Understanding the Leitmotif

The musical leitmotif, having reached a point of particular forcefulness in the music of Richard Wagner, has remained a popular compositional device up to the present day. In this book, Matthew Bribitzer-Stull explores the background and development of the leitmotif, from Wagner to the Hollywood adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Harry Potter* series. Analyzing both concert music and film music, Bribitzer-Stull explains what the leitmotif is and establishes it as the union of two aspects: the thematic and the associative. He goes on to show that Wagner's *Ring* cycle provides a leitmotivic paradigm, a model from which we can learn to better understand the leitmotif across style periods. Arguing for a renewed interest in the artistic merit of the leitmotif, Bribitzer-Stull reveals how uniting meaning, memory, and emotion in music can lead to a richer listening experience and a better understanding of dramatic music's enduring appeal.

MATTHEW BRIBITZER-STULL is Associate Professor of Music Theory at the University of Minnesota. He has presented and published widely on Wagner, nineteenth-century chromatic tonality, musical association, and music-theory pedagogy. His articles appear in *Music Theory Spectrum*, *Journal of Music Theory*, *Music Analysis*, *Intégral*, *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, *Journal of Musicological Research*, *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy*, *The Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia*, and *The Legacy of Richard Wagner*, among others. He is author of the *Anthology for Performance and Analysis* (2013) and co-editor of *Richard Wagner for the New Millennium: Essays on Music and Culture* (with Alex Lubet and Gottfried Wagner (great-grandson of the composer), 2007). The winner of the Society for Music Theory Emerging Scholar Award, he has also received a number of teaching awards.

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From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music

MATTHEW BRIBITZER-STULL

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For Warren Darcy and Robert Gauldin,
whose teaching and scholarship inspired me
to study music theory and to study Wagner.

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Preface

"Understanding," the first word of this book's title, implies that we have not yet fully grasped the concept of the leitmotif. Certainly, past decades bear testament to a history of leitmotivic *deconstruction* – that is, subverting the musico-philosophical significance of the leitmotif to expose its fundamental assumptions and inconsistencies – and we must admit that the days of its facile usage in music scholarship are long past.[1] While it would be an exaggeration to assert its *destruction*, it is fair to say that the leitmotif concept has suffered considerable damage and abuse over the past century. Not only have critics disparaged its effectiveness and value as a compositional device, but also leitmotivic analysis has been attacked as a puerile, descriptive mania akin to collecting. Moreover, the very meaning of the word "leitmotif" itself has splintered; a cursory glance at the scholarly literature on the topic reveals an object imperfectly apprehended, as though viewed from different angles through a refracting lens.

Certainly, an entire book could be devoted to the history of leitmotivic analysis, criticism, and reception. I am less interested, though, in sifting through the detritus left in the wake of the previous century's leitmotivic de-(con)struction than I am in resuscitating the idea of leitmotif as a valuable component of musical understanding. To that end I attempt to establish the twofold importance of the leitmotif: first as a theme – a component of musical structure – and second as an associative entity – a component of musical meaning. In so doing, I engage largely, but not exclusively, with dramatic Western art music of the later nineteenth century and Hollywood film music post-1970. Among Western, functionally tonal musics, these repertories comprise what is arguably some of the most emotionally evocative music still widely enjoyed by modern man. In the pages that follow, I hope to show that both the accessibility and the subtlety of this music rest in no small part on the leitmotif.

Perhaps it is best to admit now that I find Wagner's thematic technique of singular importance to the history of Western dramatic music, hence the

[1] See Krims 1998 for a serviceable overview of the intersection between music analysis and deconstruction.

inspiration for this book. It is all too easy to perpetuate Wagner's self-aggrandizing teleologies and his followers' essentialist viewpoints regarding the nature of his compositional practice and of German art – something I have tried to avoid. That said, Wagner scholarship is, in my opinion, plagued with a critical *sine qua non* that one finds rarely – if at all – in the analytic work on other composers' music. There are many who argue, implicitly or explicitly, that *any* positive appraisal of Wagner's artistry *must* be counter-balanced by criticism of his deeply problematic philosophies, self-appraisals, and legacy; failure to do so is irresponsible, a thoughtless acceptance of Wagnerian hagiography. Because the darker side of Wagner and Bayreuth is well documented in the scholarly literature (including within an anthology I co-edited with Gottfried Wagner, great-grandson of the composer), it is my hope that readers will understand that I find it unnecessary to weave it into my narrative on leitmotif here.[2] Rather, I wish to argue, unapologetically, that Wagner's thematic technique not only admirably served his dramatic aims in *The Ring*, but also provided a paradigm adopted by countless later composers across a wide variety of genres. Illustrating said claim comprises the content of the final three chapters of this book.

My approach embraces what some will consider artificial separations – musical materials from musical meanings, and soundtrack from filmic whole. While I agree that such epistemological divorces necessarily impoverish and misrepresent the items under consideration, the criticism leveled against them really indicts analysis itself, an act that, by definition, separates complex objects into their constituent parts.[3] An analyst at heart, I must confess that I find the benefits of analysis outweigh its faults, and that I have no interest in pursuing a lengthy scholarly defense of it here. Such arguments are worth having, but readers familiar with the English-language musicological literature will know that these arguments have been made at length (and will doubtless continue) in more fitting places than the preface to a book about leitmotifs.

And that brings me to my final point – a point any writer of prefaces knows all too well – a pre-emptive disclaimer of what this book does not do. Because leitmotif is a complex topic, doing *it* justice means that I can't do full justice to the many topics it intersects – in my attempt to serve

[2] For those to whom this literature is unfamiliar, I suggest beginning with the writings of Paul Lawrence Rose and Gottfried Wagner. See Rose 1992 and 1990; Wagner 1999; and these men's essays in Bribitzer-Stull 2007.

[3] See Chion 2009: xi for just such a critique.

many audiences, I run the real risk of satisfying none. Wagnerians will long for more detailed insights into Wagner's prose, Wagnerian reception history, and modern-day opera productions; card-carrying music theorists may find the analytic content of the book too light; historical musicologists will likely feel an imagined rush of wind as we race through topics in the history of Western music that beg for deeper study; students of musical meaning will doubtless find the material in Chapters Four and Five synoptic (though I hope some of my thoughts on associativity are both new and deserving of further consideration); and film-music scholars will search in vain for probing new insights into the history of film music, or the analysis thereof.

That said, certain readers will likely experience opposite problems. Wagnerians may find their eyes glazing over when perusing the details of the Peircian trichotomies; musicologists might lament that the clutter of film music, semiotics, and thematic theory burdens what could have been a good book on the history of the Wagnerian leitmotif; readers without technical training in music may find *too much* analysis ("What do I do with these Schenker graphs?!"); and students of film might tire of the copious "classical" music citations. In my defense against dilettantism on the one hand and inscrutable specialization on the other, I can only plead that I have attempted to write a book that I would want to read – one that, in its discursiveness, affirms my command of certain bailiwicks, while challenging me to grow in others.

This goal will, I hope, explain why this book steers clear of a standard chapter arrangement. I eschew the formula of "literature review," followed by "theory," closing with "analysis," in favor of chapters peppered with all of these things united to explain a certain aspect of the leitmotif. Since I take Wagner's *Ring* as paradigmatic of leitmotivic practice, his thoughts feature prominently in the pages that follow (though I juxtapose them with those of numerous other musical thinkers). That said, Wagnerian citations are not confined to one section in a compilation or summary along the lines of what so many previous scholars have already accomplished, but are rather aired in service of the topic at hand.[4] Thus, it is my hope that readers of this book will trace a variety of *Leitfaden* (to borrow a Wagnerian metaphor) to help them make sense of a wide-ranging study much the way listeners continue to use the leitmotif to make sense of multi-media art forms like opera and film.

[4] For one lightly glossed collection of Wagner quotations on themes and expression, see Kirby 2004: 11–16.

A note on film-music excerpts

Many chapters of this book engage film music. Since the film soundtrack is often "team composed" under the direction of the lead composer, and is also subject to editors' and directors' input, it does not usually reflect one composer's musical conception or intention the way we assume most recent art music does.[5] (It is important to remember that film, including the soundtrack, in the period from 1970 to the present is largely the *director's* medium.) Thus, the analysis and transcription in this study relies on the full score *as heard* in the DVD release of the motion picture (director's cut, if available), rather than music or information presented in scores or soundtrack releases. Soundtrack releases often include suites, music cut from the theatric release of the film, and music played over the credits – that is, music catering to the needs of the composer or to a listener experiencing the music divorced from image, rather than the needs of someone engaged with the filmic experience as a whole.

Pedal points, atmospheric timbral effects, dialogue, and non-musical (though sometimes pitched) sound effects are all part of the film soundtrack, often occurring simultaneously with the music. This, coupled with large orchestral forces, makes it difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a definitive transcription of any given musical passage. Since access to many film scores is difficult, if not impossible, the transcriptions in the pages that follow present only what is most salient *dramatically*. First and foremost this will comprise melodic content.[6] It may also include a prose description of the texture and orchestral colors and, when appropriate, the harmonic support presented as one or more of the following: a bass or other contrapuntal line, an accompanying chord progression, figured-bass notation, or Roman numerals. These last are included only if they seem to accurately represent the tonal implications of the harmonies.

Finally, unless otherwise indicated, theme names are my own and rely on my judgment of the theme's associative role in the drama, rather than the name of the scene or cue used to identify tracks on CD soundtrack releases.[7]

[5] For an entertaining look behind the scenes at the frenetic process of team composition, see Raskin 1989.

[6] Danny Elfman believes it is *melody* that lodges in the memory after watching a film (see Halfyard 2004: 60).

[7] The practice of naming themes is a problematic one, though I believe the benefits outweigh the pitfalls. For some thoughts on the practice, see the discussion on pp. 18, 27, and 63–64 in this volume, as well as Bribitzer-Stull 2007; Thorau 2003: 138–44; and Monelle 2000: 41–42.

Acknowledgments

It is a persistent irony that the first sections of a book – the dedication, the acknowledgments, and the preface – are finished last. To frame a project, of course, requires clarity only hindsight can grant. Looking back over the journey that brought me to this point, it is with both a palpable sense of nostalgia and a deep feeling of gratitude that I celebrate the assistance I had along the way.

I would be remiss to thank anyone before my parents, who, in an age of decreased interest in arts-and-humanities education supported me financially and emotionally in my pursuit of music. Recognition is also due my teachers; they include: Earl Benson, my high-school band director, who introduced me to Wagner through a wind-band transcription of "Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral" from *Lohengrin*, and whose demand for excellence (captured so concisely with the banner stretching across our classroom that read "Results, not Alibis") instilled in me a lasting desire to reach toward excellence whatever the circumstances; Charles McDonald, my first horn teacher, who inspired me with his deep love of music, and encouraged me to start thinking about how music means things; Sylvan Suskin, who introduced me to Wagner's *Die Walküre* in his Music History 101 class at Oberlin; and Warren Darcy, another Oberlin professor, whose *Ring* course inspired me in ways that words cannot express, and who honored me in May 2014 with an invitation to present my work as part of his retirement celebration. I am indebted as well to my mentors at Eastman: Matthew Brown for numerous thought-provoking discussions on music and on making a living in the academy; and Robert Gauldin, for sharing his seemingly boundless knowledge of the repertory with me, a level of knowledge I aspire – in all likelihood fruitlessly – to attain.

My position at the University of Minnesota has not only allowed me the time and resources necessary to complete this project, but has also enabled me to make contact with many fine minds across the spectrum of musical thought. Anyone who enjoys conversations with passionate and intelligent people can imagine how much these contribute to one's own intellectual development and productivity, and what a rare blessing it is to lead a life as professor. The University and its College of Liberal Arts also supported this

book in a more direct fashion, seeing fit to grant me a Single-Semester Leave, two Summer Research Fellowships, and a McKnight Fellowship to conduct research.

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Various portions of this book passed through the hands of many other thinkers along the way. I find that I respect their judgment and advice all the more now that I can see how much they improved the end product. These include: family (Jason Bribitzer-Stull and Emily Stull), friends (David Philip Norris), students (Tim Brock), colleagues (Michael Cherlin, Sumanth Gopinath, Richard Leppert, Scott Lipscomb, and David Neumeyer), and, naturally, the anonymous readers for Cambridge who provided copious and helpful comments on my prospectus. The errors and shortcomings that remain are mine alone.

Finally, I wish to admit my debt of gratitude to those closest to my heart. To my sister, Emily: thank you for traveling to New York City with me in 2000 to join me for my first live *Ring*-cycle performance; a moment from our experience there finds its way into Chapter 4. And to my husband, Jason: I may never be able to fully repay your love, understanding, tolerance, and support. May the next twenty years put the last twenty to shame.