

New perspectives on Richard Wagner's opera

GEORGE ȘTEFAN COMAN*

“George Enescu” National University of the Arts, Iași
ROMÂNIA

Abstract: The originality of the artistic conception and the creative principles launched by Richard Wagner in his writings on musical aesthetics continue to be a subject of research. Renowned musicologists such as Deryck Cooke, Bryan Magee or Richard Taruskin delve deeper into Wagner's conception, both through the reception of his work and through the interpretation of his literature and of the way in which it is reflected in the composing process. Starting from current research, the study focuses on explaining the composer's contributions to revolutionising the opera genre. We discuss the following components of his conception: the concept of a "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), taken from romantic literature and philosophy, which deals with the perfect union of all arts, having the Greek tragedy as a model; the writing of libretti for dramas, inspired by Germanic Norse mythology and adapted to special versification techniques (*Stabreim*); the emancipation of musical dramaturgy by rethinking the composing process, using original techniques (infinite melody, leitmotifs); the introduction of a specific type of vocal declamation, called *Wagnerian sprechgesang*. His creation decisively influenced the evolution of opera precisely because of an artistic vision capable of rendering human experience in a complex and unitary way.

Keywords: Wagner, opera, aesthetics, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, dramaturgy.

1. Introduction

Richard Wagner's work and theories had an overwhelming impact on the development of the genre in the 20th century and continue to arouse a growing interest among performers, listeners, and researchers. This phenomenon has resulted in original interpretations, in the discovery of new meanings in the composer's theoretical writings, as well as in the elaboration of numerous specialised studies which launch present-day aesthetic and philosophical visions. Along with the detailed research of the scores and of a significant part of Wagner's writings, the present study has also involved the consultation of important scientific works signed by authors such as Bryan Magee, Deryck Cooke, Roger Scruton, Collin Cleary, Richard Taruskin and Heinrich Porges. The contact with numerous studies in specialised scientific journals has also provided me with numerous ideas and themes that have been thoroughly debated, contributing substantially to the progress of this research.

* PhD Student, email: comangeorge67@gmail.com; PhD Supervisor: Prof. Laura Otilia Vasiliu.

This study aims to bring into focus new aesthetic concepts, principles and compositional practices of Wagner's work, as well as to discuss the composer's contributions to the development of the opera genre, with the goal of offering a new perspective on musical dramas and on the message that the composer wanted to communicate through them.

2. The total work of art – *Gesamtkunsterk*

The idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk [Total Work of Art] is not Wagner's invention. It appeared in the works of German Romantic writers and philosophers, such as Friedrich Schelling¹, the main theme being the necessary emancipation of the human being to the highest levels of self-consciousness, so that the artist's work would increasingly identify with the work of nature. The first mention of the term itself belongs to the writer and philosopher Eusebius Trahdorff, who, in 1827, published the work *Ästhetik oder Lehre von Weltanschauung und Kunst* [Aesthetics or the Study of Worldview and Art]. Starting with 1849, the idea appears in Wagner's theoretical writings (*Die Kunst und die Revolution*), the author considering Greek tragedy as the essential synthesis of the arts. The composer's subsequent writings and essays develop this principle, putting forward an entirely new and meticulous way of conceiving and treating opera, viewed from the perspective of an interdependent relationship of all its constituent arts. Wagner thus lays the foundations of clear precepts and theories on the configuration of a new genre of musical-dramatic art.²

Following the timeline of Wagner's work, we can see that his writings anticipate his operas. Regarding Wagner's theoretical writings, Bryan Magee launches the idea that one of the main reasons for their writing was that within the composer there was a glimpse of the development of new creative visions and possibilities, and, in order to clarify them, the composer tried to articulate them in the form of a theoretical system; thus, although the operas succeeded the writings, being presented to the public later, the latter are the ones that derive from the operas and not vice versa, a fact confirmed by the composer's statement:³

“Let me say that even the boldest strokes of the dramatic-musical form which I was postulating came to me because I had in mind at the same time the plan for my great Nibelungen drama, of which I had already written one part [the text of Siegfried's Death]. At this time, the conception was

¹ Friedrich Schelling (1802). *Bruno oder über das göttliche und natürliche Princip der Dinge* [Bruno or about the divine or natural principle of things], 1802.

² *** Gesamtkunstwerk, Wikipedia, the free Enciclopedia, from https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gesamtkunstwerk#cite_note-1.

³ Bryan Magee (2009). *Aspects of Wagner*, Revised and enlarged edition, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, p. 5.

maturing in a way that made my theory little more than an abstract expression of the productive artistic process which was taking shape within me.”⁴

Wagner's central theory, due, to a considerable extent, to the experience accumulated as a result of his work in German theatres and concert halls, deals with the meaning of the opera, its genesis, its affirmation and, subsequently, its decline. In order to reimagine the genre, the composer turned his attention to Greek tragedy, considering it the highest form of artistic expression. Bryan Magee formulates five main reasons why Greek tragedy was at the origin of Wagnerian drama: 1. it constituted a successful combination of all the arts; 2. the topics were taken from mythology; 3. the content and occasion of the performances had a religious significance; 4. the performances represented a celebration of life; 5. the entire community participated. Thus, this art form was ideal because it formed a unitary whole: “its means of expression encompassed all the arts, its themes encompassed all human experiences, and its audience encompassed the entire population.”⁵

From the very first pages of *Opera and Drama*, Wagner meticulously explains the genesis of opera and how it has developed over time, so that, after an extensive historical description, the composer expresses his disapproval and criticizes the compositional habits of those that came before him. Careful analysis led him to find and denounce an “error” in the opera genre, according to which a means of expression (music) had become an end, and the end of expression, represented by drama, had become the means. In this regard, the composer deplores the phenomenon of subordination of all the elements that make up a musical performance, which has irreversibly led to the neglect of the text and dramatic action due to the belief that only music, having reached a peak of expression, can express emotions and feelings. As a result, the poet has become subordinate to the composer, since only musical means are taken into account in terms of both organizing moments and selecting subjects⁶.

However, opera had the greatest potential, because it was the only one in the modern world which could combine all the arts as Greek tragedy had successfully done in ancient times. Therefore, the need for a revolution in opera became imperative in order to turn it into a comprehensive art form, in which all the resources of dramaturgy, poetry, instrumental music, song, interpretation, gestures, costumes and scenery would be combined once again in the theatrical representation of myth (before an audience made up of all social classes). The topic of such works, although purely human, could be constituted by the deepest

⁴ Jack M. Stein (1960). *Richard Wagner & The Synthesis of Arts*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, p. 68.

⁵ Bryn Magee (2009). *Aspects of Wagner*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁶ Richard Wagner (1983). *Opera și drama* [Opera and Drama], translation by Liviu Rusu and Bucur Stănescu, Editura Muzicală, București, p. 34.

things in life. Consequently, far from being simple entertainment, opera would acquire the aura of a religious manifestation⁷.

3. Literary sources and the creation of libretti. *Stabreim*

In the process of designing and writing the libretti, Wagner thoroughly studied Germanic myths, developing the material in his own style, like the authors of mediaeval poems. The result of this practice was the revelation and development of new meanings latent in the sources, rendered through a unique interpretative vision. According to researcher Collin Cleary, myths and epics are not works with a clearly defined form, framed only under certain patterns; in the right hands, they become capable of giving rise to new ideas and connections. Specialists appreciate that the intellectual depth of Wagnerian texts is due to the direct influence exerted on the composer by philosophers such as Hegel, Feuerbach and Schopenhauer⁸.

Opera libretti, also called “poems,” as Wagner considered them, were the pinnacle of all stage creation. Unlike his predecessors, whose texts did not go beyond the level of “templates” which were to remain humble in servitude to music, Wagner completely rethought the technique of writing opera texts, explaining it in numerous articles and theoretical works. Thus, in the work *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde* (“A Communication to My Friends”), Wagner provides information about the form and style of the new genre of dramatic libretto, based on the ancient alliterative verse *Stabreim*, which appeared in the times of Teutonic poetry, and on the old Nordic songs and ballads (for example in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda Snora*) from which Wagner drew inspiration for the creation of the *Ring*⁹.

A characteristic of this technique is its rhythmic structure: it does not use classical rhythms or rhymes, but relies on accents and pauses. Wagner adopted this way of writing the lyrics to suggest the epic and mythological atmosphere of his texts, thus reflecting the traditional style of versification specific to the myths and heroic stories of the Northern European space. In terms of dramatic function, the presence of alliteration in the sung texts helps emphasize the authenticity and archaic character of the Wagnerian universe, giving the stage performance a ritualistic character. The Wagnerian *Stabreim* is an artistic innovation to unify the text with the music; it provides clarity and strength to the music through its sound, while the music provides the alliterated words with the depth of their literary meanings¹⁰. In addition to the fact that the texts of the

⁷ Bryan Magee (2009). *Aspects of Wagner*, op. cit., p. 7.

⁸ Collin Cleary (2021). *Wagner's Ring and the Germanic Tradition*, Wagnerphile Books, U.S.A., pp. 3-4.

⁹ Richard Taruskin (2010). *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, Cap. 10, *Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class 1813, I)*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 501.

¹⁰ Deryck Cooke (2002). *I Saw the World End, A study of Wagner's Ring*, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, p. 78.

operas form a balanced conceptual framework for the musical development, they also have exceptional dramatic clarity, highlighted both in the individual profile of each character and in the intelligibility of the stage action, whether we are referring to *Tristan und Isolde*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* or *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The characters' language, although succinct, is full of voluptuousness, the lyrics suggesting a multitude of meanings, even if this is about present events or the mention or remembrance of others that have already taken place¹¹.

4. Musical dramaturgy

Wagner's artistic vision, as it is treated in his theoretical writings, is about turning music into the vehicle of drama. It says that music is not an accompaniment to words, but the main channel through which the emotions conveyed in the drama are transmitted – both the motives of the characters and the reactions of the audience. However, music is not an explicit channel of representation, given that its meaning, expressed only through sound, is interdependent on the subjectivity and sensitivity of the listener. The relationship between words and music was meant to change forever, the latter taking over the task of explaining the meaning of the words. Music was to introduce into the drama all those deeper levels of meaning, symbolism and primordial emotion that words alone could only suggest¹².

Three innovations promoted this objective: the development of the construction of lyrics that would unite the movement of the music with the emotional rhythm of the words, the reinvention of the orchestra, so that it would serve the composer's intentions through all its possibilities, and the development of the entire musical-dramatic construction based on well-defined musical themes, with unlimited potential for variation, themes which could be easily correlated with any extra-musical element: leitmotifs.

4.1. Leitmotifs

In his work *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* [A Communication to My Friends], Wagner writes an extensive presentation of the leitmotif principle in the composition of musical form, explaining the principle of recurring musical themes whose purpose is to create an organic unity between music and drama; the fact that the structure of his music is influenced by the poetic topic causes the musical themes (which he calls *Hauptthemen*) to be organized and continuously developed according to the characters' moods. Thus, an essential dramatic moment acquires a specific musical theme, which is linked to other scenes and contributes to a coherent narrative. As for the origin of the term

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

¹² Roger Scruton (2017). *The Ring of Truth, The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of The Nibelung*, Penguin Books, UK, 2017, p. 146.

“leitmotif”, its promoter was Baron Hans Paul von Wolzogen, one of the composer’s friends, who catalogued the musical ideas from the *Ring* cycle in a special programme, on the occasion of the first edition of the Bayreuth Festival¹³.

A particularly important aspect, pointed out by Richard Taruskin, is that Wagner, following the principle of abstraction and avoiding the tendency towards programmatic music, never gave any leitmotif a specific name, unlike the “fixed idea” technique used by Hector Berlioz. This decision can be justified by Wagner's desire to have the meaning of the leitmotifs result from a cognitive process of the audience, based on the association of the music with the action taking place on stage at that moment. Thus, due to the stimulation of the listener’s imagination, the audience actively participated in the development of the musical drama, to the same extent that the viewers of ancient tragedies participated in the artistic act¹⁴.

According to Wagner's statement regarding the entire construction of drama as an organic unity, the processing and combination of thematic materials, which must remain ever present in the viewer’s mind, is an essential factor for the narrative development to reach the fullness of its aesthetic possibilities. However attentive his audience might be, one of Wagner's goals was to infuse the musical fabric with materials that would remind them of previously heard events and contexts and to show them, through combination and processing, how these reference points changed according to the relationships between characters, moods, and context over time¹⁵.

There are several categories of leitmotifs that require a separate discussion. The first category of this type consists of the leitmotifs which appear from the very beginning of the musical development in *Das Rheingold* and which gradually accumulate a wide range of meanings through various musical processing procedures (the leitmotif of *Wotan's spear*).





Fig. 2 The *contract* leitmotif



Fig. 3 The *storm* leitmotif

The second special category of leitmotifs consists of themes made up of several musical particles, which, when put together, form their own melody, which is easily recognizable and which gradually becomes a “focal point” of dramatic meanings; the cells can be developed separately, acquiring new meanings during the course of the drama (the *Valhalla* leitmotif).

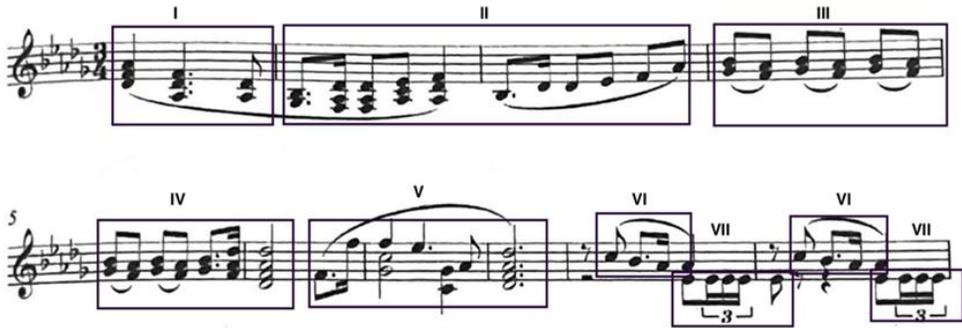


Fig. 4 The *Valhalla* leitmotif, in sections

The third category consists of “saturated” and “unsaturated” leitmotifs. While the former can appear as clearly defined motifs, without the need to merge or combine them with other musical ideas (the *Tarnhelm* leitmotif), the latter are distinguished by their very need to receive a complement, thus achieving an intrinsic dramatic connection (the *ring* leitmotif or the *sword* leitmotif). The fourth category, perhaps the most controversial and debated by most experts, has as its point of interest a certain leitmotif that suggests a key idea throughout all Wagnerian dramas: the leitmotif associated with the goddess Freia in the *Ring*, is split into two distinct parts, the latter taking on an essential role in each scene associated with the feeling of love. This musical idea appears for the first time in the opera *Lohengrin* (the *Grail* theme) and is introduced, transformed and endlessly processed in the four dramas of the tetralogy¹⁶.

¹⁶ Roger Scruton (2017). *The Ring of Truth, The Wisdom of Wagner’s Ring of The Nibelung*, p. 153.

Music Section



Fig. 5 The leitmotif associated to the goddess Freia/ the *love* leitmotif/ the *flight* leitmotif, *Das Rheingold*

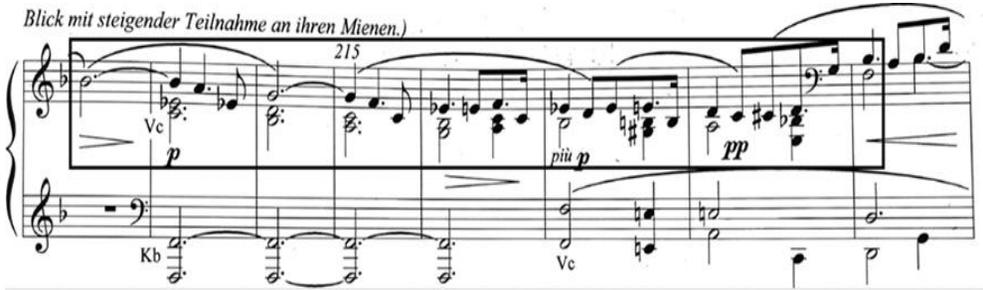


Fig. 6 Richard Wagner, *Die Walküre*, Act. I, Sc. I, ms. 212-219 – the *love* leitmotif portraying the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde



Fig. 7 Richard Wagner, *Lohengrin*, Act. III, Sc. 3 – the *love* leitmotif present in Lohengrin's aria (*In fernem Land*)

5. Wagnerian *Sprechgesang*

The term *sprechgesang* designates a vocal technique that arises from the combination of singing and speech, but, in the Wagnerian context, it develops in an original manner called *Wagnerian sprechgesang*. Although Wagner did not provide a specific name, he used this type of declamation in his works, adapting it to his aesthetic principles. It is also necessary to make a clear distinction between the concepts of *sprechgesang* and *sprechstimme*. The first term is more closely related to musical techniques carried out over longer periods, characteristic of recitative or *parlando*-type sequences, than *sprechstimme*. When the term is used in this way, it mainly refers to Wagnerian musical dramas, as well as to several other works composed in the 19th century. Thus, the term *sprechgesang* may often refer only to a German alternative to the recitative¹⁷.

One of the earliest uses of the *sprechstimme* technique appears in the first version of Engelbert Humperdinck's melodrama *Königskinder* from 1897 (a section which in the 1910 version was replaced by conventional melodic writing), but it is more closely associated with the composers of the Second Viennese School. Among them, Arnold Schönberg uses this technique in a number of works: the narrator's part in *Gurre Lieder* (1911) uses this notation, but it was not until the melodrama *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) that he fully integrated it, also providing an explanatory note of the technique. The second significant member of this school, Alban Berg, would use this technique in parts of the operas *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*.

Influenced by the principles and practices of German theatre at the time, Wagner conceived his own model of operatic composition, according to the specific manner of interpretation of the German theatre actor, which would appear more and more often in his works after 1840. The first examples of *sprechgesang* in his works appear in solo moments, such as in the Flying Dutchman's monologue or the Tannhäuser's narration, while in *Lohengrin*, the technique would take on much larger proportions, as in the vocal writing of King Heinrich or Telramund. In the *Tetralogy*, along with numerous moments in which the vocal score follows the pattern of operatic writing, the declamatory style takes on ample proportions, giving the drama authenticity. This tendency to combine both types of speech is highlighted in the role of Wotan, a score with numerous *sprechgesang* scenes but also purely melodic sections, as can be seen in the final scene of the opera *Die Walküre*, in the *Farewell Song*¹⁸.

Wagner used the technique of rhythmic and melodic declamation, which combines singing with recitation in order to best convey the text and the emotions of the characters. This allowed for greater flexibility of vocal expressiveness, emphasizing the meaning of the words rather than the melody.

¹⁷ Ralph W. Wood (2010). *Concerning Sprechgesang*, Cambridge University Press.

¹⁸ Martin Knust (2015). *Music, Drama, and Sprechgesang*, in *19th-Century Music*, Vol. 38, No. 3, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, p. 225.

Music Section

Wagner abandoned the traditional recitative characteristic of Italian opera, the new type of declamation facilitating the creation of an uninterrupted and free flow of speech, without strict metrical structures. Thus, it can be said that the characters in Wagnerian dramas must declaim, more than sing, being accompanied by a large and complex musical background, in the writing of which leitmotifs contribute to suggesting and emphasizing the emotion, feeling or context of that moment.

An example of Wagnerian declamation appears at the beginning of the *Tetralogy*, with the entrance of Alberich addressing the Rhine daughters. The melodic pattern of successive leaps, the dotted rhythm, the accents and the indication *mit rauher Trockenheit im Ton* [with harsh dryness in the sound] outline a type of discourse that differs substantially from traditional singing.

ALBERICH *mit rauher Trockenheit im Ton* [1876] (*Die Mädchen halten, sobald sie*

185

He-he! Ihr Ni-cker! Wie seid ihr nied-lich

190

Alberichs Stimme hören, mit dem Spiele ein.)

A. neid-li-ches Volk! Aus Ni-bel-heims Nacht naht' ich mich gern, neig-tet ihreuch zu mir!

euch*

* [Tb, KS, PE]

Fig. 8 Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, Sc. 1, ms. 179-186 – Alberich's entrance

6. Conclusions

In a century in constant change and marked by innovative artistic visions throughout the European continent, the composer Richard Wagner represented a turning point in the evolution of the opera genre. If, in the first part of his career, marked by the crystallization of his own style, the composer did not renounce the contributions of his predecessors, achieving a true synthesis between traditional and original elements, starting with *Das Rheingold*, he dedicated himself entirely to a new creative direction. The time spent in exile gave him the opportunity to re-evaluate his principles and values and to rethink the opera genre, which at that time was treated only as a fashionable entertainment. In the most important volumes written during the Swiss period, i.e. *Die Kunst und die Revolution* [Art and Revolution], *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* [The Artwork of the Future], *Oper und Drama* [Opera and Drama] and *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* [A Communication to My Friends], Wagner describes in detail his view of the new operatic genre, which would bear the name of *music drama*. With strong roots in Greek tragedy, Wagnerian music drama was to be the vehicle for expressing essential truths, for a representation of pure art. This would not have been possible without fulfilling an inexorable condition: that of achieving a new synthesis of all the arts, which would bear the name *Gesamtkunstwerk* [Total Work of Art]. Within this new genre, the *infinite melody* becomes the main mode of expression against the backdrop of dense orchestral support, and the musical-narrative dramaturgy, freed from the constraints of the division of musical moments, specific to opera, arises through the intensive use of the leitmotif technique.

A major influence on the composer's mature work was the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, according to which music is the highest artistic form of expression of the human will. This influence is reflected in the action of the libretti, based on themes such as the endless suffering of human existence, from which liberation and salvation can only occur through death.

Bibliography

- Cleary, Collin (2021). *Wagner's Ring and The Germanic Tradition*, Wagnerphile Books, U.S.A.
- Cooke, D. (2002). *I saw the World End, A study of Wagner's Ring*, Oxford University Press Inc. New York.
- Knust, Martin (2015). *Music, Drama, and Sprechgesang*, 19th-Century Music, Vol. 38, No. 3, University of California Press, pp. 219-242.
- Magee, B. (2009). *Aspects of Wagner*, revised and enlarged edition, Oxford University Press Inc., New York.
- Scruton, R. (2017). *The Ring of Truth, The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of The Nibelung*, Penguin Books, UK.

Music Section

Stein, Jack M. (1960). *Richard Wagner & the Synthesis of Arts*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit.

Taruskin, Richard (2010). *Music in the Nineteenth Century, Chapter 10, Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class 1813, I)*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Wagner, Richard (1983). *Opera și Drama (Opera and Drama)*, Editura Muzicală, București.

Webography

Gesamtkunstwerk, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,
https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gesamtkunstwerk#cite_note-1.

Wood, Ralph W. (1946). *Concerning Sprechgesang*, Cambridge University Press,
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/tempo/article/abs/concerning-sprechgesang/167407F4485E9B271395E6681C2BEA7D>.

Scores

Wagner, Richard (1914). *Lohengrin*, WWV 75, Klavierauszug, C. F. Peters, Leipzig.

Wagner, Richard (2010). *Das Rheingold*, WWV 86A, Klavierauszug nach der Gesamtausgabe, Schott Music, Mainz.

Wagner, Richard (2013). *Die Walküre*, WWV 86B, Klavierauszug nach der Gesamtausgabe, Schott Music, Mainz.

Wagner, Richard (1942). *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Klavierauszug, C. F. Peters, Leipzig.