

Introduction: Analysing Wagner

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Wagner's 'relationship with music theory', Alexander Rehding drily notes in his contribution to the present volume, 'was complicated' (p. 205). One could say something similar about music theory's relationship with Wagner. On the one hand Wagner's music, and especially its harmonic structure, has long served as a touchstone for theoretical models both old and new. At the same time, however, music analysts more often than not have appeared intimidated by the complexity of Wagner's works, their multi-layeredness and their sheer unwieldiness. Already in 1981, the late Anthony Newcomb noted in the first of a series of remarkably forward-looking articles on Wagner analysis that American music theory was 'unwilling to touch messy Wagnerian opera with [its] bright Schenkerian tools'.¹ To be sure, much has changed since then: not only have Schenkerians (or at least some of them) embraced Wagner, but also the toolbox of both North American and global music theory has expanded considerably over the last three or four decades, not to mention how much broader the perspective of music theory and analysis in general (what they are, what they can do and what they can be about) has become. Still, a survey of general music theory journals or analysis of conference programmes from the past two decades quickly makes clear that Wagner's music is not exactly one of the discipline's main preoccupations.

There are, of course, exceptions, and the contributors to this volume have been responsible for many of them over the years. The time seemed ripe, therefore, to bring these authors together in a volume that takes stock of what Wagner analysis is (what it can do and what it can be about) close to a century and a half after the composer's death. In putting analytical engagement with Wagner's works at its centre, the present tome differs in scope from the generally more comprehensive volumes in the *Cambridge Composer Studies* series. One reason for this is practical. The field of Wagner studies is so vast – comprising scholarship not only from within but, more than for other composers, also from outside the musicologies –

¹ Anthony Newcomb, 'The Birth of Music out of the Spirit of Drama: An Essay in Wagnerian Formal Analysis', *19th-Century Music* 5 (1981): 39 n. 4.

that no single volume can adequately represent it in all its diversity; any attempt to do so would have resulted in a collection that was overly disparate. (In an ideal world, this volume would over time be complemented by a *Wagner Studies* 2 that is devoted exclusively to cultural-historical, ideological and philosophical aspects of Wagner's works and – why not – a *Wagner Studies* 3 that is entirely about Wagner performance, both musical and theatrical.) At least as much, however, our choice is informed by ideological motives. The rich interdisciplinary conversation about Wagner stretches from musicology to philosophy, theatre studies, German studies, cultural studies, political science and beyond. It is, however, a conversation that, as Melanie Wald and Wolfgang Fuhrmann have observed, 'is conducted . . . to a large extent as if the actual (even though not the only) reason for the fascination of [Wagner's] works that continues to this day did not even exist: the music'.² As a corrective – a naïve one, perhaps – to this state of affairs, this volume wants to reclaim Wagner for his 'home' discipline, in that the authors of the ten chapters in this volume unabashedly put the music itself at the centre of attention.

This does not mean that the book presents a series of purely technical accounts of Wagner's music. Rather, while retaining the traditional interest in aspects of harmony, motive and form, the essays this volume assembles bring existing and newly developing analytical tools into fruitful contact with a range of perspectives that include hermeneutics, dramaturgy, history of theory, theories of reception and discursive analysis of sexuality and ideology. Indeed, some of its contributions might not be recognised by everyone as music analysis or music theory in the strict sense. What all of them have in common, though, is a direct, close and sustained engagement with the music and text as notated in the score. Collectively they capture the breadth of analytical studies of Wagner in contemporary scholarship and expand the reach of the field by challenging it to break new interpretative and methodological ground.

This volume's ten chapters are thematically grouped into four parts – two sets of three framed by two pairs. The title of the first part, 'Orientations', may be less straightforward than it seems. Coming from an author who has spent a lifetime writing about Wagner, Arnold Whittall's chapter "'Wo sind wir?": *Tristan* Disorientations' in particular may indeed be an unexpectedly disorienting opener to a volume that purports to be about analysing

² Melanie Wald and Wolfgang Fuhrmann, *Ahnung und Erinnerung. Die Dramaturgie der Leit motive bei Richard Wagner* (Kassel: Bärenreiter and Leipzig: Henschel, 2013), 22.

Wagner. Like much of Whittall's writing it is analytically impressionistic – memorable more for its erudite suggestiveness than for its actual analytical remarks. Starting from a very personal, even confessional position, it shines light on *Tristan* through the lens of a series of unobvious comparisons, ranging from Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* to Frank McGuinness's *Thebans*. No less personal, Matthew Bribitzer-Stull's chapter 'Bottoming for Wagner: Listening, Analysis and (Gay-Male) Subjectivity' explores how a specific sexual orientation can open new analytical perspectives and illustrates this with two analytical vignettes of the Prelude to *Lohengrin* and the Prelude to Act 2 of *Die Walküre*. What is crucial is that a seemingly very subjective position can have broader intersubjective relevance; as Bribitzer-Stull writes: 'Any posited subject position has not only a *descriptive* value for analysis, but also a *prescriptive* value for individuals who might wish to inhabit it experimentally as they expand their own listening practices' (p. 31).

The three chapters that form the next section ('Form, Drama and Convention') are perhaps the most traditionally music-theoretical ones in the volume – even though they broach topics that would long have been considered controversial in orthodox Wagnerian circles. William M. Marvin's 'Wagner and the Uses of Convention' takes a bird's-eye view of the early and romantic operas (from *Die Feen* through *Lohengrin*, with an additional glance at *Tristan*), identifying the many passages that betray Wagner's familiarity with the formal conventions of Italian opera from the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Graham Hunt's chapter on *Lohengrin*, 'Elsa, Ortrud, the Grail and the Forbidden Question', builds on the recent interest in form-functional analysis of nineteenth-century vocal music, focusing on the phrase-structural organisation of, and the connections between, some of the opera's main motives, as well as on the ways in which they are deployed in two of Wagner's earliest uses of rotational form. My own essay ('Scena, Form and Drama in Act 1 of *Die Walküre*') complements Marvin's survey in that it analyses a single extended scene from one of the mature operas through the lens of *la solita forma*, showing how form plays an active role in shaping the drama.

Part Three ('Time, Texture and Tonality') brings together three very contrasting chapters which have in common that each of them engages with a specific musical aspect of one of Wagner's operas and from there builds towards a wide-ranging dramatic, ideological or historical interpretation. In 'Time, Sound and Regression in *Tristan und Isolde*', Tobias Janz analyses the music and drama in *Tristan* as 'a tragedy of hearing . . . in which the main characters . . . are bound to the discursive and plot-oriented forms

of musical-operatic time, while the redemption they desire . . . points musically beyond the opera's temporal structures' (p. 116). More than any of the other chapters, J. P. E. Harper-Scott and Oliver Chandler's 'Waltraute's Plaint: Riemannian Tonal Function and Dramatic Narrative' combines analysis with explicit theory formation. Bringing 'neo-Riemannian theory closer to its origin in Hugo Riemann's functional theory', it not only seeks a dialectical understanding of tonality's meaning in the specific dramatic context of *Götterdämmerung*, but also hints at 'a new theoretical frame for understanding tonal function in chromatic music' (p. 138). The final chapter in this section, Ariane Jeßulat's 'Wagner's Late Counterpoint', situates a few short passages from *Parsifal* within a complex interpretative context that combines nineteenth-century counterpoint pedagogy and historical and contemporary models with memory studies and Adorno's ideas on late style.

The concluding pair of chapters focuses on issues of 'Reception'. Anna Stoll Knecht ('Silence and Gesture in Mahler's Ninth Symphony and Wagner's *Parsifal*') presents a hermeneutic analysis of Gustav Mahler's adaptation of the turn figure from *Parsifal* in his Ninth Symphony, reading it as a gesture that expresses the unspeakable. In 'Wagner's Early Analysts', finally, Alexander Rehding surveys the reception of Wagner's music among mainly German-speaking theorists during the final years of Wagner's life and the decades immediately after. Centred on the Tristan chord, his essay shows how Wagner's music had a formative influence on the development as *Harmonielehre* as 'a practice that was at once analytical, interpretative and historiographical' at a crucial moment in the history of music theory (p. 214).

It was an unusually balmy Friday afternoon in February 2019 when, over beers at a pub in Bloomsbury, I recklessly told Paul Harper-Scott that I thought someone should edit a collection of essays on analysing Wagner. In his characteristic manner, Paul did not respond directly (instead we probably just ordered another round), but a few days later an email landed in my inbox: was I serious and, if I was, could he and I perhaps be the ones putting that volume together. I was and we could, so one thing led to another, including an informal 'Wagner Studies symposium' with most of the volume's contributors over Zoom in the spring of 2021. Paul's career change soon after that has meant that I am listed as the sole editor, even though the book's general conception is as much his as it is mine. I am very grateful that he and Oliver Chandler (one of his last advisees) found a way to co-author the chapter that Paul had originally planned to write on

his own. Thanks are also due to Kate Brett, for accepting to publish the book as part of the *Cambridge Composer Studies* series, and to her and her team for seeing it through to completion; to Rebecca Moranis, for her help organising the online symposium as well as with editing many of the chapters; to Elwyn Rowlands, for helping me review the page proofs; to the staff at the Music Library of the University of Toronto, for their assistance with the cover image; and to Sarah Gutsche-Miller, who seems to have finally (yet grudgingly) accepted that her husband spends so much of his time thinking about Wagner.

