This book is a study of the prose writings of Richard Wagner and their relevance to an understanding of his music and drama, as well as their relation to music criticism and aesthetics in the nineteenth century in general. As a by-product of Wagner’s many-faceted career as composer, conductor, cultural critic, and controversial ideologue, the writings are documents of undisputed interpretive value, despite their notoriously problematic style. This study focuses on Wagner’s words on music, and interprets them in light of the musical, aesthetic, and critical contexts that generated them. Professor Grey considers Wagner’s ambivalence concerning the idea of absolute music and the capacity of music to project meaning or drama from within its own systems of referents. Central themes are Wagner’s appropriation of a Beethoven legacy, the metaphors of musical “gender” and “biology” in Opera and Drama, concepts of melody, and the critical background to ideas of motive and “leitmotif” in theory and practice.
New perspectives in music history and criticism

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New perspectives in music history and criticism

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*Texts and contexts*

THOMAS S. GREY

*Stanford University*
For my parents
Ann Foote Grey and Spencer Y. Grey
Entnahmt ihr ‘was der Worte Schwall?

– Beckmesser
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Preface

It has long been customary to preface books on Wagner with apologies, and apologetics, for “yet another” - sometimes accompanied by vague comparative statistics about Jesus and Napoleon. Since these statistics (which have usually sounded suspiciously obsolete anyway) have been revealed as yet another mythical Wagnerian motif, and since the apology can by this point be taken as read, I shall concentrate briefly on the apologetics.

Until recently it could be said that Wagner’s prose writings, after spawning a sizeable quantity of adulatory mystification in the days of the Bayreuther Blätter, the Revue Wagnerienne, or The Meister, and a more sinister if less exhaustive phase of exegesis over the next generation, had eventually succumbed to a state of near-total scholarly disregard (even if the fundamental articles of their musical-dramatic creed had since become sedimented into a universal critical consciousness). Over the last several decades the situation has changed, however. The same period that saw the critical and academic rehabilitation of Verdi and Rossini, across the 1960s and 70s, also witnessed a revival of serious critical interest in Wagner’s literary oeuvre. (I am not proposing any secret, deep-structural link here, aside from the fact that this was a time of much academic rehabilitation in general.) This revived attention to the writings is attributable above all to the large body of work by Carl Dahlhaus from these years addressing certain central themes of Wagner’s aesthetic thought and its intellectual-historical contexts, although Jack Stein’s Richard Wagner and the Synthesis of the Arts (1960) had already revived some interest in Wagner’s writings among English-speaking readers before that, and Ernest Newman’s Wagner as Man and Artist (1911; 2nd edn, 1924) has always stood apart from the routine ideological Wagnerian blather of the early days.

2 Despite the evolutions and revolutions of musical and dramaturgical fashions, Roger Parker submits, “we remain under the influence of Wagnerian ideas about how one might ‘read’ an opera. This is less often recognized and stated than it should be” (“On Reading Nineteenth-Century Opera: Verdi Through the Looking-Glass,” in Reading Opera, ed. A. Groos and R. Parker [Princeton, 1988], 291).
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Dahlhaus’s Wagnerian project began largely as an attempt to discredit the orthodoxy of Alfred Lorenz’s famous Wagner analyses, whose compendiousness seemed to have served as a kind of protective armor over the years. Wagner’s relatively few, but relatively unequivocal statements on the nature or “secrets” of his musical form were cited and interpreted by Dahlhaus as corroborating evidence to numerous analytical demonstrations of the insufficiency of Alfred Lorenz’s architectonic schemes and of the need to take seriously Wagner’s assertions that his music absorbed the fluid, open-ended, and often ambiguous designs of drama into its own structures and procedures. This project was largely completed by the mid-1970s, although Dahlhaus continued to return to and modify his points through the next decade. Since then the basic texts of the Wagnerian prose canon have rarely been absent altogether from critical writing on the music. Klaus Kropfinger’s Wagner und Beethoven of 1974 (trans. Wagner and Beethoven, 1991) represents the next and most thorough confrontation with Wagner’s writings on musical and aesthetic subjects after Dahlhaus’s influential beginnings, followed by Dieter Borchmeyer’s Das Theater Richard Wagners (1982; trans. Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre, 1991), two essays by Carolyn Abbate from 1989 (in Analyzing Opera and the Cambridge Opera Journal), and most recently Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s Wagner Androgyné (1990; trans. 1993), which – under the seemingly esoteric rubric of an “androgynous” motif linking aspects of Wagner’s life, thought, and works – involves substantial readings of many of the prose texts, and includes a convenient conspectus of the ever-shifting emphases of poetry, drama, and music in relation to one another.  

3 Dahlhaus seems to have taken a cue here from Rudolf Stephan, who laid out the fundamental objections to Lorenz’s compulsive and often irrationalizations of Wagnerian “form” in a lecture inquiring: “Gibt es ein Geheimnis der Form bei Wagner?” Though written in 1962, it was not published until 1970 (Das Drama Richard Wagners als musikalisches Kunstwerk, ed. C. Dahlhaus [Regensburg, 1970], 9-16).  


5 Nattiez also includes a comprehensive catalogue of Wagner’s writings, including information regarding original publication, and numerous items not included in the sixteen-volume Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen (Wagner Androgyné, trans. Stewart Spencer [Princeton, 1993], 303-22). Because of the availability of this list, as well as those given by Barry Millington (The Wagner Compendium, 1992) and John Deathridge (The New Grove Wagner, 1984), and because I focus here on a relatively small number of basic texts, I have included only a selective check-list of these as an appendix (see pp. 378-9).
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My aim here has been to bring together a variety of leading musical motifs in Wagner’s writings and situate them within the larger texture of his aesthetic and critical thought, to analyze them in the manner of a Gewebe von Grundthemen or fabric of recurring, transforming, interrelated “fundamental themes,” as Wagner characterized his own scores. Some of these motifs have been sounded and variously developed in the work of Dahlhaus and the other writers mentioned here, others may be less familiar. I have been concerned to ground these themes not only in the contexts of Wagner’s literary and musical-dramatic oeuvre as a whole, but also more broadly in the aesthetic, cultural, and social contexts of his time (to do for these musical-aesthetic themes something of what Dieter Borchmeyer has done for the principal motifs of the dramas, for instance, in Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre). To some extent such a methodology is inevitable and hence, scarcely unprecedented: no one would think to invoke a Wagnerian “philosophy of music” without also invoking the name of Schopenhauer or Nietzsche, and Kropfinger’s study of the Beethovenmotiv in Wagner’s writings (one of the most prominent and heavily transformed motifs there) has stressed the extent to which this philosophy looked to established figures of cultural authority for support, even as it reconstructed the image of such authority to suit its needs.

All the same, Wagner the Gesamtkünstler was remarkably successful in projecting an illusion of intellectual autonomy, a sense that he really had re-invented art and music in his own image, that his oeuvre was indeed a perfected, self-contained whole that was expressly designed to render its context – an imperfect present – obsolete. (Nietzsche caustically summed this up as the three-point guiding principle of the writings as a whole: “Everything Wagner can not do is reprehensible. There is much else that Wagner could do: but he doesn’t want to, from rigorism in principle. Everything Wagner can do, nobody will be able to do after him, nobody has done before him, nobody shall do after him. – Wagner is divine.”) Even Dahlhaus, who was anything but naive with regard to the historical contexts of Wagner’s music and ideas, still tended to approach the works (music and prose alike) as a series of more or less self-contained problems, topics interconnected only, or primarily, within the great artistic monologue of Wagner’s career; when Dahlhaus did appeal to a wider context, it was to a relevant but narrowly circumscribed canon of musical, philosophical, and critical texts.

In fact, Wagner did often try and sometimes succeeded in isolating himself from the “corrupt” surroundings of the modern world – on the Wesendonck hillside Asyl, behind the tapestried walls of a Venetian palazzo, or in his peninsular Tribschen idyll – and the music that

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emanated from these cloistered sites stands remarkably apart from much else of the time. But in so many other ways, of course, Wagner was deeply engaged with the culture of his century, even programatically so. And the terms of the musical-cultural critique articulated throughout his writings are (again) inevitably implicated in those of the musical culture critiqued. Indeed, a principal strategy of this critique and of the ongoing brief for a new “musical drama” was, as I shall argue, the appropriation of a popular critical discourse of music and “ideas,” “poetic ideas,” new means (and forms) of musical representation and signification, and the ideal of an increasingly “determinate” musical semantics. The endless stream of words issuing from Wagner’s pen in the form of essays and articles, brochures and treatises, proclamations and rebuttals to the press, letter upon letter, not to mention the dramatic poems – all of this might be read as a kind of collective, almost desperate gesture underwriting the greater project of making music “speak” (to articulate “ideas” and enact dramas). Wagner’s prose thus becomes a kind of supplément to his music and its aspirations, which crystallized those of the age, even in pressing them to extremes.

The rubric under which I have chosen to approach these Wagnerian texts, as his “musical prose,” is meant to designate the admittedly narrow limits of the enterprise. (Although I do occasionally touch on the matter of musical prose in the technical, Schoenbergian sense, I trust that the allusion to that familiar term in my title will not be misconstrued as the principal subject of the book, which it clearly is not.) The greater part of Wagner’s published writings are not devoted to musical matters at all, and among those that are, I have largely restricted myself to a central canon that is generally agreed to speak most directly to issues in his own music, and to the reception of the similarly narrow canon of works Wagner was willing to acknowledge as historically significant. In the modern (which is to say postmodern) critical climate it becomes increasingly difficult to segregate strictly musical issues from “extra”-musical ones; and to a certain extent, this permeable border is one of my chief concerns, so far as it engages problems of musical expression, representation, and other forms of meaning. But the possible intersection of Wagner’s manifold implication in matters of politics, race, psychology, and cultural ethics – as documented in so much of his writing – with the procedures and sounds of his music is a notoriously elusive thing. Those social, psychological, and ethical matters, as such, have scarcely lacked for attention; how they intersect with the methods of the composer and the music is quite another matter – maybe a real and pressing one, but not one I am prepared to pursue at length in the context of his “musical” prose. (If we dismiss Wagner’s diagnosis of “Jewishness” in music as the bigoted drivel it seems to be, how do we go about ascertaining anti-Semitic traces in his music? The question is not posed as an exoneration of
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Wagner, but as a genuine methodological query whose answer seems to me still ambiguous. On the other hand, some kinds of broad cultural constructions are so obviously engaged by both the writings and the dramas at once that they demand to be recognized even within the discussion of musical-aesthetic issues, which I scarcely want to represent as pure and self-contained. Along these lines I have scrutinized in chapter 3 the familiar metaphors of gender that figure so largely throughout Opera and Drama, and propose a reading of how they may be allegorized, both consciously and unconsciously, in the dramatic configurations and musical processes of scenes from Siegfried and Parsifal. Even so, I am not necessarily sure what the consequences should be (if any) for our evaluation of the music “itself” or of the musical drama, as aesthetic artifact.

Embedded in the designation “musical prose” is the irony that the style of these writings is anything but musical, in the sense of conveying delight through sheer sounding surfaces, lyrical contours, or dancing rhythms. (On the other hand, the prose style does often bear a certain kinship to Wagner’s “endless melody,” which was often faulted on similar grounds, and both share that marked tendency to motivic recurrence and transformation, mentioned above.) The famous opacity of Wagner’s prose style, its overwrought syntax, and often strident rhetorical tone surely reflect something fundamental about the author’s character. These points have been sufficiently remarked over the years that there is no need to dwell on them here. (I might just note the long list of neurotic symptoms diagnosed by Max Nordau, of Degeneration fame, on the basis of Wagner’s prose style, beginning with “persecution mania, megalomania, mysticism, vague philanthropy, and anarchism” – none of them too surprising – and concluding with “graphomania, namely incoherence, fugitive ideation, and a tendency to idiotic punning.”) Thomas Mann, who was originally put off by the verbosity of the prose and its over-inflated rhetorical posturings, later came to

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7 The problem (like so many pertaining to operatic music) is of course compounded by the concrete representational stratum of the drama. Barry Millington has recently argued, for instance, that Beckmesser was indeed intended by Wagner as an anti-Semitic caricature, on the grounds of both musical and textual evidence (“Nuremberg Trial: Is there Anti-Semitism in Die Meistersinger?” Cambridge Opera Journal 3:3 [1991], 247-60). Similarly, Sander Gilman’s reading of Jewish representations and attendant cultural paranoia in Strauss’s Salome is predicated on conscious compositional intent, supported and “determined” (as Wagner would put it) by the dramatic text (Gilman, “Strauss and the Pervert,” in Reading Opera, 306-27). On the other hand, Paul Lawrence Rose’s attempts to implicate “the music itself” and the operas more generally in Wagner’s anti-semitism – to hear in the music sublimated traces of racial bias and aggression – are not wholly convincing, even if they remain incidental to the biographical, cultural, and historical picture that is his principal concern (Wagner: Race and Revolution [London and Boston, 1992]).

8 Max Nordau, Degeneration (7th edn New York, 1895), 171.
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acknowledge behind its “stiffness” and “random, unkempt amateurism” an “astonishing perspicacity and intellectual vigor,” both as aesthetic theory and as cultural critique. Wagner’s texts, at any rate, give new meaning (so to speak) to deconstructive adages about the undecidability of textual meaning, its “iterability” and endless dissemination, the inevitability of misreading, as well as the fundamental metaphoricity of language (the “prison-house of language” might also come to mind, especially the longer one immerses oneself in the toils of Wagnerian syntax). Though offered as opinion rather than fiction, theory rather than art, these texts force us to linger more than usual at the first stage of interpretation. The “transparent” meaning we might normally posit at this stage is often absent here. For the English speaker, the necessity of translation presses this point further. The reader of Wagner’s prose needn’t work hard at teasing out latent ambiguities, blind-spots, slippages of figural language, unwitting contradictions and aporias: they grow in rank profusion across nearly every page.

Despite the frequent challenge of establishing just a provisional first-level or intended meaning in these texts, I have tried not to remain insensitive to other levels of interpretation, or to the problematic status of authorial intentions in general. That status has been perhaps over-romanticized to a wearying extent by now. But the relation of an author’s secondary, critical or reflective texts to primary, creative ones (i.e., Wagner the “author” to Wagner the composer) largely reduces to a simple matter of historical awareness (I won’t say objectivity). A moderate dose of skepticism has nearly always been axiomatic in reading Wagner’s self-presentations, at least outside of the Bayreuth sanctum of old. Inevitably, I will often have recourse to the usual declarative formulae (Wagner said this, Wagner thought that, Wagner believed . . .). The larger context should make the contingencies of such statements clear

9 Thoman Mann, Pro and Contra Wagner, trans. Allan Blunden (Chicago and London, 1985), 105. Adorno’s comment that Wagner was “the author of his collected works from the first day” is characteristically perceptive and misleading at once. It captures that aspect of the mature Wagner dedicated to creating his own monuments, epitaphs, and memoirs, but thereby misconstrues the essentially random and occasional nature of the writings as a whole. It is this occasional (hence contextual or contingent) nature of the writings that explains, to a great extent, their many lapses of “theoretical” consistency.

10 Carolyn Abbate has reviewed “the problems of taking Wagner’s prose as a primer for Wagnerian analysis” in the prefatory remarks to her essay “Wagner, ‘On Modulation,’ and Tristan,” Cambridge Opera Journal 1:1 (1989), 33-4. The remarks are offered partly as critique, partly as disclaimer. Within the essay she does not dispense with the composer’s critical voice, but looks and listens for different ways of hearing it, or the different identities it assumes (in this case, an “anti-symphonic” voice that might be heard as dissonant to that of Beethoven’s “heir”). The method is essentially similar to that I have adopted here, while I have tried to bring into the conversation some of the voices around Wagner, as well.

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enough, I hope. Part of my project is indeed to interpret what I think Wagner did say, think, or believe at a given time, for a given purpose. Another part is to interpret how these attitudes were modified over time (his celebrated reversal on the "absoluteness" of music, for instance). A further part is to suggest how beliefs about the nature of his and others' music respond not only to Wagner's development as a composer – which of course they do – but also to the musical discourses and discourse on music happening around him. Analyzing or otherwise interpreting the music on the basis of his words (prose or poetry) is not the central objective of this book. But where I do attempt this, I don't look to the critical texts for straightforward directives on the interpretation of form and meaning (such directives are not there). Rather, I have tried to put Wagner's words on music into a counterpoint with the music, offering a tentative analysis of the various harmonies and dissonances that result. Such methods of reading the prose as a counterpoint to the music I have also tried to extend to the "musical prose" of Wagner's contemporaries, as an additional contrapuntal strand against those of his music and his prose.

Just as we are exhorted to renounce the illusion of reconstituting authorial intentions and the attempt to found our interpretive acts upon that unsafe ground, a parallel danger exists, I realize, in seeking to supplant author with context, claiming to speak for the many instead of the one. The potential arbitrariness of seizing on a name and date to represent a larger place and time is manifest. But this is hardly a sufficient argument to forgo all speculation about shared ideas and the intellectual physiognomy of the past in any form. The philosophy and method informing the chapters that follow are neatly encapsulated in a passage by George Steiner, which attempts to recuperate the values of historical contextualism from the encroachments of programmatic theoretical uncertainty:

We must read as if the temporal and executive settings of a text do matter. The historical surroundings, the cultural and formal circumstances, the biographical stratum, what we can construe or conjecture of an author’s intentions, constitute vulnerable aids. We know that they ought to be stringently ironized and examined for what there is in them of subjective hazard. They matter nonetheless. They enrich the levels of awareness and enjoyment; they generate constraints on the complacencies and license of interpretive anarchy.11

11 George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago, 1989), 86. In a similar vein, if from a somewhat different perspective, Gary Tomlinson has advocated a music-historical contextualism “that will not circle back narrowly to the notes but will instead resolutely historicize musical utterance, exploding it outwards through an imaginative building of contexts out of as wealthy a concatenation of past traces as the historian can manage” (“Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer,” Current Musicology 53 [1993], 22).
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To inveigh against the “complacencies and license of interpretive anarchy” may have an uncomfortably authoritarian, even reactionary ring to it. If so, we could censor that. We could even censor “constraints,” and be left with “awareness and enjoyment.” (To my mind, that may be enough.) But if our theoretical rigor insists that we forgo all that precedes, then we probably have no business lingering about in the past and its artifacts at all.

While my approach to the writings is neither comprehensive nor chronological, I have tried to incorporate at least a rudimentary sense of these values. That is, I have touched on what I take to be representative writings from across Wagner’s career, and according to a pattern that generally moves in a historical direction. Chapter 1, on fundamental questions of musical autonomy, form, and content, is the most telescopic, but in addressing the “dialectics” of Wagner’s positions on the question of absolute music it necessarily engages the diachronic history of those positions. Chapter 2 again moves across much of Wagner’s career, in considering Wagner’s absorption of Beethoven’s music, mythos, and the critical traditions attendant on these. Here the trajectory is perhaps more evident, moving from the Parisian stories of 1840–1 to the “programmatic commentaries” and reform essays of the Zurich years to a few passages from Beethoven (1870). (Since Klaus Kropfinger has already provided a detailed history of Wagner’s reception and appropriation of Beethoven in general, I have focused here on just a few Grundmotiven, especially on the ways in which Wagner adapted the critical tradition around Beethoven’s music to the purposes of his own program.) Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned almost exclusively with Wagner’s critical Hauptwerk, Opera and Drama, from different but (marginally) complementary perspectives. The margin of overlap is located in the figure of “evolution,” which itself figures as a central, centering concept for much of what I have to say about Wagner’s aesthetics of musical form. That he strove to make his music “evolve” after the manner of the drama, as a deliberate alternative to the “architectonics” of symphonic form was a foundational point of Dahlhaus’s critique of Lorenz, and hence of much that grew out of it. I have tried to ground this idea (and ideal) more fully in the metaphors and terminology of the writings. Concern with Wagner’s metaphors involves a concern with the kinds of ideological and cultural meanings they embody (here archetypes of gender), and the ways in which these may be transmitted to the music, which might be understood to absorb the metaphors that surround it. Chapter 4 focuses on terminology (the disputed “poetic-musical period”) more than metaphor, though they intersect. (Wagner appeals to the poetic-rhetorical origins of the term “period” as a means of transforming its musical applications.) As such, the methods of this chapter are fairly traditional. Chapter 5 revolves around a slightly later text (“Music of the Future,” 1860) and another
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contested and still more famous phrase: “endless melody.” As a terminological study, it resembles chapter 4, just as the categories of “period” and “melody” overlap. But just as the category of “melody” enfolds that of “period,” chapter 5 takes a broader view of the history and aesthetics of the term “melody,” as received by Wagner, and moves to analytical interpretations only at the end. Chapter 6, finally, begins with a later text (“On the Application of Music to the Drama,” 1879), but also moves further than the preceding chapters into contextual margins and byways, particularly in constructing a history for the term “leitmotif.” Although obviously an authentic Wagnerian practice, with a tentative theoretical foundation in Opera and Drama (Part III), the famous term “leitmotif” is itself entirely a product of Wagnerian contexts, while absent from the primary texts. How the term and its originating contexts may have a bearing on our reading/hearing of Wagner’s musical texts, their forms and textures, is a question I address in the end of that chapter.

In closing, I would like to thank especially Anthony Newcomb, Paul Robinson, and Stephen McClatchie for responses to and suggestions on the form and content of the text. My thanks also to Erik Goldstrom and Jean Pang-Goyal for their assistance at various stages of work on this book, to Penny Souster of Cambridge University Press for her patience with my continual (all too Wagnerian) deferral of closure on this project, as well as to Kathryn Bailey Puffett and Ann M. Lewis for their careful scrutiny of the final draft and proofs, respectively. I am grateful for grants received from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung which supported work on the later stages of writing and the final preparation of the text (fall 1993–winter 1994); and my gratitude also extends to Karol Berger, Klaus Kropfinger, Barry Millington, and Steven P. Scher for their supportive assistance.