

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

- 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***)
- 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
- **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.