

**The Origin and the Decline of Wagnerianism,  
as reflected in the  
*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (NZM) and the  
*Die Redenden Künste, Leipziger Konzertsaal* (LKS)**

Nowadays one has the possibility all over the world to attend performances of Wagner's operas. And, by consulting the index and full-text of music journals treated in RIPM one can determine not only when and where Wagner's operas were performed in the 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-centuries, but also who staged, sung and conducted them. Moreover, one can also explore the contemporary view of so-called Wagner-singing, questions relating to over-straining the human voice and the possible disproportion relationship between singing and orchestral music in Wagner's works.

But, are they really **operas** that you see and hear? And how can they be, if according to the views of their creator and of his followers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, opera itself should be abolished. But, replaced with what you ask? The so-called Wagnerianism, and the propaganda for Wagner's ideas, provides information about this. But in what original sources can we observe their expression and gain insights about their specific meaning? Soon with the addition of new titles it will be possible to explore such fundamental questions in RIPM, through search queries with specific key words in certain nineteenth-century music journals. Moreover, it will be possible, by viewing the full text of the original articles, to study exactly what Wagnerianism meant, and how the Wagnerians expressed their ideas.

My aim here is to demonstrate how the Wagnerians' viewpoints can be observed and studied with the aid of access to the journals found in RIPM. Wagner himself diligently published general as well as detailed articles explaining and justifying the arguments for his artistic world view. Of course one can, even without knowing these theories, delight in Wagner's works or find them annoying. Today, the audience is attending performances of Wagner's opera to listen to beautiful music and to beautiful voices —an attitude that Wagner despised and wished to contradict and to struggle against with his works.

Wagner's journalistic message was communicated in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (NZM), which had been edited by Franz Brendel since 1845, and who took it over from Robert Schumann. Under Brendel's editorial direction, the journal became the leading advocate for a new direction of art, supporting the abolition or transformation of opera as it was known to be exclusively replaced by the artwork of the future: the music drama.

If one searches in RIPM for Wagner as author, one finds in the NZM articles of the 1850s and -60s that were relatively important for the development of his theories about the musical drama or the total artwork he created. Here his articles in the NZM are listed:

1850:

- Das Judenthum in der Musik (under the pseudonym K. Freigedank)

1851:

- Entwurf zur Organisation eines deutschen Nationaltheaters für das Königreich Sachsen  
- Für ein Theater in Zürich

1852:

- Ein Brief an den Redacteur der Neuen Zeitschrift für Musik  
- Ein Brief an Franz Liszt über die „Goethe-Stiftung“

1852/53:

- Ueber die Aufführung des *Tannhäuser*. Eine Mittheilung an die Dirigenten und Darsteller dieser Oper vom Dichter und Tonsetzer derselben

1853:

- Die Instrumental-Einleitung zu *Lohengrin*  
- Ouvertüre zu *Der Fliegende Holländer*

1854:

- Gluck's Ouvertüre zu *Iphigenie in Aulis*

1857:

- Ein Brief von Richard Wagner über Franz Liszt

1859:

- Text der 1. Szene des Zweiten Aufzugs aus R. Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*  
- Dem Andenken meines theuren [Wilhelm] Fischer

1860:

- Wagner's Antwort auf die Kritik von H. Berlioz

1861:

- Offener Brief Richard Wagners über die Aufführung seines *Tannhäuser* in Paris

1868:

- Meine Erinnerungen an Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld

In his NZM articles from the fifties and sixties, Wagner took only a relatively casual look at the fundamental views of his new art and spoke only indirectly about them. The most important statement was his description of his own and foreign works under the guiding principle that there was in them a program, a musical description of actions and poetic ideas. To

understand the basic elements of Wagner's art ideology, one must read his major writings: *Opera and Drama*, *Art and Revolution*, or *The Artwork of the Future* from the later fifties.

When searching in the index for other elements associated with the name Wagner in the title and for abstracts of the articles, one encounters either the titles of his works and reviews of their performances, or analyzes of them by Wagner or by other critics.

The central keywords associated with Wagnerianism in the NZM follow below. They are explained and justified as follows in the articles in which they appear:

**Music drama (Musikdrama)**. This is a new genre directed against the old form of opera, in which the central position of music and of singers as virtuosos should be eliminated, as should be the separation of recitatives and arias. In addition, the music drama is directed against the continuation of independent pure instrumental music as separate art form, which compulsorily should be associated with a superior music drama. The term **drama (Drama)** or even **German drama (Deutsches Drama)** is another keyword which does not mean drama as an inner-musical element, but rather comes from outside the music, as a metaphysical event for the interpretation of the world and humanity. In such a drama, **music serves as a means (Musik als Mittel)** of representation of the poetry. The erroneous path of pure instrumental music (**music for its own sake (Musik als Selbstzweck)**, developed since the 17th century with its sonatas, symphonies and concerts) is to be eliminated; it belongs to the past and should be presented in historical concerts as artworks of the past. Why? Because the drama stands above, governs and summarizes the three great arts: poetry, music and fine art. This is what the Wagnerians refer to as music drama, as a **total artwork (Gesamtkunstwerk)** which should be the only surviving type of **artwork in the future (Kunstwerk der Zukunft)** and that all other types of music works have no right to exist any longer. For, all previous music was written in such a way as to serve merely as a prelude to the music drama created by Wagner, through which the original unity of the art would be restored, as in the Greek tragedy. The history of music, in their eyes, led from its unity with poetry, dance, and ritual in the temple and theater among the Greeks, away from and at the same time back to this unity in Wagner's total artwork. It is not difficult to recognize the totalitarian character of this construction, because it is a purposeful historical conception. The goal is: "Gesamtkunstwerk" à la Wagner, in which all former, historically developed, special art forms are to be abolished. This idea of abolition (with the triple meaning

of the German word “Aufhebung”: to pick up something, to store or to care for something, and to abolish something - all in the same process), is a typical point of view of totalitarians.

There was also the attempt to substantiate the necessity of the music drama, which would destroy everything else, by deriving it from the desires and demands of the classical authors of German spoken drama, such as Lessing, Schiller, Goethe, and Herder. For, they had always theorized about music as a supplement to their dramas, supplying tension or resolution, or enhancing it. Wagner also called his works **stage festival (Bühnenfestspiel)** or, in an intensified form, **stage consecration festival (Bühnenweihfestspiel)**, in order to underline the popular and sacred character of his production.

The inner musical shaping of the musical drama is determined by **leading motives (Leitmotiven)**, which are assigned to different persons, situations and symbolic processes. Wagner called them “sentiment guides” for the listener, who takes in the experience and who is ultimately spiritually overpowered by it. Instead of recitatives and arias, permanent **speaking chant (Sprechgesang)** or **declamation** occurs. During and inside of this declamation the drama is supposed to take place, interrupted only by orchestral interludes.

Wagner's efforts were embedded in a direction called the **New German School (Neue Deutsche Schule)**, the main characteristic of which was devotion to **program music (Programm Musik)**, the expression of non-musical ideas with music. Franz Liszt, who, in addition to the musical drama of Wagner, established the **tone poem (Tondichtung)** or **symphonic poem (Sinfonische Dichtung)**. It arose from the concerto-overture with program, and represented another way of replacing the old worn-out musical forms.

So far about the key words of Wagnerianism, now something about the early Wagnerians.

Besides Wagner, the most important Wagnerians supporting the formative and developmental phase of the new genres were the following three decisive spokespersons in the NZM: Theodor Uhlig, Franz Brendel and Richard Pohl.

**Theodor Uhlig** (1822-53) was a music critic who died young and who gave up his own attempts as a composer to propagate strongly the idea that music drama was the only possible genre of musical composition for the future. In August 1850 he wrote a detailed, long-drawn-out exposition of the early writings of Wagner with accompanying polemics against Ludwig Bischof

of the *Rheinische Musikzeitung* and Johann Christian Lobe (pseudonym "The Well-Known"). Together with his "Thoughts on the Opera" he began in 1851 his confrontation with the "reactionary views" of Wagner's opponents with a polemical text titled "Contemporary Contemplations".

**Franz Brendel** (1811-68) was from 1845 until his death the only editor of the journal. Brendel developed an ideologically founded totalitarian attitude which promoted the total artwork of the future and led him to believe that all previous musical views are outdated. He became an ideological pioneer of Wagnerianism. In Brendel's Musikhistoric lectures (reviewed lengthily in the NZM), he denied pure instrumental music the right to exist in the future, as it would remain isolated from "life" and the other arts. In 1853 Brendel wrote a text calling for the abolition of the "special art" music. Uhlig and Brendel's identification with these ideas went so far, that it is not clear whether the two are merely apologists for Wagner's music-drama concepts, or whether Wagner was the executor of their conceptions.

**Richard Pohl** (1826-96, pseudonym "Hoplit") was in the years 1853 and following the main critic of all Anti-Wagnerians, such as W. H. Riehl, J. Chr. Lobe, and L. Bischof, and promoted the works of Berlioz and Liszt.

One can investigate the manner in which these contemporary authors such as Uhlig, Brendel and Pohl, sympathetic to Wagner's intentions and goals, attempted to disseminate his theories in the form of presentations justifying them. Wagner's very important friend from Dresden's time, Uhlig, pleads in January 1850 for a reformed musical drama. For him, this was a conclusion from his own long overall view of Beethoven's symphonies, extending over several issues. Uhlig was concerned with overcoming the weaknesses of the old opera form, which he recognized as an unfortunate union of dramatic and musical elements. The weaknesses of portraying or "painting" music, which had been a reaction to the limits of pure instrumental music, also had to be overcome, as did the weaknesses of vocal music because of its strict contrapuntal habits. Uhlig pleads for awareness that the human being is the starting point of art. Music is only part of an overall art that has to work toward refining human beings. In his series about the reform of musical drama I would see the genesis of Wagnerianism. Wagner has adopted these views quickly, further developed them after the early death of Uhlig, systematized them, and, above all, put them into practice by writing and composing musical dramas of the

desired new type. The first work of this kind is *Lohengrin*, first performed in Weimar in August 1850. In an 1851 letter to his friend Uhlig, Wagner, while writing the first plan for his tetralogy *Ring of the Nibelungen*, stated that it had to be performed later on the “ruins of the old opera”. Brendel, in his 1853 New Year's article, also mentions that Wagner had followed the suggestions of the NZM and had brought them to fulfillment. Thus, Wagner appears as the voice of his Leipzig supporters, and as the executor of ideas of which he is not at all the inventor.

This is also evident in Brendel's early articles. For, in the middle of the so-called “Vormärz” (the years before the failed Revolution in March 1848 in Germany), and as early as 1846, Brendel declared in the conclusion to a series of articles on the “past, present, and future of the opera” that opera has to be regarded as a national and in the same time an universal affair; that there is a need for a break with the past; that advances in music are made possible only by the study of poetry and general education; and that the scenic and dramatic design must be modeled differently, according to the laws of drama. As Germany was gaining an overall political consciousness, opera had the task of raising itself to a new national level. The elements already present in the works of the Romantics and Beethoven were to be increased. Only national unity and a democratic attitude would permit music to achieve this goal which is about trying to merge international influences into a new national and at the same time universal art. This series of articles can also be regarded as a forerunner, if not another founding document of later Wagnerianism.

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At the end of the 1890s, the situation looked completely different. Wagner's articulate ideas seemed to have won a victory, if the Wagnerians are to be believed. At least in the field of opera the old operas and those new operas, which do not yet follow the Wagnerian concept, seemed to be pushed aside. However, new sonatas, character pieces, fantasies, songs, symphonies, concerts and oratorios were still composed and performed. Reading the years of the journal *Die Redenden Künste (Leipziger Konzertsaal)* (LKS) one has the impression, that on German stages 80% of the repertoire are Wagner's music dramas. The LKS represents a particularly fanatical group of Wagnerians. They, the guardians of the Holy Grail of Wagner, were struggling to defend the authenticity and purity of Wagner's ideas even against the distortions of Wagner's work in Bayreuth under the guidance of his widow. They were, however, representatives overseeing the

decline of Wagnerianism at a time when they thought they could take possession of musical life, or at least of German theater life. In a word, the success of Wagnerianism led to its failure because that which had already been laid out by Wagner and the early Wagnerians as a rigorous ideal had here been pushed to the extreme, namely, expressing the point of view that only an exact adherence to all Wagnerian regulations was acceptable. They argued as priests defending an orthodox religious ideal. Again and again they operated with quotations of the "master from Bayreuth," who had wanted and created the supreme, to justify the only correct way of performing Wagner's works.

In fact, Wagner's musical dramas were triumphant throughout Europe, which is reported in the LKS. In 1899 alone there was a Wagner cycle at the Covent Garden Opera House with German singers, a planned Wagner cycle in Paris during the world exhibition in a new Festival house, to be recreated by Bayreuth, and that, in Paris, a city which Wagner said had to burn down before his work could be successful. Everywhere in Germany there were Wagner clubs, which had to be satisfied with poor performances of concertante fragments from Wagner's complete artworks and insipid Wagner lectures.

The leading Wagnerian of this Leipzig grouping was Moritz Wirth (1849-1917), whose articles, which are characterized above all by long-windedness, are forgotten today, but at the time they were dominant. He clearly played the smart aleck, consistently discovering new leading motives in Wagner's scores, meticulously following how they were used and transformed by Wagner, and identifying the symbol or sign represented by each. He also found new, more correct terms for previously identified leading motives. He also pushed the idea of program music so far that he "recognized" in the Andante from Beethoven's Symphony No. 3, the so-called Eroica, a description of the deeds not only of the First Consul Napoleon, but also those of the recently deceased Founder and Chancellor of the German "Reich" (empire): Bismarck. Wirth also called for the founding of a "Rheingold Society", because he asserted to have discovered the definitely right decorations for *Rheingold* and now he tried to push them through as exemplary stage set which should be objectively binding for all further performances of this prelude to *The Ring of the Nibelung*. It is striking that Wagner was more appreciated as a dramatist (in the metaphysical sense indicated above) than as a musician. In a contribution to the LKS by M. Behrendt Wagner was even recognized as a dramatist in the history of German

poetry as superior to Goethe, Schiller, and Grillparzer, as the one who perfected what they had only wanted. This point of view is astonishing in light of the very poor quality of Wagner's language, and above all of the poetic nonsense he created by translating the old Germanic staff rhyme into the new High German language.

In a long series of articles by Ernst Lauterer, a publicist who will later promote occultism in the leadership circles of the Waffen-SS, there are forecasts of a popular pedagogical campaign that anticipates that the later Nazi dictatorship in Germany will prevail. It contained plans for the realization of a German folk art through an education to the old Germanic virtues, as Wagner had rediscovered them in the Edda saga.

Signs of the decline are also the result of the combination of this type of Wagnerianism with the antisemitism that emerged in the early 1880s. Lauterer was concerned with the use of Wagner's popular art against a poisoning of the healthy German national body by means of Semitic (ie Arab and Jewish) influences. Thus he spoke in LKS 1899 of "Attacks of immorality on the stage through Semitic practices and Gallic immorality".

The proposed monopoly of Wagner's musical dramas also led to the determination of that which could be considered as dramatic music. Thus, after a Leipzig re-performance of the oratorio *Elijah* by Mendelssohn in 1899, Julius Burghold forcefully recommended that Mendelssohn's *Elijah* no longer be performed because it was a failed hermaphroditism in which the composer had absurdly dramatized the epic-lyrical genre of the oratorio, which led to "miserable music-making". We can see how little the National Socialists had to do only 30 years later, in order to ban performances of Mendelssohn's music in Germany.

In a last article of principle at the beginning of the last year of the LKS (1900), its editors expressed their support for the promotion of Wagnerianism; they published individual investigations to justify Wagner's drama and wanted to create a corrected consciousness of Wagner's cause. It was about an extended and full Wagnerianism. The author F. A. Geissler regarded Wagner as a prophet of a German Christianity and made the assertion that Jesus could not have been a member of the Jewish, "anti-German" people, that Christianity would be essentially German, that Wagner would be essentially German and Christian, and that these elements were embodied in the figures of Siegfried and Parsifal. Parsifal would be a fusion of German and Christian essence, of Jesus and Siegfried, that is, a Germanized Christ.



In his commentary on Paul Sturm's design of a planned Wagner Memorial in Leipzig Wirth explained the significance and form of the Rhein daughters, the Valkyrie, Siegfried, and Wotan, who were depicted there. With the depiction of Siegfried he missed the "Aryan gold of his curls". Wagnerianism had become part of the "völkisch" (ethnic) ideology which distorted Wagner to his recognizability, something that might be called a paradox.

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