

Carl Dahlhaus's Conception of Wagner's Post-1848 Dramaturgy *

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1.

“Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner,” a secret whose existence was announced and solution promised in the title of Alfred Lorenz’s tetralogy that appeared between 1924 and 1933, remains unsolved.¹ But if we rightly feel to be closer today to its solution than Lorenz ever got, this is surely due to Carl Dahlhaus’s voluminous writings on the subject. Not that Dahlhaus himself ever offered a solution: he was far too brilliant and impatient to be interested in answering questions. His strength lay elsewhere—in the uncanny ability to identify interesting questions and in knowing how to ask them. The working out of answers he left for the most part to others. But to ask a question in the right way is to go far toward providing an answer.

My central concern here will be with Wagner’s large-scale music-dramatic form, the shaping of complete acts and works in the post-1848 music dramas. To the best of my knowledge, Dahlhaus himself never presented a comprehensive analysis of a complete music drama or even of a complete act thereof; his analytical observations remained focused on smaller music-dramatic units, on “poetic-musical periods” and scenes. All the same, his reconstruction of Wagner’s operatic dramaturgy, I believe, offers an indispensable starting point for anyone who might want to attempt a large-scale analysis today.

The most comprehensive statement of these insights can be found in the 1971 book, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas*.² The ideas presented there were often repeated and further developed on a number of occasions, the most important of which are another book of 1971, *Richard Wagners Musikdramen* and two late statements: “The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera” first published in Italian in 1988; and “What is a musical drama?” first published in English a year later.³ My reconstruction of Dahlhaus’s thought will be based primarily on these four texts, and on the first one in particular. And it will be a reconstruction rather than a straightforward summary: Dahlhaus’s

¹ Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, 4 vols. (Berlin, 1924-33).

² Carl Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas* (Regensburg, 1971); reprint in Dahlhaus, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Danuser, vol. 7 (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2004), pp. 11-140.

³ Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagners Musikdramen* (Velber: Friedrich Verlag, 1971); reprint in Dahlhaus, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Danuser, vol. 7 (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2004), pp. 141-273; Eng. trans. in *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). “The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera,” in Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, eds., *Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth [The History of Italian Opera]*, vol. 6, part II, “Systems” (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 73-150; German original reprinted in “Dramaturgie der italienischen Oper,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Danuser, vol. 2 (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2001), pp. 467-545. “What is a musical drama?,” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 1 (1989), 95-111; German original in “Was ist ein musikalisches Drama?,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Hermann Danuser, vol. 2 (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 2001), pp. 546-64.

thinking is too nimble-footed and mercurial, too ready to digress and follow its quarry along some obscure but promising byway, to allow a simple summary. But there is a systematic structure hidden beneath the luxuriant overgrowth and I shall try to bring it out to the open.

2.

What Dahlhaus calls “dramaturgy” is not (as an English-speaking person might expect) the theory of dramatic production and performance, but something more inclusive, the theory of drama, a part of what Aristotle called “poetics.” “... ‘dramaturgy’ is to drama what ‘poetics’ is to poetry: it denotes the essential nature of the categories that form the basis of a drama and can be re constructed in a dramatic theory.”⁴ At a minimum, it seems to me, such a theory has to answer two questions: first, What is drama, that is, what is (or are) its aim(s)?; and second, What are its means and how do they serve the aim(s)? It is by following these questions that we should be able to enter the thickets of Dahlhausian thinking without losing our way in them.

“The common definition of drama as a series of events represented onstage,” is dismissed right away as “unexceptionable” but also “so banal as to be useless as a starting-point in the search for the basic difference between an ordinary play and a drama in which music is essential.”⁵ Perhaps the most characteristic feature of Dahlhaus’s method as he develops his conception of the Wagnerian post-1848 dramaturgy is that he proceeds by comparing and contrasting this dramaturgy with that of earlier opera (a common move) and by comparing and contrasting the dramaturgy of earlier opera with that of spoken drama (a move that is not common at all and that may reflect Dahlhaus’s experience of eight years as the Dramaturg at the Deutsches Theater in Göttingen). Like Wagner, and indeed like Aristotle, Dahlhaus accepts that drama is an onstage representation of an action (a series of events) involving the acting and suffering characters. But he also understands that, if he is to capture the essential differences between the spoken drama and opera, on the one hand, and between both of these and music drama, on the other, he must consider the means employed by each.

That the main means employed by the spoken drama is language and that employed by the opera is music is obvious. Less obvious, and crucial, is Dahlhaus’s next step: the main discursive form of modern spoken drama, he claims (taking his clue primarily from Peter Szondi’s 1963 *Theorie des modernen Dramas*), is dialogue: “The medium of modern drama, as it developed since the sixteenth century, is the dialogue. And dialogue, as the carrier of form, tends to be exclusive. Epic and contemplative moments, which were constitutive for the ancient and medieval theater ..., were eliminated from drama...”⁶ And similarly: “The medium and the sole formal principle of modern drama since the Renaissance is dialogue ... The goal of dramatic dialogue is a moment of decision when a character becomes aware of his moral autonomy and acts according to his inner motivation.”⁷ Since the late sixteenth century, modern spoken drama develops its action, a series of events in each of which one situation is changed into another, primarily by means

⁴ Dahlhaus, “What is a musical drama?,” p. 95.

⁵ Dahlhaus, “What is a musical drama?,” p. 96.

⁶ “Das Medium des neuzeitlichen Dramas, wie es sich seit dem 16. Jahrhundert herausbildete, ist der Dialog. Und als Träger der Form tendiert er zur Ausschließlichkeit. Epische und kontemplative Momente, die für das antike und mittelalterliche Theater konstitutiv waren ..., wurden aus dem Drama ausgeschieden ...” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 40.

⁷ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p. 16.

of a dialogue in which the participating characters come to decisions concerning how they would act. Other discursive forms, such as the monologue or the chorus, forms that might introduce contemplative or epic components, are either absent or marginal and in any case more often than not monologues are in effect interior dialogues designed to allow the character to arrive at a decision.

In opera, a dramatic type that develops simultaneously with modern spoken drama (“... opera came into the existence at the same time as the drama of the modern era—the drama of Shakespeare and Racine ...”⁸), the principal means are both language and music (and Dahlhaus never tires to remind us that, contrary to popular misrepresentations, the Wagnerian reform of the early 1850s did not envisage putting the music in the service of the words, but rather putting it, along with the words, in the service of the drama: “The text, the poem, is—just like the music—understood by Wagner as a means of the drama, not as its essence.”⁹). But if in theory both the language and the music are to serve the drama, in operatic practice, in singing, the music overwhelms the language and becomes the opera’s principal and defining means. “When, therefore, we speak of ‘musical dramaturgy’—dramaturgy that makes use of musical means—we should refer only to the function of music in the creation of a drama. ... music does not alight from somewhere outside upon a drama that already has an independent existence, but rather ... the music alone creates the drama, which is that drama of a special kind.”¹⁰ Moreover, the main discursive form of the opera is not the one that would correspond to the dialogue of the spoken drama, that is, the recitative dialogue, but rather the one corresponding to the spoken monologue, that is, the aria: what is central in the spoken drama is marginal in the opera, and the reverse. The predominant forms of operatic discourse are the “closed” forms of “melody” (primarily, the aria, but also others, such as the duet and the ensemble), not the “open” form of “declamation” (the recitative). The conflict between characters is expressed in a configuration of arias, not in a dialogue:

... the emphasis has shifted from dialogue, where it lies in a play (which expresses conflict in arguments), to a configuration of monologues in which the affects, as the underlying structure of the drama taking place among the characters, are made musically manifest ... If modern European spoken drama ... rests on the premise that everything important which happens between people can be expressed through speech, then opera ... has at its core a profound distrust of language. It is not arguments exchanged in recitatives, but affects expressed in arias—i.e., in soliloquies—that reveal the true substance of relationships between characters in a musical drama. [...] Presenting a configuration of characters in a drama of affects is the stylistic principle opera imposes on the action represented, just as expressing human conflicts in dialogue is the stylistic principle of a play.¹¹

The different means and discursive forms emphasized, respectively, by the spoken drama (speaking, dialogue) and opera (singing, aria) are correlated with the difference of the essential features of what gets represented in them—correlated, since it would be hard, and perhaps unnecessary, to decide what is the cause and what the effect in this case. Speaking is a medium of reflection that allows the characters to connect the experienced present with the recollected past and anticipated future; and a dialogue involves at least two such reflective characters. Hence a spoken play emphasizes the external action, what happens between the individual characters, and its protagonists are reflective in the

⁸ Dahlhaus, “The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera,” p. 75.

⁹ “Der Text, die Dichtung, ist—nicht anders als die Musik, von Wagner als Mittel des Dramas, nicht als dessen Inbegriff, verstanden worden.” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 15.

¹⁰ Dahlhaus, “What is a musical drama?,” p. 95.

¹¹ Dahlhaus, “What is a musical drama?,” p. 96.

sense that they relate the present moment to the past and the future: one acts on motives deriving from the remembered past, attempting to change the presently experienced situation into an anticipated future one. Singing, on the other hand, and in particular the solo aria, is a medium of self-expression that allows the character to vent his presently experienced affect without connecting it to the past or future. Hence an opera emphasizes the internal passion, what happens not between the individual characters but within this individual character who remains unreflective, that is, imprisoned in the present, and passive, that is, interested not in acting, but in passionate self-expression. Thus, Dahlhaus argues:

[In opera,] the stress falls on the scenic-musical moment which is fulfilled by itself and therefore encloses a lyrical aspect. Any given situation is unreflectively experienced in its presence, rather than interpreted on the basis of the relationships that link it with the past and the future. And it seems that the difference with drama is rooted in the nature of music ...: The musical tone, just as the affect that it expresses, is ‘fettered to the sensuous present,’ so that what went on before and what is still to come pale in significance. Paradoxically speaking, the decisive moments of the action in opera are those when the action stops and is suspended. ... The musical-scenic present is not a function of the dramatic aim-directed process that transcends them, but the reverse, the process is a function of the self-sufficient present.¹²

The correlation of the difference in the way time is handled in drama and in opera with the difference between the dominant medium of each is repeatedly emphasized by Dahlhaus: “If, in a play, emphasis lies less on what is happening at the present moment than on the relations to past and future that generate the dialectics of the moment, it is because of the primacy of speech over scenic elements ... In opera, conversely, the focus on the present moment has to do with music’s affinity to the scenic ...”¹³ And again:

In spoken drama, ... a large ... part of the action is usually unseen. The language of the dialogue adds other meanings to what is shown onstage and these may be remote in both space and time. Music, by contrast, is tied to the place in which it occurs and relates to the moment in which it belongs. ... Singing is the essence of operatic music, expressing as it does the present moment ...; and the musical present manifested in it is simultaneously the scenic present. Melodic expression, unlike verbal expression, does not reach beyond the present moment but exists entirely in the given situation; it isolates that situation and lifts it out of its context, so that what has gone before recedes into oblivion with no thought given to the consequences which will follow the particular moment.¹⁴

In short (see Figure 1), the spoken drama centers on action (dynamic change of situation), opera on passion (static expression of affects released by the situation); the protagonist of the former relates his present to the past and future, the protagonist of the latter remains imprisoned in the present. This contrast is correlated with (that is, is either the cause or the effect of) the contrast between the means and discursive forms emphasized in each type of drama—the

¹² “Auf den szenisch-musikalischen Augenblick, der in sich erfüllt ist und darum ein Moment des Lyrischen in sich schließt, fällt der Akzent. Die jeweils gegenwärtige Situation wird reflexionslos in ihrer Präsenz erlebt, nicht aus den Zusammenhängen heraus gedeutet, durch die sie mit der Vergangenheit und der Zukunft verbunden ist. Und es scheint, als sei die Differenz zum Drama in der Natur der Musik begründet ...: Der musikalische Ton ist, ebenso wie der Affekt, den er ausdrückt, ‘an die sinnliche Gegenwart gefesselt’, so daß das Vorher und das Nachher verblassen. Die entscheidenden Momente der Handlung sind in der Oper, paradox formuliert, die des Innehaltens, in denen die Handlung aufgehoben ist. ... Die musikalisch-szenische Gegenwart ist nicht eine Funktion des dramatischen Verlaufs, der über sie hinausgreift und einem Ziel zustrebt, sondern umgekehrt der Verlauf eine Funktion der Gegenwart, die in sich selbst beruht und beharrt.” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 48.

¹³ Dahlhaus, “The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera,” p. 103.

¹⁴ Dahlhaus, “What is a musical drama?,” p. 102.

spoken dialogue and sung aria, respectively. It will be readily observed that, while Dahlhaus's view of opera as centering on passion and aria rather than on action and recitative is something of a commonplace, the second component of his analysis—the observation that opera, unlike the spoken drama, emphasizes the present moment at the expense of its connections with the past and future—is highly original and, we shall see, crucially important for his understanding of Wagner's dramaturgy.

Figure 1: Ideal Types I: Drama versus Opera

Aims:

represented object: action versus passion

temporality: the present related to the past and future versus the present isolated

Means:

kind of discourse: speaking versus singing

form of discourse: dialogue versus aria

3.

“The name ‘music drama’,” writes Dahlhaus, “... seems to have established itself in the 1860s as a designation for what was specific to Wagner's works that one ... did not want to classify as operas.”¹⁵ The Wagnerian music drama, Dahlhaus implies, can be understood only with reference to the contrast between the spoken drama and opera: it is a new dramatic type that falls somewhere in between the two older ones. The music drama aspires to the condition of the spoken drama, without wanting, or being able, to give up entirely on its operatic heritage and musical means, that is, on being, precisely, a *music* drama:

Wagner proceeds in an ambiguous fashion. While the intention to realize drama musically as a dialogue-drama is unmistakable, the subterranean operatic tradition remains paramount ... On the one hand, music drama confers on dialogue the rights that were reserved for it in the modern spoken drama, but not in opera; and the epic-contemplative parts, chorus and monologue, are pushed back. ... On the other hand, however, the dialogic structure of music drama that was Wagner's aim is not infrequently endangered by relicts of compositional technique deriving from operatic tradition from which he did not emancipate himself as completely as he believed.¹⁶

The aspiration to the condition of spoken drama means that an attempt had to be made to shift the point of gravity from monologues to dialogue, that is, from arias to recitative. But for this shift of the point of gravity to be effective, it was

¹⁵ “Der Name ‘Musikdrama’ ... scheint sich in den 1860er Jahren als Bezeichnung für das Spezifische der Wagnerschen Werke durchgesetzt zu haben, die man ... nicht als Opern klassifizieren mochte.” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, pp. 11f.

¹⁶ “Wagners Verfahren ist zwiespältig. So unmißverständlich die Absicht ist, das Drama als Dialog-Drama musikalisch zu realisieren, so übermächtig ist untergründig die Operntradition ... Einerseits ist im Musikdrama der Dialog in die Rechte eingesetzt, die ihm das gesprochene Drama der Neuzeit gewährte, die Oper jedoch verweigerte; und die episch-kontemplativen Teile, Chor und Monolog, sind zurückgedrängt. ... Andererseits ist jedoch die dialogische Struktur des musikalischen Dramas, die Wagner erstrebte, nicht selten gefährdet durch kompositionstechnische Relikte der Operntradition, von der er sich nicht so restlos emanzipiert hatte, wie er glaubte.” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, pp. 41f.

not enough simply to phase out or attenuate the arias; rather, the recitative dialogue had to become musically more emphatic, more substantial and interesting, more weighty. Moreover, and this is a crucial point, it would not do simply to make the recitative more like aria, to transform the recitative dialogue into something akin to a duet: the closed forms of vocal melody—the aria, the duet—tend to isolate the present from the past and future and this isolation was precisely what the music drama wanted to overcome. Thus, what was needed was a new way to compose the recitative, a way that would preserve its “open” declamatory character and yet make it musically more substantial, and, what is most important, would put these new musical means at the service of the drama: it is on them primarily that the burden of binding the present with its past and future was to rest.

This new way of composing the recitative dialogue Wagner found by examining and adapting the developmental discourse of the Beethovenian symphony. In a nutshell, his solution was to leave the style of the vocal lines in principle intact (the declamation was pushed in the *arioso* direction already in the Romantic operas of the 1840s) and to concentrate the musical and dramatic interest on the developing variation of the accompanying orchestral discourse based on motifs of reminiscence and anticipation—on the *Leitmotivtechnik* that provided a present moment with a recollected past and expected future. Wagner’s aim, says Dahlhaus, was “... to create a rapprochement between the *arioso*-declamatory style of vocal melody and the expressive and allegorical motivic writing for orchestra ...”¹⁷ And the main point of the latter was not merely to provide the orchestral discourse with melodic substance and interest, but to accomplish by musical means what in a spoken drama was accomplished by means of language:

... the symphonic style in Wagner is the foundation of a leitmotivic technique which forms a counter-instance to the predominance ... of the musical and scenic present. Leitmotifs, which dramaturgically nearly always function as reminiscence motifs, link the present moment, the visible event, with earlier events or with ideas whose origins lie in the pre-history. However, the delineation of a second, unseen action ... belongs ... to the dramaturgy of the spoken genre.¹⁸

In short, “the symphonic style of orchestral composition, as Wagner recognized, assists the dialogising of music and the musicalising of dialogue, and dialogue in turn constitutes the primary medium of a drama whose poetics reflects that of the spoken genre ...”¹⁹

Here, too, Dahlhaus relies on an implied contrast between two ideal types, two ways of composing (see Figure 2)—implied, since, admittedly, I am systematizing his thoughts on the subject perhaps beyond the limits he himself would find comfortable. Taking his cue at least in part from Jacques Handschin’s 1948 book, *Musikgeschichte im Überblick*, Dahlhaus contrasts two compositional systems—systems in the sense that the individual components of each strongly imply, though do not absolutely require, one another.²⁰ The open system favors prose-like syntax of irregular phrases-lengths, floating or modulating tonality, developing variation of motifs, and contrapuntal texture with the main melodic line freely circulating among the inner and outer voices; its overall result is the open logical form based primarily on a web of motivic relationships spun over the entire length of the musical discourse, relationships that ensure that

¹⁷ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p. 34.

¹⁸ Dahlhaus, “What is a musical drama?,” p. 104.

¹⁹ Dahlhaus, “What is a musical drama?,” pp. 103f.

²⁰ See, e.g., Dahlhaus, “Tonalität und Form in Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen*,” [originally published in *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 40 (1983), 165-73], *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 481.

every present moment of the discourse is connected to moments in the past and future. (It will be noticed that Dahlhaus has a weakness for Schoenbergian terminology: “musical prose,” “floating tonality,” “developing variation” are all Schoenberg’s locutions.) The closed system, by contrast, favors a “poetic” (or “quadratic”) syntax of regular phrase-lengths that do not merely follow one another, but form hierarchical patterns (such as the antecedent and consequent phrases in a period), stable tonality, patterns of phrases based on contrast and repetition (such as ABA or AAB), and homophonic texture with the main melodic line staying in one voice; its overall result is the closed architectonic form that, instead of emphasizing the passage of time, tends to isolate and, so to speak, “absolutize” the present moment so that the discourse as a whole is an extended nunc stans.

Figure 2: Ideal Types II: Open versus Closed Composition

syntax: irregular prose versus regular poetry

tonality: floating versus stable

motivic relationships: developing variation versus patterns based on contrast and repetition

texture: contrapuntal versus homophonic

form: logical versus architectonic

The individual components of each system are correlated. Thus, for instance, since musical comprehensibility depends on both the regularity of phrasing and the motivic connections, Wagner, “who always aimed at musical innovation, but on the other hand wanted to be immediately and precisely understood,” compensates for the irregular syntax with the increased interconnectedness of leitmotifs:²¹ “To make a rough contrast, *Lohengrin* is regular in the musical syntax and difficult to grasp—poor in melodic connections—in its form. ... *Ring*, on the other hand, is rich in form-creating pregnant motivic connections ..., but complicated and irregular in the musical syntax.”²² In general, “between symphonic style, emphasis on dialogue, dissolution of ‘quadratic’ syntax in ‘musical prose’ ..., leitmotivic technique and the delineation of an unseen action beyond the seen, there exists in Wagner a nexus, the individual elements of which can be derived as consequences of each other.”²³ In short:

The compositional technique of the *Ring* tetralogy constitutes a ‘system’ and was described as such by Wagner himself. The ‘musical prose,’ the ‘floating’ tonality, and the constitutive leitmotivic technique are just as correlated or complementary as are the ‘quadratic’ rhythmic syntax, the stable tonality, and the accidental leitmotivic or reminiscence technique.²⁴

²¹ “... der stets auf musikalisch Neues zielte, der andererseits aber unmittelbar und genau verstanden werden wollte ...” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 59.

²² “*Lohengrin* ist, grob zu kontrastieren, regulär in der musikalischen Syntax und schwer faßlich—arm an melodischen Zusammenhängen—in der Form. ... Umgekehrt ist der *Ring* reich an formbildenden, prägnanten Motivzusammenhängen ..., aber verwickelt und irregulär in der musikalischen Syntax.” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 59.

²³ Dahlhaus, “What is a musical drama?,” p. 105.

²⁴ “Die kompositorische Technik der *Ring*-Tetralogie bildet ein ‘System’ und ist von Wagner selbst als solches bezeichnet worden. Zwischen der ‘musikalischen Prosa’, der ‘schwebenden’ Tonalität und der konstitutiven Leitmotivtechnik besteht ebenso eine Korrelation oder ein Verhältnis der Komplementarität wie zwischen der rhythmisch-syntaktischen ‘Quadratur’, der festen Tonalität und der akzidentellen Leitmotiv- oder Reminiszenzentechnik.” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, pp. 76f.

When conceived at their most abstract, the two systems are clearly independent of the distinction between vocal and instrumental genres: in opera, elements of the open system can be adapted to serve the purpose of “declamation” in recitative, while the closed system serves “melody” in arias, duets, and ensembles; in symphony, the themes are articulated in the closed system, while the open system serves to formulate the transitions and developments. Accordingly, one might claim that throughout the long nineteenth century the open and closed systems of composition coexisted and that their interplay defined the large-scale form in both opera and instrumental music. Dahlhaus’s own claim that “in the evolution of the sonata allegro from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth, the focus shifted progressively from architecture to logic” is certainly correct and can be extended to embrace opera too, provided one does not take this shift of focus to signify a complete replacement.²⁵ In both symphony and opera, for Wagner and his contemporaries the overall form remained based on the interplay of the two principles. Dahlhaus would probably not deny all this, but he might persuasively argue that a natural affinity of some sort exists between the open system of composition and the dynamic developmental temporal logic of the symphony, on the one hand, and the closed system of composition and the static atemporal architecture of the aria, on the other. Wagner’s post-1848 reform, then, would consist in importing into the composition of the recitative dialogue the full resources of the symphonic open system (in particular, the developing motivic variation and contrapuntal texture) and thus providing the vocal dialogue with the orchestral substance and weight it required, while ensuring that these resources (the resources of the *Leitmotivtechnik*) serve the drama by connecting the present with the past and future.

The unprecedented density of the motivic content in the orchestral part had one further far-reaching consequence: it gave the orchestra an independent dramatic voice. In addition to its usual functions of providing a privileged direct insight into the mind of the currently speaking and acting character and every now and then a touch of local color, the orchestra now could also allow the composer to step on occasion forward and speak in his own name as a narrator. Thus the music drama not only approached the condition of the spoken drama, but also approximated the poetics of the main literary genre of the nineteenth century—the novel:

Accordingly, if in the ‘closed’ form of drama the speech is exclusively the expression of the acting personages and not of the dramatist who remains as it were aesthetically anonymous, in music drama, the prototype of which is the Ring tetralogy, the author intervenes with his comments in the proceedings, and he does so as a composer, not as a poet. In the musical speech of the leitmotifs, the ‘orchestral melody,’ it is Wagner himself who speaks and reaches an understanding with the listeners above the head of the acting personage, so long as the listeners are able to comprehend the musical metaphors.²⁶

In his later writings, Dahlhaus expressed himself less categorically, without fundamentally changing his opinion:

²⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), p. 255.

²⁶ “Ist demnach in der ‘geschlossenen’ Form des Dramas die Sprache restlos Ausdruck der handelnden Personen und nicht des Dramatikers, der gleichsam ästhetisch anonym bleibt, so greift im Musikdrama, dessen Prototyp die *Ring*-Tetralogie ist, der Autor kommentierend in die Vorgänge ein, und zwar als Komponist, nicht als Dichter. In der musikalischen Sprache der Leitmotive, der ‘Orchestermelodie’, redet Wagner selbst und verständigt sich über den Kopf der handelnden Personen hinweg mit den Hörern, sofern sie fähig sind, die musikalische Metaphorik zu begreifen.” *Dahlhaus, Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 28.

It is unmistakable and was never doubted that what is being expressed musically in the motifs is sometimes the conscious and not infrequently the unconscious remembrance of the speaking personage. But a significant number of motifs express ... a sense or a meaningful connection implied in the text or in the stage situation, about which the composer reaches an understanding with the public ... Thus, in those leitmotifs that are not grounded in psychology, it is the author—as the narrator in a novel or epic—who is aesthetically present ...²⁷

4.

What are the analytical consequences of this picture, that is, how can it guide us in an effort to understand Wagner's long-range forms, his way of giving shape to a complete act or even a complete music drama?

One finds in Dahlhaus's writings two separate answers to this question, answers that neither support nor contradict one another, but, rather, run along parallel and independent lines. The first answer, and the one to which he devotes most space and attention, centers on Wagner's notion of the "poetic-musical period," which Dahlhaus wants to save from Lorenz's misinterpretations, but in which he, like Lorenz, sees the key to the secret of the Wagnerian form. Lorenz, Dahlhaus argues, misunderstood the nature of the poetic-musical period, but he was right to see in it the principal formal unit of the music drama, articulating the flow of "endless melody" and giving shape and formal coherence to what otherwise would be merely a stream of events. Correctly understood, all poetic-musical periods would be of roughly comparable size of some twenty-thirty measures, similar to the size of a normal nineteenth-century period, and each would be defined by its distinctive poetic and musical contents—its specific configuration of characters and events, on the one hand, and its specific configuration of the constitutive principal motifs and the inessential secondary motifs, on the other.²⁸ The form these periods articulated was hierarchical: motifs were grouped into configurations; these constituted periods; these in turn combined into scenes; and finally the whole drama was a series of such scenes: "Musical form, in so far as it is intended, is realized hierarchically as it were: motifs are combined into motivic complexes or groups, groups into 'poetic-musical periods,' periods into scenes or parts of scenes ..., and scenes into the whole drama."²⁹

"In so far as it is intended" is the key clause here. The tidy picture is namely disturbed by Dahlhaus's admission that not everything in the music dramas can be accommodated by it: in addition, the dramas contain sections that are, quite simply, formless. "The Wagnerian exegesis," writes Dahlhaus, "should not presuppose the existence of form throughout, and then assume a failure when the discovery or construction of what was presupposed does not succeed;

²⁷ "Daß in den Motiven manchmal die bewußte und nicht selten die unbewußte Erinnerung der redenden Personen musikalisch zur Sprache kommt, ist unverkennbar und wurde niemals bezweifelt. Eine nicht geringe Anzahl von Motiven aber drückt ... einen im Text oder in der szenischen Situation implizierten Sinn oder Sinnzusammenhang aus, über den sich der Komponist mit dem Publikum ... verständigt. In den psychologisch nicht begründbaren Leitmotiven ist also der Autor—wie der Erzähler in einem Roman oder Epos—ästhetisch gegenwärtig ..." Carl Dahlhaus, "Entfremdung und Erinnerung. Zu Wagners *Götterdämmerung*," [originally published in C. H. Mahling and S. Wiesmann, eds., *Kongreßbericht Bayreuth 1981* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1984), 416-20], *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 490.

²⁸ For Dahlhaus's understanding of the "poetic-musical period," see in particular his *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, pp. 88-92; see also Dahlhaus, "Wagners Begriff der 'dichterisch-musikalischen Periode'," in Walter Salmen, ed., *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Musikanschauung im 19. Jahrhundert*, Studien zur Musik des 19. Jahrhunderts 1 (Regensburg, 1965), pp. 179-87, reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, pp. 274-83.

²⁹ "Musikalische Form, sofern sie intendiert ist, verwirklicht sich gleichsam hierarchisch: Motive schließen sich zu Motivkomplexen oder -gruppen zusammen, Gruppen zu 'dichterisch-musikalischen Perioden', Perioden zu Szenen oder Szenenteilen ... und Szenen zum ganzen Drama." Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, p. 97.

rather, it must try to decide whether or not it at all makes sense to analyze a complex of motifs, a ‘poetic-musical period,’ or a scene as a form.”³⁰ Accordingly, in an act, individual hierarchically organized units (scenes divided into periods) would swim in a shapeless stream of events. And, accordingly too, Dahlhaus refrained from investigating the shapes of whole acts and dramas and limited his analyses to a few selected scenes. It is a measure of his impact on subsequent development of research in this area that so did his most interesting successors in Wagnerian analysis.³¹

However, even if this vision of large-scale form in Wagner’s music dramas were to be proven correct (and the matter is by no means closed at this point), one problem with it would remain: it offers no clues as to how these individual formal units suspended in the shapeless stream are related to one another. Do they simply follow one another, or do they configure themselves into larger shapes? Dahlhaus’s vision does not even offer a suggestion as to how a question of this sort might be investigated.

But twice, in *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, Dahlhaus offers glimpses of another vision, one that seems to me much more promising in this respect. He writes: “The theory that the distinction between recitative and aria or arioso is completely annulled in Wagner’s ‘endless melody’ is one of those dogmas which by over-insistence turn insight into error; the difference is certainly diminished in music drama but not wiped out, and far from being a tiresome relic of traditional form, it plays a structural role.”³² And further: “... to ignore the presence of degrees that to some extent recall the division of a scene in opera into recitatives, ariosos and arias would merely be to exchange one kind of simplistic listening—the search for lyrical passages—for another—the immersion in an undifferentiated stream of music. ... the differentiation within endless melody must be recognized before the form can be understood.”³³

These are no more than glimpses: they are never developed or analytically substantiated. But they do suggest how one might move forward in an effort to understand Wagner’s long-range forms. They imply a three-step analytical procedure. First, one should accept the idea that the Wagnerian recitative dialogue based on the open system of composition constitutes the discursive norm of the music drama and proceed to identify all those sections that depart from this norm, whether because they employ some or all of the elements of the closed system of composition, or because what they set is not a dialogue. Second, one should see whether these individual abnormal sections suspended in the sea of discursive normality are or are not related to one another in such a way as to form families and create larger patterns. And third, one should ask whether different kinds of discourse that depart from the norm are coordinated with different kinds of dramatic aims.

³⁰ “Die Wagner-Exegese darf die Existenz von Form nicht durchgängig voraussetzen, um es sich als Versagen zuzuschreiben, wenn die Entdeckung oder Konstruktion des Vorausgesetzten mißlingt, sondern muß zu entscheiden versuchen, ob ein Motivkomplex, eine ‘dichterisch-musikalische Periode’ oder eine Szene überhaupt sinnvoll als Form analysierbar ist oder nicht.” Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7, pp. 96f.

³¹ See in particular Anthony Newcomb, “The Birth of Music out of the Spirit of Drama: an Essay in Wagnerian Formal Analysis,” *19th-Century Music*, V (1981–2), 38–66; Newcomb, “Those Images that Yet Fresh Images Beget,” *Journal of Musicology*, II (1983), 227–45; Newcomb, “Ritornello Ritornato: a Variety of Wagnerian Refrain Form,” in Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, eds., *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 202–21; Carolyn Abbate, “Opera as Symphony, a Wagnerian Myth,” in Abbate and Parker, eds., *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner*, pp. 92–124; Abbate, “Wagner, ‘On Modulation’, and *Tristan*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 1 (1989), 33–58.

³² Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p. 122.

³³ Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p. 124.

Why then did Dahlhaus himself not take this particular road?

The answer had surely have something to do with his desire to correct Lorenz: it was Lorenz who offered an understanding of the Wagnerian music-dramatic form that was still authoritative when Dahlhaus began his own Wagner studies and it was this understanding that had to be addresses at the time. More fundamentally, however, it was probably the result of his desire to capture what was specific and new to Wagner's post-1848 reforms, to emphasize the way the music drama differed from the romantic opera. But the conjunction of the dialogue and the open system of composition is the discursive norm not only of music drama, but of opera in general. To investigate the large-scale structural implications of the distinction between open and closed sections of an act would deemphasize the specificity of the music drama, treat it as in principle no different from the opera. By concentrating on what was new about the music drama, Dahlhaus opened fruitful ways of investigating individual sections of the Wagnerian dialogue, but may have obscured the access to a comprehensive vision of complete acts and dramas. And the reverse: by turning to the question of large-scale form, I am proposing to treat the music drama as opera.

*Paper read at "Carl Dahlhaus und die Musikwissenschaft" Symposium, Staatliches Institut für Musikwissenschaft, Berlin, June 12, 2008.

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