

## Freie Referate 12

### Wagner

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#### Leading Motives and Narrative Threads

#### Notes on the «Leitfaden» Metaphor and the Critical Pre-History of the Wagnerian «Leitmotiv»

In *De la grammatologie* Derrida speaks at one point of the text as a «fabric of signs»,<sup>1</sup> alluding to the semantic and etymological ties that link the concepts of text, texture, and fabric (from the Latin *textus* = tissue/*Gewebe*, *texere* = to weave/*weben*). We can easily modify this statement, of course, to describe the (musical text) as a «fabric of musical signs». Either statement is a commonplace, and relatively unproblematic, at least until we inquire about the nature of those signs and their interpretation. Another commonplace follows logically from these: that the musical setting of a verbal text produces a double-layered fabric of signs, two autonomous fabrics superimposed, and stitched together, in a sense, by the singing of the text. Wagner's operas (or particularly, the «music dramas») have always posed a challenge to such a conception of two more-or-less autonomous but compatible levels of discourse in the form of their famous «leitmotifs». Here the two layers or fabrics of signs are purposefully tangled; the layer of musical signs is thoroughly «conditioned» (*bestimmt*) — as Wagner would say — by the layer of verbal signs.<sup>2</sup> This mutual intrusion of layers was and is, of course, promoted as a higher unity, the great aesthetic synthesis of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (and all that). But the idea of a musical fabric in which the disposition of signs (themes, motives) is dictated in large part by poetic and dramatic signs (objects, concepts, characters) has always been problematic — the suspicion of Wagner the composer as radical dilettante has never quite been successfully quelled. We may have become increasingly sensitive to the sophistication and complexity of Wagner's *musikalische Gewebe* over the years (however much the nature of its formal «designs» are still contested). But it remains impossible, I think, to ignore a certain characteristic roughness of Wagner's leitmotivic (fabric) (much of the time) when compared to the formal textures and designs of (pure music) — a point Wagner willingly conceded.

I introduce the figure of (musical) text as (musical) fabric here not only in recognition of the designated *Leitmotiv* of the present conference («*Musik als Text*»), but also with reference to the phenomenon of the Wagnerian leitmotif itself, whose (critical genesis) is the focus of my topic. The questions I want to address are simply put: what are the origins of the term *Leitmotiv* and how does it figure in the early reception of Wagner's «leitmotif technique». The history of «reminiscence motives» (*Erinnerungsmotiven*), from the 18th century on, has been much studied over the years (if still far from exhaustively), while surprisingly little thought has been devoted to the reception of this phenomenon, either before or after Wagner. The omission is strange, considering the role that such studies might play in evaluating modern scholars' claims for the existence of allusive networks of small motives, even abstract intervals, in the operatic scores of Mozart, Méhul, Weber, and others, as compared to the incontestable role of recurring melodies in these same composers' works and those of many others (Cherubini, Meyerbeer, Donizetti, Verdi, and host of lesser German composers).<sup>3</sup> My own interest, then, is in

1 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore/London 1977, p. 14.

2 Note, incidentally, that Wagner spoke of both his musical scores and his dramatic poems in terms of a «fabric» or texture (*Gewebe*). Numerous references to the «fabric» of his musical form are well known (as, for example, this passage from *Eine Mitteilung an mein Freunde*: «Auf das *Gewebe* meiner Musik äußerte dieses durch die Natur des dichterischen Gegenstands bestimmte Verfahren einen ganz besonderen Einfluß in Bezug auf die charakteristische Verbindung und Verzweigung der thematischen Motive» (*Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, Leipzig 1898, vol. 4, p. 322). Another familiar passage, from *Zukunftsmusik*, posits the formative influence of the «fabric of words and verses» in the libretto of *Tristan und Isolde* on the disposition of the («endless») melody («the entire expanse of the melody [*Ausdehnung der Melodie*] is now dictated by the «fabric [*Gewebe*] of the words and verses, or in other words, the design of this melody is poetically pre-determined» (vol. 7, p. 123).

3 A standard study of reminiscence motives in pre-Wagnerian opera remains Karl Wörner's «Beiträge zur Geschichte des Leitmotivs in der Oper», in: *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 14 (1931-32), pp. 151-72. See also Siegfried Goslich, *Die deutsche romantische Oper*,



the critical and receptive pre-history of the *Leitmotiv*, both as a term and as a musical concept. Concentrating on the reception of Wagner's (leit-)motivic practice *before* the coining of the term *Leitmotiv*, as well as the establishment of the term in the critical vocabulary, I will at least try to suggest some of the questions pertaining to the development of a leitmotivic mode of *listening* (thus «reception» in its theoretical or cognitive sense).

## The Genesis of «Leitmotiv»

First some facts. We're always told that Wagner did not invent the term *Leitmotiv*, nor even condoned it, necessarily (as with the case of «*Musikdrama*»). (The «inauthenticity» of the term, it seems, is somehow meant to exonerate Wagner from having composed with «leitmotifs» at all — to exorcise, that is, the image of Wagner the radical dilettante.) The credit — or blame — for the term *Leitmotiv* and the practice of attaching identifying labels to the motives has traditionally been accorded to the industrious Wagnerian apostle, Hans von Wolzogen. (Wagner exposed the culprit in his 1879 essay «Über die Anwendung der Musik auf das Drama», but this was no secret, of course — Wolzogen's thematic guide to the *Ring* had been a best-seller since the first Bayreuth festival of 1876.)<sup>4</sup> It is not technically true that Wolzogen coined the term, or even the practice of labelling motives, as I will explain — but in the long run this hardly matters: there is no doubt that the widespread fame of the term *Leitmotiv* as well as the popular practice of leitmotivic exegesis can be attributed to Wolzogen's successful *thematische Leitfäden* (as he called them), which he eventually provided for the remaining «music dramas», as well.

More recently it has been noted — initially by John Warrack — that the early Weber scholar Wilhelm Jähns used the term *Leitmotiv* in the context of his 1871 thematic catalogue of Weber's works.<sup>5</sup> It appears, however, that even Jähns was not the first to use the term. A review (unsigned) of the first Dresden production of *Die Meistersinger* in 1869 introduces the term, quite casually, in drawing an analogy between musical motives and dramatic characters as «agents within the [dramatic] action»:

Was aber im recitirenden Drama die Personen sind, gewissermaßen die Merkzeichen für die Gefühlsanschauung, das sind im musikalischen Drama die Leitmotive, die auch ihrerseits an die Träger der Handlung oder an gewisse typische Begriffe anknüpfen.<sup>6</sup>

Eduard Hanslick also appears to have used the term *Leitmotiv* in his reviews of *Die Meistersinger* from 1868 and 1870.<sup>7</sup> More strikingly, we find the historian and critic August Wilhelm Ambros using the term *Leitmotiv* as early as 1860, at a time when he would only have known the «Romantic operas» up through *Lohengrin*. And strangely enough, Ambros applies the term to Wagner's operas and Franz Liszt's orchestral works, without any qualitative distinction, as part of a catalogue of perceived common attributes (the textile image of Ambros' *Sprichwort* at the beginning of the passage is surely fortuitous):

Im Grunde sind aber Wagner's Opern und Liszt's symphonische Dichtungen «zweierlei Hosen, einerlei Tuch's». Beide amalgamieren die Musik mit einem bestimmt gefärbten poetischen Inhalt, dem sie sich fügen und anpassen muß, beide verschmähen die herkömmliche Gliederung (Andante, Scherzo usw. in der Symphonie, Arie, Duett, usw. in der Oper) oder bringen sie nur in kaum noch [er]kennbaren Andeutungen, beide suchen die höhere Einheit des Ganzen mittelst durchgehender *Leitmotive* zu wahren, beide treiben der poetischen Intention zuliebe den musikalischen Ausdruck auf die Spitze und opfern jener Intention alles andere, wenn es sein muß auch Schönheit und Wohlklang [...].

In sum, Ambros concludes, Liszt's Symphonic Poems are «Wagner'sche Opern ohne Worte», while Wagner's operas are «symphonische Dichtungen mit Gesangstext».<sup>8</sup> The perceived commonality between Wagner's development of the reminiscence motive and Liszt's use of thematic transformation is understandable — we still acknowledge it today. Less clear, however, is why Ambros should have coined the term *Leitmotiv* (if in fact he did?) to embrace these phenomena.

Hans von Wolzogen, on the other hand, did not actually use the word *Leitmotiv* in print before 1877, by which time it was already quickly becoming a catchword. He later claimed to be unsure whether he might have coined the term or not.<sup>9</sup> But again, he surely provided the impetus for its sudden popularity — before uttering it

Tutzing 1975, and Andrew D. McCreddie, «Leitmotive: Wagner's Points of Departure and their Antecedents», in: *Miscellanea Musicologica (Adelaide Studies in Musicology 14)*, Adelaide 1985, pp. 1-28.

4 Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften* 10, p. 185.

5 Wilhelm Jähns, *Carl Maria von Weber in seinen Werken. Chronologisch-thematisches Verzeichniss seiner sämtlichen Compositionen*, Berlin 1871. See John Warrack, «Leitmotif», in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, New York, 1980, vol. 10, p. 644. It would be difficult to determine whether Jähns came up with the term independently of the influence of contemporary Wagner reception or not.

6 «Wagner's (Meistersinger) auf der Dresdener Hofbühne», in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 65 (1869), p. 55.

7 The original review of the 1868 Munich premiere was slightly revised on the occasion of the first Vienna production in 1870, and subsequently reprinted in the first volume of *Die moderne Oper*, Berlin: A. Hoffmann & Co. 1875; see pp. 304-5. All versions of this review include, alternately, the terms *Leitmotiv*, *Gedächtnismotiv*, and *Erinnerungsmotiv*.

8 August Wilhelm Ambros, «Der Streit um die sogenannte «Zukunftsmusik»», in: *Culturhistorische Bilder aus dem Musikleben der Gegenwart*, Leipzig, 1860<sup>2</sup>1865, pp. 142-43.

9 See Hans von Wolzogen, «Leitmotive», in: *Bayreuther Blätter* 20 (1897), pp. 313-30, esp. pp. 314-15.



himself, paradoxically — through the title of his immediately famous guidebook of 1876: *Thematischer Leitfaden durch die Musik zu Richard Wagner's Festspiel «Der Ring des Nibelungen»*.<sup>10</sup> *Leitmotiv* was the logical designation for the motives catalogued in Wolzogen's *Leitfaden* — particularly in a language with such an insatiable appetite for compound noun formations.

### «Leitfaden» and Labyrinth

The image of a *Leitfaden* — a leading or guiding thread — derives, of course, from classical mythology: the thread that Ariadne provided Theseus, enabling him to extricate himself from the Minoan labyrinth. These complementary images of maze and thread have an extensive history (from antiquity onwards), not only as visual motifs and emblems, but also as literary metaphor.<sup>11</sup> The classical image of maze and thread, for instance, is the evident source of such common figures as the thread of an argument, a plot, a train of thought, or of the disconnected images of a dream: in short, a so-called «narrative thread». The literary metaphor seems to have gained access to music by the 17th century with reference to modulatory toccatas or sets of preludes exploring the tortuous byways opened up by a fully chromatic tonal system (titles such as «Harmonic Labyrinth» or *Ariadne Musica*, in which works we recognize the background to Bach's *Wohltemperiertes Clavier*). Johann Gottfried Herder expressed a layman's perception of *all* untexted music as a «pleasing labyrinth» of tones as late as 1800.<sup>12</sup> Beginning sometime around the middle of the 18th century, if not earlier, there also developed the common figure of a *melodic* thread, constituting the listener's perception of linear-syntactic continuity within a musical discourse (related, of course, to the similarly metaphorical construction of musical texture). It is a primarily *melodic* thread that guides the listener, evidently, through the harmonic-contrapuntal «labyrinth» of a composition (the *musikalischer Satz*), analogous to the syntactic thread of language that leads a reader through the discursive labyrinth of the narrative text. (On the other hand, the thread of a narrative text is really less a matter of grammar and syntax than of threads spun in the reader's imagination to connect disparate events or characters' actions; in this sense, I will argue, the musical analogue is not the «thread» of a melody, but the listener's interpretation of patterns of motivic return, transformation, and so on. In this sense the verbal/literary figure of the thread resembles the figure, and function, of *Leitmotiv*.)

### Der «rote Faden»

A particular variant of the thread-image haunts the scene of the birth of the Wagnerian *Leitmotiv* itself: the image of a «red thread» (or *roter Faden* — the image appears to be more indigenous to German than English).<sup>13</sup> In describing the score of Wagner's newly-premiered *Lohengrin* in 1850, his young admirer Theodor Uhlig explained how certain recurring *Hauptmotive*, «raised to the level of a stereotypical character, run through the opera like a red thread» («die bezeichnendsten musikalischen Gedanken ziehen sich bei ihm [Wagner] wie ein rother Faden durch das ganze Oper»), thus compensating for the disintegrating framework of fixed solo and ensemble numbers.<sup>14</sup> Significantly, Uhlig's «red thread» has more in common with the figure of a narrative thread — something that must be constructed by the reader's imagination, often to relate non-contiguous motives or events — than it has to do with the traditional «melodic thread» as a concretely syntactical phenomenon. A «red thread» stands out against some more neutral background of black, grey, or white, just as Wagner's still somewhat crudely «high-definition» associative themes in *Lohengrin* stand out easily against long swathes of fairly neutral dramatic recitation or semantically «unmarked» *arioso* melody. Here the listener, like the reader of

10 Leipzig 1876. Wolzogen's *Leitfäden* to Wagner's operas were evidently deemed to be so shameful or so obvious — or both — as to be banished entirely from the bibliography of *The New Grove Wagner* (Carl Dahlhaus and John Deathridge), New York: Norton 1984. Yet Wolzogen's books were easily the most influential publications on Wagner's music to be issued in the nineteenth century. This situation reminds us how much our critical biases are still likely to distort our historical perspectives.

11 See Penelope R. Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages*, Ithaca NY 1990, for a detailed history of the origins and early development of the image, and J. Hillis Miller, *Ariadne's Thread: Story Lines*, New Haven/London 1992, for a variety of critical reflections and readings loosely bound by a nexus of rhetorical tropes and images relating (occasionally) to the figures of thread, line, knot, web, and the like.

12 «Es giebt kein süßer Bild des Suchens und Findens, des freundschaftlichen Zwistes und der Versöhnung, des Verlierens und der Sehnsucht, der zweifelnden und ganzen Wiedererkennung, endlich der vollen süßen Vereinigung und Verschmelzung als diese zwei- und mehrstimmigen Tongänge, Tonkämpfe, wortlos oder von Worten begleitet. Im letzten Fall sind die Worte nicht etwa träge Ausleger dessen, was jenes anmuthige Labyrinth bedeute, sondern in ihm wirkende Mitkämpfer» (Johann Gottfried Herder, *Kalligone*, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by B. Suphan (1877-1913), vol. 22, p. 182.

13 In J. Hillis Miller's *Ariadne's Thread*, for instance (the cover of which is adorned with the image of a red thread), the single literary example of this particular image is from Goethe's *Wahlverwandtschaften*, which Miller analyzes at some length under the figurative rubric of «anastomosis» (figures of lines or ties describing intersubjective relations of persons or characters). In Goethe's novel, the diary of the principal female character, Otilie, is said to be characterized by a certain thematic «red thread» that runs through it, although the nature of this thread remains (characteristically, for this figure), secretive and elusively sub-textual (see pp. 164-65, although Miller, strangely enough, cites this passage without comment).

14 Theodor Uhlig, «Drei Tage in Weimar» [1850], reprinted in: *Musikalische Schriften*, ed. by Ludwig Frankenstein, Regensburg 1913, p. 333.



(or listener to) a narrative text, connects temporally discontinuous appearances of the «red thread» — as motive or character — and thereby bridges the gaps where the «thread» goes momentarily underground.

The phenomenological status of this thread is thus ambiguous. Is it an immanent feature of the text, of the textural fabric, or is it an imaginative projection on the part of the listener or reader? Thematic identity and imaginative fantasy are con-founded in the following description of a «red thread» running through the «Queen Mab» scherzo of Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* (by the Viennese critic Julius Wend, in 1846):

Der phantastische Humor der sich — in dem melodischen Hauptthema — als *rother Faden* durch das ganze elfenzarte Gewebe dieser Composition hindurchschlingt; dieses träumerische Weben; dieses Herüber- und Hinüberwiegen der Töne; dieses Zerfließen, Wiederanknüpfen und Verschlingen der Melodie schildert das kaleidoskopische Traumleben der Psyche, das krausverschlungenen Arabeskengewebes der Phantasie mit meisterhafter Charakteristik und [...] tief psychologischer Wahrheit.<sup>15</sup>

The transposition of the Hanslickian imagery of arabesque and kaleidoscope to this piece of Berliozian *Tonmalerei* is an unintended irony, since it pre-dates Hanslick by six years. Yet it might alert us to an implicit tension between a «formalist» and a fantastic-impressionistic mode of listening: is the guiding thread here a «principal theme» and its developments, or rather the general tone of fantastic humor evoked by the darting melodic lines and rhythms, the «elfin» timbres and textures of the movement generally?

The «red thread» is conjured up by another nocturnal fantasy piece — the central scene of Act II in Wagner's *Meistersinger* — for the same anonymous early reviewer of that opera cited above. Referring to the so-called «mid-summer-magic» motive as it first wafts up like some evening fragrance to fill the musical space cleared by the Night-Watchman's discordant horn, this reviewer writes (rather more prosaically):

Diese Melodie mit voraufgehendem Horntone kehrt noch mehrmals in diesem Aufzuge wieder, sie zieht wie ein *rother Faden* durch den übrigen Theil desselben und scheint eine mehrfache Bedeutung zu haben.<sup>16</sup>

The reviewer treats the theme, in fact, as a «leitmotiv». He christens it with a name (*Sommernachts-Motiv* or *-Melodie*), he posits «multiple meanings» (*eine mehrfache*

Richard Wagner, *Die Meistersinger*, Act 2, scene 5 (Klavierauszug C.F. Peters, Leipzig o.J.)

15 Julius Wend, «Berlioz und die moderne Symphonie», in: *Wiener Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 6 (1846) 43, p. 169.

16 «Wagner's *Meistersinger* auf der Dresdener Hofbühne», in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 65 (1869), p. 62. Like other early reviewers of Wagner's operas (pre-Wolzogen), this one casually assigns labels to some motives, including this one, which he calls both «*Sommernachts-Motiv*» and «*Sommernachts-Melodie*» (ibid.).



*Bedeutung*) that accrue to the motive over time, and goes on to speak of meanings or associations «confirmed» by later contexts (Act III). The «red thread» is constituted on one hand by recurring imaginative associations of the music; but on the other hand (no doubt), the image was suggested by the immanent musical character of this particular theme and by its lyrical *Fortspinnung* as a piece of Wagnerian «endless melody» — regardless of any role as dramatic «sign». In other words, both senses of the thread image seem to be invoked at once: the continuous line of «endless melody» (the melodic thread) on a local level, and the conceptual thread that connects separate appearances of characters, motives, or images (the narrative thread).

## Melodic or Narrative Threads?

While the thread-metaphor seems to have entered the critical vocabulary of music as a figure for the technical coherence of music (harmonic or melodic syntax), it tends to become increasingly converted to this «second level» of metaphoricity from the beginning of the 19th century by adaptation of the existing metaphor of a narrative thread to the perception and interpretation of music, especially as thematic process. The image that had initially pictured the linear continuity of melody or the role of a melodic line within a polyphonic texture («fabric») comes to evoke, alternatively, the thread of a metaphorical narrative expressed in music (a sequence of musical characters, the progressive *Bildung* of a musical theme, the dialectic interplay of a «gendered» thematic opposition, and so on). Even so, the image need not shed its earlier, «technical» (syntactic) sense; rather, a perpetual convertibility is maintained between melodic-syntactic and «narrative» levels of the metaphor. The distinction is not always clear, and in the spirit of Romantic *Witz*, perception of the musical «thread» may depend on the listener's capacity to intuit affinities of substance or character that lie concealed beneath the musical surface. Acknowledging the use of what we would call «reminiscence motives» in Spohr's opera *Faust* (1816), Carl Maria von Weber spoke of several melodies that «run through the whole score like subtle threads and hold the whole thing together» («*einige Melodien gehen wie leise Fäden durch das Ganze und halten es geistig zusammen*»).<sup>17</sup> The thread described one year later by a reviewer of Beethoven's A-major piano sonata, op. 101, evokes something of the style of «endless melody» Wagner later heard prefigured in this sonata as well as the meandering course of some picaresque novellistic experience:

Währlich, hier in seinem 101sten Werk ergreift uns Bewunderung und erneute Hochachtung, wenn wir so mit dem grossen Seelenmaler auf fremden, nie betretenen Wegen — gleichsam an *Ariadnes Faden durch labyrinthische Krümmungen* wandeln, wo uns bald ein frischer Bach zuflüstert, bald ein schroffer Fels anstarrt; hier eine unbekannte, süsduftende Blume uns anzieht, dort ein dorniger Pfad uns abschrecken möchte.<sup>18</sup> [emphasis added]

Surely the *fantasia*-like elements of this sonata, especially the brief «cyclic» return of the opening movement-theme, have something to do with this critic's response. Here again, the thread-image seems to evoke both the sense of a continuous melodic line — effected by continually deferred cadences in the first movement — and a broadly narrative reading of the cyclic, *fantasia* elements of the sonata, such as the recitative-like adagio or the enigmatic return of the first-movement theme before the finale.

In his famous essay on Berlioz and *Harold in Italy*, Franz Liszt appealed to the maze and the thread in characterizing the cultural situation of post-Beethovenian music: with the ever-wider audience for «serious» music, on one hand, and the ever-increasing complexity of musical means, on the other hand, «the public has more and more felt the need to be led through music's labyrinths by Ariadne's thread» («...hat nicht allein das Publikum das Bedürfnis empfunden, an einem Ariadnefaden durch ihre Labyrinth geleitet zu werden, sondern auch die Künstler haben einsehen gelernt, denselben [Faden] gewähren zu müssen»).<sup>19</sup> The modern composer, Liszt suggests, should become the hermeneutic *cicerone* of his listeners (as an imaginary Beethoven did for the reviewer of op. 101), leading them Virgil-like through the manifold toils of modern musical infernos toward the bright light of paradisaical apotheoses (to adopt an appropriately Lisztian figure). The «thread» may be grasped at first as a series of titles or images, but corresponding to these images may be a series of characteristic transformations of some emphatic, pregnant motive (what Ambros saw fit to call *Leitmotive*, even in Liszt's music, as we saw).

Liszt and Ambros explicitly address a situation that implicitly informs, perhaps, impulse behind Wagner's leitmotif-technique. Liszt (in the essay on Berlioz) and Ambros (in his *Grenzen der Poesie und Musik*, for instance) acknowledge the rise of a new audience culture, a culture whose principal mode of aesthetic response was literary or «narrative», broadly construed. Unlike the select group of musical connoisseurs who might constitute the «ideal» audience of Haydn's or Mozart's later string quartets, the aesthetic imagination of the

17 Carl Maria von Weber, *Kunstansichten: Ausgewählte Schriften*, introduction by Karl Laux, Wilhelmshafen 1978, p. 194.

18 *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 19 (1817), col. 687 (review signed «d-»); cited from Stefan Kunze, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Die Werke im Spiegel seiner Zeit*, Laaber 1987, p. 334. Wagner cited Beethoven's op. 101 as an anticipation of his own «endless melody» in a remark to Cosima, recorded in her diary entry of 14 Nov. 1882: «The first movement of the A-major Sonata [Beethoven] is an excellent example of what I mean by unending melody — what music really is. The change [?] — four bars here, boom-boom, then another 4 bars — is extremely clumsy. But Beethoven is unique in that respect.»

19 Franz Liszt, «Berlioz und seine Harold-Sinfonie», in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (1855); cited from *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Lina Ramann, Leipzig 1897, vol. 4, pp. 26-7.



*Bildungsbürgertum* making up much of the audience for orchestral concerts or opera by the middle of the 19th century was conditioned above all by the experience of novels, plays, histories, and newspapers (the popularity and prestige of grand opera and *Historienmalerei* during this era is another index of this situation). The Lisztian Symphonic Poem (like the Wagnerian *Musikdrama*, I would maintain) appealed to this evolving audience not only by decking out its music in the external, «extra-musical» trappings of heroic and philosophical epic narrative (Liszt's *philosophische Epopöen*), but also through the infusion of narrative techniques into the formal processes of the music itself (thematic transformation, cyclic form, and the leitmotif are emblematic). Liszt's evaluation of Wagner's motivic techniques in his 1850 brochure on *Lohengrin*, for instance, applies the vocabulary of narrative form to the musical process:

Der Zuschauer wird [...] ein eigenthümliches Interesse daran finden, während dreier langer Akte der tief durchdachten, erstau-nenswerth geschickten und poetisch verständigen Kombination zu folgen, mit welcher Wagner mittelst mehrerer Hauptsätze den melodischen Knoten seines ganzen Dramas geschürzt hat.

[Le spectateur [...] pourra trouver un singulier intérêt à suivre, durant trois longs actes, la combinaison profondément réfléchie, étonnamment habile, et poétiquement intelligente avec laquelle Wagner, aux moyens de plusieurs phrases principales, a serré un nœud mélodique qui constitue tout son drame.]<sup>20</sup>

Liszt, with a characteristic admixture of frankness and naïveté, is not afraid to acknowledge the appeal of Wagner's methods to the «dilettante» or the literary listener (who represents, to his mind, the «listener of the future»):

Diese systematische Durchführung [der Motive] ist mit einer Kunst der Vertheilung verbunden, welche durch die hier entwickelte Feinheit der psychologischen, poetischen und philosophischen Andeutungen selbst solchen, denen die Achtel- und Sechzehntel-Noten todt Buchstaben und reine Hieroglyphen sind, ein sehr hohes Interesse einflößen müssen. Wagner zwingt unser Nachdenken und unser Gedächtnis zu einer fortwährenden Übung, wodurch er die Wirkung der Musik dem Gebiete unbestimmter Rührungen entreißt und ihren Reizen Genüsse des Verstands hinzufügt.

[Cette persistance systématique est jointe à un art de distribution, qui offrait par la finesse des aperçus psychologiques, poétiques et philosophiques dont il fait preuve, un intérêt de haute curiosité, à ceux aussi pour qui les croches et doubles croches sont lettres mortes et purs hiéroglyphes. Wagner forçant notre méditation et notre mémoire à un si constant exercice, arrache par cela seul l'action de la musique au domaine des vagues attendrissements, et ajoute à ses charmes quelques-un des plaisirs de l'esprit.]<sup>21</sup>

Liszt sees his own project reflected in Wagner's leitmotifs: to animate for a broader audience the «dead letters» and «pure hieroglyphs» («*lettres mortes et purs hiéroglyphes*») which have so far been the stuff of music. Yet the project also demands something new of its listeners, who are forced to «exercise their memory and powers of reflection» in an unaccustomed way, across large expanses of musical time. That is, this music requires its listeners to apply to the act of listening the skills they have acquired as readers. In this way, Liszt adds, it complicates the simple pleasures («*les faciles jouissances*») derived with less effort from operatic songs.<sup>22</sup>

The increasing complexity of musical means (and the dissolution of clear-cut formal paradigms) in Liszt or Wagner requires the presence of a musical *Leitfaden* for the uninitiated. Likewise, the «convertability» of the thread-metaphor becomes crucial — the possibility of appealing to a supplementary diegesis of mental images (associations) when the traditional «thread» of melodic-harmonic discourse becomes abstruse. Such a conversion from «melodic» to «narrative» thread is not uncommon even in earlier criticism, though it may not always be positively evaluated. The Berlin critic Ludwig Rellstab, for instance, had complained in reviewing Mendelssohn's *Hebrides* (*Fingalshöhle*) overture of the blurring of formal outlines (oddly enough); «without the help of poetic images or some imagined dramatic action, we loose the thread [*verlieren wir den Faden*], as well as tiring of the somewhat monotonous characteristic figure on which the whole is based.»<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Wagner spoke of «loosing the musical thread» of the Adagio in Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, supposing that the listener was meant to supply the «scenic motives» from Shakespeare's balcony scene to clarify the discontinuities of melodic discourse.<sup>24</sup> Judged according to Wagner's official aesthetics of «presence» (the thesis that everything must be «realized» [*verwirklicht*] as an immediate, sensible presence), such supplementary activity is regarded as an imposition on the listener. But in fact, it is not so very different from the supplementary activity demanded by Wagner's leitmotifs and the dramatic-musical designs woven from them. Wagner alternately calls on the musical and the «narrative» competencies of his listeners, even within the parameter of *Orchestermelodie* alone.

20 Franz Liszt, «Lohengrin, große romantische Oper von Richard Wagner», in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Lina Ramann, Leipzig 1881, vol. 3.2, p. 93 (emphasis added). Cf. *Lohengrin et Tannhäuser de Richard Wagner*, Leipzig 1851, p. 67. Liszt contrasts the melodic-motivic «knot» (*nœud mélodique*, *melodischer Knoten*) that holds together Wagner's musical drama with the individual numbers that are randomly tied to the «thread» of traditional operatic plots («*an den Faden irgend einer Intrigue gereiht*», *ibid.*).

21 Franz Liszt, «Lohengrin, große romantische Oper von Richard Wagner», p. 94 (*Lohengrin et Tannhäuser de Richard Wagner*, p. 68-69).

22 Franz Liszt, «Lohengrin, große romantische Oper von Richard Wagner», p. 94 (*Lohengrin et Tannhäuser*, p. 69).

23 Ludwig Rellstab, *Iris im Gebiet der Tonkunst* 5 (1834) 13, p. 49-50.

24 Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften* 5, pp. 193-4: «... ich errieth sogleich, daß, während der musikalische Faden verloren gegangen war (d.h. der consequent übersichtliche Wechsel bestimmter Motive), ich mich nun an scenische Motive zu halten hatte, die mir nicht gegenwärtig und auch nicht im Programm aufgezeichnet waren. Diese Motive waren unstreitig in der berühmten Shakespeare'schen Balkonszene vorhanden [usw.]».



## Voices in the Labyrinth

The role of Wagner's leitmotivic *Orchestermelodie* as narrating voice within the composite framework of Wagner's music-dramas has always been recognized, of course, and has recently been subjected to a somewhat skeptical re-appraisal in Carolyn Abbate's *Unsung Voices*. «Interpretations of Wagner's [dramatic] narratives», she writes, «have focussed almost without exception on leitmotifs and their representation of the story being narrated, how a chain of symbolic motives evokes nodal points in a tale».<sup>25</sup> Applying the experience of reading literary texts, she suggests, listeners will tend to weave a «narrative» thread to explain a sequence of motivic events (assuming that these motives have absorbed semantic meaning from an initial dramatic text and context). Abbate implies, reasonably enough, that Wagner and his leitmotifs became a motivating impulse behind the narrativizing tendencies of late-Romantic orchestral music — Dukas's *L'Apprenti sorcier*, Strauss's tone-poems, or Mahler's symphonies. Reading from the other direction, on the other hand, Arno Forchert has suggested (in discussing the dichotomy of associative and analytical reception in the earlier 19th century) a gradual shift of critical paradigm from the *Seelengemälde* (the development of a central affective type, composition as emotional «portrait») to that of the *Lebensbild* (composition read as developmental stages in an imagined life-history).<sup>26</sup> In the latter case, the «narrative» interpretation was often imposed on conventional movement-cycles (sonatas, quartets, symphonies) that did not necessarily invite it. Thus Berlioz or Liszt, Forchert argues, were responding to existing interpretive practices as much they eventually influenced these, in turn. The point can surely be extended to the evolution of Wagner's (leit-)motivic techniques, as well — as the metaphorical threads linking them and their reception to Berlioz and Liszt seem to attest.

As the harmonic and formal dimensions of musical texts became more complex, more labyrinthine across the 19th century, motivic identities (characters and associative meanings) assumed a greater role in «leading» or guiding listeners through these complex textures — and nowhere more so than with Wagner. He expressed precisely this in *Opera and Drama*, when he described the characteristic *melodische Momente* of his projected works as «in a certain sense emotional guideposts through the whole labyrinthine edifice of the drama» («gewissermaßen [...] Gefühlswegweisern durch den ganzen vielgewundenen Bau des Dramas»).<sup>27</sup> Yet the labyrinth itself, as a sign, was traditionally ambivalent. It might be admired for its artful complexity, or it might be feared as a sign of dizzying, impenetrable confusion: an allegory of chaos, moral error, and duplicity, hiding a terrible and deadly secret at its center.<sup>28</sup> Was Nietzsche perhaps alluding to the ambivalent implications of Wolzogen's *Leitfaden* when he apostrophized Wagner as that «old minotaur»:

[...] dieser alte Minotaurus, dieser alte Räuber! Er raubt uns die Jünglinge, er raubt selbst noch uns're Frauen und schleppt sie in seine Höhle [...] Alljährlich führt man ihm Züge der schönsten Mädchen und Jünglinge in sein Labyrinth, damit er sie verschlinge — alljährlich intoniert ganz Europa «Auf nach Kreta! Auf nach Kreta!»<sup>29</sup>

Wolzogen's *Leitfaden*, Nietzsche implies, will lead these innocent victims into the musical mazes of Bayreuth, but never safely out of them. The «cave» is the *Festspielhaus*, but the maze is Wagner's music. What lies at the center of this — «redemption», as Wagner tells us, or destruction (aesthetic degeneracy) as Nietzsche and like-minded *fin-de-siècle* prophets of doom came to believe? Wolzogen's *Leitfäden* attempt to interpret the signs that make up this maze, but of course it ultimately fails to explain where they lead us, or to interpret the whole (musical) story they tell.

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25 Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Music and Narrative in Nineteenth-Century Opera*, Princeton NJ 1991, p. 36.

26 Arno Forchert, «Ästhetischer Eindruck und kompositionstechnische Analyse: Zwei Ebenen musikalischer Rezeption in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts», in: *Rezeptionsästhetik und Rezeptionsgeschichte in der Musikwissenschaft*, ed. by Hermann Danuser and Friedhelm Krummacker, Laaber 1991, pp. 193-203. I have discussed similar critical developments in an essay on «Metaphorical Modes in 19th-century Music Criticism: Image, Narrative, and Idea», in: *Music and Text: Critical Inquiries*, ed. by Steven P. Scher, 1992, pp. 93-117.

27 Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften* 4, p. 200.

28 On the alternative traditions of the labyrinth image in *bono* and in *malo* see Penelope Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth*, esp. Chapters 1 and 3.

29 Friedrich Nietzsche, «Nachwort», in: *Der Fall Wagner: Schriften und Aufzeichnungen über Richard Wagner*, ed. by Dieter Borchmeyer, Frankfurt/M. 1983, p. 123.