

Wagner the Innovator

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It has fallen to me to be one of the less frivolous contributors to this *Bikwil Wagner* issue. What follows, however, is something which only on a charitable day might just pass for an "academic" or "formal" paper. This short article will thus not be particularly learned, and certainly it isn't boldly original. What it may be, though, is interesting enough to motivate further explorations by the new Wagner buff into a couple of the more technical aspects of the composer's art. To that end, as we proceed I'll provide references to the literature I found most illuminating while researching this topic.

The Vision Thing

Before we can talk about Wagner's craft (at least that of his mature works *Tristan*, the *Ring*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*) we must first address his *Gesamtkunstwerk* concept (= unified art form). In opera the method had long been to have the various scenes sung by isolated arias or choruses which rarely bore any musical relationship to each other. As a rule, operas set throughout to music (whether arias, recitatives, ensembles or choruses) were called "grand operas", while those with dialogue came to be known as "comic operas".

Wagner's intention, by contrast, was to create a new kind of dramatic work, in which music, poetry, drama, acting, scenery and spectacle could be combined in a meaningful and expressive whole, and which was to be called, not "opera", but "music drama". The *Collins Encyclopedia of Music* [1] offers a deft summary of all the stipulations Wagner attached to the idea, which included legends as subject matter, verse written by the composer, the abandonment of conventions like the operatic ensemble, the orchestra as equally expressive partner to the voices, and symphonic continuity.

From here on, however, I will be able to focus on just two design implications of the concept: melodic and orchestrational. I realize that this will omit a number of other important topics, but space limitations dictate such exclusions.

Catchphrases Galore

One device Wagner developed to help actualize his vision is known as the "leitmotiv".

Contrary to a widespread misconception, neither the term "leitmotiv" nor the device itself was invented by Wagner. His word was "Grundthema" (= basic theme). The coinage of the word "leitmotiv" has sometimes been attributed to Friedrich Wilhelm Jähns [2], who was applying it, not to Wagner, but to Weber. Most commentators [3], however, confer the credit on H. von Wolzogen, the editor of *Bayreuther Blätter*, who employed it 1887 when discussing *Götterdämmerung*, and who gave the leitmotifs their well-known names.

So what exactly is a leitmotiv? Simply put, in the words of the indestructible Anna Russell, "it merely means a signature tune" for persons, events, emotions and physical objects — a sort of motto chiefly used as a "device of presentiments and reminiscences" [4]. In a way, it resembles Berlioz' *idée fixe* in his *Symphonie Fantastique* of 1830, although Wagner made far more elaborate and consistent use of it, particularly in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The fascinating thing in that work is that, though each leitmotiv has its own easily remembered melodic characteristic (often harmonic and/or rhythmic as well), almost every one grows out of another previously heard.

Sometimes the connections only become apparent in retrospect, but it is the symphonist's art to integrate large-scale structures, linking backward and forward to create a continuous text, rich in associative ideas. [5]

The effect of this back-and-forth association of leitmotifs is thus an unbroken thematic development that ultimately binds the four dramas together into a cohesive, organic musical edifice, and helps give it its unity.

These days there are many references available for the *Ring* student to explore in detail the meaning and interplay of the work's melodic fragments. One is a now out-of-print book by Aylmer Buesst [6], which narrates

the full plot of the tetralogy, at the same time naming, numbering and notating each leitmotiv, original or derived, as it appears. Another is the magnificent Ring Disc CD-Rom, which allows you to search by leitmotiv, then hear it in context.

For my money the most useful resource, however, is the recording made by Deryck Cooke [7] as part of the Decca re-release as an integrated set of its world's-first complete Ring recording. Cooke's masterly explanation consists of commentary and nearly 200 examples extracted from the Decca recordings, plus a printed version of both, the leitmotiv examples in musical notation.

The advantage here, of course, is that you can look and listen at the same time. The only possible question arising is this: is the Cooke recorded commentary available separately? I'm not sure, but then, doesn't everyone need a Solti/Vienna PO Ring anyway?

New Sounds for Old

Coming now to the implications of the music drama concept for the use of the orchestra, I want to first clarify the acoustic importance of the design of the Bayreuth building itself. Modeling his auditorium on the sloping fan shape of an ancient amphitheatre, so that the lines of sight would be democratically favorable from all seats, Wagner did away with the private side boxes hitherto so valued by the European upper classes. Nor would he permit pillars or multi-storey galleries.

At the same time he had the orchestra repositioned from its customary place into a sunken area in front of and partly beneath the proscenium. Orchestra and audience were separated by a low wall, and the source of the opera's music was now essentially invisible to the spectators. In this respect the Bayreuth Festspielhaus has had an abiding influence on all musical theatres subsequently built, with most theatre-goers today, however, blithely unaware that the orchestra pit they take for granted was Richard Wagner's invention.

In addition, the hall was built entirely of timber. Gottfried Semper, Wagner's architect, believed wood to be the best possible building material for acoustic purposes.

Musicians of the day loved the sound properties of the theatre, as the following observation attests:

In this hall brass is transformed into gold. [8]

Acoustically, then, Bayreuth in 1876 offered a completely new experience. Yet these innovations were not purely for the purpose of better listening, but all arose rather from the Gesamtkunstwerk objective. Wagner, in characteristic language, actually called the space between the front row seats and the stage action the "mystic abyss",

. . . because it is intended to separate reality from idealism . . . [it] has the effect of producing . . . [the perception] that the figures in the scene appear to be of enlarged, superhuman dimensions. [9]

As important to Wagner as that larger-than-life impression was the advantage that the pit prevented the distractions caused by

. . . the mechanical movements attendant on the musicians' and their conductor's performance . . . [distractions to be avoided] almost as carefully as the strings, ropes, and boards of the scenery, which, when viewed from the wings, have a notoriously destructive effect on any illusion. [10]

So far, so good — a place for the musicians and the musicians in their place. But Wagner's theatrical innovations were matched — surpassed — by his skill as an orchestrator, and that is what we now turn our attention to. Indeed, for countless listeners his unwieldy political, philosophical and quasi-religious ideas as realised in his opera house design are of little import; what they hear clearest and love most is the sound of the orchestral writing.

It was not for nothing that he never tired of claiming his musical descent from Beethoven rather than from such operatic composers as Gluck, Mozart and Weber. For in Beethoven's symphonies Wagner saw the expression of poetic and dramatic ideas; and since this was precisely his aim in the music-drama, he took the decisive step of applying Beethoven's symphonic technique to the medium of opera. [11]

In other words, his grand conception demanded a symphonic approach rather than a traditional operatic one, and with it a greatly enlarged orchestra. In this he was undoubtedly assisted by current improvements in instrument

design and construction (e.g. horns, trumpets and tubas with valves), and in fact wrote specifications for several of them.

What follows are some relevant quotations from writings on Wagner's inventive orchestral dexterity.

Millington points out that, during the last two centuries,

. . . composers have drawn more specifically on tone-color to articulate the language of emotion. Wagner participated in this process by exploiting timbres of instruments, both in families and individually. To some of the less familiar instruments — the bass clarinet and bass tuba, for example — he gave a respectability that has remained with them ever since. He even invented, for *The Ring*, an instrument to bridge the gap in tonal color between the horns and trombones. The "Wagner tuba" [not a tuba really, more a horn-saxhorn hybrid] is played by each of four extra horn players who alternate between the two instruments, and gives a sombre dignity to such passages as the announcement of the Valhalla motif. [12]

Paul Grabbe says:

Where previously three harps had been considered ample, he called for six; instead of the traditional four horns, he wanted eight. Eventually he wound up with a body of 112 players capable of thunderous sound effects. [13]

According to David Boyden,

Wagner's orchestra was an instrument of fabulous power, and he was its absolute master. . . [In his hands] the orchestra had become complete in all divisions. The number of instruments had been vastly increased, the woodwinds greatly improved, and the brass made chromatic by the addition of valves. *The Ring* requires a complete family of tubas, eight horns, three trumpets, bass trumpet, and four trombones, including a contrabass trombone. Comparable expansion had taken place in the rest of the orchestra. The whole orchestra could furnish some seventeen choirs and about one hundred voice parts! [14]

Just as important as Wagner's use of new instruments and his expansion of the sheer size of the orchestra is the way he refrained from assailing our ears continuously with fortissimo tutti passages. Yes, I know everyone thinks of his music as deafening, and admittedly when it is loud there's nothing more incandescently exciting. But it does not blast all the time.

. . . the use that Wagner made of this potential volume was as skillful as it was new. For instance, instead of swelling or decreasing volume with the whole orchestra, he wove a complicated pattern of alternating crescendos and diminuendos by individual instruments. He also introduced tiny melodic fragments intended not so much to be heard separately as to add greater richness to the tonal texture. In his climaxes he made the violins move in an intricate network of figuration around the blaring brasses which he did not hesitate to use in unison. [15]

Evans and Carner [16] describe Wagner's orchestral style as "multi-coloured and immensely flexible", while Boyden [17] notes:

With such variety and range of pitch and dynamics, magical effects related to the situation could be produced almost entirely by orchestral means. As in all great orchestrators, Wagner's demands from the orchestra were directly related to the orchestral effects he wished to create. No one before or since has created such effects of brilliant light (*Lohengrin*) or dark cavernous sounds (*The Ring*). The opulence and variety of his instrumental colors are surely the most extraordinary in opera.

Perhaps the definitive discussion of Wagner's instrumentation and orchestration is to be found in Adam Carse's book. In this Carse devotes 14 pages to the topic, and it is well worth study for those interested in the awe-inspiring sound of Wagner's orchestra. On the point of Wagner's brass, for example, Carse was one of the first to show clearly that "the secret of their irresistible power of penetration" [18] often lies in their use, not harmonized in open chords (as lesser composers might have done), but in majestic unison or octaves.

The Surface Merely Scratched

So there you have it: leitmotifs and orchestra, just two of Wagner's new methods. None of this of course has touched on his concept of "endless melody", nor on the more outré sounds he demanded for *The Ring*, such as 18 tuned anvils, the thunder machine, a pair of off-stage steer-horns, the alp-horn . . . For some impressive photos in the latter domain, check out John Culshaw's book on the making of the Decca Ring. [19]

Also ignored here is the issue of Wagner's notorious poetry. Though not downright failures, his librettos can be criticized on a number of counts (the words "turgid" and "tedious" come readily to mind), and readers are best encouraged to look into all that at their own pace.

In the meantime, I hope this little piece will have enhanced your understanding of and listening pleasure with Wagner's music. In case it hasn't, I'll leave you Bikwilians with this tasty morsel from Frank Muir:

An alp-horn is a very long round wooden instrument with a hole through the middle, sometimes having a bend towards the far end to support it. Laughing Swiss peasantry in leather knickers blow down it at dusk to call home the Gruyère cheeses. [20]

1 Collins Encyclopedia of Music, pp. 591-2. Lond., Collins, 1976.

2 Quoted in The Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Lond., OUP, 1989), from Composer & Conductor, Aug. 1971.

3a Collins Encyclopedia of Music, p. 319;

3b Robert L. Jacobs, Wagner, p. 160. Lond., Dent, 1947

4 Barry Millington, Richard Wagner, a Musical Appreciation, in: Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, The Wagner Companion, p. 8. Lond., W.H. Allen, 1977. ISBN 0 491 01856 8.

5 Ibid., p. 11

6 Aylmer Buesst, The Nibelung's Ring, 2nd ed. Lond. Newman Neame, 1952.

7 Deryck Cooke, An Introduction to Der Ring des Nibelungen, being an Explanation and Analysis of Wagner's System of Leitmotifs. Lond., Decca, 1968?

8 Anonymous musician, quoted in The World of Music, p. 2171. Lond., Waverley, 1954.

9 Richard Wagner, quoted in Mander and Mitchenson, op. cit., p. 101-2.

10 Ibid.

11 Edwin Evans and Mosco Carner, German Music, in Jethro Bithell, Germany, a Companion to German Studies, 5th ed., p. 480. Lond., Methuen, 1955.

12 Millington, op. cit., p. 8

13 Paul Grabbe, The Story of Orchestral Music and Its Times, pp. 66-7. N.Y., Grosset and Dunlap, 1942.

14 David D. Boyden, An Introduction to Music, 2nd ed., pp. 344-5. Lond., Faber, 1971. ISBN 0 571 091 19 0.

15 Grabbe, *ibid.*

16 Evans and Carner, *ibid.*

17 Boyden, *ibid.*

18 Adam Carse, The History of Orchestration, p. 280. N.Y., Dover, 1964 (reprint of the original 1925 edition).

19 John Culshaw, Ring Resounding. Lond., Secker and Warburg, 1967.

20 Steve Race, My Music, p. 130. Lond., Robson, 1979. ISBN 0 86051 072 7.