Wagner’s Melodies

Since the 1840s, critics have lambasted Wagner for lacking the ability to compose melody. But for him, melody was fundamental – “music’s only form.” This incongruity testifies to the surprising difficulties during the nineteenth century of conceptualizing melody. Despite its indispensible place in opera, contemporary theorists were unable even to agree on a definition for it, let alone formulate a stable basis for teaching it.

In Wagner’s Melodies, David Trippett re-examines Wagner’s central aesthetic claims. He places the composer’s ideas about melody in the context of the scientific discourse of his age: from the emergence of the Natural Sciences and historical linguistics to sources about music’s stimulation of the body, and inventions for “automatic” composition. Interweaving a rich variety of material from the history of science, music theory, criticism, private correspondence and court reports, Trippett uncovers a new and controversial discourse that placed melody at the apex of artistic self-consciousness, and generated problems of urgent dimensions for German music aesthetics.

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Wagner’s Melodies

Aesthetics and Materialism in German Musical Identity

DAVID TRIPPETT
For Paula
Contents

List of illustrations  [page viii]
Acknowledgements  [x]
A note on presentation  [xii]
List of abbreviations  [xiii]

Introduction  [1]
1 German melody  [12]
2 Melodielehre?  [69]
3 Wagner in the melodic workshop  [130]
   Excursus: Bellini’s Sinnlichkeit and Wagner’s Italy  [182]
4 Hearing voices: Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient and the
   Lohengrin “recitatives”  [198]
5 Vowels, voices, and “original truth”  [280]
6 Wagner’s material expression  [330]
   Epilogue: Turning off the lights  [393]

Appendix A: Books on language in Wagner’s Dresden library  [399]
Appendix B: Books on language in Wagner’s Wahnfried library  [402]
Select bibliography  [408]
Index  [439]
Illustrations

1.1  
Hagesandros, Athenedoros, and Polydoros [Laocoön and his sons]. Marble copy of the original, from ca. 200 BC; discovered in the Baths of Trajan in 1506. Musei Vaticani, Museo Pio-Clementino, Octagon, Laocoön Hall. [page 41]

1.2  
Theodor Géricault, A Study of Severed Limbs (1818–19). [56]

1.3  
The modest wavy line to indicate Brangäne’s scream in Wagner’s Orchesterpartitur for Tristan und Isolde, NA A III h 7, p. 235. [65]

2.1  
Emil Grimm, Musikalischer Wahnsinn des 19ten Jahrhundert, (1851). Museumlandschaft Hessen Kassel. [73]

2.2  
The internal mechanism for Diederich Nicolaus Winkel’s Componium (1821). [97]

2.3a–d  
Friedrich August Kanne’s illustrations of melodic wave motion in imitation of water, Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung 68 (1821), 537–38. [106]

3.1  

3.2  
Francesco Hayez, Meditations on the History of Italy / Meditations on the Old and New Testament (1850), Galleria Civica D’Arte Moderna E Contemporanea Di Palazzo Forti. [191]

3.3  

4.1a–c  
Liszt’s conducting score of Lohengrin, Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv, Weimar (GSA 60/Z 19). [236]

4.2a–b  
Wagner’s conducting score for performances of Lohengrin in Frankfurt am Main on September 12–17, 1862. Universitätsbibliothek, Frankfurt am Main (Mus Wf 22). [248]

4.3a–b  
Édouard-Léon Scott de Martinville, “Fixation Graphique de la Voix” (1857), Société d’encouragement pour l’industrie nationale, archives. [258]
List of illustrations


4.5 Wagner’s Kompositionsskizze for Lohengrin (showing revisions in Example 4.10a), NA A II B 2, 1 recto. [269]

6.1 Johannes Müller’s illustration of how a human cadaver can be manipulated to produce artificial tones. From Müller, Über die Compensation der physischen Kräfte am menschlichen Stimmorgan (Berlin: August Hirschwald, 1839), figure 12. [343]

6.2 The emblem for Otto Ule’s journal Die Natur (1852–1902). [347]

6.3 André Gill’s caricature of Wagner in the newspaper L’Eclipse (April 18, 1869), frontispiece. [368]

6.4 A comparison of Goethe’s color triangle with Moritz Rapp’s vowel triangle. [372]

6.5 A Wagnerian “melodic triangle.” [374]
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A note on presentation

All translations into English are my own unless otherwise stated. In the case of Richard Wagner’s prose writings, letters, and opera poems, I have worked in consultation with published translations, where these exist. Since his collected letters and collected writings are widely available to readers, I do not reproduce his German text as a matter of course; where particular words or clauses are idiosyncratic I give these in parentheses in the main text. For clarity, I have opted to use Wagner’s German titles throughout, for both his operas and his essays. For all other foreign language sources, I provide the original text in the footnotes, as this may be harder for readers to come by. To help readers locate sources with ease, I have chosen to use footnotes rather than the more aesthetically appealing endnote style.
Abbreviations

AmZ  Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung
BamZ  Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung

FBfM  Fliegende Blätter für Musik
GSA  Goethe- und Schiller-Archiv. Klassik Stiftung Weimar


NA  Nationalarchiv der Richard-Wagner-Stiftung Bayreuth

NZfM  Neue Zeitschrift für Musik


xiv

List of abbreviations


TMW The Musical World