# Richard Wagner and the Legacy of the Leitmotif

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In 1934, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi advisors decided to hold the second Nazi Party Congress in Nuremburg. Former actress Leni Riefenstahl was asked to document the event on film. As part of her propaganda masterwork, *Triumph of the Will* (1935)[1], Riefenstahl included shots of quaint Nuremburg, decked out with swastikas and other Nazi symbols for the rally. To accompany this footage, she chose Richard Wagner's Act III prelude to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. The pompous music not only gave the town majesty and grandeur, but it also pleased Hitler, who loved Wagner's music.

About forty years earlier, the Zionist Theodor Herzl had also been an admirer of Wagner. As he composed his pamphlet, *The Jewish State*[2], Herzl wrote in his diary, "my only recreation was listening to Wagner's music in the evening." Herzl's pamphlet proposed that the only way for Jews to escape anti-Semitism was to create a state of their own in the Middle East. The father of Israel was listening to the same music as the destroyer of the Jewish people[3].

And what of the composer of the music, Richard Wagner? He had been a passionate anti-Semite, decrying the inadequacies of Jewish composers like Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn before him. He was a womanizer, and betrayed those closest to him to get ahead. He nearly bankrupted his patron, King Ludwig II of Bavaria, and believed that he was the greatest composer to ever work.

Still, despite all of his flaws, despite his ego and his habits and his prejudices, he was the composer of some of the most moving and influential pieces of the 19th-century. In the musical world, none could escape his influence—Giuseppe Verdi, Claude Debussy

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[1] Riefenstahl's complete film is easily accessible online—see *Triumph of the Will*. Dir. Leni Riefenstahl. Universum Film AG, 1935. Film.

[2] See citation in bibliography for the full text of Herzl's paper.

[3] See Alex Ross's *New Yorker* article for more on the connection between Wagner and Herzl.

and Richard Strauss, among others, were all touched by it. His reputation extended far beyond the realm of music—Friedrich Nietzsche, George Bernard Shaw, and even Mark Twain wrote at length about his innovations. There were 1,170 performances of his work between 2009 and 2014.[4] His music has been heard frequently at the cinema—films from Michael Powell's *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* to Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* have made extensive use of Wagner's work. Wagner has been called the "last great romantic," following in the tradition of composers like Beethoven, but is also known as the father of modern music, experimenting with dissonance and the leitmotif. No composer could escape his influence, and unquestionably, he was a leader in telling a story through music. At the same time, his association with anti-Semitism and Nazism has created a complicated legacy that is difficult to unravel.

Wagner was born on May 22, 1813 in Leipzig, Germany. His mother was Johanna Rosine, the daughter of a baker, and his father, Carl Friedrich Wagner, a policeman. The elder Wagner died when Richard was six months old. Some believe that Ludwig Geyer, an actor who lived in the Jewish quarters of Leipzig, was Wagner's biological father. Friedrich Nietzsche went so far to suggest in his pamphlet, "The Case of Wagner" that Geyer was Jewish, but there is little evidence to support this claim.[5]

In any case, the young Wagner was drawn at first not to the piano, but to Greek epics. Wagner, whose prose was often verbose and cumbersome, was not destined to become a writer, but his exploration of literature allowed him to write his own operatic libretti. The subjects of Wagner's operas did not live in contemporary times—rather, they inhabited a distant, classical past.

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[4] Statistics taken from www.operabase.com

[5] See citation in bibliography for the full text of Nietzsche's pamphlet.

As a teenager, Wagner forsook the Greek classics for long hours at the piano. The composers that played the greatest role in his development were Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Ludwig Beethoven, and Carl Maria von Weber[6]—three individuals integral in the development of German music. It was during this time that Wagner first came into contact with the music of the Jewish grand opera composer Giacomo Meyerbeer. The interactions between Meyerbeer and Wagner would not only shape Wagner's later life, but to a certain extent, the future of music.

In 1831, Wagner enrolled in Leipzig University. While there, he started working on an opera, called *Die Hochzeit*, or *The Wedding*, but could not finish it. . Wagner became choirmaster at a theater in Wurzburg in 1833, and wrote his first complete opera, *Die Feen*, or *The Fairies*. In 1834, Wagner moved to Magdeburg, and wrote a second opera, *Das Liebesverbot*, based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. He fell in love with a young actress named Christine Wilhelmine "Minna" Planer.[7] The couple was married by 1836, but by 1837, Minna and Wagner were already having affairs with other people.

Wagner was never frugal, and by 1839, his debts were massive. Creditors threatened to have his head, and so, Minna and Wagner escaped to London and then to Paris. In Wagner's suitcase during the stormy voyage was the manuscript of a third opera, *Rienzi*. In light of the troubled circumstances Wagner faced at the time and the snobbery of the Paris stage, it seemed unlikely that this opera would ever be presented.

Then, Giacomo Meyerbeer stepped in. Meyerbeer, originally from Germany, was the defining figure of French grand opera and the newest craze sweeping the European

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[6] Wagner writes at length about these influences in his autobiography.
[7] Cross's short biography of opera provides a detailed overview of this period.

opera world. His works had been played thousands of times in opera houses, and he convinced the Dresden Court Theater in Saxony to put on a production of Wagner's work. The premiere of *Rienzi* on October 20, 1842 was a great success, and Wagner was propelled overnight to fame.

In his later years, Wagner would become dissatisfied with these early efforts and disown them. The first of the works in the official Wagner canon and the one that represents his maturity as an artist is *Der fliegende Holländer*. The grim opera tells the story of the Flying Dutchman, and it reflects a departure for Wagner in several respects[8]. With this opera, Wagner would delve into Germanic myth. *Rienzi* had been set in ancient Roman times, and *Das Liebesverbot* had taken place in 17th-century England, but Wagner's fourth opera dealt with a mythical Germany, and this setting of a legendary golden age linked the opera to German nationalism.

Perhaps more importantly, Wagner began his experiments with the leitmotif, or the leading tone. In his later operas, Wagner would use a reoccurring theme of music to symbolize themes like love or redemption, or would attach musical cues to characters. This experiment in opera was not new—as Wagner was writing his opera, Verdi was using the idea of the leitmotif in his *I due Foscari*. However, Wagner's leitmotifs were not just "calling cards" to identity themes or characters. Rather, he used them to advance the drama and get to the heart of the story.

Two more operas followed in 1845 and 1850—*Tännhauser* and *Lohengrin*[9]. Both dealt with Germanic myth, and both further advanced Wagner's conception of the

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[8] Wagner writes at length about this in his autobiography, and he claims he invented the leitmotif with an aria in this opera.

[9] Cross's book of opera stories provides more details about these operas.

leitmotif. *Lohengrin* contained the famous Bridal March or "Here Comes the Bride," a staple of weddings around the world today. Wagner was not able to hear the first public rendition of the Bridal March because at the time, he was living in exile. Wagner had participated in the 1848 Prussian revolution, and as a result, was forced to leave Saxony.

In 1848, Wagner also published a pamphlet called *Jewishness in Music*.[10] In this essay, he promoted the idea that music composed by Jews was inherently inferior. These ideas were connected with German nationalism. Wagner published the essay under a pretentious pseudonym (K. Freethought) and there was little comment on it. Interest in the pamphlet only revived after the Eichmann Trial in the 1960s, when some suggested that Wagner was calling for the Holocaust. The reasons why Wagner wrote the pamphlet or became such an anti-Semite are unclear. Some suggest that Wagner's supposed hatred of Jews began when the Jewish Meyerbeer refused to loan him more money. In any case, Wagner's anti-Semitism developed out of jealousy for Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn, two of the great names in German music up to that time. Wagner truly believed that he was the greatest composer ever to write music, and he wanted to sully the reputations of those two musicians. In addition, Meyerbeer wrote grand opera, which the crowds adored. Wagner wanted to best Meyerbeer and create something beyond grand opera—Wagnerian spectacle. Even after he wrote the pamphlet, Wagner maintained relations with Jewish musicians. Despite Wagner's protests, Hermann Levi, the son of a rabbi, conducted the premiere of *Parsifal* in 1882.

The pamphlet was just published when Wagner escaped Saxony for Zurich. By this time, Wagner had amassed a legion of loyal supporters—the superstar pianist Franz

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[10] The text of Wagner's pamphlet is available in print or online.

Liszt among them. As he escaped Saxony, Wagner brought a new project with him—an opera telling the story of the Teutonic hero Siegfried. The story of Siegfried, however, was too epic to be told in a single opera, and the opera quickly became four operas, telling the story of not only Siegfried, but of the beginning and the end of the world. However, Wagner's financial situation prevented him from continuing his opera cycle in 1856.

Instead, Wagner turned his attention to a new project, based on Gottfried von Strassburg's version of the story of Tristan and Iseult. In writing the work, Wagner was influenced by the ideas of the German philosopher Arnold Schopenhauer, which related to the will to live and presented an erotic view of death.

*Tristan und Isolde*, completed in 1859, was a landmark in Wagner's career and marks the beginning of modern music history.[11] Wagner continued his exploration of the leitmotif, making his melodies more complex than in any previous opera. The first notes heard during the prelude make up the "longing" motif, conveying the passion of Tristan and Isolde. The "longing" motif reappears when Tristan and Isolde drink a love potion and are instantly filled with desire, when the villainous King Marke prevents them from being together, and when Tristan and Isolde die at the end of the opera.[12] For the first time, Wagner used leitmotifs so that if a listener was familiar with them, he could follow the story of the opera through the music, without having to look at the libretto.

Finally, Wagner broke with traditional conceptions of music. The prelude to the opera begins with a dissonant chord—the "Tristan chord." The chord broke the age-old rules of musical composition. Yet, even the dissonance in the opera served the purposes

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[11] Abbate and Parker provide an overview of the opera's role in music history.
[12] For more information, see the University of Texas's website on the opera.

of the story[13]—the chord suggests Tristan and Isolde's troubled and passionate relationship. Wagner's experiments with dissonance in *Tristan und Isolde* would make him not only the last great romantic, but also a prophet of atonality.

The work was scheduled for a premiere in Vienna in 1864, but the avant-garde music was deemed too hard to sing. When it seemed that the opera would never be seen on stage, fate stepped in. The eccentric and flamboyant King Ludwig II of Bavaria had a great love for Wagner's music, and he offered to be his patron. Wagner accepted, and a friendship began. With Ludwig's support, *Tristan und Isolde* was finally staged in Munich on June 10, 1865. Reactions to opera were divided—on one hand, people like philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche were astonished by the work, while others, like Mark Twain, were unimpressed. "Wagnerites" emerged in one camp, and anti-Wagner critics were in the other.

The conductor of the opera's premiere was Hans von Bulow, who was married to Cosima von Bulow, the daughter of Franz Liszt. Wagner and Cosima fell madly in love, and had two children before she divorced Hans. Wagner deserted Minna, and as he celebrated his new nuptial to Cosima, he embarked on another opera called *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. The opera, which tells the story of a song contest, was Wagner's most nationalistic opera. It was also the work most appropriated by the Third Reich—Hitler used to stage performances of the work at Bayreuth for the troops, who resented sitting through a six-hour extravaganza, and despite their impatience, the opera was another success.

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[13] Wagner addressed his connection between music and story in his pamphlet *Opera and Drama*, available online.

With the support of King Ludwig, Wagner was able to complete his four opera Ring cycle and write a final opera, *Parsifal*, in 1882. In the 1870s, he embarked on his most massive project of all—building a theater dedicated exclusively to performing his works at Bayreuth. Each year, Wagner dreamed, a festival would be held, celebrating his legacy. Mark Twain was not wrong in calling the theater at Bayreuth the "shrine to St. Wagner."[14] Wagner died in Venice in 1883, but the Bayreuth Festival continues to be held annually.

Wagner may not fit the traditional conception of a leader. Unlike a political figure such as Otto von Bismarck, he did not create policies that would shape the world. However, he changed concert halls and opera houses forever. Opera would no longer be a collection of arias haphazardly thrown together—no, Wagner deemed, the story would determine the music, hence, the birth of the leitmotif. Composers like Bizet, Tchaikovsky, and Saint-Saens as well as those who worked in film, like Max Steiner and Bernard Hermann, would follow this rule. At the same time, Wagner experimented with dissonance in music, paving the way for the atonality of Stravinsky and Schoenberg. Even those that rejected his kind of music could not escape him. Debussy, who disliked Wagner, felt compelled to pay him homage in his piece *Golliwog's Cakewalk.*

John Quincy Adams said, "if your actions inspire others to learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader." Wagner inspired a generation of composers to pursue careers in music and to reinvent traditional conceptions of what music was. Did he also inspire Adolf Hitler and anti-Semites across Europe? Hitler was born six years after Wagner died, and Wagner cannot be held responsible for the Holocaust. There were

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[14] Twain's humorous essay is available online.

many Wagnerites in Europe, not all of who were Nazis—Richard Strauss escaped Nazi Germany. There is little evidence Wagner's works were played in concentration camps, and some of Wagner's work was censored under the Nazis—the pacifist message of *Parsifal* did not conform to Nazi ideology. There were a plethora of anti-Semites in Europe in the 19th-century—the anti-Semitic Karl Lueger was mayor of Vienna for about twenty years. However, Wagner's prejudice is disturbing.

Throughout his life, Wagner wrote anti-Semitic essays. He proudly republished *Jewishness in Music* several times, expanding it and making it even more derogatory. To this day, his work is rarely performed in Israel.[15] A performance of the *Tristan und Isolde* prelude there was met with jeers and threats of violence. What is particularly disturbing about Wagner is that he was an unquestioned leader in music, and yet he left behind a flawed legacy. There are other great figures that have left difficult legacies, like D.W. Griffith and Thomas Jefferson. Wagner's music was ahead of his time, and yet he was a man of his time, proudly espousing racism and militant German nationalism. As a Holocaust survivor stated, "the man was anti-Semitic, not the music." Is it possible to separate Wagner from his music?

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[15] See the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* articles for more on Wagner in Nazi Germany and in Israel.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Herzl, Theodor. *The Jewish State*. Mineola: Dover, 2012. Print.

In this landmark pamphlet, Herzl calls for the creation of a Jewish state. He believed that Jews could not escape the widespread anti-Semitism of Europe. Herzl, a Wagner admirer, decried the anti-Semitism that Wagner himself held, and paved the way for the creation of Israel in his book. It was interesting to note that despite these Zionist views, Herzl admired Wagner, an anti-Semite.

Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. London: Hurst and Blackett Ltd., 1939. Print

Hitler loved Wagner's music—in fact, he had several of Wagner's original scores with him in his bunker at the end of World War II. In his most famous book, Hitler describes

his encounters with Wagner. Hitler was more enchanted with Wagner's depictions of a grand Germanic past than he was with his anti-Semitic writings.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Case of Wagner: The Twilight of the Idols*. New York: Macmillan and Co., 1896. Print.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the famous philosopher, addressed his feelings to Wagner in this lengthy essay. He discusses the question of Wagner's parentage and then explores his own conflicting feelings toward Wagner's music. While in his earlier years Nietzsche was a Wagnerite, he later moved away from Wagner. In this later period, Nietzsche chose Bizet's *Carmen* as his favorite opera—a decidedly Wagnerian work.

*Triumph of the Will*. Dir. Leni Riefenstahl. Universum Film AG, 1935. Film.

Riefenstahl's account of the 1934 Nuremburg Rally serves as Nazi propaganda. Riefenstahl, a master director and manipulator, used Wagner's music to evoke Germany's glorious past. The use of the music is striking, especially when compared with other uses of Wagner's music in film. The use of "Ride of the Valkyries" in Apocalypse Now serves a radically different purpose than what Wagner's music does here. The film shows how the Nazis and Riefenstahl used Wagner's music to advance their own goals.

Twain, Mark. "At the Shrine of St. Wagner." *What is Man?* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1917. 209-227. Print.

Mark Twain visited Bayreuth on a trip to Europe, and he was unimpressed. He found Wagner's works pretentious and overrated, and he did not see the high culture present in

Wagner's long spectacles. His opinion is drastically different than Herzl's or Nietzsche's. Taken together with those other works, Twain's essay shows the wide range of response that Wagner's work solicited in the late 19th-century.

Wagner, Richard. "Judaism in Music." *Judaism in Music and Other Essays*. London: Bison Books, 1995. 75-122. Print.

This is Wagner's classic anti-Semitic treatise, in which he speaks of the cultural inferiority of Jewish music. He tries to tarnish the reputations of composers like Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn while celebrating the purity of Germanic music. There may be overtones of Hitler's "racial theory" here, but it is worth noting that the essay received very little attention until the 1960s. Still, it was essential for me to read Wagner's own troubling anti-Semitic thoughts.

Wagner, Richard. *My Life*. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1911. Print.

Wagner's autobiography was published in two volumes. He began writing it early in his life, and it contains Wagner's account of his successes and failure. It was interesting to read what Wagner considered to be his ultimate triumphs, and it was insightful to read Wagner's views of those around him. However, Wagner was egotistical. He believed that he was the greatest composer ever to live, and therefore, his autobiography is not the most objective source.

Wagner, Richard. *Opera and Drama*. London: Bison Books, 1995. Print.

In this book-long treatise, Wagner lays out his thoughts for the synthesis of opera and drama. He believes music should mirror what is going on in a story, and shares his thoughts on the leitmotif. This resource was helpful because it contains Wagner's thoughts on the innovations that would make him a leader in the field of music. However,

Wagner ignores others that experimented with the leitmotif before him in the treatise, so it is not the definitive authority on the subject.

Secondary Sources

Abbate, Carolyn and Roger Parker. *A History of Opera*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012. Print.

This history of opera includes two full chapters on Wagner, and both explore his development as a composer. The authors address the influences of Meyerbeer and Beethoven, and also touch on Verdi's earlier experiments with the leitmotif. They discuss how Wagner was a true innovator at the opera, and throughout the book, discuss the repercussions he had on music history. The authors address Wagner's anti-Semitism, but do not spend that long discussing it. The book provides a description of Wagner's leadership in music, but does not truly explore his legacy.

Cross, Milton. *Complete Stories of the Great Operas*. Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1952. Print.

This book contains the stories of all the major operas in the modern repertoire. They are clearly described by Metropolitan Opera radio broadcaster Milton Cross, and all ten of Wagner's "mature" operas are included. Before summarizing each opera, Cross provides a decent bit of background history. Reading Cross's vivid summaries of heroic gods, beautiful damsels, proud singers, and holy pilgrims, it is easy to see why Wagner was identified with German nationalism and how he created a grand Germanic past on the opera stage.

Cross, Milton. *Encyclopedia of the Great Composers and Their Music, Volume II*. New York: Doubleday and Company, 1962. Print.

Cross's encyclopedia features the biographies of many composers, including Wagner. The biography is rather brief and does not include much analysis of Wagner's works and legacy, but it does provide a cursory biographical sketch. I also used this resource to give me details on the careers of musicians like Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn, Bizet, and Verdi who were connected to Wagner. Cross, a famous personality at the Metropolitan Opera, provides a good introduction to Wagner's life and music.

Dellios, Hugh. "Barenboim called 'uncivilized' after he conducts Wagner at Israeli fest." *Chicago Tribune* 9 July 2001. Print.

This article provides a detailed description of the Israeli reaction to Wagner's music. It describes the violent protests to a performance of Wagner's music and shares the thoughts of some in the audience. It also provides some background on the history of Wagner in Israel. The article is not very in-depth, but it provides a balanced view of the issue.

Heisterman, Matthew and John Weinstock. *Tristan und Isolde*. University of Texas at Austin, 2007. Web. 19 Apr. 2015.

This website, maintained by the University of Texas at Austin, provides a comprehensive guide to the music of Tristan und Isolde. Other sources have better histories of the opera, but this source deconstructs the music of the opera, providing a complete list of all the leitmotifs. It addresses examples of dissonance in the opera, and explains when and why leitmotifs appear in the score. The website bettered my understanding of how Wagner used certain leitmotifs to tell his story of star-crossed lovers.

Johnson, Reed. "No denying Wagner's complexity and divisiveness: L.A. talks again." *Los Angeles Times* 7 February 2010. Print.

This article explores the connection between Wagner, the Nazis, and the Holocaust. It also discusses the informal Israeli ban on Wagner's music. Like the Hugh Dellios article, it is not very in-depth, but it does give an insight into how the Nazis appropriated Wagner, describing what sections of his music were centered and how Hitler reshaped Wagner's ideas to make them compatible with Nazi thought.

Ross, Alex. "The Case for Wagner in Israel." *The New Yorker* 25 September 2012. Print.

Ross, a music critic, describes the relationship between Theodor Herzl and Wagner in this article. It is essentially an opinion piece, and Ross is pro-Wagner. Using the testimony of Holocaust victims and a history of Wagner in Israel to support his claims, he explores Wagner's complex legacy. However, Ross does downplay some of the arguments for not allowing Wagner in Israel, and the anti-Wagner in Israel stance is better discussed elsewhere.