Music 320
Richard Wagner
(1813-1883)

- **Biography**
  - Youngest of 7 children; step father was an actor, Richard had early intro to stage life.
  - Began writing operas at age 20. Wagner had job offers but always felt the jobs were beneath him.
  - 1836-48 wrote 4 important operas (though none were well-received): *Rienzi, Flying Dutchman, Tannhauser, Lohengrin*.
  - 1849 – 1860 exile in Switzerland. Developed his ideas on music and drama. Also started writing operas of Ring Cycle, and *Tristan und Isolde*.
  - Scandal caused him to leave Germany again in 1870 (marrying Cosima).
  - He returned to supervise building of new theater in Bayreuth; *Festspielhaus* (built for him by “Mad” King Ludwig of Bavaria; has innovative design of orchestra pit that hides orchestra and conductor from audience) opened in 1876 with first production of *Ring of the Niebelung*.

- **Ideas on Music**:
  - Wagner’s ideal of *Great German Opera*: Wagner wanted German opera to occupy artistic position and status equal to the greatest symphonic music. Theater was a place to express nobility of human species. He felt Beethoven achieved highest state of art in instrumental music; next step was to “fertilize music with poetry.” In his words, “the words are the roots and the music is the flower.”

- **Early operas** (up to *Lohengrin*) are basically in Italian tradition: following conventions of Weber and Meyerbeer. Some new techniques, esp. with *Lohengrin* that are developed in later operas:
  - Orchestra plays reminiscence motives: easily recognizable, linked to a character or idea; helps hold opera sections together.
  - Wagner associated keys with certain characters or incidents.
  - Starts exploring some unusual instruments, e.g. English horn and bass clarinet, off-stage or on-stage brass.

- **Turning Point**: After *Lohengrin*, Wagner stopped writing opera temporarily; partly because of disputes with management in Dresden theater, also revolution (had to leave country); but mostly because he wanted to develop new kind of opera.
  - Wrote essays on his ideas on musical drama.
  - Studied Norse mythology, ancient Greek tragedy.
o Started librettos for *Die Gotterdammerung* (Twilight of Gods), final opera of *Ring of the Niebelung*, his operatic cycle (four operas in all: *Das Rheingold, Die Walkure, Siegfried, Gotterdammerung*).

o Gist of essays:
  - Restore drama as a thoroughly integrated art: each component art (plot, poetry, music, scenery costume, action, etc.) had to be in its ultimate state.
  - Music should be the means for fullest realization of drama.
  - Music in opera should unfold continuously, not stop and start for applause as in “number opera.”
  - Plots should come from mythology or legends, which would serve as best settings for basic questions of humanity.
  - Two problems to be resolved:
    1. **Unification of speech and song**: had to start with right kind of speech. He used Alliteration: like rhyme but beginnings of words sound alike rather than ends. Also frees text (and therefore music) from metric accents that are usually found in rhyming verse.
    2. **Reconciliation of music and drama**: achieved through orchestra: provided scenic environment. Instrumental music could do things that speech couldn’t: recall past incidents, ideas, feelings more precisely than mere words.

o **Leitmotif**: Musical identification of a character, object, or force (Fate, Destiny), state of mind. Can be a brief melody, harmonic progression, single chord, or rhythm.
  - The Ring has very extensive system of Leitmotifs; helps audience follow action.
  - Wagner wrote Leitmotifs that would modulate so he could avoid cadences. His music is sometimes called “endless melody” because it never seems to stop.

- **Wagner’s Harmony**:
  - Very chromatic: e.g. opening of *Tristan und Isolde* opening.
  - Even in very chromatic sections, you still get tonal stability in form of progression from tonic through other chords to dominant 7th, but then deceptive cadence where deceptive chord becomes new tonic.
  - **Harmony and tonal relationships**: Wagner believed the ear would pick up on tonal structures that unify entire acts and even entire operas; he often organized an entire act as a big V-I progression.