Total Artwork: Wagner's Philosophies on Art and Music in the Ring Cycle

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Abstract
Richard Wagner is one of the most renowned composers of the Romantic period, due to his intensely emotional music, captivating operatic plots, and his unique idea to combine visual art, vocal music, and instrumental music in an unprecedented way. His music is acclaimed for being highly progressive for its time; Wagner also held unique philosophical beliefs which formed the foundation for his music. Wagner’s pioneering ideas about art, music, and the way they should be paired together led to the composition of many operas that still have a place in the permanent repertoire today, including Der Ring des Nibelungen, or the Ring cycle. The Ring cycle is the pinnacle of Wagner’s compositional career. Though his previous operas were innovative, it was the Ring into which Wagner poured his most groundbreaking ideas, taking over twenty years to complete it. The cycle consists of four independent operas that contain a continuous storyline and musical themes, all tied together through leitmotifs and equally featuring instrumental music, vocal music, and visual art. Ultimately, Richard Wagner’s philosophies about art and music led to his use of leitmotifs and his support of Gesamtkunstwerk, which influenced his compositional techniques in the Ring cycle.

Keywords
Wagner, Ring Cycle, Gesamtkunstwerk, leitmotif, total artwork, music drama, opera

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Total Artwork: Wagner’s Philosophies on Art and Music in the *Ring* Cycle

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Throughout music history, few composers have attracted as much controversy as Richard Wagner. From his outright rejection of Jewish composers due to their beliefs to his scandalous love affairs throughout his marriage, scholars have raised concerns about his works and whether they deserve a place in music education. However wayward Wagner’s moral convictions may have been, his music is also acclaimed for its progressive nature and its unprecedented philosophical foundation. Wagner’s pioneering ideas about art and music led to the composition of many operas that secured a place in the permanent repertoire. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, or the *Ring* cycle, is the pinnacle of Wagner’s compositional career. Though his previous operas were innovative, it was the *Ring* into which he poured his most groundbreaking ideas, taking over twenty years to complete it.¹ The work consists of four independent operas that contain a continuous storyline and musical themes; generally, it is performed over four evenings and is approximately fifteen hours long in total. It was into this particular work that he integrated his most revolutionary compositional ideas, including his beliefs about total artwork. Richard Wagner’s philosophies of art and music led to his use of *Leitmotifs* and his support of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which influenced his compositional techniques in the *Ring* cycle.

In order to understand Richard Wagner’s philosophies of art and music, it is necessary to consider how he was impacted by Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer was a German philosopher who published many writings about his artistic philosophies. He is considered to be a philosopher “for whom music was not only an occasional pastime, but an integrant part of his life and of his daily meditations.”² Schopenhauer believed the physical body to be a mere container for the soul, and that

¹ Newman, 202.
² Green, 200.
the soul’s “will” is carried out in one’s actions. In this way, music is a way of revealing the “will” and is unlike any other art form in its power to convey emotion. Schopenhauer ranked different types of art based on their levels of depth and intricacy. He considered architecture to be low-grade because of its limited focus on form and rigidity. Landscape paintings were considered a step above because they depict life; historical paintings are one step higher because they show man and his actions. He ranked the literary arts highest of all because they can convey progress, movement, and even thought. Schopenhauer concluded, therefore, that “music must have deeper roots in human nature than the other arts, and that whilst these are representations of external phenomena, themselves symbols of the real essence of things, music is the representation of this essence itself.” The many components of music, such as melody, rhythm, and harmony, can be used to depict various aspects of the “will.” Schopenhauer revered music as a way to surpass the tangible world and reach a transcendental reality.

Richard Wagner’s philosophies of art and music are very similar to those of Schopenhauer. In Wagner’s writing entitled Opera and Drama, he writes that “Harmony and Rhythm are the blood, flesh, nerves and bones, with all the entrails, and like these, when we look upon the finished, living man, stay closed against the gazing eye; Melody, on the other hand, is this finished man himself.” In this way, he considered melody to be the culmination of inner thought and meaning. However, Wagner also held that music could not express its full potential without the addition of language or poetry. He writes that without linguistic thought, “music’s organism [can] never bear the true, the living Melody, except it first be fecundated by the Poet’s Thought.” There is no point in composing absolute music, because instrumental music without language lacks complete human emotion. Likewise, drama and dialogue cannot convey the entire range of emotions that can be accomplished with the addition of music. Ernest Newman writes that Wagner could “not as a rule cognise music apart from certain poetical associations—that he flooded his musical impressions of a work with other and more

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3 Alperson, 155–156.
4 Alperson, 155.
5 Alperson, 156.
6 Green, 200.
7 Alperson, 159.
8 Wagner, “Opera,” 104.
concrete impressions derived from poetry.”\footnote{Newman, 143.} The idea of combined art forms led to Wagner’s fascination with \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}, or “total artwork,” where drama and music could work harmoniously; in this relationship, each provides the other with expressive abilities that they do not possess individually.\footnote{Gal, 177.}

Wagner created \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk} not only for his own satisfaction, but he believed that collective art satisfied the intrinsic desires of his audience. In his \textit{Artwork of the Future}, Wagner speaks of the “folk” population and their inner desires for music. The “folk” refer to those who share an artistic perspective; therefore, Wagner incorporated folk stories and other German traditions into his music.\footnote{Wagner, “The Art-Work,” 75–76.} He states that artists create something of nature, which reveals an inner truth. Therefore, art “is not an \textit{artificial} product,—that the need of Art is not an arbitrary issue, but an inbred craving of the natural, genuine, and uncorrupted man.”\footnote{Wagner, “The Art-Work,” 89.} Wagner saw art as satisfying a very natural human desire and wrote his music with the intention of fulfilling his listeners. However, his music was also a call for political revolution. In incorporating music with drama, he initiated a radical change in the musical sphere that simultaneously expressed his desire for change in the social order, on behalf of the folk and their inner “Want.”\footnote{Garten, 73.}

Along with satisfying the desires of his audiences, Wagner also aimed to provoke a particular reaction from them. He abandoned all previously established musical forms, traditions, and structure, leaving many critics to perceive his music as being without true direction or melody.\footnote{Thorau, 145.} In fact, Hans Gal criticizes Wagner’s innovation and claims he was simply eager to be a pioneer, saying that

\textit{he never took any notice of the opposite aspect of music, that joy of music-making which is fostered by objective impulses and the sheer delight in polyphony, rhythms and forms: for him all this represented nothing but a history of the past which had to be overcome.}\footnote{Gal, 164.}
Wagner’s compositional innovations may have been a result of wanting to fulfill his own passions and please the audience, but it is clear that he also sought to create a new type of music that had not yet been explored. He believed “an artwork is a great artwork only if it ‘works,’ only if it has a powerful effect, only if it is received and digested by an attentive audience.”

Although it appears that Wagner may have only been pioneering in order to make a name for himself, he developed Gesamtkunstwerk with masterful intentions; he wanted this new total artwork to be true art. Ultimately, although Wagner’s specific social motivations are unclear, his compositional goal was to uproot all existing musical guidelines. He sought to create something unprecedented and memorable, combining the arts in a way that had not been done previously.

Wagner additionally rejected the methods of operatic tradition that were in place at the time. He did not see them as fluid or cohesive, but believed that the distinction between aria and recitative was disjunct and did not serve to further the plot appropriately. Until this point, the orchestra “had never been anything beyond the rhythmic and harmonic bearer of the opera-melody: however richly equipped in this its station, yet it was always subordinated to that melody.” Rather than serving as an accompaniment to the drama, Wagner believed the poetry and music were inherently fused; the orchestra should be equally prominent as the vocalists. In this way, the poet and the composer must rely on each other fully.

Newman identifies Wagner’s main complaint about opera, explaining that

the poet, then, cannot realize his aim in modern speech, because he cannot speak directly to the feeling. Yet he must not simply work out his drama on the lines of the understanding, and then try to add expression to it by means of music. This was the error of opera.

Wagner believed that in order for an opera to be a complete work, the lyrics and music had to be intimately fused from the beginning; they must each be written with the other in mind, and they must be written simultaneously. He disapproved of writing a dramatic production and

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17 Young, 45.
20 Stein, 152.
21 Newman, 93.
adding music secondarily, because it would seem to be an afterthought. Neither the words nor the music are of lesser importance than the other. Wagner believed that linking the two would render “speech coextensive with music so as to restore both to prelapsarian expressive wholeness.”

For this reason his philosophies of art and music shaped his opinions on opera and were what fostered his desire to reinvent compositional techniques. He preferred operas to feature continuous melodic material, or “endless melody,” where the musical material was birthed from a few simple motifs. Wagner was heavily inspired by the works of Beethoven in accomplishing this goal, writing that Beethoven, unlike other composers, used the most natural methods to develop his melodies. 

Gesamtkunstwerk, in Wagner’s opinion, was better exemplified by Beethoven than any opera composers. Around 1840, Wagner claimed to be the only composer qualified to be Beethoven’s true successor, making it his life’s work to live up to his idol. Whether it was true admiration for his musical abilities or the desire to achieve Beethoven’s level of fame, Wagner sought to emulate Beethoven’s symphonic techniques in opera.

Wagner referred to his operatic works as “music-dramas,” attempting to make a clear distinction between his works and those from the classical operatic tradition. In the Ring cycle, he employs elements such as alliteration and free rhythm, which help to make the poetry feel natural and mimic natural speech patterns. Jack Stein writes that Wagner “demanded a melodic configuration at every point so intimately fused with the poetic verse that the melody would be felt as the actual musical counterpart of that text; or better, as the musical portion of an indivisible unit.” Wagner did not separate his musical material into categories of recitative, aria, or arioso; instead, the melody continued throughout the work, not promoting virtuosic opportunities but focusing on storytelling. Compared to other operas, this was a radical approach. Language, music, and drama had not been previously fused so intimately; this allowed for emotional depth and artistic continuity that flawlessly formed to the dramatic demands of the production. This approach eliminated the need

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22 Rasula, 38.
25 Kropfinger, 25.
26 Stein, 69–70.
27 Stein, 71.
28 Bribitzer-Stull, 159.
for major scene or mood changes and prevented stark contrasts between musical styles in the work. Rather than following a specific form, Wagner’s music was directly fused to the drama. In a similar way, the music was not merely an accompaniment, but furthered the plot by partnering with the poetry.

Wagner also sought to achieve realism in his music-dramas. The Ring cycle contains both mythical and immortal characters, yet it develops underlying themes and messages that engage the general public. He uses many symbols throughout the four operas to produce a dramatic and captivating story while developing realistic messages that he intends the audience to understand. Robert Donington analyzes symbols in the Ring cycle and concludes that

> music and the poetry of the Ring work together in expressing that ‘deep and hidden’ truth of whose underlying presence Wagner was himself aware [...] But because much of it does lie deep and hidden, Wagner’s truth rewards investigation, among other tools, by the modern tools of depth psychology, as well as by the more usual tools of thematic and structural comparison.29

Since he believed the folk had a desire and need for the arts, Wagner sought to make his works accessible without allowing them to be overly simple or blunt. He believed that the music allowed the drama to unfold with more clarity, but that an element of mystery was essential in making the work understandable to the audience. He explains that making his “intention too obvious would get in the way of a genuine understanding; in drama and in art generally, the way to make an effect is not by arguing an opinion but by putting forward something instinctive.”30 Rather than making his values or message too obvious, he prefers to allow the music to depict the story which then leaves the audience in a position to interpret the precise meaning for themselves. However, he does incorporate symbols to represent general truths throughout the Ring. Wagner’s symbols are selected intentionally, so that every aspect of his composition works to convey a particular message or emotion to his audience.

29 Donington, 27.
30 Wagner, quoted in Donington, 31.
As the pride of Wagner’s career, the *Ring* capitalizes on Beethoven’s methods of using a few core motifs to develop the entirety of the melodic material. Thematic shifts are often used to manipulate a motif, producing a different mood each time. These shifts are carried out through methods including a change of mode, thematic truncation, fragmentation, or contextual reinterpretation.\(^{31}\) By continuously reinterpreting similar musical material, Wagner makes the plot more fluid and continuous. He specifically incorporates musical motifs to echo the dramatic events, where it remains “part of the total effect, where that which is shown is understood in a holistic, integrated manner as being the instinctively right thing, the motivated and the motivating at the same time.”\(^{32}\) This exemplifies Wagner’s desire to create *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where the music and the drama are perfectly intertwined.

*Gesamtkunstwerk* also involves the use of *Leitmotifs*. When translated into English from German, “leitmotif” roughly means “leading motive.” Although Wagner himself never used the term, it was established as a necessary term later by Hans von Wolzogen in an analysis of Wagner’s operas.\(^{33}\) The definition is put most precisely in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*:

> In its primary sense, a theme, or other coherent musical idea, clearly defined so as to retain its identity if modified on subsequent appearances, whose purpose is to represent or symbolize a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force or any other ingredient in a dramatic work. A leitmotif may be musically unaltered on its return, or altered in rhythm, intervallic structure, harmony, orchestration or accompaniment, and may also be combined with other leitmotifs in order to suggest a new dramatic situation. A leitmotif is to be distinguished from a reminiscence motif (*Erinnerungsmotiv*), which, in earlier operas and in Wagner’s works up to and including *Lohengrin*, tends to punctuate the musical design rather than provide the principal, ‘leading’ thematic premises for that design.\(^{34}\)

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\(^{31}\) Bribitzer-Stull, 170–194.

\(^{32}\) Thorau, 138.

\(^{33}\) Stein, 75.

\(^{34}\) Strickland, 527.
Leitmotifs are unique musical motifs that not only repeat throughout the work but form the foundation for the musical material as it develops throughout the work. Matthew Bribitzer-Stull includes multiple ways of describing a Leitmotif, but explains it “is not just a musical labeling of people and things… it is also a matter of musical memory, of recalling things dimly remembered and seeing what sense we can make of them in a new context.”\textsuperscript{35} Leitmotifs begin with a presentiment, which introduces the listener to the musical theme while associating it with its corresponding situation, person, thing, or idea. Like Leitmotifs, presentiments create a real sense of reminiscence but are not yet connected to a person or object.\textsuperscript{36} The connection between the musical idea and the subject are solidified through the repetition of the theme at every subsequent appearance of the idea. Bribitzer-Stull writes that although “the listener may associate a given theme with a certain emotion or mood, it is the repetition of this theme, at an appropriately dramatic point, that cements its association and allows for future qualification of its meaning.”\textsuperscript{37} The continual connection between the music and the dramatic ideas throughout the \textit{Ring} work to create a deeply coherent storyline that intimately binds his music with the poetry in all four operas. Stein writes that this connection is formed when a leitmotif is derived originally from a word-tone combination, and takes its meaning from the word content of the melodic verse, then, each time it is repeated, it serves as a link between the orchestra music and the musical-poetic line, because it automatically calls to mind the words of which it was originally the melodic counterpart.\textsuperscript{38}

This is the primary outpouring of Wagner’s theories of music; the music and poetry work together and every aspect of the music serves to further the plot. This occurs not only within each individual opera, but across all four that comprise the \textit{Ring} cycle, binding together the themes and ideas in both music and language to create one continuous masterpiece.

The first opera of the \textit{Ring}, \textit{Das Rheingold}, introduces the Rhinemaidens, who are magical female creatures who protect a magic gold ring. The ring gives its owner unsurpassable power, but in taking it the owner must

\textsuperscript{35} Bribitzer-Stull, 8.
\textsuperscript{36} Stein, 77.
\textsuperscript{37} Bribitzer-Stull, 168.
\textsuperscript{38} Stein, 93.
give up love. A dwarf named Alberich sacrifices love in order to gain this power. Shortly after, the ring is stolen by the leader of the gods, Wotan, to pay a debt he owes. Alberich then curses the ring so that anyone who owns the ring will live in constant fear of losing it, and everyone who does not own the ring will live in envy of it. The work unfolds as the ring continues to change hands and its various owners sacrifice love in exchange for power.

Wagner incorporates several specific Leitmotifs that occur numerous times throughout the Ring cycle. He establishes the gold motif from the very beginning of the first opera, with the French horn playing the theme, gradually adding more players in harmony.

**Example 1:** *Das Rheingold*, “Gleichmässig ruhig im Zeitmass,” pp. 46.

This motif occurs in the first drama a total of fifteen times and is developed into several variations in both the vocal line and the orchestral accompaniment. Over the numerous appearances of this gold motif, it establishes an aural connection with the gold, the river, and the Rhinemaidens that suffer its loss.

Another example of a blatant Leitmotif is the curse motif, which is first introduced when Alberich curses the ring after he loses possession of it. The motif occurs whenever Wagner wants to remind the listeners of the curse that was originally put on the ring: first, when the two giants fight over the ring, and again when Fasner kills Fasolt to take possession of it.

**Example 2:** *Das Rheingold*, “Langsam,” pp. 238.

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39 “The Ring Cycle in a Nutshell.”
40 Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 46.
41 Wagner, *Das Rheingold*, 238.
The primary role of these *Leitmotifs* is not simply to create consistency in Wagner’s music, but also to create continuity in the storyline and help the listener make connections that are not always obvious without assistance from the musical motifs. Martin Geck notices that Wotan appears in *Das Rheingold, Die Walküre*, and *Siegfried*, but not in *Götterdämmerung*. But as soon as we turn to the music, we shall see that he is an even greater presence in *Götterdämmerung* than before, for time and again the motifs associated with the sword, the treaties engraved on the gods’ spear, and Valhalla are woven into the musical fabric.  

By creating musical symbolism in his *Leitmotifs*, Wagner eliminates the need to express these connections through the characters’ lines, and nothing is directly explained to the audience. *Leitmotifs* are included subtly, through musical implications that require great artistry and technique.

Wagner sought to depict a particular overall message through the incorporation of *Leitmotifs* in the *Ring*. In a letter to Liszt written on February 11, 1853, Wagner writes that the *Ring* cycle “holds the world’s beginning, and its destruction.”  

It is clear throughout the four operas that there is a constant conflict between authority and man’s natural desire for power, as well as his willpower to achieve what he desires. The ring itself symbolizes power, and multiple characters demonstrate what they are truly capable of in order to gain that power. The use of *Leitmotifs* helps to continually emphasize themes like power, curse, and destruction throughout the four operas. With the audience being continually reminded of these themes through the use of the musical motifs, Wagner’s prevailing messages are ultimately more evident. The Rhinemaidens explain in the first scene of *Das Rheingold* that in order to possess the ring, one must permanently renounce love. The lengths to which the characters go to gain the power that the ring provides demonstrates, time and again, the depravity and selfishness of mankind. Wagner writes to August Roeckel:

> I meant in the presentment of the whole Nibelung myth to express my meaning even more clearly, by showing

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42 Geck, 203.
43 Donington, 35.
44 Newman, 206.
how from the first wrong-doing a whole world of evil arose, and consequently fell to pieces in order to teach us the lesson, that we must recognise evil and tear it up by the roots, and raise in its stead a righteous world.\textsuperscript{45}

By using musical motifs that evoke particular emotions such as warning or strife, Wagner is able to guide the audience through their general understanding of the plot. Without the music to assist, it is difficult to make associations between particular events and symbols throughout the work, and many ideas must be directly explained to the audience. Although connections between \textit{Leitmotifs} and their symbols may be received differently by different viewers, Wagner’s primary message about man’s desire for power is clear.

Wagner’s \textit{Ring} is unlike any other operatic performance that came before it. Rather than separating aria and recitative, Wagner’s melody is continuous throughout. Additionally, \textit{Leitmotifs} are so densely incorporated that all of the musical material appears interconnected. Wagner considered this to be the climax of his career; in a letter written to August Roeckel prior to finishing the \textit{Ring}, he writes that upon its completion, “I shall then have attained, if not my ideal, at least all that mortal man can aspire to.”\textsuperscript{46} Wagner’s pride over his accomplishment is not unwarranted. Critics and scholars have admired the intricacy of the work since its completion. Gal declares that anyone who could create this tetralogy was a giant, both in character and imperturbability of artistic vision. What is unique in this work is the curve of stylistic development which reflects a process of maturation encompassing twenty-five years, from its first conception in Dresden to its completion in Bayreuth.\textsuperscript{47}

Not only is the work intricately orchestrated in terms of music, poetry, and symbols, but it remains one of the longest and most well-known operatic works in the permanent repertoire.

Wagner’s approach to musical symbolism forever impacted how music is composed. \textit{Leitmotifs} are still used today in classical music, Broadway shows, and even film music. In having what Bribitzer-Stull calls an

\textsuperscript{45} Wagner, \textit{Richard Wagner’s Letters}, 149–150.
\textsuperscript{46} Wagner, \textit{Richard Wagner’s Letters}, 67.
\textsuperscript{47} Gal, 178.
“artistic philosophy that relegated music to a collaborative, rather than a central, role, Wagner paved the way for a similar treatment in film.”\(^{48}\) In the film industry, music is not of primary importance, but it can be more impactful and more intimately related to the plotline by incorporating Leitmotifs in Wagner’s footsteps. The “Voldemort” theme in *Harry Potter*, for example, appears when Harry receives the magic wand that is the twin of his mortal enemy, Voldemort. As the words “its brother gave you that scar” are spoken, the presentment of the *Leitmotif* is introduced, setting forth a pattern of portraying tension each subsequent occurrence.\(^{49}\) The *Star Wars* movies also include *Leitmotifs*; in the beginning of the movie, “the audience hears a fragment of the ‘Leia’ theme during the princess’s first brief appearance before we understand her importance to the tale at hand.”\(^{50}\) The *Jaws* theme is another *Leitmotif* that audiences commonly recognize as a signal of impending doom or danger. Not only was Wagner’s incorporation of *Leitmotifs* a radical reflection of his musical philosophy, but it still impacts compositional techniques today.

Whether Richard Wagner intended to permanently change operatic composition, wanted to more deeply intrigue his audiences, or simply desired fame, the impact of the *Ring* cycle is difficult to refute. Not only has he achieved permanent recognition for his numerous operas including the *Ring*, but he was able to create a partnership between words and music that had not been accomplished before. The birth of the *Leitmotif* came from his belief that music and poetry were more powerful when intimately connected. Ultimately, Wagner included *Leitmotifs* and created *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the *Ring* cycle as a direct reaction to his philosophies of art and music. Not only is the *Ring* cycle a masterpiece because of its unprecedented musical symbols, but because it has permanently impacted how music is composed.

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\(^{48}\) Bribitzer-Stull, 264.
\(^{49}\) Bribitzer-Stull, 282.
\(^{50}\) Bribitzer-Stull, 289.


