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Cambridge Opera Journal, **27**, 3, 301–314 © Cambridge University Press, 2015
doi:10.1017/S0954586715000130

Review Article
Conceptualising Wagner

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Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, *Understanding the Leitmotif: From Richard Wagner to Hollywood Film Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 352pp.

Bryan Gilliam, *Rounding Wagner's Mountain: Richard Strauss and Modern German Opera*. Cambridge Studies in Opera. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 353pp.

Nicholas Vazsonyi, ed., *The Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 897pp.

'The movement Wagner created extends even into the realm of knowledge: disciplines related to the movement are slowly emerging out of centuries-old scholasticism.'[1] So remarked Friedrich Nietzsche in his 1888 pamphlet, *Der Fall Wagner* (*The Case of Wagner*), alluding to the coincidence of Wagnerian music drama with a burgeoning industry of musical analysis and interpretation in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche went on to suggest (with characteristic irony) that prominent theorists and commentators of his day might be regarded as 'the best of Wagner's admirers' – presumably because they approached music in a Wagnerian spirit, as an expressive language open to interpretation, while avoiding the superficial hagiography of the Bayreuth ideologues.[2] If Nietzsche was quick to observe Wagner's significance for music-theoretical discourse, however, he also implied the importance of detached historical investigation in Wagner criticism more generally, especially in the face of a rising cult of Wagner worship. Indeed, while *The Case of Wagner* is commonly appreciated for its influential and polemical indictment of the composer as decadent and dilettantish, Nietzsche's own complex evaluation was nonetheless offset by an implicit advocacy of musical understanding and dispassionate enquiry as a basis for analysis and critique. As he put it as early as 1877: 'I have always wanted some competent person simply to describe Wagner's various methods within the context of his art as a whole, to make an historical and plain statement as to how he does it here, how he does it there.'[3]

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1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner*, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Vol. 6, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, 1999), 28; *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo. Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge, 2005), 253.

2 *Der Fall Wagner,* 28; *The Case of Wagner*, 253.

3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, 1975), II (part 5): 261–2; *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Christopher Middleton (Indianapolis, 1996), 162.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586715000130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

With characteristic foresight, Nietzsche's fleeting remarks anticipate on one level the proliferation of Wagnerian interpretation that would emerge more fully in the early decades of the twentieth century, when motivic commentaries and listening guides gave way to increasingly specialised analyses of Wagnerian harmony and form.[4] Looking beyond the history of analysis, though, the suggestion of a descriptive, historical investigation into the composer's methods might also be seen to resonate more indirectly with the empirical research methods that became central to the musicological reception of the composer in the post-war era. The founding of the *Sämtliche Werke* in 1968, the publication of the *Wagner Werk-Verzeichnis* in 1986, not to mention the appearance of balanced reference guides and biographies based on primary source research: all this marked a conscious endeavour to rehabilitate Wagner from received mythology, grounding criticism in a systematic understanding of the historical evidence surrounding the composer as artist and intellectual. As John Deathridge reflected in 1983, one hundred years after the composer's death, 'it is only relatively recently that there have been signs of a fruitful confrontation between dispassionate historical investigation on the one hand and a strong tradition of criticism and analysis on the other'.[5]

The thirty or so years that have elapsed since the centenary of Wagner's death have undoubtedly witnessed the continued saturation of analytical and musicological studies, not to mention an array of perspectives on the composer as cultural and political phenomenon. Indeed, if Nietzsche implied a certain degree of misguided positivism and rigid specialisation in his critical allusions to Wagnerian music analysis and criticism, contemporary scholarship might be characterised more by its plurality and interdisciplinarity. The most prominent development has been the wealth of more overtly politicised criticism surrounding Wagner's notorious nationalism and anti-Semitism, as well as substantial interest in the political reception of his music and ideas before and during the Third Reich. Yet a renewed fascination with Wagner's far-reaching historical relevance and reception has continued to inform a multitude of approaches from a broad range of vantage points. Indeed, the emergence of more affirmative narratives on Wagner's artistic and cultural legacy, away from the darker ideology of Bayreuth, has helped to reshape the field in the years leading up to the recent bicentenary in 2013.

The three books under consideration here all reflect in different ways the various developments briefly sketched above, raising larger issues of historical enquiry, analysis, interdisciplinarity and influence. Published to coincide with the bicentenary, *The Cambridge Wagner Encyclopedia* (hereafter *CWE*) not only offers a comprehensive reference guide to the composer as artist and intellectual, but also documents the contemporary expansion of interest in Wagner as a controversial cultural and political phenomenon beyond the immediate sphere of opera and music. Comprising some 550 entries by eighty-seven scholars from diverse disciplines, the *CWE* reflects the

[4] See, for example, Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1924–33); and Ernst Kurth, *Romantische Harmonik und ihre Krise in Wagner's* Tristan (Bern, 1920).

[5] John Deathridge, 'A Brief History of Wagner Research', in *The Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski; English trans. ed. John Deathridge (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 202. See also Deathridge, 'Cataloguing Wagner', *Musical Times* 124 (1983), 92–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586715000130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sheer scope of current knowledge on Wagner's life, works, ideas and impact. At the same time, it continues an established tradition of providing accurate, down-to-earth historical information about the composer, debunking popular mythology for the benefit of scholars, students, teachers, performers and enthusiasts alike. In this way, the volume productively builds on several earlier reference books in English: *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music*, *The Wagner Handbook* and *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*.[6] As Vazsonyi points out in the preface, while these comprehensive publications all comprise substantial essays, chapters and information guides, none claims to be an encyclopedia (xi). Hence it is in the breadth and diversity of the topics covered, as well as the conciseness of its individual entries, that the *CWE* stands apart as an invaluable reference tool.

The *CWE* certainly succeeds in its aim of covering the background and basics, often with the addition of some perceptive new insights and revisionist perspectives. The most successful entries not only provide vivid and informative introductions, but also allude beyond their isolated topics towards a rich web of distinctive sub-themes, interpretative issues and connected ideas and figures. The combined contributions thus present a rich, heterogeneous portrait of Wagner – one that distinguishes the *CWE* from standard essay compendiums that may deal successively with topics of historical background, works, ideas and influence, as though these categories existed as isolated areas of study.

As one would expect from a non-specialist companion, the key entries on Wagner's works, ideas and influence are clear, informative and generally up to date, even if they do not always present particularly new findings. For those less familiar with Wagner's oeuvre, the key entries on the individual operas provide obvious starting points. The entry on *Der Ring des Nibelungen* by Adrian Daub and Patrick McCreless, for example, succeeds in clarifying the complex issues surrounding the lengthy genesis and composition of the libretto and musical score, providing concise summaries of the plot and musical structure, as well as a brief history of notable interpretations and performances from the 1876 Bayreuth premiere up to the present day (493–504). Moving on from this contribution, readers could easily follow up additional references to the individual operas of the cycle, as well as related entries on characters, plot, musical technique, interpretation, staging and performance history. Those approaching the *CWE* via an interest in Wagner's works more generally may also wish to look beyond the immediate issues of composition, performance and reception to consider a range of more abstract Wagnerian themes pertinent to his operatic oeuvre as a whole, including entries on 'absolute music', 'avant-garde', 'metaphor', 'modernity', 'modernism', 'love', 'sleep/dream', '*Kunstreligion*', 'redemption', 'myth', 'morality' and 'politics', to name but a few.

If the major contributions on Wagner's works open up some of the central themes and interpretative issues at stake, the entries relating to Wagner's copious prose writings provide helpful insights into his theoretical ideas. Roger Allen's revisionist overview of aesthetics is particularly valuable, not least in debunking some outworn

[6] See Barry Millington, ed., *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music* (London, 1992); Müller and Wapnewski, *The Wagner Handbook*; Thomas S. Grey, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner* (Cambridge, 2008).

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narratives concerning Wagner's fluctuating ideas on the relationship between poetry and music (6–10). In comparison to traditional explanations of Wagner's aesthetics – which have tended to define his complex theorising in terms of sharply contrasting periods or stages – Allen portrays a refreshing coherence to the composer's overall outlook on music and words. He interprets the composer's underlying quest 'to realize an ideal fusion of poetry and music as a means of dramatic expression' (6) as the guiding concern throughout his creative project. In discussing Wagner's later writings, he interrogates the idea that the influence of Schopenhauer's philosophy caused a straightforward shift in Wagner's music-aesthetic outlook: from an emphasis on the conceptual priority of poetry and drama in the Zurich writings, towards a theory of musical primacy as exemplified in the 1870 essay *Beethoven*.

Contradicting Allen's interpretation, the philosopher Julian Young in his article on Schopenhauer maintains the more conventional narrative that Wagner 'experienced something like a religious conversion' on encountering *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Representation*, 1818), an event that precipitated major changes in the composer's philosophical outlook (519–24). Young thus reiterates the familiar bipartite reading of Wagner's aesthetics: 'in his pre-Schopenhauerian *Oper und Drama* (*Opera and Drama*, 1851), Wagner asserted the priority of words … After 1854, however, Wagner reverses himself and accepts Schopenhauer's thesis of the primacy of music over words' (521). In the related entry, 'Philosophy', Young also suggests – somewhat misleadingly – that the extent of Schopenhauer's influence was so powerful and transformative that it caused Wagner to sacrifice his standing as an independent creative thinker in his own right (423–6).

Certainly there is no doubt that Wagner's evolving philosophy of art has always been a contentious issue, open to multiple readings and interpretations. However, attempts to reduce the nuances of his ideas to cause-and-effect narratives, involving uncritical conceptions of influence, can have the effect of masking important ambiguities or possible points of continuity and coherence. Even within the constraints of an introductory encyclopedia entry, one might have wished for some acknowledgement of the composer's critical or idiosyncratic appropriation of Schopenhauer within the context of his distinctive operatic project.

On the one hand, overt discrepancies of opinion and competing narrative outlooks in the *CWE* can be problematic, especially when it comes to such a pivotal topic as Wagner's philosophy of art and his evolving theories of music and words. Particularly for those students less familiar with the complex tensions and convolutions of Wagner's theoretical writings, there is the potential for even further confusion when faced with competing perspectives on closely related topics. On the other hand, narrative discrepancies more generally must surely be accepted as a natural consequence of any compendium that seeks to bring together a diverse range of scholars all dealing with a figure already so fraught with contradictions and controversies as Wagner. In this respect, it would be unreasonable and unwarranted to expect a volume such as this to flatten productive scholarly differences and discrepancies. Indeed, and continuing in the spirit of related reference texts, the *CWE* does not shy away from documenting some of the more contentious debates surrounding Wagner's ideas and influence.

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The topic of anti-Semitism, for instance, is thoughtfully addressed in a number of related entries in the *CWE*. Hans Rudolf Vaget, in his article on anti-Semitism, confronts the familiar rift between Wagner's widely acknowledged Judeophobia, as reflected in his essayistic writings, and the more contested question of anti-Semitic meaning within the operas themselves (16–20). The strength of his contribution lies in documenting the existing arguments and proposing a middle-ground position: between an absolute denial of Jewish references on the one hand, and a deterministic diagnosis of caricatures and stereotypes on the other. Developing beyond the familiar dichotomy between Wagner's personal anti-Semitism and the extent of its bearing on his works, Sander L. Gilman (in an entry on 'Jews') provides a nuanced account of Wagner's ambivalent relationships with Jewish individuals, including Fromental Halévy, Giacomo Meyerbeer and Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (221–3). Reflecting recent historical scholarship on Wagner's influences and professional relationships, Gilman complicates essentialist narratives of the composer's personal anti-Semitism as depicted in his prose writings. As he puts it: 'Wagner's relationship to living "Jews" is much more complex than his denigration of Jews as a collective' (222).

If the *CWE* complements existing reference books in its extensive coverage of Wagner's works, ideas and politics, it also affords substantial weight to issues of influence and interpretation. In his entry on 'Reception', Anthony J. Steinhoff offers a helpful overview of the issues involved: from the first public recognition of Wagner and the emergence of print culture, to the dissemination of his music and theoretical writings, to the ideology of the Bayreuth circle and the conflicting nationalist and pan-European Wagnerisms of the late nineteenth century (461–4). Steinhoff also refers briefly to the National Socialist appropriation of Wagner's works and ideas, the ban on Wagner's music in Israel, and the revolutionary performances and intellectual interpretations of the later twentieth century – all topics dealt with more substantially throughout the volume as a whole. Those wishing to explore in more detail the issue of Wagner and his legacy might also begin with Lydia Mayne's description of 'Wagnerism' – which places this multifarious phenomenon within a broader context of nineteenth-century musical idealism (696–9).

Such discussions certainly function as helpful starting points for those readers less familiar with issues in Wagnerian reception, politics and influence. While descriptive accounts of Wagner's cultural and artistic influence in the *CWE* provide instructive overviews, however, there is often relatively little to distinguish these contributions from the existing literature. Indeed, the restatement of established topics and well-rehearsed problems is perhaps an unavoidable trope common to many of the key entries in the volume. Julian Young's contribution on 'Nietzsche' is another case in point. To a certain extent, Young goes beyond existing descriptions of this infamous friendship to provide distinctive insights into the philosophical basis underpinning Nietzsche's critique of Wagner as decadent. Concentrating on *The Case of Wagner*, he helpfully clarifies the philosopher's specific lines of criticism against Wagnerian theatre. If Young includes some perceptive insights into Nietzsche's philosophical critique of Wagner, he also underplays the historical dimension of this critique. Despite a brief reference to Hanslick's related musical criticisms, Nietzsche's key

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texts on Wagner are presented too much as isolated philosophical tracts, divorced from their wider relevance in nineteenth-century criticism and aesthetics, not to mention their continued contemporary significance. It is also disappointing that Young does not include sufficient mention of Nietzsche's important early claims for Wagnerian music drama in such texts as *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872) or the *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (*Untimely Meditations*, 1873–6), focusing instead on recounting once again the familiar biographical circumstances of the friendship.

For those interested in the philosophical reception of Wagner beyond the nineteenth century, Roger Allen again provides a welcome contribution in the form of an article on Adorno (4–5). As with Young's account of Nietzsche, Allen clarifies some of the key topics at stake in Adorno's most substantial contribution to Wagner criticism, *Versuch über Wagner* (*In Search of Wagner*, 1952) – particularly his ideological criticisms of leitmotif, orchestration and phantasmagoria. Allen also briefly documents Adorno's changing views as reflected in later texts (such as 'Wagner's Relevance for Today' (1964) and 'On the Score of *Parsifal*' (1956)). He concludes by asserting the lasting significance of Adorno's Wagner criticism, which raises many important political, philosophical and interpretative challenges that continue to inform current debates. For a reference book that purports to confront Wagner's immense impact on the cultural and political landscapes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, it is perhaps surprising that the *CWE* does not include further reference to critical interpretations of the composer in less mainstream philosophical and critical contexts. Especially given a current resurgence of scholarly interest in Wagner and political philosophy, one might have wished for some consideration of critical theorists such as Ernst Bloch, Slavoj Žižek or Alain Badiou.[7] Continuing a critical tradition that encompasses Nietzsche, Mann, Shaw and Adorno, these thinkers have also raised important interpretative challenges for contemporary Wagner criticism and arguably deserved greater mention within the present volume.

Nevertheless, the *CWE* does reflect its historical moment by documenting other important scholarly advancements. One significant development from older companions is the inclusion of issues of gender and sexuality – issues that were still oddly lacking even from relatively recent reference books on Wagner.[8] Similarly, the greater space attributed to issues of performance and reception allows for a richer appreciation of Wagner's works and ideas not only for modern music, literature and the visual arts, but also for more recent debates about film music and new media technology.[9] Such contributions certainly go beyond earlier guides to the composer's life and works, reflecting renewed assessments of Wagner's positive cultural legacy for the new millennium.

[7] See, for example, the contributions to the recent special issue of *Opera Quarterly* on 'Wagner and the Left'; *Opera Quarterly* 30/2–3 (2014).

[8] See, for example, Eva Rieger's entries on 'Gender' (148–50) and 'Women' (724–6); as well as Chris Walton's essay on 'Sexuality and Eroticism' (531–4).

[9] See David Huckvale, 'Film Music' (126–7) and Lutz Koepnick, 'Wagner and New Media' (655–8).

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Looking beyond the influence of Wagner's works and ideas in general terms, a further advantage of the *CWE* (in contrast to earlier reference guides and essay compendiums) is that it incorporates succinct definitions of specific music-historical and theoretical concepts unique to the composer and his reception. Indeed, the unprecedented conceptual and discursive dimension to Wagner's oeuvre alone lends itself particularly well to an encyclopedic format. More than any other composer, the dissemination of Wagner's works and writings gave rise to a distinctive and lasting repertoire of associative terms: from *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Total work of Art), *Musikdrama* (Music Drama) and *Zukunftsmusik* (Music of the Future), to *Endliche Melodie* (Endless Melody), *Kunst des Übergangs* (Art of Transition) and *Leitmotiv* (Leitmotif). While many of these key terms derived directly from Wagner's theoretical writings, they have also generated a rich history of their own, not least through the extensive discourse of criticism and analysis that accompanied the first publications and performances of the operas, and that continues to inform our musical understanding today.

The concept of 'leitmotif' in particular is one we have come to associate above all with Wagnerian opera and its legacy. Following brief allusions to the concept in nineteenth-century criticism, Hans von Wolzogen was the first to employ the concept substantially in connection with Wagner's mature music dramas, notably in his influential 1876 commentary, *Thematische Leitfaden durch die Musik zu Richard Wagner's Festspiel* 'Der Ring des Nibelungen' ('Thematic Guide to the Music of Richard Wagner's Stage Festival Play *Der Ring des Nibelungen*').[10] Since the days of descriptive commentaries and listening guides, the leitmotif as concept and practice has continued to provoke substantial debate throughout twentieth-century music theory and criticism. Writers including Ernest Newman, Deryck Cooke, Carl Dahlhaus, Robert Donington and F. E. Kirby all advanced varying perspectives on leitmotivic interpretation in Wagner's operas, in the process addressing deeper philosophical and aesthetic questions about the relationship between music, language and meaning.[11] Critics have also long levelled objections against leitmotivic analysis, particularly the application of semiotics as a method of naming and circumscribing musical themes as verbal signs.[12] Contrary to accusations of an absence of development in Wagner on the one hand, and to taxonomic thematic analyses on the other, Carolyn Abbate emphasised the fluidity and vagueness of Wagner's protean musical motives, and their capacity to elude specific associations as suggested by the drama.[13] In addition, scholars such as Christian Thorau and Thomas S. Grey have returned to Wagner's own principal ideas on motivic composition in *Opera and*

[10] For a brief overview of the concept, see Arnold Whittall, 'Leitmotiv', *CWE*, 245–9, and Christian Thorau, 'Leitmotiv Guides', *CWE*, 249–51.

[11] Ernest Newman, *The Wagner Operas* (Princeton, 1989); Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring* (London, 1979); Robert Donington, *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols: The Music and the Myth* (London, 1963); Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1979); F. E. Kirby, *Wagner's Themes: A Study in Musical Expression* (Warren, MI, 2004).

[12] See Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, 'Introduction: On Analyzing Opera', in their *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley, 1989).

[13] Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991), 168.

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Drama, situating these within the wider landscape of nineteenth-century aesthetics and criticism.[14]

It is against this background that we can read Matthew Bribitzer-Stull's *Understanding the Leitmotif: From Wagner to Hollywood Film Music* – a book that claims to define and revaluate the leitmotif as a valuable compositional and artistic device across a range of genres or multimedia contexts. In contrast to scholars such as Thorau and Grey, Bribitzer-Stull is less concerned with presenting a history of leitmotivic analysis and criticism than with illuminating and defining the concept more widely as a 'valuable component of musical understanding' (xix). As the author informs us, the very title of his book assumes that this concept has been previously misunderstood or unintelligible. He clarifies two common 'errors' in previous approaches. First, commentators have traditionally tended to simplify or even neglect the musical attributes of leitmotifs in favour of naming or categorising dramatic relationships. Second, critics have all-too-often reduced the semantics of leitmotifs to the recollection of static objects, events or characters, overlooking Wagner's own emphasis on the dynamic *emotional* association of motives as theorised in *Opera and Drama*. As he argues, such misunderstandings have not only resulted in overly simplistic approaches to Wagner's leitmotivic practice, but also in wrong-headed criticisms (23–9). Adorno in particular notoriously derided the static, repetitive character of Wagner's themes, which he saw as anticipating both the allegorical style of Richard Strauss and the commodity-culture of film music.[15] As Bribitzer-Stull points out, Wagner himself was fundamentally averse to the practice of attributing fixed linguistic tags to musical motives in the *Ring* (63–4).[16] Such a tendency goes against both the fluid emotional associations of leitmotifs and their innate developmental nature.

Understanding the Leitmotif thus aims to illuminate some of the deeper epistemological issues involved in understanding the Wagnerian leitmotif as concept and practice. In this way, it complements and builds on recent work in highlighting the nuances and complexities of the leitmotif as pivotal for thematic development, memory and emotional meaning in dramatic contexts. Moreover, it offers lucid and engaging reflections on some of the aesthetic and philosophical questions at stake. The problem of how one distinguishes the leitmotif from other associative themes, together with the controversial question of how Wagner's themes function as conglomerations of musical sound and emotional meaning are addressed with sensitivity and subtlety. Although the author's particular reliance on Peircian semiotics is potentially alienating to those less versed in such theories, the central chapters on the trope of 'musical association' are particularly valuable in their attempt to open out

[14] See Thomas S. Grey, 'wie ein roter Faden: On the Origins of the "leitmotif" as Critical Construct and Musical Practice', in *Music Theory in the Age of Romanticism*, ed. Ian Bent (Cambridge, 1996), 187–210; Christian Thorau, *Semantisierte Sinnlichkeit: Studien zu Rezeption und Zeichenstruktur der Leitmotivtechnik Richard Wagners* (Stuttgart, 2003).

[15] Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, 2005), 31.

[16] For Wagner's comments on leitmotivic analysis of the *Ring*, see *Cosima Wagner's Diaries: An Abridgement*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Skelton, Vol. 1. (New Haven, 1994), 435 (1 August 1881).

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Wagnerian leitmotivic analysis to a broader consideration of how musical sound relates to textual, visual, narrative and dramatic components – whether in opera, song, programmatic music or film.

In what is perhaps the strongest chapter of the study, 'The Paradigm of Wagner's *Ring*', the author applies his arguments about the leitmotif concept to an analysis of Wagner's mature thematic technique. Rather than simply identify and clarify Wagner's themes, he focuses on specific techniques of thematic transformation, exploring how these musical developments themselves convey topical and emotional associations within the context of the drama. By way of this analysis, Bribitzer-Stull reads *The Ring* work as paradigmatic of leitmotivic practice more generally – a practice that has ramifications both for Wagner's subsequent operas, and for later musical-dramatic artworks.

Despite its analytical method and scope, therefore, *Understanding the Leitmotif* concludes with a historical argument, portraying positive continuity from the compositional techniques of Wagnerian opera to Hollywood film music. The closing chapters offer some informative, albeit fleeting references to developmental leitmotifs not only in later opera, but also in symphonies, symphonic poems, song cycle, oratorio and ballet. Turning to the legacy of the Wagnerian leitmotif in film music, Bribitzer-Stull emphasises the potential of this association to 'legitimise' the genre. Against the background of Adorno's critique of film music, the author suggests that filmic leitmotifs operate as a more powerful and subtle tool than the clichéd depiction of functional and repetitive musical gestures suggests. He describes how composers from Max Steiner and Eric Korngold, to John Williams and Howard Shore, used thematic transformation techniques derived from Wagnerian practice.

On the one hand, these concluding chapters effectively illuminate the important legacy of Wagner's compositional method for later art and film music history, and in doing so imply a productive revaluation of cinematic music. On the other, *Understanding the Leitmotif* lacks a richer historical insight into the complex legacy of leitmotivic practice and theory beyond Wagner. The teleological narrative of Wagnerian leitmotif technique as a 'paradigm' tends to underplay potential variations and changes in compositional theory and technique throughout history and across varying cultural and social contexts. It is a little frustrating, for instance, that the closing chapters do not explore more closely the interaction between isolated examples of post-Wagnerian compositional techniques, and the new stylistic and cultural contexts in which these techniques later appear. Rather than persistently seeking to justify a progressive teleology from Wagnerian leitmotif technique to modern dramatic art music and contemporary film music, Bribitzer-Stull might have offered a deeper, more subtle exploration of the major cultural and socio-political differences underpinning contrasting genres, composers and stylistic periods as a basis for addressing music-theoretical commonalities and comparisons.

To a certain extent, then, his attempt to arrive at a nuanced and subtle understanding of the Wagnerian leitmotif is undercut by a more circumscribed quest to arrive at a true definition of this complex term. In this way, the relentless insistence on understanding the leitmotif – as opposed to, say, 'interpreting' or 'analysing' – tends towards the prescriptive and universal. Admittedly, Bribitzer-Stull offers the

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caveat that *Understanding the Leitmotif* does not seek to provide a reception history of the leitmotif as concept. Even within a work-based analytical study such as this, however, one might have wished for some deeper engagement with the intellectual history of leitmotivic interpretation beyond the corrective tone of the 'leitmotif problem' established in the introduction. Indeed, it is at times unclear whether the book is principally concerned with understanding a specifically *Wagnerian* type of thematic practice, or with defining the leitmotif-as-concept more generally. These historical oversights may ultimately come down to a problematic view of analysis itself, a process that Bribitzer-Stull defines restrictively as the separation of 'complex objects into their constituent parts' (xx). As a result, what we are left with in conclusion is a rather descriptive survey of various isolated examples of Wagnerian-inspired leitmotivic techniques detached from their wider meaningful contexts. In this respect, and despite its wide-ranging scope, *Understanding the Leitmotif* does not altogether avoid the kind of taxonomic and cataloguing tropes typical of Wagnerian leitmotivic analysis more generally, but rather tends to relocate traditional methods to new contexts.

While *Understanding the Leitmotif* explores the Wagnerian influence through a focus on a single music-theoretical concept, Bryan Gilliam addresses this legacy through a focus on a single composer: Richard Strauss. In *Rounding Wagner's Mountain: Richard Strauss and Modern German Opera*, Gilliam discusses each of the composer's fifteen operas, seeing these works as 'the greatest German operatic legacy since Richard Wagner' (xi). He argues that Strauss stood out within the history of German operatic composition for effectively confronting and overcoming the immense influence of Wagner's artistic project. Particularly in the shadow of Wagner's final music drama, *Parsifal* (1882), which spawned countless imitations by lesser composers, Strauss emerges as an unrivalled innovator and reformer. Crucially, however, this newness was as much conceptual as it was musical: it derived not just from Strauss's post-Wagnerian techniques, but also from his unique intellectual response to Wagnerian metaphysics.

In some ways, the title of Gilliam's study is a little misleading. Rather than illuminate in depth Strauss's complex relationship with Wagnerian opera and ideology throughout the book, Gilliam takes the composer's ambivalent relationship with his predecessor more as an initial backdrop for interpreting the operas on their own terms. In this respect, *Rounding Wagner's Mountain* builds on recent work in Strauss studies to debunk tired assumptions concerning the evolution of the composer's operatic oeuvre, reassessing its pivotal place within a larger historical landscape of modernism. Indeed, although this book is the first musicological study to analyse Strauss's entire operatic output, many of its overarching arguments and insights are not entirely new, building not least on the author's own existing work on the composer's life, works and legacy.[17]

[17] See, for example, Bryan Gilliam, *The Life of Richard Strauss* (Cambridge, 1999); idem, ed., *Richard Strauss and his World* (Princeton, 1992); idem, ed., *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and his Work* (Durham, NC, 1992); idem, 'Ariadne, Daphne and the Problem of *Verwandlung*', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 15 (2003), 67–81; idem, 'Between Resignation and Hope: The Late Works of Richard Strauss', in *Late Thoughts: Reflections on Artists and Composers at Work*, ed. Karen Painter and Thomas Crow (Los Angeles, 2006), 167–80.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586715000130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In interpreting Strauss's first opera, *Guntram*, Gilliam challenges the idea of this work as unreflective Wagnerian pastiche, seeing it rather as a genuine rejection of Wagnerian metaphysics and a key source for understanding Strauss's emergence as an independent artist. He reveals how young Strauss was exposed to diverse Wagnerisms, as mediated through key influences in his early life, such as Alexander Ritter, Friedrich Jodl and Arther Seidl. And he shows how, through his relationships with these individuals, Strauss absorbed contrasting interpretations of Schopenhauer and encountered the thought of Nietzsche and Stirner (10–38). As Gilliam argues, the influence of Nietzsche's rejection of Christianity, not to mention his philosophical critique of Wagner and Schopenhauer, proved particularly significant for Strauss in undermining a metaphysical and Romantic worldview throughout his operatic oeuvre as a whole. Nietzschean affirmation of revolutionary individualism in the face of the collective characterises Strauss's modern outlook in *Guntram*. Moreover, Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics was crucial to the controversial themes of sexuality and the body in two of Strauss's subsequent operas: *Feuersnot* and *Salome* (40).

In challenging religion and metaphysics through a philosophy of life-affirming individualism, eroticism and irony, Strauss effectively garnered Wagnerian musical techniques against the philosophical assumptions underpinning works such as *Tristan, Der Ring des Nibelungen* and *Parsifal*. If Strauss's musical language extended Wagner's innovations in tonal expansion, thematic development and bold instrumentation, however, he also used such techniques with a degree of detachment that was characteristically modern. As Gilliam points out in reference to the musical materialism of *Feuersnot*, 'Strauss delighted in the fast pace and the fragmentation of modern life and saw no reason that music should not be part of it' (52). It was with the composition of *Der Rosenkavalier* that Strauss more adamantly rejected the idea of a unified musical style, achieving an incongruous 'euphony' of anachronistic sonic allusions. Rejecting the perception of *Der Rosenkavalier* as a reactionary retreat from the bold musical modernism of *Salome* and *Elektra*, Gilliam hears the sonic texture of *Der Rosenkavalier* not as nostalgic pastiche, but rather as a conscious response to modernity – one that went against ideas of musical transcendence and idealism still advocated by composers such as Brahms, Schoenberg and Webern (122).

Complementing his discussions of the music, Gilliam also considers Strauss's collaborations with his various librettists. The central discussions of Hugo von Hofmannsthal are particularly informative, particularly in the context of apprehending Strauss's relationship with Wagner. As Gilliam demonstrates, Hofmannsthal's reflections on the transitory nature of language and time, his values on life and society, not to mention his own views on the relationship between music, prose, dance and gesture in opera – all these contributed to Strauss's critical departure from the ideology of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Through his collaborations with Hofmannsthal, the theme of transformation (*Verwandlung*) took on a new social dimension for Strauss. In operas such as *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Ariadne auf Naxos*, transfiguration occurs not as a pessimistic movement towards metaphysical or

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spiritual redemption, but as a worldly, life-affirming process of human progress and change. In a similar vein, Strauss and Hofmannsthal collaborated to reclaim the modern relevance of Greek myth, in the process undercutting Wagner's treatment of German mythology. Both composer and librettist saw myth as a vehicle through which to explore social and psychological problems pertinent to modern life – as exemplified in the transformative, rejuvenating power of Dionysian tragedy in *Elektra*, or in the positive transfiguration of the self through love and marriage in such works as *Ariadne* and *Die Frau ohne Schatten*.

The picture of Strauss that emerges from *Rounding Wagner's Mountain*, then, is one of an opera composer deeply in touch with the rich philosophical, aesthetic and social problems of his time. As Gilliam demonstrates, Strauss's response to Wagner's operatic legacy was far more than a purely musical confrontation with a great composer; it entailed a creative engagement with diverse manifestations of Wagnerism more widely. In this sense, Gilliam's book not only stands as a valuable contribution to Strauss studies, but also reflects a contemporary interest in Wagner's legacy for musical modernism away from narrowly circumscribed musical allusions on the one hand, and binary narratives of acceptance and rejection on the other.[18]

Despite the breadth of Gilliam's approach, however, his references to Strauss's intellectual and philosophical influences and associations are at times too vague or fleeting. For example, the title of Chapter 2, '*Élan vital*: Feuersnot, Salome and radical individualism' implies a reference to Bergson's philosophy as potentially illuminating Strauss's rejection of ideological Wagnerism. In the preface, Gilliam also asserts that 'Strauss the nonbeliever, the practitioner of Bergsonian *élan vital*, was indifferent to post-Wagnerian notions of redemption through music' (xi–xii). Yet this connection is not cited or explored further either within the chapter in question or anywhere else in the book.

Admittedly, for a book aimed primarily at readers in musicology and opera studies, too much digression into specific philosophical details can be tangential. Yet some more direct discussion of those key ideas that inform Strauss's operas (or our historical interpretation of them) might also help to clarify important themes and even give rise to new insights. In this respect, Gilliam's discussions of Strauss's ongoing involvement with Nietzsche's thought are particularly valuable. However, these references also lack sufficient detail and depth. On several occasions, Gilliam mentions the influence of *The Birth of Tragedy* for Strauss and Hofmannsthal's views on revaluating Greek drama for modern times. A more detailed engagement with the ideas presented in Nietzsche's text might have done much to further substantiate such claims. Indeed, the ways in which Strauss and Hofmannsthal responded to Nietzsche's early Wagnerian-inspired tract on music and theatre in Greek and modern culture – treating it as an aid to undercut Wagner's operatic legacy from a twentieth-century vantage point – suggest in themselves an interesting paradox worthy of deeper investigation.

[18] See, for example, Charles Youmans, *Richard Strauss's Orchestral Music and the German Intellectual Tradition: The Philosophical Roots of Musical Modernism* (Bloomington, 2005).

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Gilliam is predominantly concerned throughout the book with illuminating and contextualising the genesis of Strauss's operas, the major aesthetic and philosophical themes and topics at stake, and their musical-dramatic content. Admittedly, the author does allude to issues of reception and criticism – notably in reference to the controversial reviews of *Salome*, the modernist reception of *Der Rosenkavalier* and the critical and moral debates surrounding Strauss's compositional output during the period of National Socialism and the Second World War. Yet for a book that claims to explore the social, cultural and political environment of Strauss's operatic output, these discussions of reception are potentially limiting. We are left wondering, for instance, how critical responses to *Salome* as 'nerve opera' might have related to wider critical and political debates in the reception history of musical modernism? Similarly, how might such criticisms have related to surrounding perceptions of Wagner's music along similar or contrasting lines? If Gilliam maintains that Strauss confronted and successfully overcame Wagner's operatic legacy, how does this argument compare with perceptions of the composer within the wider critical discourse surrounding the publication and performances of his operas? And how might issues of performance, staging and listening come into play when considering Strauss's operatic legacy in relation to Wagnerism?

Such questions arguably touch on a larger potential limitation inherent in Gilliam's overall narrative; namely, that the image of Wagner and Wagnerism he provides as background to interpreting Strauss's operas remains somewhat elusive. The idea of 'Wagnerian metaphysics' presumably refers to the composer's Schopenhauerian and Christian worldview as depicted in a work such as *Parsifal*. Gilliam also refers to the composer's overall treatment of mythology, or the aesthetic ideology of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as tropes that Strauss inherited and successfully manipulated. At other times, though, it seems that what is at stake is a particular idea of music itself as sustained by nineteenth-century German idealism and perpetuated through the phenomenon of Wagnerism. As mentioned already, Gilliam explores how Strauss's operas involve an aesthetic of musical materialism – one that challenges ideologies of musical transcendence with an ahistorical 'euphony' of musical styles. In the closing chapter of the book, however, ideas of musical transcendence and autonomy resurface in Gilliam's discussion of *Capriccio*:

> The final twenty-five minutes of this opera is swamped by some of Strauss's greatest late music, and it is almost impossible to believe that anyone in the audience is at this point thinking of the text. *Capriccio* is a grand artifice. Strauss, the seasoned opera composer, knew – even in his final stage piece – that in order to have an effective final curtain, *music,* not words, must reign supreme.
>
> (311)

Such a statement implies that Strauss's overcoming of Wagnerian musical metaphysics was not quite as conclusive as the author makes out. Indeed, the separation between Strauss's post-Wagnerian music and his outright rejection of Wagnerism as ideology is in itself a problematic division. If Strauss successfully rejected the ideological Wagnerisms of his day to create a lasting operatic legacy of his own, this

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586715000130 Published online by Cambridge University Press

still leaves us with the question as to how Strauss – and indeed other composers, artists and critics of his generation – responded to Wagner's wider musical influence and legacy beyond the level of compositional style and technique.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586715000130 Published online by Cambridge University Press