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Wagner's «Hour of Need» The Development of Musical Narrative in *Lohengrin* and *Die Walküre*

This essay concerns several closely interrelated musical texts and the stories they tell. First and foremost it is about two narrative passages from Wagner's operatic production of the years around 1850, excerpts that reveal much about Wagner's special talent for the musical representation of telling dramatic moments. Together, these imbedded narratives also help to tell the story of the profound stylistic development that Wagner undertook during the years between the Dresden uprising and his first efforts at the *Ring*. This stylistic turn, moreover, is itself part of a broad program of social reform through artistic realignment that Wagner publicly espoused in several of his theoretical tracts. In this sense, the stories, the stylistic development they chart, and the historiographical vision they imply are directed towards the same end.

Nowhere are Wagner's ideas on the union of poetry and music so effectively presented as in his art of narration: how he tells and retells stories through the characters on stage and the music that accompanies them. This paper focuses on two famous narrations — one for Elsa in Act-I of *Lohengrin*, the other for Sieglinde in Act-I of *Die Walküre* — that reveal some striking dramatic and musical parallels. At the hour of their highest need, Elsa and Sieglinde each recount a vision of imagined salvation through the agency of a long-awaited hero. The music that accompanies these narratives compellingly amplifies the drama at hand. In their motivic language, each of these passages recalls music heard elsewhere in the score, thematic allusions whose meaning the audience readily recognizes. Tonally, too, Wagner's treatment of these two narratives is strikingly similar, for in the distant modulations he embraces, the composer aptly suggests the urgent sweep of events about to unfold. Each of the narratives, in fact, divides neatly into two segments, one recalling past events, the other anticipating ones soon to come. Past and future here meet in a portentous present.¹

Elsa's «Einsam in trüben Tagen» consists of two sets of three quatrains, rhyming metrical lines that Wagner carefully crafted to convey the central images of his character's longing. Wagner's musical response to these verses at first seems quite ordinary, proceeding phrase by phrase within the prevailing tonality of A-flat-major. But if the rhythmic and periodic design of Elsa's narration holds rather closely to the formal requirements of its rhymed verse, Wagner nevertheless avails himself of a surprisingly rich harmonic vocabulary in these passages, one that is in many ways the metaphorical representation of Elsa's desires themselves. In the first half of her narration her ascendant prayer («weit in die Lüfte») is accompanied by an ominous orchestral crescendo and tremolo on a C-flat-major sonority, a harmony built on the minor third of A-flat that Wagner so aptly works into the opening lines of Elsa's story. Yet the harmonic potential of this excursion to C-flat, like Elsa's prayer itself, remains just that — offering possibilities but not exploring their full implications. The first half of Elsa's story thus hints at but does not fully reveal dramatic and musical events soon to unfold.

The second half of the narrative (beginning «In lichter Waffen Scheine») embraces the same overall tonal framework as the first, moving from A-flat at the outset to a sustained E-flat (dominant) at the close. But there is also much that is different here, too. The passage opens not with music from the first half of her story, but instead with music from the overture, an ethereal choir of strings that gradually descends in pitch and gathers rhythmic vitality (now as a march) as the violins are joined by the remainder of the orchestra. This musical passage parallels Elsa's description of her savior and alludes to the distant origin of his authority (the grail of Montsalvat). This metaphorical descent, of course, also neatly complements the as yet unanswered «ascent» of Elsa's prayers. But it does more than just that, for in the course of this orchestral descent Wagner reinterprets the C-flat-major harmony of the previous stanza as its enharmonic equivalent, B-natural, here in the context of a clear and unambiguous cadence on D-major. This, of course, is precisely the sharp-side tonality in which *Lohengrin*'s music will dwell elsewhere in the opera. The latent power of Elsa's hope and its subsequent realization in the form of the swan knight is thus symbolized in tonal language through the enharmonic shift from C-flat (as a flat mediant in A-flat-major) to B-natural (as sub-mediant in D-major). In this sense the passage is central to both the story of *Lohengrin*'s arrival and to the musical means used to represent it.

Sieglinde's narrative, too, figures centrally in the larger story of the opera in which it appears. Like Elsa's story, it recalls events never actually represented on stage (in this case the tale of how a mysterious wedding guest left a sword intended for her savior) and alludes in prospect to ones about to unfold (first and foremost

1 The scholarly literature concerning Wagner's heavy reliance on imbedded narrations is suitably vast. See, by way of introduction, John Daverio, «Narration as Drama: Wagner's Early Revisions of Tannhäuser and their Relation to the Rome Narrative», in: *College Music Symposium* 24/2 (Fall 1984), pp. 55-68 and Edward A. Lippman, «Wagner's Conception of the Dream», in: *Journal of Musicology* 8/1 (Winter 1990), pp. 54-81. Carolyn Abbate's recent work on what she calls the reflexive relationship between Wagner's narrative texts and the music used to represent them are considered in her *Unsung Voices. Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, Princeton 1991, especially pp. 61-118.

Sieglinde's and Siegmund's mutual recognition as brother and sister). Of course, the poetic and musical language that Wagner here provides for his heroine's story is in some ways quite different from that just encountered in Elsa's narration. By the early 1850's, after all, the composer had eschewed end-rhyme and the parallel phrasing it implies for an idiom based upon the alliterative rhythms of *Stabreim*. This new verse form, as Wagner himself was keen to point out in *Oper und Drama*, is the ideal counterpart to his new musical idiom, which dispenses with closed phrases and clear cadences in favor of small-scale sequential repetitions of melodic motives.

Sieglinde's story would thus at first glance appear to have little in common with the strophic design and tonal allegory of Wagner's earlier idiom as represented in Elsa's vision. Yet its formal plan and indeed some of its musical gestures directly recall Wagner's previous practice: like Elsa's dream, Sieglinde's story divides rather neatly into two parallel statements, the first (beginning «Der Männer Sippe, saß hier im Saal») recounting her mysterious wedding guest and the sword he leaves; the second (starting «Der Männer alle, so kühn sie sich mühten») her premonitions about the identity of the as yet nameless Siegmund now before her. This mirrors the broad rhetorical lines of potential prayer and envisaged savior presented in the two strophes of Elsa's narrative.

Like Elsa's narrative, too, each of these broad divisions unfolds according to a parallel musical plan. Each opens with a hushed E-minor recitative, and each soon turns, with Sieglinde's allusion to her mysterious guest, to the solemn E-major brass sonorities that *Ring* listeners readily identify with Wotan and Walhalla. The signal dramatic emblem of Sieglinde's story, of course, is the sword itself, which ties together not only her past and future (as abducted bride and, soon, bride/sister to Siegmund) but indeed the larger political narrative of the *Ring* itself (linking Wotan's schemes in *Rheingold* with his subsequent downfall at the conclusion of *Siegfried*). No wonder, then, that Wagner represented the sword in a tonal and motivic context designed to link its retrospective connections with Wotan the Wanderer to its prospective ties to Siegmund the Walsung. In the first half of Sieglinde's narration this sword theme is scored as a striking C-major interpolation in the E-major landscape that dominates the remainder of her story. Like the imbedded sword itself, this tonal gesture offers promise of later musical potential, returning to underscore Sieglinde's hope for an avenging protector in the second half of her narrative: «O fänd' ich ihn heut», sung to accompaniment of a triadic motive often identified as the Walsung war cry. The triumphant orchestral outburst of the first half of Sieglinde's narration also returns much later in this scene when Siegmund, now recognizing himself in his lost sister, pulls the sword from the tree. Wagner's initial gesture to C-major (a mediant relation to the prevailing E-major tonality) in the first half of the narrative thus serves to bind the potential of Sieglinde's past longings with the prospect of her future salvation. This is precisely the dramatic importance conveyed by Wagner's C-flat-major tremolo (likewise a mediant relation to the A-flat that prevailed in that narrative) and its subsequent enharmonic transformation in Elsa's narration of her dream.

Wagner's new *Ring* project relied increasingly upon specifically this sort of musical narration, in contrast to the direct theatrical representation of events themselves. The concentration of narrative energy in the orchestral score, in fact, becomes a hallmark of his new style, as Carl Dahlhaus once observed: the *Lohengrin* narratives,

during which the action apparently stands still, in fact contain its determining elements. The significance of that is nothing less than that the music of this «romantic opera» the only thing that makes Lohengrin's appearance as the realization of Elsa's dream credible, is endowed with a fundamental motivating function.²

The similarities between the stories told by Elsa and Sieglinde are thus profoundly important: they show how a narrative strategy that soon came to dominate the *Ring* was already latent in works composed before the great theoretical statements of that nascent project had been formulated. But the two stories just examined also reveal that it was above all thanks to the passivity of his female characters that Wagner's own voice as narrator was most strongly heard, as the composer later recalled in *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* of 1851:

Erst bei diesem Deutlichkeitsstreben in der Ausführung entsinne ich mich, das Wesen des weiblichen Herzens, wie ich es in der liebenden *Elsa* darzustellen hatte, mit immer größerer Bestimmtheit erfaßt zu haben. Der Künstler kann nur dann zur Fähigkeit überzeugender Darstellung gelangen, wenn er mit vollster Sympathie in das Wesen des Darzustellenden sich zu versetzen vermag.³

Elsa, as the musical narration of her dream amply demonstrates, is incapable of effecting her own salvation except to the extent that through longing itself she can materialize Lohengrin. Understanding her unspoken emotions, it is Lohengrin alone who possesses the capacity to act in the operatic world that he and Elsa inhabit. Here Wagner identifies Elsa with pure unconsciousness («*Elsa* ist das Unbewußte, Unwillkürliche»), with which the unconscious consciousness of Lohengrin (dieses «unbewußten Bewußtseins») finds his own reflection.⁴ These qualities of feminine unconsciousness and masculine consciousness are, moreover, precisely the categories that Wagner identifies with music and poetry. In the prose draft for his abandoned project on Jesus of Nazareth Wagner depends heavily on commonplace nineteenth-century biological and philosophical positions that held

2 Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. by Mary Whittall, Cambridge 1979, p. 41.

3 Quoted in Richard Wagner, «Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde», in: *Dichtungen und Schriften*, vol. 6, hrsg. von Dieter Borchmeyer, Frankfurt/M. 1983, p. 277.

4 Ibid.

women as vessels rather than creators of new life. Music, for Wagner, dwells exclusively in this realm of feminine capacity, made complete only by the fertilising seed of masculine poetic intent. From this position is but a small logical leap to Wagner's metaphorical presentation, clearly articulated in *Oper und Drama*, of music and poetry themselves as encoded versions of male and female principles:

Die Musik kann nicht denken; sie kann aber Gedanken verwirklichen, d.h. ihren Empfindungsgehalt als einen nicht mehr erinnern, sondern vergegenwärtigen kundtun: dies kann sie aber nur, wenn ihre eigene Kundgebung von der dichterischen Absicht bedingt ist, und diese wiederum sich nicht also eine nur gedachte, sondern zunächst durch das Organ des Verstandes, die Wortsprache, klar dargelegte offenbart.⁵

In this way, Wagner comes to understand his own art through the characters that populate it, assimilating their attributes and aspirations to his theoretical model for the union of poetry and music. This stance, whereby Wagner becomes both father and mother of his own creative offspring, has recently been interpreted by Jean-Jacques Nattiez (among others) as manifesting a latent androgyny that runs throughout Wagner's work. As poet and composer, according to this reading, Wagner serves as progenitor of the very *Kunstwerk der Zukunft* that his theoretical texts envisage.⁶

The roots of this particular longing for the metaphysical totality implied by androgynous creativity rest in part with a new historical consciousness that Wagner encountered during last years in Dresden. Certainly the most important of the texts that Wagner read and discussed during the late 1840's were those of Ludwig Feuerbach. Profoundly impressed by the mystical anthropology of Feuerbach's *Grundsätze der Philosophie der Zukunft*, Wagner borrowed its title for his own historico-aesthetic construction, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, the first of the three Zurich essays that form the artistic manifesto for the *Ring*. But while Wagner himself, among many others, noted the obvious debt of his new aesthetic creed to Feuerbach's thought, few have recognized that Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* is also likely to have offered Wagner an important model for his peculiar vision of artistic production and social reform. For Hegel, conscious masculine action («selbst bewußten Wirklichkeit») — in the form of human laws) and unconscious feminine spirit («bewußtloser Geist») — here idealized as divine family laws of «Das Volk») serve as mediating agencies for the revelation of higher ethical reason («das sittliche Reich».)⁷ It is the search for mutual recognition on the part of these twin ideals that forms an essential process behind individual action and history itself. This, it will be recalled, is the same formal plan adopted by Wagner for his own vision of artistic production, wherein conscious masculine poetic intent and unconscious feminine musical feeling are the complementary mediating agencies for a higher aesthetic truth that will in turn have ethical import in the world at large. The mutual recognition of poetry and music (in Wagner's own creative faculties) is itself mirrored in the mutual recognition of the characters by whom he represents this general process. It seems no coincidence that the previously unnoticed points of similarity between Wagner's theory of artistic creativity and Hegel's model for the emergence of ethical reason emerged during the same period that witnessed the crucial evolution charted by Elsa's and Sieglinde's stories. Indeed, Wagner's apparent indebtedness to Hegelian thought shows that this stylistic change was accompanied by a parallel but not less profound philosophical insight that permitted — even compelled — the composer to situate himself as an agent of his own later salvation. Poised, like his heroines Elsa and Sieglinde, between the remembrance of past experience and the anticipation of future salvation, the composer urgently attends a heroic medium that he alone felt capable of creating.

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5 Wagner, «Oper und Drama», in: *Dichtungen und Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 321.

6 Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyné. A Study in Interpretation*, trans. by Stewart Spencer, Princeton 1993, especially pp. 122-26.

7 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, hrsg. von Johannes Hoffmeister, Hamburg 1952, pp. 319 and 330. That Wagner was at least familiar with Hegel's famous text seems clear from the memoirs of one of the composer's acquaintances in Dresden, Friedrich Pecht, who later recalled Wagner reading aloud from the *Phänomenologie* in 1847. See Friedrich Pecht, *Aus meiner Zeit. Lebenserinnerungen*, vol. 1, München 1894, p. 294. Concerning the intellectual background of Wagner's writings of the years around 1850, see Jürgen Kühnel, «The Prose Writings», in: *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. by Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. by John Deathridge, Cambridge Mass. 1992, pp. 565-654.