Wagner's Philosophy, Music, & Siegfried-Idyll

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Wagner’s Philosophy, Music, & Siegfried-Idyll

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Introduction

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was one of the most significant opera composers of his time. William Cord, a Wagnerian researcher, goes as far as to say that Wagner was “the international monarch of musical innovation, the most controversial ever to have appeared on the musical scene.”1 By analyzing solely his music, this may be debatable. However, it is impossible to have a solid understanding of his music without considering the other aspects of his life that resulted in his remarkable contributions to the world of music, philosophy, drama, art, society, and most importantly, opera. Wagner’s outlook on society and the function of opera influenced him to speak out and formulate his own philosophies in the form of several prose works. It was in conjunction with these writings that he came to develop his opera music to the highest degree. Wagner’s philosophies and his music are dependent on one another and, as a result, produced gesamtkunstwerkes, “total works of art.” Wagner developed and demonstrated his mature, highly cerebral style in his compositions during the last thirty years of his life, but is even apparent in non-operatic compositions such as Siegfried-Idyll.

Wagner’s Philosophies

Firstly, Wagner held a radical view of the present state of opera during his time. He believed that the accepted model of opera consisted of “trivial music” that was a “series of separate and unrelated incongruous tunes – arias, duets, choruses – loosely held together by the rhyming words of an irrelevant plot.”3 Bryan Magee, another Wagnerian researcher, harshly stated that opera of Wagner’s time was “the most frivolous, vulgar, socially exclusive, and void of content of all theatrical forms.”4 Wagner abhorred what opera had become. As a result, Wagner believed that artistic reforms, especially in terms of opera, were warranted and also inevitable.

Before delving into his prose writings, it is worth noting Wagner’s extensive knowledge of literature. He had a propensity for reading contemporary literature as well as the classics of the past. He was well versed in the German classics, Shakespeare, Romantic literature, and the works of the Junges Deutschland (Young Germany) writers. Later in his life, he studied Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Wagner’s library collection exemplified his desire to be up to date on the present literary and philosophical developments.5 This directly influenced his abundance of prose writings throughout his life.

Wagner’s significant prose works were written between 1847 and 1852, a period of about five and a half years, when he composed hardly any music at all. During this time he “studied, reflected and theorized about the nature of opera, and its possible future development.”6 The important writings between 1847 and 1852 were Die Kunst und die Revolution (Art and Revolution), 1849; Das
Kunstwerk der Zukunft (The Artwork of the Future), 1849; Oper und Drama (Opera and Drama), 1851; and Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde (A Communication to my Friends), 1851. The first two writings described the degradation of art since the era of the Greek tragedy and his concept of the artwork of the future. Wagner suggested that capitalist ideas contaminated art and would “express the spirit of emancipated humanity” if negated. He elaborated on the “artwork of the future,” or gesamtkunstwerk, which would be a modern return to the essence of the Greek tragedy. The following is Magee’s simplification of Wagner’s thoughts:

The highest point ever reached in human creative achievement was Greek tragedy. This is for five main reasons… First, it represented a successful combination of the arts – poetry, drama, costumes, mime, instrumental music, dance, song – and as such had greater scope and expressive powers than any of the arts alone. Second, it took subject matter from myth, which illuminates human experience to the depths and in universal terms. ‘The unique thing about myth is that it is true for all time; and its content, no matter how terse or compact, is inexhaustible for every age.’ Third, both the content and the occasion of performance had religious significance. But fourth, this was a religion of ‘the purely human,’ a celebration of life… And fifth, the entire community took part… It was the summation of living.

Furthermore, the artists of this future would merge the successes of Shakespeare and Beethoven into a single art form: a music drama. Wagner thought that this artwork of the future would come from a collective need for it by das Volk (the people). This would also require theatres to be redesigned without the influence of social hierarchy.

Wagner believed the term musikdrama was a feasible term in that it advanced his theories set forth in his prose writings. The concept of music drama is that it would bring about the emotions and feelings of the characters. This, of course, conflicts with the view of traditional drama that depicts “what goes on outside people, in particular what goes on between people.” A music drama would “explore and articulate the ultimate reality of experience, what goes on in the heart and soul.” The origin of this was Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven had developed the power to express in music the inner soul to its fullest potential. Essentially what Wagner was after was an art form that encompassed all art forms with music tying it all together. However, at this point in Wagner’s life, he believed that the music would have an equal role with the other art forms in the music drama.

A few years later, in 1851, Wagner wrote Oper und Drama (Opera and Drama), in which he describes a new form of verse-setting (Vermelodie) in music
dramas in which the “melody will grow organically out of the verse.” He also mentioned “Stabreim (an old German verse form using alliteration) and a system of presentiments and reminiscences, functioning as melodische Momente (‘melodic impulses.’)” The latter refers to his use of leitmotifs, usually melodic or rhythmic themes associated with a person, thing, idea, or emotion. Wagner’s emphasis on words signifies his realization that the libretto should be “shaped and informed to accommodate the music it is for, even if it is written before the music is composed.” That is, Wagner took immense care with crafting the libretto in order to pair it perfectly with the music.

After immersing himself in the ideas of Schopenhauer in the 1850s, his outlook on his music dramas shifted to a more musical stance. This influence is noted in his work, Beethoven, written in 1870. Wagner wrote that “words and music cannot enjoy totally equal status” and that “music is the ultimate vehicle of expression.” Nevertheless, this combination of words and music conveys an exponential emotional force far greater than the expression by words and music separately.

In summation, Wagner’s philosophical ideas covered a wide range of ideas that encompassed his concept of music drama. He was able to “develop a form through which he could express his multiform genius in all these respects at once.” Wagner’s philosophies were not rudimentary. They encompassed a high level of thought. It is clear that he had a plan for opera, and it only took time for him to integrate it in his compositions.

**Wagner’s Music**

Thirteen works with Wagner’s own libretti make up his contribution to the opera genre. However, only the last ten operas, from Der Fliegende Holländer (1841) to Parsifal (1882), are considered part of Wagner’s canon works and are the only ones performed at the venue Wagner created, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus (Bayreuth Festival Theatre). Wagner himself ceased to believe that the first three operas he wrote – Die Feen (1833-4), Das Liebesverbot (1834-6), and Rienzi (1837-40) – were authentically his. This is because they followed the existing models of opera of the time – German Romantic opera, Italian/French opera, and Parisian grand opera, respectively. Thus, the composition of Der Fliegende Holländer (1841) began Wagner’s career as a composer in terms of implementing his own original style. This is when “he stopped trying to lead from the head and, instead, put his trust in his intuitions even when he did not understand them.”

The journey of making his own style emerged with his German Romantic operas, Der Fliegende Holländer, Tannhäuser (1845), and Lohengrin (1848). Note that these dates precede the influential philosophical writings he wrote between 1847 and 1852. Wagner was ruminating on his philosophies and was not quite ready to embark on his quest to write the music for his music dramas. This quest officially
started with the completion of *Das Rheingold (The Rhinegold)* (1854), one of four operas in his tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen (The Ring of the Nibelung, or the Ring Cycle for short)*. In any event, these three operas developed German Romantic opera to an entirely new and unprecedented level. They forwent the traditional form of ‘number opera’ (recitative, aria, chorus, etc.) and were replaced with “through-composed structures and a more malleable vocal line.” The completion of these three operas resulted in the exhaustion of the possibilities of the German Romantic opera and his five and a half year period of forming his new philosophies on opera. Following these operas, Wagner applied his philosophies to his musical compositions.

The composition of the next set of operas heralded Wagner’s application of his theories to his music. These operas included the Ring Cycle (1848-1874), *Tristan und Isolde* (1859), *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg)* (1867), and *Parsifal* (1882). What the Ring Cycle consists of musically is unique. In *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre (The Valkyrie)* it is clear that Wagner implemented the principles he mentioned in *Opera and Drama* and his other writings. In these two operas, association of *leitmotifs* with certain objects or ideas is unmistakable and a bit less apparent in the latter. This was exactly his intent from his prose writings. However, *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods)* extended the relationships between motives further and in a much more complex and contrapuntally virtuosic fashion. His use of *leitmotifs* was enhanced; “they were being used for the first time to recall something or somebody no longer present.” This implementation leaned toward the “acquisition of abstract significance” with his *leitmotifs*. This abstract use of themes was a result of his influence from Schopenhauer. Additionally, in later compositions the orchestra is actually the primary force that comments on the action, and the motives are used even less representationally, as a means of ‘symphonic development.’

Overall, what we see in Wagner’s later compositions is that the “core of the drama is really in the music, and the other arts make it apparent.” The orchestra conveys the core of the composition, the inner feelings of the drama, while the sung words communicate the outer aspect, “the events and situations that further the action and give names to the feelings and experiences suggested by the music.” As Wagner stated, his operas were “acts of music made visible.” In order for one to experience his operas in the highest degree, one must be able to understand the acting, the words (in German, of course), the complex instrumental music, the staging, and all the other aspects in addition to understanding how they all fit together to make a music drama, a *gesamtkunstwerk.*
**Siegfried-Idyll**

How do Wagner’s ideas come into play in a non-operatic work such as his symphonic work *Siegfried-Idyll*? The short answer is that one must always consider non-musical ideas when dealing with Wagner, even if it is not an operatic work that embodies a music drama. Taking the title itself, the German word “sieg” translates to “victory” and “fried” translates to “peaceful.” The definition of “idyll” is: “an extremely happy, peaceful, or picturesque episode or scene, typically an idealized or unsustainable one” or “a short description in verse or prose of a picturesque scene or incident, esp. in rustic life.”

Therefore, one would think that *Siegfried-Idyll* means “peaceful victory.” However, there is much more to consider in the work.

The work was originally titled *Tribschen-Idyll*. Tribschen was where Wagner and his lover, Cosima, lived starting in 1868. The manuscript noted, “Tribschen-Idyll, with Fidi’s Bird Song and Orange Sunrise, presented as a Symphonic Birthday greeting to his Cosima by her Richard, 1870.” “Fidi” was a domestic name for Siegfried, their son, and the “orange sunrise” referred to the memory of how the sunrise lit up the orange wallpaper, “nature’s own tribute to his [Wagner’s] first son.”

The piece “reflected and set the seal on the couple’s new-found domestic bliss” since they were not able to marry until August 25, 1870, after two years of living with each other. Already we see several non-musical references in Wagner’s work.

In terms of the performance, fifteen musicians first performed *Siegfried-Idyll* on Christmas Day in 1870 outside of Cosima’s bedroom in their villa, Tribschen. The reason for the number is that only fifteen musicians could fit on the staircase. Conductor Hans Richter specifically learned and played the trumpet part for this occasion. The part was only thirteen measures long. Despite the lack of space, Wagner did later score it for a larger orchestra – fl, ob, 2 cl, bn, 2 hn, tpt, str. While this was clearly a private composition and private performance, the Wagners found themselves in a financial bind and had to sell it in 1877. Cosima noted in her diary, “The secret treasure is to become public property.” There is no known date as to when Wagner officially changed the title. However, it certainly was changed before it was sold, which might have been around the time of a performance in Meningen on 10 March 1877.

Musically speaking, the piece is riddled with four notable themes and/or sections, the first of which is the Principal Theme. The Principal Theme’s origin comes from Wagner and Cosima’s summer in 1864 when they consummated their relationship while Wagner was still married to Minna Planer. This theme is also used at the end of Act III of *Siegfried* to the words “Ewig war ich, ewig bin ich,” sung by Brünnhilde. In fact, Wagner was working on *Siegfried, Act III* during the composition of *Siegfried-Idyll* in 1869. What happens at the end of the opera is that Brünnhilde and Siegfried proclaim their love for one another. At the same
time, Brünnhilde fears for her life and fears Siegfried. She is overcome by his love and gives in to him. As they embrace, Brünnhilde accepts her mortal status, and they invoke ‘laughing death.’ Wagner hinted at such a situation in his own life with Cosima and his marriage with Minna. Wagner and Cosima entered into a relationship and had children out of wedlock. The drama and hesitation in Cosima and Wagner’s relationship can be compared to the same insecurity in Brünnhilde and Siegfried’s situation. However, this is just a textual connection between the two instances. The music uncovers and conveys these emotions to the listener.

The second important theme in Siegfried-Idyll is the Cradle Theme, ‘Sleep, baby, sleep,’ that Wagner “noted down in the Brown Book on New Year’s Eve 1868.” This was written for his son-to-be, Siegfried, just six months away. Just like the direct connection from the Principal Theme of Siegfried-Idyll to the opera Siegfried, the third theme, labeled the New Theme, borrows material from the opera as well. Similarly to the Principal Theme, the New Theme is based on words sung by Brünnhilde. Lastly, Wagner also used leitmotifs – recurrent musical themes associated with a person, thing, or idea – from the opera in Siegfried-Idyll. They are mostly concentrated in the Leitmotif Section but they are interspersed throughout.

One can view the work as a modified sonata form centered around E major. There is an exposition in 4/4 that introduces the Principal Theme, transition, Secondary Theme, Modulating Theme, Cradle Theme, and bridge. Wagner breaks away from the traditional sonata form by including two additional themes which feature chromaticism, a lack of key center. The development in 3/4 introduces the New Theme, modulation of the New Theme, layering of the Principal Theme, a Leitmotif Section in 4/4, and a re-transition to the recapitulation. Here, Wagner delineates from the standard sonata form by introducing a different time signature, introducing two sections of previously unheard of material, and only developing the Principal Theme – dismissing the satisfaction of Secondary Theme augmentation. The recapitulation is a return to the original key of E major and includes all of the materials from the exposition. However, Wagner includes a hint of the New Theme and Leitmotif Section throughout the recapitulation. There is also a coda that uses motives from the Leitmotif Section, Cradle Theme, and Principal Theme. Due to the complexity of Wagner’s compositions, the formal analysis is simplified. This designation of sonata form is reinforced by what Millington has to say about the form:

In spite of the lyrical melodies and the pastoral pedal-points, the work itself is in a broadly based (modified) sonata form, in which the subsidiary material is represented by the lullaby... and in which new thematic ideas are given out in place of an orthodox development.
Just from viewing the form from this simplified angle demonstrates that Wagner is not adhering to a strict form whatsoever, but does keep fragments of it. For a composition written thirteen years before Wagner’s passing, one would think it would be more complicated. An extensive analysis does indeed bring this formal analysis into a complex light. (See Appendix II)

In the exposition the Principal Theme (Figure 1 in Appendix I) is introduced in the strings in the key of E major. A sweet, beautiful palette of sound coming from the low strings characterizes this theme. The violins have the primary melodic line. Wagner was also partial toward the strings, which is demonstrated here. What Wagner does after this, as a way of dismissing the strict concept of sonata form, is put the Principal Theme through a sequence and even a modulation to the dominant key. Remember the concept behind this piece – it is a celebration of his marriage with Cosima and his newborn son, Siegfried. However, in m. 21, Wagner introduces the key F-sharp minor with a heartbreaking motive. Then, it disappears and the Principal Theme returns in E major. Wagner’s emotions got in the way only twenty-one measures into the work. The strife with his earlier marriage briefly appeared then dissolved.

The return of the Principal Theme in m. 29 also brings about a few additional musical lines as if reinforcing the love that Cosima and Wagner shared. The cellos have a beautiful phrase (Figure 2) that seems to be reminiscent of leitmotifs from Siegfried and ends just in time for the first entrance of the winds, a flute entering with yet another leitmotif (Figure 3). This initiates several additional occurrences of the flute motive in the other wind parts, often augmented. After a segment of building intensity, unusual in that is uses E" frequently, there is an immediate subito piano in the form of a F-sharp7 (dominant seventh chord). This is the transition (m. 50) to the Secondary Theme.

The Secondary Theme in m. 55 (Figure 4) comes after a chromatic progression/slide to the dominant key of B major. The winds are the foreground for the first time. As expected, Wagner does introduce an odd idea after this in the form of a chromatic mediant progression from F-sharp major to D-sharp minor to A-sharp major. Strangely enough, this instance where a progression begins with a mediant relationship can be found in several different places throughout the piece. Next, Wagner breaks the trend again by introducing the Modulating Theme in m. 63 (Figure 5). This theme goes from C-sharp7 to B6 to C-double-sharp6/4 to F-sharp major, quite a chromatic progression. Once a second mediant progression takes place, the Secondary Theme’ (Figure 6) begins. This section is vastly different than the first Secondary Theme. The only similarity between the two sections is that it begins with the same progression. Afterward, there is a buildup of intensity, just like the Principal Theme section, that takes the music through F-sharp7, E+(add 4), and B+(6/4). This is the first instance of an augmented chord and, oddly enough, it does not lead the harmonic motion to any specific key center.

The music then returns to B major with the introduction of the Cradle Theme (Figure 7) in m. 91. The flute and clarinet carry the tune with the
accompaniment in the strings. This theme is rather simplistic when compared to the previous section. In the following measures, Wagner adds the Principal Theme with the Cradle Theme then repeats the material in the original key of E major. It is almost as if the composition has come full circle back to its roots. Then the bridge to the development begins unobtrusively.

The Cradle Theme is used in the bridge, but another *leitmotif* appears in m. 131-133 in the strings (Figure 8). This particular *leitmotif* is reminiscent of Siegfried’s funeral march in the final opera. In addition to this, Wagner also employs the use of a palindrome in the strings (Figure 9). Essentially, there is a B-flat major chord that transitions into an A-flat minor *arpeggiated* figure. Then, it goes backwards to where it started. It is unusual to consider something as symmetrical as this when such a device would normally be used in the musical practices of the twentieth century. Regardless, what proceeds is the transition to the development.

The development is nonstandard for several reasons. Wagner changes the time signature to 3/4 and introduces the New Theme in the key of A-flat major, an augmented fourth away from the tonic key of E major. Throughout the development section, Wagner modulates to different keys (A major, B major, and F major), layers on an augmented version of the Principal Theme, and uses an almost constant chromatic line in the bass voices. Wagner completely dismisses any mention of the Secondary Theme in the development, neither after the Principal Theme development nor in the *Leitmotif* Section.

What is striking about the next section in the development is that Wagner seems to have taken it straight from the opera, *Siegfried*, in the *Leitmotif* Section. There is a time signature change back to 4/4, hinting at the eminent return to the recapitulation. Yet, Wagner introduces the Siegfried *leitmotif* (Figure 10.1), played in the first horn with a pedal G in the bass. The flute and clarinet have the birdsong *leitmotifs* (Figure 10.2). Here the battle seems to be between G/G7 and F major. However, there is a quick transition to a flurry of eighth-note figures in the strings – a compressed version of the Siegfried *leitmotif* – which signals the re-transition to the recapitulation in the home key of E major – a joyous return.

The recapitulation and *coda*, for the most part, can be considered standard. Wagner adds a few modifications though, one of which being a sudden modulation of the Principal Theme to C major – a mediant relationship away from E major. Soon, the Secondary Theme comes back in E major. Throughout this section, Wagner includes hints of the New Theme and *Leitmotif* Section. At the end of the recapitulation, there is a deceptive resolution to C major that consequently begins the *coda*. The *coda* begins with themes from the *Leitmotif* Section and Cradle Theme. Finally, the piece ends quietly with the Principal Theme back in E major. The return was rewarding as ever.
Conclusion

What one takes from a thorough analysis of *Siegfried-Idyll* is essentially a small-scale replica of what Wagner’s operas encompass. Of course, this piece may be non-operatic, but there are still tendencies to include motives that take the listener on a journey. The work clearly reflects “the couple’s new-found domestic bliss” and celebrates their newborn son, Siegfried. On a broader level, a glance at the non-musical motives behind the piece and a consideration for Wagner’s philosophies on opera recast what Wagner’s life was all about. Magee commented:

He was transubstantiating myth, in all the detailed universality of its socio-psychological significance, into theatrical works which were themselves a marriage of poetic drama in the conscious traditions of the ancient Greeks and of Shakespeare with symphonic orchestral music in the tradition of Beethoven – all on the largest possible scale, while at the same time paying close attention to detail.

Though many detest the man Wagner was, it is undeniable that his contributions to music are among the greatest in history, and his music expresses what words cannot. It is indisputable that he was a man of many talents with music at the forefront.

Appendix I – Figures
Figure 1: Principal Theme, m. 1-5
Source: Wagner’s Siegfried-Idyll

Figure 2: Cello motive/leitmotif, m. 31-35

Figure 3: Flute leitmotif, m. 35

Figure 4: Secondary Theme, Clarinets in A, m. 57-60
Figure 5: Modulating Theme, m. 64-65

Figure 6: Secondary Theme', m. 76-80

Figure 7: Cradle Theme, m. 91-100
Figure 8: String leitmotif, m. 128-133

Figure 9: Palindrome – m. 138-144

Figure 10.1: Leitmotif Section, m. 259-268, Part One

Figure 10.2: Leitmotif Section, m. 259-268, Part Two
Exposition

Siegfried Idyll
Line Graph

Development

Pal. Form

New theme (NT)

Bridge

NT 200 NT + PT

NT 251 NT + PT
Appendix III – Endnotes


16. Bryan Magee, Aspects of Wagner. op. cit., p. 84.


25. Ibid., p. 32.


32. Ibid., p. 312.

33. Ibid., p. 311.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid., p. 312.

36. Ibid., p. 137.

37. Ibid., p. 294.

38. Ibid., p. 311.

39. Ibid.


References


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