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ART AND REVOLUTION

Chapter: CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)
Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
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In view of his eventual transformative stature in history, the most extraordinary fact in Wagner's biography is the ordinariness of his beginnings. No composer of comparable achievement—at least none up to then—had ever had a slower start. Wagner was no Mozartian or Mendelssohnian prodigy. He was no Lisztian virtuoso. A native Leipziger, he manifested no early signs of unusual talent for music. Like many late starters, he never developed perfect pitch, often taken as a measure of natural aptitude for music. His earliest artistic interest was, perhaps significantly, in Greek epic and drama. At school he made translations from the *Odyssey* and tried to compose an epic of his own. His first completed creative effort was a pseudo-Shakespearean tragedy, written in 1828, when he was fifteen. It was a wish to set the play to music that led Wagner to his first lessons in music theory and composition that year, with a local theater conductor. Later he studied violin and counterpoint at the Leipzig Thomasschule, where Bach had taught a century before.

By the time Wagner reached the age at which Schubert died, he had gained some experience as a conductor at a couple of provincial East Prussian opera houses, first in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad, Russia) and then in Riga (now the capital of Latvia, located in Wagner's time within the borders of the Russian empire). But as a composer he had accomplished practically nothing worth remembering. “I still remember, around my thirtieth year,” the world-famous composer wrote in his fiftieth year, “asking myself whether I possessed the capacity to develop an artistic individuality of high rank; I could still detect in my work a tendency toward imitation, and contemplated only with great anxiety my chances of developing into an independent original creator.”

This was a harsh judgment, perhaps (and in retrospect he could afford it), but it was not unfair. The work Wagner had produced up to 1842 had included three complete operas, several overtures (including one on “Rule, Britannia”), a hymn in honor of the Russian Emperor Nikolai I (required by the terms of his Riga contract), three piano sonatas, and some songs, but none of it survives in repertory with the exception of the occasionally exhumed overture to the third opera, *Rienzi*, a Meyerbeerian grand opera on a subject from Roman history. The two earlier operas were both comic works: *Die Feen* (“The fairies,” never performed during Wagner's lifetime) after an old scenario by the Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi, and *Das Liebesverbot* (“The ban on love,” performed, once only, in 1836) after Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. The music, as Wagner admitted in retrospect, was completely derivative of the repertory current at the German theaters of the day, and bizarrely eclectic, mixing Weber with Bellini.

In 1839, having been fired from his post in Riga, Wagner made for Paris, where he fancied the as yet unfinished *Rienzi* might be staged, and remained there for two and one-half years. He utterly failed to establish himself as a composer, and kept from starving only by accepting low-paying work from music publishers making piano arrangements of popular operas, and by writing reviews and other articles (not all of them on music) for publication both in Paris and at home. When *Rienzi* was finally accepted for performance, it was in Dresden, not Paris. It became the occasion not for his success in the French capital, but for his leaving it. The lifelong resentment with which Wagner looked back on his three years in Paris had a considerable impact on the subsequent direction of his work.

But as of 1842, five years before the death of his contemporary Mendelssohn, seven years before the death of his contemporary Chopin, and fourteen years before the death of his contemporary Schumann, Wagner was still at square one, both creatively and

in terms of his career. That is why one tends to forget that he was an only slightly younger member of the same generation as the three composers just named, and why he is associated even more firmly and exclusively than Liszt with the somewhat later period whose "complete expression" (to recall Mann) he unexpectedly became.

Wagner did receive one all-important musical impression in Paris, however—though he did his best in later life to cover it up. In the fall of 1839 Wagner heard Berlioz conduct his own dramatic symphony *Roméo et Juliette*, a work in the symphony-oratorio tradition of Beethoven's Ninth and David's *Le Désert*, in which vocal music alternated with instrumental—that is, texted music with absolute—in the delineation of Shakespeare's tragedy of ill-starred love. In Wagner's own recollection, it opened for him "a new world of possibilities which I had not then dreamed of,"[2] both in the handling of the orchestra and in the transmutation of drama into instrumental music—or, to put it the other way around, in the dramatic concretization of textless music.

Wagner never forgot this lesson from Berlioz, and acknowledged it a quarter of a century later in a presentation copy of the orchestral score to one of his own operas, inscribed "To the great and dear author of *Roméo et Juliette*, the grateful author of *Tristan und Isolde*." He also acknowledged it to Liszt, in a letter dating from the time of the *Lohengrin* premiere, when he averred that "there are only three of us who belong together nowadays, because only we are our own equals, and that's you—*he* [Berlioz]—and I."[3] At the very least, this was an enormous slight to Schumann, then the most eminent German composer by far. But Schumann had put himself at a distance from the New German School in reaction to Franz Brendel's critical excesses (see chapter 8), and (as we may remember from chapter 6) he had been somewhat chary in his praise of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. In light of the alliance Wagner now claimed with his French and Hungarian senior colleagues, the claims of the New German School to a bona fide national birthright seem more equivocal than ever.

But for public consumption Wagner told another story. In his autobiography *Mein Leben* ("My life"), written in the 1870s, when Wagner was widely if grudgingly recognized (in Carl Dahlhaus's words) as "the uncrowned king of German music,"[4] and after a newly powerful and united Germany had at last avenged itself in war against post-Napoleonic France, Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* was replaced in Wagner's account by a fictitious performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony as the shattering event of Wagner's Paris days, the purifying experience that ended "that whole period of deterioration in my musical taste" brought about by "my superficial theatrical activities," which "now sank away before me as if into an abyss of shame and remorse."[5]

Wagner now professed having been put off, in *Roméo et Juliette*, by "a great deal that was empty and shallow."[6] He performed something like a ritual of exorcism to purge his soul, and the souls of his readers, of any sense of kinship with French art, even Berlioz's: "While admiring this genius, absolutely unique in his methods," Wagner now admonished, "I could never quite shake off a certain peculiar feeling of anxiety; his works left me with a sensation as of something strange, something with which I felt I should never be able to be familiar, and I was often puzzled at the strange fact that, though ravished by his compositions, I was at the same time repelled and even wearied by them."[7] He was, in short, a *German*, to whose essential nature French culture was, by *its* essential nature, insuperably alien. This mystique of unanalyzable essences—"essentialism" as it is now usually called—was already on display twenty years before in his tract on Jewishness in music. A necessary component of racism (if not by itself a sufficient one), it was Wagner's signal contribution to music criticism.

The Dresden premiere of *Rienzi*, at the Royal Court Theater of Saxony on 20 October 1842, was a huge success, followed almost immediately by an incredible break: the sudden death of the Royal Court Kapellmeister, an Italian named Francesco Morlacchi (whose music, quoted in Ex. 6-3, may have had a chance influence on Schumann). Wagner, who until then had conducted only at Königsberg and Riga, and nowhere for the last three years, was offered the job. It was as if the former conductor of the Portland Junior Symphony were suddenly named director of the Metropolitan Opera. To cement the deal, Wagner supervised a production of his next opera—*Der fliegende Holländer* (*The FlyingDutchman*), his first on a German legendary subject and by common consent his first masterpiece—in February 1843.

The six-year tenure at Dresden thus so auspiciously inaugurated would reach its conclusion in the spring of 1849 on the city barricades, with the opera house in flames and Wagner so obviously delighted at the sight of the blaze that he was accused of having started it. A musician, spotting him in the crowd, yelled a merry parody of Schiller's and Beethoven's Ode to Joy: "Herr Kapellmeister, der Freude schöner Götterfunken hat gezündet!" ("Mr. Conductor, the divine spark of joy has ignited!"). A warrant for Wagner's arrest was issued on 16 May; eight days later, with Liszt's help, he escaped to Switzerland. He would not set foot on German soil for more than a decade.

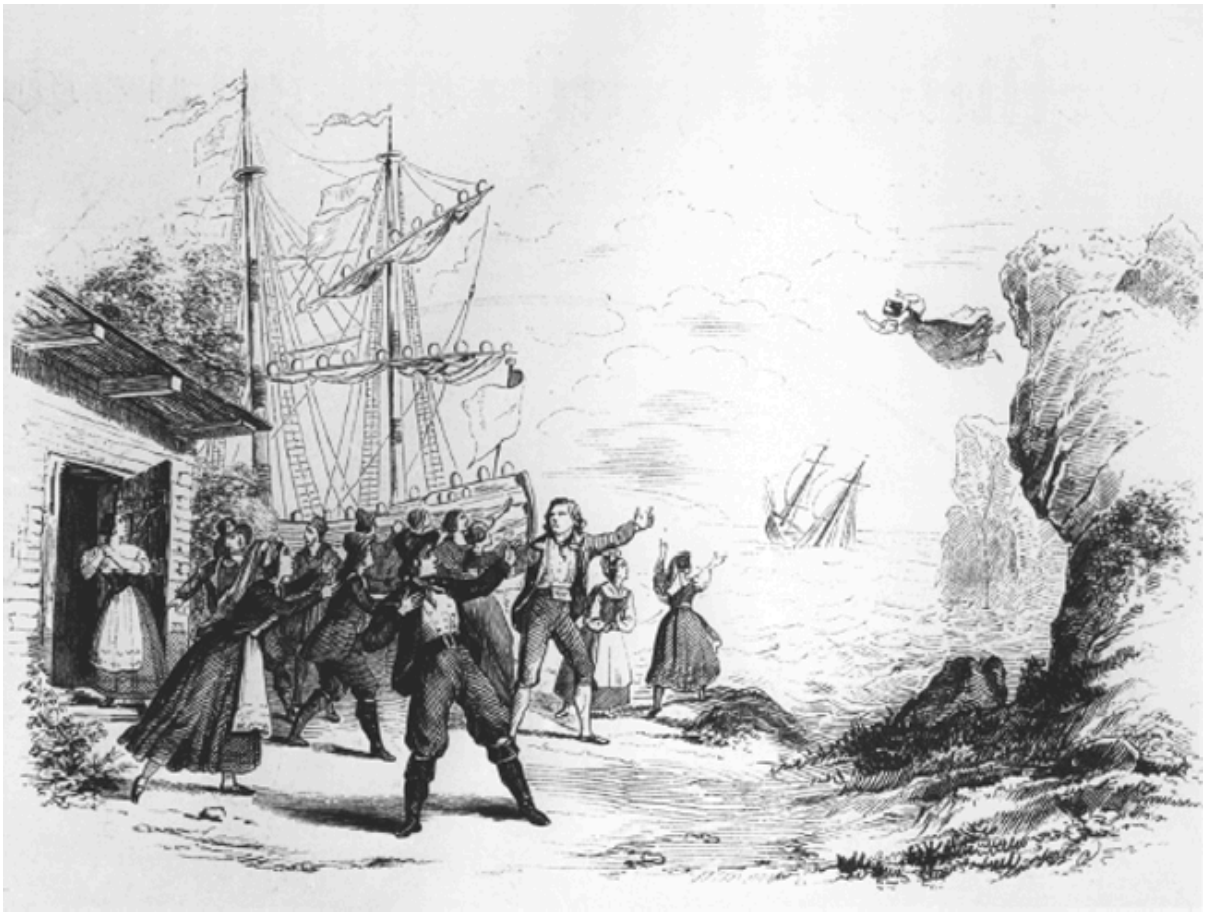

fig. 10-2 *The Flying Dutchman*, final scene of the first production (1843).

By then Wagner had composed his grand romantic operas *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, which continued his series of German legends for the stage and marked him out as the white hope of the New German School. The combination of antiquarian romanticism in the work with revolutionary politics in the life is only a surface paradox: both the futuristic politics and the nostalgic esthetics were symptoms of a general utopianism that seized the European cultural avant-garde during the revolutionary decade. Moreover, the title characters of all three of Wagner's romantic operas—the Dutchman, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin—were heroic intruders whose advent irrevocably disrupts a corrupt or complacent social order: revolutionaries, in short, with whom Wagner, resentful parvenu that he was, identified intensely.

The Flying Dutchman (who should really be known as the Roaming or Wandering Dutchman) was a legendary symbol of uprooting and persecution akin to the Wandering Jew, condemned to roam unceasingly because he taunted (some say struck) Christ on the day of his crucifixion. In Wagner's version, borrowed from Heine, the title character, a phantom sea captain condemned to eternal maritime wandering in his phantom ship as penalty for the sin of pride, is redeemed by the sacrificial love of a pure maiden (Senta), daughter of a greedy merchant sailor who had plighted her to the Dutchman for the sake of material gain. To her father's despair she willingly perishes to free the stranger. The stormy D-minor Overture to *The Flying Dutchman*, Wagner's earliest palpable hit, is one of the most successful of the many emblematic nineteenth-century rewritings of the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth.

Tannhäuser was a historical figure, one of the thirteenth-century German knightly poet-musicians known as *Minnesänger*. In the opera, the full title of which is *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* ("Tannhäuser and the singers' contest on the Wartburg"), he is a knight crusader who has dallied (both sacrilegiously and anachronistically) with Venus, the Roman love goddess, and has scandalized his peers with his lascivious songs, but is redeemed by the sacrificial love of Elisabeth, a pure maiden who inspires sincere remorse, by pilgrimage, and by divine forgiveness despite his sin (and despite the pope's obduracy).

The musical tour de force in Wagner's setting is the brilliant contrast between the impressive chorale-like solemnity of the pilgrimage music and the extraordinary sensuality of the music suggestive of the "Venusberg" (Mount of Venus or Mons Veneris,

the goddess's abode). The Venusberg music certainly flaunts the lessons in timbre and orchestral texture that Wagner had learned from Berlioz. In the form in which it is performed today, however, the episode is an interpolation made for a (famously unsuccessful) Paris revival in 1861, after Wagner had broken through (in *Tristan und Isolde*) to a harmonic idiom unforeseen in 1845.

In retrospect, however, the most Wagnerian moment in *Tannhäuser* is the title character's long narrative monologue in the third and last act, in which the composer achieved what the Wagner scholar Barry Millington calls an unprecedented "musico-poetic synthesis,"[8] something inescapably reminiscent of earlier attempts to invent or re-invent opera along neoclassical lines. As in a recitative, say, by Monteverdi or by Gluck, Wagner's vocal line closely follows the contour and rhythm of the spoken language, while the form seems to follow no preconceived structure but responds instead, and with great flexibility, to the anecdotal and emotional sequence of the narrative. And following the unacknowledged example of more recent French composers, the orchestra supports the vocal line with a supple web of expressive and illustrative reminiscence motifs.

Later, however, another Wagner scholar, Carolyn Abbate, discerned a crucial additional element in the Wagnerian synthesis. She showed that underlying the apparently free form of the narrative is the traditionally strophic form of the narrative ballad, long associated (at least, in our experience, since the days of Goethe and Schubert) with Germanic imitation folklore. This was a particularly fertile insight since it bridged the modernistic (revolutionary) and the folkloric or archaic aspects of Wagner's legend-spinning technique.[9]

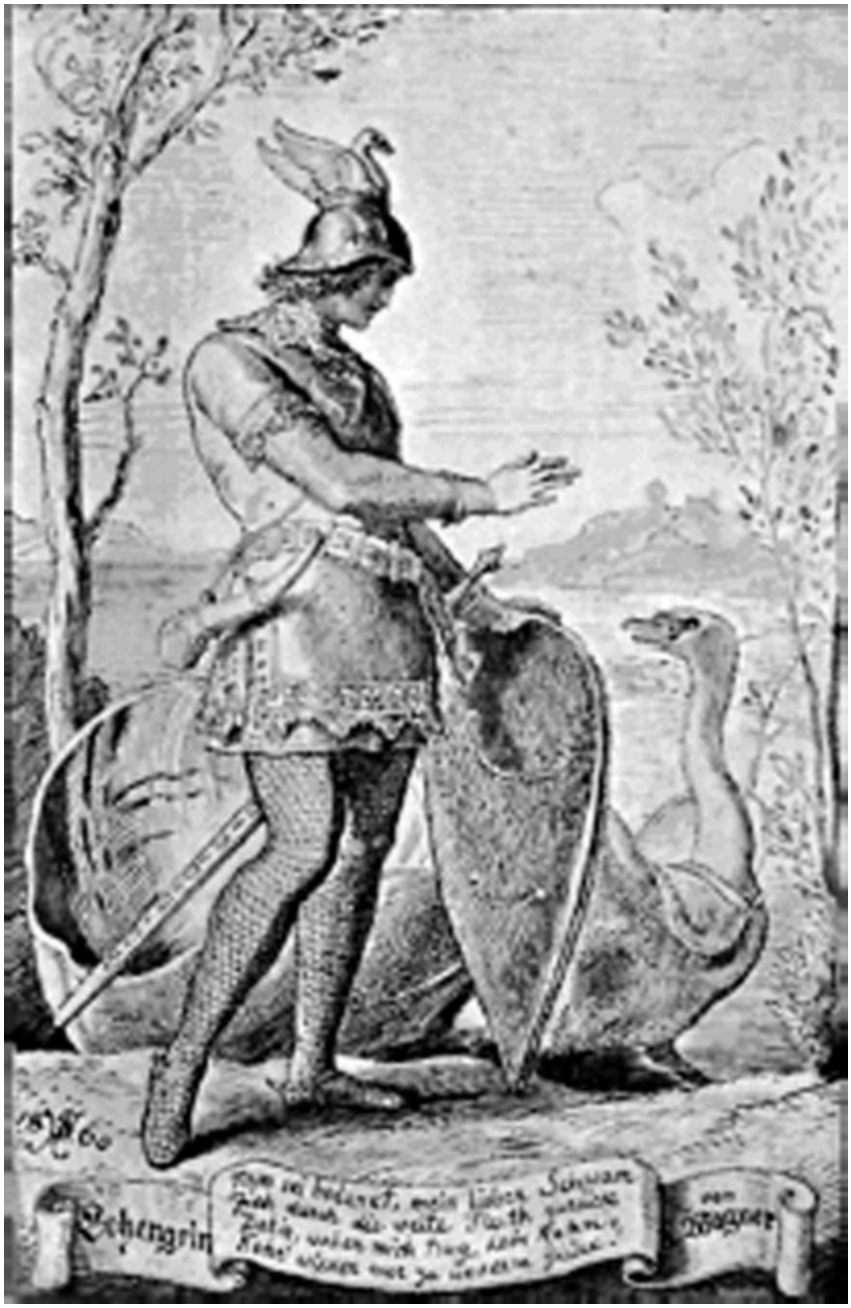

fig. 10-3 *Lohengrin*, costume design by Julius Schnorr von Carosfeld for the first production (Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris).

In *Lohengrin*, finally, the title character is a legendary knight of the Holy Grail. The opera follows no single literary prototype but is Wagner's own synthesis derived from anonymous medieval epics and from the romances of the Minnesinger Wolfram von Eschenbach (ca. 1170–ca. 1220), a contemporary of the historical Tannhäuser. In the plot the composer crafted from these sources, the pure knight comes out of nowhere in a boat drawn by a white swan, to aid a pure maiden (Elsa of Brabant) who has been falsely accused of murder by a scheming claimant to the throne to which her slain brother was heir. Lohengrin restores order to the troubled land, banishes the schemer and his sorceress wife, and prepares to marry Elsa. Because she could not contain her curiosity and demands to know his identity, he is forced to renounce her and she dies of grief, but not before her brother is miraculously released from the transmogrified swanlike state in which he had conveyed his sister's deliverer to his noble mission.

Like Tannhäuser, Lohengrin sings a self-revealing ballad-narrative in the third act, establishing it as the quintessential Wagnerian form. The other item in the opera that in retrospect assumes the character of a Wagnerian first is the Prelude (*Vorspiel*) to the first act. Instead of a conventional overture in several contrasting sections (or with several contrasting themes),

a Wagnerian prelude aspires to complete formal unity, carried along as if on a single breath by what Wagner later termed *unendliche Melodie* (“endless” or “infinite melody”), a seamless stream in which every note is thematic. Many of Wagner's later preludes could be described as scene setters, but this one is something else. It is a summary of the opera's ideal content: the musically (that is, nonverbally) enunciated concepts and imagery of which the anecdotal plot that follows is to be a metaphor. Far from anticipating or preparing for the agitated opening scene, it contrasts with it in every way. Wagner called it a representation of a host of angels descending with the Holy Grail, and their return to heaven after delivering it. Lohengrin's serenely mysterious appearance and departure, and his powers of deliverance, are prefigured. The form of this seventy-five-bar composition is simplicity itself—a highly significant simplicity, in fact, since even here the strophic principle of the narrative ballad rules. The melody first heard in the ethereal timbre of divided violins immediately returns, reinforced by doubled woodwinds (and with a different continuation). Again, more richly yet, it returns in the horns and lower strings; yet again, powerfully, it returns in the massed brass, after which a composed diminuendo reverses the composed crescendo of perpetually strengthened instrumentation, until just four solo violins are left playing at the end.

Less audaciously simple in form, but more popular as a concert piece, is the boisterous prelude to act III with its brassy main theme sandwiching a quieter middle section for the winds in a conventional ABA form. It gives way, incidentally, to a number so popular as to have become folk music: Elsa's bridal song, known by many who are unaware of ever having heard any Wagner as “Here Comes the Bride.” Even in the nineteenth century, the oral tradition remained as alert to emanations from the literate sphere as the other way around.

In keeping with his personal identification with his heroes—or, perhaps more to the point, with his wish to be identified *as* a hero—Wagner insisted on drawing links between his artistic output and his biography, many of which have been exposed as spurious. He claimed, for example, that *The Flying Dutchman* had been inspired by his own shipboard experience of storms off the Norwegian coast during a voyage to England in 1839. But examination of his manuscripts has revealed that the Norwegian setting was hastily substituted for a Scottish one only weeks before the Dresden premiere.

In a similar vein, Wagner claimed that the inspiration for *Tannhäuser* came when he caught a glimpse of the site of the eventual song contest, the famous castle at Wartburg in Thuringia (eastern Germany), on his way back from Paris to Dresden in 1842. As he put it in a famous passage from *Mein Leben*, the sight, “so rich in historical and mythical associations, so warmed my heart against wind and weather, against Jews and Leipzig commerce, that in the end I arrived hale and hearty.”[10] A seemingly gratuitous dig, this; and yet, like all of Wagner's self-mythologizing, it points up the strong connections between art and myth, and between myth and contemporary politics, that guided Wagner's work from beginning to end, and that has always formed the context of its reception.

Notes:

(2) Richard Wagner, *My Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927), p. 234.

(3) Wagner to Liszt, 5 July 1855; *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt*, Vol. II, trans. Francis Hueffer (New York: Scribners, 1897), pp. 102–3.

(4) Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 4.

(5) Wagner, *My Life* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927), pp. 214–15.

(6) Wagner, *My Life*, p. 234.

(7) *Ibid.*, p. 235.

(8) Barry Millington, “Tannhäuser,” in *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Vol. IV (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 650.

(9) Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 98–117.

(10) Wagner, *My Life*, p. 266.