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Leitmotif

Arthur Schopenhauer

Die Walküre

DESIRE AND HOW TO CHANNEL IT

Chapter: CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)
Source: MUSIC IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
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That “more” is a technique that composers ever since the Counter Reformation had employed to induce a sort of esthetic ecstasy in listeners and save their souls from the snares of rationalism. It consists in strategic harmonic delays, and what is delayed is “closure,” or functional resolution. The heightened expressivity thus connoted arises not out of cognitive symbolism or “extroversive” reference, the representational mode of which Wagnerian leitmotives would be the supreme example. Rather, that expressivity arises out of “introversive” reference whereby the music, by forecasting closure and then delaying it, calls attention to its own need for cadential resolution.

“Its” need is actually the listener's psychological need, of course. The fluctuating musical tension analogizes the fluctuating tensions—psychological, emotional, sexual—of our lives as we live them. And here is where the process leaves the realm of representation altogether. Harmonic forecasts and delays play directly upon the listener's expectation, or, to put it more strongly, on the *desires* that the music induces in the listener. And so the musical events, relative to listener expectations, are translated directly into the intensified emotion that the fulfillment or frustration of desire produces in any context.

This aspect of music's effect on the listener—this uncanny directness—has been recognized (as the *ethos* of music) from ancient times. As early as Plato, it has led to calls for police action. The enhancement and ultimate perfection of this emotional potency had long been touted as the primary achievement of the “functional” harmonic practices that began with the composers of Palestrina's generation in the sixteenth century and reached fullest elaboration with Beethoven (or so it was thought until Wagner's time).

As Karol Berger, a musicologist who has branched out into general esthetics, reminds us, this power of “tonal” music goes much deeper than rational cognition into the wellsprings of our conscious experience as temporal. While it could be argued that what music evokes is a representation of that deep experience, it is a representation that is uniquely concerned with our mental and spiritual innards rather than with the world outside. “What I actually experience,” Berger writes in a discussion that is crucial for understanding Wagner,

> when I experience the tonal tendency of a sound is the dynamics of my own desire, its arousal, its satisfaction, its frustration. It is my own desire for the leading tone to move up, the satisfaction of my own desire when it so moves, the frustration thereof when it refuses to budge or when it moves elsewhere, that I feel.… Thus, the precondition of my being able to hear an imaginary pattern of lines of directed motion in a tonal work is that I first experience the desires, satisfactions, and frustrations of this sort. In tonal music, the direct experience of the dynamics of my own desire precedes any recognition of the represented object, of lines of directed motion, and is the necessary precondition of such a recognition. I must first experience the desire that the leading tone move up, before I can recognize the representation of an imaginary ascending line when it so moves.

Therefore, Berger concludes,

> It follows that tonal music, like a visual medium, may represent an imaginary object different from myself, an imaginary world, albeit a highly abstract one, consisting of lines of directed motion. But, unlike a visual medium, tonal music also

> makes me experience directly the dynamics of my own desiring, my own inner world, and it is this latter experience that is the more primordial one, since any representation depends on it. While visual media allow us to grasp, represent, and explore an outer, visual world, music makes it possible for me to grasp, experience, and explore an inner world of desiring. While visual media show us objects we might want without making us aware of what it would feel like to want anything, music makes us aware of how it feels to want something without showing us the objects we want. In a brief formula, visual media are the instruments of knowing the object of desire but not the desire itself, tonal music is the instrument of knowing the desire but not its object.[43]

Berger purports to write about all tonal music, but his remarks have special relevance to Wagner, who (precisely because of his ideological commitments, it could be argued) was more explicitly conscious of these aspects of the musical experience, and more determined to exploit them, than any other composer before or since. With Wagner, moreover, we are in an unusually favored position to investigate his aims, since he wrote so prolifically about them, and because, aspiring to their intellectual status, he read widely among his philosopher contemporaries in search of corroboration for his intuitions and theories.

Berger, in fact, builds his case about music on precisely those philosophers who most closely paralleled Wagner's thinking and eventual practice. One of them was the Danish religious thinker Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), who argued that our most elemental knowledge of “the sensuous-erotic”[44] comes to us from music, the only art that can present desire to our minds “in all its immediacy.” Even more fundamentally “Wagnerian” were the views of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), already mentioned as an influence on the composer's thinking, who was so impressed with the influence of music on his feelings that he promoted music to a status beyond any of the other arts, where it directly embodied the experience of “striving” that not only constitutes our life but also embodies the “Will,” or essential axiomatic basis of all reality. “Music,” Schopenhauer famously wrote, “gives the innermost kernel preceding all form, or the heart of things.”[45] What better precept for a composer who wants to create worlds in music, and what better motivation or justification for the “formlessness”—a formlessness that goes to the very heart of things—that leitmotif technique enables.

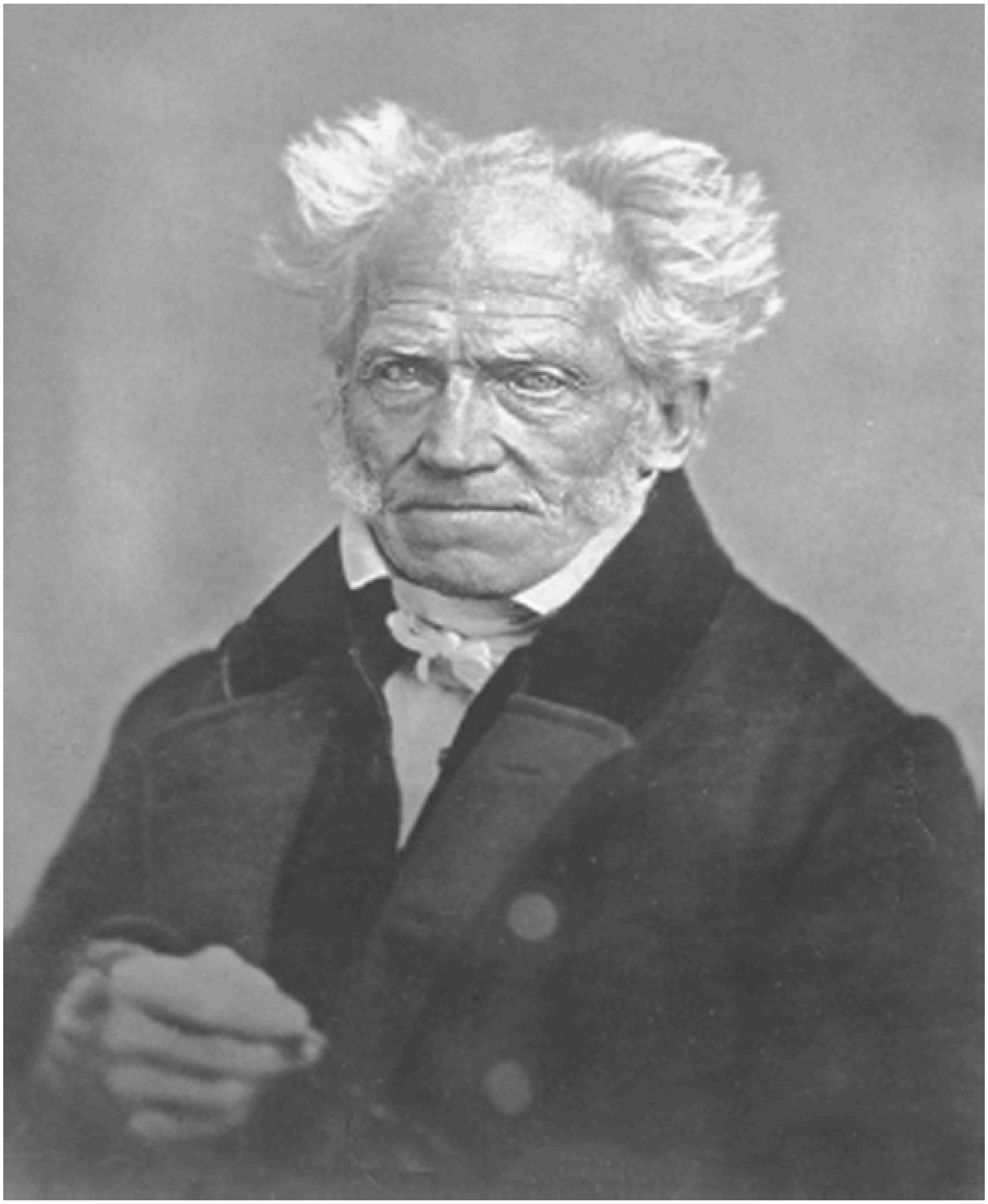


fig. 10-11 Arthur Schopenhauer, photographed in 1858.

That technique was the mechanism by which the channeling of desire took place, providing the thematic medium for a ceaseless process of harmonic movement that continually forecasts goals, and just as continually subverts them, subjecting us who listen to a constant manipulation of “the dynamics of our own desire,” to use Berger's term. More than any other music, Wagner's plays on these basic sensations, magnifying the direct impact all music has on our nerves and bodies. Moreover, the leitmotives—which supply exactly that which, in Berger's formulation, music does not inherently possess—complement presentation or embodiment (Schopenhauer's “will”) with representation, thus in Schopenhauer's terms completing a “world.” By combining precognitive musical process with cognitive symbolism, in other words, Wagner had it both ways: the music through which he constructed his mythic dramas was the instrument of *both* “desire itself” *and* of “knowing the object of desire.” It was frighteningly powerful, as Hanslick, the high priest of the Wagnerian opposition, knew best of all. The whole reason for writing his book in opposition to the current that produced the New German School, which immediately adopted Wagner as its standard-bearer, was Hanslick's acknowledgment that “music works more rapidly and intensely upon the mind than any other art,” and, more strongly yet, that “while the other arts persuade, music invades us.”[46] That is why music needed, in Hanslick's view, to be contained—and Wagner's above all. Hanslick's theory of musical beauty was above all an instrument of containment.

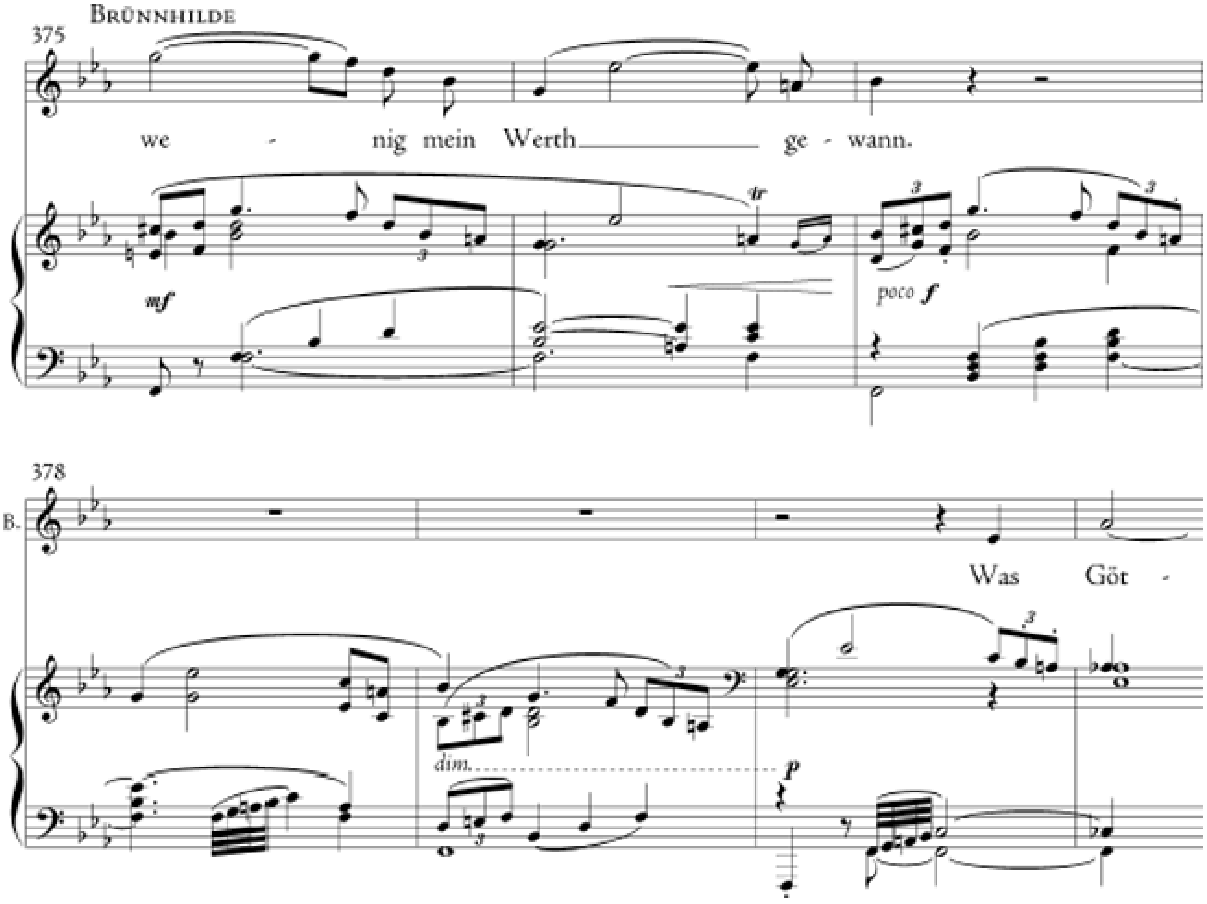
The act of freely submitting to such music turned one temporarily into a solipsist, for whom there is no external reality, only the inner reality of the psyche. Succumbing to its hypnosis—a hypnosis that differed from the music trance of Schubert's time because it was so actively manipulated and directed by the composer-operator—was valued as religious experience, as erotic experience, as narcotic experience, in any combination or all at once. Music that could produce such experiences and such states of consciousness was thought by its devotees to be the most sanctifying and exalting art in the world. Which is precisely why such music—for Hanslick, for Rimsky-Korsakov, and for so many since—could seem the ultimate in dangerous, degenerate art.

With these weighty thoughts in mind let us return now to the second scene of the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue, where Siegfried and Brünnhilde have just achieved their ecstasy of false consciousness in E ♭ major. Where the Norns' scene, as befit its recapitulatory role, was built entirely out of existing leitmotives, the scene of the hero and heroine is a forging ground for new ones. Besides the two characters' own themes, there is an arching cadential phrase that first accompanies Brünnhilde's ejaculation, "dir zu wenig mein Wert gewann!" ("in winning me your reward was too small," Ex. 10-12), is immediately thrice repeated for emphasis before subsiding on the baleful F-A ♭ -C ♭ -E ♭ chord, and thereafter underscores references to their union.

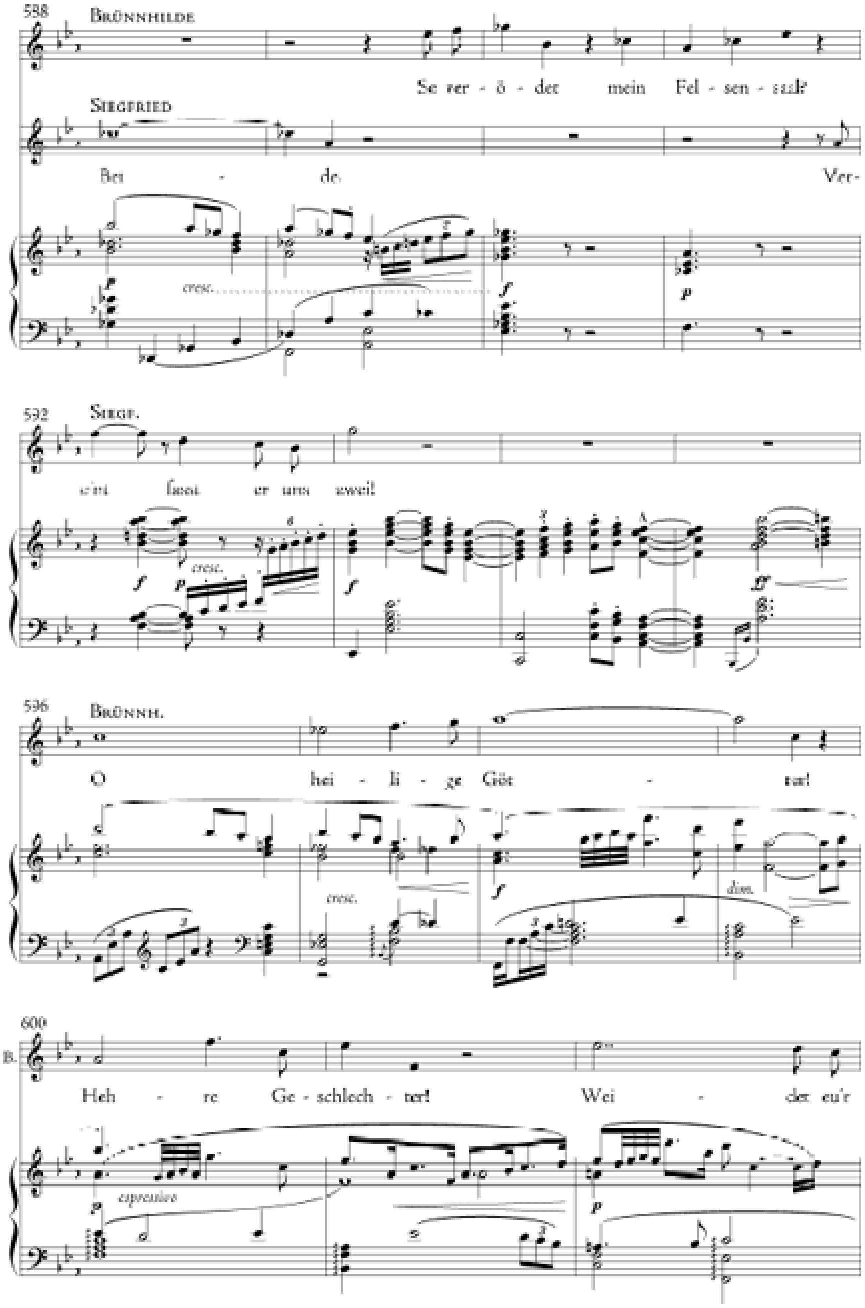
Apart from transient specific allusions of a kind that would have made Rimsky-Korsakov snicker, the three new leitmotives make up the whole thematic content of the scene, giving it the character of a purposeful thematic development. And its harmonic content, apart from brief departures the more forcefully to return, is similarly straightforward and stable. It is simply a reiterated approach, signaled both harmonically and by the use of the Union motif, to the key of E ♭ , the false "promise of happiness." In effect, Wagner replays and replays again the tense and finally triumphant "retransition" in the first movement of Beethoven's "heroic" Third Symphony. But where Beethoven's avowals were indubitably (that is, psychologically) "true," here the successive reiterations of arrival, each capping a longer temporal span than the last and controlling a greater modulatory range, further the cause of the Big Lie, the desire for the tonic analogizing both Siegfried and Brünnhilde's ill-fated desire for triumph over Alberich's curse and their henceforth-to-be-frustrated desire for each other.

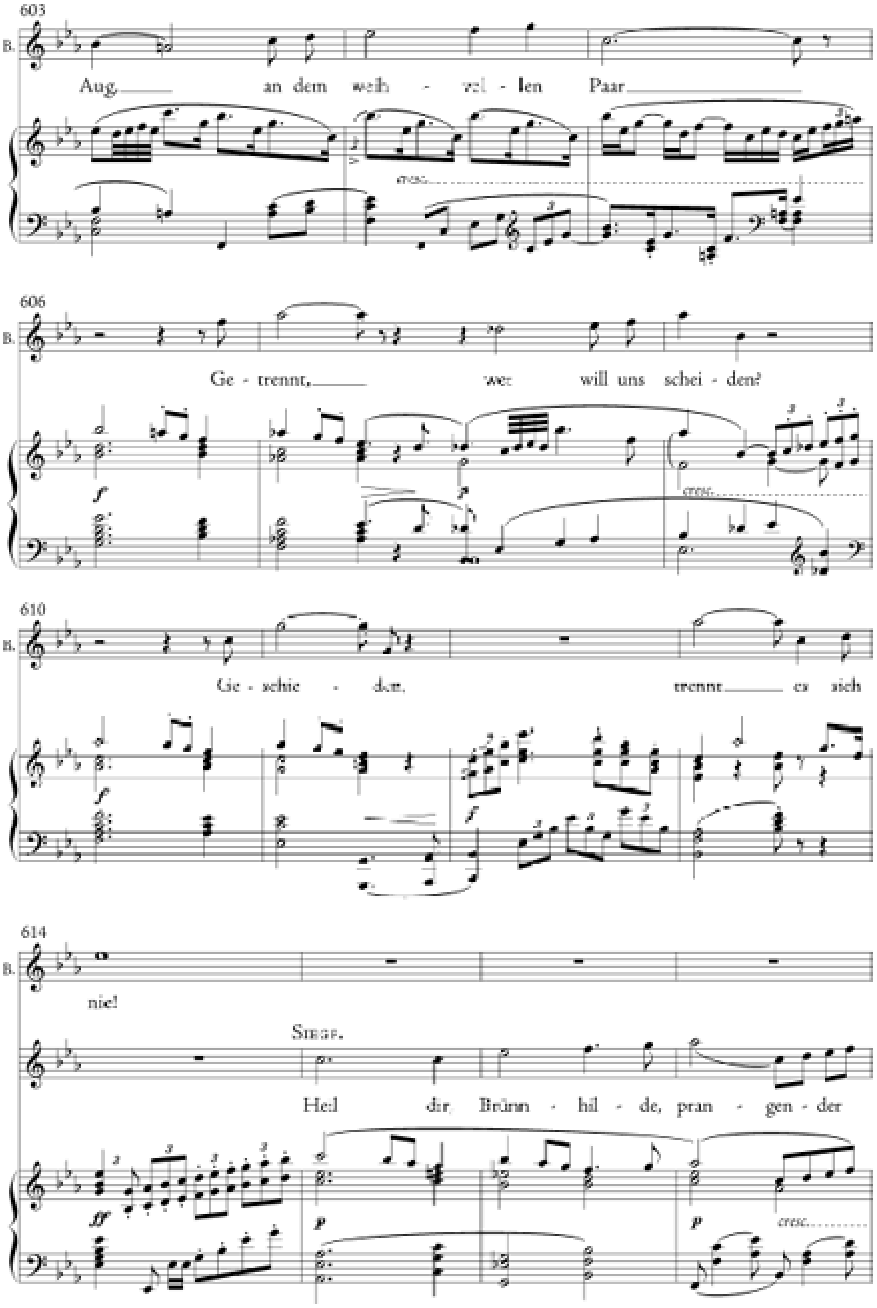
What might be called the coda of the scene—beginning with the last approach to E ♭ , its seemingly ultimate confirmation, and its loss—is worth tracing in some thematic and harmonic detail (Ex. 10-13). The triumph of E ♭ major at its outset is made all the sweeter by its proximity to the half-diminished harmony that played such a baleful role in the Norns' scene, functioning here in its most ordinary cadential capacity (as ii_7 of the parallel minor). Siegfried and Brünnhilde are singing of their oneness. The two of them now launch together into a little set piece in which the orchestra harps on a tune the young Siegfried sang in the opera named after him, all about the joy of freedom from fear. That Brünnhilde sings first to its accompaniment is a testimony to the merger of their identities. The irony of their fearlessness in the face of imminent destruction is all the more poignant because of their perfect subjective oblivion, symbolized by page after page with hardly a sharp or a flat to disturb the ecstatic stability of the soon-to-be-subverted key.

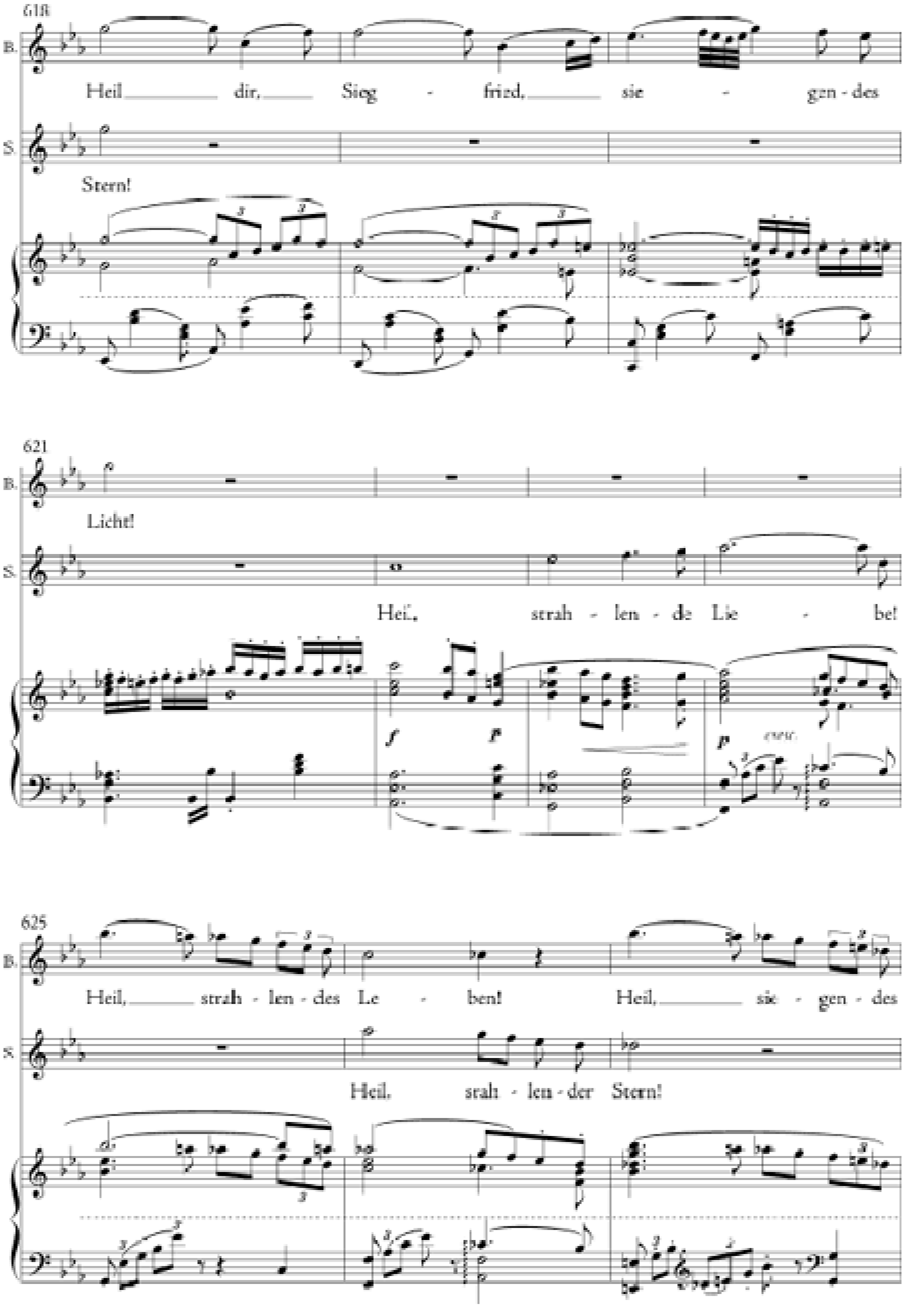
At the other end of the coda, the height of rapture, with both characters now reduced to a single word ("Heil! Heil! Heil! Heil!"), a theme from Brünnhilde's carefree youth (first heard in *Die Walküre*, the opera named after *her*) likewise insinuates itself into the texture, at first in counterpoint with the Union motif. An arpeggio in dotted triplet rhythms, it dates back to the early sketches of 1850, where (as a glance back at Ex. 10-1 will confirm) its contour informed the Norns' refrain. Later the same year Wagner recast it as a song for the Valkyries, Wotan's warrior daughters, as they sweep through the skies on winged horseback (Ex. 10-14).

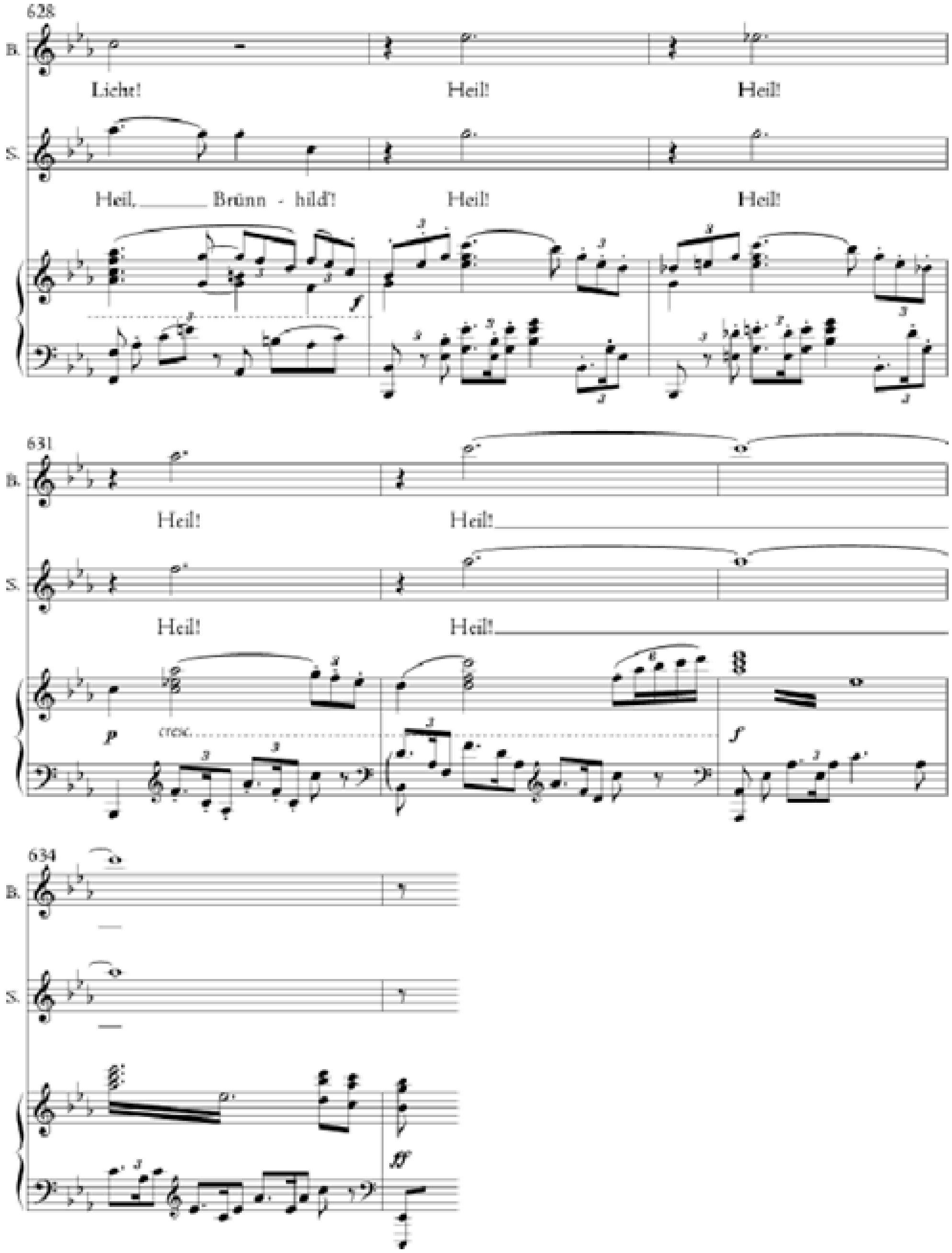

Brünnhilde
375
we - nig mein Werth ge - wann.
mf
tr
poco f
378
B.
Was Göt -
dim.
p

ex. 10-12 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, mm. 375–381


588
Brünnhilde
So ver - ö - det mein Fel - sen - saal?
Siegfried
Bei - de. Ver-
cresc.
f
p
592
Siegf.
eint fasst er uns zwei!
f
p
cresc.
f
ff
596
Brünnh.
O hei - li - ge Göt - ter!
cresc.
f
dim.
600
B.
Heh - re Ge - schlech - ter! Wei - det eu'r
espressivo
p


603
B.
Aug an dem weih - vol - len Paar
cresc.
606
B.
Ge - trennt, wer will uns schei - den?
f
cresc.
610
B.
Ge - schie - den, trennt es sich
f
f
614
B.
nie!
Siegf.
Heil dir, Brünn - hil - de, pran - gen - der
ff
p
p
cresc.


618
B.
Heil dir, Sieg - fried, sie - gen - des
S.
Stern!
621
B.
Licht!
S.
Heil, strah - len - de Lie - be!
f
p
p
cresc.
625
B.
Heil, strah - len - des Le - ben! Heil, sie - gen - des
S.
Heil, strah - len - der Stern!

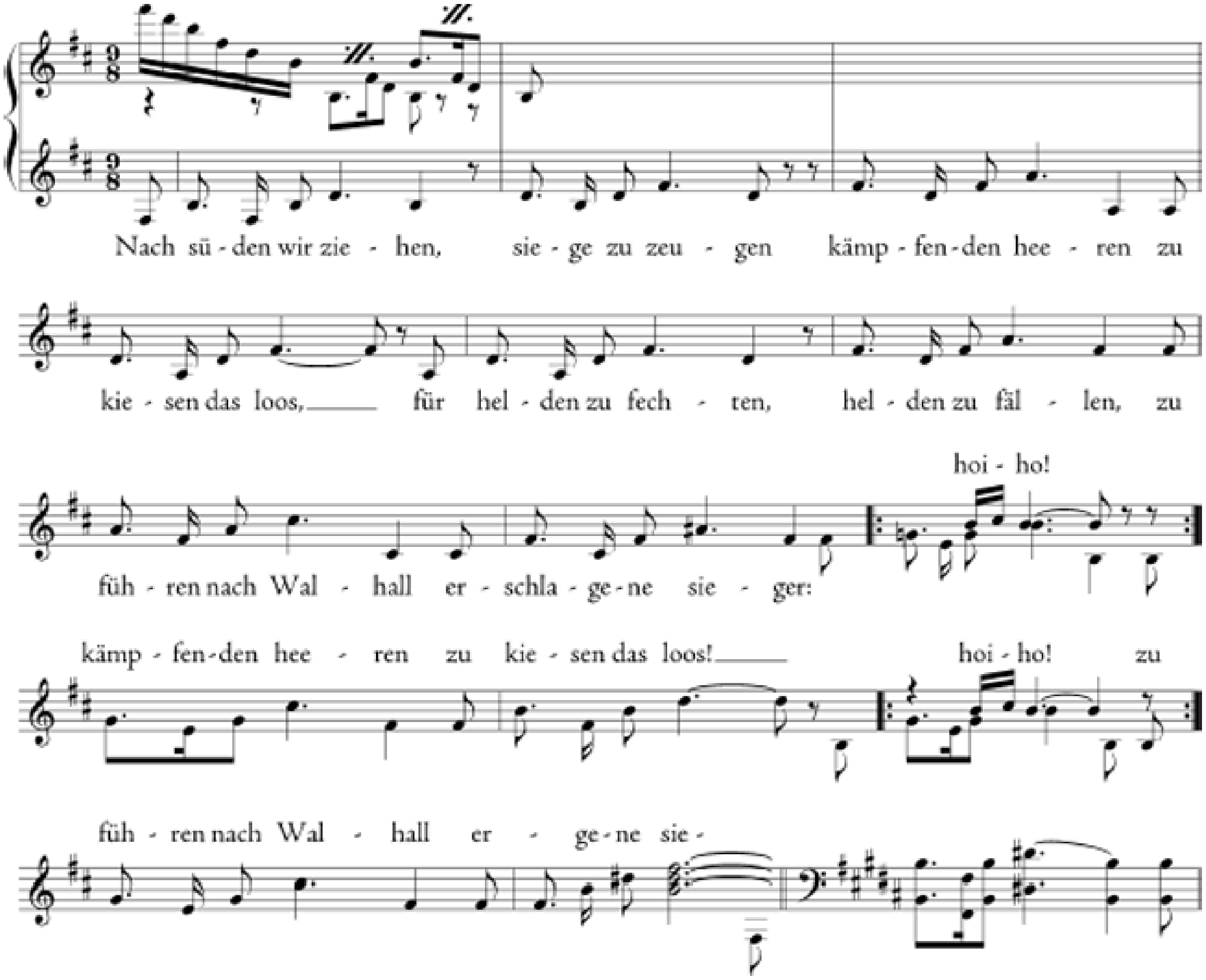


ex. 10-13 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, leitmotives labeled as in Ex. 10-2, mm. 588–635

By the time he actually composed *Die Walküre* the song had given way to an orchestral fantasy (“The Ride of the Valkyries”), which functioned in context as the prelude to act III, but is more often heard (in slightly different form) as a concert showpiece. It brings the duet at the end of the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue to a wild conclusion: set over the plagal harmony of Siegfried's freedom song, it even gives the soprano a chance to end with a traditional high C (albeit over the subdominant rather than the tonic harmony, which forces the singers to fall silent at the true cadence).

That cadence is the last we will hear of E ♭ major for some time (and never again in so unclouded a form). It disappears along with Siegfried himself at m. 649, liquidated by a series of “common-tone” progressions—the key's leading tone (D) re-identified as the fifth of a G major triad and the seventh of a dominant seventh on E—into what sounds like a looming A major, an antipodal tritone away from E ♭ along the circle of fifths. But after prolonging the dominant of A with a pedal lasting twenty bars, Wagner evades the promised key with a deceptive cadence borrowed from the parallel minor, when Siegfried's horn call is heard from offstage, accompanied by another dominant pedal promising F.

The apparition of F major lasts a good while. After a transitional passage played entirely over the dominant pedal, in which a leitmotif as old as *Das Rheingold* (labeled “*Liebesnot*”—“Love's distress”—by Wolzogen) gives way to the main theme from the Siegfried/Brünnhilde duet in the last act of *Siegfried* (*Liebesbund*—“Bond of love”—according to Wolzogen), the curtain falls, the dominant resolves, and we seem to be at the beginning of a jaunty orchestral piece reflective of Siegfried's euphoria and full of his themes, sometimes in counterpoint with the themes of others (e.g., Loge, one of whose attributes is god of fun, appearing at one point against the horn call in the bass).

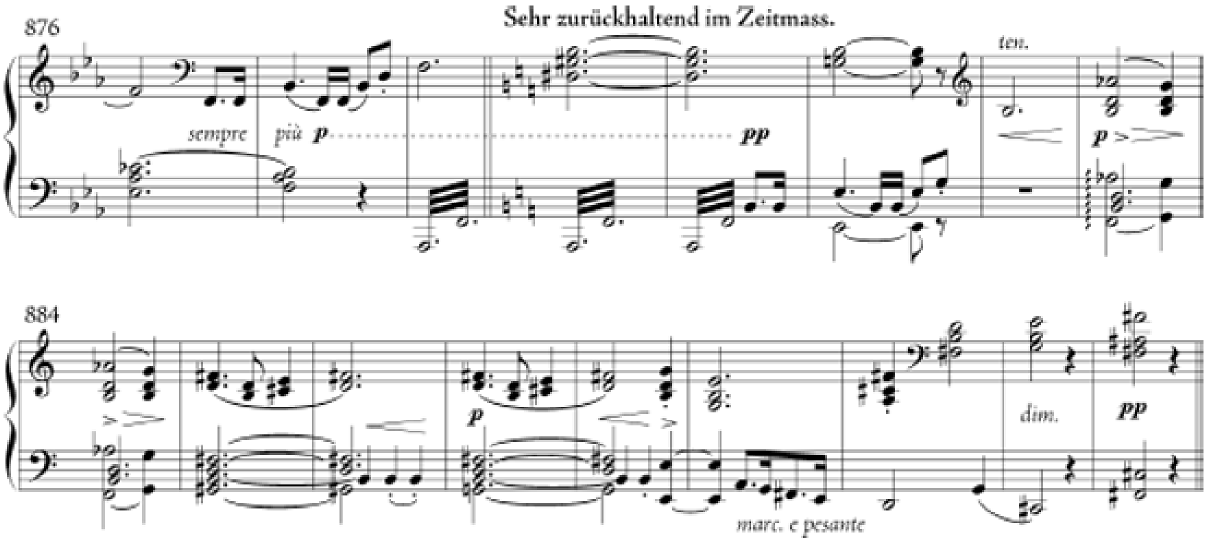

Nach sü - den wir zie - hen, sie - ge zu zeu - gen kämp - fen - den hee - ren zu
kie - sen das loos, für hel - den zu fech - ten, hel - den zu fäl - len, zu
hoi - ho!
füh - ren nach Wal - hall er - schla - ge - ne sie - ger:
kämp - fen - den hee - ren zu kie - sen das loos! hoi - ho! zu
füh - ren nach Wal - hall er - ge - ne sie -

ex. 10-14 Richard Wagner, The Valkyries’ Song as sketched in 1850

A deceptive cadence tosses us suddenly into the key of A major as Siegfried's boat rounds the bend to meet the main current of the Rhine (identifiable by its leitmotif; compare the analogous spot in Smetana's almost exactly contemporaneous *Moldau*, described in chapter 9). This is harmonic “navigation” at its most literal. The key seems altogether unprepared until we remember its very elaborate unconsummated preparation (twenty bars over a dominant pedal), that set the Rhine journey in motion. Again we must acknowledge the long-range design that gives harmonic coherence to the seemingly random vagaries of the Wagnerian surface. And yet we are not really in the key of A: it is just another apparition. While it confirms retrospectively the dominant sounded minutes ago, on this appearance it remains unconfirmed by a cadence. That makes it a prime target for liquidation; and sure enough, before any cadence in A has a chance to be heard, another bend is metaphorically rounded and the key of E ♭ seems to return after all, in just as sudden and unprepared a fashion as its predecessor.

But wait: the E ♭ harmony returns in the first inversion, and the descending scale, with its seemingly Lydian fourth degree (A-natural), identifies the chord as Neapolitan and the leitmotif as one of those (Götterdämmerung, Liebe-Tragik) portending doom. So even when the harmony settles down (through a plagal cadence) into root position for another bout of Rhine music, it has been destabilized both musically and dramatically. Memories of Brünnhilde (the Ride motif in the cylindrical brass) bring both a rush of joy (motif in the woodwinds) and an attempt to stabilize the key with an authentic cadence.

But liquidation has already been as if preordained, and we are not surprised to hear the bright subdominant replaced by its functional equivalent (but dramatic antipode), the half-diminished F–A♭–C♭–E♭ that recalls the debacle of the Norns forcibly to mind. After this baneful substitution, in which the noisome harmony supports the Ring motif redolent of Alberich and his curse, recapture of E♭ is impossible. The next attempt at resolution of the dominant produces only the Liebe-Tragik motif over an inverted C♭ major triad (another recollection of the Norns), in which the bass E♭ is roundly contradicted and rebuked by everything it is trying to support. Its loss of control is complete by m. 876, when the half-diminished harmony (in extraordinary third inversion) usurps the place of the tonic triad altogether (Ex. 10-15).



ex. 10-15 Richard Wagner, Prologue to *Götterdämmerung* in vocal score, mm. 876–92

Respelled enharmonically, with sharps in place of flats, the half-diminished chord is rerouted toward the key of the scene about to open, in which Siegfried's doom is plotted. That key, as already shown in Ex. 10-8b, is B minor (=C♭, similarly respelled), strongly prefigured but unconfirmed at the end of the Norns' scene. Its recuperation here brackets the confident euphoria of the immediately preceding scene and exposes its false consciousness. When next Siegfried and Brünnhilde meet, it will be as enemies whose misguided quarrel makes the final crisis of the drama inevitable.

Notes:

(43) Karol Berger, *A Theory of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 33–34. Get at KU

(44) Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (1843), Vol. I, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 64. Get at KU

(45) Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. I (1819), trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 263. Get at KU

(46) Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful* (1854), trans. Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p. 50. Get at KU

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