, the motive is virtually indistinguishable from a conventional accompanimental figure. Certainly, in both the *Lohengrin* and *Das Rheingold* episodes, the most impressive evidence of something resembling symphonic techniques is in the way the opening sections are integrated into and amplified by the sections which follow them and complete the formal unit. In *Lohengrin*, the 38-bar prayer leads to a 51-bar ensemble: in *Das Rheingold*, a 16-bar ‘exposition’ leads to a development which is more than twice as long — 38 bars, though performed at a faster tempo.

Of course, I could scarcely have chosen a more backward-looking episode

from *Lohengrin* than this one, a classic — or romantic — instance of a set piece holding up the dramatic action. But even a passage as widely regarded as genuinely prophetic of the later Wagner as Ortrud's outburst in II/2, 'Entweihte Götter!' — which is an invocation of divine forces very different from King Henry's — quite lacks the motivic perspectives we expect to find in the music dramas. Its rhetoric is prophetic, certainly, but not its actual musical content — unless, that is, every diminished seventh in *Lohengrin* is regarded as directly associated, leitmotivically, with Ortrud's evil designs.

There are, nevertheless, recurrent thematic elements in *Lohengrin*, and all the worthwhile commentaries on the work discuss this use of what are normally called 'themes of reminiscence' to distinguish them from true *Leitmotive*. Though these commentaries invariably fail to give similar attention to the whole matter of how Wagner treats material developmentally which does not recur as a 'theme of reminiscence', they rightly point to the first scene of Act II as the most forward-looking in its thematic processes and therefore, presumably, the most genuinely transitional in method and manner: that is, while this scene cannot be simply equated with the consistent motivic structures of the later works, it does give some indication of how those structures would work. For the moment, I have no new perspectives to offer on these motivic matters, and so, rather than simply cover well-trodden ground, I shall pass on to a more detailed examination of certain vital formal and harmonic factors in salient extracts from the two works.

So far, the main similarity identified in *Lohengrin* and *Das Rheingold* has been Wagner's tendency to use multiples of two-bar phrases as the fundamental unit of measurement on which to build and, occasionally, from which to deviate. Despite the different textual and textural characteristics evident in the two works, we cannot claim that Wagner's methods of form-building were suddenly transformed when he began to compose *Das Rheingold*; and there is also a continuity with respect to fundamental tonal and harmonic processes which calls into question any assumption that music drama is inevitably more radical in harmonic character, and less suitable for consideration in fundamental harmonic terms, than romantic opera.

King Henry's prayer is notable for its prolonging enrichments of dominant and subdominant chords, with the most extended enrichment coming in the early stages of the ensemble which follows the solo section: the twelve-bar, *a cappella* enrichment of the dominant chord here involves the truncated presentation of a progression which, in its full form, partitions the octave by minor thirds, thereby enabling the composer to reach the chord a tritone away from his starting point with notable rapidity (*in Ex. 2). Wagner reaches the tritone in relatively orthodox fashion: but instead of continuing the sequence to get himself back as naturally as possible to his starting point, he writes a one-bar, unaccompanied linear motion from tritone to starting point (F \flat –B \flat) and then devotes six bars (of which three only are shown here) to stabilizing the surprisingly sudden return to the dominant:

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Ex. 2

Elsa (1)
Ortrud (2)
Lohengrin (1)

Telramund (3)
The King (4)

(T) (K) (T)

* 7.

¹Du kündest nun dein wahr Gericht,
mein Gott und Herr, drum zag' ich nicht!

²Ich baue fest auf seine Kraft, die, wo er kämpft, ihm Sieg
verschafft.

³(Herr Gott!) Herr Gott, nun verlass mein' Ehre nicht!

⁴Mein Herr und Gott, dich rufe ich!
Nun künd uns (. . . dein wahr Gericht!)

This, and the many other comparable instances, shows the skill with which Wagner could control chromatic harmony in *Lohengrin*. Comparison with the Mime episode from Scene 3 of *Das Rheingold* nevertheless suggests an advance, a greater adventurousness, or at least a greater flexibility. The 16-bar 'model' section here is, harmonically, even more straightforward than King Henry's prayer, with only a tonicization of the mediant ($B\flat$ major) to enrich its basic diatonicism, but the hugely expanded 38-bar consequent section elaborates this particular enrichment of the tonic chord by emphasizing the dominant chord of the mediant $B\flat$: and this harmony has enormous motivic significance, since it is closely identified with Alberich. The tonic chord of $B\flat$ minor or major is not present here, however; and the actual closure on the tonic of G minor occurs only at the start of the next section of the scene, without any transition.

As these examples suggest, it is proving impossible to separate harmonic and formal factors in Wagner analysis, and that is even more the case in my final comparison. *Das Rheingold* was, in Wagner's mind, the first new German opera: we may therefore feel confident that he would have wished to provide a convincing, conclusive example of his new 'symphonic' way of achieving cohesion and integration. How better to do this than to end the work with a section which does not simply confirm the central importance of a particular tonality, but which amounts to an extended, developmental recapitulation of the section in which that tonality was first unfolded? *Lohengrin* has no direct precedent to offer for this. For although the Act I Prelude does relate fairly closely to parts of the final scene's focal event, Lohengrin's narrative monologue 'In fernem Land', the predominant arioso style of that monologue has little in common with the Prelude's more symphonic style. And although the ending of *Lohengrin* makes skilful use of various thematic reminiscences and symbolic tonal relations, notably the crucial one between F# and A, there are no broader parallels between that ending and earlier events in the work — even those which were apparently composed after the ending itself.

It would be something of an over-simplification to say that the last 150 bars of *Das Rheingold* represent a developmental recapitulation of the 57 bars which begin Scene 2, especially as not all the bars in question have the same time-signature; but that statement would convey at least the essence of the situation. Of itself the Valhalla music which begins Scene 2 — the work's fourth Period, according to Alfred Lorenz — is possibly a little less regular in phrase-structure and rather more consistently diatonic in harmonic character, compared with a formal scheme in *Lohengrin* — the Bridal Chorus, for example. But the real difference between the two passages lies in the way their motivic potential is exploited elsewhere; or not, in the case of the Bridal Chorus. The basic formal outline of Period 4 in *Das Rheingold* — a clear example of *Bogenform*, in Lorenz's terminology⁶ — provides a Principal Section of 20 bars progressing from tonic to dominant: a middle section of 8 bars, after a 2-bar interruption, which enriches the dominant chord and develops the principal Valhalla motive; then, after a 5-bar interruption, a 22-bar recapitulatory section, enriching the tonic chord. The equivalent segment of the closing scene — the major part of Lorenz's *Bogenform* 19th Period⁷ — has sections of 30, 30 and 90 bars (or 105, including the coda), with the final section incorporating within its tonal frame other developments and recapitulations as well as that of the Valhalla theme. In addition, the central section contains some spectacular new material, introduced as Wotan salutes the fortress, and a remarkable double enrichment of the dominant chord — A_b major — to take the harmony through F minor to C major. Harmonic enrichment of basic diatonic structures was already well developed in *Lohengrin*; but that work has far more of conventional cadential rhetoric than does *Das Rheingold*. The later work does not literally shun emphatic perfect cadences, yet when they do occur they are treated with a new power and imagination (compare, for example, the endings of 'In fernem Land' with Alberich's Curse or Wotan's Salutation). Thus there is a shift of emphasis

in the elements which constitute and define the 2-, 4- or 8-bar units in *Das Rheingold*, a shift which promotes a greater stylistic and structural richness in the development of successions of tonal focuses and implications. Wagner has become more committed to that whole process of loosening the ties between tonics and dominants — a process that has proved so influential for music of the post-Wagner century and so problematic for post-Wagner analysts. Clearly it is the impulse for larger continuity provided by the combination of motivic evolution and harmonic enrichment which is new in *Das Rheingold*; and it is the relative absence of conjunction between these two factors in *Lohengrin* which ensures that, in the end, that work is likely to be judged as a thoroughly convincing and satisfying opera, rather than as a hybrid work whose main interest is in its proto-musico-dramatic features.

If, as seems to be the case, *Lohengrin* is more concerned with differences than similarities, it is in this sense at least a more radical work than the first music drama. But I doubt whether we should apply such rigorous 'Modernist' standards as to what constitutes radicalism to works from the mid-19th century, especially as it must in the end be the greater integration present in *Das Rheingold* that makes the analyst say the work is not just different from, more progressive than, *Lohengrin*; it is actually better. *Das Rheingold* does indeed share certain basic structural and syntactic features of harmonic character and form with *Lohengrin*. But the differences between the two works are not just musical, not just a matter of the presence of consistently evolving musical ideas, the *Leitmotive*, in *Das Rheingold*. In his music dramas, Wagner sought subjects in which 'all that smacks of convention and all that pertains to abstract reason is completely missing'⁸: and he sought a simply, easily grasped action which would spare the poet 'the necessity of retarding explanations'.⁹ It may well be that, of all the music dramas, *Das Rheingold* most purely fulfils these aspirations. It certainly has less in the way of 'retarding explanations' than any of the later, longer dramas, and less of conventional operatic device. It may be reckless in the extreme to challenge the conventional wisdom that *Das Rheingold* lacks the purely musical richness of the later works. But I do believe that it has action and reflection in better balance than any save, perhaps, *Die Meistersinger*.

Stylistically, for sure, Wagner needed a clean break after *Lohengrin* — a point amply confirmed by the failings evident in the sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod*. And even if the kinds of phrase structure and chromatic harmony already evident in the romantic operas survive in the music dramas, their effect was substantially changed by being brought into contact with the new kind of text, the new motivic processes and the new, far less stylized dramatic character which they promoted. Of course, there are many other possible types of comparison between *Lohengrin* and *Das Rheingold* than the ones I have touched on. And any comparative study is likely to remind us of the senses in which 'style' is foreground; I mean that without some continuity of the most fundamental sort, coherent style itself would probably disintegrate, or at least fail to develop effectively. Wagner's attempt to begin the composition of *Siegfrieds Tod* came

to grief in 1851 for a variety of reasons. But the survival of the composer's fundamental technical principles, his structural essentials, was not at risk, and it is this continuity which ultimately explains the extraordinary speed with which Wagner's work on *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* was eventually able to proceed.

NOTES

1. 'Zukunftsmusik' (1860): 'Music of the Future', in *Three Wagner Essays*, trans. Robert L. Jacobs (London: Eulenberg, 1979), p. 23.
2. *Loc. cit.*
3. *Op. cit.*, p. 19.
4. *The Diaries of Cosima Wagner*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (London: Collins 1980), Vol. 2, p. 493.
5. 'Wagner's Musical Sketches for *Siegfried's Tod*' in *Studies in Music History: Essays for Oliver Strunk*, ed. Harold Powers (Princeton: Princeton University, 1968), p. 478.
6. *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner. Vol. 1: Der Musikalische Aufbau des Bühnenfestspiels Der Ring des Nibelungen* (Tutzing: Schneider, 1966), pp. 93–4.
7. Lorenz, *op. cit.*, pp. 195–6.
8. 'Music of the Future', p. 24.
9. *Op. cit.*, p.34.