

Introduction

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Concept of the Companion; Or, How to Use This Volume

This book is intended for a broad range of readers: for those entirely new to Richard Wagner's monumental *Der Ring des Nibelungen*; for those who know it well; for those who have heard (possibly seen) a little or all of it and who would like to explore it further; and for all shades of difference in between. The Introduction attempts to provide as thorough an overview to the work and its creator as possible within the space allowed. Much of this is quite brief and necessarily superficial, but it nevertheless should serve to orient the reader. Especially for newcomers, therefore, we highly recommend that you read the whole Introduction first.

The chapters that follow go into greater detail about their given topics. For those chapters, the Introduction serves to set out the background knowledge assumed by the authors or to address aspects not covered. Of course, not every aspect of the *Ring* and its history is addressed by the chapters, and, in some of those cases, the Introduction is there to provide some coverage and guide the reader to further sources. The editors have highlighted connections between the individual chapters by pointing to other sections of the book where a certain idea, made in passing in one place, is elaborated more fully or, perhaps, considered from a different angle. Therefore, each chapter provides an entry point into the book.

The *Ring* opens vistas into a multitude of different historical, social, cultural, political, and philosophical domains, and so it will not be solely the student of music or even theater history who might find this book of interest. Wagner's *Ring* continues to draw and inspire devotees from all walks of life, and the editors hope that this volume will likewise have something to say to a diverse readership, young and old, novices and aficionados, amateurs and professionals, students and scholars from a broad range of fields, listeners, readers, performers, and spectators alike.

Whilst it is, of course, always advantageous when dealing with Wagner to have some familiarity with German, no knowledge of the

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language is assumed for the purposes of this volume. Although the titles of his compositions are generally provided in German, the titles of his prose works will be presented first in both the German and English versions, followed thereafter by just the English. Quotes will always be in English, but the original is offered either parenthetically – or in the footnotes for longer ones – either where the German presents a translation challenge or where Wagner's choice of vocabulary or semantic structure is particularly noteworthy, revealing, or crucial to understanding.

The structure of this Introduction is a little unusual. We had initially intended to write each section together, one of us writing first, the other making changes, additions, and so on, in the hope that it might emerge in, if not quite one voice, then in two that were closely allied. In a sense, it still does; we certainly continue to think of ourselves as allies. However, during editing of contributors' chapters and conversations about this volume and more generally about the *Ring*, we decided that, rather than try to conceal our differences, here was the place to bring them into the open. No two people, let alone a volume of contributors and its readers, will think the same way about Wagner or about the *Ring*. Wagner himself thought very differently about it at different times in his life, even according to his daily mood. His correspondence and a multitude of other sources, discussed throughout the Introduction and *Companion* alike, make that abundantly clear.

With that in mind, we have discussed and edited each other's sections in something akin to the "normal" way, whilst at the same time allowing the other the opportunity to state his own views. To this end of friendly difference, we also decided against using any one translation of the *Ring* poem; we have rather let contributors choose their own (in many cases, very much their own, made expressly for this purpose). We wish to underline that there is nothing wrong with disagreement, that it is inherent in both work and reception. Nothing written here should be taken as the last word on the *Ring*; at best, we hope, it may have some worth as a first.

Why Wagner? (Nicholas Vazsonyi)

There is a lot of misinformation in circulation about Wagner, some of it originating with Wagner himself. As if his publicly expressed anti-Semitism were not problematic enough, he, his music, and the aesthetic of his dramas were incorporated into the world of the Third Reich to such an extent that, as a result, many have come to assume, falsely, that he was a contemporary of Hitler, functioning as a sort of court composer who

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wrote the theme music to accompany the Blitzkrieg and to be played from loudspeakers at Auschwitz.

Actually, Richard Wagner was born in 1813, in Leipzig, a few months before the famous “Battle of the Nations” on the outskirts of that same city, where Napoleon, after his disastrous retreat from Russia, was finally routed at the hands of the European allies and sent off to exile in Elba to serve out the rest of his days, or so it was hoped. Wagner died almost exactly seventy years later, in 1883, in Venice. Hitler would not be born until 1889. Wagner’s world was a different one from that of Hitler and the first half of the twentieth century, framed as it was by two world wars and a global economic collapse in between. The nineteenth century was, instead, an age fueled by enormous possibilities and hopes, as the feudalism that had marked the social and political order in Europe for almost a millennium was clearly drawing its last breaths, extinguished quite literally by the guillotine and eroded by other less violent though no less unstoppable tectonic shifts. The Church, too, and the religious ways of faith-based thinking it propagated were being forced to yield to the irrefutable and tangible conclusions of the sciences and the technologies they produced. The development of industrial production and improvements in modes of travel and communication altered society and living conditions more fundamentally and on a broader scale than even today’s dizzying advances in technology can begin to match. For better and for worse.

This was the world into which Richard Wagner was born, a world that affected him profoundly and that he in turn would profoundly affect. The reason to devote a *Companion* volume in a series more typically reserved for authors and works of literature is that Wagner was far more than a composer, or even a dramatist. The fact that he wrote the texts to his own stage works and that these texts are themselves substantial works of literature is only one aspect of the reason. From the start, Wagner was interested in and drawn to the most weighty issues of human psychology and the drama of life. He read voraciously and quite eclectically, from the classics of Antiquity to the latest works of German philosophy, and pretty much everything in between. The only thing he probably spent more time doing than reading was talking and writing. The surviving correspondence will eventually fill thirty-five volumes of the complete edition, and according to accounts of his friends and acquaintances, Wagner simply dominated the room at any gathering where he was present. He also was part of a generation of composers who felt compelled to write for the public, publishing in journals that were growing in circulation and influence across the Continent. But, whereas his contemporaries such as Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Hector Berlioz generally limited their publications to musical issues, Wagner went much further, writing about

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aesthetics, politics, history, culture, and sociological issues. Even in his own day, when standards of what constituted scholarship or informed opinion were less rigorous than they have become, his essays were often the stuff of conjecture and loosely tied together facts and ideas that, even then, were considered fanciful by many. But they need to be taken seriously by us, because they provide some insight into his ways of thinking and, more significantly still, his dramatic works. This is a fraught topic and one that continues to spark heated debate within Wagner scholarship and beyond: what exactly is the relationship between his published essays on a variety of topics and the artworks he created around the same time? It is a debate that cannot ever be resolved satisfactorily, nor even could Wagner himself answer the question conclusively, were he alive today, because the creator cannot be fully aware of the creative process, just as we as individuals can never be fully aware of our motivations, our intentions, and ourselves.

Wagner began to write essays prodigiously during his first and longest stay in Paris: 1839–42. He had gone there to seek success, fame, and fortune in the lively and lucrative opera scene but found mainly failure, misery, and poverty.¹ In order to make ends meet, he started writing essays on music and reviews of the music scene, alongside a few novellas, mostly published in the leading *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* as well as back in Germany. It turns out that he was very good at writing and was encouraged to continue. During the 1840s, he also composed *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*, also becoming the Royal Saxon Kapellmeister in Dresden in 1843, a well-paid position that he could conceivably have held for the remainder of his professional life. Had he died at this point, he would be remembered today as one of the greatest opera composers of the nineteenth century and a notable orchestral conductor. To cite just one example, the French avant-garde poet, Charles Baudelaire, heard the Prelude to *Lohengrin* in 1860 and was immediately swept off his feet, writing a breathtakingly moving fan letter to Wagner immediately after.² For Baudelaire, Wagner's music was a revelation about the essence of existence which inspired his own poetic work. The generation of French modernists who came after Baudelaire were some of Wagner's greatest admirers of the nineteenth century. To say that Wagner was the Godfather of the French and eventually the

¹ Ulrich Drüner has argued against Wagner's claim of poverty. Of course, if one spends more than one earns, one will always be short of money. Either way, Wagner's autobiographical narrative continues to mold how he is perceived by posterity. See Ulrich Drüner, *Richard Wagner: Die Inszenierung eines Lebens* (Munich: Blessing, 2016), chapter 7.

² See Charles Baudelaire's letter to Wagner on February 17, 1860, in Charles Baudelaire, *Baudelaire as a Literary Critic*, trans. L. B. and F. E. Hyslop (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964).

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European fin-de-siècle movements would not be an overstatement.³ But he had another thirty-three years to go.

In 1849, he found himself at perhaps the most significant juncture and junction of his life. We will never know precisely what he did during the May 1849 uprising in Dresden, a relatively late echo of the 1848 revolutions that swept Europe. Whatever it was, he felt compelled to flee for his life as the revolt was crushed, and a good thing too, because a warrant was issued for his arrest and, if captured, he would most certainly have faced the death penalty. He remained an exile from German lands and did not receive a full pardon until 1862, wandering Europe like the Flying Dutchman himself. His main residence during this period was Zurich, with stays in Paris and Venice, at Swiss spas, and with friends here and there in between. Wagner's existential crisis of 1849 was accompanied by a creative one. What to do after *Lohengrin*? The solution he found was quite literally to write his way out of the impasse. What followed is loosely referred to as the "Zurich essays," and you will see references to them throughout this volume, because they form the cultural, historical, aesthetic, and theoretical basis for the *Ring* as it was initially conceived.

The main writings that form the "Zurich essays" are, in chronological order, *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (*Art and Revolution*, 1849), *Die Revolution* (*Revolution*, 1849), *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*Artwork of the Future*, 1849), *Kunst und Klima* (*Art and Climate*, 1850), and *Das Judentum in der Musik* (*Jewishness in Music*, 1850), capped off by the book-length *Oper und Drama* (*Opera and Drama*, 1851). The seeming anomaly in this list is *Jewishness in Music* which we will return to below. These essays and the book form a progression in Wagner's thinking that, whilst fundamentally about the aesthetics of his future undertakings, are fueled and inspired by his quite particular understanding of the cultural history of what I will call the West, combined with his equally distinctive interpretation of the sociological and political stakes of his own time. Instead of chiseling away at his writings and honing his thoughts, his approach was to write, write, and then publish when he had arrived at a caesura. Reading Wagner is thus both thrilling and frustrating. Thrilling, because we experience the organic and dialectical development of his thoughts as if in real time. One misses a lot if one just reads the last in the series of works because it is much harder to understand how he arrives at his conclusions. On the other hand, if one reads it all, one must wade through many half-baked, murky formulated, and abandoned ideas that a good editorial process would have eliminated or refined. It has also meant that

³ See Mark Berry, "Music and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*," in *The Fin-de-Siècle World*, ed. Michael Saler (Routledge: London and New York, 2015), 625–40.

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commentators and scholars have wasted time puzzling over matters that Wagner himself might have excised upon reflection.

These essays are grounded in Wagner's iconoclastic understanding of the sociological role played by drama in ancient Greece. In this, Wagner is part of a German interest in ancient Greece that starts with the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann whose *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* ("Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture") of 1755 launched the movement which would culminate in the Weimar Classicism of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller at the end of the eighteenth century.⁴ Wagner was inspired by the idea that the performance of dramas in Athens was part of a religious festival, where the public, freed from their daily labors and cares, attended for free. The idea of "religious festival" was central for the remainder of his life, reflected in the label he gave the *Ring* – Bühnenfestspiel (stage festival play) – and the building in which the work was to be performed: the Festspielhaus (Festival Theater) in Bayreuth.⁵ More on the "religious" dimension below. Furthermore, Greek drama was not merely a text to be spoken but a work integrating music and dance (i.e. movement), as well as words. Wagner refers to this as a "Gesamtkunstwerk" (total work of art) that ceased to exist once the Athenian state disappeared. Although he never referred to his own subsequent stage works by that label, the term stuck and came to be used by others to describe the Wagnerian project, an aesthetic goal to (re)unify the distinct arts that has continued to capture the imagination of creators ever since.⁶

The eighteenth century provided Wagner with another, equally important, impetus in the work of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), a maverick and highly creative thinker whose project became the basis of

⁴ For more on this issue, see the seminal work by E. M. Butler: *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012), originally published in 1935.

⁵ See Wagner's essays: "Epilogischer Bericht über die Umstände und Schicksale, welche die Ausführung des Bühnenfestspiels *Der Ring des Nibelungen* bis zur Veröffentlichung der Dichtung desselben begleiteten." SSD, 6:257–72, and "Vorwort zur Herausgabe der Dichtung des Bühnenfestspiels *Der Ring des Nibelungen*." SSD, 6:272–81, as well as Roger Allen's chapter in this volume.

⁶ There is a vast literature on the subject, hence no separate chapter devoted to the concept in this volume. For orientation, the reader might consult: Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (Routledge: New York, 2007); Anke Finger and Danielle Follett, eds. *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork: On Borders and Fragments* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2011); David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2011); Margaret Menninger and Anthony Steinhoff, eds. *Gesamtkunstwerk: Foundations, Articulations, and Inspirations* (Berghahn: New York, 2016); not to mention the sections on "Gesamtkunstwerk" in *CWE* and the *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. ed. John Deathridge (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992).

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what later was called Ethnography and, more recently, Culture Studies. Herder was interested in questions of language, origins, and identity. How can one find out a people's original and, presumably, "authentic" culture in an age when dominant cultures and a way of thinking that had aspirations of universality – the Enlightenment – were effacing local particularism? The answer, he argued, was to go into the field, make contact with peasants and villagers (i.e. those as yet untouched by the Enlightenment), and recuperate the stories, tales, and songs they had been handing down orally for centuries from one generation to another. In these tales were to be found the "spirit of the people" (*Volksgeist*). Although Herder was unable to complete his mammoth undertaking, the fairy tale collections of the Grimm brothers and the Lieder assembled and published by Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim in the Romantic period of the first decades of the nineteenth century, not to mention Béla Bartók traversing the Hungarian countryside with a gramophone recorder a hundred years later, would have been inconceivable without Herder's grand idea. Herder's work was a prime ingredient in the development of what we can call cultural nationalism, a movement that accompanied the political or state nationalism that came into being with the French Revolution and the liberal bourgeois movements of the nineteenth century. At this point, it is important to point out that "nationalism" in the nineteenth century, especially leading up to the revolutions of 1848, was something quite different from what nationalism became in the latter part of that century and into the twentieth. In the first half of the nineteenth century, nationalists were on the "left" of the political spectrum, supporting a "progressive" agenda that demanded political rights for the people and standing against the feudal institutions of the Middle Ages, a project that was at least as important as defining what was particular about one national identity when set against an "other." Richard Wagner's interest in the question of an authentic German identity, a question which, among many others, infuses his work, comes out of this particular tradition and must also be understood within this context. By the end of the First World War, the vestiges of medieval feudalism were all but gone, and the nation state had become the political order by default, leaving little more than the cultural and racist aspects of nationalism to define what by then had become a movement of the political right.

But Wagner also got an important impulse from both the ancient Greeks and Herder together: the centrality of myth. Whilst we observe a revival of myth, broadly understood, in both the Classical and Romantic movements of Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the former fueled by Winkelmann, the latter by Herder, Wagner, I would argue, stands alone in his adoption and fusion of myth from both

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ancient Greek and Germanic sources.⁷ In Wagner's hands, the potential and significance of myth are raised exponentially as if to the level of myth itself: a myth of the myth. Wagner was the first German speaker to use the word "Mythos" (from ancient Greek) as opposed to the commonly used Latin-based "Mythus." By doing so, he meant to send a signal that, in his hands, myth was to be something different, extraordinary. He explained: "the incomparable quality of myth is that it is always true, and its content in concentrated form is forever inexhaustible."⁸ Myth addresses situations and emotions that are essentially human and thus emotionally and psychologically universal. So, as "Germanic" as Wagner's works may appear, his turn to the world of myth is actually quite the opposite. The *Ring* is not about Germans; it is about the human condition.

As if this were not enough, Wagner's project was not merely a fusion of strands from the eighteenth century and earlier. Perhaps more importantly still, he was a keen observer of his own age and an artist who seemed to have grasped the long-term consequences of what we can simply call modernity. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Wagner's closest friends and most incisive critics, put it succinctly, as always: "Wagner sums up modernity; it's no use, one must first be a Wagnerian."⁹ What exactly Nietzsche meant by this cannot be explored here, but one of Wagner's most significant responses to modernity was in the area of religion. He understood the crisis of faith and the erosion of Church authority that modernity had precipitated, but he also understood humanity's deep need and longing for transcendence. In his late essay *Religion and Art* (1880), he wrote: "One might say that where religion becomes artificial, it is reserved for art to save the essence of religion by recognizing the figurative value of the mythic symbols which the former would have us believe in their literal sense, and revealing their deep and hidden truth through an ideal presentation."¹⁰ In other words, art, for Wagner, would assume the role of religion in modernity. Hence the significance of the ancient Greek idea of dramas being performed at "religious festivals."

Wagner's stage works offer even more, however. Beyond the "merely" transcendental substitution for religious experience, they explore the mysteries of human existence and psychology that the research- and reason-based cultures of Western scientism continue to have difficulty grasping.

⁷ See Stewart Spencer, "The Romantic Operas and the Turn to Myth," *CCtW*, 71, "Wagner himself does not seem to have drawn any fundamental distinction between legend and myth, but came to see both as outpourings of the popular spirit." One could add folktales as well.

⁸ "Das Unvergleichliche des Mythos ist, daß er jederzeit wahr, und sein Inhalt, bei dichtester Gedrängtheit, für alle Zeiten unerschöpflich ist" (*SSD*, 4:64).

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage: New York, 1967), 156.

¹⁰ *SSD*, 10:211; *PW*, 6:213.

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Wagner also exposes the dynamics of social structures and offers a critique of modern modalities that quite remarkably continue to have relevance today. The influences on his thinking came from a heady mix of contemporary thinkers, from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to Ludwig Feuerbach and Arthur Schopenhauer as well as French socialists Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who also influenced Karl Marx, only five years Wagner's junior. The Zurich essays contain a critique of property and money, and use the term "communism," though not with the same rigor that we find in Marx. Nevertheless, the consequences of industrialization and the rise of the money economy constitute a significant element in the *Ring*.

The political dimension of Wagner's thinking brings us to the last issue in this section. If the emphasis of the Zurich essays was on the aesthetic stakes of Wagner's worldview, his later essays, starting around 1865 with a series of pieces initially designed to convey Wagner's understanding of Germany and politics to the new king, Ludwig II, become increasingly ideological. Ludwig ascended the Bavarian throne in 1864 at the age of eighteen. He was, already then, enthralled by Wagner's operas, especially *Lohengrin*. One of his first acts was to demand to meet the composer. From their initial encounter until Wagner's death, the composer enjoyed the financial support of the king, who was also instrumental in making the construction of Wagner's Festival Theater in Bayreuth and thus the world premiere of the *Ring* cycle possible. For a time, Wagner became Ludwig's trusted advisor, invited by the monarch to explain his views on matters of politics and the state. This launched the last phase of Wagner's prose output, which increased in quantity after the founding of the *Bayreuther Blätter*, an in-house journal of the Bayreuth Festival, established by Wagner in 1878 and edited by Hans von Wolzogen until his death in 1938, when the journal itself was disbanded. With a few notable exceptions, the majority of these writings centered on Wagner's critique of modernity and its corrosive effects on society and the human condition. Essays promoting vegetarianism, against vivisection, and against mass media, among other topics, followed, all aimed at advocating a "regeneration" of humanity. Although there is much in Wagner's original thinking that corresponds to what we would consider a radical socialist agenda, the context in which they were written and the group of people who formed around Wagner in these last years – referred to as the Bayreuth Circle – were staunch nationalists and radical conservatives who functioned as the connective ideological sinew between Wagner, who died in 1883, and the Nazis, who began to stir in earnest after 1918. These last, often anti-Semitic, and misogynistic essays, the product of a world-weary and resentful person filled with spite and hatred – ironically reminiscent of Alberich in the *Ring* – are what haunt the Wagner legacy today. This legacy is all the harder to defend as the rantings of an old

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and dying man given the publication in 1850 of *Jewishness in Music*, no less the ravings of resentment and hatred. In combination, we can see that Wagner was driven lifelong by pervasive and enduring sentiments which, given the direction of subsequent history for which he cannot be held responsible, are nevertheless horrible and terrifying.

So, why Wagner? Clearly there is something to an artist who can simultaneously have been important for French modernism and the Third Reich, not to mention close to two centuries of devoted listeners and leading minds who have responded to the challenge of understanding and interpreting his work. J. P. E. Harper-Scott, in Chapter 4 of this volume, refers to the “magnetic effect” Wagner has had on radical artists and thinkers over the last one hundred and fifty years. Indeed. Wagner is an enormously complex phenomenon, and I note that, in the preceding, I have barely even touched on his music. The next section will hopefully make up for this lacuna.

Why the *Ring*? (Mark Berry)

Even within Wagner's œuvre, there is something not only particular but extreme about the *Ring*. If *Tristan und Isolde* outdoes it for particularity and extremity of musical language – perhaps because it is but a single drama and thus less all-encompassing – then the *Ring*, like life, like world history, like religion and philosophy themselves, emerges victorious on most other fronts. Art as any revolutionary socialist such as Wagner would tell you, is not a competition; yet that is not to say that there are no judgments, quantitative *and* qualitative, to be made.

The scale of the tetralogy – strictly, three dramas with a “preliminary evening” (*Vorabend*), *Das Rheingold* – is one thing. It consciously echoes the *Oresteia* of Æschylus and the tragedies of Sophocles as much as, perhaps more than, any previous musical drama. Indeed, until the end of his life, Wagner would continue to read – often aloud, to his second wife Cosima or to a small, invited audience – such dramatic works. The evening after one such reading, Cosima records him saying of Æschylus's *Agamemnon*: “I declare that to be the most perfect thing in every way, religious, philosophic, poetic, artistic. One can put Shakespeare's histories beside it, but he had no Athenian state, no Areopagus as a final resort.”¹¹ Such a remark already points us to the truth that size, whilst not irrelevant, was far from sufficient. (The same might be said the other way round for the music of Anton Webern: his aphoristic brevity is a characteristic it

¹¹ CT, June 24, 1880.