

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Richard Wagner

The achievement of Richard Wagner. Richard Wagner (1813-1883) was a great composer, poet (of the librettos of his own operas), scenographer and dramaturge, publicist, political voice, and autobiographer. It is no wonder that his creative brilliance made of opera (the Gesamtkunstwerk, the Total Art Work) the consummate statement of 19th century Romanticism, with its overtones (in Germany) of apocalypse and violence. German literature is multiply intertwined with the work of Wagner: the themes of his greatest work, like *Parzifal* and the *Ring of the Niebelungen*, are drawn from the earliest classics of German literature; Wagner himself proved to be a consummate wordsmith, in creating the librettos for his operas; and the literary climate of early 20th century German literature is unthinkable without Wagner's looming shadow over it.

The Life of Richard Wagner. Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig. His father was a police department clerk, while his mother was the daughter of a baker. His father died shortly after Richard's birth, and his mother, remarrying one of the Father's friends, moved the family to Dresden, near to which the young Wagner went to a pastor's school at Possendorf. At the age of nine, while still in elementary school, Wagner registered his extreme delight at hearing Karl Maria von Weber's *Die Freischuetz*; at the same stage he wrote his first play. (Wagner was quick to pick up on driving new forces in the German art world: in 1825 he heard Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, and was taken with a fit of demonic excitement.) In 1831 Wagner entered the University of Leipzig, and at the age of 20 he composed his first opera, *The Fairies*. In 1836 Wagner fell in love—for the first of many recorded times—and married. (The next year the lady left him for another man, only to reappear, reconciled then fighting, many times in Wagner's later life, all the while he was accumulating new romantic encumbrances. Romantic confusion and constant debt were the two constants of Wagner's personal life.) The following years, as Wagner composed unremittingly, were to find him making his way by luck and prayer through the labyrinth of higher culture elements on whom he was dependent for his livelihood, and, even in his later years, when he had settled in Bayreuth, and established a performance for his operatic achievement, for the funding of an appropriate Grand Hall for the staging of his works.

The Work of Richard Wagner. You will be able to trace, in any of Wagner's major operas, the combination of skills which marks his originality: his bringing together of all the elements of the opera—from costume and gesture to the highest singing roles—to a firm unity; tonal experimentation and chromaticism that bespeaks the advent of the 'modern music' lying not far ahead into the next century. Wagner recapitulates (in his invariably fresh and socially alert manner) many of the greatest early Germanic narrative themes: *Lohengrin* and *Parzifal* (Wolfram's *Parzifal*); *Tannhauser* (the *Meistersingers*); *The Ring of the Niebelungen*; *Tristan und Isolde* (Gottfried von Strassburg, 12th century). Wagner's perspective, throughout his reworking of this narrative material, is romantic-tragic in mode; in world view he is both celebratory of the origins of German literature, and scornful of the fallen state of commercial middle class Germany, at its worst exemplified by the Jews, whom Wagner regularly excoriates. Wagner's powerful written lyrics, and sublime (at best) music, which he was to help enshrine in a national festival at Bayreuth (1872), mark one of the high points of German cultural self-awareness. It must be mentioned that Adolf Hitler promoted his own cult of Wagnerian music, which he considered the highest testimony to German national supremacy. But it has been frequently observed, that Wagner was, instead of a nationalist, a creator employing the treasures of German culture to focus an unrelenting critique of German society.

Reading

Primary source reading

Wagner, Richard, *My Life*, trans. Gray, 1992.

Secondary source reading

Selected Letters of Richard Wagner, ed. Spencer and Millington, 1987.

Further reading

Spett, Frederic, *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*, 1994.

Original language reading

Callico, J, 'Fuer eine neue deutsche Nationaloper,' in Applegate, *Music and German National Identity*, 2002.

Suggested paper topics

What connection do you see between Wagner's conception of the Gesamtkunstwerk and the work of creative imagination in literature? While it is true that Wagner composed the lyrics for his own operas, and that he was a genius at creating lyrics for the operatic production, does this kind of work constitute literary creation?

What kinds of transformation of early German literature do you see in Wagner's operas? How has Wagner's *The Ring of the Niebelungen* modified the *Niebelungenlied*? How has Wagner's *Parzifal* refashioned the epic of Wolfram von Eschenbach? Answer with the view to the kinds of radical transformation the Gesamtkunstwerk makes when it assembles literary material into a new whole.

Excerpt en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Richard_Wagner

- I believe in God, Mozart, and Beethoven.
- The error in the art-genre of Opera consists herein: a Means of expression (Music) has been made the end, while the End of expression (the Drama) has been made a means.
- The oldest, truest, most beautiful organ of music, the origin to which alone our music owes its being, is the human voice.
- A political man is disgusting, but a political wife, horrible.
- From its first faint glimmerings, History shews Man's constant progress as a beast of prey. As such he conquers every land, subdues the fruit-fed races, founds mighty realms by subjugating other subjugators, forms states and sets up civilisations, to enjoy his prey at rest.
- Attack and defence, want and war, victory and defeat, lordship and thralldom, all sealed with the seal of blood: this from henceforth is the History of Man.