

Richard Wagner

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Wilhelm Richard Wagner (/ˈvɑːɡnər/; German: [ˈʁɪçəʁt ˈvaːɡnɐ]; 22 May 1813 – 13 February 1883) was a German composer, theatre director, polemicist, and conductor who is primarily known for his operas (or, as some of his later works were later known, "music dramas"). Unlike most opera composers, Wagner wrote both the libretto and the music for each of his stage works. Initially establishing his reputation as a composer of works in the romantic vein of Weber and Meyerbeer, Wagner revolutionised opera through his concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art"), by which he sought to synthesise the poetic, visual, musical and dramatic arts, with music subsidiary to drama, and which was announced in a series of essays between 1849 and 1852. Wagner realised these ideas most fully in the first half of the four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung).

His compositions, particularly those of his later period, are notable for their complex textures, rich harmonies and orchestration, and the elaborate use of leitmotifs—musical phrases associated with individual characters, places, ideas or plot elements. His advances in musical language, such as extreme chromaticism and quickly shifting tonal centres, greatly influenced the development of classical music. His *Tristan und Isolde* is sometimes described as marking the start of modern music.

Wagner had his own opera house built, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, which embodied many novel design features. It was here that the Ring and Parsifal received their premieres and where his most important stage works continue to be performed in an annual festival run by his descendants. His thoughts on the relative contributions of music and drama in opera were to change again, and he reintroduced some traditional forms into his last few stage works, including Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg).

Until his final years, Wagner's life was characterised by political exile, turbulent love affairs, poverty and repeated flight from his creditors. His controversial writings on music, drama and politics have attracted extensive comment in recent decades, especially where they express antisemitic sentiments. The effect of his ideas can be traced in many of the arts throughout the 20th century; their influence spread beyond composition into conducting, philosophy, literature, the visual arts and theatre.

Biography

Early years

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, at No. 3, the Brühl (The House of the Red and White Lions), in the Jewish quarter. He was however an ethnic German, the ninth child of Carl Friedrich Wagner, who was a clerk in the Leipzig police service, and his wife, Johanna Rosine (née Paetz), the daughter of a baker. Wagner's father Carl died of typhus six months after Richard's birth, after which Johanna began living with Carl's friend, the actor and playwright Ludwig Geyer. In August 1814 Johanna and Geyer probably married—although no documentation of this has been found in the Leipzig church registers. She and her family moved to Geyer's residence in Dresden. Until he was fourteen, Wagner was known as Wilhelm Richard Geyer. He almost certainly thought that Geyer was his biological father.

Geyer's love of the theatre came to be shared by his stepson, and Wagner took part in his performances. In his autobiography *Mein Leben*, Wagner recalled once playing the part of an angel. In late 1820, Wagner was enrolled at Pastor Wetzel's school at Possendorf, near Dresden, where he received a little piano instruction from his Latin teacher. He struggled to play a proper scale at the keyboard and preferred playing theatre overtures by ear. Following Geyer's death in 1821, Richard was sent to the Kreuzschule, the boarding school of the Dresdner Kreuzchor, at the expense of Geyer's brother. At the age of nine he was hugely impressed by the Gothic elements of Carl Maria von Weber's opera *Der Freischütz*, which he saw Weber conduct. At this period Wagner entertained ambitions as a playwright. His first creative effort, listed in the *Wagner-Werk-Verzeichnis* (the standard listing of Wagner's works) as WWV 1, was a tragedy

called Leubald. Begun at school in 1826, it was strongly influenced by Shakespeare and Goethe. Wagner was determined to set it to music, and persuaded his family to allow him music lessons.

By 1827, the family had returned to Leipzig. Wagner's first lessons in harmony were taken during 1828–31 with Christian Gottlieb Müller. In January 1828 he first heard Beethoven's 7th Symphony and then, in March, the same composer's 9th Symphony (both at the Gewandhaus). Beethoven became a major inspiration, and Wagner wrote a piano transcription of the 9th Symphony. He was also greatly impressed by a performance of Mozart's Requiem. Wagner's early piano sonatas and his first attempts at orchestral overtures date from this period.

In 1829 he saw a performance by dramatic soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, and she became his ideal of the fusion of drama and music in opera. In *Mein Leben*, Wagner wrote "When I look back across my entire life I find no event to place beside this in the impression it produced on me", and claimed that the "profoundly human and ecstatic performance of this incomparable artist" kindled in him an "almost demonic fire."

In 1831, Wagner enrolled at the Leipzig University, where he became a member of the Saxon student fraternity. He also took composition lessons with the Thomaskantor Theodor Weinlig.[18] Weinlig was so impressed with Wagner's musical ability that he refused any payment for his lessons. He arranged for his pupil's Piano Sonata in B-flat major (which was consequently dedicated to him) to be published as Wagner's Op. 1. A year later, Wagner composed his Symphony in C

major, a Beethovenesque work performed in Prague in 1832 and at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in 1833. He then began to work on an opera, *Die Hochzeit* (The Wedding), which he never completed.

Early career (1833–42)

In 1833, Wagner's brother Albert managed to obtain for him a position as choir master at the theatre in Würzburg. In the same year, at the age of 20, Wagner composed his first complete opera, *Die Feen* (The Fairies). This work, which imitated the style of Weber, went unproduced until half a century later, when it was premiered in Munich shortly after the composer's death in 1883.

Having returned to Leipzig in 1834, Wagner held a brief appointment as musical director at the opera house in Magdeburg during which he wrote *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love), based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*. This was staged at Magdeburg in 1836 but closed before the second performance; this, together with the financial collapse of the theatre company employing him, left the composer with serious money problems. Wagner had fallen for one of the leading ladies at Magdeburg, the actress Christine Wilhelmine "Minna" Planer. After the disaster of *Das Liebesverbot*, he followed her to Königsberg where she helped him to get an engagement at the theatre. The two married in Tragheim Church on 24 November 1836. In May 1837, Minna left Wagner for another man; this was but the first débâcle of a troubled marriage. In June 1837, Wagner moved to Riga (then in the Russian Empire), where he became music director of the local opera; having in this capacity engaged Minna's sister Amalie (also a singer) for the theatre, he presently resumed relations with Minna during 1838.

By 1839, the couple had amassed such large debts that they fled Riga to avoid their creditors; debt would plague Wagner for most of his life. Initially they took a stormy sea passage to London, from which Wagner drew the inspiration

for *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman), with a plot based on a sketch by Heinrich Heine. The Wagners arrived in Paris in September 1839 and stayed there until 1842. Richard made a scant living writing articles and arranging operas by other composers, largely on behalf of the Schlesinger publishing house. He also completed during this stay his third and fourth operas *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer*.

Dresden (1842–49)

Wagner had completed *Rienzi* in 1840. With the strong support of Giacomo Meyerbeer, it was accepted for performance by the Dresden Court Theatre (Hofoper) in the Kingdom of Saxony and in 1842, Wagner moved to Dresden. His relief at returning to Germany was recorded in his "Autobiographic Sketch" of 1842, where he wrote that, en route from Paris, "For the first time I saw the Rhine—with hot tears in my eyes, I, poor artist, swore eternal fidelity to my German fatherland." *Rienzi* was staged to considerable acclaim on 20 October.

Wagner lived in Dresden for the next six years, eventually being appointed the Royal Saxon Court Conductor. During this period, he staged there *Der fliegende Holländer* (2 January 1843) and *Tannhäuser* (19 October 1845), the first two of his three middle-period operas. Wagner also mixed with artistic circles in Dresden, including the composer Ferdinand Hiller and the architect Gottfried Semper.

Wagner's involvement in left-wing politics abruptly ended his welcome in Dresden. Wagner was active among socialist German nationalists there, regularly receiving such guests as the conductor and radical editor August Röckel and the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. He was also influenced by the ideas of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Ludwig Feuerbach. Widespread discontent came to a head in 1849, when the unsuccessful May Uprising in Dresden broke out, in which Wagner played a minor supporting role. Warrants were issued for the revolutionaries' arrest. Wagner had to flee, first visiting Paris and then settling in Zürich.

In exile: Switzerland (1849–58)

Wagner was to spend the next twelve years in exile from Germany. He had completed *Lohengrin*, the last of his middle-period operas, before the Dresden uprising, and now wrote desperately to his friend Franz Liszt to have it staged in his absence. Liszt conducted the premiere in Weimar in August 1850.

Nevertheless, Wagner was in grim personal straits, isolated from the German musical world and without any regular income. In 1850, Julie, the wife of his friend Karl Ritter, began to pay him a small pension which she maintained until 1859. With help from her friend Jessie Laussot this was to have been augmented to an annual sum of 3000 Thalers per year; but this plan was abandoned when Wagner began an affair with Mme. Laussot. Wagner even planned an elopement with her in 1852, which her husband prevented. Meanwhile, Wagner's wife Minna, who had disliked the operas he had written after *Rienzi*, was falling into a deepening depression. Wagner fell victim to ill-health, according to Ernest Newman "largely a matter of overwrought nerves", which made it difficult for him to continue writing.

Wagner's primary published output during his first years in Zürich was a set of essays. In "The Artwork of the Future" (1849), he described a vision of opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art"), in which the various arts such as music, song, dance, poetry, visual arts and stagecraft were unified. "Judaism in Music" (1850) was the first of Wagner's writings to feature antisemitic views. In this polemic Wagner argued, frequently using traditional antisemitic abuse, that Jews had no connection to the German spirit, and were thus only capable of producing shallow and artificial music. According

to him, they composed music to achieve popularity and, thereby, financial success, as opposed to creating genuine works of art.

In "Opera and Drama" (1851), Wagner described the aesthetics of drama that he was using to create the Ring operas. Before leaving Dresden, Wagner had drafted a scenario that eventually became the four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. He initially wrote the libretto for a single opera, *Siegfrieds Tod* (Siegfried's Death), in 1848. After arriving in Zürich he expanded the story with the opera *Der junge Siegfried* (Young Siegfried), which explored the hero's background. He completed the text of the cycle by writing the libretti for *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie) and *Das Rheingold* (The Rhine Gold) and revising the other libretti to agree with his new concept, completing them in 1852. The concept of opera expressed in "Opera and Drama" and in other essays effectively renounced the operas he had previously written, up to and including *Lohengrin*. Partly in an attempt to explain his change of views, Wagner published in 1851 the autobiographical "A Communication to My Friends". This contained his first public announcement of what was to become the Ring cycle:

I shall never write an Opera more. As I have no wish to invent an arbitrary title for my works, I will call them Dramas ...

I propose to produce my myth in three complete dramas, preceded by a lengthy Prelude (Vorspiel). ...

At a specially-appointed Festival, I propose, some future time, to produce those three Dramas with their Prelude, in the course of three days and a fore-evening [emphasis in original].

Wagner began composing the music for *Das Rheingold* between November 1853 and September 1854, following it immediately with *Die Walküre* (written between June 1854 and March 1856). He began work on the third Ring opera, which he now called simply *Siegfried*, probably in September 1856, but by June 1857 he had completed only the first two acts before deciding to put the work aside to concentrate on a new idea: *Tristan und Isolde*, based on the Arthurian love story *Tristan and Iseult*.

One source of inspiration for *Tristan und Isolde* was the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, notably his *The World as Will and Representation*, to which Wagner had been introduced in 1854 by his poet friend Georg Herwegh. Wagner later called this the most important event of his life. His personal circumstances certainly made him an easy convert to what he understood to be Schopenhauer's philosophy, a deeply pessimistic view of the human condition. He remained an adherent of Schopenhauer for the rest of his life.

One of Schopenhauer's doctrines was that music held a supreme role in the arts as a direct expression of the world's essence, namely, blind, impulsive will. This doctrine contradicted Wagner's view, expressed in "Opera and Drama", that the music in opera had to be subservient to the drama. Wagner scholars have argued that Schopenhauer's influence caused Wagner to assign a more commanding role to music in his later operas, including the latter half of the Ring cycle, which he had yet to compose. Aspects of Schopenhauerian doctrine found their way into Wagner's subsequent libretti.

A second source of inspiration was Wagner's infatuation with the poet-writer Mathilde Wesendonck, the wife of the silk merchant Otto Wesendonck. Wagner met the Wesendoncks, who were both great admirers of his music, in Zürich in 1852. From May 1853 onwards Wesendonck made several loans to Wagner to finance his household expenses in Zürich,

and in 1857 placed a cottage on his estate at Wagner's disposal, which became known as the Asyl ("asylum" or "place of rest"). During this period, Wagner's growing passion for his patron's wife inspired him to put aside work on the Ring cycle (which was not resumed for the next twelve years) and begin work on Tristan. While planning the opera, Wagner composed the Wesendonck Lieder, five songs for voice and piano, setting poems by Mathilde. Two of these settings are explicitly subtitled by Wagner as "studies for Tristan und Isolde".

Amongst the conducting engagements that Wagner undertook for revenue during this period, he gave several concerts in 1855 with the London Philharmonic Society, including one before Queen Victoria. The Queen enjoyed his Tannhäuser overture and spoke with Wagner after the concert, writing of him in her diary that he was "short, very quiet, wears spectacles & has a very finely-developed forehead, a hooked nose & projecting chin."

In exile: Venice and Paris (1858–62)

Wagner's uneasy affair with Mathilde collapsed in 1858, when Minna intercepted a letter to Mathilde from him. After the resulting confrontation with Minna, Wagner left Zürich alone, bound for Venice, where he rented an apartment in the Palazzo Giustinian, while Minna returned to Germany. Wagner's attitude to Minna had changed; the editor of his correspondence with her, John Burk, has said that she was to him "an invalid, to be treated with kindness and consideration, but, except at a distance, [was] a menace to his peace of mind." Wagner continued his correspondence with Mathilde and his friendship with her husband Otto, who maintained his financial support of the composer. In an 1859 letter to Mathilde, Wagner wrote, half-satirically, of Tristan: "Child! This Tristan is turning into something terrible. This final act!!!—I fear the opera will be banned ... only mediocre performances can save me! Perfectly good ones will be bound to drive people mad."

In November 1859, Wagner once again moved to Paris to oversee production of a new revision of *Tannhäuser*, staged thanks to the efforts of Princess Pauline von Metternich, whose husband was the Austrian ambassador in Paris. The performances of the Paris *Tannhäuser* in 1861 were a notable fiasco. This was partly a consequence of the conservative tastes of the Jockey Club, which organised demonstrations in the theatre to protest at the presentation of the ballet feature in act 1 (instead of its traditional location in the second act); but the opportunity was also exploited by those who wanted to use the occasion as a veiled political protest against the pro-Austrian policies of Napoleon III. The work was withdrawn after the third performance and Wagner left Paris soon after. He had sought a reconciliation with Minna

during this Paris visit, and although she joined him there, the reunion was not successful and they again parted from each other when Wagner left.

Return and resurgence (1862–71)

The political ban that had been placed on Wagner in Germany after he had fled Dresden was fully lifted in 1862. The composer settled in Biebrich in Prussia. Here Minna visited him for the last time: they parted irrevocably, though Wagner continued to give financial support to her while she lived in Dresden until her death in 1866.

In Biebrich, Wagner at last began work on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, his only mature comedy. Wagner wrote a first draft of the libretto in 1845, and he had resolved to develop it during a visit he had made to Venice with the Wesendoncks in 1860, where he was inspired by Titian's painting *The Assumption of the Virgin*. Throughout this period (1861–64) Wagner sought to have *Tristan und Isolde* produced in Vienna. Despite numerous rehearsals, the opera remained unperformed, and gained a reputation as being "impossible" to sing, which added to Wagner's financial problems.

Wagner's fortunes took a dramatic upturn in 1864, when King Ludwig II succeeded to the throne of Bavaria at the age of 18. The young king, an ardent admirer of Wagner's operas, had the composer brought to Munich. The King, who was homosexual, expressed in his correspondence a passionate personal adoration for the composer, and Wagner in his responses had no scruples about counterfeiting a similar atmosphere. Ludwig settled Wagner's considerable debts, and proposed to stage *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger*, *the Ring*, and the other operas Wagner planned. Wagner also began to dictate his autobiography, *Mein Leben*, at the King's request. Wagner noted that his rescue by Ludwig coincided with

news of the death of his earlier mentor (but later supposed enemy) Giacomo Meyerbeer, and regretted that "this operatic master, who had done me so much harm, should not have lived to see this day."

After grave difficulties in rehearsal, *Tristan und Isolde* premiered at the National Theatre Munich on 10 June 1865, the first Wagner opera premiere in almost 15 years. (The premiere had been scheduled for 15 May, but was delayed by bailiffs acting for Wagner's creditors, and also because the Isolde, Malvina Schnorr von Carolsfeld, was hoarse and needed time to recover.) The conductor of this premiere was Hans von Bülow, whose wife, Cosima, had given birth in April that year to a daughter, named Isolde, a child not of Bülow but of Wagner.

Cosima was 24 years younger than Wagner and was herself illegitimate, the daughter of the Countess Marie d'Agoult, who had left her husband for Franz Liszt. Liszt initially disapproved of his daughter's involvement with Wagner, though nevertheless the two men were friends. The indiscreet affair scandalised Munich, and Wagner also fell into disfavour with many leading members of the court, who were suspicious of his influence on the King. In December 1865, Ludwig was finally forced to ask the composer to leave Munich. He apparently also toyed with the idea of abdicating to follow his hero into exile, but Wagner quickly dissuaded him.

Ludwig installed Wagner at the Villa Tribschen, beside Switzerland's Lake Lucerne. *Die Meistersinger* was completed at Tribschen in 1867, and premiered in Munich on 21 June the following year. At Ludwig's insistence, "special previews" of the first two works of the Ring, *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, were performed at Munich in 1869 and 1870,[103] but Wagner retained his dream, first expressed in "A Communication to My Friends", to present the first complete cycle at a special festival with a new, dedicated, opera house.

Minna had died of a heart attack on 25 January 1866 in Dresden. Wagner did not attend the funeral. Following Minna's death Cosima wrote to Hans von Bülow on a number of occasions asking him to grant her a divorce, but Bülow refused to concede this. He only consented after she had two more children with Wagner; another daughter, named Eva, after the heroine of *Meistersinger*, and a son Siegfried, named for the hero of the Ring. The divorce was finally sanctioned, after delays in the legal process, by a Berlin court on 18 July 1870. Richard and Cosima's wedding took place on 25 August 1870. On Christmas Day of that year, Wagner arranged a surprise performance (its premiere) of the *Siegfried Idyll* for Cosima's birthday. The marriage to Cosima lasted to the end of Wagner's life.

Wagner, settled into his new-found domesticity, turned his energies towards completing the Ring cycle. He had not abandoned polemics: he republished his 1850 pamphlet "*Judaism in Music*", originally issued under a pseudonym, under his own name in 1869. He extended the introduction, and wrote a lengthy additional final section. The publication led to several public protests at early performances of *Die Meistersinger* in Vienna and Mannheim.

Bayreuth (1871–76)

In 1871, Wagner decided to move to Bayreuth, which was to be the location of his new opera house. The town council donated a large plot of land—the "Green Hill"—as a site for the theatre. The Wagners moved to the town the following year, and the foundation stone for the Bayreuth Festspielhaus ("Festival Theatre") was laid. Wagner initially announced the first Bayreuth Festival, at which for the first time the Ring cycle would be presented complete, for 1873, but since Ludwig had declined to finance the project, the start of building was delayed and the proposed date for the festival was deferred. To raise funds for the construction, "Wagner societies" were formed in several cities, and Wagner began touring Germany conducting concerts. By the spring of 1873, only a third of the required funds had been raised; further pleas to Ludwig were initially ignored, but early in 1874, with the project on the verge of collapse, the King relented and provided a loan. The full building programme included the family home, "Wahnfried", into which Wagner, with Cosima and the children, moved from their temporary accommodation on 18 April 1874.[116] The theatre was completed in 1875, and the festival scheduled for the following year. Commenting on the struggle to finish the building, Wagner remarked to Cosima: "Each stone is red with my blood and yours".

For the design of the Festspielhaus, Wagner appropriated some of the ideas of his former colleague, Gottfried Semper, which he had previously solicited for a proposed new opera house at Munich. Wagner was responsible for several theatrical innovations at Bayreuth; these include darkening the auditorium during performances, and placing the orchestra in a pit out of view of the audience.

The Festspielhaus finally opened on 13 August 1876 with *Das Rheingold*, at last taking its place as the first evening of the complete Ring cycle; the 1876 Bayreuth Festival therefore saw the premiere of the complete cycle, performed as a

sequence as the composer had intended. The 1876 Festival consisted of three full Ring cycles (under the baton of Hans Richter). At the end, critical reactions ranged between that of the Norwegian composer Edvard Grieg, who thought the work "divinely composed", and that of the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, which called the music "the dream of a lunatic". Amongst the disillusioned were Wagner's friend and disciple Friedrich Nietzsche, who, having published his eulogistic essay "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth" before the festival as part of his *Untimely Meditations*, was bitterly disappointed by what he saw as Wagner's pandering to increasingly exclusivist German nationalism; his breach with Wagner began at this time. The festival firmly established Wagner as an artist of European, and indeed world, importance: attendees included Kaiser Wilhelm I, the Emperor Pedro II of Brazil, Anton Bruckner, Camille Saint-Saëns and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

Wagner was far from satisfied with the Festival; Cosima recorded that months later, his attitude towards the productions was "Never again, never again!"[124] Moreover, the festival finished with a deficit of about 150,000 marks. The expenses of Bayreuth and of Wahnfried meant that Wagner still sought additional sources of income by conducting or taking on commissions such as the Centennial March for America, for which he received \$5000.

Last years (1876–83)

Following the first Bayreuth Festival, Wagner began work on *Parsifal*, his final opera. The composition took four years, much of which Wagner spent in Italy for health reasons. From 1876 to 1878 Wagner also embarked on the last of his documented emotional liaisons, this time with Judith Gautier, whom he had met at the 1876 Festival. Wagner was also much troubled by problems of financing *Parsifal*, and by the prospect of the work being performed by other theatres than Bayreuth. He was once again assisted by the liberality of King Ludwig, but was still forced by his personal financial situation in 1877 to sell the rights of several of his unpublished works (including the *Siegfried Idyll*) to the publisher Schott.

Wagner wrote a number of articles in his later years, often on political topics, and often reactionary in tone, repudiating some of his earlier, more liberal, views. These include "Religion and Art" (1880) and "Heroism and Christianity" (1881), which were printed in the journal *Bayreuther Blätter*, published by his supporter Hans von Wolzogen. Wagner's sudden interest in Christianity at this period, which infuses *Parsifal*, was contemporary with his increasing alignment with German nationalism, and required on his part, and the part of his associates, "the rewriting of some recent Wagnerian history", so as to represent, for example, the Ring as a work reflecting Christian ideals. Many of these later articles, including "What is German?" (1878, but based on a draft written in the 1860s), repeated Wagner's antisemitic preoccupations.

Wagner completed *Parsifal* in January 1882, and a second Bayreuth Festival was held for the new opera, which premiered on 26 May. Wagner was by this time extremely ill, having suffered a series of increasingly severe angina

attacks. During the sixteenth and final performance of Parsifal on 29 August, he entered the pit unseen during act 3, took the baton from conductor Hermann Levi, and led the performance to its conclusion.

After the festival, the Wagner family journeyed to Venice for the winter. Wagner died of a heart attack at the age of 69 on 13 February 1883 at Ca' Vendramin Calergi, a 16th-century palazzo on the Grand Canal. The legend that the attack was prompted by argument with Cosima over Wagner's supposedly amorous interest in the singer Carrie Pringle, who had been a Flower-maiden in Parsifal at Bayreuth, is without credible evidence. After a funerary gondola bore Wagner's remains over the Grand Canal, his body was taken to Germany where it was buried in the garden of the Villa Wahnfried in Bayreuth.

Works

Wagner's musical output is listed by the Wagner-Werk-Verzeichnis (WWV) as comprising 113 works, including fragments and projects.

Operas

Leitmotif associated with the horn-call of the hero of Wagner's opera Siegfried

Wagner's operatic works are his primary artistic legacy. Unlike most opera composers, who generally left the task of writing the libretto (the text and lyrics) to others, Wagner wrote his own libretti, which he referred to as "poems".

From 1849 onwards, he urged a new concept of opera often referred to as "music drama" (although he later rejected this term), in which all musical, poetic and dramatic elements were to be fused together—the Gesamtkunstwerk. Wagner developed a compositional style in which the importance of the orchestra is equal to that of the singers. The orchestra's dramatic role in the later operas includes the use of leitmotifs, musical phrases that can be interpreted as announcing specific characters, locales, and plot elements; their complex interweaving and evolution illuminates the progression of the drama. These operas are still, despite Wagner's reservations, referred to by many writers as "music dramas".

Early works (to 1842)

Wagner's earliest attempts at opera were often uncompleted. Abandoned works include a pastoral opera based on Goethe's *Die Laune des Verliebten* (The Infatuated Lover's Caprice), written at the age of 17, *Die Hochzeit* (The Wedding), on which Wagner worked in 1832, and the singspiel *Männerlist größer als Frauenlist* (Men are More Cunning than Women, 1837–38). *Die Feen* (The Fairies, 1833) was unperformed in the composer's lifetime and *Das Liebesverbot* (The Ban on Love, 1836) was withdrawn after its first performance. *Rienzi* (1842) was Wagner's first opera to be successfully staged. The compositional style of these early works was conventional—the relatively more sophisticated *Rienzi* showing the clear influence of Grand Opera à la Spontini and Meyerbeer—and did not exhibit the innovations that would mark Wagner's place in musical history. Later in life, Wagner said that he did not consider these works to be part of his oeuvre; none of them has ever been performed at the Bayreuth Festival, and they have been performed only rarely in the last hundred years (although the overture to *Rienzi* is an occasional concert piece). *Die Feen*, *Das Liebesverbot* and *Rienzi* were performed at both Leipzig and Bayreuth in 2013 to mark the composer's bicentenary.

"Romantic operas" (1843–51)

Opening of overture to *Der fliegende Holländer* in Wagner's hand and with his notes to the publisher

Wagner's middle stage output began with *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman, 1843), followed by *Tannhäuser* (1845) and *Lohengrin* (1850). These three operas are sometimes referred to as Wagner's "romantic operas". They reinforced the reputation, among the public in Germany and beyond, that Wagner had begun to establish with *Rienzi*. Although distancing himself from the style of these operas from 1849 onwards, he nevertheless reworked both *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser* on several occasions. These three operas are considered to represent a significant developmental stage in Wagner's musical and operatic maturity as regards thematic handling, portrayal of emotions and orchestration. They are the earliest works included in the Bayreuth canon, the mature operas that Cosima staged at the Bayreuth Festival after Wagner's death in accordance with his wishes. All three (including the differing versions of *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*) continue to be regularly performed throughout the world, and have been frequently recorded. They were also the operas by which his fame spread during his lifetime.

"Music dramas" (1851–82)

Starting the Ring

Wagner's late dramas are considered his masterpieces. *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, commonly referred to as the Ring or "Ring cycle", is a set of four operas based loosely on figures and elements of Germanic mythology—particularly from the later Norse mythology—notably the Old Norse Poetic Edda and Volsunga Saga, and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. Wagner specifically developed the libretti for these operas according to his interpretation of Stabreim, highly alliterative rhyming verse-pairs used in old Germanic poetry. They were also influenced by Wagner's concepts of ancient Greek drama, in which tetralogies were a component of Athenian festivals, and which he had amply discussed in his essay "Oper und Drama".

The first two components of the Ring cycle were *Das Rheingold* (The Rhinegold), which was completed in 1854, and *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), which was finished in 1856. In *Das Rheingold*, with its "relentlessly talky 'realism' [and] the absence of lyrical 'numbers'", Wagner came very close to the musical ideals of his 1849–51 essays. *Die Walküre*, which contains what is virtually a traditional aria (Siegmund's *Winterstürme* in the first act), and the quasi-choral appearance of the Valkyries themselves, shows more "operatic" traits, but has been assessed by Barry Millington as "the music drama that most satisfactorily embodies the theoretical principles of 'Oper und Drama'... A thoroughgoing synthesis of poetry and music is achieved without any notable sacrifice in musical expression."

Tristan und Isolde and Die Meistersinger

While composing the opera Siegfried, the third part of the Ring cycle, Wagner interrupted work on it and between 1857 and 1864 wrote the tragic love story Tristan und Isolde and his only mature comedy Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg), two works that are also part of the regular operatic canon.

Tristan is often granted a special place in musical history; many see it as the beginning of the move away from conventional harmony and tonality and consider that it lays the groundwork for the direction of classical music in the 20th century. Wagner felt that his musico-dramatical theories were most perfectly realised in this work with its use of "the art of transition" between dramatic elements and the balance achieved between vocal and orchestral lines. Completed in 1859, the work was given its first performance in Munich, conducted by Bülow, in June 1865.

Die Meistersinger was originally conceived by Wagner in 1845 as a sort of comic pendant to Tannhäuser. Like Tristan, it was premiered in Munich under the baton of Bülow, on 21 June 1868, and became an immediate success. Barry Millington describes Meistersinger as "a rich, perceptive music drama widely admired for its warm humanity"; but because of its strong German nationalist overtones, it is also cited by some as an example of Wagner's reactionary politics and antisemitism.

Completing the Ring

When Wagner returned to writing the music for the last act of Siegfried and for *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods), as the final part of the Ring, his style had changed once more to something more recognisable as "operatic" than the aural world of *Rheingold* and *Walküre*, though it was still thoroughly stamped with his own originality as a composer and suffused with leitmotifs. This was in part because the libretti of the four Ring operas had been written in reverse order, so that the book for *Götterdämmerung* was conceived more "traditionally" than that of *Rheingold*; still, the self-imposed strictures of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* had become relaxed. The differences also result from Wagner's development as a composer during the period in which he wrote *Tristan*, *Meistersinger* and the Paris version of *Tannhäuser*. From act 3 of *Siegfried* onwards, the Ring becomes more chromatic melodically, more complex harmonically and more developmental in its treatment of leitmotifs.

Wagner took 26 years from writing the first draft of a libretto in 1848 until he completed *Götterdämmerung* in 1874. The Ring takes about 15 hours to perform and is the only undertaking of such size to be regularly presented on the world's stages.

Parsifal

Wagner's final opera, *Parsifal* (1882), which was his only work written especially for his Bayreuth Festspielhaus and which is described in the score as a "Bühnenweihfestspiel" ("festival play for the consecration of the stage"), has a storyline suggested by elements of the legend of the Holy Grail. It also carries elements of Buddhist renunciation suggested by Wagner's readings of Schopenhauer. Wagner described it to Cosima as his "last card". It remains controversial because of its treatment of Christianity, its eroticism, and its expression, as perceived by some commentators, of German nationalism and antisemitism. Despite the composer's own description of the opera to King Ludwig as "this most Christian of works", Ulrike Kienzle has commented that "Wagner's turn to Christian mythology, upon which the imagery and spiritual contents of *Parsifal* rest, is idiosyncratic and contradicts Christian dogma in many ways." Musically the opera has been held to represent a continuing development of the composer's style, and Barry Millington describes it as "a diaphanous score of unearthly beauty and refinement".

Non-operatic music

Apart from his operas, Wagner composed relatively few pieces of music. These include a symphony in C major (written at the age of 19), the Faust Overture (the only completed part of an intended symphony on the subject), some overtures, and choral and piano pieces. His most commonly performed work that is not an extract from an opera is the Siegfried Idyll for chamber orchestra, which has several motifs in common with the Ring cycle. The Wesendonck Lieder are also often performed, either in the original piano version, or with orchestral accompaniment.[n 16] More rarely performed are the American Centennial March (1876), and Das Liebesmahl der Apostel (The Love Feast of the Apostles), a piece for male choruses and orchestra composed in 1843 for the city of Dresden.

After completing Parsifal, Wagner expressed his intention to turn to the writing of symphonies, and several sketches dating from the late 1870s and early 1880s have been identified as work towards this end. The overtures and certain orchestral passages from Wagner's middle and late-stage operas are commonly played as concert pieces. For most of these, Wagner wrote or rewrote short passages to ensure musical coherence. The "Bridal Chorus" from Lohengrin is frequently played as the bride's processional wedding march in English-speaking countries.

Prose writings

Wagner was an extremely prolific writer, authoring numerous books, poems, and articles, as well as voluminous correspondence. His writings covered a wide range of topics, including autobiography, politics, philosophy, and detailed analyses of his own operas.

Wagner planned for a collected edition of his publications as early as 1865; he believed that such an edition would help the world understand his intellectual development and artistic aims. The first such edition was published between 1871 and 1883, but was doctored to suppress or alter articles that were an embarrassment to him (e.g. those praising Meyerbeer), or by altering dates on some articles to reinforce Wagner's own account of his progress. Wagner's autobiography *Mein Leben* was originally published for close friends only in a very small edition (15–18 copies per volume) in four volumes between 1870 and 1880. The first public edition (with many passages suppressed by Cosima) appeared in 1911; the first attempt at a full edition (in German) appeared in 1963.

There have been modern complete or partial editions of Wagner's writings, including a centennial edition in German edited by Dieter Borchmeyer (which, however, omitted the essay "Das Judenthum in der Musik" and *Mein Leben*). The English translations of Wagner's prose in eight volumes by W. Ashton Ellis (1892–99) are still in print and commonly used, despite their deficiencies. A complete edition of Wagner's correspondence, estimated to amount to between 10,000 and 12,000 items, is still under way under the supervision of the Institute for Music Research at the University of Würzburg. As of November 2014, 21 volumes have appeared, covering the period to 1870.

Influence and legacy

Influence on music

Wagner's later musical style introduced new ideas in harmony, melodic process (leitmotif) and operatic structure. Notably from *Tristan und Isolde* onwards, he explored the limits of the traditional tonal system, which gave keys and chords their identity, pointing the way to atonality in the 20th century. Some music historians date the beginning of modern classical music to the first notes of *Tristan*, which include the so-called *Tristan chord*.

Wagner inspired great devotion. For a long period, many composers were inclined to align themselves with or against Wagner's music. Anton Bruckner and Hugo Wolf were greatly indebted to him, as were César Franck, Henri Duparc, Ernest Chausson, Jules Massenet, Richard Strauss, Alexander von Zemlinsky, Hans Pfitzner and numerous others. Gustav Mahler was devoted to Wagner and his music; aged 15, he sought him out on his 1875 visit to Vienna, became a renowned Wagner conductor, and his compositions are seen by Richard Taruskin as extending Wagner's "maximalization" of "the temporal and the sonorous" in music to the world of the symphony.[198] The harmonic revolutions of Claude Debussy and Arnold Schoenberg (both of whose oeuvres contain examples of tonal and atonal modernism) have often been traced back to *Tristan* and *Parsifal*. The Italian form of operatic realism known as *verismo* owed much to the Wagnerian concept of musical form.

Wagner made a major contribution to the principles and practice of conducting. His essay "About Conducting" (1869) advanced Hector Berlioz's technique of conducting and claimed that conducting was a means by which a musical work

could be re-interpreted, rather than simply a mechanism for achieving orchestral unison. He exemplified this approach in his own conducting, which was significantly more flexible than the disciplined approach of Mendelssohn; in his view this also justified practices that would today be frowned upon, such as the rewriting of scores. Wilhelm Furtwängler felt that Wagner and Bülow, through their interpretative approach, inspired a whole new generation of conductors (including Furtwängler himself).

Amongst those claiming inspiration from Wagner's music are the German band Rammstein, and the electronic composer Klaus Schulze, whose 1975 album *Timewind* consists of two 30-minute tracks, *Bayreuth Return* and *Wahnfried 1883*. Joey DeMaio of the band Manowar has described Wagner as "The father of heavy metal".[206] The Slovenian group Laibach created the 2009 suite *VolksWagner*, using material from Wagner's operas. Phil Spector's *Wall of Sound* recording technique was, it has been claimed, heavily influenced by Wagner.

Influence on literature, philosophy and the visual arts

Wagner's influence on literature and philosophy is significant. Millington has commented:

[Wagner's] protean abundance meant that he could inspire the use of literary motif in many a novel employing interior monologue; ... the Symbolists saw him as a mystic hierophant; the Decadents found many a frisson in his work.

Friedrich Nietzsche was a member of Wagner's inner circle during the early 1870s, and his first published work, *The Birth of Tragedy*, proposed Wagner's music as the Dionysian "rebirth" of European culture in opposition to Apollonian rationalist "decadence". Nietzsche broke with Wagner following the first Bayreuth Festival, believing that Wagner's final phase represented a pandering to Christian pieties and a surrender to the new German Reich. Nietzsche expressed his displeasure with the later Wagner in "The Case of Wagner" and "Nietzsche contra Wagner".

Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine worshipped Wagner. Édouard Dujardin, whose influential novel *Les Lauriers sont coupés* is in the form of an interior monologue inspired by Wagnerian music, founded a journal dedicated to Wagner, *La Revue Wagnérienne*, to which J. K. Huysmans and Téodor de Wyzewa contributed. In a list of major cultural figures influenced by Wagner, Bryan Magee includes D. H. Lawrence, Aubrey Beardsley, Romain Rolland, Gérard de Nerval, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Rainer Maria Rilke and numerous others.

In the 20th century, W. H. Auden once called Wagner "perhaps the greatest genius that ever lived", while Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust were heavily influenced by him and discussed Wagner in their novels. He is also discussed in some of the works of James Joyce. Wagnerian themes inhabit T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which contains lines from *Tristan und Isolde* and *Götterdämmerung* and Verlaine's poem on *Parsifal*.

Many of Wagner's concepts, including his speculation about dreams, predated their investigation by Sigmund Freud. Wagner had publicly analysed the Oedipus myth before Freud was born in terms of its psychological significance, insisting that incestuous desires are natural and normal, and perceptively exhibiting the relationship between sexuality and anxiety. Georg Groddeck considered the *Ring* as the first manual of psychoanalysis.

Influence on cinema

Wagner's concept of the use of leitmotifs and the integrated musical expression which they can enable has influenced many 20th and 21st century film scores. The critic Theodor Adorno has noted that the Wagnerian leitmotif "leads directly to cinema music where the sole function of the leitmotif is to announce heroes or situations so as to allow the audience to orient itself more easily". Amongst film scores citing Wagnerian themes are Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, which features a version of the Ride of the Valkyries, Trevor Jones's soundtrack to John Boorman's film *Excalibur*, and the 2011 films *A Dangerous Method* (dir. David Cronenberg) and *Melancholia* (dir. Lars von Trier). Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's 1977 film *Hitler: A Film from Germany*'s visual style and set design are strongly inspired by *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, musical excerpts from which are frequently used in the film's soundtrack.

Opponents and supporters

Not all reaction to Wagner was positive. For a time, German musical life divided into two factions, supporters of Wagner and supporters of Johannes Brahms; the latter, with the support of the powerful critic Eduard Hanslick (of whom Beckmesser in *Meistersinger* is in part a caricature) championed traditional forms and led the conservative front against Wagnerian innovations. They were supported by the conservative leanings of some German music schools, including the conservatories at Leipzig under Ignaz Moscheles and at Cologne under the direction of Ferdinand Hiller. Another Wagner detractor was the French composer Charles-Valentin Alkan, who wrote to Hiller after attending Wagner's Paris concert on 25 January 1860 at which Wagner conducted the overtures to *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*, the preludes to *Lohengrin* and *Tristan und Isolde*, and six other extracts from *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*: "I had imagined that I was going to meet music of an innovative kind but was astonished to find a pale imitation of Berlioz... I do not like all the music of Berlioz while appreciating his marvellous understanding of certain instrumental effects... but here he was imitated and caricatured... Wagner is not a musician, he is a disease."

Even those who, like Debussy, opposed Wagner ("this old poisoner") could not deny his influence. Indeed, Debussy was one of many composers, including Tchaikovsky, who felt the need to break with Wagner precisely because his influence was so unmistakable and overwhelming. "Golliwogg's Cakewalk" from Debussy's *Children's Corner* piano suite contains a deliberately tongue-in-cheek quotation from the opening bars of *Tristan*. Others who proved resistant to Wagner's operas included Gioachino Rossini, who said "Wagner has wonderful moments, and dreadful quarters of an hour." In the 20th century Wagner's music was parodied by Paul Hindemith and Hanns Eisler, among others.

Wagner's followers (known as Wagnerians or Wagnerites) have formed many societies dedicated to Wagner's life and work.

Film and stage portrayals

Wagner has been the subject of many biographical films. The earliest was a silent film made by Carl Froelich in 1913 and featured in the title role the composer Giuseppe Becce, who also wrote the score for the film (as Wagner's music, still in copyright, was not available). Amongst other film portrayals of Wagner are: Alan Badel in *Magic Fire* (1955); Lyndon Brook in *Song Without End* (1960); Trevor Howard in *Ludwig* (1972); Paul Nicholas in *Lisztomania* (1975); and Richard Burton in *Wagner* (1983).

Jonathan Harvey's opera *Wagner Dream* (2007) intertwines the events surrounding Wagner's death with the story of Wagner's uncompleted opera outline *Die Sieger* (The Victors).

Bayreuth Festival

Since Wagner's death, the Bayreuth Festival, which has become an annual event, has been successively directed by his widow, his son Siegfried, the latter's widow Winifred Wagner, their two sons Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, and, presently, two of the composer's great-granddaughters, Eva Wagner-Pasquier and Katharina Wagner. Since 1973, the festival has been overseen by the Richard-Wagner-Stiftung (Richard Wagner Foundation), the members of which include a number of Wagner's descendants.

Controversies

Wagner's operas, writings, politics, beliefs and unorthodox lifestyle made him a controversial figure during his lifetime. Following his death, debate about his ideas and their interpretation, particularly in Germany during the 20th century, has continued.

Racism and antisemitism

Caricature of Wagner by Karl Clig in the Viennese satirical magazine, *Humoristische Blätter* (1873). The exaggerated features refer to rumours of Wagner's Jewish ancestry.

Wagner's writings on the Jews corresponded to some existing trends of thought in Germany during the 19th century; however, despite his very public views on these themes, throughout his life Wagner had Jewish friends, colleagues and supporters. There have been frequent suggestions that antisemitic stereotypes are represented in Wagner's operas. The characters of Mime in the Ring, Sixtus Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*, and Klingsor in *Parsifal* are sometimes claimed as Jewish representations, though they are not identified as such in the librettos of these operas. The topic of Wagner and the Jews is further complicated by allegations, which may have been credited by Wagner, that he himself was of Jewish ancestry, via his supposed father Geyer.

Some biographers have asserted that Wagner in his final years came to believe in the racist philosophy of Arthur de Gobineau, notably Gobineau's belief that Western society was doomed because of miscegenation between "superior"

and "inferior" races. According to Robert Gutman, this theme is reflected in the opera Parsifal. Other biographers (such as Lucy Beckett) believe that this is not true, as the original drafts of the story date back to 1857 and Wagner had completed the libretto for Parsifal by 1877; but he displayed no significant interest in Gobineau until 1880.

Other interpretations

Wagner's ideas are amenable to socialist interpretations; many of his ideas on art were being formulated at the time of his revolutionary inclinations in the 1840s. Thus, for example, George Bernard Shaw wrote in *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1883):

[Wagner's] picture of Niblunghome under the reign of Alberic is a poetic vision of unregulated industrial capitalism as it was made known in Germany in the middle of the 19th century by Engels's book "The Condition of the Working Class in England".

Left-wing interpretations of Wagner also inform the writings of Theodor Adorno among other Wagner critics. Walter Benjamin gave Wagner as an example of "bourgeois false consciousness", alienating art from its social context.

The writer Robert Donington has produced a detailed, if controversial, Jungian interpretation of the Ring cycle, described as "an approach to Wagner by way of his symbols", which, for example, sees the character of the goddess Fricka as part of her husband Wotan's "inner femininity". Millington notes that Jean-Jacques Nattiez has also applied psychoanalytical techniques in an evaluation of Wagner's life and works.

Nazi appropriation

Adolf Hitler was an admirer of Wagner's music and saw in his operas an embodiment of his own vision of the German nation; in a 1922 speech he claimed that Wagner's works glorified "the heroic Teutonic nature ... Greatness lies in the heroic." Hitler visited Bayreuth frequently from 1923 onwards and attended the productions at the theatre. There continues to be debate about the extent to which Wagner's views might have influenced Nazi thinking. Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855–1927), who married Wagner's daughter Eva in 1908 but never met Wagner, was the author of the racist book *The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, approved by the Nazi movement. He met Hitler on a number of occasions between 1923 and 1927 in Bayreuth, but cannot credibly be regarded as a conduit of Wagner's own views. The Nazis used those parts of Wagner's thought that were useful for propaganda and ignored or suppressed the rest.

While Bayreuth presented a useful front for Nazi culture, and Wagner's music was used at many Nazi events,[259] the Nazi hierarchy as a whole did not share Hitler's enthusiasm for Wagner's operas and resented attending these lengthy epics at Hitler's insistence.

Guido Fackler has researched evidence that indicates that it is possible that Wagner's music was used at the Dachau concentration camp in 1933–34 to "reeducate" political prisoners by exposure to "national music". There seems to be no evidence to support claims, sometimes made,[262] that his music was played at Nazi death camps during the Second World War.

Because of the associations of Wagner with antisemitism and Nazism, the performance of his music in the State of Israel has been a source of controversy.