

Adorno's *Essay on Wagner*: Rescuing an Inverted Panegyric

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1

Theodor Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner* stands after Nietzsche's assorted polemics as perhaps the most sophisticated, provocative, and enduring critique of Wagner and his oeuvre, certainly from what we might loosely term the political Left. Yet it remains much misunderstood, often taken, from Carl Dahlhaus's initial review onward, for a far more unremittingly hostile attack than it was either intended as or actually became.¹ Thomas Mann wrote that he had always believed Nietzsche's Wagner critique to be an "inverted panegyric" (*Panegyrikus mit umgekehrtem Vorzeichen*), "another form of celebration."² Much the same, though not quite in the same way, might be said of Adorno's book too, and not only because Nietzsche's critique so often provides its starting points. It helps to understand Adorno's *Versuch* within the German tradition, initiated at the latest by Nietzsche, of offering a "case of Wagner," a case that must be addressed.³ That there is a "problem," a "case," few would deny. After all, one of Wagner's greatest interpreters, Wilhelm Furtwängler, provided his "case of Wagner, freely after Nietzsche" as an essay, opening with the estimable claim that Wagner was "the most highly controversial figure in the entire history of the arts."⁴ Adorno and Furtwängler had more in common than one might necessarily expect, though they were hardly kindred spirits; nevertheless, both in their different ways were attempting both an exploration of Wagner and his rescue (*Rettung*), to employ a term of which Adorno was fond.⁵

Adorno's book was published by Suhrkamp in 1952, although it had for the most part been written between autumn 1937 and spring 1938 in London and New York, and four chapters had appeared previously in the 1939 *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. He later explained that he had "endeavoured to combine sociological, technical-musical, and aesthetic analyses in such a manner that, on the one hand, societal analyses of Wagner's 'social character' and the function of his work would shed light upon its internal composition. On the other hand—and what seemed to me more essential—the internal-technical findings in turns should be brought to societal expression and be read as ciphers of societal conditions."⁶ The

paperback edition, published in 1963, brought minor changes, but nothing substantive.

Adorno admitted, however, in his preface to that edition that “the author’s more recent views on Wagner would not have fitted into the framework of the present study.” For those views, he pointed to an essay, “‘Zur Partitur des *Parsifal*,’ found in the *Moments Musicaux*,” and to his “talk, ‘Wagners Aktualität,’ given during the September 1963 Berliner Festwochen, [which] has not yet appeared in print.”⁷ In the latter, which soon did appear in print, he conceded that he would “today. . . formulate many things in the book differently. Its central problem, that of the relation between societal aspects on the one hand and compositional and aesthetic aspects on the other, might have to be argued more profoundly within the subject matter than it was then.” Nevertheless, he continued, “I am not distancing myself from the book, nor am I abandoning the conception.” Indeed, if anything, his association, however partial, of Wagner with National Socialism was stated more baldly: “As the National Socialist potential continues to smoulder within the German reality now as then, so it is still present in Wagner.”⁸ Wagner had certainly not been neutralized by the passing of time.

Reception in the English-speaking world has not been helped by Rodney Livingstone’s strange translation of the title as *In Search of Wagner*, when *Essay on Wagner* would have been more accurate.⁹ *Experiment upon Wagner* or *An Approach toward Wagner* might even have laid some claim to partial validity, given the senses in which the composer is tested as a case of “enlightenment”—in good part *avant la lettre*. There is little sense of seeking after his antagonist; indeed, John Deathridge, in his astute 1983 review of the English edition, went so far as to say that Adorno was “definitely not ‘in search of Wagner.’”¹⁰ Wagner had rather been there all along. The question was what to do with him; perhaps even, in Wagnerian terms, whether there were still hope for his redemption. Or at least for his rescue, *Rettung* being the term Adorno used in a 1952 “self-advertisement” of the book.¹¹ Adorno wished to act as a critical Elisabeth to Wagner’s Tannhäuser—a noble aim, one that most Wagner scholars might wish to share. The problem was that on occasion he lacked not only Elisabeth’s forgiveness but also the deeper understanding enabled by such forgiveness, reverting instead to the horrified party of Tannhäuser’s Minnesänger critics.

Even the dedication, to Adorno’s wife Gretel, suggests something beyond mere negative polemics. Granted, Adorno’s personal practice of gender relations was no more admirable than that of Wagner, perhaps even less so; but it is not fanciful to see a declaration of some unorthodox form of love toward both subject and dedicatee.¹² Occasionally, Adorno explicitly admits as much, for instance when writing, “Actually, when one looks not just shallowly, but with passion and admiration” (which certainly implies that he does), “one can say, with the danger of being misunderstood, that Wagner’s art arises from a dilettantism monumentalized to the stature of genius by the highest willpower and intelligence.”¹³ The words may be

equivocal, but the balance yet tilts toward panegyric. It might have tilted more strongly had it not been both for the catastrophe of the Third Reich and for the fact that, as Adorno explained in Freudian terms to Walter Benjamin, he had never felt great personal closeness to Wagner. Wagner had been less of a childhood presence for Adorno than various other great composers: he had “never really belonged amongst the stars above in my childhood.”¹⁴ Yet that critical distance could prove a strength too.

2

It is not difficult to see how reading Adorno's *Versuch* without an awareness of context might lead to its dismissal—or even celebration—as an overwhelmingly negative tract. Its opening treatment of *Rienzi* condemns Wagner for presenting a puritanical revolt against libertine lifestyle rather than class warfare and having founded political action in private familial conflict.¹⁵ Even, Adorno continues, when Wagner later managed to achieve his self-trumpeted harmony between “untrammeled sexuality and the ascetic ideal,” it was only in “the name of death”—though we might note that is perhaps not quite the same as saying “in death.”¹⁶ Yet that founding of political action in family conflict might be explained in a number of ways. It is inherent in the story; it stands in a long, Petrarchan tradition of conflict between Amor and Roma; it is, perhaps most important, typical of Meyerbeerian *grand opéra*, which in one strong sense makes *Rienzi* what it is. Moreover, if we understand a degree of reconciliation “in the name of death” between sexual freedom and asceticism—though there are many good reasons why we should not necessarily take Wagner at his word here—then that may be seen to have at least as much in common with Ludwig Feuerbach's “progressive,” Young German–Young Hegelian *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, as (proto-)Schopenhauerian resignation. It would, moreover, take an extremely jaundiced understanding of act 1 of *Die Walküre* to follow Adorno's next major criticism of Wagner's character, or rather his lack thereof (*Charakterlosigkeit*), and see Siegmund's request for sympathy as pertaining to the ruling classes (the *Herrschenden*) rather than straightforwardly to Sieglinde; for one thing, it is the last thing the proud Volsung would dream of requesting from the more obviously politically engaged, brutally bourgeois Hunding.¹⁷ Put like that, brief treatment of a few early paragraphs does not bode well. It may be freely admitted that there is much of that ilk.

However, not only does the perceived necessity of such detailed criticism suggest an adversary worthy of the name; there is also much, especially if one is prepared to strip away Adorno's almost kneejerk negative judgments, that may be understood more positively. Some judgments—for instance, the endlessly repeated claim that Wagner's music rejects time and history, heard at its most extreme in the assertion that nothing changes during the course of the *Ring*—remain

wrongheaded, even baffling.¹⁸ Others, however, become richer in their deepening ambiguity. Adorno's claim that nothing is unambiguous in Wagner might not only be turned back upon its writer but also signify greater kinship than he is willing to acknowledge explicitly. The strong element of Freud in his intellectual makeup already suggests a degree of projection.

The most crucial element of context is perhaps not Adorno's writing in the shadow of the Third Reich (obvious enough), but rather the need to consider Wagner as an important case study in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, itself of course highly colored but not necessarily dictated by that political context. (One may say the same about many of his other works too, not least the *Philosophy of New Music*.)¹⁹ The picture painted in the opening of Adorno's book written with Max Horkheimer informs and is informed by Wagner as the most particular of nineteenth-century cases. As Andreas Huyssen has noted, "pivotal categories" such as "myth," "regression," and even "reification" are already fully developed in the Wagner critique—insofar, we might add, as it was penned before the war—"waiting, as it were, to be articulated in terms of the American culture industry."²⁰ It is certainly not a matter of merely "applying" theory to example; that is what makes treatment of Adorno's writings so difficult, for there is no one obvious place to start. Lydia Goehr has pointed out that Adorno "picked up on the thought that philosophy as a conceptual language stood in a necessarily interpretative relation to languages, like music, that were not primarily conceptual or conceptual at all."²¹ That is true up to a point, but it is partly a matter of degree. Adorno certainly did not rule out the possibility that music might express concepts.²² Still more to the point, music shaped what Georg Picht in a memorial tribute dubbed Adorno's "atonal philosophy" at least as much as philosophy shaped his music.²³ Therefore the interpreter of Adorno finds himself in a bind, unsurprisingly so, given the dialectic of enlightenment: to begin with, say, the theory of phantasmagoria risks undue abstraction, whereas to progress to it via the *Ring* or *Tristan* risks undue particularity, even empiricism—but so does Adorno, and necessarily so. One must simply, or not so simply, decide—almost arbitrarily, yet therefore perhaps defying instrumentalism—upon a path, and, like Adorno, forge a wayward route that is yet not nonsensical. Analytical philosophical method will just not work here, offering false, "enlightened" clarification.

Nevertheless, theoretical treatment of instrumental reason looms large: "Myth turns into enlightenment and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power."²⁴ Had Adorno been a more charitable reader of the *Ring*, he might have seen more clearly that the twin bind of instrumental reason is incisively portrayed by Wagner himself, arguably with a more modern, ecological twist than Adorno, and certainly Marx, would have approved or even comprehended. Wotan's creation of a political world is accomplished both by critical reason, personified in his demigod henchman, Loge,

and also in his act of violence against the world-ash tree, hewing from its living branches his spear, a dead instrument upon which runes of legal domination are inscribed. It is up to us whether we consider Wagner to be caught up within the bounds of his own myth or to be offering a self-reflexive critique thereof. Perhaps the more Adornian path—*plus adornien que le roi*—would be to allow that both possess more than an element of truth.

For there are good reasons, rooted in Wagner's dramatic material, why his oeuvre is particularly well suited to Adorno's project. Wagner's alleged "indifference towards the 'inner life' [*Seelenleben*] of the individual [character] attests to traces of political knowledge of the individual's conditioning by material reality. Like the great philosophers," no mean compliment, "he distrusts the private." That penetrates to the heart of Adorno's intriguing analysis of Wagner's use of myth; indeed, Adorno proceeds to describe Heidegger as "not dissimilar to Wagner as a mythologist of language." The *Ring* might be summarized by a maxim of Anaximander, as "recently" analyzed by Heidegger: "From wherever things have their origin, there too they must also perish according to necessity, for they must make penance and be judged for their iniquity, according to the rules of time." There is a regressive side to that pre-Socratic, fatalist form of redress, not simply taken as subject matter but forming an aesthetic grounding for the immanent coherence of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, "art of transition" and all.²⁵ Yet once again Adorno recognizes, and has the interested reader pursue, alternative, pregnant possibilities. And we should remind ourselves that Wotan dismisses Erda's world of fate—though Adorno's answer would be that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* itself remains ensnared by it.²⁶ Already, however, we spy the seeds of the more conciliatory, indeed more dialectical, claim in "Wagners Aktualität" that "Wagner makes the case for myth, but accuses it through his creation."²⁷

Even at its most dubious, for instance in Wagner's work's grandfathering of the culture industry's cinematic insistence, Adorno detects truth content. If the "tone adopted by every film" were that "of the witch handing food to the child she wants to enchant or devour, while mumbling horribly: 'Lovely, lovely soup. How you're going to enjoy it,' such 'kitchen-fire witchcraft' might on the one hand be said to have been "invented by Wagner, whose linguistic intimacies and musical spices are forever tasting themselves," and yet are also indicted by him. "With a genius's"—yes, a genius's—"compulsion to confess," he had already lain "bare the whole process in the scene of the *Ring* where Mime offers Siegfried the poisoned potion."²⁸ This, though Adorno does not say so, offered a textbook example of his analogy between the phantasmagoria and the work of art. It does not seem entirely out of the question that, as in the case of many a furious Nietzschean accusation, this second turn of the dialectical screw not only profited from a Wagnerian simile but had actually in the first place arisen in Adorno's study of Wagner. A third, justifiable turn might note just how critical Wagner's practice is—even, if the anachronism be forgiven, quite how

Adornian it is, or at least as we might read it. The phantasmagorical seduction of a false eternity is nowhere to be found in *Siegfried*; if anything, it is violently rejected, both in Wotan's dismissal of Erda's primeval world of fate and, in more political terms, in the following scene, with Siegfried's breaking of Wotan's spear of laws, allegedly eternal but outdated as soon as they were hewn into cold, dead wood. Far from presenting itself uncritically, even the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—an idea ever ascribed exaggerated importance in Wagner studies—criticizes itself; it does precisely what Adorno says it should.

For Adorno, Wagner seems to have borne special responsibility with respect to musical fatalism. In a footnote to the *Philosophy of New Music*, he described music as “the enemy of fate,” since from “the earliest times, the force of protest against mythology” had “been attributed to music, no less in the image of Orpheus than in the Chinese doctrine of music. Only since Wagner has music imitated fate.”²⁹ Writing on *Carmen* for Thomas Mann's eightieth birthday, Adorno explicitly made reference to Nietzsche's celebrated elevation of Bizet's opera over Wagner's Teutonism. Taking his point further, *Carmen*'s “Latin precision,” which might be understood also to refer to the work as a whole, is contrasted with “the *Ring* laboriously” unfolding “dark oracles about the rolling wheel.” Erda's realm of fate has as its counterpart, or antipode, Bizet's music starting “to roll in an allegretto on the strings as if it were a roulette wheel.”³⁰ Yet we should remind ourselves, taking Adorno as a starting point but not as a final destination, that Wotan's rejection of Erda marks the peripeteia of the *Ring* as a whole.

Let us consider another example: “The more triumphantly Wagner's music sounds, the less can it find within itself a foe to subdue; bourgeois triumph ever drowned out mendacious claims to the heroic act [*Heldentat*].”³¹ Such an aperçu, a typical Marxist Nietzscheanism, ought at the very least to have us thinking about the Siegfried of *Götterdämmerung*: in Peter Wapnewski's apt phrase, the “rebel without consciousness.”³² That, of course, is his fatal flaw, but what if we extend our investigation, Adorno-like, from the personal to the social? Does Siegfried, heralded not only by Wagner but by the young Engels in 1840—“What is the *Hannolied*,” the song of Anno, Archbishop of Cologne, “against the *Nibelungen*?”—commemorate the bourgeois failing of elevating rebellion over thoroughgoing revolution more truly than Wagner himself realized?³³ We do not necessarily have to answer yes, though it portrays Wagner's claim to “make clear to the men of the Revolution the meaning of that Revolution, in its noblest sense,” in an intriguing, unintentionally self-reflexive light. And that is before we begin to consider the effects of gloomy Schopenhauerism upon the erstwhile Young German's revolutionary fervor.³⁴ Nicholas Baragwanath is right to object that “Adorno's application of Horkheimer's generic category of the ‘bourgeois revolutionary’ to Wagner and his musical praxis . . . does not stand up to close scrutiny,” or at least begs a good number of questions, yet in terms of the commemoration of revolution, the distinction Adorno

teases out between “rebel” and “revolutionary” proves more productive than one might expect.³⁵ This distinction is, after all, critical rather than positivistic or even, in the generally understood sense, biographical. For Adorno’s provocation concerning bourgeois triumph’s drowning out of heroic acts remains well worth considering. It might even acquire a queer tinge, perhaps via Hans Werner Henze—(ironically, given Henze’s distaste for Adorno, whom he once met at a Vienna performance of *Götterdämmerung*): “There is the sense of an imperialist threat, of something militantly nationalistic, something disagreeably heterosexual and Aryan in all these rampant horn calls, this pseudo-Germanic *Stabreim*, these incessant chords of a seventh and all the insecure heroes and villains that people Wagner’s librettos.”³⁶ Adorno, then, like Wagner “himself,” presents a Wagner who proposes more questions than he can possibly answer. Adorno’s Wagner may not be identical with Wagner’s Wagner—whose is?—but his remains an indispensable Wagner.

3

The idea of the historical nature of musical material, with particular though far from exclusive reference to Wagner, was not a matter only for theorists of Hegelian inclination. Schoenberg certainly dealt with the German idealist tradition; his library copies of Schopenhauer’s works are littered with marginal annotations, some of them extending to the length of short essays. Nevertheless, he was above all a composer—and certainly wrote as such in his 1911 *Harmonielehre*. In the opening paragraph of the chapter “An den Grenzen der Tonart” (To the limits of tonality), he gives the example of the diminished seventh chord. In “early music,” it had long performed the role of accomplishing difficult tasks harmonically, but had also acquired another role, that of being the “‘expressive [*ausdrucksvoll*] chord’ of its time,” whether in Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Weber, or “still in Wagner’s first works.” However, that role had “soon played itself out. The uncommon, volatile, unreliable guest, here today, somewhere else tomorrow, settled down, had become a bourgeois, was a philistine in retirement.” It had fallen from the “higher sphere of art music [*Kunstmusik*] to the lower one of entertainment music [*Unterhaltungsmusik*],” remaining as the “sentimental expression of sentimental concerns. It has become banal and effeminate. Become banal!”³⁷

The stress on having *become* banal is clear. As Max Paddison has noted, Ernst Bloch clearly derived a passage in his *Geist der Utopie* from Schoenberg, writing of a chord once new, having “sunk irretrievably into mere ‘light music’ as a sentimental expression of sentimental ideas.”³⁸ Adorno learned, took, extended a great deal from both Bloch and Schoenberg. Even in the case of what for Adorno had become a weakness in Wagner, however, there lies also a historical opportunity, or rather an opportunity for the critical historian. In considering even such a “weakness,” there can yet remain admiration for the skill with which Wagner mitigates such

“weakness,” and moreover there can be implications for our understanding both of Wagner in the nineteenth century and indeed for the nineteenth century more generally. The Schoenbergian view of the historical nature of material both indemnifies and rescues Wagner (an Adornian *Rettung*, we might say). It is, moreover, a signal of Wagner’s stature that he is the point of reference for this “becoming banal”; Wagner is posited almost as a Beethoven-like figure, one without whom musical history would look very different or, at the least, one who sums up an era. Wagner is seen, as in that former panegyric, as Nietzsche’s “modern artist par excellence.”³⁹

As early as 1956, Adorno offers a generous summary, perhaps not entirely at odds with the *Essay on Wagner* but different in tone, divining truth content even in Schopenhauerian pessimism.⁴⁰ His *Essay* had described the “affinity with language” of Wagner’s music (*die Sprachähnlichkeit der Musik*), and Wagner’s turning upside down that hitherto metaphysical claim so as to become a “means of musical enlightenment,” that is, of the rationalizing domination outlined in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁴¹ Adorno does not now spurn that claim, yet he becomes more expansive with respect to the positive qualities of that Wagnerian linguistic turn:

Music’s turn toward language in Wagner not only created hitherto unimagined expressive values, not only gave the musical material a wealth of the most highly differentiated qualities without which it can no longer survive, but also gave this music a dimension of bottomless depth. It may have been characterized by a boastful tragicality, something theatrical and self-dramatizing. It is easy to hold up the comparison of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart as more metaphysically substantial, but all this does is to drown out, with difficulty, the truth of its own particular moment. The devalorization of metaphysical sense, which was reflected in Wagner’s relationship to Schopenhauer, was appropriate to the state of social consciousness under developed capitalism; the thing that makes it inauthentic, the murky and despairing conflation of such negativity with the positivity of redemption, still did more honor to the determining historical experience than the fiction that humanity had been spared this experience. For Wagner, however, this experience was not some mere *Weltanschauung* lacking in compelling force; it left its stamp on the musical form [*Gestalt*] itself. The idea of great music, of music as a serious matter instead of ornament or private amusement, survived the nineteenth century solely as a result of the Wagnerian turn of music toward language.⁴²

That claim for seriousness would be echoed in subsequent writings. In 1957 Adorno is more critical of Nietzsche’s critique and perhaps implicitly therefore of his own, while still maintaining its—and his own?—ultimate “progressiveness,” almost as if the admission of guilt were still made through the most gritted of teeth. The critical barbs seem to carry less conviction by now, yet must be made, as if to cover the writer’s back:

Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner was higher criticism. . . . But he failed to make it stick because . . . he failed to penetrate to the music’s innermost workings. There is

something unconvincing about the Nietzschean questions, for all their apparent mastery, and it fits in well with the reactionary quality inherent in the music: Nietzsche was superior to what happens in Wagner, but at the same time he was not quite up to it, in the same way that the dialectics of progress almost always thrust the avant-garde back behind the very stage of development that it advances beyond. . . . In Nietzsche's invectives against Wagner's decadence and play-acting, . . . one cannot escape the nagging sense that they are not free of a latent philistinism, even though he had a sharp eye for the philistine aspects of Wagner's own nationalist worldview. For it is unclear whether artistic quality and the truth content of works of art coincide so perfectly. . . . The thesis that Beethoven's music is superior to Wagner's because it articulates the idea of freedom and humanity as a whole, while Wagner's music, regardless of its inner tendency, resonates with the loss of these categories, leads the critic into a disastrous flirtation with art philosophy in the style of the *Verlust der Mitte*.⁴³

It is easy and doubtless perfectly justified to exclaim "tu quoque!" yet we might also understand Adorno to be engaged in unacknowledged, or semiacknowledged, self-criticism. If Nietzsche were both "superior to what happens in Wagner, but at the same time . . . not quite up to it," then had this not also once been the case with some at least of Adorno's jibes? Had he not actually failed—and it is an admittedly difficult task, this—to live up to his own dialectical demands, and does he not also in some sense recognize that here? It had, perhaps, been all too easy to think of Nietzsche, or indeed Beethoven, as preferable to Wagner. While it would doubtless be at least as foolish to posit Wagner's superiority, there might be heuristic use in acknowledging greatness and difference. Wagner's never having belonged "amongst the stars above" in Adorno's childhood, as we saw him admit to Benjamin, might have occasioned critical distance but also a critical disdain that stood in danger of collapse into inverse hagiography.

Moreover, in "Wagners Aktualität," Adorno states that Wagner's "verdict that opera was childish, his desire that music should finally come of age, cannot be appealed." For instance, number opera, as in *The Rake's Progress*, could now only occur "in a refracted mode, as stylization."⁴⁴ "The idea," Adorno continues, "of a unity of constantly changing situations, which in Wagner still oriented itself to the requirements of the dramatic action, has, to this day, not been fully realized. It would provide the ideal model for a truly informal process of composition utilizing characteristic models that would be both differentiated from each other and necessarily complementary." Even though "the dramatic action was more important to him than the constructive structure, . . . the objective tendency toward the latter is unmistakable."⁴⁵ Wagner, it seems, is being suggested as a herald for Pierre Boulez—as Boulez himself would come to realize, especially following his work conducting at Bayreuth.⁴⁶

Wagner's Romantic organicism offers a legacy to posterity—to Adorno's younger contemporaries—stronger, richer, than that of any other composer from the second half of the nineteenth century:

The very thing which ever since *Tristan* has seemed with good reason to embody the subjectivizing process of music, is an objective reality from the point of view of the language of music: it is the semblance of the organic as mediated by this language. With incomparable genius, Wagner succeeded in creating in *Tristan* an almost perfect unity between the subjective work, the specific musical achievement, and the objectivity of the musical idiom of chromaticism. This was the musical site of the phantasmagoria. What has been postulated and created, claims to be natural. Young composers react quite allergically to this. But following the liquidation of the organic language of music, music once again, thanks to its immanent organization, has become the very image of the organic.⁴⁷

Even the phantasmagoria of *Versuch über Wagner*, then, receives dialectical treatment more positive, more reconciliatory, than one might have expected from the purveyor of negative dialectics. “For the subject,” as Adorno went on to say, “is the only component of art that is non-mechanical, truly alive.”⁴⁸

Moreover, Wagner, or at least tendencies within his material legacy—Adorno allows considerable slippage between the two—had already paved the way *both* for Schoenberg *and* for the Hollywood film score, in terms both of expression and rationalization.⁴⁹ As *Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggested, television, which aimed “at a synthesis of radio and film,” might yet prove still more capable of “derisively fulfilling the Wagnerian dream of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*,” the alliance between “word, image, and music” being “all the more perfect than in *Tristan*.”⁵⁰ Such was the nature, in the words of that book's chapter title, of “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Via Richard Strauss's “supple illustrative technique,” the decline (*Verfall*) of the leitmotif might have led to cinema music, whose sole purpose was to announce a hero and situation to the audience.⁵¹ More suggestively still, Adorno claims that the “birth of film out of the spirit of [Wagnerian] music” shows not that mass culture was an external imposition upon art, but that art's “own emancipation” turned it into its opposite.⁵² Strikingly, he claims that it is “especially the sacred *Parsifal* that employs the filmic technique of scenic transformation [*Wandeldekoration*] . . . : the magical artwork dreams,” a suitably phantasmagorical term, “its opposite, the mechanical [artwork].”⁵³ That Wagnerian inheritance of Parisian *grand opéra*, the *panorama mobile*, and indeed beyond it, of Baroque theatrical spectacle, has provided the opportunity for many a coup de théâtre thereafter, from the first Bayreuth collapse of Klingsor's castle to Stefan Herheim's 2008–12 Bayreuth staging, in which that collapse was itself collapsed into the advent of the Third Reich, Weimar vanquished, swastikas unfurled, the phantasmagoria revealed for what it was.⁵⁴ In such evocation—Wagner's *Opera and*

Drama term would have been “presentiment”—of the cinema, we might think of Nietzsche’s accusation: “Behold those youths—benumbed, wan, breathless! They are Wagnerians: they understand nothing of music,—and nevertheless Wagner comes to rules over them.”⁵⁵

At the same time, however, Adorno concedes that Wagner’s own linguistic usage was more sophisticated than his “aesthetics of unmediated unity,” not unjustly characterized as a “declaration of bankruptcy” (*Bankrotterklärung*), would permit.⁵⁶ The road (or at least *a* road) also led to Schoenberg too. Moreover, that provides a fine example of Wagner’s work being rescued from his own aesthetic claims (which, in any case, more often than not preceded rather than followed his dramatic work). It was, Adorno observed in his *Aesthetic Theory*, when dealing more broadly than just with Wagner, the “conciliatory element of culture in art that characterized even its most violent protestation,” which had “intensified in the history of modernism.” What was anachronistic to speak of in relation to Bach, Mozart, Schubert, and even Bruckner—it seems that the point here is the latter’s untimeliness—applied to “Brahms, Wagner, even Chopin.” Yet what seems negative becomes, with a further twist of the dialectic, “today. . . the *differentia specifica* of art in opposition to the deluge of philistinism, and at the same time it is a criterion of mastery.”⁵⁷ Wagner is not unique, yet he acts more often than not as exemplar and as *ne plus ultra*.

4

Tristan was always to be preferred. “The source of the immense importance of all dissonance for new art since Baudelaire and *Tristan*,” a Nietzschean pairing of *décadence* that yet appreciates the modernistic seeds within that *décadence*, is “veritably an invariant of the modern,” for “the immanent play of forces in the artwork converges with external reality.”⁵⁸ Moreover, “in his greatest moments,” such as the opening of *Tristan*, Wagner was able to draw “progressive *Konstruktion*,” which almost inevitably has one think of Bauhaus-like early dodecaphonic Schoenberg, from the “gestural-regressive moment.” In such a display of “productive strength,” it went beyond “mere subjective expression” so as to render that moment, “in the Hegelian sense,” praise indeed, canceled and preserved at a higher level of mediated unity, that is, *aufgehoben*.⁵⁹ From that analysis, that is, from engagement with the score rather than with biography, aesthetics, influence, or anything else, immediately arises Adorno’s celebrated, well-nigh irrefutable observation that “progress and reaction in Wagner’s music” (and we should note that he specifically refers again to Wagner’s *music*) “cannot be separated as sheep from goats.”⁶⁰

There remained both sheep and goats, though. Adorno noted approvingly that “though traces of *Tristan* can always be detected in Berg, those of *Die Meistersinger* cannot.” For “Berg’s music . . . never affirms itself,” unlike, presumably *Die Meistersinger*.⁶¹ If Adorno concentrates upon Wagner’s darker side, the positive side

remains: positive in its implicit negating—and self-negating—quality, the emancipation of the dissonance beckoning from within an allegedly ahistorical Schopenhauerian rut. Indeed, as Adorno admitted, albeit through gritted teeth, “If there is any truth to the facile associations between Wagner and Berg, then it would be a similarity with the Wotan of *Götterdämmerung*: not with the allegory of a self-negating world will—Berg negated that before he heard the first E-flat of *Das Rheingold*—but rather with the individualistic figure of the magnanimous, entangled, and weary god.”⁶² One begins to understand what Adorno might have made of Wagner, had he been able to summon up a fraction of the charity, or rather adoration, he offered Berg.

Wagner both contributed to and reflected that “modernity” when his form, determinedly hostile to standard, feudal remnants, rendered material “more pliant to the composer’s will” than had ever previously been the case.⁶³ Such modernity was a thing of wonder, just as in Marx’s celebrated paean to the bourgeoisie in the *Communist Manifesto*—or indeed Wagner’s vision of a capitalist-administrated society in Nibelheim and the Tarnhelm. In Marx’s words, the bourgeoisie had been “the first to show what man’s activity can bring about. It has accomplished miracles surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exoduses of nations and crusades.”⁶⁴ Rationalization, it seems, extends further in Adorno’s Wagner than in any previous composer, despite the regressive character of its outdated Romantic “expression”—what, in shorthand, we might term that problem of the diminished seventh, so long as it is considered as exemplar rather than rootless root. (One might equally well select Adorno’s thoroughgoing claim that, in Wagner, *Sein* [being] takes precedence over *Werden* [becoming], save for its more problematic nature, namely that many more would dispute its accuracy. Had Adorno been *more* dialectical, or allowed that Wagner had been, he might have seen that Wagner’s writing is more properly accomplished through a struggle between the two.)

5

“There is no decadent moment in Wagner’s work, from which productive moments of the future could not be wrought.”⁶⁵ Not a single such moment: if that is not a panegyric claim, then it is difficult to know what might be. The idea is pursued, in “Wagners Aktualität,” in Adorno’s criticism of Heinrich Schenker, whose accusation against Wagner of having destroyed the *Urlinie* (fundamental line) missed the point: “he failed to hear precisely in the supposed destruction, the emancipation of music from its merely skeletal, abstract organization toward an organization located in its specific forms, the irresistibly new element that was the precondition of everything that was to come.”⁶⁶ What held for harmony held even for the phantasmagorical ideology of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For Wagner possessed “the power of the neurotic, to look his own decadence straight in the eye and to transcend it in an image that resists

the absorbing glance.”⁶⁷ We might say, even though Adorno does not, that the Wagnerian phantasmagoria resists itself and perhaps offers hope that late-capitalist phantasmagoria might do so too: something of the “Happy-End” (the English was his own) Adorno scorned in Wagner and elsewhere.⁶⁸ Such happiness is of course highly relative, for few others would consider the end of *Götterdämmerung* to qualify as such—yet not impermissibly so, for those able to take a slightly less negative view of dialectics or indeed of Wagner. Adorno might have permitted himself to do so with, say, Berg; perhaps we might permit ourselves to do so with Wagner.

Adorno notes Wagner's harmonic anticipations of impressionism and highly progressive dissonance, contrasting his use of harmony for constructivist (for which read proto-Schoenbergian) ends with Strauss's later use of the same dissonances and others derived therefrom as mere cheap thrills (*Reizwerte*).⁶⁹ The extent of his admiration for Wagner's harmony is summarized in the final sentence of the *Essay's* fourth chapter, that on sound (*Klang*). Having referred to chords such as that in the third measure of the prelude to act 1 of *Die Meistersinger*, the *Tristan* chord, and that signaling the Rhinemaidens' warning to Siegfried—all of them dissonances instantly recalled in the mind's ear, for those who know the works—Adorno makes a startling claim, rifling back and forward through musical history, in a fashion not entirely unlike that of his celebrated essay on Bach and authenticity. Such chords can only be “properly understood” when compared with “the most advanced material of contemporary music,” from which the “continuity of the Wagnerian transition” (*Stetigkeit des Wagnerschen Übergangs*) had been removed.⁷⁰ If Bach needed defending against his devotees, so, it seems, did Wagner—and it is difficult to disagree with that. But more interesting still, it seems, reading the Bach essay into the Wagner book, that we might understand Wagner's heritage, like that of Bach, to have passed into composition. Whether or not that made or makes Wagner unperformable, or only difficult to perform, it did seem to be the case that modernist composition might “call his music by name in producing it anew.”⁷¹

Moreover, if Wagner's harmony oscillated (*schwankt*) between past and future, “the coloristic dimension” was, according to the opening of Adorno's fifth chapter, on color (*Farbe*), “quite properly, discovered by him.” Quite a startling claim, which if anything becomes more startling still: “The art of instrumentation in the incisive sense, as the productive part of color in the musical event [*Geschehnis*] ‘in a way such that color itself would become action,’ did not exist before him.”⁷² By contrast—and here Adorno is surely alluding to Wagner's own dismissal of Berlioz's mere “mechanical miracles”—Berlioz's achievement was merely material (*stofflich*), not properly integrated into “the composition as such.”⁷³ Once again, Wagner's music, that of *Tristan* in particular, is posited as a progenitor of Schoenberg and “in particular, Alban Berg.”⁷⁴

Taking Adorno's observation a little further than he does himself, we might think of the Tarnhelm. The motif's sonority, its voicing for six horns as much as its

mysterious, rooted yet almost rootless harmony, enunciates the mysteries and potential terror of new technology. Proudest creation of the skilled craftsman Mime, it is immediately, sadistically turned upon its maker by its owner, Alberich. The worker must be kept in his place: even when, perhaps especially when, he is one's own brother. This uncanny new device enables Alberich to become, or at least to seem, a magician, portraying himself both to his terrified people and to his visitors, Loge and Wotan, not only as a merchant but also as what Herbert Marcuse called a "gifted economic leader."⁷⁵ Accumulation works—mysteriously, it might seem, though with a perfectly comprehensible economic logic in practice—in one direction alone. The Tarnhelm depicts, expresses, and embodies the dialectic of enlightenment.

Moreover, this is not a case of miniaturism, Nietzschean or otherwise.⁷⁶ The motif provides the dramatic coloring and forms a good part of the musico-dramatic structure for much of the third scene of *Das Rheingold*. Wagner wrote that it would be to do "things by halves" were he to use a key for its own sake and thereby ignore the instrument or, by contrast, to use the instrument simply for its own sake.⁷⁷ His ambition was to unify, indeed for there to be no distinction in the first place; and here is a case where that ambition seems well-nigh fulfilled. Debussy, we might add, beckons as strongly as Berg, or indeed Webern. The other side of the coin is that Wagner offers an explicit critique of the totalitarianism of modern technology. That critique he offers, moreover, through the most modern technological means not only at his disposal, but of his creation.

6

Such mastery, as Adorno noted, led to the decidedly ambiguous wonder of the phantasmagoria, to which Adorno devotes his sixth chapter. The (originally English) term dates back beyond Marx to the very beginning of the nineteenth century; however, it is from Marx's usage, as well as that of the Baudelaire study of Walter Benjamin, the "allegorist of commodity fetishism: revealing the return of the primeval in the petrified objects of the nineteenth century," that Adorno's analysis springs.⁷⁸ Marx had famously employed the idea in *Capital* to describe the disjunction between a commodity itself, its roots in concealed human labor, and its form: "It is only the particular social relation between men themselves, which here takes upon itself, for them, the phantasmagorical form of a relationship between things."⁷⁹ But he also—perhaps as revealingly for Wagner, or at least for the Wagner we might develop from Adorno—used it in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* with respect to the dissipation of hopes of revolution: "The constitution, the National Assembly, . . . the 'liberté, égalité, fraternité,' . . .—everything disappeared like a phantasmagoria before the spell [*Bannformel*] cast by one man, whose enemies had not taken him as a master of witchcraft."⁸⁰ Adorno makes no

direct reference to Marx in this chapter, but he opens the next with the summative phrase “world in a phantasmagoria”; we are at liberty, within reason, to pursue the Marxian, Adornian, Wagnerian avenues we choose.⁸¹

However, to pursue Adorno's meaning and its implications, the attempt to connect the masterly spell of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* with that of the repression of revolution fits Wagner and his moment particularly well. A treatment of Wagner as “rebel” rather than “revolutionary” precedes the sixth chapter in Adorno's book, so, although that chapter concerns itself with the claim that “Wagner's operas tend toward illusion [*Blendwerk*], to what Schopenhauer called the ‘outside of inferior commodities’: toward phantasmagoria,” that claim can no more be merely immanent than any of the rest of Adorno's socially bound critique.⁸² Indeed, a phantasmagoria would have no meaning whatsoever in purely immanent terms. It extends in Wagner from the Venusberg's creation of its “characteristic sound through the method of diminution,” a “diminished *forte*” prevailing, “the image of resounding from afar,” to the description of *Die Meistersinger* as Wagner's central work, insofar as it presents a “sketch for an original bourgeois period [*bürgerlichen Urzeit*],” and the phantasmagorical wonder of the spear hovering above Parsifal's head, the hero cursing its “deceiving splendor” (*trügende Pracht*).⁸³ That is the history of the technical means that Wagner—and the nineteenth century—amassed to work the magical dialectic of enlightenment. Moreover, as Adorno reminds us in the chapter's final sentence, following that quotation from *Parsifal*, “It is the curse of a rebel, who in his youth stormed unforgotten brothels.”⁸⁴ Whether or not we subscribe to Adorno's placing of Wagner somewhere uneasily between sensuality and its repression, it stands even here at the heart of the fascination Wagner held for him, Freudian as well as Marxian: that is, at the very heart of the concerns of his philosophy and, more broadly, that of the Frankfurt School. There is truth content here in the very deceptions of the phantasmagoria, for with the “outlawry [*Verfemung*] of that same pleasure it puts before our eyes,” the phantasmagoria of the Venusberg “has provided from the beginning the seed of its own destruction.”⁸⁵ It provides a slippery microcosm, both in its truth and in its lies, of the bourgeois world itself, and Wagner's artwork is held up as its exemplar: “the Wagnerian totality,” like Hegel's, we might add, “the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is condemned to collapse.”⁸⁶ However, Wagner's phantasmagoria proves less regressive, less phantasmagorical—dialectically, phantasmagoria itself, not just Wagner's variety, proves less phantasmagorical—than would be permitted by Adorno's idea of gesture as deceiving *non-revelation*, involving Wagner as conductor-composer in the “großen Stil.”⁸⁷

Another composer who suffered a similarly hostile, perhaps even more hostile, critique from Adorno was Stravinsky. It is interesting that Adorno, in his *Philosophy of New Music*, picked up on the strong element of Wagnerism in *The Rite of Spring* less often noted than one might expect. Stravinsky's “primitive Russians,” he wrote, “resemble Wagner's old Germans, the stage settings for *Rite* recall the cliffs

of the Valkyries, and Wagnerian too is the configuration of the mythically monumental and its high-strung tension, which Thomas Mann noted in his Wagner essay of 1933.⁸⁸ Adorno had already coupled the composers in his *Essay on Wagner*. Stravinsky, he claimed, regarded himself as Wagner's antipode despite, or perhaps because of, a "deep affinity in the element of the primeval."⁸⁹ Yet today there would be few takers for Adorno's condemnation of the *Rite*, even though there may be more who would remain equivocal or even hostile with respect to Stravinsky's avowedly anti-Wagnerian neoclassicism; again, we may glean interesting, even "progressive," aspects from Adorno's critiques of both, without necessarily holding to the apparently damning judgments that sometimes might cloud them. For instance, the "mythically monumental" in Wagner *and* Stravinsky would find not the least of its musical heirs in Harrison Birtwistle's interrogation and revivification of some of Western culture's foundational myths—as the coauthor of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, having "always taken the basic principle of myth to be anthropomorphism," might well have come to realize.⁹⁰

7

When, then, in his more "mature," though unfinished, *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno made a more general point concerning artistic extinction, using literature as an example, Wagner had helped him to that point: "Although adultery filled Victorian and early-twentieth-century novels, it is scarcely possible to empathize directly with this literature now, given the dissolution of the high-bourgeois nuclear family and the loosening of monogamy; distorted and impoverished, this literature lives on only in illustrated magazines."⁹¹ Likewise, when treating in 1950 with Bach and the advent of pernicious "authenticity," he held out in conclusion, as mentioned above, the possibility that, even if Bach's music were no longer performable, "composition," by which he meant modernist composition, would call Bach's "music by name in producing it anew." Was the same true for some of Wagner's oeuvre, in terms of performance, or at least of staging? That question may prove a case in which Adorno's method ultimately rescues a verdict that has come to seem untenable.

Take *Lohengrin*, for instance. In a note from the 1940s, part of what we might, borrowing from Young Hegelianism, ironically call the negatively inclined Adorno's "positive philosophy," *Lohengrin* and Weber's *Der Freischütz* are described as works that have become uninterpretable. It is a claim intended specifically in terms of opera direction, a "particularly sensitive" world. "The wolf's glen of *Der Freischütz* and the swan of *Lohengrin* . . . presented in sensory terms," he writes, "are impossible—their apologetics transforms the works into illustrated magazines. If one abandons and changes them, for example, into natural symbols, or signs such as the swan as a cone of light, the works are evened out to that generalised human level which means the death of all art." He even went so far as to claim that Ludwig II, "who saw

nothing in *Lohengrin* but the swan, understood more than the most spiritual interpretation."⁹² The reduction of *Lohengrin* to Neuschwanstein is objectively malevolent, whatever the intention.

Yet if we extend Adorno's method, trying to establish, along the lines of the Young Hegelian idea of an "esoteric" Hegel, an "esoteric Adorno," matters may look very different, especially in the arena of staging. Adorno himself praised, in "Wagners Aktualität," what he described as "surrealistic attempts" at staging from the 1920s and 1930s; they had attempted "not to mythologize Wagner in the sense of timelessness, but to explode his temporal core, to show Wagner himself as in the grip of history." He therefore liked "Max Ernst's idea: to have King Ludwig II amusing himself in the cave of the Venusberg."⁹³ Adorno described a staging tendency of his youth as a "trivial revolt," the phrase itself not entirely unlike his vision of Wagner as rebel: "Hamlet in a suit, Lohengrin without a swan." But he does not answer, in the light of a "crisis" concerning "whether art can outlive semblance," what the staging alternative might be; indeed, he seems to have thought that there was none, *Lohengrin* having become unperformable.⁹⁴ It is clearly not enough in Adornian terms *simply* to return to Hamlet without a suit or Lohengrin with a swan; indeed, he went so far as to say that "only experimental solutions" to staging "are justified today: only what injures the Wagner orthodoxy is true."⁹⁵

Pursuing the theme of a *Rettung* of Adorno, director Stefan Herheim's style of *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, or perhaps *Rezeptionstheater*, may offer a dialectical possibility. It might also be argued that it remains true to Adorno's claim, truer than some of Adorno's more hostile critiques of Wagner, that "critical analysis of the effect of artworks has a great deal to say about what artworks, in their character as things, have sealed up in themselves." That, Adorno admitted, though he did not pursue the observation, "could be demonstrated in the ideological effect of Wagner's music."⁹⁶ Herheim's staging of *Lohengrin* for the Berlin Staatsoper Unter den Linden has attracted far less attention than the Bayreuth *Parsifal* mentioned above, not least because, owing to differences between him and the house's music director, Daniel Barenboim, it seems unlikely to be revived. However, like that *Parsifal* and indeed like so much of Herheim's work, it was a multilayered staging that would doubtless have revealed additional secrets upon further acquaintance. Even upon a single viewing, an array of intricately interconnected ideas revealed themselves while still—crucially—providing theatrical excitement, coherence, and engagement with the work, not least in its musical form.

A controversial prelude to the first act, the very act of staging it being the initial root of artistic disagreement between director and conductor—dare I suggest, assuming the roles ascribed by Adorno to him as critic and to Wagner as composer-conductor?—showed Wagner both as puppet and puppeteer, an ambiguity to be revisited upon many of the characters. Apparently assumed into heaven, a similar fate—albeit with an all-important distinction—would be visited upon Lohengrin at

the work's conclusion. Wagner's presence was seen onstage throughout the work, sometimes in multiple guises, both as puppets and as chorus members—frock coat, signature *altdeutsche* cap, and all—and sometimes melding with other members of the depicted *Volk*, both changing them and being changed by them. It was difficult not to think forward to Hans Sachs's ambiguous, dialectical relationship with the crowd in *Die Meistersinger*—and thus, inevitably, to the problems of charismatic leadership and *Volksgemeinschaft* never far away in any consideration of modern German history. Herheim's treatment of the chorus proved thought-provoking. What might in lesser hands have degenerated into stock responses showed instead a *Volk* dangerously swayed by the ministrations of a charismatic leader and dangerous in its responses thereto. The foundation of Lohengrin's power, like that of Parsifal, was charisma alone, though it was arguably more sinister in this case: Parsifal must discover who he is, whereas Lohengrin—it is probably better to leave to one side the red herring of Parsifal as his father—insists that none may know who he is. As members of the crowd lost their individuality, illustrated by their loss of individual modern dress, they found themselves—or rather, we found them—subsumed into a bland yet fearsome force of social repression, personified by the “Protector” (*Schützer*) of Brabant.

The scene thus shifted to an impossible, Magritte-styled Eden, followed by a make-believe world of horned helmets and other neomedievalisms: incorporating yet challenging the work's history, the German catastrophe again unmistakably present, Heike Scheele's Brabantian sets and Gesine Völm's offered a riposte to those claiming to speak for a “tradition” that never really was—and certainly pertained no longer. Lohengrin, when he arrived, apparently straight from Neuschwanstein, was the menacingly kitsch instrument of transformation from an opera house in modern Berlin—much of Herheim's initial attention hinted at contemporary social and cultural local politics—to a world of fantasy in which *Gleichschaltung* was the name of the game, just as it had been once before under another seductive charismatic leader with naught but emptiness for a core. We could read what we want into him, and that was a large part of the problem. Like his creator, Wagner, he would ultimately be assumed heavenward, but then, to seal the tragedy, would come crashing back down to earth. Feuerbach, perhaps, remained; the Adornian Wagner had not entirely sold out, as it were, to Schopenhauerian pessimism.

Throughout, exterior manifestations of theatrical craft reminded the audience of instrumentalization at work. And at the end, we saw Wagner's own reported words, spoken following his dissatisfaction with the first Bayreuth Festival and yet always disregarded by his would-be “protectors”—*Schützer*?—“Kinder, macht Neues!” After the first Bayreuth Festival, the composer had urged his followers to rethink their efforts the next time. But then, what did he know? In Herheim's production, Wagner found himself used and abused at least as much by the community as the other way round. Was it the visible theatrical apparatus that let the hero

and us down, or was it letting us in on a secret? Quite rightly, there were no easy answers. As Adorno wisely noted in “Wagner’s Aktualität,” “If it is true about Wagner [staging] that no matter what one does, it is wrong, the thing that is still most likely to help is to force what is false, flawed, antinomical out into the open, rather than glossing over it and generating a kind of harmony to which the most profound element in Wagner is antithetical.”⁹⁷ Herheim’s production, however, offered another twist to the dialectic, in that it forced what might be considered false, flawed, antinomical out into the open, while preserving a greater degree of “fidelity,” costumes included, than traditionalists would ever have believed.

8

Moreover, Wagner’s score remained, an equivocal agent, as in Herheim’s *Parsifal*, of something we might be tempted still to call redemption, even if it were no longer really possible in good faith to do so. Similarly, on the final page of *Essay on Wagner* we read, “Tristan’s curse upon love [*Minne*] is more than the impotent sacrifice intoxication [*Rausch*] offers up to asceticism.” It is rather music’s rebellion against its own “constraint of Fate”; only through total determination might it regain its ability to reflect upon itself. (Such is, of course, the path to Schoenberg.) “It is with good reason that the bars in the *Tristan* score following the words ‘der furchtbare Trank’ stand upon the threshold of new music, in whose first canonical work, Schoenberg’s F-sharp minor Quartet, the words appear: “Take love from me, grant me your happiness!” Adorno offers the rider that such musical rebellion might be “futile”; we may (or may not) differ. He then offers the possibility, at the last, that someone able to snatch the message from the Wagnerian orchestra that love and happiness were impossible in this (bourgeois, administered) world, would find the sound of that orchestra changed, offering solace that hitherto, for all its *Rausch* and phantasmagoria, it had denied. It might yet grant new life to music’s “original appeal . . . : to live without fear.”⁹⁸

That attempt at redemption actually comes across as somewhat forced, as if Adorno were slightly guilty of following Wagner in positing the deceitful or at least illusory “Happy-End.” Yet the fundamental truth of his essay taken as a whole, and indeed taken in the context of his other Wagner writing, remains, spurring us on to posthumous if doubtless ultimately unfulfilled attempts at further *Rettung*. Max Paddison, in his classic treatment of Adorno’s musical aesthetics, concludes with the following:

Most valuable of all is the dialectical “method” itself. . . . That his critical aesthetics of music cannot be understood, interpreted and reapplied to changing historical conditions without us actively entering that debate and, in the process, very likely changing its terms is a sign of its authenticity. . . . Adorno’s incomplete project itself demands continuing reinterpretation and critique: not in order to systematize and “complete” it, but, through locating its terms and revealing its lacunae, to go beyond it.⁹⁹

I was reminded of Paddison's conclusion only after having made my own small effort in such a direction, but I am delighted and reassured to find that effort consonant with his words. Or, in Adorno's own words, "As spiritual entities, works of art are not complete in themselves. . . . One relates to a work of art not merely, as is often said, by adapting it to fit a new situation, but rather by deciphering within it things to which one has a historically different reaction." Adorno wrote that his position had become more, not less, "ambivalent," for "as progressive and regressive traits are intertwined in his [Wagner's] work, so also in his reception."¹⁰⁰ Those and the closing words seem equally relevant to Wagner, to Adorno, to Adorno's Wagner, and to ours: "Because it does not, in the end, realize what it has promised, it is therefore fallible, given into our hands incomplete, as something to be advanced. . . . It awaits the influence that will advance it to self-realization. This would seem to be its true relevance for our time."¹⁰¹ As Adorno insisted in his *Nachschrift* to the debate in *Die Zeit* occasioned by publication of his lecture, "it would be a bad dialectic that immobilized its own reason."¹⁰² That did not invalidate what he had said in *Versuch über Wagner*; in many ways, it was dependent upon his earlier investigation. Yet at the same time the two were not identical. Performers, scholars, devotees, foes of Wagner, even those who think themselves indifferent: let us all take note. *Kinder, macht Neues!*

NOTES

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1. Carl Dahlhaus, "Theodor Adornos 'Versuch über Wagner,'" in *Deutsche Universitätszeitung* 7 (1953): 7–9.

2. Thomas Mann, "Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners," in *Im Schatten Thomas Mann über Richard Wagner: Texte und Zeugnisse, 1895–1955*, ed. Hans Rudolf Valet (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1999), 94. The phrase is translated as "a panegyric with the wrong label" in Thomas Mann, "Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner," in *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Secker & Warburg, 1947), 314. See also Mark Berry, "The Positive Influence of Wagner upon Nietzsche," *The Wagner Journal* 2, no. 2 (2008): 11–28.

3. See Mark Berry, "Nietzsche's Critique of Wagner," *Wagner* 20 (1999): 38–48.

4. Wilhelm Furtwängler, "The Case of Wagner," in *Furtwängler on Music: Essays and Addresses*, ed. and trans. Ronald Taylor (Aldershot, UK: Scolar, 1991), 66.

5. On Adorno and Furtwängler, see Mark Berry, "Romantic Modernism: Bach, Furtwängler, and Adorno," *New German Critique* 104 (Spring–Summer 2008): 71–102.

6. Theodor W. Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 218.

7. Theodor W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981), 7–8. Adorno would return to Wagner in his postscript to a discussion in *Die Zeit* on "Wagners Aktualität," the 1964 "Nachschrift zu einer Wagner-Diskussion," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Gretel Adorno (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), 665–70, and in a 1966 Bayreuth program article, "Wagner und Bayreuth," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18 (1984), 210–25.

8. Theodor W. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 584–85.

9. Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1991).

10. John Deathridge, review of *In Search of Wagner*, by Theodor Adorno, *19th-Century Music* 7, no. 1 (Summer 1983): 81.

11. Theodor W. Adorno, "Selbstanzeige des Essaybuches *Versuch über Wagner*," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 13 (1985), 506.

12. We know surprisingly little about Gretel Adorno, or Margarete Karplus, as she was born, though she was a significant chemist and far more than a mere recorder and transcriber of her husband's conversations. Correspondence between her and Walter Benjamin has now been published (*Briefwechsel, 1930–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz and Christoph Göbbe [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005]), and their relationship has even been dramatized by Carl Djerassi in *Foreplay: Hannah Arendt, the Two Adornos, and Walter Benjamin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011).
13. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 24.
14. Henri Lonitz, ed., *Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence, 1928–1940*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 265.
15. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 10.
16. *Ibid.*, 11.
17. *Ibid.*, 13.
18. *Ibid.*, 35–36.
19. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).
20. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 42.
21. Lydia Goehr, "Dissonant Works and the Listening Public," in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 225.
22. Theodor W. Adorno, "Music and Language: A Fragment," in *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), 1–2.
23. Georg Picht, "Atonale Philosophie: Theodor W. Adorno zum Gedächtnis," *Merkur* 23 (1969): 889–92.
24. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), 9.
25. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 109–10. Both Heidegger and Adorno employ Nietzsche's translation of Anaximander.
26. Adorno unconvincingly explains away Wotan's dismissal of the earth goddess by claiming that Wotan does not gain his freedom thereby and that, in the Norns' scene, Wotan falls victim to the Norns' (fate's) words, while they return to Erda (*Versuch über Wagner*, 114). With respect to the scene from *Siegfried*, Wotan certainly does gain his freedom; he is only defeated, as he must be, by Siegfried's "revolutionary" breaking of the spear with Nothing. It is that necessary deed that prepares Wotan finally for the end, not the words of the Norns, however much he may previously, as in his *Walküre* monologue, have resolved upon "das Ende." The Norns' return to Erda, moreover, is a sign that the rule of fate is over; the rope with which fate was woven having snapped, the daughters and their mother come together once more in defeat, in powerlessness. On Erda and fate, see Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's "Ring"* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 244–45, 250–53; Dieter Borchmeyer, *Richard Wagner: Theory and Theatre*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 297–98.
27. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," 590.
28. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), §129, p. 201.
29. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 180n43.
30. Theodor W. Adorno, "Fantasia sopra *Carmen*," in *Quasi una fantasia*, 54–55.
31. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 47.
32. Peter Wapnewski, *Der traurige Gott: Richard Wagner in seine Helden* (Munich: Beck, 1978), 169.
33. Friedrich Engels, "Siegfrieds Heimat," in *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol. 41 (Berlin: Dietz, 2008), 105.
34. Letter to Theodor Uhlig, 12 November 1851, in Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, vol. 4, ed. Gertrud Strobel, Werner Wolf, et al. (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1979), 176.
35. Nicholas Barangawath, "Musicology and Critical Theory: The Case of Wagner, Adorno, and Horkheimer," *Music and Letters* 87 (2006): 59.
36. Hans Werner Henze, *Bohemian Fifts: An Autobiography*, trans. Stewart Spencer (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 207.
37. Arnold Schoenberg, *Harmonielehre* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1986), 287–88. Bourgeois is, given its Marxist connotations, perhaps a slightly problematic translation for the German *Bürger*, here used by Schoenberg in verbal form, "hatte sich verbürgerlicht."
38. Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 75.
39. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Der Fall Wagner," in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 6, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1980), §5, p. 23.
40. In that, Adorno certainly shows greater historical charity than Engels in his classic sketch of nineteenth-century intellectual history, damning the years following the failure of the revolutions of

- 1848–49, especially after Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état, as being receptive in their anti-Hegelian turn to "the vapid reflections of Schopenhauer, which were fashioned to fit the philistines," and decrying the resurgence of "a certain neo-Kantianism, whose last word was the eternally unknowable thing-in-itself, that is, the bit of Kant that least merited preservation." Friedrich Engels, first preface to *Anti-Dühring*, "On Dialectics," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress, 1970), 61–62.
41. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 45.
 42. Theodor W. Adorno, "Music, Language, and Composition," trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, 123.
 43. Theodor W. Adorno, "Criteria of New Music," in *Sound Figures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 164. Adorno refers to Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte: Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit* (Salzburg: Müller, 1951).
 44. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," 588–99.
 45. *Ibid.*, 592. See also Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," in *Quasi una fantasia*, 269–322. *Tristan* is discussed briefly there as a precursor on 306–7.
 46. See Erling E. Gulbrandsen, "Modernist Composer and Mahler Conductor: Changing Conceptions of Performativity in Boulez," *Studia musicologica norvegica* 32 (2006): 140–68.
 47. Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," 306–7.
 48. *Ibid.*, 307.
 49. See also Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 146.
 50. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 124.
 51. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 42.
 52. *Ibid.*, 100–101.
 53. *Ibid.*, 102.
 54. Patrick Carnegy briefly discusses the legacy of the *panorama mobile* and Wagner's "rechristening"—one can hardly fail to think of Hans Sachs—of it as *Wandeldedekoration* in *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 24–25.
 55. Nietzsche, "Der Fall Wagner," 29.
 56. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 42.
 57. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), 242.
 58. *Ibid.*, 15.
 59. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 43.
 60. *Ibid.*, 44.
 61. Theodor W. Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, trans. Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5.
 62. *Ibid.*, 11.
 63. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 44.
 64. Karl Marx, "Manifest der kommunistischen Partei," in *Die Frühschriften*, ed. S. Landshut (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1971), 528.
 65. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 141.
 66. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," 590–91.
 67. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 142.
 68. *Ibid.*, 137.
 69. *Ibid.*, 58–59. Adorno may be punning here on the association of *Reizwert* with Strauss's beloved card game, Skat.
 70. *Ibid.*, 65.
 71. Adorno, "Bach gegen seine Liebhaber verteidigt" in *Gesammelte Schriften*, v01.10, 151.
 72. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 66. The source for Adorno's quotation ("in der Art, daß jene Farbe selbst zur Aktion wurde") may be found in Richard Wagner, "Zukunftsmusik": An einen französischen Freund (Fr. Villot) als Vorwort zu einer Prosa-Übersetzung meiner Operndichtungen," in *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 4th ed., vol. 7 (Leipzig: Siegel, 1907), 122.
 73. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 66; Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, ed. Klaus Kropfinger (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994), 56.
 74. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 70.
 75. Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Allen Lane, 1968), 11–12.
 76. Nietzsche described Wagner as "our greatest miniaturist." "Der Fall Wagner," 28.
 77. Letter to Theodor Uhlig, 31 May 1852, in Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, vol. 4, 386.
 78. Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the Thought of Theodor W. Adorno* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 42.
 79. Karl Marx, "Das Kapital," in *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol. 23 (1970), 86.
 80. Karl Marx, "Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte," in *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol. 8 (1960), 119.
 81. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 80.
 82. *Ibid.*
 83. *Ibid.*, 80, 89.
 84. *Ibid.*, 89.
 85. *Ibid.*, 87.
 86. *Ibid.*, 95.
 87. *Ibid.*, 94.
 88. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, 120.

89. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 57.
90. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 6.
91. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 4.
92. Theodor W. Adorno, *Towards a Theory of Musical Reproduction: Notes, a Draft, and Two Schemata*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Wieland Honban (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 49. David Trippett argues that Adorno ascribes an excess of fantasy to nineteenth-century audiences, neglecting that age's strongly empirical tendencies. David Trippett, *Wagner's Melodies: Aesthetics and Materialism in German Musical Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 333–34.
93. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," 600–601. His source for this idea of Ernst has apparently yet to be discovered.
94. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 101–2.
95. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," 600.
96. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 242.
97. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," 600.
98. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 143.
99. Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 278.
100. Adorno, "Wagner's Relevance for Today," 586–87.
101. *Ibid.*, 601.
102. Adorno, "Nachschrift," 666.