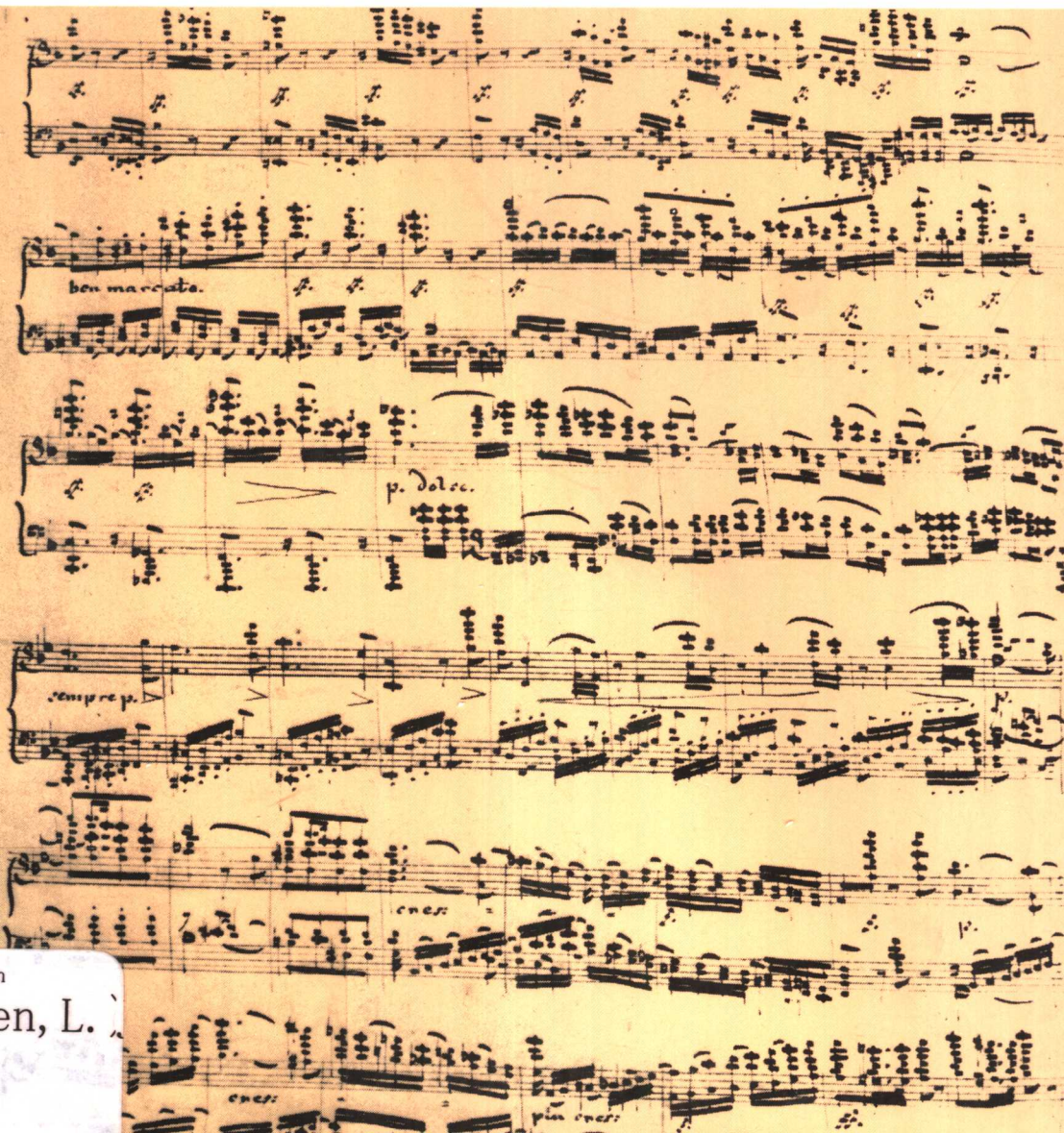
WAGNER and BEETHOVEN

Richard Wagner's reception of Beethoven

Klaus Kropfinger



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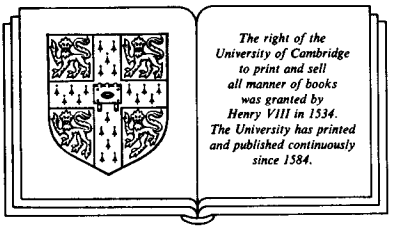

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PREFACE

This is a revised version of a book first published in German in 1974. More than ever, I have tried to present Wagner's relationship to Beethoven with as little prejudice as possible. It is only away from the beaten track, removed from the aura of the Wagner myth, but also beyond scepticism cultivated for its own sake, that the labyrinthine structure of the *œuvre* becomes evident. Wagner's reception of Beethoven is part of that structure. It therefore needs examining in greater depth and breadth – but even so, this study can only be a partial one: 'drops from the Wagnerian ocean' (*The Times Literary Supplement*, 18 June 1970).

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GERMAN AND ENGLISH ABBREVIATIONS

BAMZ *Berliner Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*
BLW *König Ludwig II. und Richard Wagner. Briefwechsel*, in 5 vols. ed. by Otto Strobel (Karlsruhe, 1936–9)
GS R. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 12 vols. (Leipzig, 1907)
MGG *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 14 (+2) vols., ed. by Friedrich Blume (Kassel, 1949–68, 1973–9)
NZfM *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*
SB R. Wagner, *Sämtliche Briefe*, ed. by Gertrud Strobel and Werner Wolf, Vol. I: 1830–42 (Leipzig, 1967); Vol. II: 1842–9 (Leipzig, 1970)
WWV *Wagner-Werkverzeichnis*

CW C. Wagner, *Diaries I and II* (London, 1978–80)
MET *Music in European Thought 1851–1912*, ed. by B. Bujić (Cambridge, 1988)
ML R. Wagner, *My Life* (Cambridge, 1983)
NGW John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (London, 1984)
SL *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987)
TWE *Three Wagner Essays* (London, 1979)
WP *Wagner Writes from Paris ... Stories, Essays and Articles by the Young Composer* (London, 1973)

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I

INTRODUCTION

In 1869 Wagner successfully requested a copy of Waldmüller's portrait of Beethoven, which was owned by the publishers Breitkopf & Härtel. This was not the only Beethoven portrait that Wagner possessed. For in December 1851, when he wanted a portrait of Liszt, he said that 'so far I have only Beethoven on my wall, apart from the Nibelung sheet by Cornelius' (*SB*, IV, p. 221). Since his teens, in fact, Wagner had been familiar with Beethoven's outward appearance: in *My Life* (p. 30) he mentions the impression which 'Beethoven's physiognomy, as shown by lithographs of the time' had made on him in 1827. The composer's image accompanied Wagner throughout his life, symbolizing his persistent attempts to comprehend the spiritual phenomenon that was Beethoven, to capture his likeness as both man and artist. What, then, did Beethoven look like to Wagner?

Wagner's mental image of Beethoven is an integral part of that myth of himself, or persona, at which he worked all his life and which he handed on to posterity as something binding and sacrosanct. Both during his lifetime and later on, Wagner's staunch admirers took pains to conserve this 'self-portrait', including those Beethovenian features to which it owes a great deal. The dyed-in-the-wool Wagnerite has always tended to accept statements by Wagner without stopping to consider the background, the context in which they were made. One illustration of this is the way Curt von Westernhagen interprets Wagner's request for a true and not an ideal picture of Beethoven. As Wagner's correspondence with Breitkopf & Härtel and with Robert Krausse, the copyist, shows, it was what made him choose Waldmüller's portrait. Beethoven was to be depicted 'free from any affectation'. But did Wagner actually see in the desired portrait simply the 'real man', i.e. his immediate outward appearance?

Among the portraits painted of Beethoven, Waldmüller's was one of the most suspect and heavily criticized. Wagner knew that, because Breitkopf & Härtel pointed it out to him. No doubt he also knew Schindler's account of the circumstances in which the portrait was produced, and knew how harshly he had judged Waldmüller's labours. Interestingly enough, Wagner rejected this opinion in favour of one which would gain currency at a later period. Unlike Schindler, Theodor Frimmel thought that Wald-

müller's Beethoven portrait managed to reawaken a mental image of the Beethoven of the twenties. And Bruno Grimschitz remarks in his study of the painter (1957) that he was capable of memorizing individual characteristics exceptionally quickly. Waldmüller's portrait with the 'hearing eyes' is, he believes, 'one of the best portraits of the great tone-poet'.

Wagner evidently saw in this picture of the 'real man' some quite specific features which he found important. They belong, says Joseph Schmidt-Görg in *MGG*, to a composer already scarred by worry and illness, and above all one who was hard of hearing. The 'hearing eyes' are a sign that his ears were attuned to the sounds within him. Thus in the 'true picture' he wanted, Wagner could see once again the features of the Beethoven he had described in his *Beethoven* essay. This was the composer with 'the vision of an innermost musical world to proclaim' (*GS*, IX, p. 83); the musician who, 'being afflicted by deafness, is now undisturbed by life's noises and listens solely to the harmonies within him' (*GS*, IX, p. 92). The composer as a saint and a redeemer – that was Wagner's contribution to the Romantic image of Beethoven. So behind his apparently straightforward request there lies a specific perception of Beethoven. And it affects Wagner's own myth, too, because his image of 'Beethoven the redeemer is simply an allegory of Wagner the redeemer' (A. Schmitz 1926, p. 183).

Previous research

Although the literature on Wagner has swollen to vast proportions, it does not include many studies that deal in a critical way with the Wagner myth as it relates to the myth of Beethoven. Moreover, the majority of such studies are concerned with individual topics. Only Karl Ipser's *Beethoven – Wagner – Bayreuth* (1953) examines Wagner's reception of Beethoven comprehensively, and as a self-contained subject. (Wyzewa's *Beethoven et Wagner*, first published in 1898, deals with other matters.)

It was Ipser's aim to present Wagner's life as 'a life with Beethoven' not just with the aid of facts and figures, but by postulating the existence of an 'innermost active force'. But his book falls short in this respect: there are long passages comprising merely a stream of facts and quotations. Like the uncritical Wagnerite, Ipser treats his data as symbols with an obvious meaning and function that stand in no need of analysis or criticism. What point is there in his saying, for instance, that Beethoven was born in the same year as Wagner's father? This, to Ipser, is a 'significant conjunction' and no coincidence. As to Wagner's *Faust* Overture, he finds it significant that Beethoven too had planned to set 'Faust' to music. A little farther on he quotes the enthusiastic conclusion to an essay about Wagner's overture, which hailed him as one of 'the few legitimate heirs and successors to Beethoven, the son of the god of music incarnate'. But Ipser never acknowledges Hans von Bülow as the author, and this typifies his liberal

and nonchalant use of other writers' ideas and work on the subject of Wagner and Beethoven. In addition to acknowledged quotations, the book includes whole chunks of unidentified 'literary extracts'. (The late Gertrud Strobel has kindly identified Lorenz's *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner* and Engelsmann's *Wagners klingendes Universum* as two of the sources.) Ipser also uses his sources uncritically in various respects. In the first, 1907 volume of his Beethoven biography, Max Koch wrote that Wagner 'was able to hear' Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on three occasions; Ipser presents this as an established fact. And Koch wrongly stated that Wagner had copied out the score of Beethoven's Ninth in Paris. This leads Ipser into claiming that Wagner made 'a fresh copy of the score', which has since been lost. There are many more such errors to illustrate the superficiality of Ipser's approach. The motto of the 'Wesendonck' Sonata, 'Wisst ihr wie das wird', is described as the Norns' question in *Walküre*. Lehrs, instead of Anders, is named as the person to whom Schindler – after an exchange in which Wagner took part – guaranteed to make amends for having criticized him. The significance of this episode is not explained, although a little earlier, Ipser mentions the Beethoven biography on which Wagner and Anders planned to collaborate.

Jean Boyer gives considerable space to Wagner's reception of Beethoven in his book *Le 'Romantisme' de Beethoven* (1938). He outlines the formation and development of the 'Romantic' Beethoven legend and looks at Wagner so thoroughly that this section of his book could be described as an internal monograph. Drawing on Wagner's performance of the Ninth Symphony as well as his writings, Boyer examines Wagner's view of Beethoven chronologically. He particularly stresses the fact that Wagner saw in Beethoven a forerunner of music drama. This idea, he says, was derived from E. T. A. Hoffmann, whose interpretation of Beethoven influenced Wagner's for a long time, until eventually Schopenhauer's influence made itself felt in the *Beethoven* essay. But Boyer also discerns Romantic precursors, especially Novalis and Wackenroder, in major aspects of Schopenhauer's thought. Boyer's survey is broad and richly faceted, while at the same time containing points that call for criticism and debate. What is most open to question is the way he deals with Wagner's concept of music. It is a moot point whether, in *A Happy Evening*, Wagner already takes the view that Beethoven's conception of certain works began with a poetic idea, and that this determined his musical themes. Equally debatable is the claim that in *Beethoven*, Wagner is conforming to Schopenhauer in representing the 'absolute' musician's standpoint. Besides examining what Wagner meant by 'absolute music', we need to explain how he visualized Beethoven's 'idea', and what actively inspired it. Boyer also makes us examine Wagner's interpretation of the Ninth Symphony in greater detail, since this is so closely bound up with the way he experienced Beethoven.

Another major contributor to the subject of Wagner's Beethoven

reception is Herbert Birtner with his treatise *Zur Deutschen Beethoven-Auffassung seit Richard Wagner* (1937). Birtner uses the Ninth Symphony to trace the evolution of Wagner's interpretation of Beethoven. He makes the important point that Wagner's experience of Weber's music prepared him for his responses to Beethoven, although it is debatable whether Beethoven was then just 'another object of "enthusiastic veneration" besides Weber and Mozart'. Another valuable comment he makes is that it was only slowly and gradually that Wagner put his personal image of Beethoven to creative, practical use. Here we have some further starting-points for a more intensive study of Wagner's Beethoven experience and its function in his output.

Arnold Schmitz has written a number of works that deal with Beethoven and Wagner. Each is an attempt to explore the interplay between the myths of Wagner and Beethoven respectively. The first, basic work is *Die Beethoven-Apotheose als Beispiel eines Säkularisierungsvorganges* (1926). Schmitz renewed his efforts in *Das Romantische Beethovenbild* (1927), which probably blazed a trail for Boyer's study. His essay *Der Mythos der Kunst in den Schriften Richard Wagners* (1947–50) concentrates on specific features of a development that is linked to the history of ideas. Schmitz offers some illuminating remarks on the 'myth-making technique'. He traces Wagner's 'myth of art' through the composer's writings from the Zurich period to the last years. Schmitz shows how the Beethoven myth – the idea of a 'saint' who embodies man's natural goodness – comes into Wagner's 'art myth', by virtue of the claim that he was going to redeem religion with art's assistance. This amounts to a fusion, within Wagner's own myth of art, of the Wagner myth and the Beethoven myth. Schmitz's studies are an inducement to examine other myths and legends accruing from Wagner's reception of Beethoven, and to observe how they fit in with Wagner's self-portrait. This we shall do in our next two chapters.

Of the objective, critical studies that exist of Wagner and his relationship to Beethoven, Guido Adler's Wagner lectures from the start of the century are the earliest. What is the significance of these lectures? The answer is that they probably represent the first major attempt to grasp Wagner as one phenomenon among others – all of which have equal claims on our attention in an historical context. They challenged the thesis that Wagner's music drama formed the climax to an inevitable development, Beethoven's works constituting a preliminary step. It was also Adler who noted the crucial difference between the invention and treatment of music drama's vocal motifs on the one hand, and purely instrumental motifs on the other. In so doing, Adler provided the basic tools for later research.

Ernest Newman's writings are equally enlightening, especially *Wagner as Man and Artist*, although from the critical viewpoint there is less emphasis on Wagner's relationship to Beethoven. Newman points out some major discrepancies between Wagner's theories and his practice. This is the basic

reason why opinions differ so strongly on Wagner's compositional debt to Beethoven, and on the extent to which their techniques can be related and compared, if at all. Such commentators as Walter Engelsmann and Theodor W. Adorno are diametrically opposed in their views on this subject, just as myth and anti-myth are poles apart.

Like Engelsmann, Alfred Lorenz represents the orthodox school of Wagner commentators, except that he tries to demonstrate the music drama's absorption of the Beethovenian symphony by means of a special analytical device: the *Bar* form. At the end of his treatise *Worauf beruht die bekannte Wirkung der Durchführung im I. Eroicasatz* (1924), Lorenz writes as follows:

> The forms piled one upon the other which I have found in Wagner's music drama are rooted not in the type of opera that went before it but in the *Beethoven symphony*, thus confirming the truth of Wagner's claim that the symphony had poured into his drama. (p. 183)

Two objections can be raised to this statement. First, studies by Carl Dahlhaus and Rudolf Stephan have since undermined it by illustrating the inadequacy of the formal patterns Lorenz applied to Wagner's music drama: the *Bar* ('strophe'), the *Bogen* ('arch') and so on. Secondly, even if we apply it to the development section of Beethoven's 'Eroica', the *Bar* form (or rather the scheme of the *Reprisenbar*) does not make sense. In fact it contradicts something that Lorenz himself said. Unlike others, he regarded the close of the development not as 'signalling a victory' but as a 'period of exhaustion' which, he maintained, pointed beyond the development's confines. We may question the correctness of referring to a victory or defeat of the principal theme, but that is not now the point. What is evident is that, having perceived the development's forward impetus, Lorenz subsequently loses sight of it by imposing the *Reprisenbar* on the procedure. For the concept of the *Reprisenbar* implies a 'return of the same thing' [*Wiederkehr des Gleichen*], which is precisely what Beethoven avoids in his developments. To adapt Rudolf Stephan's remark on the schematic character of Lorenz's Wagner analyses, Lorenz does away with all that is best about Beethoven's music, 'its dynamic force, its ceaseless animation'. Lorenz's Beethoven analysis poses two inescapable questions. One is the question of Wagner's own attitude to the dynamic element in Beethoven's music; and, closely connected with this, there is the question of how Wagner viewed the 'reprise'. What is the relationship between Wagner's music drama and the compositions of Beethoven? What sources can we consult on this subject? We shall return to these issues in Chapters 4 and 5.

Otto Daube has tried to give some constructive answers to the above questions in *Richard Wagner. 'Ich schreibe keine Symphonien mehr'* (1960). Daube's main aim was to set forth the sources for Wagner's period of study with Weinlig, but also for the 'actual studies', covering not just Wagner's

'brief half-year' with Weinlig but the whole period from 1828 to the end of 1832. In the *NGW*, however, John Deathridge points out not only that Weinlig evidently taught Wagner over a longer period of time, but also that these lessons may have included classical sonata form as well as studies in counterpoint. Otto Daube's book may be said to hinge on the publication of Wagner's counterpoint studies under Weinlig, together with the previously unpublished Piano Sonata in A major. But on closer scrutiny it is difficult to grant Daube's work as a whole the status of a source-book, because large parts of it are littered with extremely subjective interpretations. Daube avowedly intended them as starting-points for a new and thorough account for the Wagnerian work of art's 'musical anatomy', but they should not go unchallenged. Thus he cites Nietzsche when discussing 'formal parallels' between the symphony and drama, although in the end he rejects Nietzsche – and Thomas Mann and Adorno as well – as an interpretative point of departure. The parallel drawn between cyclical form in the symphony and the *Ring* cycle is arbitrary and totally unfounded: Daube never provides any 'sources'. The same goes for his demonstration of a formal correspondence between the Ninth Symphony and the 'formal miracle of *Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*', where he invokes Alfred Lorenz. A question-mark even hangs over Daube's source-material with regard to the Sonata in A major. Wagner cut the fugato section that originally formed part of the finale, as can be seen from Carl Dahlhaus's edition of the piano music. Daube's edition reproduces the section in full, without comment. His thoughts on this interesting matter are limited to a footnote which dismisses vital details of the sources as negligible. It is up to us to ask if speculation about the reasons for such cuts would truly lead nowhere.

Max Fehr published the two volumes of his *Richard Wagners Schweizer Zeit* in 1934 and 1954 respectively. They have always been essential reading for students of Wagner's reception of Beethoven. The years Wagner spent as an exile in Zurich and Tribschen had an important bearing on his development and on the exact nature of his relationship to Beethoven. Fehr records them from the viewpoint of his activities as a conductor of Beethoven's orchestral music, and as a 'coach' at rehearsals of his string quartets.

Probably the most ambitious recent Wagner book with a close bearing on the present study was published by Egon Voss in 1977, two years after the first (German) edition of *Wagner and Beethoven*. Voss's book is titled *Richard Wagner und die Instrumentalmusik. Wagners symphonischer Ehrgeiz*. Voss has worked as an editor on the Wagner *Gesamtausgabe*, and his book draws extensively on that experience. That fact in itself would suffice to make it interesting. The book's special immediacy is however derived from its central critical point of departure, namely a revaluation and reinterpretation of Wagner as a composer, particularly of instrumental works. Voss has carried a stage further the process of demythologization to which the

present study was and still is devoted. He attempts to show how Wagner directed his creative efforts – more or less covertly or knowingly – towards instrumental, i.e. symphonic, music, but also towards symphonic drama, a drama seen as being primarily musical in orientation. Thus Wagner's 'symphonic ambition' [*Ehrgeiz*] serves as a vantage-point from which to look down on a bare stage. The actors have all removed their masks, and the scenery swings to one side or becomes transparent, affording a glimpse of what lies behind it.

This idea has a certain attractiveness, and it seems quite feasible for Wagner's few instrumental compositions to fit in with it. But when we examine this idea more closely, it proves to be fraught with problems. The very phrase 'symphonic ambition' invites contradiction, and here we can quote Thomas Mann:

> But in any case the insinuation of ambition in any normal worldly sense can be dismissed for the simple reason that Wagner was working initially without any hope or prospect of making an immediate impact, which actual circumstances and conditions would not allow – working in a vacuum of his own invention, towards an imaginary, ideal theatre that could not possibly be realized for the present. There is certainly no hint of cool calculation or the ambitious exploitation of existing opportunities in words such as these, addressed to Otto Wesendonck: 'For I see clearly that I am fully myself only when I create . . .'
>
> (*Pro and Contra Wagner*, p. 139)

'Ambition' suggests something external; Thomas Mann's critique delves to the heart of the matter. But if it is still insisted that Wagner had this ambition, then was it not from a false, improper motive that he turned to writing instrumental works from time to time?

By a kind of 'double strategy', it might be argued, Wagner – because he was very aware of his limitations as a purely instrumental composer – ultimately 'slaked' his symphonic ambitions in his music dramas, the latter being 'symphonic dramas'. But this is not the case. Either Wagner was an instrumental fanatic with some kind of secret compulsion to identify himself with the symphony, and was not at all averse to writing any more symphonies, or else his music dramas were the result of a genuine artistic decision, a logical departure as a composer from the instrumental medium of the symphony and from any ambition to write in a genuinely 'symphonic' manner, albeit in the form of 'music dramas'. These propositions cannot both be true. And it is possible to show that Wagner's instrumental works are glosses, experiments and leftovers, and that it is the music dramas which represent his real creative output. It was a musico-dramatic output, not a primarily instrumental one, not one that was the result of 'symphonic ambition'. Dahlhaus describes the instrumental works as mere parerga in *The New Grove Wagner*.

If we want to characterize Wagner at all accurately, the only concept which seems to fit is 'intention'. By this we mean first and foremost the

unflagging concentration of all one's intellectual and imaginative powers on a single *artistic* goal. But there is also an 'intention' in respect of the artistic objects. In both structure and 'content', or mythical subject-matter, these supremely imaginative products have that 'intentional objectivity' which clearly distinguishes them from any of the products of 'ambition'. Ingarden, in his *Der Streit um die Existenz der Welt* (1965), writes that the 'activity of creating an *intentional object*' consists of actions 'which tend to make permanent, to "fix" in some way the purely intentional objects created therein, and this is achieved by giving these objects some existentially stronger ontological basis that will enable them to outlast the actions which produced them. They will thus become detached from the purely subjective foundation in which they originated and acquire an intersubjective objectivity' (II/1, pp. 204–5).

Such 'permanence' necessarily entails a complete design for the 'intended work'. But the majority of Wagner's symphonic or purely instrumental works – including his late 'symphonic sketches' – lack this for the simple reason that he never completed them. We find a major discrepancy between Wagner's avowed (but temporary!) aims as a composer and his non-realization of symphonic pieces as 'intentional objects'.

There are, however, distinctions to be made here. It would surely be wrong to regard the purely instrumental side of Wagner's creative output as a single entity. Rather it reflects creative impulses arising from a given situation as man and artist: impulses which take various forms because there were different motives behind them. It seems fair to assume that at the start of Wagner's artistic development, the early instrumental works left him the option of being a purely instrumental composer, but that he very soon chose a different path. And via opera, this eventually led him to music drama. Thus viewed, Wagner's symphonic forays and excursions will come to represent transitory impulses arising out of the particular circumstances of his life and artistic career.

Pierre Boulez has summed up the composer's relationship to tradition in the words: 'It can thus be said that a composer does not have a hard-and-fast attitude to tradition; rather his responses are conditioned by his evolution and depend on the current state of his creative development' (*Melos* 27 [1960], p. 294). This holds good for Wagner's relationship to purely instrumental music, and especially the symphony, as a traditional genre.

According to Voss, Wagner's claim that the symphony had evolved into drama was not a true reflection of his views. Instead it reflected his desire to present music drama as a legitimate genre and for it to be acknowledged as such – which would eventually evoke one element in the notorious 'Bayreuth ideology'. This judgment is far too sweeping. Granted, Wagner himself pointed to a whole series of differences (central ones at that) between the symphony and music drama. They include the elimination –

or the redesigning or redeployment – of the reprise; the different design, configurations and development of themes; the harmonic progressions; and the individual structure and form. But looking at it through Wagner's eyes, there are certainly elements in the way he developed his motifs and melodies, for example, that indicate a connection between the symphony and drama. At bottom, however, it was Wagner's broad artistic intention which engendered music drama instead of instrumental works, even though it had had its beginnings in instrumental and operatic pieces, and had passed through several stages of opera composing.

Voss maintains that almost throughout his life, it was Wagner's ambition to become a great and significant symphonist, or at least to compose significant and universally recognized symphonic music. This now seems an exaggeration. Wagner's subsequent efforts in the symphonic realm were more extensive but did not last; after that, there were only sporadic excursions. He cherished no secret yet central, lifelong desire in that respect. Whatever the content and objective by which it is defined, his so-called symphonic ambition was altogether a by-product of his artistic development. If Wagner had really nurtured far-reaching symphonic aims, he would not have cast aside the *Faust* Overture, which he originally conceived as a symphony in Paris in 1839. The thematic sketches and compositional fragments that Voss goes out of his way to enumerate would not have remained mere statements of intent. And towards the end of his life, Wagner would have done more than just talk about future symphonies. He would have actually realized one or other of his initial themes rather than carry on with and complete his final stage-work, *Parsifal*.

After arriving at music drama, Wagner was still driven to the brink of instrumental music time and again. This was for reasons which affected him deeply and were also a provocation. These causes were, however, 'adjusted' very quickly within the music drama's ambit. They included Berlioz (and Beethoven!) in Paris, the symphonic poems of Liszt, those two dogged symphonists Mendelssohn and Schumann, but above all Brahms and – Bruckner. Instrumental music not only survived in the shadow of music drama but even acquired a fresh impetus. This impressed Wagner considerably, and he felt it as a challenge; again and again, however, it was also of instant fascination, for all his woolly anti-Semitism and his fixed art-ideology. The fact is graphically illustrated by Cosima Wagner's diaries, which mention Mendelssohn as an orchestral composer surprisingly often, and not always negatively. In the light of Mendelssohn's unerring skill as a purely instrumental composer, Wagner said such things as 'Mendelssohn would raise his hands in horror if he ever saw me composing' (23 June 1871). Statements like this may be tinged with irony, but the real feelings behind them are complex. They explain why Wagner thought it so important to have at least one entire symphony to his credit in later life, even if it was only the early one in C major. He had once entrusted

the score of that very work to Mendelssohn, and he never forgave him for its disappearance!

We can now also understand why, in the end, Wagner wanted to have nothing more to do with the 'Wesendonck' Sonata. Contemporaries of his were casting their 'infinite symphonic shadow'. Do we really wish to embarrass Wagner by puffing up this sketch as a kind of magnum opus of his 'symphonic ambition'? The piece is marginal to a very different order of music that was going through the forward-looking composer's mind. Gutman quite rightly calls it shallow. The 'Wesendonck' Sonata was produced in a specific set of circumstances relating to Wagner's life and career. It stands on the threshold of the composition of the *Ring*. But this is no pointer to music drama as the consummation of the symphony. After all, it was Wagner's aim as a musical dramatist to transpose purely instrumental music into a new – and 'essential' [*eigentlich*] – musical dimension once and for all by giving it dramatic significance. Cosima records Wagner as saying (16 August 1869) that in him, the accent lay on the conjunction of the dramatic poet with the musician; he would not amount to much purely as a musician. Is the idea to unmask this too as a piece of self-ideologizing?

The thesis of Wagner's 'symphonic ambition' appears to be a fresh attempt to solve the problem of how his creative work should really be understood and classified. And it corresponds to the attempt to subsume Wagner's output under the 'idea of absolute music' (Carl Dahlhaus). The notion of assigning Wagner to the realm of absolute music is crucial to numerous studies published by Dahlhaus. It also appears in his extensive contribution to *The New Grove Wagner*, and it undoubtedly has its attractions. There may have indeed been an idea of absolute music lasting from early Romanticism to Wagner and beyond. But if so, we need to ask if, as the result of a change in the musical material, in formal, structural and expressive qualities during the nineteenth century, the content and concept of this idea did not undergo some changes as well. The problem clearly emerges where analysis, by using purely musical categories of form, only partially succeeds in grasping the structure of music drama. This leads on to the question of Wagner's concept of music. Was it really that of an instrumental music which fitted into a purely musical structural and expressive framework, and with which the symphonic drama also fell into line?

Wagner's view of Beethoven can help to enlighten us on this very point. For his reception of the Beethoven symphonies, and also of the other instrumental works, represents a crossroads. Not only does it give a fair picture of the way he summed up Beethoven's instrumental music; it also serves to bring out more clearly the structure of his own range as a composer of music dramas. The one left its mark on the other.

We now come to a matter which looms large both in Voss's book and in