Introduction

"Let us slander melody!" Nietzsche cried. "Nothing is more dangerous than a beautiful melody . . . Let us dare to be ugly, my friends! Wagner dared!" Written five years after Wagner’s death, this was hardly an enviable epitaph for a composer of opera. Nietzsche’s barb paraphrased the widely held view that the master of Bayreuth could not write melodies as such. It was a grave accusation. Music without melody was simply unthinkable for nineteenth-century aesthetics, like an opera staged without singers, or a language spoken without vowels. It was oxymoronic. And with it, Wagner’s credibility was effectively being hollowed out to reveal a void at the center of his creative métier, for there was no strain of exaggeration when, in 1864, the Leipzig Thomaskantor Moritz Hauptmann dubbed melody simply the “alpha and omega of music.”

Yet against a hailstorm of criticism, Wagner agreed wholeheartedly with this view. “Music’s only form is melody” he claimed while in exile at the age of forty-seven, “it is not even conceivable without melody.” Of the few genuine neologisms that the composer introduced in his extensive writings, “endless melody” (unendliche Melodie) perhaps best reflects this privileged status. But, coined in 1860, the term was also defensive: Wagner was anticipating the critical reception of his works in Paris, and arguably deployed it in response to the European-wide suspicion that his melodies were less than real – something of a fairy tale. The Danish author Hans Christian Andersen is one such critic and, if we read literary texts and criticism as parallel discursive realms that offer ideas a different local habitation, the early reception of music

---

drama’s thematic fabric has much in common with Andersen’s story of the Emperor’s New Clothes (1837), where an unusually beautiful cloth of silk and gold thread is apparently woven into an imperial costume with unprecedented industry and extravagance. The resulting gown is said to be magnificent. But the “magic property” of the fabric is its invisibility to idiots or those unequal to their office: a patently false claim that ridicules all pretenders once the fraud is exposed.5

Wagner himself understood the criticism only too well:

The only thing the public seeks in opera, melodies, melodies – were downright not forthcoming in my operas; no, nothing but the most boring recitatives, the most incomprehensible musical gallimathias . . . To say that a piece of music has no melody can only mean: the musician has failed to create a form that grips and stirs our feeling; a statement that simply announces the composer’s lack of talent, his want of originality.6

What, then, was the problem? How could the central figure of nineteenth-century German opera have acquired an abiding reputation as an unmelodic pretender? For us today, such questions exaggerate Wagner’s fragility as a cultural icon, and are deceptive in this sense. Against the metaphysics of transcendence in the libretto to Tristan und Isolde, completed shortly before this frank admission, Wagner would seem to be taunting his contemporary critics openly: “Friends! Look! / Do you not feel and see it? / Can it be that I alone / Hear this tune sounding . . . so wondrousl and softly around me?”

But the historical question remains: if he believed music was inseparable from the concept of melody, why were his melodies invisible – adapting Andersen’s tale – to so many “idiots”?7

In fact, we owe this assessment of Wagner to reactionary criticism that responded to his three major Zurich essays as much as his operas.8 What is at stake in the discourse of melodic theory are differing understandings of the very fabric of opera itself, i.e. the mechanism of vocal expression through which emotion was thought to communicate between performing artist and sentient observer. This is the platform on which I shall investigate discourses about melody during the nineteenth century. In performance, melody becomes a medium: a channel of communication that maintains the

8 Die Kunst und die Revolution (1849), Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (1849), Oper und Drama (1851).
presence of numerous sensual stimuli in the transmission of a message. Quite what that message is, and how it came to assert itself over a listener’s consciousness, prompted a good deal of speculation – and correspondingly few concrete answers – throughout the middle decades of the century.

The appeal of simply taking pleasure in melody’s expressivity was never endangered, of course. In 1833, Schumann wryly invoked a chess analogy to reflect the disproportionate prominence melodic expression continued to have for dilettante listeners when compared to its formal dependence on harmonic structure: “The queen (melody) has the greatest power, but the king (harmony) decides the game.” Given its preeminence for listeners of all stripes, it may be no wonder that melody was such a problem for aesthetic and compositional theory at the time. Precisely because it was granted the freedom to express what language could not, melody became dauntingly indefinable, instilling anxiety in composers and theorists alike. The assumption that it could represent a seismographic register of emotional expression, and that melodic invention simply resided in the realm of the genius went hand in hand with accusations of melodic poverty in contemporary music, and of outright failure in contemporary theory. Two interconnected but conflicting forces perpetuated this situation. On the one hand, popular acclaim for melodic beauty was tied to its prestige as a product of nature; since it symbolized a fragment of a unified but unknowably magnificent and inscrutable cosmos, it was easily co-opted within the autopoietic system of Naturphilosophie, reinforcing Friedrich Schelling’s belief that “the system of nature is at the same time the system of our mind.” On the other hand, the profound interest this inspired in the study of melody as the calling card of the natural genius led to attempts to probe and examine precisely that whose prestige depended on not being understood. The inhibiting factor for melodic theory, in other words, was contained in the very desire to understand melody.


10 F. W. J. Schelling, Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature, trans. E. E. Harris and P. Heath (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 30. In relation to Schelling’s Naturphilosophie, autopoiesis refers to the circularity of a closed system as such, where no information passes between the system and its environment, and where the system’s aim – were we, via cybernetics, to attribute agency to a system of ideas – is to perpetuate the organization of ideas that define it as a system. See Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela, Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living (Dordrecht: D. Riedel, 1980), and later, Niklaus Luhmann, Essays on Self-Reference (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).
The specific problem from the musical-theoretical side of this divide was not lack of theorists, it was a shifting ground of musical style coupled to the fact that prominent philosophers co-opted melody as a special category. There was no shortage of would-be music theorists in Germany; yet while a relatively large number of treatises on harmony were published during the course of the century, only a handful of German writers of any stature engaged with the concept of melodic pedagogy at length. (It is indicative that Franz Brendel’s landmark competition in 1859 to celebrate the fiftieth issue of the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik solicited entries on “the transformation and progress of harmony” rather than melody.) Approaches to melody were far from unimportant, but they failed to secure a tractable basis for analytical scrutiny, and therefore tended to be shunned in the public arena as partial or provisional.

Consider the first melodic treatise of the century: when the theorist and pedagogue Anton Reicha published his Traité de mélodie in 1814, boldly delimiting it to his consideration of phrasal metrical structure, François-Josef Fétis sneered that he “has not even touched upon the laws of melody in connection with tonality, modulation, harmony and aesthetics,” concluding that “a good treatise on melody is yet to be written.” As it happens, the complaint was old. Similar calls for adequate Melodik had been voiced since Johann Mattheson’s Kern melodischer Wissenschafft in 1737; even a year after Wagner’s death, Friedrich von Hausegger still opined that “unfortunately, no one has taken the trouble to determine the laws of melodic composition in quite the same way as with harmony,” and as late as 1945, Paul Hindemith would preface his discussion of melody by observing what was by now the “astounding fact that instruction in composition has never developed a theory of melody.” Even Hegel took a swipe at music theorists in 1830 when confessing his partial knowledge of “the rules of composition” in relation to melodic theory, protesting that “from real scholars and practicing musicians . . . we seldom hear anything definitive
and detailed on these matters.” But Vormärz music theorists were not negligent (as Hegel and Hausegger suggest), they were in an impossibly conflicted position, and given the degree of negative melodic criticism within German language journals and newspapers, this context of uncertainty only underscores Wagner’s audacity in placing melodic theory at the center of a vision for opera in *Oper und Drama* (1851), the longest and most conceptually detailed of his theoretical essays.

Yet the significance of this single publication for Wagner’s reception arguably belies its diachronic context. Wagner’s life spanned nearly three quarters of a century in which considerable changes took place in the conception of musical sound. When he was born in Leipzig, an idealist metaphysics could still claim music as the metaphor of transcendence, something conceptual, disembodied and intangible; by his death, prominent figures within the natural sciences had argued that the entire basis of musical expression was explicable through mechanisms of sensation: in electrical nervous impulses and obedient muscular contractions. While this study of debates and tensions over melody cannot survey the breadth of the century in all its discursive richness, it is precisely an axis of idealist and materialist epistemologies that will structure my approach.

At the mid-century, materialism was less a new philosophy than a revival of an old one, one which Friedrich Lange in 1865 traced back to Democritus’ belief in a world composed of physically indivisible atoms. Such a view quite literally anchored the present in the past, for Democritus’ atoms could be neither created nor destroyed. They were responsible for all change and variety, governed by physical “cause and necessity,” and constituted all that exists, including the soul as the seat of being and the essence of life, which — incidentally — “consists of fine, smooth, round atoms, like those of fire.” As Lange’s genealogy revealed, nineteenth-century materialism also gave priority to matter over spirit, and shared with Democritus’ atomism a view of matter that was conceived exclusively as material but with the crucial caveat (drawn from Newtonian physics) that it is subject to physical forces which regulate the mechanisms by which we perceive our environment. Occurring in the afterglow of Hegelian idealism, this latter outlook was typically cast negatively: as the rejection of an idealist worldview, the overthrowing of presumptive hypotheses based on disembodied or metaphysical prime causes. It is perhaps prudent to point out that this — the rejection of idealism — is also a


recurring stance I have adopted in this book with the intention of gaining perspective within the structures of knowledge that link contemporary criticism, literature, scientific thinking, and university curricula.

In Wagner’s case, though he never attended university, his writings from Paris (1839–42) onward illustrate that he was an idealist by inclination (he would dismiss Lange’s readership as “ignoramuses” in 1878, while in the same breath branding Humboldt and Helmholtz “Schopenhauerian ‘donkeys’”). Against the drift among German academic writers towards a materialist philosophy, then, Wagner’s formative years ensured that he never fully embraced materialist doctrine; they were years spent rather traditionally, absorbing – among other things – lengthy runs of Italian opera (as I explore in Chapter 3). In fact, while still an aspiring composer racked with insecurity over his artistic originality and prospects, he cited Norma as one of his favorite operas during the 1830s; the Italian flavor, though marginalized by an entire scholarly tradition following Hans von Wolzogen and Carl Friedrich Glasenapp in the late nineteenth century, plays an ever-present role in Wagner’s aesthetics of expression, and can help to account for the unresolved tensions surrounding materialism in his writings. If Italy was the seat of song, and “music is not even thinkable without melody,” it is unsurprising that a key concept for Wagner, that of Sinnlichkeit or sensuality (the aesthetic counterpart to pleasurable physical sensation), derives in large part from his engagement with the Italian tradition. Yet, at first glance, the ideology of Germany as a Kulturrnation which Wagner courted so explicitly after 1842 through language as well as literary myth fails to mesh with this reading of his Italianate sensibility, an incongruity I explore in the short Excursus following Chapter 3. Moreover, ever since Rousseau’s polemical appraisal of Italian melody in his Lettre sur la musique française (1753), melody had come to be understood principally as a vocal phenomenon among non-German critics, with language a latent presence. It was with the voice’s innate semiotic capacity in mind that Wagner effectively adopted the Mediterranean priority of vocal melody over “pure” instrumental lines, declaring the voice “the organ to which our music exclusively owes its being.”

over nationhood, particularly when allied to text-as-\textit{Nationalsprache}. In this respect the horizon against which the nineteenth-century melodic discourse unfolds becomes overtly rather than merely implicitly political.

When Germany was finally unified in 1871, Wagner could look back on six decades of ambivalent nationalism, reflecting upon the famous Germanist Jacob Grimm: “of course, Grimm [in 1848] had given up all hope of a German culture (and one can’t blame him).”\textsuperscript{19} Since the late eighteenth century, liberal commentators from Johann Gottfried Herder to Theodor Mundt had spelled out an ideology of nationhood that valued linguistic unity above all, placing the sonority, syntax, and history of a common tongue at the center of a project for national identity. The familiar fallibility in this case is that the search for a persuasive identity in the present was predicated on the assumption of a lost autochthony that could only be reclaimed by drawing on the historical past. Indo-European philologists such as Grimm and Franz Bopp were able to make astonishing claims for etymological certainties in this respect, but the project of philology also aspired to uncover the history of verbal \textit{sounds}. This exercise in historical imagination – a putative archeology of historical utterances – effectively claimed to be holding a microphone to the \textit{Germanen} or pre-medieval German Goths (the earliest Germanic tribe to employ a written literary language), simulating a kind of recording technology sensitized to cultural need. Quite how a text vocalized in melody became synonymous with national identity is a peculiarly German story.\textsuperscript{20} Particularly within Saxony and Prussia, the search for meaningful melodic content was defined, in opposition to French and Italian operatic melody, and relatively few composers pursued explicit links between music and German identity. But Wagner was unequivocal in viewing melody as a signifier of the national condition: “the national tendencies of melodic practice are \textit{so telling}” he explained, freely connecting melodic form to social identity and political institutions.\textsuperscript{21} However daring Wagner’s semiotics may have appeared in

\textsuperscript{19} CT (June 7, 1873).


1851, German commentators on vocal-melodic sounds had already opened wide a hermeneutic door. Hence the ensuing variety of interpretations of melodies often had little to do with music theory, but reflected correspondingly different epistemologies of sound that hinged between the aesthetic and the acoustic, between psychological reflection and somatic reflex.

Amid this expansion of “melody,” the German quest for securely grounded melodic content was principally driven by one question: can melodic sounds carry a meaning that is intuitively comprehensible (gefühlsverständlich)? Brendel put this one way when he defined modern music’s “developmental law” in 1852 as an increasing “particularity of expression.” Wagner put it slightly differently, however, emphasizing a cognitive process that governs “understanding.” Indeed, for a time during the mid-century Wagner consistently defined his artistic aims as the avoidance of “misunderstanding” (in criticism) by accessing the listener’s sensorium directly (in performance). The belief that certain vocal-melodic sounds could not fail to be understood in their moment of delivery intrigued both aestheticians and their colleagues in the life sciences. The broken whimpering of a tearful utterance would seem unmistakable in the human empathy it elicits. Likewise the mimetic portrait of sexual desire in Tristan. But these primal vocalic sounds have more patterned, less characteristic cousins. Rossini’s periodic phrase structures and standardized accompaniments famously disappointed Wagner for their lack of character (even if illustrating how a “pleasing” melodic line could serve as an amulet against criticism). The other side of the coin, however, is Wagner’s incessant interest in performance aesthetics within these fixed lines – how such intervallic shapes are delivered. A pragmatist in matters of stage production, he complained throughout his life of inept singing and acting, notably citing this as a reason for what he took to be the poor reception of his vocal lines in Lohengrin when Liszt conducted the premiere in 1850. Was the reception solely down to the modest standard of the theater? The dull singers? Such questions raise the larger matter of why Wagner’s vocal lines were so seemingly dependent on the singers’ performances, a topic discussed in Chapter 4. One tantalizing hope for getting around this dependence on performers was to hit upon uniquely shaped phrases or interval structures that might establish a natural basis for expression, one effectively tending towards qualia (inherent properties of our mental lives perceived as lived...
experience, e.g. the whiteness of snow, the taste of liquorice, the consonance of perfect intervals). These aspirations entered the melodic discourse under the auspices of musical character, specifically, melody that was deemed charakteristisch. But like shot in game or sand in clams, gritty contortions of melodic line strewn throughout an opera were evidently hard to listen to, as Wagner’s critics found ever new ways to explain.

For Nietzsche, the quest to find meaning in every sound merely desensitized listeners to a bombastic kind of music with “much greater volume, much greater ‘noise’.” This resulted in a twofold trend, he continued, in which a minority were “ever more attuned to ‘what it means’” while the vast majority subsisted with dulled and weakened senses, leading to a physiologically inevitable appreciation of “the basely sensual.”

Polemics aside, the possibility that a physiological explanation for how we perceive emotion might be attainable fired the imagination of researchers as diverse as Rudolf Hermann Lotze and Gustav Fechner. Accordingly, the historical belief in a “science of feeling” crystallizes towards the end of this study, and underpins the discursive network I trace in Chapter 6; it brought about uneasy compromises between monistic and old-school Cartesian doctrines, where the body’s response to melody is no longer a literary metaphor (a phenomenon rapidly caricatured as a soul reduced to mere cerebral convulsion). While the opera house and the laboratory were quite separate spaces, curiosity about the potential of applied science established a conduit between the two in the writings of musical scientists and scientifically minded musicians, and audiences’ critical reactions to melodic “stimuli” became something of a proving ground for physiological evidence about what was effective and ineffective in melody. Indeed, while the later field of experimental psychology and its associated empiricism emerged in Germany during the heyday of Wagnerism, many of its tenets are traceable earlier in the composer’s reception, and it is indicative that the inauguration of psychophysics as a quantitative approach to mind–body relations is roughly coeval with this quasi-scientific reception of Wagner’s music.

Initially, the category of melodic expression most susceptible to this kind of explication was Klangfarbe (sound color), which promised to link the sonorities of instruments and voices directly to one another. But discussions of sound color soon raised the question as to whether “color” – like the body – was merely metaphorical, or whether in fact the literary comparison

---

24 Nietzsche, Human all too Human, Beyond Good and Evil, trans. Helen Zimmern and Paul V. Cohn (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2008), 123.

of light and sound concealed a shattering literalism: a single, natural spectrum of wave forms whose differing lengths would determine whether pitch frequencies or colors are perceived. Fanciful though such theories turned out to be, the attractiveness of a scientific explication of melodic expression continued to besiege the imagination of writers, thinkers, and scientific researchers well into the twentieth century. In the margin alongside his list of the four “most fundamental features of melody,” Arnold Schoenberg scribbled “what is water? H₂O,” emphatically suggesting the possibility of getting at the essence of something – an objective knowledge of melody’s elemental properties seemingly available to those with a mind to access them empirically.²⁶

And the mystique of melody’s natural power survives comfortably into the digital age of videogame music, motivating figures such as Koji Kondo to explain that “for me it’s the art of creating that one main melody that is the primary goal behind music composition.”²⁷ Coming from the composer of Legend of Zelda and Super Mario Brothers, this illustrates the longevity of melody’s appeal, for – oddly enough – Kondo’s statement has a certain amount in common with Wagner’s critical reception of Rossini 150 years earlier, wherein the popularity of a melodic line “that slips into your ear, although you don’t know why, and that you sing to yourself, without knowing why” dominates all other compositional parameters.²⁸

Remaining in the twentieth century, the suspicion that physical and chemical laws could explain what music theory could not finds perhaps its most fantastical outlet in the literary imagination rather than Wagner reception per se. Gilbert Lister, the fictional neuroscientist in Arthur C. Clarke’s tale of The Ultimate Melody (1957), seeks out a tune that fits perfectly with “the fundamental electrical rhythms going on in the brain.”²⁹ After researching the properties of all available hit tunes, he succeeds – we learn – and is promptly reduced to a catatonic state in which an endless melody monopolizes his brain function. A cautionary narrator explains why the resulting theme is so lethal: “it would form an endless ring in the memory circuits of the mind. It would go round and round forever, obliterating all other thoughts.”³⁰ Needless to say, Clarke’s modernist inversion of the hope for applied biologism, whether through a hit tune or a musical texture definitively saturated in melody – i.e.

²⁷ See Koji Kondo, “Interview with a legend” at http://uk.wii.ign.com/articles/772/772299p2.html.
³⁰ Ibid., 585.