

Wagner

4/25/17

Wilhelm Richard Wagner (1813 - 1883)

- Parental confusion:
 - Is Carl Friedrich Wagner, police actuary, his father?
 - Or Ludwig Geyer, actor and painter? (who raised him after Carl's death)
- Formal musical schooling also not known completely
 - Downplayed (deliberately) in *Mein Leben*, but definitely involving piano and harmony instruction, as well as some work toward a music degree at Leipzig University (as of 1831)
- Early affinity for Beethoven, played up in *Mein Leben*: piano transcription of the 9th symphony (1830), a Beethovenian Symphony in C (1832)
- 1833 named Chorus Master in Wurzburg.
- 1834, returns to Leipzig, becomes involved with the *Junges Deutschland* movement, contra classicism (Mozart, Goethe) as well as certain more recent, “Romantic” strains (Weber, Hoffman).
 - Essays: *Die deutsche Oper* (1834) and *Bellini* (1837)
- 1834, musical director for a traveling theater company, where (because?) he is in love with one of the actors, Christine Wilhelmine Planer ('Minna')
- 1836 marries Minna, within the year she leaves him for Dietrich, wealthy merchant.
- 1837 musical director of the Riga theater, reconciles with Minna, shares an apartment with her, her sister Amalie ... and a wolf.
- 1839 Serious debt problems; they flee Riga secretly.
- Hears **Berlioz, Romeo et Juliette**: opened up “a new world of possibilities.”
- Received in Paris by Meyerbeer, who generously connects Wagner with the Paris music community.
- Two miserable, broke years in Paris.

Life of herr Wagner, continued

- Through Meyerbeer's influence, *Rienzi* accepted for 1842 performance in Dresden.
 - “Rienzi, the last of the Tribunes”, chronicles career of 14th-century Roman populist, ending with the burning of the capitol.
- 1843 De Vliegende Hollander – less successful, but still named Kappellmeister in Dresden.
 - “It was as if the former conductor of the Portland Junior Symphony were suddenly named director of the Metropolitan Opera” (Taruskin)
 - Steady job, with official duties *Liebesmahl der Apostel* (1843)
 - *An Webers Grabe* (1844)
- 1848 Paris uprisings, establishment of 2nd republic.
 - Wagner involved with republican movement in Dresden, espousing a moderate liberalism typical of his social milieu.
- 1849 Prussian troops put down uprising in Dresden, Wagner flees to Switzerland.
- Zurich essays:
 - *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849)
 - *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849)
 - *Oper und Drama* (1850)

Das Volk, the re-unification of the arts (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), the importance of Greek models, *Versmelodie*, *Leitmotif* (actually, *Melodische Momente*)

- *Judentum in Musik*
 - Jews have no cultural rootedness, etc.
 - Many features of this argument are not new.

Wagner, continued

- In Zurich, supported by Jessie Laussot, a married Englishwoman.
- 1850, *Lohengrin* premiered (composer absent) by Liszt in Weimar.
 - Prelude to Act III (ending, into Scene 1)
- Financial troubles, depression, musical hiatus 1848-1853
 - Frustration with reforming court policies
 - Meets Bakunin
 - Turns against Christianity
- Otto Wesendonck lets his house outside Zurich to Richard and Minna; Richard falls in love with Otto's wife, Mathilde. Begins composition of *Tristan*. Minna kicks him out, moves to Venice.
- 1864 Ludwig II ascends to the throne in Bavaria. Forgives many of Wagner's sizeable debts, gives him a huge stipend.
- Now Wagner's in love with Cosima (daughter of Liszt and Daniel Stern)
- "Charade of lamentable mendacity" to keep Wagner-Cosima illegitimate unioni from their patron, Ludwig.
- 1872 Construction begins for Bayreuth, a theater designed to accommodate the Wagner aesthetic

The Ring

- Nordic (pagan) myth, by the 1840s familiar in Germany as *Nibelunglied*.
 - Brendel: “I believe the composer who could accomplish this task in an adequate manner would become the man of his era.”
 - Begins with myth of Sigfried. Siezes gold from the Nibelungs (dwarves) for the superior Volsung race. Siezes (rescues?) Brunhilde, dies through her betrayal, her atonement. This becomes the narrative of the *Siegfried (III)* and *Gotterdammerung (IV)* – the last of the Ring cycle.
 - Then, the prehistory there becomes *Die Walkure (II)*
 - Schopenhauer
 - Then, 1852, composes libretto for *Das Rheingold (I)*, narrating the theft of the gold and forging of the ring.
- Density of Leitmotivic polyphony example: Taruskin’s analysis of the Norn’s scene in *Gotterdammerung*.

Stylistic features and development

- Early work (e.g. *Die Feen*, 1830) exhibits some features of traditional Opera convention; finale, scene/aria
- *Rienzi* (1835) clearly exhibits influence of Paris Grand Opera; influence in particular of Meyerbeer and Halevy.
- *Der fliegende Hollander* (1843); get rid of all “tiresome operatic accessories” (*Mein Leben*)
 - Organic unity
 - Abandonment of periodic phrase structure
- *Lohengrin* (1848)
 - “associative” use of tonality; certain keys associated with certain characters/ideas
- The end of artificial forms
- A “true past in music” – a “tissue” of significant particles.
- “leitmotif” actually a pejorative coinage, by Heinrich Dorn
- *Unendliche Melodie*
- *Extreme* freedom in modulation within broader tonal organizational framework.
- ‘introversive’ and ‘extroversive’ treatment of leitmotif

From *Art and Revolution* (1849)

- Each one of these dissevered arts, nursed and luxuriously tended for the entertainment of the rich, has filled the world to overflowing with its products; in each, great minds have brought forth marvels; but the one true Art has not been born again, either in or since the so-called Renaissance. The perfect Art-work, the great united utterance of a free and lovely public life, the Drama, Tragedy,—howsoever great the poets who have here and there indited tragedies—is not yet born again: for the reason that it cannot be re-born, but must be born anew.
- Only the great Revolution of Mankind, whose beginnings erstwhile shattered Grecian Tragedy, can win for us this Art-work. For only this Revolution can bring forth from its hidden depths, in the new beauty of a nobler Universalism, that which it once tore from the conservative spirit of a time of beautiful but narrow-meted culture—and tearing it, engulfed.
 - ...thus art-religion is the necessary precondition for the establishment of a strong nation state.
- Under every fold of heaven's canopy, in every race, shall men by real freedom grow up to equal strength; by strength to truest love; and by true love to beauty. But Art is Beauty energized and turned to Knowledge.

Leitmotif and desire

- Karol Berger:

- “What I actually experience when I experience the tonal tendency of a sound is the dynamics of my own desire, its arousal, its satisfaction, its frustration. It is my own desire for the leading tone to move up, the satisfaction of my own desire when it so moves, the frustration thereof when it refuses to budge or when it moves elsewhere, that I feel.... Thus, the precondition of my being able to hear an imaginary pattern of lines of directed motion in a tonal work is that I **first experience the desires**, satisfactions, and frustrations of this sort.”
- It follows that tonal music, like a visual medium, may represent an imaginary object different from myself, an imaginary world, albeit a highly abstract one, consisting of lines of directed motion. But, unlike a visual medium, tonal music also makes me experience directly the dynamics of my own desiring, my own inner world, and it is this latter experience that is the more primordial one, since any representation depends on it.”
 - (*A Theory of Art*)

- Taruskin:

- “By combining precognitive musical process with cognitive symbolism, in other words, Wagner had it both ways: the music through which he constructed his mythic dramas was the instrument of both “desire itself” and of “knowing the object of desire.”

Tristan und Isolde (1865): eine Handlung (action? Plot?)

- Prelude
- O Sink Hernieder – the end of act II, scene II (“Track” 19 on the met site)
- Conclusion -- Isoldes Liebestod
 - And Liszt's Transcription
- Presentational vs. Representational (introversive vs. extroversive?)
- Plot: two people love each other, she's betrothed to his uncle, they are forcibly separated, he's killed, she dies in sympathy.

Tristan, con't

- What did Wagner think the drama was about?
 - “Suddenly aflame, they must confess they belong only to each other. No end, now, to the yearning, the desire, the bliss, the suffering of love: world, power, fame, splendor, honor, knighthood, loyalty, friendship—all scattered like an empty dream; one thing alone still living: yearning, yearning, unquenchable, ever-regenerated longing—languishing, thirsting; the only redemption—death, extinction, eternal sleep!”
 - Quoted in Taruskin

Tristan, con't

- The myth of the tristan chord
- Taruskin's little composition
- Schopenhauer

Philosophy as Opera

- Beethoven (1870) – words have finite meaning, music does not. Music is therefore better. Schopenhauer.
- It's not a marriage of music and words, but of music and dramatic simulation of life. Of the noumenal and phenomenal (kantian and Schopenhaur's terms).
- The music “includes the Drama within itself.”
- Music's relationship to drama is analogous to the following relationship:
 - Space and time structure our world, but we're not aware of it.
 - “As we construct the phenomenal world by application of the laws of time and space...so this conscious presentation of the Idea of the world in the drama would be conditioned by the inner laws of music, which assert themselves in the dramatist unconsciously, much as we draw on the laws of causality in our perception of the phenomenal world.”
 - Kant/Schopenhauer “turned into a theory of opera.” (Bryan Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy*, 231)
- Transcendence of the Will (Schopenhauer) → a valuation of improvisation, which *Tristan* almost is, and which Wagner speculated may have been the best of Beethoven's work.