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Wagner's Ring
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Wagner's Anti-Classical Influence

Though Wagner's art is widely regarded as revolutionary, the principles and techniques of his *Ring of the Nibelung* were, for the most part, hyperbolic applications of ancient conventions, his 'total art' a novel marriage of classical formulae. He synthesized and realized the classical forms to such an exhaustive degree that his legacy became the decadence of classical opera. The immediate response to his work was positive and imitative. His true influence was negative, a reaction against his conservative principles. I will first describe the classical elements in his work, using 'Aristotelian' as a synonym for 'classical'.[1] Then I will briefly treat Debussy's *Pelleas and Melisande* as one example of the post-Wagnerian reaction that manifested itself in a movement away from classicism.

Music

The most striking aspect of Wagner's art, when examined in the context of the *Poetics*, is that it justifies Aristotle's somewhat cryptic assertion that music is a mimetic medium, fit to describe "characters, sufferings, and actions" (Poetics 1.1). The Wagnerian leitmotif is, as far as we know, the first instance of truly representational music, until which musical mimesis had not been put to systematic use (Riedelbauer). Musical effects were historically sought case-by-case to representational ends, from the piccolo chirps in

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[1] The legacy of classical drama comes bound with the aesthetic philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, so I assume that Wagner, as a classicist manqué and philosophy enthusiast, saw drama through the filter of Aristotle.

Beethoven's *Pastoral* to the whole of Haydn's *Creation*, but Wagner was the first to invent a fluent system of musical representation. The relation of his system to the empirical world is not mimetic as mimesis is generally understood—the leitmotif is representative only in a non-objective way[2]—but it is apparently the first attempt in Western music to fulfill Aristotle's claim completely, by systematically extending music's mimetic scope beyond dispositions and sufferings.

A passage in the *Politics* shows the extent of Aristotle's view of music as a mimetic medium:

> Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance, and all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character, which hardly fall short of the actual affections [...] Even in mere melodies there is an imitation of character, for the musical modes differ essentially from one another, and those who hear them are differently affected by each. Some of them make men sad and grave, like the so-called Mixolydian, others enfeeble the mind, like the relaxed modes, another, again, produces a moderate and settled temper, which appears to be the peculiar effect of the Dorian; the Phrygian inspires enthusiasm.
>
> (VIII.ch5.1340a19-1340b5)

To Aristotle, the various musical modes had power as literal representations of dispositions and emotions. Wagner's initial view of music was confined to these Aristotelian terms (50-51):

> In the opera [musical] expression is unquestionably due to the feeling of the characters who are speaking; and music which provides this with convincing effect has already become all that is desirable. A description of music, however, which aspires to be more than this—which disdains to relate itself to an object to be expressed, but itself wishes to be that object—is, at root, no longer music at all, but a monstrous abstraction

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[2] The leitmotifs are artificially associated with their subjects and do not naturally suggest them.

Accordingly, he developed musical characterization to a very high degree, and did so along purely classical lines, treating "what is ultimate in character as being something universal. For this reason he chose to base most of his mature works on myths or legends, because they possessed this quality of universality" (Magee 84). Though in *Opera and Drama* he declared strictly Aristotelian intentions for musical mimesis, he contradicted himself in practice. Though his music does not aspire to become *the* object—the drama itself—it readily assumes the identities of objects within the drama (a ring, a spear, love, frustration, renunciation, etc.) His system of leitmotifs allowed a vast elaboration of the traditional, Aristotelian concept of music by expanding its mimetic scope to include objects, concepts, and actions. The system is not so much a reevaluation of Aristotle's "music as mimesis" as its complete realization. It is one of many instances in which Wagner developed classical ideas and principles to utter hyperbole in a kind of forceful affirmation of them.

Music's prominence in Wagnerian drama might be seen as a challenge to Aristotle's prescriptions, since it ostensibly rivals the most important element of Aristotelian drama, which is plot. He says in the *Poetics* that "if someone daubed a surface with the finest pigments indiscriminately, he would not give the same enjoyment as if he had sketched an image in black and white" (3.1.3). Here, the pigments are characters, but the metaphor could just as well apply to music. To Aristotle, any dramatic element becomes superfluous and decadent when divorced from the plot. To give pure music the prominence traditionally required by opera, as well as to initiate a work with pure music before it can have any dramatic function, would be Aristotelian folly. But Wagner's music is not pure. It is imbued by the leitmotif with dramatic self-sufficiency.

He asserts in *Opera and Drama* that only "two roads lay open to the composer […] Either he could develop the purely sensuous contents of the air […] Or he could take the more serious course [of] restricting all arbitrary rendering of the air by making its expression correspond with that of the underlying text" (41). *Opera and Drama* shows a near obsession with music's subjugation to text, but Wagner's method of composition was not always directed by this principle. Though his work on *The Ring* began with the text (he published its libretto before starting work on the music), he later abandoned this method for *Tristan*, compelled in part by Schopenhauer's philosophy of the noumenal to declare that music "includes the drama within itself" (Magee 230). This suggests that there was even in his earlier music something purely dramatic. His music still does not aspire to become the drama itself—the music of *Tristan* is after all dictated by the story—but its direct lietmotivic relation to the drama imbues it with dramatic substance. Its dramatic self-sufficiency is analogous to the self-sufficiency of the Greek chorus; each enters into the drama by evoking past occurrences and expressing disapproval, pity, and fear of the play's characters (Magee 91). "Early drama was choral," says Richmond Lattimore, "and the life of Attic tragedy shows the indispensable chorus to the end, though the actors steadily invade the preserves of chorus until, at the close of the fifth century, Euripides is using it sometimes in a most perfunctory manner, as if it were a convention he could not get rid of but might otherwise have preferred to do without" (3). Wagner restored viability to the tragic chorus by enabling it, as musical accompaniment, to coexist with the play's main dialogue. It was no longer the archaic burden it had been to Euripides; no longer was it disruptive of the play's action. Finally, it could regain something of the prominence it had enjoyed in pre-Aeschylean theater, where the chorus reigned.

In the form of the prelude, Wagner's music assumes the other function of the Greek chorus, the choral interlude. Each section of the *Oresteia* is initiated by a choral presence, but what in Aeschylus' time consisted of simultaneous song and dance had by Wagner's time been transferred to instrumental music. In Aristotelian terms, the orchestral prelude—when imbued by the leitmotif with dramatic substance—might be seen as a nobler form of the choral dance, purged of spectacle, which is the least noble tragic element according to the *Poetics*. Aristotle treats it only dismissively and places it last in his hierarchy, as "something enthralling [but] very artless and least particular to the art of poetic composition" (3.1.3).

Now we can unite the three functions of Wagner's music: traditional musical mimesis of the orchestra, which with the aid of the leitmotif becomes a powerful means of characterization; Wagner's expanded musical mimesis, which is choral commentary greatly increased in its sheer volume and ability to comment immediately upon the action; and the prelude, which is a nobler form of choral dance, divorced from spectacle.

Structure

Plot, said Aristotle, should "represent a single complete action of the proper magnitude" (3.2.1), and Wagner would seem to depart from this. Each opera of *The Ring* goes well beyond the arc of a single action if we define 'action' in classical terms--involving a single character over the course of a day. But overall, the work forms what Aristotle calls an 'episodic plot' (not the most desirable, he says, but still in the realm of tragedy) on a single trajectory toward the world's destruction. The operas are united by more than the ring; its theft is sometimes described as the play's fatal error, but Alberich's theft of the Rheingold lies outside the cycle's main action. His role in the first scene of *Rheingold* is akin to that of Hamlet's father as he approaches the castle guard; he is there merely to establish an order of corruption and fear by representing original sin prior to the tragedy itself. The real dramatic impetus comes from Wotan, the tragic hero, whose errors and ultimate destruction define the play's tragic arc. Tragic unity in its classical sense cannot coalesce around a material object or symbol like the ring; neither can it form around a recurring motif such as the renunciation of love that Ewans cites as *The Ring's* unifying feature (50). Tragic unity is unity of action, and *The Ring's* action is unified by Wotan. His desecration of the world ash tree sets the Götterdämmerung in motion, and his contract with the giants compels him to surrender the ring once it is reclaimed from the Nibelung. The tragic thread is drawn directly from his hubris to the conflagration. Accordingly, he is the last to appear in the flames, enthroned in the symbol of his hamartia (3.iii):

> When [the fire-light] reaches its greatest brightness, the hall of Walhall is seen, in which gods and heroes sit assembled, just as Waltraute described them in the first act. Bright flames seize on the hall of the gods. When the gods are entirely hidden by the flames, the curtain falls.

As Waltraute described them (1.iii):

> By [Wotan's] side in fear and dismay they assembled; in ranks around the hall he stationed his heroes. He sits there, speaks no word, enthroned in silence, stern and sad; the spear in splinters grasped in his hand.

He is the focal point as the curtain falls; his is the only face we recognize among the nameless gathered in his hall. In essence, the tragedy belongs to him. Tragic unity of *The Ring* would not have been attainable, however, if Wagner had not defined Wotan, Sigmund, and Siegfried as incarnations of a single tragic hero. This device ingeniously bridges the gap between the play's epic source and tragic form.[3]

In regards to its magnitude, however, *The Ring* would seem to exceed the Aristotelian ideal. One might easily place this fifteen-hour, four-night 'festival play' among those lumbering beasts whose "unity and wholeness vanish from the observers' view" (3.2.1). But because Wagner insisted on having the operas performed on consecutive nights--the closest reasonable staging to placing the cycle before the audience at once--it seems that he tried to keep the work within Aristotelian bounds. Wagner's Bayreuth demanded the same devotion from its audience as did Aeschylus' Dionysia; each kept the spectator in a place where, for a certain period, his thoughts must be entirely devoted to the drama. If the *Poetics* was Wagner's guide, he must have been conscious of Aristotle's assertion that "the larger the plot is, the finer it is because of its magnitude, so long as the work is still clear" (3.2.1). In order to experience *The Ring* with any semblance of tragic clarity, one must temporarily put all else aside and commit himself entirely to the work. Wagner surely recognized this when he conceived of the *Festspielhaus*.

The Ring's prelude/trilogy arrangement provides further consistency with classical ideals of magnitude; Michael Ewans analyzed this extensively in terms of its relationship to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In *Das Rheingold*, the expository "preliminary evening" of the cycle, he sees something analogous to the two-hundred line choral ode that lays out the premise for Aeschylus' trilogy. *Rheingold*, he says, is essentially a greatly expanded version of the choral ode with a similarly non-tragic, expository structure. The remaining three operas correspond, of course, to the tragedies of the *Oresteia*.

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[3] I know this final point has been discussed elsewhere, including in class, but I was unable to find a source.

So far, I have addressed features of Wagner's work that can be unified by their overarching relation to the theme of revelation. Wagner's music is designed to reveal the inward nature of the drama, and the magnitude of *The Ring* was dictated by Wagner's desire to relate as much of the story as possible, by extending it backward from the original opera, *Siegfrieds Tod* (Magee 104).

Public Role

Wagner often claimed the goal of approximating the public function of the Greek tragic poet. The Greeks inspired "his vision of what he was going to do for his own society in *The Ring*. He was going to reveal to it its own inner nature, and thus bring it to a true understanding of itself, and of the direction into the future that it should take" (Magee 87). Initially, the direction was toward anarchy, but as Wagner matured, his goals became more elusive (Magee). In any case, the conclusion reached by *The Ring* is that society, or at least some aspect of it, should be swept away. Thus, Wagner goes much further in his moral pronouncements than Aeschylus does in the *Oresteia*; the latter is an affirmation of the existing order, whose reverend homicide court becomes the solution to the play's problem.

Genre

The poet, says Aristotle, "as he represents people who are angry, lazy, or have other such traits, should make them such in their characters, but decent too" (4.2.3). Wagner's characters do not always get this treatment, but those who do are without exception either divine or human. There is a clear dichotomy between those who deserve redemption and those who do not, and the division is racial. Hunding is decent enough at least to observe the code of hospitality and shelter a professed enemy for the night. Alberich, Mime, and Fafner, in contrast, are totally unredeemable; the rules of Aristotelian characterization do not apply to them, perhaps (as I would argue) because their characters belong to epic rather than tragedy. I will not pursue this point any further; I mention it only as one expression of the epic nature of Wagner's source material, culled from the *Volsungasaga* and *Nibelungenlied*. When he speaks in *Opera and Drama* of tragic unity, he asserts that "the unity of the [Greek] tragic poet's art-work, in respect of form, was indicated beforehand […] in the very outline of the legend; so that he had only to carry it out as a living structure; and, by no means, in favour of any spontaneously imagined structure, to break it up, and piece it together again" (278). The process of adaptation was not so simple for Wagner; while the Greek poets drew upon a vital legendary culture, Wagner had to rely on a few obscure texts whose legends were fixed in epic form. It is no wonder, then, that certain epic characteristics should find their way into his tragedy (including, most conspicuously, its magnitude, which I have already addressed).

The scene following Siegfried's victory over the dragon exemplifies the work's comic element. Until this point, Mime has been a tragic character by Aristotle's standards: one with the power to do real harm. When Siegfried tastes the dragon's blood, the danger vanishes. Mime suddenly represents "a sort of error and ugliness that is not painful and destructive" (*Poetics* 2.4), and this gives way to the ensuing comic exchange.

Summary

Wagner's art vastly expanded tragedy along classical, Aristotelian lines. He expanded the mimetic role of music, the role of the chorus, and tragic magnitude, all in service of revelation, the essence of tragedy. He professed the goal of expanding the public, moral role of drama to its greatest height since the classical era, and he expanded the genre by admixing elements of epic and comedy. By *The Ring's* completion, his bombastic personality had filled the vessel of tragedy to its brim; there was simply nowhere else for the genre to go.

Debussy

It is easy to view Debussy's *Pelleas and Melisande* as a reaction against the revelatory nature of Wagnerian opera; it is difficult to imagine an opera that reveals less about its subjects. The work is often linked to Wagner (specifically to *Tristan and Isolde*) through its non-traditional tonality; tonality aside, it is a thoroughly anti-Wagnerian and anti-classical work.

Debussy's feelings about Wagner are well-documented. He was initially "swept up in the current [of Wagnerism], which leaves strong traces in *La damoiselle élue* and *Cinq poèmes de Baudelaire*, but after his second visit to Bayreuth (1889) he became increasingly detached to the point of being regarded as a heretic by his Wagnerite friends. In 1893 he announced an article to be entitled 'The Futility of Wagnerism' but it never appeared" (Grove).

Debussy's *Pelleas* uses for its libretto the play by symbolist poet Maurice Maeterlinck, a contemporary of the composer. Its plot goes roughly as follows: a prince by the name of Golaud loses his way in a forest while hunting a boar. There, he comes upon a beautiful young woman named Melisande, weeping over a stream. He instantly falls in love with her and carries her back to his castle to be his wife. When she is introduced to Golaud's brother Pelleas, a strange and ultimately unconsummated love begins to develop between them. Golaud becomes suspicious and does everything in his means to discover them. Finally, from a place of concealment, he watches them kiss in the forest, prompting him to spring forth and stab Pelleas. He pursues Melisande back to the castle and manages to give her a small, superficial wound; it is not long, however, before the wound proves fatal.

The plot is nothing extraordinary; the play's real value is in the means by which it establishes an aesthetic of concealment and inertia in accordance with its Symbolist pedigree. The most fantastic examples of concealment run through the first forest scene:

> GOLAUD. Who was it that hurt you?
>
> MELISANDA. All of them! All of them!
>
> GOLAUD. How did they hurt you?
>
> MELISANDA. I will not tell! I cannot tell!
>
> GOLAUD. Come; you must not cry so. Where have you come from?
>
> MELISANDA. I ran away! I ran away!
>
> (I.ii)

A wonderful picture of inertia surfaces later, when Golaud enlists his son to spy on Pelleas and Melisande:

> GOLAUD. […] What are they doing?—
>
> YNIOLD. They are doing nothing, father dear; they are expecting something.
>
> GOLAUD. Are they near one another?
>
> YNIOLD. No, father dear.
>
> […]
>
> GOLAUD. […] Are they saying anything?
>
> YNIOLD. No, father dear; they are saying nothing.
>
> GOLAUD. But what are they doing?—They must be doing something…
>
> YNIOLD. They are looking at the light.

> […]
>
> GOLAUD. They are not moving towards one another?
>
> YNIOLD. No, father dear; they have not moved.
>
> (III.v)

It is not difficult to see how this stands in opposition to Wagner's tragic and revelatory principles. Debussy's music acts only to intensify the sense of mystery and inertia:

> There are essentially only three [motifs] that truly play a role in the melodic fabric: Pelléas, Mélisande and Golaud; they do not always recur in exactly the same form but change shape and colour according to the changing situations. They are not leitmotifs but are woven into the orchestral texture in order to unify and energize the discourse. The tension and progression of the drama are ensured by the subtlety of the orchestra – seldom used at full strength – which constantly serves to change the work's mood.
>
> (Grove)

Mood is Debussy's primary musical concern, as opposed to commentary or revelation. Though he may owe something to Wagner in terms of tonality and orchestration, his use of music in *Pelleas* is unique.

Pelleas departs from Wagnerian classicism in what appears, in comparison to *The Ring*, to be its amoral esotericism. Unlike Wagner, Debussy did not pretend to be a philosopher; his philosophy was confined mostly to the aesthetic concerns of Symbolism, a movement "characterized by rejection of naturalism, of realism and of overly clearcut forms, hatred of emphasis, indifference to the public, and a taste for the indefinite, the mysterious, even the esoteric" (Grove). He professed no public aim for his work and, unlike Wagner, did not modify his source material to accommodate a personal moral statement.

Conclusion

Much has been said of Wagner's positive effect on opera, but I believe the history of opera was most affected by the reaction against his hyperbolic form of classicism. *Pelleas and Melisande* exemplifies this reaction by aligning itself with mystery and inertia as opposed to revelation and dramatic force, and by rejecting the public, moral role of Wagnerism in favor of the amoral esotericism of Symbolism.

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