Introduction: Analysing Wagner

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Wagner's 'relationship with music theory', Alexander Rehding drily notes in his contribution to the present volume, 'was complicated' (p. 205). One could say something similar about music theory's relationship with Wagner. On the one hand Wagner's music, and especially its harmonic structure, has long served as a touchstone for theoretical models both old and new. At the same time, however, music analysts more often than not have appeared intimidated by the complexity of Wagner's works, their multi-layeredness and their sheer unwieldiness. Already in 1981, the late Anthony Newcomb noted in the first of a series of remarkably forward-looking articles on Wagner analysis that American music theory was 'unwilling to touch messy Wagnerian opera with [its] bright Schenkerian tools'.[1] To be sure, much has changed since then: not only have Schenkerians (or at least some of them) embraced Wagner, but also the toolbox of both North American and global music theory has expanded considerably over the last three or four decades, not to mention how much broader the perspective of music theory and analysis in general (what they are, what they can do and what they can be about) has become. Still, a survey of general music theory journals or analysis of conference programmes from the past two decades quickly makes clear that Wagner's music is not exactly one of the discipline's main preoccupations.

There are, of course, exceptions, and the contributors to this volume have been responsible for many of them over the years. The time seemed ripe, therefore, to bring these authors together in a volume that takes stock of what Wagner analysis is (what it can do and what it can be about) close to a century and a half after the composer's death. In putting analytical engagement with Wagner's works at its centre, the present tome differs in scope from the generally more comprehensive volumes in the *Cambridge Composer Studies* series. One reason for this is practical. The field of Wagner studies is so vast – comprising scholarship not only from within but, more than for other composers, also from outside the musicologies –

[1] Anthony Newcomb, 'The Birth of Music out of the Spirit of Drama: An Essay in Wagnerian Formal Analysis', *19th-Century Music* 5 (1981): 39 n. 4.

that no single volume can adequately represent it in all its diversity; any attempt to do so would have resulted in a collection that was overly disparate. (In an ideal world, this volume would over time be complemented by a *Wagner Studies 2* that is devoted exclusively to cultural-historical, ideological and philosophical aspects of Wagner's works and – why not – a *Wagner Studies 3* that is entirely about Wagner performance, both musical and theatrical.) At least as much, however, our choice is informed by ideological motives. The rich interdisciplinary conversation about Wagner stretches from musicology to philosophy, theatre studies, German studies, cultural studies, political science and beyond. It is, however, a conversation that, as Melanie Wald and Wolfgang Fuhrmann have observed, 'is conducted . . . to a large extent as if the actual (even though not the only) reason for the fascination of [Wagner's] works that continues to this day did not even exist: the music'.[2] As a corrective – a naïve one, perhaps – to this state of affairs, this volume wants to reclaim Wagner for his 'home' discipline, in that the authors of the ten chapters in this volume unabashedly put the music itself at the centre of attention.

This does not mean that the book presents a series of purely technical accounts of Wagner's music. Rather, while retaining the traditional interest in aspects of harmony, motive and form, the essays this volume assembles bring existing and newly developing analytical tools into fruitful contact with a range of perspectives that include hermeneutics, dramaturgy, history of theory, theories of reception and discursive analysis of sexuality and ideology. Indeed, some of its contributions might not be recognised by everyone as music analysis or music theory in the strict sense. What all of them have in common, though, is a direct, close and sustained engagement with the music and text as notated in the score. Collectively they capture the breadth of analytical studies of Wagner in contemporary scholarship and expand the reach of the field by challenging it to break new interpretative and methodological ground.

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This volume's ten chapters are thematically grouped into four parts – two sets of three framed by two pairs. The title of the first part, 'Orientations', may be less straightforward than it seems. Coming from an author who has spent a lifetime writing about Wagner, Arnold Whittall's chapter '"Wo sind wir?": *Tristan* Disorientations' in particular may indeed be an unexpectedly disorienting opener to a volume that purports to be about analysing

[2] Melanie Wald and Wolfgang Fuhrmann, *Ahnung und Erinnerung. Die Dramaturgie der Leitmotive bei Richard Wagner* (Kassel: Bärenreiter and Leipzig: Henschel, 2013), 22.

Wagner. Like much of Whittall's writing it is analytically impressionistic – memorable more for its erudite suggestiveness than for its actual analytical remarks. Starting from a very personal, even confessional position, it shines light on *Tristan* through the lens of a series of unobvious comparisons, ranging from Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* to Frank McGuinness's *Thebans*. No less personal, Matthew Bribitzer-Stull's chapter 'Bottoming for Wagner: Listening, Analysis and (Gay-Male) Subjectivity' explores how a specific sexual orientation can open new analytical perspectives and illustrates this with two analytical vignettes of the Prelude to *Lohengrin* and the Prelude to Act 2 of *Die Walküre*. What is crucial is that a seemingly very subjective position can have broader intersubjective relevance; as Bribitzer-Stull writes: 'Any posited subject position has not only a *descriptive* value for analysis, but also a *prescriptive* value for individuals who might wish to inhabit it experimentally as they expand their own listening practices' (p. 31).

The three chapters that form the next section ('Form, Drama and Convention') are perhaps the most traditionally music-theoretical ones in the volume – even though they broach topics that would long have been considered controversial in orthodox Wagnerian circles. William M. Marvin's 'Wagner and the Uses of Convention' takes a bird's-eye view of the early and romantic operas (from *Die Feen* through *Lohengrin*, with an additional glance at *Tristan*), identifying the many passages that betray Wagner's familiarity with the formal conventions of Italian opera from the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Graham Hunt's chapter on *Lohengrin*, 'Elsa, Ortrud, the Grail and the Forbidden Question', builds on the recent interest in form-functional analysis of nineteenth-century vocal music, focusing on the phrase-structural organisation of, and the connections between, some of the opera's main motives, as well as on the ways in which they are deployed in two of Wagner's earliest uses of rotational form. My own essay ('Scena, Form and Drama in Act 1 of *Die Walküre*') complements Marvin's survey in that it analyses a single extended scene from one of the mature operas through the lens of *la solita forma*, showing how form plays an active role in shaping the drama.

Part Three ('Time, Texture and Tonality') brings together three very contrasting chapters which have in common that each of them engages with a specific musical aspect of one of Wagner's operas and from there builds towards a wide-ranging dramatic, ideological or historical interpretation. In 'Time, Sound and Regression in *Tristan und Isolde*', Tobias Janz analyses the music and drama in *Tristan* as 'a tragedy of hearing . . . in which the main characters . . . are bound to the discursive and plot-oriented forms

of musical-operatic time, while the redemption they desire . . . points musically beyond the opera's temporal structures' (p. 116). More than any of the other chapters, J. P. E. Harper-Scott and Oliver Chandler's 'Waltraute's Plaint: Riemannian Tonal Function and Dramatic Narrative' combines analysis with explicit theory formation. Bringing 'neo-Riemannian theory closer to its origin in Hugo Riemann's functional theory', it not only seeks a dialectical understanding of tonality's meaning in the specific dramatic context of *Götterdämmerung*, but also hints at 'a new theoretical frame for understanding tonal function in chromatic music' (p. 138). The final chapter in this section, Ariane Jeßulat's 'Wagner's Late Counterpoint', situates a few short passages from *Parsifal* within a complex interpretative context that combines nineteenth-century counterpoint pedagogy and historical and contemporary models with memory studies and Adorno's ideas on late style.

The concluding pair of chapters focuses on issues of 'Reception'. Anna Stoll Knecht ('Silence and Gesture in Mahler's Ninth Symphony and Wagner's *Parsifal*') presents a hermeneutic analysis of Gustav Mahler's adaptation of the turn figure from *Parsifal* in his Ninth Symphony, reading it as a gesture that expresses the unspeakable. In 'Wagner's Early Analysts', finally, Alexander Rehding surveys the reception of Wagner's music among mainly German-speaking theorists during the final years of Wagner's life and the decades immediately after. Centred on the Tristan chord, his essay shows how Wagner's music had a formative influence on the development as *Harmonielehre* as 'a practice that was at once analytical, interpretative and historiographic' at a crucial moment in the history of music theory (p. 214).

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It was an unusually balmy Friday afternoon in February 2019 when, over beers at a pub in Bloomsbury, I recklessly told Paul Harper-Scott that I thought someone should edit a collection of essays on analysing Wagner. In his characteristic manner, Paul did not respond directly (instead we probably just ordered another round), but a few days later an email landed in my inbox: was I serious and, if I was, could he and I perhaps be the ones putting that volume together. I was and we could, so one thing led to another, including an informal 'Wagner Studies symposium' with most of the volume's contributors over Zoom in the spring of 2021. Paul's career change soon after that has meant that I am listed as the sole editor, even though the book's general conception is as much his as it is mine. I am very grateful that he and Oliver Chandler (one of his last advisees) found a way to co-author the chapter that Paul had originally planned to write on

his own. Thanks are also due to Kate Brett, for accepting to publish the book as part of the *Cambridge Composer Studies* series, and to her and her team for seeing it through to completion; to Rebecca Moranis, for her help organising the online symposium as well as with editing many of the chapters; to Elwyn Rowlands, for helping me review the page proofs; to the staff at the Music Library of the University of Toronto, for their assistance with the cover image; and to Sarah Gutsche-Miller, who seems to have finally (yet grudgingly) accepted that her husband spends so much of his time thinking about Wagner.

PART I

Orientations

1 'Wo sind wir?' Tristan *Disorientations*

ARNOLD WHITTALL

Writers on Wagner in general, and *Tristan* in particular, see no need to shun broad-brush assertions. A sheaf of quotations illustrates this. Karol Berger writes:

> No matter how highly we value Wagner's artistic (musical and dramatic) achievement in *Tristan und Isolde* (and it would not be easy to overestimate that), it is hard not to entertain some doubts about the ultimate significance of the work.[1]

And Alain Badiou:

> Wagner cannot be approached exclusively in terms of totality, since what we are dealing with is greatness uncoupled from totality. We will therefore have to venture into Wagnerian fragmentation.[2]

Finally, Richard Taruskin:

> Though *Götterdämmerung* . . . could be fairly described as Wagner's crowning achievement, bringing to consummation as it did the largest musical entity ever conceived within the European literate tradition, it is not his emblematic work. That distinction belongs to *Tristan und Isolde.*[3]

The impulse to raise *Tristan* above all alternatives – evident especially in Taruskin – is entirely understandable. There is something about *Tristan* that inspires scholarly rapture as well as special apprehensiveness in potential performers. May it not therefore be one of the roles of critical as well as compositional activity after *Tristan* not to question that emblematic status within Wagner's works, but to insist (with *Tristan* very much in mind) on seeking plausible equivalents by later composers and even – where possible – in different genres?

[1] Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 226.
[2] Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London: Verso, 2010), 83.
[3] Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 3: *The Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 539.

1.1 A Rather Personal Prelude

My own starting point is modest and mundane: the two brief expressions of literal disorientation in *Tristan*: Isolde's 'Wo sind wir?' at the very beginning of Act 1, Tristan's later on when his ship-board meeting with Isolde is reaching crisis point. (Tristan twice offers the variant 'Wo bin ich?' early in Act 3.) As material for critical comment, these not-so-rhetorical questions are at the opposite extreme to the high-minded abstractions, with emphasis on concepts like the sacred and the ecstatic, which have been much emphasised in *Tristan* studies.[4] These have their place, but for the moment I prefer to look more closely at those mundane, material and physical features in the work's words and music that the heroic efforts expected of singers and players in performance make it dangerous to ignore. Wagner demands intense engagement from listeners and performers alike, and the continuing viability of his operas and music dramas requires that such engagements are critical and principled. The humanity of Tristan and Isolde, as Wagner portrays it, involves a war between conviction and confusion. Critical analysis should respond accordingly.

I was in my late thirties before I saw *Tristan* in the theatre (1973, Peter Hall's Covent Garden production, conducted by Colin Davis). Even for dedicated Wagnerians, it was not so unusual then to have little opportunity to see a staging, whether live or on film. Like many of my contemporaries I had got to know the work through the LP recording conducted by Furtwängler, followed a decade or so later by the Culshaw-produced, Solti-conducted stereo recording, and the need to get up from one's seat and turn the last LP at the double-bar separating Tristan's death and Isolde's initial, gasped response from the opera's last twenty minutes involved a degree of unavoidable disorientation whose recall reaches deeply into the materials of the present essay. In their different ways, these recordings helped to create a feeling that *Tristan* was not just a great opera but a problem opera: the demands it made on performers, producers and listeners were of a different order, even when compared to the *Ring*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*, which in any case were performed in the theatre more frequently. *Parsifal* was the first Wagner opera I saw, in 1959 (Covent Garden), and I had seen the four *Ring* operas as well as *Meistersinger* between 1971 and

[4] See, for example, Eric Chafe, *The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Roger Scruton, *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's Tristan und Isolde* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

1973, all in English in the ENO productions staged by Glen Byam Shaw and conducted by Reginald Goodall.

Personal reminiscences are hardly suitable material for a volume of this kind, but they help to explain an instinctive desire on the part of someone keen to contribute to Wagner scholarship to keep *Tristan* at a distance. Anyone who attends Wagner performances regularly is likely to have a good fund of stories centring on discomfort – singers below par (or moving in and out of par), productions nothing if not resourceful in their capacity to irritate and confuse – and *Tristan* supplies more instances than most. Fortunately, however, any unhappy experiences in the theatre can be compensated for by performances not only leaving one in awe of the work's greatness but also persuaded that such greatness can only be fully realised in staged presentations. One may be deeply moved in front of one's screen and speakers at home, and considerably less exhausted physically, but one needs to witness the challenges and risks of live performance being overcome in order to sense the work's full power; that is, to be as enthused as strongly as it is possible to be by the force of the disorientations and discomforts around which *Tristan* unfolds – a force ensuring their necessary impact on any of the work's countervailing attempts at transcendence and consolation.

Two previous pieces of my writing have focused on *Tristan*, the first published in 1990 but written in the early to mid-1980s, the second published in 2015 but deriving from a lecture given in the 1990s and a consequent article published in 2009.[5] Both avoid detailed discussion of the work's most 'iconic' episodes, such as the dialogue scenes for the protagonists in Acts 1 and 2 and the monologues for each in turn that dominate Act 3. The first essay responds to a familiar trope within Wagner studies: the dialogue between the progressive and the conservative as constructive rather than disruptive – much emphasis is therefore given to 'a heightened linearity in which assertions of "unity" by means of strategically placed repetitions are less vital than the continuous process of transformation'.[6] In the second essay, most space is given to a theory-based analysis of King Marke's Act 2 monologue (bars 1689–1890), thereby reinforcing the sidelining of the work's title characters, central though they remain to the essay's broader dramatic and psychological topics of 'romance and responsibility'. The topics of disorientation, and of 'unity' requiring scare-quotes, are introduced in this later essay during my summarising

[5] Arnold Whittall, 'Wagner's Later Stage Works', in *Romanticism, 1830–1890* (*The New Oxford History of Music*, 9), ed. Gerald Abraham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 257–321; *The Wagner Style: Close Readings and Critical Perspectives* (London: Plumbago, 2015).

[6] Whittall, 'Wagner's Later Stage Works', 292.

conclusions about the 'Marke Period', and in relation to Alfred Lorenz's analysis: 'If D minor is indeed "the" tonality of the entire Period, it is only as something to be subject to disorientations and spasms as intense as Marke himself.'[7] In this reading, the king's all-too-human confusions and frustrations are implicitly categorised as wholly at odds with the superhuman or even inhuman obsessions of the lovers and their evident concern to be 'immaterial' to a fault. But this does not mean that the lovers are immune to psychological 'disorientations and spasms' akin to those that afflict the king.

1.2 Voice Exchanges

In the 1990s, scholars were given particularly rich food for thought in the ongoing debate about centripetal versus centrifugal forces in Wagner's music and the links between this polarity and the aesthetic opposition between modernism and classicism. For *Tristan*, one has only to read the powerful narratives of John Daverio and Thomas Grey from this time to be vividly aware of the technical, musical means by which that polarity works its magic over the entire action of the opera.[8] Separation yields to convergence, convergence to crisis and back to a separation out of which Isolde conjures a shared extinction: and each act of the opera stages the moment of meeting as maximally fraught, maximally decisive.

Meeting in opera means dialogue, but according to Wagner's theory of music drama, it should not mean duet or even ensemble. His most fully finished achievement before starting work on *Tristan*, *Die Walküre*, had vindicated the theory with its finely wrought representations of high passion and familial tensions and affections – Siegmund/Sieglinde, Siegmund/Brünnhilde, Brünnhilde/Wotan – without the need for singing at the same time; only the ensemble of like-thinking Valkyries subordinates individuality to a collective voice. In theory, Tristan and Isolde could also be kept entirely separate, even when Wagner's text involves rapid exchanges of their names. But that text also emphasises that this is not

[7] Whittall, *The Wagner Style*, 179.

[8] John Daverio, *Nineteenth-Century Music and the German Romantic Ideology* (New York: Schirmer, 1993); Thomas Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Grey, 'Magnificent Obsession: *Tristan und Isolde* as the Object of Musical Analysis' in *Music, Theatre and Politics in Germany: 1848 to the Third Reich*, ed. Nikolaus Bacht (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 51–78. For a recent example of an analytical approach to *Tristan* that prioritises 'classicism' and excludes 'modernism', see John Koslovsky, 'Schenkerizing *Tristan*, Past and Present', *Journal of Schenkerian Studies* 12 (2019): 1–51.