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Gustav Mahler, Alfred Roller, and the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk: Tristan and Affinities Between the Arts at the Vienna Court Opera

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GUSTAV MAHLER, ALFRED ROLLER, AND THE WAGNERIAN
GESAMTKUNSTWERK: TRISTAN AND AFFINITIES BETWEEN THE
ARTS AT THE VIENNA COURT OPERA

By

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To my wonderful wife Joanna, for whose patience and love I am eternally grateful.

In memory of my grandfather, James C. Thursby (1926-2008).
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ABSTRACT

Gustav Mahler’s music has been extensively studied and discussed in both scholarly and popular circles, especially since the middle of the past century. His conducting and directorial activity, however, deserves greater attention. The 1903 Vienna Court Opera production of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* was a landmark in opera history because of Mahler's masterful conducting and Secession artist Alfred Roller's vibrant costumes, sets, and lighting design. Roller helped to move the Court Opera away from overly naturalistic and museum-like stage sets and costumes towards greater stylization and abstraction. The dissertation situates this collaborative project within *fin-de-siècle* debates about the nature of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, which today is generally misinterpreted as a multimedia spectacle in which all production elements are conceived organically.

Previous studies of this production explored the technical achievements of Mahler and Roller and surveyed the critical response in Vienna. More work remains to be done in examining the deeper cultural significance of the Mahler-Roller *Tristan* and differing contemporary views on the proper balance of aural and visual stimuli in the Gesamtkunstwerk. This study demonstrates the degree to which Mahler participated in a long tradition of addressing the proper sphere of the arts in the theatrical spectacle through his work with Roller in Vienna. Their partnership also anticipated the spirit of cooperation and mutual encouragement that characterized the work of influential troupes such as the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois, both of which represented the “modern” in the twenty years after Mahler’s death. The spirit of the Mahler-Roller production of *Tristan und Isolde* can also be detected in Wieland Wagner’s bold postwar productions at Bayreuth. Through his work with Roller, Mahler served as a link between naturalistic Romantic stage practice, epitomized by many nineteenth-century Wagner productions, and the more symbolic style of twentieth-century directors such as Wieland Wagner.
INTRODUCTION

In these scenic images the most modern principles of art seem to have guided the theater painter’s brush. The stage image appears to hog all the artistic appeal and moreover to want to relate symbolically and intellectually to the plot […] These endeavors seem fully to embrace Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk.¹

-Critic Julius Korngold, on the Mahler-Roller Tristan (1903)

There has never been a Gesamtkunstwerk. Perhaps one could even say: there will never be a Gesamtkunstwerk. To create one is just as impossible as perpetual motion or squaring a circle.²

-Composer Juan Allende-Blin (1994)

On February 21, 1903, a new production of Richard Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde premiered at the Vienna Court Opera. This was the first major collaboration between music director Gustav Mahler and his stage designer, the Secession artist Alfred Roller. The production’s striking visual images, incorporating key colors for each act, lush new costumes and props, and dramatic lighting effects, provoked the most discussion in the press. Many critics praised this production as the realization of Wagner’s artistic ideal, as the first quote above indicates. For Mahler biographer Henry-Louis de La Grange, the 1903 Tristan also marked a significant step beyond Wagner’s productions at Bayreuth and towards the true ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk.

The idea of a “total” or “collective” work of art was developed by Wagner in his theoretical writings around 1850 while in exile in Switzerland after the failed 1848 Dresden uprisings. Philosophical examinations of the proper form and function of the different arts, and the degree to which they might be combined, had a long history. Leaders of the German Enlightenment, such as art historian Johann Joachim

¹ Julius Korngold, Neue Freie Presse (22 February 1903). “In diesen szenischen Bildern scheinen modernste Kunstprinzipien den Pinsel des Theatermalers gelenkt zu haben. Das Bühnenbild scheint Kunstwirkung für sich zu beanspruchen und überdies in symbolische, geistige Beziehungen treten zu wollen zur Handlung […] Diesen Bestrebungen scheint Wagners Gesamtkunstwerk weit die Arme zu öffnen.” All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Winckelmann and playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, dealt with issues concerning
the different arts in the eighteenth century. The years around 1900 also marked a period
of intense artistic discussion of the Gesamtkunstwerk; the Mahler-Roller Tristan emerged
within this vibrant culture.

This dissertation takes as its focus the long disputed and never clearly defined
concept of Gesamtkunstwerk and the degree to which the 1903 Mahler-Roller Tristan
might have realized this ultimate artistic goal. Previous studies of this production have
explored the technical achievements of Mahler and Roller and surveyed some of the
critical responses in Vienna. More work, however, remains to be done in examining the
significance of this production, not only in its own time, but also as a pivotal moment
which joined the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual debates about the proper
sphere of the different arts with the bold theatrical experimentation of the twentieth
century. As director of the Vienna Court Opera from 1897 until 1907, Mahler held a
position of enormous influence. He was one of the most important composer-conductors
of his day, along with Richard Strauss, and provoked impassioned critical reactions not
only to his bold symphonies, but also to his decisions as director of one of the most
prestigious opera houses in the world.

Much of the contemporary critical reaction to the 1903 Tristan stressed the
powerful impact of Roller’s lighting and use of color upon the senses. His and Mahler’s
achievement was sometimes compared favorably with Wagner’s total work of art. Artists
and historians in our day, however, are often more reluctant to credit past experiments in
the arts with such an exalted accomplishment. Allende-Blin, quoted above, denied even
the possibility of the Gesamtkunstwerk. He proclaimed that Wagner’s music dramas were
only partial successes in realizing that ideal, because the poetic texts did not equal the
quality of the music or dramatic conception (no mention of visual elements was made).
For him, each artist who strove for the Gesamtkunstwerk did so by taking “his [or her]
own art as the starting point.”\(^3\) This seems self-evident and highlights the difficulty of
achieving an equal balance of many arts in one spectacle. Although Wagner not only
composed the music of his works, but also wrote the libretti and specified staging

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\(^3\) Idem. “Die Sehnsucht nach einem Gesamtkunstwerk nahm bei jedem Künstler, der es versuchte, zunächst
seine eigene Kunst als Ausgangspunkt.”
direction in his scores, he was a far better composer than poet or visual artist. Musicologist Wolfgang Dömling, writing in 1994, stressed the utopian nature of the Gesamtkunstwerk concept as developed by Wagner. For Dömling, the total work of art was really only a “partially realizable artistic anticipation of a coming social order.”

Constantin Floros, in a recent essay on Mahler and the musical theater, did not concern himself exclusively with the issue of the Gesamtkunstwerk and Mahler’s relationship to it. Instead, he posited that the director’s significance in relation to twentieth-century developments in music theater depends upon how one defines the term “music theater.” If the term implies a “complete harmony between scenery and music,” then Mahler was “truly a trailblazer” in that sphere of art. But if the goal of music theater is to use scenery as a “counterpoint to music,” then Mahler aimed for something completely different, since Roller recalled that Mahler wanted the public’s attention to remain focused on the music and not be distracted by the “struggles over the scene design.” Floros’s ideas have deep ramifications for my study of Romantic and Modernist approaches to musical theater, in which the 1903 Tristan plays a pivotal role. We shall find, however, that what some considered to be a cooperative fusion of visual and aural components, others found hardly ideal, with the visuals competing too prominently for the viewer/listener’s attention.

The dissertation is divided into three broad sections. Part 1, consisting of the first two chapters, examines antecedents to the 1903 Mahler-Roller Tristan. These include an examination of conflicting views on the possibility of combining the arts into a larger whole within the German Enlightenment and Romantic traditions. This leads into an exploration of Richard Wagner’s ideas about the total work of art as expressed in his mid-century exile writings, primarily Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft. As an intellectually-curious German, Wagner would have been aware of his place within the historical dialogue on the arts and their functions, and in his writings he openly addressed the ideas of Enlightenment figures such as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

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Part 2 consists of chapters 3-5 and focuses on Mahler and Roller and the significance of the Court Opera production of *Tristan und Isolde* within the artistic world of the *fin-de-siècle*. Important topics in chapter 3 include Mahler’s engagement with Wagner’s music as a conductor and director, and his attempts to transplant a sense of Bayreuth solemnity and professionalism to the Court Opera. Mahler has been characterized as lacking a sophisticated visual sensibility. The noted biographer Kurt Blaukopf characterized the composer as someone who, because of his personality structure was “kein optischer Typ” (“not a visually-oriented guy”). He credited Mahler’s introduction to the world of the visual arts to Siegfried Lipiner and Fritz Löhr, and declared that Mahler’s “optical reaction” was not to be awakened by “pure contemplation,” but rather through “philosophical reflection.”

In spite of Blaukopf’s general assessment, Mahler seems to have had at least a keen interest in the visual elements of opera production. Before being appointed as head of the Court Opera in 1897, Mahler held numerous music-directorships across Europe, most notably in Budapest and Hamburg. He directed both orchestral and operatic performances at these stops on his career path to Vienna. In Budapest he was particularly involved in shaping new opera productions, controlling not only the musical aspects but the visual elements as well. By the time Mahler took charge of the Vienna Court Opera, he was experienced in operatic direction.

Mahler helped to introduce the revolving stage at the Court Opera, which allowed for rapid scene changes, the sustaining of dramatic intensity, and a smoother flow of the entire show. He also had very specific ideas about stage gestures and actor movement. The Austrian National Library possesses a vocal score for *Tristan und Isolde* that belonged to Anna von Mildenburg, who sang Isolde in the 1903 Court Opera production. Mahler made notes throughout the score indicating stage movement and gestures for Mildenburg to incorporate into her study of the role. Mahler, according to Roller, believed that the music should always remain in the foreground of the audience’s

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perception. His view was that “everything is in the score” (“steht alles in der Partitur”). He nevertheless praised and approved of Roller’s visual conception of Tristan, demonstrating a more fully-developed view of the Gesamtkunstwerk than that of Wagner himself, who promoted the idea of an equal collaboration of many arts but favored musical expression above all.

In chapter 4, Roller’s views on the profession of stage designer and his visual conception of the production are examined. His bold use of light and color modernized the visual element of Wagner productions and also invigorated critical debates about the relative importance of music and stage spectacle in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. Chapter 5 provides a closer look at the widespread interest in the unity of the arts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Artists as diverse as American architect Louis Sullivan, Austrian architect Camillo Sitte, and Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky advocated the combined power of multiple arts in their own ways. Critical responses to the Tristan production by contemporary journalists and artists are also interwoven throughout chapters 4 and 5.

The American aesthetician Irving Babbitt, in his The New Laokoon (1910), recognized contemporary interest in multi-sensory stimulation. He criticized such attempts to blend different arts and sensory perceptions. Babbitt associated hybrid art forms, such as color audition (associating sounds with particular colors), with the abnormal and the dangerous. Such phenomena found expression for him “only in those who belong to what we may term the neurotic school,” which he connected with the German Romantics, who tended “not only to worship music, but to reduce to music all the other arts.”8 Babbitt related an account of a multi-sensory event that had taken place in New York in 1902, the first “experimental perfume concert in America,” at which “a trip to Japan in sixteen minutes,” was simulated by a series of odors. For him, any attempt to “have a whole audience respond in a similar manner to olfactory suggestiveness was foredoomed to failure,” because it was more likely to appeal not to the audience’s sense of smell, but to “its sense of humor.”9

Just two years before the New York concert the Scottish stage reformer Edward

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9 Ibid., 182.
Gordon Craig had contemplated “making illusion more complete” in a London production of Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* by involving the audience’s senses of smell, hearing, and sight by filling the performance space with the odor of sulphur during the witches’ scene, and with “rare perfume” while rose petals fell on Dido’s corpse.\(^{10}\) There was a clear desire on the part of many stage reformers of that period to create what we might now term “multi-media” experiences. Babbitt linked these radical, experimental artistic endeavors with a lack of centeredness and permanency in the modern world, and with the “flux of phenomena” and “torrent of impressions” that characterized modern urban life.\(^{11}\) Although a perfume concert and a new production of a famous work by Wagner are two completely different things, both highlight the creative spirit that was evident in theater around 1900 and represent attempts by directors to stimulate theatergoers on multiple sensory levels.

In the final part (and chapter) of the dissertation, I consider ways in which the Mahler-Roller collaboration anticipated the work of influential twentieth-century theater artists. These include the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois in Paris and Wieland Wagner at Bayreuth after the Second World War. The dance troupes were models of artistic collaboration, employing leading artists in music, dance, and the visual arts, though under the guidance of a Sergei Diaghilev or a Rolf de Maré. Wieland stripped the Bayreuth stage of traditional naturalistic elements and created productions of his grandfather’s works that sought universal appeal rather than a narrower German Romantic focus. His striking use of light and color suggested a similar goal to that of Mahler and Roller in Vienna: to reinvigorate older works that had become somewhat stale over time because of traditional productions.

The 1903 Vienna Court Opera *Tristan* emerged at a time when the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk both inspired and polarized artists and thinkers in many fields. The Mahler-Roller collaboration was both a reaction against the long tradition of antiquated naturalism in opera production and also a catalyst in the emergence of coming movements such as Expressionism and Der blaue Reiter, both of which aimed at the ideal of Gesamtkunstwerk, and advocated art as a socially-regenerative force. Critics

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\(^{11}\) Babbitt, 185.
such as Babbitt recognized the sensory overload inherent in the modern world and argued for art that would re-center the modern individual according to the critic’s own artistic model, which was often at odds with many fin-de-siècle attempts at Gesamtkunstwerk.

Survey of Literature

Some of the best sources of information concerning Mahler’s work with Roller, particularly on the 1903 Tristan in Vienna, include two articles by Franz Willnauer in a recent collection of essays edited by Constantin Floros.\(^{12}\) Dissertations by Edith Dutzer,\(^ {13}\) Eva Luschinsky,\(^ {14}\) and Evan Baker also provide valuable information.\(^ {15}\) Manfred Wagner examined Roller’s life and work in his 1996 monograph on the artist.\(^ {16}\) The work of Floros, Wolfgang Greisenegger, and Henri-Louis de la Grange has also contributed to our knowledge of the Mahler-Roller collaborations.

In “Gustav Mahler und Alfred Roller: Die Reform der Opernbühne aus dem Geist des Jugendstils,” Franz Willnauer examined Mahler’s work with Roller at the Court Opera between 1903 and 1907. He discussed Secession philosophy and goals, provided a brief biographical background on Roller, including details concerning the first meeting of the two artists at the 1902 Beethoven exhibition mounted by the Secession, and surveyed critical reaction to their collaborative efforts. Several of Roller’s sketches related to his work at the Hofoper were reproduced. Willnauer stated that the Tristan-sketches “show that Roller sought, above all, to capture the mood of each act in a fundamental color.”\(^ {17}\) He traced the development of Roller’s style in the years 1903-1907, characterizing it as a steady move towards greater abstraction after the 1903 Tristan production. Willnauer


\(^{16}\) Manfred Wagner, Alfred Roller in seiner Zeit (Salzburg: Residenz, 1996).

\(^{17}\) Willnauer “Mahler und Roller,” 93.
argued that Secession and Jugendstil styles were brought to the Vienna Court Opera stage by Mahler and Roller, which supports my thesis that the 1903 *Tristan* was intricately connected with the ideals of Gesamtkunstwerk and social regeneration through art.

In “‘Auf Dein Geheiß entbrenne ein Feuer’: Dunkelheit und Licht auf Alfred Rollers Hofopern-Bühne” Willnauer specifically explored Roller’s use of light and darkness in his Hofoper sets, especially those created for *Fidelio* and *Die Walküre*. He included a sample of the critical response that highlighted elements of Roller’s stage lighting. Willnauer concluded with the first publication of a letter from Anna von Mildenburg to Roller in which she asked for more lighting onstage in *Die Walküre*. The Mildenburg letter was the most significant aspect of this essay, since it documented both praise for and criticism of Roller’s ideas from a prominent cast member (Mildenburg) rather than from an outside journalist. There were practical issues involved with Roller’s dark stages, since performers could not see and react to their fellow actors’ faces, and the audience would not be able to follow the onstage action as easily. Willnauer connected Roller’s work with the ideas of stage reformers such as Adolphe Appia, and his findings support my study of the Mahler-Roller partnership in the context of widespread artistic reforms at the turn-of-the-century.

In her 1949 dissertation titled “Die Wagner-Oper und ihre Bühnenbilder an der Wiener Hof – bzw. Staatsoper,” Edith Dutzer provided one of the first discussions of the 1903 Mahler-Roller *Tristan*, and this at a time when archival materials related to the production were less accessible than they are now.18 She examined twentieth-century stagings of all of Wagner’s major works in Vienna, in productions by several notable designers, including Roller, Emil Preetorius, Robert Kautsky, and Ludwig Sievert. She laid particular emphasis on the individual working methods of the different designers and how they pursued the ideal of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, while also stressing that a visual sketch, even if thoroughly carried out, never transmitted the “same impression as the actual scenic realization.”19

Regarding Roller’s work on *Tristan*, she concluded that his stage designs “entered into a symbolic-intellectual relationship to the plot and, insofar as they were born out of

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18 She was not allowed to publish any photographs or other mechanical reproductions of any visual materials.
19 Dutzer, foreword.
the spirit of the music, they fulfilled Wagner’s strivings towards the Gesamtkunstwerk completely.” She spoke of a “timeless validity” for his stage designs, perhaps influenced by Furtwängler’s resurrection of Roller’s sets for a Vienna State Opera Tristan in early 1943.²⁰ Dutzer concluded that Roller and stage designers after him came closer to the Wagnerian ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk than nineteenth-century designers largely because of technical innovations, especially in lighting techniques. Her dissertation is a valuable resource, but it covers so many stagings of Wagner’s works that there is no possibility of an exhaustive examination of any single production. My dissertation goes beyond the scope of Dutzer’s by examining the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk and the significance attached to it in great detail and in connection with the 1903 Tristan.

In her dissertation titled “Studien zur Morphologie des Tristan: Konzept und Realisierung,” Eva Luschinsky analyzed the dramatic elements of Wagner’s Tristan und Isolde, as well as the philosophical and psychological currents that permeate the work. She examined Classical and Romantic ideas drawn from Novalis and Schopenhauer that influenced Wagner’s conception of the work and discussed the demands placed upon the singers in Tristan and the important role of the orchestra in expressing that which words cannot. Luschinsky concluded by analyzing five influential stagings of Tristan, including the 1903 Hofoper production, as well as the world premiere in Munich and twentieth-century productions by Heinz Tietjen, Wieland Wagner, and August Everding. She discussed Roller’s style in the 1903 Tristan, surveyed critical response to the production, and also examined the influence of Roller on the later productions by Tietjen and Wieland Wagner. Luschinsky thoroughly documented the Roller influence on later Wagner stagings, whereas I focus specifically on the intersection of the 1903 Tristan with the broader concept of Gesamtkunstwerk.

In his dissertation titled “Alfred Roller’s production of Mozart's Don Giovanni: A break in the scenic traditions of the Vienna Court Opera,” Evan Baker examined the 1905 Mahler-Roller production of Don Giovanni and innovations in stage design associated with it. In the introduction and first two chapters, he discussed ideas for theatrical reform popular in Mahler’s time in Vienna, and provided a brief overview of

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²⁰ Ibid., 68.
the history of stage production and design at the Hofoper. Baker surveyed a fair amount of critical response to the 1903 Tristan production, and provided detailed information about all aspects of Roller’s stage design for Don Giovanni. My dissertation will situate within a broader artistic and philosophical context the important Mahler-Roller productions that Baker examined from a technical point of view.

Laura Anne Dolp, in her dissertation on spatial elements in Mahler’s music, specifically Das Lied von der Erde, did not directly address Mahler’s conducting activities, but she did make note of music criticism at the fin-de-siècle that blended aural and visual imagery. Dolp observed that “language that promoted musical and visual correspondence” was not used only in connection with Mahler’s music, but that it “stemmed in part from the tradition of Baudelaire” and “pervaded journalistic commentary on many of Mahler’s contemporaries.”21 Her observations support my study of one significant Wagner production within a culture that was deeply engaged with the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk and affinities between the arts.

The major monograph on Alfred Roller is Manfred Wagner’s 1996 Alfred Roller in seiner Zeit. Wagner thoroughly examined the career and achievements of Mahler’s accomplished stage designer in Vienna. He reproduced many of Roller’s paintings, drawings, stage models, and even a few original costumes, many in color. Regarding the 1903 Tristan, Wagner reproduced several important critical reviews and highlighted the significant aspects of this first Mahler-Roller collaboration, including the striking use of color enhanced through new lighting techniques. My work explores the cultural context in which the cultural artifacts Wagner described emerged.

Constantin Floros, in his essay entitled “Gustav Mahler und das Musiktheater: Inszenierungen aus dem ‘Geiste der Musik,’” offered a brief survey of Mahler’s operatic conducting activities during his years in Vienna.22 He developed a view of Mahler as a sophisticated man of the theater, largely through the recollections of people who knew him well. After conducting Les Huguenots in Hamburg with the final act cut entirely, Mahler responded to critics with an essay that defended his actions. Floros argued that

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21 Laura Anne Dolp, “Mahler’s Landscapes: Constructions of space in music and the visual arts in fin-de-siècle Vienna” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 2005), 13.
this essay documents Mahler’s conviction that the “inspired modern artist” could legitimately make “serious interventions into the structure of an earlier artwork,” but only if this would allow the work’s “fundamental Idea to become more structurally-prominent” [plastischer hervortreten]. This idea reflected Mahler’s propensity for making alterations to the works of composers such as Bach, Schubert, and Beethoven in order to adapt them to the modern world of large concert halls and colorfully-orchestrated symphonic works. For Mahler, “no gesture was allowed that could disturb the musical mood,” and Floros concluded that such recollections of Mahler’s directing style suggested that he staged operatic masterworks “out of the spirit of music.”

Wolfgang Greisenegger has also contributed to our understanding of Roller’s innovations in Vienna. In “Alfred Roller: die prolongierte Reform” Greisenegger discussed Roller’s work with Mahler at the Hofoper, evaluated Appia’s 1900 article “Das Licht und die Inszenierung,” which appeared in the Wiener Rundschau, and provided details of Roller’s views on Mahler as a director. Press responses to their co-productions, and the views of artists such as Hermann Bahr were also included. In “Alfred Roller: Neubedeutung des szenischen Raumes” Greisenegger discussed the Mahler-Roller partnership, especially Mahler’s relation to visual artists of his time and his receptiveness to visual arguments. He referenced Kurt Blaukopf’s characterization of Mahler as “kein optischer Typ,” which recalls Thomas Mann’s critique of Wagner as “kein Augenmensch.”

Henri-Louis de la Grange, in the second volume of his important Mahler biography, provided a thorough overview of Roller’s artistic aims and highlighted important themes that recurred in responses to the 1903 Tristan, including those published in the press and in the recollections of people familiar with the production. These readings provide ample detail about the Mahler-Roller partnership, but they simultaneously lack a deeper examination of how the 1903 Tristan related to fin-de-siècle

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23 Ibid., 11.
24 Ibid., 19.
notions of Gesamtkunstwerk and to the German tradition of exploring affinities between the arts. That is the purpose of the present study.
CHAPTER 1

MUSIC IN RELATION TO THE OTHER ARTS IN THE GERMAN IDEALIST TRADITION

Richard Wagner developed the idea of a “total” or “collective” work of art in his theoretical writings around 1850 while living in exile in Switzerland after the failed 1848 Dresden uprisings. In doing so, he participated in a long tradition in the West of investigating the relationship between the arts. The philosophical examination of the proper form and function of the different arts had been addressed by earlier German thinkers, including the dramatists Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the eighteenth century. Their ideas touched on the proper function, expressive limits, and influence of the various arts upon the recipient. Wagner was well aware of the German intellectual tradition of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As a composer with strong opinions concerning the dramatic effectiveness of contemporary opera, he could not help but insert himself into the ongoing debate about relationships between the arts. His music and writings were influential in popularizing and continuing this debate.28

The history and culture of ancient Greece exerted a powerful influence over many German intellectuals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two exemplary figures to engage with the ancient Greek world during this time were Johann Joachim Winckelmann, the classicist whose most significant writings included Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in Malerei und Bildhauerkunst (Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture - 1755) and Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums (History of ancient Art - 1764), and Heinrich Schliemann, the archaeologist who in the 1870s and 1880s made important excavations at Mycenae and

28 Chung-Sun Kwon provides a thorough examination of the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk in early Romantic thought in his dissertation “Studie zur Idee des Gesamtkunstwerks in der Frühromantik: zur Utopie einer Musikanschauung von Wackenroder bis Schopenhauer” (Frankfurt: Europäischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 2003). He identifies the comparison of one art form with another as a “clear tendency” in much nineteenth-century thought and concludes that Wagner’s all-encompassing view of the total artwork was anticipated by the early Romantics who championed a “transcendental union” of all artistic genres. See: Kwon, 12, 16.
discovered a possible site of ancient Troy. The degree to which ancient Greek culture dominated German thought was first examined in 1935 by Eliza Marian Butler in *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth Centuries*. She observed that the Germans imitated the Greeks “more slavishly” than did other Europeans, that they were obsessed with the Greeks “more utterly,” but that they “assimilated them” less than did any other people.29 By this, Butler meant that, with the exception of Winckelmann, few eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German artists who were passionate about Greek culture and ideas were capable of the “pagan attitude to beauty” and “objective, dispassionate contemplation” that Goethe also cultivated. Instead, they wished to “seize” and “possess” Greek beauty, to “drag it violently into the present” and “resuscitate” the Greek gods. As a result, great art was created, but the artists suffered personally. Nietzsche’s madness, for example, Butler credited to his “ecstatic worship of the god Dionysus.” Ultimately, the “undisciplined desires” of most German artists who came in contact with Greek ideas, and the “insidious disease of mythomania” that possessed them, led her to assert that the merciful should regret that Winckelmann had ever been born.30 While her conclusions might appear somewhat extreme to a twenty-first-century audience, they nevertheless demonstrated the degree to which Greek culture and art influenced German intellectuals and artists after Winckelmann.

Richard Wagner also engaged deeply with Greek culture. In his autobiography *Mein Leben*, dictated to his second wife Cosima, we read that he was strongly influenced by Greek drama from an early age. He so valued the Greek theater that he repeatedly drew parallels in his mid-century writings between Greek drama and dramatic festivals and his own idealized Gesamtkunstwerk. According to Wagner, the total work of art would bring together the greatest artists from multiple fields and play as important a role in German culture as Athenian drama did in ancient Athens. In order to recreate the spirit of ancient dramatic festivals, Wagner conceived of his own in the small Bavarian town of Bayreuth. He intended for the annual festivals there to occur in an environment far-

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30 Ibid., 335-36. In the case of Nietzsche, one assumes that Butler meant that he was obsessed with Dionysian aspects of art, not that he was an alcoholic.
removed from the distractions of large urban centers and non-artistic concerns. Wagner designed the Festspielhaus along the lines of the Greek amphitheater, which provided better acoustics and sight-lines for spectators than the standard horseshoe model did, and perhaps symbolized a link with Athenian democracy through the reduction in the number and visibility of private boxes. Additionally, spectators were not segregated into groups according to prestige and wealth.\textsuperscript{31}

Among Greek thinkers who exerted a lasting impact on European thought since antiquity were Plato and Aristotle, and both men examined the nature of the arts in their writings. In the \textit{Republic} Plato discussed music and other arts in relation to their suitability for the education of philosopher kings, the rulers of his fictional state. He famously linked the different Greek musical modes with character attributes and settled on the Dorian and Phrygian as the only ones capable of building good character, for expressing the “tones of self-disciplined and courageous men in failure and success.”\textsuperscript{32} He criticized the Pythagoreans, who were obsessed with measuring intervals between pitches and making life difficult for strings, torturing them by “twisting them on pegs.”\textsuperscript{33} Plato asserted that the effort of describing the different arts and their relevance for educating leaders was not wasted as long as the work led to the “common ground of affinity between the subjects,” and enabled one to “work out how they are all related to one another.”\textsuperscript{34}

In his penultimate chapter, “Poetry and Unreality,” Plato characterized the arts as two steps removed from ultimate truth. His premise was that a craftsman who made a table imitated its ultimate form and was one step removed from reality. While this ideal form was divorced from the physical object itself, Plato considered it to be the ultimate reality. A painter who painted a picture of a table imitated the craftsman’s imitation,

\textsuperscript{31} Frederic Spotts, while not giving exact prices for tickets at the first two festivals (1876 and 1883), observed that it was “impossible to fill the house” in the early years. Attendance, he noted, picked up significantly at the end of the 1880s, and tickets soon began to be sold for more than face value. In the twenty-first century, demand far exceeds the number of available tickets. Ticket requests, which must be made in writing, are entered into a computer system and sorted by “nationality, fame, and demonstrated interest in the Festival.” See Spotts, \textit{Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 24.


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 263.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 264.
creating an “appearance,” and was thus two steps removed from reality and the truth.\textsuperscript{35} Plato labeled the makers of these three tables—the ideal type, the manufactured product, and the artistic depiction—the progenitor, manufacturer, and representer. The painter, he argued, lacked true knowledge about the objects being depicted, since he neither made use of those objects himself (aulos pipes, for example), nor was told what to paint by a user of those objects (an aulete in that case). He observed that a representer knew “nothing of value” about the things he represented, and that representation was a “kind of game” that “shouldn’t be taken seriously.”\textsuperscript{36}

Plato also considered which faculties of a person were influenced by representation. He first characterized painting that played tricks on the mind through optical illusions as “sorcery,” equivalent to “conjuring and all trickery of that sort.”\textsuperscript{37} In order to explain optical illusions such as an object appearing bent when entering water, a “better” part of the mind was capable of understanding measurements and calculations, which give order to our surroundings. Representation, being “far from the truth,” appealed to the lesser part of the mind, which may be fooled by optical illusions and was “far from intelligence.”\textsuperscript{38} Like its painted analogue, representational poetry, he asserted, was also guilty of appealing to our baser sides. Plato divided each person into two personas: the one who yielded to custom and kept emotions in check during times of crisis, and the one who gave vent to internal emotions. As an example of poetry’s corrupting nature, Plato referenced Homer, whose descriptions of great heroes beating their breasts and lamenting the loss of comrades moved us deeply. Such demonstrative behavior, which we would condemn in ourselves was thus made an object of our approval in poetry. Exposure to such poetry might even lead us to greater lapses in our own conduct. Representational art such as poetry, he concluded, can be harmful to the development of men of good character and should be banned from the ideal state.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 346. This conception of the abstract idea of something as being superior to its physical reality influenced Boethius’s theory that \textit{musica mundana}, the unheard “music of the spheres,” was more worthy than \textit{musica humana} and \textit{musica instrumentalis}; the theory of music was more prestigious than practical matters of performance.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 354.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 355.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 356.

\textsuperscript{39} Wagner developed a system of Leitmotifs that represented distinct objects, people, or concepts and helped to unify his large-scale musical works, but this was not representation of something in the same way that a painting of a table would be.
also viewed art primarily as a tool for properly educating leaders and for reinforcing approved moral characteristics. Wagner approached his art with a seriousness of purpose that suggested that of the idealist Plato. The composer’s view of the orchestra as a means of expressing what words cannot, which intensified after his reading of the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, also linked him with Platonic thinking. For Wagner there were things which the rational mind could not wholly comprehend, whether they be Plato’s ideal forms, Kant’s noumena, or Schopenhauer’s Will. But in the composer’s mind, his orchestra could lead the listener to a deeper understanding of those eternal truths.

In his *Poetics* Aristotle dealt primarily with epic poetry and tragedy, though he mentioned music in several instances. He focused on art as imitation (mimesis) of nature, and observed that imitation was “natural to man from childhood,” which was one of our “advantages over the lower animals.” 40 Aristotle grouped flute and lyre playing with epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, and dithyrambic poetry as different modes of imitation. Some arts used only one or two means of imitation, while “Dithyrambic and Nomic poetry, Tragedy and Comedy” combined the means of rhythm, melody, and verse. 41

Aristotle labeled the six components of tragedy as Fable or Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, and Melody. Spectacle he defined as the “stage appearance of the actors,” although he made no mention of props or lighting. He characterized the spectacle as an “attraction,” but also the “least artistic” of all the component parts of a tragedy. To strengthen this point, Aristotle noted that a tragic effect could be produced without a public performance and actors, and that spectacle was “more a matter for the costumier than the poet.” 42

The Florentine intellectuals who developed European opera in the late sixteenth century were inspired by ancient Greek drama, but did not borrow Aristotle’s views on the limited importance of staging and the visual presence of the actor within a larger production. Opera in the Baroque became a spectacle in which lavish decors and costumes would become increasingly prominent. The tendency of star singers to dominate the stage and for dramatic effect to yield to virtuosic displays led reformers

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41 Ibid., 342-43.
42 Ibid., 349, 351.
such as Gluck in the eighteenth century to reassert the primacy of dramatic integrity in the opera. Wagner also sharply criticized the style of French grand opéra, in which spectacle tended to overshadow all else. He thus would seem to affirm Aristotle’s views on the relative importance of visual elements to music and dramatic effects within tragic art. But Wagner was also the creator of Der Ring des Nibelungen, in which swimming Rhine Maidens and a fire-breathing dragon were brought to the stage. His relationship to Aristotelian thought on the balance of the arts in drama therefore remains complicated. Not as unclear, however, was the degree to which he engaged with the arguments of more-contemporary thinkers.

**Lessing**

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), one of the greatest German dramatists of the eighteenth century, wrote an influential treatise on the proper roles and spheres of the arts, entitled *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766). His views were far more conservative than those of the German idealist philosophers who helped sow the seeds of Romanticism around 1800. Lessing’s ideas constituted a major product of German Enlightenment thought. He also discussed the nature of representational art in his dramatic masterwork *Emilia Galotti* (1772).

In this tragedy Lessing presented a tragic story of class conflict. A prince falls madly in love with Emilia Galotti, a young woman from the lower classes. He has her bridegroom murdered and seizes her as his own lover. Emilia’s father Odoardo fatally stabs her in a climactic scene near the end of the play, in order to save her from being debased. In the opening scene Lessing briefly addressed the nature of painting and, by implication, the representational arts. This intellectual concern might seem somewhat out of place at first, as the scene occurs in the prince’s chamber. The court painter Conti enters, bringing two of his portraits for the prince to inspect. One depicts the Countess Orsina, the prince’s mistress in whom he no longer has any interest, the other the beautiful Emilia Galotti. The scene develops into a philosophical examination of the art of painting.
The prince chastises his court painter for depicting in the portrait of Orsina that which he no longer sees in her, and no longer wishes to see. He finds the portrait admirable but also too flattering. Conti responds that the countess would not agree with that judgment. For him the portrait actually flatters no more than art must by its very nature. He explains that the artist must paint, just as “plastic nature, if there is such a thing, conceived the image.” That is, without the universal decay of beauty with age, without the “spoilage” with which time “struggles against” beauty. Conti also tells the prince that the countess explicitly asked for his obeisance, for him not to “express anything disadvantageous” in the portrait.

The prince declares that Conti has, through his art, improved upon the countess’s “large, distinguished, bull-like, unyielding Medusa eyes.” But, he adds, “can the character of the person really be inferred from this portrait?” For him, Conti transformed the countess’s pride into dignity, her scorn into smiles, and her basic mood of doleful rapture into gentle melancholy. Conti remarks that painters do not paint solely with their eyes. Much of what strikes the eye is lost “on the long path from the eye through the arm and into the brush.” He adds that he knows what is lost and why it must be lost in transferring a visual impression to the canvas, and that he is more proud of what he allows to be lost than what he retains. What he leaves out proves to him that he is a great painter, for this shows him that his hand is not always the final determinant of what appears on the canvas. He rhetorically asks the prince whether he really thinks that Raphael would not have been the greatest genius had he been born without hands.

Without being the primary focus of the play, this scene addressed the subjective nature of the visual arts. The painter does not reproduce his or her subject like a machine, but must make countless decisions in creating a painting. The dramatist’s interest in the nature of art and the role of the artist is clear in this opening scene, though its relevance for the play as a whole might not be immediately apparent.

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44 Ibid., 4-5.
In a 1985 article Neil Flax connected this opening discussion about painting directly with the climactic scene near the end of the play, where Emilia’s father kills her. This event, Flax observed, was intended to recall the ancient Roman tale of Virginius, who stabbed his daughter Virginia in order to save her from a life as a slave to a Roman magistrate. Emilia even suggests the Roman story to Odoardo without specifically naming the historical father and daughter. The allusion to the historical characters goads him into committing the fatal act, which was her intention. Flax observed that an eighteenth-century audience would have been familiar with the tale of Virginius and Virginia, but that most people knew the story not through the written word but through paintings or engravings. Most visual sources at that time depicted the father holding a knife over his daughter at a public trial where he sought to regain her from the magistrate. For Flax, the scene of Emilia’s death would have served as a *tableau vivant* for the audience, a living painting. The allusion to the Roman tale would have automatically brought to mind the engravings of that ancient scene. Emilia therefore makes her first and last appearances in the play “in the form of pictures,” as a portrait and a *tableau vivant*. Lessing, he argued, thus sought to integrate a static visual art into a sequential one, the drama.

In *Laocoön*, Lessing argued for a strict division of *Kunstarten* (artistic types). He opined that painting, as a spatial art, was best suited to the depiction of static moments of utmost emotion, whereas poetry, as a temporal art, was best suited to expressing changing events over time. His ideas were motivated in part by the popularity at that time of highly-descriptive poetry and narrative painting. In the former, poets sought to reproduce visual scenes in words. In the latter, painters presented multiple events from different points in time, or even from different historical eras, within one frame.

The work of art that lies at the center of Lessing’s study is the famous statue of Laocoön and his sons being ensnared by a giant serpent’s coils. Pliny the Elder attributed the statue to three sculptors from Rhodes: Hagesander, Athanodorus, and Polydorus, who

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46 As an example of the latter Lessing mentioned a work by Titian depicting the “entire history” of the prodigal son, including his “dissolute life, his misery, and his repentance.” I have been unable to determine which painting he was referring to. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, translated by Edward A. McCormick (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), 91.
were active between 50 BCE and 25 CE. The story was famously told by Virgil in the second book of the Aeneid. Laocoön was a Trojan priest who expressed skepticism about the motives of the Greeks in presenting their gift of the giant wooden horse after apparently sailing away from Troy. To prove his distrust he even hurled a spear against the side of the horse, which produced a hollow thud. In order to prevent him from ruining their plans for the fall of the city, the goddess Minerva sent two enormous serpents to violently kill the priest and his two sons, thus convincing the other Trojans that the gift was sacred and to take it into the city, ensuring their ruin. Lessing used two classical depictions of Laocoön’s suffering, the statue and Virgil’s poetic account, to argue for the essential differences between spatial (sculpture) and temporal (poetry) art.

Figure 1.1. The Laocoön Group (1st century BCE)

Main Purpose

Lessing began *Laocoön* by opining that recent critics had drawn the most “ill-digested conclusions” from correspondences between the arts.48 These errors included forcing poetry into the “narrower limits” of painting and allowing painting to “fill the whole wide sphere of poetry.” Lessing condemned artists who had developed a mania for descriptive poetry and allegory in painting. His stated aim in *Laocoön* was to push back against the “false taste” of artists who attempted to make poetry a “speaking picture” and painting a “silent poem.”49 He noted in his introduction that by “painting” he meant the visual arts in general, including sculpture. Likewise, under the name of “poetry” he also considered those arts in which the method of presentation unfolds in time, surely including music.50

Lessing argued that the succession of time is properly expressed in poetry, and that actions are its true subjects. Space was best expressed in painting, and bodies, objects that exist in space, were the true subjects of that art. Painting could imitate actions, but only by suggestion through bodies, and poetry might depict bodies, but only by suggestion through actions.51 When the painter combined in one picture two points “necessarily separate in time,” he intruded into the poet’s realm. Likewise, the poet overstepped his proper function when he described in great detail individual parts of an object in order to give a better impression of the whole. According to Lessing, what one perceived with one glance in nature should not be painstakingly described in poetry, because this limited the imagination of the reader.52

Painting and Sculpture

Lessing contrasted the tense but restrained facial expressions of the figures in the Laocoön statue with the vivid and grotesque description of their suffering in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Virgil described the death of Laocoön and his sons in the following manner:

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48 Lessing may have been referring to the ideas of Father Louis-Bertrand Castel (1688-1757), who advocated the idea of a “harpsichord for the eyes” (clavecin pour les yeux or clavecin des couleurs) and wrote an entry on this instrument for Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*.
49 Lessing (1962), 5.
50 Ibid., 6.
51 Ibid., 78.
52 Ibid., 91.
Laocoon, who had been chosen by lot to be priest of Neptune, happened at this moment to be sacrificing a fine bull at the altar of the cult, when, and I sicken to recall it, two giant arching sea-snakes swam over the calm waters from Tenedos, breasting the sea together and plunging towards the land. Their fore-parts and their blood-red crests towered above the waves; the rest drove through the ocean behind, wreathing monstrous coils, and leaving a wake that roared and foamed. And now, with blazing and blood-shot eyes and tongues which flickered and licked their hissing mouths, they were on the beach. We paled at the sight and scattered; they forged on, straight at Laocoon. First each snake took one of his two little sons, twined around him, tightening, and bit, and devoured the tiny limbs. Next they seized Laocoon, who had armed himself and was hastening to the rescue; they bound him in the giant spirals of their scaly length, twice round his middle, twice round his throat; and still their heads and necks towered above him. His hands strove frantically to wrench the knots apart. Filth and black venom drenched his priestly hands. His shrieks were horrible and filled the sky, like a bull’s bellow when an axe has struck awry, and he flings it off his neck and gallops wounded from the altar.\(^{53}\)

Virgil’s graphic language vividly illustrated the dramatic scene. The sculptors of the Laocoön group showed restraint in their depiction of this event. Lessing cited Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who in *Von der Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* observed that the expression in ancient Greek statues often revealed a soul that was calm and composed even in the midst of suffering great torment. This he compared to the depths of the sea remaining calm even though the surface might be agitated. Every muscle of Laocoön’s body is strained and tense, yet his face shows no rage and he does not “raise his voice in a terrible scream,” as in Virgil’s epic.\(^{54}\)

In order to explain this discrepancy between the statue and the poem, Lessing argued that, since the first law of art is the law of beauty, the sculptors “strove to attain the highest beauty possible under the given condition of physical pain.” Since an intense expression that disfigured the face would have violated the law of beauty, the agony of Virgil’s scene was moderated in the sculpture. Laocoön’s head is tilted to the side with lips slightly parted. Although his facial muscles are tensed, Lessing observed that Laocoön would never have been depicted unleashing a full-throated scream. This was

\(^{54}\) Lessing (1962), 7.
because a wide-open mouth produced a “mere spot” in a painting, and a cavity in
sculpture, creating a “most repulsive effect.”

According to Lessing, the visual artist must never depict the climax of a situation. Since the artist can depict only one moment in time, and visual artworks are made to be contemplated at length, this temporal focal point must be chosen very carefully. Only moments that allow the viewer to fully use his or her imagination are the most effective. Thus, the climax of any situation is completely unsuitable for this purpose, as it represents the highest point of emotion and the imagination can conceive of nothing beyond such a moment. As Lessing noted, “if Laocoön sighs, the imagination can hear him cry out; but if he cries out, it can neither go one step higher nor one step lower than this representation without seeing him in a more tolerable and hence less interesting condition.” What is depicted must be timeless rather than transitory. A screaming Laocoön would not be suitable, since a man of “firmness and endurance” never cries out unceasingly.

In spite of these restrictions, Lessing admitted that painting may depict coexistent actions, such as a council of the gods from the Iliad, but not progressive ones, such as Pandarus drawing and firing his bow in Book 4 of Homer’s epic. The painter must choose as his or her subject that which is “most suggestive” and which allows the viewer to comprehend the preceding and succeeding actions or events.

Poetry

Unlike the visual artist, the poet is not constrained to limit his or her focus to one point in time. If any particular moment fails to satisfy the hearer (Lessing assumed a hearer, rather than a reader of poetry), that moment might have been anticipated by what came before, or what follows might recapture the reader’s interest. The combined effect

Ibid., 17.
56 Ibid., 20.
57 Ibid., 78. Echoing Lessing’s argument, philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) argued in “On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences” from Philosophical Writings for a wise selection of subject matter on the part of the visual artist. He stated that the painter and sculptor “express beauties that are alongside one another” and had to choose their depicted moment such that it was “rich in thoughts and so full of meaning that every accompanying concept makes its own contribution to the required meaning.” This moment must animate all of our senses and allow our minds to “fathom the past from the present while reliably anticipating the future.” See: Moses Mendelssohn: Philosophical Writings, translated and edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 180-81.
of events and images over time gives poetry its special power. Lessing observed that Virgil’s Laocoön cries out violently, but the poet had already established him as a heroic figure and loving father. As a result we do not assume he is a weak man for crying out, but someone experiencing great pain and despair at the fate of his children.

Lessing then distinguished between epic poetry, in which a scream is “reported” by the poet, and dramatic poetry, in which an actor vividly depicts such an outburst. Because of the difference in presentation, he concluded that drama might have to be treated like a visual art in terms of appropriate content. The more naturalistic the expression of raw emotion in art, the more easily our senses “must be offended.” His arguments here fit nicely with Enlightenment artistic aesthetics, in which the intensity of emotional expression differed markedly from that of Baroque or Romantic art.

In addition to the degree of restrained agony the Laocoön statue also differs from the poetic account in the positioning of the serpent’s coils around the figures. Virgil described two serpents that wind their coils twice around the priest’s body, with their heads poised high above him. The sculptors, however, moved the coils to the legs and feet. With the entire torso left uncovered and vulnerable, the tense muscles are more easily perceived. This created a more striking visual effect.

Lessing limited the visual arts to the depiction of only one moment in time, and restricted poetry to the description of one single property of any particular body. He cited Homer as his model. The Greek poet depicted only “progressive actions,” and usually described bodies only as they related to those actions, without copious detail. He observed that Homer always described a ship as a black ship, or a fast ship, for example, or perhaps a “well-manned black ship.” The movement of the boat out of port, across the sea, and into port was more important than describing every aspect of it. Objects that were described in great detail, such as Achilles’s shield (in Book XVIII of the Iliad), were not simply described as if the object had appeared out of thin air. Instead, Homer described how Hephaestus, the maker of the shield, successively created each element. Actions, not features, were made the central focus.

For Lessing a notable example of an artist combining visual and poetic elements in one work was Zeuxis and his painting of Helen (5th century BCE). The painting itself

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58 Ibid., 23.
consisted of only the nude Helen, but the painter included at the bottom of the image several lines from the *Iliad* in which the effect of Helen’s beauty on the Trojan elders is described. Lessing praised Homer for not attempting to describe Helen’s beauty in intricate detail, but instead for focusing on an action, the reaction of the elders to her appearance among them at council. In Zeuxis’s painting, Lessing concluded, “never were painting and poetry engaged in a more even contest.”

**Lessing Revisited: Irving Babbitt’s *The New Laokoon***

Lessing presented a conservative view of the arts in which each expressive mode had distinct limits that should not be exceeded. While not addressing music directly in *Laocoön*, his ideas regarding the role of poetry suggested that he would not have wholeheartedly supported the concept of program music as developed by nineteenth-century composers such as Berlioz, Liszt, and Richard Strauss. He would likely have approved of works that depicted actions in a temporal framework, such as Berlioz’s “March to the Scaffold” from *Symphonie fantastique*, but not ones in which the composer sought to recreate visual works, such as Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Lessing served as a model for those who later criticized the nineteenth-century tendency to break down boundaries between the arts. In 1910 Harvard professor Irving Babbitt (1865-1933) used Lessing’s ideas to criticize Romantic aesthetics in *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts*. Babbitt concluded that the tendency of nineteenth-century artists to blur the distinctions between the arts appealed to those who “wish relaxation from analysis,” such as the “tired scientist” or “weary man of business,” and led to a debased style that reflected the uncentered nature of society circa 1910.

For Babbitt, the nineteenth century witnessed a “general confusion of the arts,” which he traced to the writings of the early German Romantics, including Novalis, Tieck, and Friedrich Schlegel, not to mention E.T.A. Hoffmann. He singled out Lessing’s critical approach to the study of art and establishment of “definite standards and a rational

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59 Ibid., 115. All of Zeuxis’s paintings are no longer extant.
61 Ibid., viii.
discipline” as an essential aspect of Laocoön. This ran counter, he argued, to the Romantics’ stance that such rigorous standards of excellence stifled the creative artist.  

Babbitt noted that Lessing planned on writing three parts of Laocoön but only completed one. The third part was to have dealt with music and dancing. Babbitt concluded from the few extant fragments of this music volume that Lessing would have been “chiefly interested in establishing boundaries and frontiers;” he was “no friend of musical painting” and would have “condemned any mixing up of the domain of sound with that of color and vision.”

As one of the more extreme examples of an attempt to blend the domains of sound and sight, Babbitt cited the ideas of Father Louis-Bertrand Castel (1688-1757), who conceived a clavecin des couleurs (clavecin oculaire) and even a clavecin des odeurs. Castel expounded on his color harpsichord in a letter to a Monsieur Decort in the November 1725 issue of the French journal Mercure. He offered several comparisons between musical tone and color in defending this conception of a harpsichord for the eyes.

In his letter Castel first remarked that nothing could be more curious to imagine than the idea of rendering sound visible and of offering to the eyes all the pleasures that music offers to the ears. He observed that people had been comparing light with sound for a long time, and he mentioned the work of Athanasius Kircher (Musurgia Universalis – 1650) and Isaac Newton (Optics – 1704, rev. 1718, 1721, 1730) specifically. According to Castel, Kircher described sound as an “imitator of light” (simia lucis) and stated that everything that can be made sensible to the eyes can be made sensible to the ears. Newton showed that colors have “their precise tones that follow the same proportions as the tones of music” and attempted to compare the visible spectrum of seven basic colors to the diatonic scale with its seven pitches.

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62 Ibid., 35.
63 Ibid., 53-54.
64 Mercure (November 1725), 2553.
66 Mercure, 2559-60. Newton compared the spectra of visible light and sound in his Optics (1704) and also developed a system for associating pitches of the musical scale with colors. Red, for example, he linked with the pitch “C” and violet he linked with “B.” Increasing frequency in the visible spectrum therefore correlated with increasing frequency of audible pitch. For a useful comparison of significant systems for comparing pitch and color, see: Alan Wells, “Music and Visual Color: a Proposed Correlation,” Leonardo 13/2 (Spring 1980), 104.
After introducing Kircher as an authority, Castel proceeded to compare light and sound in terms of their physical properties. He made the following observations: both light and sound spread outwards in direct lines, reflect off of impenetrable surfaces at similar angles, and may be refracted after passing through penetrable surfaces. Telescopes make distant objects visible, and microscopes make tiny objects visible. As an analogue in the world of sound, Castel referred to the “trompetes parlantes,” which make distant sounds audible, and ear trumpets that aid the user in hearing the quietest sounds. Furthermore, modified light produces colors, and modified sound produces musical tones. A mixture of colors creates painting, mixed tones create music.⁶⁷

For Castel, the vocabulary of painters and musicians also suggested an affinity between the disciplines. “Consult painters, listen to them speak, read their books,” he wrote, “and they always tell us of tones and semitones, of chords, harmonies, and even dissonances of color.” By listening to musicians, we might hear of a keyboard work that is “well-defined,” of “singing and its figurations” [ses figures], of dissonance that can be “nuanced,” and of the mixture of consonance and dissonance as an imitation of chiasroscuro.⁶⁸

Having compared light and sound in this manner, Castel then cited Kircher as the inspiration for his conception of the color harpsichord. In the Musurgia Universalis Kircher wrote that if, at a lovely concert, we could see the air set in motion by the voices and instruments, we would be astonished by the assorted and vivid colors we would see before us.⁶⁹ This is what Castel hoped to accomplish with his color harpsichord. He understood that a major difference between color and sound, and the most difficult aspect of his project, was the temporal nature of music. The artist could arrange and manipulate colors on a canvas, but the composer could not isolate sounds “in the air” or in the “bodies that produce them.” The listener could perceive music’s beauties and its “fugitive

⁶⁷ Mercure, 2556-58.
⁶⁸ Ibid., 2559-60.
⁶⁹ Kircher, 241. “In short, although light is invisible without air, as sound is inaudible, were the air somehow made visible to us, how many properties of the particles, what sonorous power that we otherwise would be ignorant of would be revealed.” “Ut igitur lumen sine aere invisibile est, ita & sonus, qui dum aerem reddit sensibilem nobis, quam plures corporum qualitates, quas nisi ope sonoru cognoscere nescimus, manifestat.”
character” only at the moment of their creation. A painting, on the other hand, might be contemplated at leisure.\(^{70}\)

Castel concluded that one cannot do with sounds all that one might do with colors, since sounds die away after being produced. But, he wondered, can one not do with colors all that one might do with sounds, since colors are fixed and permanent? He mentioned certain machines that could be seen in city streets. By manipulating little strings with their fingers, moving them as if playing a keyboard instrument, operators of these machines caused different images and colors to appear and disappear behind a sheet of glass. Castel’s fantastical instrument would produce similar effects, but they would be tied closely to individual pitches of the harpsichord. He remarked that the movement of his machine’s keys would make colors, “with their combinations and chords” and with “all their harmony,” appear. This harmony corresponded precisely, for Castel, with that of “every kind of music.”\(^{71}\)

In elaborating on the purpose of his harpsichord for the eyes, Castel argued that the pleasures of the eye are “infinitely more piquant” than those of the ears, since they are more developed and perceptible [sensible] than the latter. Musical sounds, for him, had no beauty in and of themselves. The beauties of music arose not from sound itself, but from the melodic sequence [la suite melodieuse] and the harmonic combination of sounds. By transforming the exact sequence and combination of sounds into colors, “the same beauties and charms” would result. In addition, colors by themselves were “infinitely more pleasant and charming” to the eyes than sounds were to the ears. But since the main charm of music was the temporal and rapidly-changing quality of sound, the principal advantage of his harpsichord for the eyes was that it gave to colors not only harmonic order, but also a “certain dash of vivacity and gracefulness that they would never have on an immobile and inanimate canvas.”\(^{72}\)

Castel extended this idea by suggesting wallpaper on which different types of music, maybe even an entire opera, might be painted. One could wallpaper a room with

\(^{70}\) *Mercure*, 2562.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 2568. Castel himself likely determined which colors corresponded with which keys, since he built a prototype of the instrument.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 2570-72.
“minuets and rigaudons, sarabandes and passacaglias, with sonatas and cantatas.” Such “harmonic wallpaper,” produced by means of his harpsichord for the eyes, would allow people to “contemplate at leisure that which one was previously only able to hear rapidly in passing and without reflection.” The eye would be able to take in at leisure “the concert, the contrast of all the pieces, the effect of one against another, the fugues, the imitations, the expressions, the sequence of cadences, the progress of the modulation.”

None of the powerful elements of music would lose any force or energy in passing from the ears to the eyes, from music to painting. Castel expressed his ideas with great enthusiasm, though unfortunately without providing clear details about how his fantastic instrument would be constructed.

Babbitt concluded that Castel’s ideas were the “reductio ad absurdum” of certain “pseudo-classical tendencies.” They were pseudo-classical because the confusion was not in the arts themselves (subjective), but rather in the means of “realizing” the arts (objective). Someone like Castel, Babbitt concluded, was typical of the figure that often appeared “toward the very end of a literary movement.” Castel demonstrated the degree to which those outside of the German-speaking world also expressed great interest in affinities between the arts, however eccentric those views may have been.

Additional influential artists and thinkers throughout history have suggested links or affinities between the arts. Horace (65-8 BCE) stated in his Ars Poetica that “as is painting, so is poetry” (Ut pictura poesis). Simonides of Ceos (ca. 556-468 BCE), as cited by Plutarch (46-120 CE) in De Gloria Atheniensium (3.347a), found that painting is “mute poetry” and poetry a “speaking painting” ("Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens"). Goethe famously described architecture as “frozen music,” adding that the mood or atmosphere produced by both disciplines created similar effects (Zu Eckermann, 23 March 1829). Babbitt acknowledged the comparative tendencies of artists like Horace, but he attributed the modern confusion of the arts to “romantic primitivism,” which he linked with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s removal from society and celebration of childlike

73 Ibid., 2573.
74 Ibid., 2575.
75 Babbitt, 57-58. This observation brings to mind the tendency of composers to display mannerist tendencies towards the ends of historical eras in music, such as in the complex motets and circular canons of the ars subtilior.
wonder at the natural world.\textsuperscript{76} This childlike wonder included the abolishing of rules that distinguished one artistic genre from another. Some children’s games, he wrote, have rules that are “about as highly regulated as seventeenth-century tragedy.” Romantic primitivists, on the other hand, sought to “escape from the conventional” and “discard all the old formal distinctions” between arts or genres.\textsuperscript{77} Rousseau’s critique of the effects of modern society on human relations and his emphasis on the benefits of close contact with nature influenced Romantic thought and aesthetics. Rousseau however, like Babbitt years later, also criticized Castel’s ideas in his \textit{Essay on the Origin of Language}. “I have seen that famous clavichord on which music was supposedly made with colors,” he wrote. He found that Castel was misguided because he contradicted natural laws, attempting to substitute colors, which are most effective when displayed statically, for musical tones, which are most effective when heard in a particular order. Spatial elements were artificially inserted into a temporal sphere. “To multiply the sounds heard at the same time or to develop colors one after another,” he concluded, “is to change their economy, to put the eye in the place of the ear, and the ear in the place of the eye.”\textsuperscript{78}

Babbitt emphasized that Romantic artists were more interested in a synthesis of artistic impressions, ways in which the arts “may melt together and interpenetrate in emotion,” than in keeping the arts distinct in terms of their roles and effects.\textsuperscript{79} August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-11845), an influential member of the Romantic circle at the University of Jena, wrote in \textit{Athenäum}, the short-lived journal of the Jena Romantics, that:

\begin{quote}
One should seek to bring the arts closer together and seek transitions from one to the other. Statues would perhaps animate themselves into paintings […] paintings would become poems, poems pieces of music; and who knows? solemn church music might suddenly rise up again as a temple into the air.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{79} Babbitt, 124.
Babbitt linked such ideas with much nineteenth-century music, where composers echoed the “confused emotional synthesis” and delighted in finding correspondences between the sense-impressions of German Romantic writers like Schlegel. He felt that composers of program music were especially guilty of this, attempting to “interpret everything in terms of everything else through suggestion.”

He singled out Richard Strauss’s *Sinfonia Domestica* as a particularly shameless example of misguided suggestiveness.

Babbitt went so far as to link modern nervous disorders, among which he included the interpretation of light or color in terms of sound, with German Romantic writers such as E.T.A. Hoffmann, who exhibited “melomania” and the tendency “not only to worship music but to reduce to music all the other arts.”

He decried the popularity of the novel, a genre demonstrating the “triumph of diffuseness over concentration.” The novel was originally developed in part by German Romantics such as Novalis, Tieck, Goethe, and Hoffmann, furthering the link in Babbitt’s argument between Romanticism and unclear expression. A preference for such types of literature reflected the character of the person as well. For Babbitt, a “clear-cut type of person” who does not live in either an “emotional or an intellectual muddle” would prefer a clear-cut style of art or literature. He would avoid a “theatrical sermon” or “play that preaches” and would distrust a symphony that “becomes intelligible only with reference to some picture or poem.” Such art was guilty of placing “color above design, illusion above informing purpose, suggestiveness above symmetry” and encouraged the “predominance of the feminine over the masculine virtues.” This led to the “corruption of literature and the arts” during the nineteenth century, which he termed the Romantic, or “Rousseauistic,” error.

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81 Babbitt, 163-64.
82 Ibid., 174-75.
83 Ibid., 204.
84 Ibid., 247. By impugning the dominance of feminine over masculine virtues, Babbitt reflected a widespread fear of the feminization of the arts, especially music, in the United States around 1900. American composer Charles Ives (1874-1954) often criticized those who opposed musical experimentation such as his own by using gendered language, labeling them as “sissies” or “lily-pads.” See: Charles Ives, *Memos*, edited by John Kirkpatrick (New York: Norton, 1972), 133-36. Critics George Upton, H.R. Haweis, and Louis Elson wrote books between 1870 and 1900 in which they concluded that women were incapable of mastering the “theoretical intricacies” of musical composition. Although women were perfectly capable of inspiring men to compose great music, and might even write works that appealed to the senses (but not the mind), in their opinion composition was not only an art, but also a science. See: George Upton, *Woman in Music* (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1880), 21-28; H. R. Haweis, *Music and Morals* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), 102-103; and Louis C. Elson, *The Realm of Music* (Boston: New England Conservatory of Music, 1892), 171-73.
Babbitt used the latter term in criticizing Wagner’s theories. This was due to several factors. Firstly, creators of the Gesamtkunstwerk were to meet not in “common discipline” but in “common sympathy.” Secondly, love “triumphed” over restraint in Wagner’s artistic world. Finally, the union of minds and arts in the total work of art suggested the original unity of man and nature before civilization divided them. In Wagner’s aesthetics a “confused emotional unity” was to be preferred to “clear and conscious intellectual distinctions.”

Babbitt also critiqued Wagner’s attempts to revive the spirit of ancient Greek drama in the modern world. In his view Wagner sought to have the arts “melt voluptuously together,” while the Athenians presented a “flexible interplay of the different arts and genres” in their drama, governed by “exquisite restraint.” He concluded that, in order for us to truly enjoy Wagner’s Gesammtkunst, we must possess the sense described by American musician and poet Sidney Lanier (1842-1881) as that which “sees, hears, tastes, smells, touches, all in one.”

German Romantics and Divisions between the Arts

The idea of individual arts blurring boundaries, such as instrumental music suggesting color schemes for lighting and décor in opera, was foreign to Lessing’s (and Babbitt’s) aesthetics, though they were clearly familiar with it. Between Lessing and Babbitt came the Romantics, who eagerly embraced the breakdown of divisions between the arts. For many German intellectuals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a blending of artistic functions and sensory impressions was a significant

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85 Babbitt, 107.
86 Ibid., 198.
87 Ibid., 173. He was referring to a line from Lanier’s poem “Clover,” written in honor of John Keats (1876). A portion of the poem including the text appears below:

“Now the little winds, as bees,
Bowing the blooms come wandering where I lie
Mixt soul and body with the clover-tufts,
Light on my spirit, give from wing and thigh
Rich pollens and divine sweet irritants
To every nerve, and freshly make report
Of inmost Nature’s secret autumn-thought
Unto some soul of sense within my frame
That owns each cognizance of the outlying five,
And sees, hears, tastes, smells, touches, all in one.”
component of their thinking. Figures such as Novalis, Goethe, and Friedrich Kind contributed to this strain of German Romanticism. Romantic artists in multiple fields were far more eager to attempt a blending of the arts than were their eighteenth-century predecessors. Goethe and Kind are linked directly with Romantic music through Schubert’s use of the former’s poetry in some of his finest Lieder and Weber’s use of the latter’s libretto for *Der Freischütz*.

**Goethe’s *Farbenlehre***

The polymath Goethe (1749-1832) expressed his observations and interests in multiple fields of inquiry in writings such as the *Farbenlehre* (*Theory of Colors*, 1810) and *Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790). Although he was not as talented musically as he was in other disciplines, Goethe’s interest in music emerges in his writings (he also wrote a fragmentary *Tonlehre*) and through his friendship and correspondence with the composer Carl Friedrich Zelter. In a March 1825 letter to poet Johann Peter Eckermann, Goethe wrote that:

> There is poetry, there painting, there singing and music, there acting and still more! When all these arts and delights of youth and beauty work together during one evening, and furthermore at a significant level of quality, then there is a celebration that cannot be compared with any other.  

Goethe praised the collaborative and cumulative effect of multiple arts as might be experienced at any first-rate operatic performance. However, there was no suggestion he was thinking of anything resembling Wagner’s elaborate theories of the Gesamtkunstwerk. German literary scholar Hedwig Walwei-Wiegelmann reached a similar conclusion regarding the scope of Goethe’s thinking and decided that the writer did not anticipate the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. To me, Goethe seems not to praise a spectacle in which many arts are combined under a single unifying dramatic purpose but instead an evening’s entertainment in which plot, speech, instrumental music, song,

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88 Babbitt observed that Goethe was often a “partisan of the genre tranché,” but also noted that Goethe felt there were only two kinds of music: that which “impels one to dance” and that which “inspires one to pray.” Ibid., 108.

89 Letter to Eckermann (22 March 1825).

90 Hedwig Walwei-Wiegelmann, afterword to his selection of *Goethes Gedanken über Musik* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1985), 246.
dance, gesture, painting, and stage decoration produce a delightful effect as a whole. What Goethe meant by “work together” is not entirely clear.

The *Farbenlehre* (*Doctrine of Colors*) provided numerous instances of Goethe’s attempts to find connections between the arts, or at least areas of common interest for practitioners of different artistic and intellectual fields. In this work he offered a systematic and thorough examination of light and color. He stated in the introduction that he would consider colors from the “physiological, physical, and chemical side.” By this he meant colors as perceived by the eye, as the “temporary effect of colorless, translucent, transparent, and opaque bodies” on light, and as a permanent quality residing in bodies. He also considered the relation of color theory to other disciplines such as philosophy, mathematics, and music, and also the “moral-sensory” effects of different colors on humans. He invited the “philosopher, physician, physicist, chemist, mathematician, and engineer” to take part in his work and add to it through their expertise, and he welcomed efforts to merge the theory of colors with the “circle of remaining natural phenomena” (from his “Didaktischer Teil”).

Goethe devoted a brief section of the work to the relationship between colors and music. He stated that there was a definite relationship between color and musical tone, but that a certain error about that relationship should be corrected. Color and tone could not be compared to one another in any specific way, he insisted, though both were related according to a “higher formula.” He compared color and tone to two rivers that have a common source on a mountain but flow down opposite sides through completely different regions, so that no two points along the two streams can be compared to one another. Though both were “general elemental forces,” they operated by different means and appealed to different senses.

He described the effects that different colors and color combinations can have upon the viewer. A few examples will demonstrate the style of his observations. He made careful distinctions between similar colors, such as yellow-red (*Gelbrot*) and red-yellow (*Rotgelb*). The latter produced a “pleasantly cheerful” feeling in him, whereas the former

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91 Quotes are taken from the text available at http://www.textlog.de/goethe_farben.html. Translations are my own.
was “unbearably oppressive.””\(^{92}\) Yellow-red was particularly enjoyed by “energetic, healthy, coarse people,” as well as by savages and children. When children are left alone and begin to draw, he observed, they “will not go light on the vermilion and minium” (Mennig), the latter a shade of yellowish red. Blue, on the other hand, is a color people enjoy looking at because it does not “impose itself on us,” but instead “draws us to it.” Rooms decorated in blue appear somewhat long (weit), as well as “empty and cold.” Red-blue he considered a rather diluted color, which also had something “vivid” but “without cheerfulness” in it.\(^{93}\)

Goethe addressed not only the qualities of individual colors, but also their combinations and the concept of a “totality” of colors in nature. In a section entitled “Totality and Harmony,” he stated that there was no general phenomenon in the natural world that demonstrated the totality of colors in close proximity. For him, the rainbow lacked a true red hue. Such a totality could be generated through human effort, and he developed a color wheel to demonstrate this. The combination of yellow and blue, which produces green, was the simplest of possible blendings in his view. But since there was no trace of red in this combination, it deviated too much from the true totality of colors and was to be considered impoverished in effect.

One of the most interesting aspects of the Farbenlehre is Goethe’s observations about the color of clothing and what that might suggest about the character of the wearer. He explicitly stated that “the character of one’s wardrobe relates to the character of the person,” and that one might observe a clear relationship between individual colors and the color of the wearer’s face, his or her age, and social rank.\(^{94}\) He observed that “natural men” (Naturmenschen), coarse people, and children have a great affinity for high-energy colors, especially yellow-red, and for multi-colored things (das Bunte). Multi-colored for him meant that colors were present in their highest state of energy and without any sense of harmonic balance. This could produce a very pleasing effect, as in the case of a Hessian officer he had seen who painted his face like certain Native Americans. The appearance of this officer produced for Goethe a kind of totality that was “not

\(^{92}\) Ibid., 774.
\(^{93}\) Ibid., 775-89.
\(^{94}\) Ibid., 839.
Educated people, in his view, had an “aversion” to colors. This might be partly due to a “weakness of the eye” (Schwäche des Organs), or partly to an “uncertainty” about proper taste. Women, he observed, now “almost universally” go about dressed in white, and men in black. His inferences of character from color preference reveal the depth of significance that he placed on color as more than a mere physical phenomenon. This sort of thinking may also have informed Alfred Roller’s choice of dominant colors for the individual acts Tristan und Isolde at the Vienna Court Opera. Numerous critics who responded to that production certainly made connections between color choices and the spirit of the music and dramatic events within those individual acts.

For Goethe, different nations also showed marked preferences for certain colors. “Mercurial” nations, such as France, loved “enhanced colors” (gesteigerte Farben), especially the active side of such colors. More “temperate” nations, such as England and Holland, loved “straw- or leather-yellow” (Stroh oder Ledergelb), and thus often wore dark blue. Finally, nations “striving towards dignity,” such as the Italians and Spanish, preferred (hinüberziehen) the red color of their coats to be more passive in intensity.

With the Farbenlehre Goethe demonstrated a deep interest in color and its effects on the human mind and body. His development of a color wheel, though not the first such attempt in Western history (Isaac Newton - 1666), demonstrated the importance he placed on situating natural phenomena within a larger framework, revealing a truly scientific and philosophical approach to his research. As a polymath, he sought to connect the study of color with other disciplines in the arts and sciences. He served as a prime example of the German Romantic search for the synthesis of multiple fields of knowledge in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. This was the tradition that Wagner inherited and would continue in the second half of the nineteenth century, and which Mahler and Roller would carry into the twentieth.

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95 Ibid., 835.
96 Ibid., 841.
Friedrich Kind’s *Van Dyck’s Landleben*

German writer Johann Friedrich Kind (1768-1843) studied law and philosophy at the University of Leipzig and was a practicing attorney in Dresden from 1793 until 1816. He devoted himself to writing after leaving his former profession and is best known for creating the libretto to Carl Maria von Weber’s influential Romantic opera *Der Freischütz* (1821). He addressed the relationship between the arts in another of his stage plays, *Van Dyck’s Landleben* (1817). This work depicts scenes from the life of Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) and reveals Kind’s penchant for the melodramatic.97

In the preface to *Van Dyck’s Landleben*, Kind expressed his views on the unity of the arts. He designated this work as a “painterly play” (*malerisches Schauspiel*), an unusual term that implied an affinity between artistic fields. He opened the introduction to the text of the play with a brief sonnet that emphasized the synthetic nature of his enterprise:

Wie Quell’ und Quelle nach Vereinung streben,  
Und rauschend dann den Ufern sich verkünden;  
Wie Fackeln, welche bräutlich sich entzünden,  
Bald hell’re Glut empfangen, bald sie geben;  
Wie Rosenlippen an einander beben,  
Auf Wechselraub ein Götterglück zu gründen:  
So will auch Geist dem Geiste sich verbünden,  
Und Kunst mit Kunst im Charis-Tanze schweben.

Just as two springs strive towards union,  
And, rustling against the banks, then meet each other;  
Like torches which ignite matrimonially  
Soon attain a brighter fervor, soon give it up;  
Like rose-lips tremble against one another,  
To establish divine happiness through mutual deprivation;  
So spirit also wants to join with spirit,  
And one art to soar with others in the dance of the Graces (*Charis-Tanze*).

Mit sieben Strahlen hat der Iris Bogen  
Die farb’ge Laub’ um unsern Stern gezogen,  
Wie siebenfach der Ton im Saitenspiele:  
So gönnst der Lyra denn die Schwesterstrahlen;  
Wie Maler dichten, so laßt Dichter malen.  
Breit ist die Bahn – nach Einem Kranz am Ziele!

The rainbow has seven rays  
Which have drawn a colorful arbor around our star,  
Like sevenfold the tone in string music:  
So the lyre does not begrudge its sister beams;  
As painters write poetry, so let poets paint.  
Broad is the path – towards one wreath as the goal!98

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97 Wilhelm Pfannkuch in the *Neue deutsche Biographie* describes Kind’s works as the “products of a coquettish and fashionable writer” (*Produkte eines gefallssüchtigen Modeschriftstellers*). Online version available at http://www.deutsche-biographie.de/. Accessed 7 February 2009. I am indebted to Dr. John Michael Cooper for bringing Kind’s play to my attention.

98 Friedrich Kind, *Van Dyck’s Landleben. Malerisches Schauspiel* (Leipzig: Göschen, 1821). Translation is my own. I would like to give special thanks to Douglass Seaton for assistance with this translation.
The imagery of separate streams (arts) striving towards union, and the notion of artists creating works in different fields in pursuing a common goal (whatever that might be), reveal a strong sympathy on Kind’s part with those Romantics who attempted to break down Classical barriers between different intellectual and creative fields. He also evoked the number seven in comparing the colors of the rainbow and the pitches of the musical scale, much as Newton and Castel had done. Kind theorized in his preface that:

Just as there is one light, though it consists of [mannigfachen] refractions of beams, so there is also one art, though it avails itself of various means and materials, or, if one prefers: All arts are daughters of one mother, the ardent human soul, although repeatedly [?] furnished, this one with musical tone, that one with color, with the word, with contours, with movement, etc. True to this common ancestry, the arts also never wish to or are able to completely separate […] So, for example, speech and gesture are almost always so intimately fused, that a separation of the two is unthinkable. And who wouldn’t obviously think of song? Who wouldn’t think about the union of several sister arts in opera and ballet?99

This integrative view of all arts ultimately springing from the human mind connects Kind with Goethe and others who had interests in many fields of inquiry and artistic pursuits. The example of speech and gesture being fused in song links the author with Wagner, whose music dramas required singers to possess not only powerful voices but sophisticated acting skills as well. As director of the Vienna Court Opera, Mahler consciously sought talented singer-actors, a priority that had earlier caused friction between himself and Bernhard Pollini, his supervisor in Hamburg. Anna von Mildenburg, who has an important place later in our discussion, epitomized Mahler’s ideal singer-actor through her dedication to natural stage movements suitable to the dramatic situation.

In the preface to Van Dyck’s Landleben, Kind wrote that he had “read and heard much about the tableau vivant, about the attitudes and mimic representations of Lady Hamilton and Frau Hendelschütz,” but without actually witnessing such a spectacle. On 2 December 1812 he finally saw such a performance at the celebration in honor of the recently-deceased Cabinet Minister and State Secretary Count von Hopfgarten. The performers were “motionless in a frame-like arrangement and [hinter Flohr].” They were arranged by his friend, the royal library secretary C. A. Semler, “not in imitation of

99 Ibid., 3-4.
existing paintings, but according to a free, ingenious contrivance.” The performers, daughters and grandchildren of the host family, depicted the following subjects: 1) religion 2) chivalry 3) patriotism and 4) childlike adoration. The scenes made a “deep, inextinguishable impression” on Kind. This type of spectacle was not as complex a harmonizing of the arts as opera, but more an enlivening of a static image through the presence of living figures. On 4 March 1814 he witnessed a similar exhibition at the home of Frau Henriette Hendel-Schütz, where he was “surprised and wonderfully excited.” He had the impression of being in a stimulating gallery where the eye, “quickly torn from one object to another, finds no point of repose, no lasting intellectual [Resultat].”¹⁰⁰ The tableau vivant represented a blending of static painting with living models. Kind presumably mentioned such exhibitions because he was attempting in this play to bring to life onstage a historical world of famous painters, and the kinds of environments they often depicted in their works.

In explaining his conception of the “painterly play” (malerisches Schauspiel), Kind stressed that he did not mean works such as Lessing’s Emilia Galotti, where “a painter casually comes onstage and speaks about artistic matters.” Rather, he aimed for a play in which “poetry and painting are united most intimately,” one in which “all those who are educated will appreciate the poetry and connoisseurs of painting will be occupied by the aspects related to painting.” This was like an opera for him, which should be enjoyable to all, even the layman, “but can only be completely appreciated by the connoisseur of music.”¹⁰¹ This suggests that Kind valued music as the most important component art of the opera. His privileging of the musical connoisseur would seem to argue against the principle of the Gesamtkunstwerk, a spectacle that was to appeal equally to all who experienced it (in a utopian sense of the concept). Wagner might have argued that his music could stand on its own and did not conceal any hidden meaning from the musically ignorant. An understanding of his usage of Leitmotifs, however, can provide greater appreciation of works such as Der Ring des Nibelungen than would be possible without that knowledge. Many felt inclined to publish lists of Wagnerian Leitmotifs and their specific meanings because of the value of their study.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 7-10. “Es ergieng mir nur, wie in einer überreichen Galerie, wo das Auge, schnell von einem Gegenstande zum andern hingerissen, keinen Ruhepunkt, kein bleibendes geistiges Resultat findet.”
¹⁰¹ Ibid., 17.
Kind’s play foregrounded the love of the painter Van Dyck for a young woman (Lenchen) who was already betrothed to a young man (Niclas). Her conflicting emotions provided much of the drama, though she ultimately chose Niclas over the esteemed painter. Kind described certain scenes very vividly, suggesting a typical subject for Dutch paintings of the Rubens-Van Dyck school: music-making. A parade of peasant musicians, for example, make music at the beginning of Act 1, Scene 5. Several scenes also illustrated a blending of the arts to a certain degree. Van Dyck, for example, accompanied Paola’s singing and lute playing on his flute. In the final act Thomas the church organist remarked that his playing seemed to enliven the paintings that were in the church (Dann scheinen sich die Bilder zu beleben). These included a work by Van Dyck, which depicted him as St. Martin on a white horse with an undulating red cloak. Thomas’s organ playing was heard as the curtain closed on the final scene. Kind indicated that, as Lenchen gazes upwards towards heaven, “several strong organ tones sound out.” The author was clearly interested in how different arts could combine to create a grander effect than one art by itself. This scene is quite melodramatic and utilizes music in a way similar to that which many filmmakers and opera composers do. Isolde’s Liebestod is a classic example of a character transfigured at the end of the work accompanied by ecstatic music.

In a scene added to the end of the drama, set years in the future, Thomas again played a central role. Now blinded by age, he told his assistants of the wondrous power of music:

“Jetzt weyh’n sie nur ihre Düfte zu; Now the flowers only waft their scents to me;
Doch dünkt mich’s wohl, wenn ich die Orgel spiele – But it seems, when I play organ –
’s ist wunderbar zu sagen, doch vorn nahen, ‘Tis wonderful to say, but near at hand
Ersehnten Schlummer gaukeln oft ja Träume, Dreams often flutter around longed-for slumber,

Des Schläfers harrend, aus der Ferne her – Awaiting the sleeper, from afar –
Doch dünkt mich’s, mein’ ich, wenn der weiche Ton But it seems to me, when the soft tone
Allmählich unter meinen Fingern stirbt, Gradually dies away under my fingers,
Als beugten sich hoch vom Gesims der Orgel As if the golden angels stooped kindly

102 Kind describes the scene for Act I, Scene 5 as a “festively decorated band of peasants” with a bagpiper and a boy with a triangle at the front. Fiddlers and pipers follow and form a circle around them. The bagpiper stands on a large barrel, the boy on a smaller one. Dance music commences. “Ein festlich geschmückter Bauernzug. Voran ein Düdelsackpfeifer und ein Knabe mit einem Triangel. Dann Geiger und Pfeifer. […] Sie stehen im Kreise herum. Der Sackpfeifer steigt auf eine große Tonne, der Knabe auf eine kleinere. Die andern Spielleute treten auf das Gerüst. Tanz-Musik” (p. 40).
Die goldnen Engel freundlich zu mir nieder,  
Mit Blütenzweigen, wie ich nie geseh'n.  
Wie Glut und wie Smaragd schwebt's vor des Geistes,  
Vorm innern Seelenauge."  

Down to me from the organ shelf,  
With flowery branches like I've never seen.  
Like embers and like emerald the image  
Hovers before the mind’s, before the soul’s inner eye.  

He later told two strangers who had arrived at the church that his heart had been filled by the power of music. “When I play my organ,” he began:

Its pious tone now swells more and more powerfully,  
When I also feel myself a tool of God,  
Because my hand animates the dead brass  
On whose breath the prayers of the churchgoer hover,  
Then I also sense it: an intimate band  
Ties those created from dust to the heavenly land;  
Then I also anticipate the painter’s heavenly call (Himmelsruf),  
He who through a painting he created from dust,  
Transports the heart of the religious man, the spirit drunk with longing,  
Up, up to more beautiful worlds.  

Kind repeatedly expressed, in both the text of this drama and his introductory remarks, the desire to combine the power of multiple arts into a more compelling whole. This desire to overcome the boundaries between the arts was a common trait among Romantic artists, a desire which distinguished them from more conservative Enlightenment figures such as Lessing. Before considering Wagner’s own conception of the integrative spectacle in the next chapter, we turn to a brief examination of a final thinker’s ideas because of their relevance for Wagner’s ultimate stance in balancing the arts in the Gesamtkunstwerk.

Philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the grandfather of composers Felix Mendelssohn and Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel, was a leading figure in the German Enlightenment. His aesthetics of art, as expressed in “On the Main Principles of the Fine Arts and Sciences” from his Philosophical Writings (1761), have implications for Wagner’s later theories of the Gesamtkunstwerk. Mendelssohn distinguished between the “fine arts” and the “fine sciences.” The latter included disciplines such as poetry and rhetoric and express objects by means of “arbitrary signs, perceptible sounds, and letters.” Any conceivable object may be expressed in these disciplines, as long as we have a clear concept of the arbitrary signs. Fine arts, on the other hand, are more limited

Kind, 170.
Ibid., 180. Thanks again to Douglass Seaton for his assistance with this translation.
in what they may express. These include the disciplines of painting, sculpture, architecture, music, and dance. They primarily make use of “natural signs” and what is expressed may be easily comprehended without prior knowledge of abstract concepts. The fine arts appeal to the senses rather than the rational mind. Music, he observed, expresses things through “inarticulate sounds” and cannot possibly depict a “rose, a poplar tree, and so on,” just as a painting could never “represent a musical chord to us.”  

The philosopher also discussed composite art forms, such as opera. He observed that the boundaries between the fine arts and sciences can often blur. Yet the artist must be able to treat a “deviation from one domain into the other” with caution and restraint. A poet, for example, who overused the imitation of natural sounds in his poetry risked giving his work a “trivial appearance that can only please children.” Likewise, the composer who sought to express in music concepts that “stand in no natural connection to the sounds” would only appear ridiculous. In the opera, where several arts form an “assembled whole,” he stressed that one “single main objective” must dominate. This must be the final purpose of one particular (“main”) art, and the other “auxiliary” arts were to serve as “means to the main purpose.” If the final expressive purpose of each individual art were to fight for dominance, the interest of the recipient would be divided and one would find “no reason why these diverse final purposes have been gathered together.” The auxiliary arts should also “elevate” the main one and lend it “certain beauties” that it does not intrinsically possess. They should yield to it and show flexibility as regards their own rules if necessary.  

Mendelssohn concurred with Gluck’s view of the relative importance of music and drama in opera. Poetry and the visual arts were to provide music with arbitrary signs that provided a more “intimate determination” of its passionate but indeterminate sentiments. The expression of natural sentiments through sound was to be the main purpose in opera, and the other arts were to be subservient to music. “The poet,” he stated unequivocally, “must be guided, in all his expressions, by the needs of the musician.” Composers, however, must be careful to avoid the “general confusion of sentiments” that

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105 Mendelssohn, 178-79.  
106 Ibid., 181.  
107 Ibid., 184-85.
might be appropriate in a symphony but would endanger a productive combination with poetry. Wagner ultimately came to realize, in part through his reading of Arthur Schopenhauer’s ideas, that music possessed an expressive power that outshone that of the other arts. In his theoretical writings of the late 1840s and early 1850s, he built upon the long tradition in the West of examining the proper function and potential overlap between the arts, which had flourished in Germany to a significant degree.

108 Ibid., 187.
CHAPTER 2

WAGNER’S CONCEPTION OF THE GESAMTKUNSTWERK

The previous chapter has demonstrated that leading German intellectuals of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, including Lessing, Goethe, and Moses Mendelssohn, engaged with the subject of the proper boundaries of the different arts and their function in drama. Enlightenment thinkers tended to advocate a strict delineation between the arts, whereas the Romantics were often more receptive to the blurring of boundaries between them. Richard Wagner would have been aware of this rich tradition of German intellectual debate about the proper function and role of the arts (he specifically discusses Lessing’s Laocoön in his essay Oper und Drama). He cultivated a passion for drama from an early age and was also keenly interested in philosophy. Several different schools of thought influenced him throughout his life, culminating in a profound engagement with the ideas of Arthur Schopenhauer beginning in the mid-1850s. Gustav Mahler was intimately familiar with Wagner’s writings and had Anna von Mildenburg, his favorite soprano in Hamburg and Vienna, study them in preparing Wagnerian roles for the stage. Before turning to Mahler and his work with Alfred Roller in the following chapters, it is vital to examine what Wagner had to say about music drama and the Gesamtkunstwerk in his mid-century essays.

The most important of Wagner’s mid-century essays include Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (The Artwork of the Future - 1849) and Oper und Drama (Opera and Drama - 1850-1851). Wagner only uses the term Gesamtkunstwerk a handful of times in these writings, and his description of that concept is more verbose than specific. When he wrote the significant essays of the late 1840s and early 1850s, Wagner had only written the operas that are considered his early and more traditionally Romantic works, including Lohengrin, Tannhäuser, and Der fliegende Holländer. The music dramas were yet to come, and they would provide much more specific information about his conception of the total work of art than his essays did. Wagner’s ideas on the proper relation of the arts changed significantly after his discovery of Schopenhauer, firmly cementing music as the
dominant element in his music dramas. Whether the Mahler-Roller *Tristan* of 1903 achieved the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal is wholly dependent upon how one defines the term.

**Influence of Earlier Philosophers**

Wagner was interested in philosophy from an early age. In *Mein Leben* he stated that he had “always felt an inclination to try to fathom the depths of philosophy.”\(^{109}\) There were two major groups of thinkers who influenced the young Wagner up until his flight to Switzerland. First there were the philosophical anarchists, chiefly Frenchman Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) and the German Max Stirner (Johann Kaspar Schmidt; 1806-1856). The second group was the Young Hegelians, including Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, who based their work on Hegel’s dialectic and theory of the continuous struggle of ideas (theses) with their opposites (antitheses), forging resolutions (syntheses) that in turn became new ideas.\(^{110}\)

Wagner showed a serious interest in philosophy throughout his life, though the patience required for its study fluctuated during his youth. He remarked that when he began studies at the University of Leipzig in 1831 he tried to learn the basics of philosophy from Wilhelm Traugott Krug (1770-1842), a professor there, but that a single hour at a lecture sufficed to make him abandon that course of study. Wagner subsequently attended lectures by Christian Hermann Weisse (1801-1866), another professor at Leipzig, and was impressed by a philosophical conversation he overheard between Weisse and his own uncle Adolf. He commented especially on Weisse’s “distracted air,” “manner of speaking rapidly but in fits and starts,” and “interesting and pensive physiognomy.”\(^{111}\)

In spite of the curiosity that Weisse inspired, the young Wagner later wrote that none of these Leipzig professors had been able to keep his attention. He admitted that he also tried to penetrate Friedrich Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*, which had been recommended by a friend, but could not get beyond the first few pages. He went

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\(^{109}\) Richard Wagner, *My Life*, translated by Andrew Gray, edited by Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 429. This will be referred to in future notes as ML.


\(^{111}\) ML, 54.
back to studying Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony instead. His inability to appreciate Schelling may have dissuaded Wagner from further study of the German idealists at the time. In Dresden, a decade later, however, he would become reacquainted with and interested in the thought of the German idealist philosophers, especially that of Hegel.

**Proudhon and Socialism/Anarchism**

Upon becoming Kapellmeister at the Dresden Court Opera in 1843, Wagner was drawn into revolutionary circles, primarily through his assistant conductor August Röckel (1814-1876). Röckel published the Republican paper *Volksblätter*, to which Wagner himself occasionally contributed articles, and introduced him to the socialist theories of Proudhon, the first person to designate himself an “anarchist.” The core of Proudhon’s philosophy was that once humanity had reached a certain level of reason and civilization, they should be able to abolish positions of leadership and live in voluntary cooperation with one another. Music critic and scholar Bryan Magee has connected the popularity of this style of anarchism with the wider desire of many Romantics to combat growing industrialization and preserve the dignity of humanity through close contact with nature.  

Although Proudhon was not the model of an anarchist according to our present-day conception, someone associated with violence and perhaps nihilism, Röckel’s good friend Michael Bakunin (1814-1876) better fit this mold. Bakunin was one of the most notorious anarchists of the nineteenth century. Originally an officer in the Russian army, he resigned his commission and left the country for Dresden and then Paris in the early 1840s. He participated actively in revolutionary activities of 1848-1849 and became acquainted with Wagner in Dresden. The composer was fascinated with this larger-than-life figure whose appetite for destruction knew no limits.

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112 Ibid., 429-30.
113 Magee 36-37. Proudhon’s first publication was “Qu’est-ce que la propriété?” (“What is property?”). He answered this question in several ways. One was that property was theft, the stealing by the sovereign or landowner of the product of his workers. He also argued that property was freedom, since freedom for him lay in the product of a worker’s labor. Proudhon did not favor state or social control of the means of production, but instead ownership by individual users (not sedentary overseers) under the supervision of organizations set up for that purpose.
Magee has suggested that Bakunin’s “mad and infantile wish to destroy everything and everybody” struck a chord deep within Wagner.\textsuperscript{115} *Die Götterdämmerung* famously ends with the complete destruction of the gods’ home Valhalla, so that the world might be reborn under the leadership of humans. Wagner admitted in *Mein Leben* that Proudhon’s theories of the “annihilation of the power of capital by productive labor” began to grow on him. He started to place his hopes for the realization of his artistic ideals upon a new moral order that might emerge from the ashes of the corrupt older one.\textsuperscript{116} Wagner attempted to put his ideals into practice by actively assisting the revolutionaries in combating Saxon and Prussian troops during the Dresden revolts of 1848-49.\textsuperscript{117} As a result of his role in the uprisings, which included surveillance of troop movements, at least one incendiary speech, and associations with Röckel and the *Volksblätter*, Wagner was forced into exile in Switzerland with a bounty on his head.

**Hegel and Feuerbach**

Wagner became reacquainted with German idealist thought during his last years in Dresden through Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, which served as an introduction to the influential thinker’s ideas. Much of the work impressed him, though he found incomprehensible many of the philosopher’s most “sweeping and speculative sentences.” Through his reading he felt impelled to fully investigate Hegel’s concept of “the absolute” and “everything connected with it.”\textsuperscript{118} It is understandable that Hegel’s view of the constant opposition of thesis and antithesis, with the subsequent emergence of a synthesis, would have appealed to the revolutionaries of 1848. The struggle of new ideas against conservatism and cultural/economic stasis is a preoccupation of many revolutionaries. It is not known exactly how much more of Hegel Wagner read, but he soon became interested in a philosopher whose ideas were influenced by Hegelian thought: Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872).

\textsuperscript{115} Magee, 39-40.  
\textsuperscript{116} ML, 373.  
\textsuperscript{117} Wagner’s major effort on behalf of the revolutionaries was to climb the tower of the Dresden Kreuzkirche and report on troop movements. See: Millington, 38-39.  
\textsuperscript{118} ML, 429-30.
Three of the newest and most influential books for the young revolutionaries of 1848 were Proudhon’s *What is Property?* (1840), and Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) and *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843). The latter two made a profound impression on Wagner. He reported in *My Life* that a “German-Catholic preacher and political agitator with a Calabrian hat” named Metzdorf had introduced him to the writings of this “sole adequate philosopher of the modern age.” Feuerbach’s lyrical writing style and fresh ideas on death and immortality in particular greatly fascinated Wagner. The composer was deeply consoled by the philosopher’s notion that “the sole authentic immortality adheres only to sublime deeds and inspired works of art.”

Feuerbach’s conclusion that “the best philosophy is to have no philosophy at all” also piqued Wagner’s interest. For someone who had always struggled in his philosophical studies, this view was immensely inviting. The declaration that the only reality was that which we perceived with our senses also supported Wagner’s conception of a work of art which would be “all-embracing” while “remaining comprehensible to the simplest, purely human power of discernment.” While Wagner soon tired of Feuerbach, the philosopher’s ideas profoundly influenced his mid-century theoretical writings, especially *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*.

Magee has highlighted several other aspects of Feuerbach’s thought that may have shaped Wagner’s writings and music dramas. One is the “extravagant glorification of love” that is found in the philosopher’s magnum opus, *The Essence of Christianity*. The redemption of a man or humanity itself by a self-immolating woman was a common theme in many of Wagner’s works, especially *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Die Götterdämmerung*. The composer who isolated the origin of evil in the *Ring* as Alberich’s curse on love after being rebuffed by the Rhinemaidens was understandably moved by Feuerbach’s praise of romantic love. In *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, Wagner characterized this emotion as the “greatest human need.”

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119 Ibid., 430.
120 Ibid., 431. Wagner writes in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* that “only what is sensory and obeys the preconditions [Bedingungen] of the senses is true and living.” See: Wagner, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (Leipzig: C.F.W. Siegel, 1871; repr. 2005), 45.
121 Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, v. 3, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Siegel, 1871), 2005 reprint (Adamant Media), 69. This source will be referred to in future notes as KdZ.
According to Magee, the core argument of The Essence of Christianity is threefold: that mankind created the gods, not the opposite; that religion must be viewed as a product of the human mind if it is to be properly understood; and that religion meets basic human needs and should not be dismissed as superstition or fairy tales but seriously appraised as “something deeply illuminating about human beings.” 122 Thus what people have long considered divine is in fact purely human, and humans are themselves divine. Magee has observed that the Ring as a whole recounts the coming of age of the world in the “explicitly Feuerbachian sense,” since forces governing the world are first viewed as the powers of gods. Humans later seize these powers from the gods and “take responsibility for the world on to themselves.” 123 One of the most obvious manifestations of this concept is the scene in Siegfried where the title hero forces his way past Wotan/Wanderer, who guards the path to Brünnhilde’s rock. Wotan’s spear, the symbol of his authority, breaks in two as Siegfried passes. The libretto of the Ring was written between 1848 and 1852, coinciding precisely with Wagner’s reading of Feuerbach.

Early philosophical interests had a lasting impact on Wagner’s prose and music. The essays on art written in Swiss exile around mid-century reveal Wagner’s frustration with the failure of the revolutions and the lingering influence of socialist thinking. In writings such as Die Kunst und Die Revolution, Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, and Oper und Drama Wagner first expressed his conception of a Gesamtkunstwerk combining the powers of multiple arts into a spectacle that would regenerate a society corrupted by greed and egoism. It is to a consideration of these writings that we now turn.

Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft

The essay in which Wagner first fleshed out his notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk was Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft. In Oper und Drama, he further refined and elaborated on these ideas. Before examining the major issues presented in these two essays, it is important first to understand Wagner’s prose style. In My Life the philosopher Christian Hermann Weisse (1801-1866), one of the composer’s first intellectual models, justified

122 Magee, 52.
123 Ibid., 55.
the “much criticized lack of clarity” in his own writing style by contending that the “deepest problems of the human spirit” could not be solved “for the benefit of the mob.” Wagner embraced this position as a “guiding principle” for his subsequent writings.\(^{124}\)

The prose is extraordinarily dense, the sentences often mind-numbingly long, and his core ideas buried among an avalanche of verbosity. Magee has asserted that Wagner’s prose style was always that of a “self-conscious intellectual writing for other intellectuals.” For Magee, when an important point does emerge from the prose, it tends to be as a “shadow in the middle of a six-page-long cloud,” and he can think of “scarcely any other writer who is so little conducive to quotation.”\(^{125}\) I concur with these assessments, though *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* provides fewer obstacles to comprehension than does *Oper und Drama*.

*Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* is divided into five large sections, which may be further subdivided as follows:

I Man and Art in General  
1 Nature, Man, and Art  
2 Life, Scholarship, und Art  
3 The Folk and Art  
4 The Folk as the causal force for the Artwork  
5 The configuration of present life as inimical to art under the dominance of abstraction and fashion  
6 Standard for the Artwork of the Future

II The artistic man and the art directly derived from him  
1 Man as his own artistic object [*Gegenstand*] and substance  
2 The three purely-human types of art in their original associations [*Vereine*]  
3 Dance  
4 Music  
5 Poetry  
6 Previous attempts at the reunification of the three human types of art

III Man as artistic image maker using natural materials [*Bildner aus natürlichen Stoffen*]  
1 Architecture  
2 Sculpture  
3 Painting

IV Main Features of the Artwork of the Future

\(^{124}\) ML, 54.  
\(^{125}\) Magee, 97.
V The Artist of the Future

Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft presents Wagner at his most polemical and highlights themes that would recur in his next major essay, Oper und Drama. Here he lays out his vision of the Gesamtkunstwerk. Wagner actually uses that word only twice, preferring to discuss “das gemeinsame Kunstwerk” (the collective artwork). The latter refers to an artwork that emerges from and belongs to a community or culture, as opposed to an artwork that features the combined strengths of multiple arts (Gesamtkunstwerk). In Kunst und Revolution (1849) he linked the communal artwork with ancient Athenian tragedy. The dissolution of the Athenian state contributed to the downfall of tragedy, as the “communal spirit” (Gemeingeist) of that society splintered into a thousand “egoistical directions.” Likewise, the “great Gesammtkunstwerk of tragedy,” here referring to a multimedia artwork, dissipated into the individual artistic components that had comprised it.126

Later in Kunst und Revolution he states that the fall of tragedy resulted in art no longer expressing the “public consciousness.” The components of drama, including rhetoric, sculpture, painting, and music, left the “circle in which they had once moved together,” in order to go their solitary and autonomous way, “to advance egoistically.” In the modern world, the “great Greek Gesammtkunstwerk” could never have presented itself in its full power to our “feral, deceived, and splintered minds,” for we would not have known how to fully understand it.127 In Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, Wagner characterizes the “great Gesammtkunstwerk” as that which must:

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127 Ibid., 29. “Mit dem späteren Verfall der Tragödie hörte die Kunst immer mehr auf, der Ausdruck des öffentlichen Bewusstseins zu sein: das Drama löste sich in seine Bestandtheile auf: Rhetorik, Bildhauerei, Malerei, Musik u.s.w. verließen den Reigen, in dem sie vereint sich bewegt hatten, um nun jede ihren Weg für sich zu gehen, sich selbständig, aber einsam, egoistisch fortzubilden. Und so war es bei der Wiedergeburt der Künste, daß wir zunächst auf diese vereinzelten griechischen Künste trafen, wie sie aus der Auflösung der Tragödie sich entwickelt hatten: das große griechische Gesammtkunstwerk durfte unserem verwilderten, an sich irren und zersplitterten Geiste nicht in seiner Fülle zuerst aufstoßen: denn wie hätten wir es verstehen sollen?”

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encompass all art forms, in order to utilize each individual one to some extent as a resource, to obliterate them in favor of the achievement of the total purpose of all of them, namely the absolute, immediate embodiment of the perfect human nature.

We should recognize such a Gesamtkunstwerk not as something arbitrary that an individual might create, but rather as something necessary and conceivable that will be the “common work of the people of the future.”128 Wagner clearly places value on collective effort and unity at the expense of individual ambition. The influence of socialist thought upon him during the years in Dresden just prior to the 1848 revolutions undoubtedly influenced these writings of his exile period.

The composer argues in Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft that the three basic human arts of dance, music, and poetry were once united in the ancient Greek drama, but became separated from one another over time. The task of future artists will be to join together in Vereine (societies or associations) to create total artworks in the form of Drama. Each art will be utilized to the full extent of its powers and will reinforce the others without trying to become the focal point. Theater historian Evan Baker has observed that Wagner advocated the unified work of art without making “aesthetic pronouncements” about the ideal balance of artistic elements.129 The composer stated unequivocally that the genuine work of art can only arise through the common striving of all three primary arts, which would find their deliverance (Erlösung) in the true artwork.130

We read in Wagner’s autobiography that he conceived the ideas for Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft in Zürich at the Café littéraire, where he enjoyed drinking coffee after his mid-day meal. There he daydreamed and studied the “rather vulgar wallpaper” which depicted landscapes from the ancient world. He was reminded of a watercolor he saw as a boy at his brother-in-law’s home. The painting was by Buonaventura Genelli (1798-1868), a popular illustrator, and depicted the education of Dionysos by the

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130 See: KdZ, 122.
Muses. The ancient Athenians performed drama during the festival of Dionysos, thus the connection of the god with an education in the arts of the muses is fitting (if music drama was to be a combination of multiple arts into a unified whole).

The essay was dedicated to Feuerbach, who for Wagner had become a proponent of the “ruthlessly radical liberation of the individual” from the bondage of traditional authority. Wagner’s political and intellectual interests of the 1840s revealed themselves in several key themes in Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft. These included a general resistance to traditional authority and the glorification of collectivism, specifically communism. Marx and Engels’s The Communist Manifesto was first published in 1848. Wagner’s formulation of the Gesamtkunstwerk thus emerged from his collectivist mindset in the years immediately after the failed mid-century revolutions. Indeed, some of Wagner’s most-favored words, encountered on almost every page, emphasized a collective instinct that drives true artistic creation. Wagner posited as the opposite of true art the artificial cultural products of contemporary society, overrun with vain egoism and luxury. Key words included “unmittelbar” (immediate/direct), “unwillkürlich” (instinctive), “gemeinsam” (communal), “Noth” (need/necessity), and “egoistisch” (self-serving).

Wagner sharply criticized luxury as “heartless, inhuman, insatiable, and egoistical,” a devil whose need for indulgence rules the world. This was the soul of industry that killed man in order to, in Wagner’s formulation, “use him as a machine.” The machine was the “cold, heartless benefactor of luxury-craving humanity” for him. These opinions reflected a sympathy for the new communist thought emerging around mid-century, as well as a Romantic opposition to the degradation of nature by industry and the capitalism that lay at the heart of the exploitation of the natural world. Wagner explicitly called for the merging of egoism into communism at several points in this essay, also noting the word “communism” was a dangerous one to use at that time if one wanted to evade imprisonment.

131 See: ML, 426. Genelli was a German painter of Italian heritage and favored subjects drawn from ancient Greek and Roman mythology in his works.
132 Ibid., 430.
133 KdZ, 49.
134 Ibid., 58.
135 See: Ibid., 51, 134.
Wagner advocated the common interest of the many as the opposite of individual egoism. For him, common necessity would end the “hell of luxury,” and people could only truly enjoy life and be genuine humans by working together toward these ends. The ideal art of the future could only emerge from such a collectivist society. This artwork would be the “brotherly kiss” that crowned the union of people, and only in the artwork will individuals become “as One.”\(^\text{136}\) The ideal of drama was only conceivable as the “fullest expression of a common artistic longing for communication,” which could only result from collaborative participation from the artists. When either of these elements, the common longing and participation, was missing, the drama was no longer a necessary artistic product, but an arbitrary one. Wagner posited the question of who the artist of the future would be. His answer was the poet/actor, who would be drawn from the cooperative of all artists.

Such a cooperative was formed through the union of all artists in a particular time and place. All artists would join together in this cause to develop their own particular arts to the greatest extent possible, and through this to interpenetrate (durchdringen) all the other arts in order to create the “living, sensuously modern drama.”\(^\text{137}\) Wagner emphasized the temporary nature of such unions, stating that they continued to exist only for as long as their fundamental needs were common ones and had yet to be fully satisfied. As soon as the common purposes were attained, the unions and needs that gave rise to them were to be dissolved. New unions then would be formed as other common needs arose. Modern political states, he noted, were the most unnatural human unions. They were often created through the agency of external force to satisfy dynastic interests that never were or no longer were important to the majority of the population. Artistic unions could therefore never be allowed to become inflexible and stagnant.

For Wagner, the true aspiration of art was all-encompassing, and those inspired by genuine artistic drives should aim for the glorification of humanity, not their specific abilities, in art. Artists could achieve their full potential only in the communal artwork, and they would remain unfree as long as their artistic skills did not contribute towards a collective effort. The greatest such artwork was the drama, which could only fully exist if

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 50.
\(^{137}\) Ibid., 162.
each type of art was present and used to its greatest effect. The product of this cooperative work was the Gesamtkunstwerk, which was to embrace all forms of art and would be conceived as the collective work of future artists, not as the deed of any single individual.

Wagner’s model for the Artwork of the Future was the ancient Greek drama. He equated the orchestra in his music dramas with the Greek chorus, a constant presence that commented upon the stage action and provided an uninterrupted illustration of the significance of the stage action. All the arts were once united in their tragedy, but became separated once Greek religion and ancient customs began to be “poked full of holes” and “dismembered” by the “sophistic pinpricks” of the Athenian mind. As a result of this, the “professors and Ph.D.’s” usurped the ruined theater and the people tossed aside art for a couple of thousand years. The different arts then dissipated like the various peoples who had once worked on the Tower of Babel, comparable to the Drama in Wagner’s analogy.

Through the skills of the landscape painter, including drawing, the use of color, and the “warm, enlivening use of light,” the operatic scene attained complete artistic truth, and nature was compelled to serve the highest artistic purpose. What the artist could only previously suggest with the brush and palette, now would become a complete dazzling conception achieved through the use of all the available optical resources at his disposal, especially the artistic use of light. The illusion of the visual arts would become reality in the drama, with the visual artist extending his hand to the dancer. Landscape painting would teach us how to build the stage for the artwork of the future, and that art would constitute the “warm background of nature” for the living humans onstage.

For Wagner, the most realistic of all the arts was dance. He identified this art with the body of the complete human and associated music

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138 Richard Wagner, Oper und Drama (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 349. “An dem Gesamtausdrucke aller Mitteilungen des Darstellers an das Gehör, wie an das Auge, nimmt das Orchester somit einen ununterbrochenen, nach jeder Seite hin tragenden und verdeutlichenden Anteil: es ist der bewegungsvolle Mutterschoß der Musik, aus dem das einigende Band des Ausdruckes erwächst. –Der Chor der griechischen Tragödie hat seine gefühlsnotwendige Bedeutung für das Drama im modernen Orchester allein zurückgelassen, um in ihm, frei von aller Beengung, zu unermeßlich mannigfaltiger Kundgebung sich zu entwickeln.” This source will be referred to as OuD in future notes.

139 KdZ, 105.

140 Ibid., 148.
with the heart and poetry with the head. Through dance, music and poetry first became “coherent.” Yet dance was intimately connected to music through rhythm, representing the “abstraction of bodily movement” and the “bones” of music, where tones were the flesh. Wagner continued his anatomical analogy by designating the human voice the “living flesh of the tones” and words the bony, muscular rhythm of the human voice. Music, for Wagner, separated and connected dance and poetry as the sea did the continents. If Columbus was the first man to teach Europeans to sail the ocean and connect the world’s continents, then Beethoven was the hero who sailed the wide, shoreless sea of absolute music to its furthest corners.

Wagner praised folksongs for their unity of poetry and music. He found that those songs were unthinkable without either words or melody, and performers of them also tended to express their feelings through gestures and bodily movement. The folk performer became Wagner’s model of the figure in whom the three “sister arts” of dance, music, and poetry were united to produce a collective effect in which the expressive capability of each art could unfold to the greatest degree possible. Humans, for Wagner, had an inner and an outer self that was expressed through performance. The outer self appealed to the eye of the spectator, the inner self to the ear. Any art that did not communicate with the eye remained unsatisfying, and the complete artistic person only existed where eye and ear were mutually stimulated (sich gegenseitig seiner Erscheinung versichern).

The opera, for Wagner, supposedly united the three sister arts, though music had traditionally maintained a dominant role. As a result, opera singers had been constrained to leave dancing to professionals in ballet sequences, and also to restrict their dramatic gestures in order to preserve their voices. Even Gluck’s reforms, which reigned in the

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141 Ibid., 71. Carl Dahlhaus has written that the central category of Wagner’s aesthetics of the music drama was “realization” [Verwirklichung]. The realization of the poetic intention and the sensual nature of that realization were more important to Wagner than the poetic intention itself. Dance was the most powerful means of expressing this corporeality, hence Wagner’s glowing praise of the art. See: Carl Dahlhaus, Richard Wagners Musikdramen (Ditzingen: Reclam, 1996), 225. “Die zentrale Kategorie in Wagners Ästhetik des musikalischen Dramas ist Verwirklichung […] Entscheidend ist nicht die dichterische Absicht, die im Inneren eines Werkes verschlossene Bedeutung, sondern die Realisierung des Intendierten, die Sinnfälligkeit, mit der es erscheint. Der Tanz, die Darstellung des wirklichen, leibhaften Menschen, wurde von Wagner als realste aller Kunstarten gerühmt.”

142 KdZ, 74.

143 Ibid., 95.
vocal gymnastics of star performers to the advantage of dramatic integrity, were for Wagner “one-sided,” because they did not involve music’s sister arts to a great enough degree.

For Wagner, the people (Das Volk) were to be the Artist of the Future. He defined Das Volk in a rather vague sense as those who experienced a “common need.” In glorifying the people, Wagner criticized the modern artistic world, which had corrupted the original authentic art of the people. One example was the opera aria, which he viewed as an artificial offspring of the folk tune. Modern opera singers trained their voices to alter tunes, which had been detached from their folk contexts, through “endless decorations” and “flourishes of all sorts.” This adulteration of folk tunes, a “derision against all nature,” tickled the ears of the “idiotic operatic world.”

Wagner concluded Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft with the tale of Wieland the Blacksmith (Wieland der Schmiedt), a gifted artisan who was unjustly enslaved by a king named Neiding, whose name likely derived from the German word for jealousy. Neiding wanted Wieland to create wonderful metal objects, including weapons, silverware, and trinkets, for him alone. In order to keep the blacksmith from escaping his clutches, Neiding severed tendons in Wieland’s feet, since he needed only his hands to do his work. Wieland in his agony plotted vengeance against the king. In a state of greatest need (Not), a keyword for Wagner, the blacksmith crafted wings that allowed him to escape his imprisonment, kill the wicked king, and fly away. After concluding the tale, Wagner implored the people, who were once capable of creating such a fantastic story and who themselves were “this Wieland,” to craft their own wings and soar away (schwinge dich auf!)

This tale vividly concluded Wagner’s glorification of the people and polemic against greed. This folk tale spoke so eloquently to him that he wrote an extended dramatic setting of it, published in volume three of his Gesammelte Schriften (Leipzig, 1871). It is likely that his own grandson Wieland, who was so influential in shaping the postwar trajectory of the Bayreuth Festival, was named after this mythical figure. Like his namesake, Wagner’s grandson demonstrated great individualism and strength of will

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144 Ibid., 89.
in guiding the festival, with his brother Wolfgang, back to international prominence after the dark years of close association with the Nazis.

Oper und Drama

The specifics of Wagner’s ideal artwork of the future were not clearly laid out in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*. The essay was likely written as a brash call to arms addressed to a wide public, and Wagner probably hoped that it would appeal to a broad readership in order to generate badly-needed income for him in exile. In *Oper und Drama* Wagner sets out the proper relationship between music and text in much greater detail than in the earlier essay. It is much larger and denser in prose style and could hardly have been considered a likely best-seller.

Wagner developed his theories of the music drama in part as a reaction to the aesthetics of mid-nineteenth-century grand opera. The essay’s original title, “Das Wesen der modernen Oper: von einem ehemaligen Opernkomponisten” (“The Nature of Modern Opera: by a Former Opera Composer”), suggests that Wagner wanted to distance himself from current operatic styles in order to move towards a genre that would represent a synthesis of poetry and music, a genre inspired by the dramatic achievements of Beethoven in his symphonies. Wagner’s primary criticism of earlier opera centered around the relative importance of music and drama in the overall production. He stated emphatically in the introduction that in traditional opera a “means of expression” (music) was made the purpose of expression, while the true purpose of expression (the drama) was made into a means. This aligned him with Gluck’s reforms of the eighteenth century, when he railed against the virtuosic displays of operatic singers and argued that music should serve the needs of the drama. Wagner characterized music as the bearer (Gebärerin) of the “true, living melody,” and the poet as the generator (Erzeuger) of it. A vocal melody should be closely tied to the structure and meaning of the text, not simply a

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145 I am indebted to discussions with Paul Machlin for influencing my thoughts on this matter.
146 Klaus Kropfinger, afterword to OuD, 451.
pretty decoration for it. According to the composer, utter madness resulted from music becoming not only the bearer, but also the generator of this living melody.  

Wagner provided a clearer explanation of what he meant in a letter to Ferdinand Freiherr von Zigarer, Intendant of the Weimar Court Theater. “It is a big mistake,” he stated, “if we believe that the public must specifically understand music at the theater, in order to correctly receive the impression of a musical drama.” The music should contribute to making every moment of the drama comprehensible, so that while listening to a good (thus a “sensible”) opera, the music was “no longer thought about,” but was instead “only involuntarily received.” This would enable the listener to make the plot being presented onstage the sole focus of his or her attention.  

With the addition of a hidden orchestra pit at Bayreuth and dimming of the auditorium lights, Wagner hoped to achieve this goal. He expressed his conception of the composer-poet relationship in the creation of opera by means of a parable about two wanderers. A poet and musician set out in opposite directions around the globe, the poet moving across land, and the musician across the ocean. When they meet on the opposite side of the world from which they initially departed, they recount to each other what they experienced. At this point, their knowledge of the world is imperfect, and they continue on their way, the poet now crossing the ocean and using a boat made by the musician, and the musician crossing the land. When they meet again at their initial point of departure they are “as one,” because each of them “knows and feels what the other knows and feels.” The poet has become a musician, and the musician a poet. Both are “totally artistic men” (vollkommener

148 Ibid., 118. “Wie die lebendige Volksmelodie untrennbar vom lebendigen Volksgedichte ist, abgetrennt von diesem aber organisch getötet wird, so vermag der Organismus der Musik die wahre, lebendige Melodie nur zu gebären, wenn er vom Gedanken des Dichters befruchtet wird. Die Musik ist die Gebärerin, der Dichter der Erzeuger; und auf dem Gipfel des Wahnsinnes war die Musik daher angelangt, als sie nicht nur gebären, sondern auch zeugen wollte.”

149 Richard Wagner, Sämtliche Briefe, vol. 3, edited by Gertrud Strobel and Werner Wolf (Leipzig, Deutscher Verlag für Musik VEB, 1967), 397f. “Ein großer Irrthum ist es nun, wenn wir glauben, ein Publikum müsse im Theater speziell Musik verstehen, um den Eindruck eines musikalischen Drama’s richtig empfangen zu können […] Umgekehrt soll die Musik nur in höchster Fülle dazu beitragen, das Drama jeden Augenblick auf das Sprechendste klar und schnell verständlich zu machen, so daß beim Anhören einer guten (d.h. einer vernünftigen) Oper gewissermaßen an die Musik gar nicht mehr gedacht, sondern sie nur noch unwillkürlich empfunden werden, dagegen die vollste teilnahme für die dargestellte Handlung uns ganz und gar erfüllen soll.”
Wagner explained that the ocean represented harmony, and the ship built by the musician which carried the poet across the waves of harmony was the orchestra. Poet and musician were thus equally important to the creation of music drama and, in Wagner’s case, they were indeed the same person.

The ideas of wholeness and integration were essential to Wagner’s development of the music drama. Its creator should combine the talents of Beethoven in musical composition and Shakespeare in drama, both of whom were highly praised in *Oper und Drama*. Wagner viewed himself as such a figure. He also felt that his music dramas expressed the totality of the human being, encompassing body, thoughts, and feelings. The body was represented by stage gesture and movement, the thoughts by speech and the text, and feelings by the music. The system of leitmotifs (*Hauptmotive*) that Wagner developed also provided a sense of unity within this large organic music drama. The motives served not only to unify specific sections of the drama, but also created a form that extended over the whole drama as a binding element.

In presenting his view of musical drama as a unity of multiple arts, Wagner reacted to Lessing’s ideas as presented in *Laokoon*. He felt that Lessing was correct to define the strict boundaries between arts such as sculpture and poetry. The arts that were being thus defined, however, were merely descriptive arts (*Schilderei*). Lessing did not have in mind Wagner’s dramatic artwork presented to the senses, but rather the “meager deathly shadow” of such an art. This was merely “narrative, delineative” art that appeals not to the senses, but to the fancy (*Einbildungskraft*). Such an “artificial art” (*künstliche Kunst*) could only truly have an effect on the recipient when proper boundaries between the arts were observed. These arts only suggested things, whereas true representation in art could only be achieved by appealing to the “universality of human artistic receptivity” and to the “complete sensual organism,” not merely to the mind.

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150 OuD, 313.
151 See: Ibid., 362. “Die zu genau unterscheidbaren, und ihren Inhalt vollkommen verwirklichenden, melodischen Momenten gewordenen Hauptmotive der dramatischen Handlung bilden sich in ihrer beziehungsvollen, stets wohlbedingten—dem Reime ähnlichen—Wiederkehr zu einer einheitlichen künstlerischen Form, die sich nicht nur über engere Teile des Dramas, sondern über das ganze Drama selbst als ein bindender Zusammenhang erstreckt.”
152 Ibid., 127-28. “Als Lessing in seinem ‘Laokoon’ sich bemühte, die Grenzen der Dichtkunst und Malerei aufzusuchen und zu bezeichnen, hatte er die Dichtkunst im Auge, die selbst bereits nur noch Schilderei war. […] Überall da, wo Lessing der Dichtkunst Grenzen und Schranken zuweist, meint er nicht das unmittelbar zur Anschauung gebrachte, sinnlich dargestellte *dramatische Kunstwerk*, das in sich alle
Wagner acknowledged that the combination of the attributes of different arts, in the descriptive poetry and narrative painting criticized by Lessing, could only blur any descriptive intent. Different types of art had to remain pure in order to be understandable. When a musician attempted to paint, Wagner observed, he brought about neither music nor a painting. If he sought even to accompany the viewing of a painting with his music, he could rest assured that no one would make sense of either the painting or music. The union of the arts in the Gesamtkunstwerk would not mean something like “a Goethe novel being read aloud amongst statues in a painting gallery while a Beethoven symphony is also performed.”

True drama was a more organic fusion of the arts, not a collage of them. For Wagner, many of his contemporaries viewed drama as a branch of literature which was not read, but “memorized by various people, declaimed, accompanied with gestures, and lit with theater lamps.” Such drama was accompanied by music that bore as much relation to the dramatic purpose as music played to a static painting might. For Wagner, this type of drama bore as much relation to true drama as a piano did to an orchestra.
Bayreuth and the Gesamtkunstwerk

In order to completely realize his dream of a total work of art, Wagner needed the proper performance space. The Bayreuth Festspielhaus, opened in 1876 for the first complete staging of the Ring tetralogy, represented his vision of the ideal performance venue and the proper relationship between spectators and the stage. Wagner was among the first to call for a darkened hall during opera performances, and the seating layout of the main auditorium was inspired by the Greek amphitheater, with rows of seats unbroken by aisles, which gave the spectators a broad view of the enormous stage. This plan had far-reaching influence. These two innovations directed the focus of spectators to the stage, not to one another. In addition, the orchestra pit was sunk below the stage, which not only created a unique acoustic environment in which the sound emerged seemingly from the Earth itself, but also allowed the audience to focus entirely on the stage action rather than on the orchestra.

In the preface to the 1863 edition of the Ring libretto Wagner stressed the importance of hiding the orchestra. This invisibility was to be effected by an “architectural illusion quite feasible with an amphitheatric plan of auditorium.” The “mechanical movements” of the musicians and the conductor made those who attended opera performances at standard theaters “unwilling” witnesses of “technical evolutions which should be almost as carefully concealed” as the “cords, ropes, laths and scaffoldings of the stage decorations” which destroyed “any sense of illusion if glimpsed from the wings.” This observation closely resembled that of Goethe in Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. There the protagonist stated that he couldn’t live without music but adamantly wished not to see the singers. Music in the theater served only the eye and accompanied the “movements, not the sentiments.” True music was “only for the ear.”

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156 Evan Baker observes that the sunken Bayreuth pit is still unique today and that, although figures such as Karl Friedrich Schinkel (1818) and Cesare della Chiesa di Benevello (1841) had earlier suggested lowering the orchestra pit, only Wagner put this idea into practice. See: Baker (1998), 263.

and whosoever sang for him should “remain hidden from view” without his or her form captivating or confusing him. Meister also wanted the orchestra hidden from view at instrumental concerts, because he often became “so very distracted and confused” by the “mechanical efforts” and “temporary, always strange expressions” of the instrumentalists. Because of this, Meister used to listen to music only with closed eyes, in order to “concentrate his entire being on the individual pure delight of the ear.”

The austerity of Bayreuth, which included a chandelier-less ceiling, a relative lack of luxurious private boxes, and hard wooden seats, reflected Wagner’s opinions on architecture as expressed in Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft. There, he sharply criticized Asian architecture for its “luxury” and the “monstrous, spiritually-barren and sense-confounding” palaces of “Asian despots.” He compared Asian architecture to the “lovely calm and noble charm” of Greek temples, in which we might once again recognize nature “spiritualized through the breath of human art.” The theater, for him, was the “temple of the gods,” expanded to become a “communal locale of the greatest human art.”

Architecture had no higher purpose than to create the “spatial environment” for a cooperative of artists who “depict themselves” (sich durch sich selbst darstellend), a necessity for the manifestation of the human artwork.

The ideal theater was to be governed only by the needs of art, even in the “tiniest detail.” An environment had to be created in which the audience members could be

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158 Reprinted in Hedwig Walwei-Wiegelmann, ed., Goethes Gedanken über Musik (Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1985), 69. “Er konnte nicht ohne Musik, besonders nicht ohne Gesang leben, und hatte dabei die Eigenheit, daß er die Sänger nicht sehen wollte. Er pflegte zu sagen: Das Theater verwöhnt uns gar zu sehr, die Musik dient dort nur gleichsam dem Auge, sie begleitet die Bewegungen, nicht die Empfindungen. […] die wahre Musik ist allein fürs Ohr; eine schöne Stimme ist das allgemeinste, was sich denken läßt, und indem das eingeschränkte Individuum, das sie hervorbringt, sich vors Auge stellt, zerstört er den reinen Effekt jener Allgemeinheit. […] wer mir singt, soll unsichtbar sein; seine Gestalt soll mich nicht bestechen oder irre machen. […] Ebenso wollte er auch bei Instrumentalmusiken die Orchester soviel als möglich versteckt haben, weil man durch die mechanischen Bemühungen und durch die notdürftigen, immer seltsamen Gebäuden der Instrumentenspieler so sehr zerstreut und verwirrt werde. Er pflegte daher eine Musik nicht anders als mit zugeschlossenen Augen anzuhören, um sein ganzes Dasein auf den einzigen reinen Genuß des Ohrs zu konzentrieren.”


160 Ibid., 150. “Die Architektur kann keine höhere Absicht haben, als einer Genossenschaft künstlerisch sich durch sich selbst darstellender Menschen die räumliche Umgebung zu schaffen, die dem menschlichen Kunstwerke zu seiner Kundgebung nothwendig ist.”
transported “completely onto the stage through watching and listening” and the actor could become a true artist by “merg[ing] with the public.” The public would then be able to “live and breathe only in the work of art,” thinking it to be “life itself” and the stage scene to be the world.

**Mann on the Gesamtkunstwerk**

For the influential German writer Thomas Mann (1875-1955), Wagner was a significant representative of German art and a figure who had to be grappled with in charting the course of German history in the twentieth century. Mann characterized the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk as “something peculiarly dilettantish” (*etwas eigentümlich Dilettantisches*), and the notion of the individual arts descending “from the decay of an originally theatrical unity” as “a crazy notion” (*ein starkes Stück*). Wagner argued for a reform of opera in his writings, but some critics asserted that his music dramas failed to realize his theoretical ideals. For all his technical innovations in opera production manifested at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the costumes and stage scenery approved by Wagner during his lifetime appeared antiquated by the end of the century.

Indeed, the visual elements of Wagner’s stage productions at Bayreuth, and those directed by his widow Cosima after his death, often drew heavy criticism. Although the complexity and sensuousness of Wagner’s music, his sophisticated use of the Leitmotiv and chromatic harmony in *Tristan und Isolde*, for example, still enraptured audiences at the turn of the century, the visual designs likely appeared old-fashioned even at the time.

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161 Ibid., 151. “In einem vollkommenen Theatergebäude giebt bis auf die kleinsten Einzelheiten nur das Bedürfnis der Kunst Maaß und Gesetz. Dieß Bedürfniß ist ein doppeltes, das des Gebens und des Empfangens [...] denn das Verlangen des gemeinsamen Zuschauers ist eben das Verlangen nach dem Kunstwerk, zu dessen Erfassen er durch Alles, was sein Auge berührt, bestimmt werden muß. So versetzt er durch Schauen und Hören sich gänzlich auf die Bühne; der Darsteller ist Künstler nur durch volles Aufgehen in das Publikum. Alles, was auf der Bühne athmet und sich bewegt, athmet und bewegt sich durch ausdrucksvolles Verlangen nach Mittheilung.”

162 Ibid., 152.

163 Thomas Mann, *Wagner und unsere Zeit: Aufsätze, Betrachtungen, Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1963), 73-74. Mann’s negative response to many of Wagner’s ideas likely stemmed from the composer’s attacks against the “Literaturdrama,” which he viewed as stiff and old-fashioned. Mann viewed himself as a “Literatur-Dichter” and remarked that “when Wagner speaks of ‘Literatur-Lyrik’ or of epic, which he calls the ‘thirsty shadow of death, etc.,’ one would like to fly off the walls [*an den Wänden hochgehen*].” See: Kropfinger, afterword to OuD, 509 and Paul Scherrer and Hans Wysling, eds., *Quellenkritische Studien zum Werk Thomas Manns* (Bern: Francke, 1967), 155.
of the first performances. The sets and costumes were extremely naturalistic, presenting images that have become clichés in operatic history, such as the Valkyries in winged helmets and Siegfried in his animal-pelt coat. Mann, writing in 1908, however, felt that anyone who sought to simplify the visual elements of Wagner productions was misguided. This included theater reformers of the *fin-de-siècle*, such as Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig. Mann wrote that:

> In all seriousness, one cannot strive to create a new stage scene applicable to Wagner’s works. Simple Wagner performances, which are attempted here and there, are against the master’s intentions, which cannot be denied. Wagner, who loved splendor no less than his young king [Ludwig II of Bavaria], had the scenic taste of grand opera; his work requires massive effects and the display of magnificence, and whoever takes this away, distorts the work. A danger for his work lies, perhaps, in this fact. His sensuality, his opulence, his refusal to move away from Grand Opera will perhaps take its revenge. This man of the Baroque, the decorator, the Bernini in him will perhaps no longer be able to withstand the European taste. As his own Apostle, he always pronounced the grandest of words – and always meant something much less grand. He said ‘Drama!’ and meant theater. He said ‘Art!’ and wanted witchcraft. That will have its revenge. His enormous body of work will perhaps become antiquated and historic earlier than one might nowadays dream. In the moment that the theater proceeds to deny witchcraft and to become something purer and stricter, something more like art – in this moment Wagner’s work will already be in danger.\(^{164}\)

Mann suggested that Wagner did not put into practice what he advocated in his writings regarding the Gesamtkunstwerk. Wagner would likely have scoffed at the notion that he did not really move away from the style of Grand Opera, though there was some truth to the assertion. Although the composer incorporated many detailed instructions about stage design and character movement into his published scores, there was still much room left to future visual artists to stamp their own personalities upon new productions.

Mann went so far as to say that Wagner had no relationship at all with the visual

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\(^{164}\) From *Versuch über das Theater* (1908). Reproduced in *Im Schatten Wagners: Thomas Mann über Richard Wagner*, ed. Hans R. Vaget (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005), 28. Theater reformers at the *fin-de-siècle*, such as Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, generally sought to guide Wagner productions away from the heavy naturalism and lavishness of the Hans Makart and Bayreuth styles towards something leaner and more abstract. Roller’s visual style, characterized by a sensual and striking use of light and essential stage props, would fall somewhere between Makart and Appia along this continuum.
arts and made reference to an 1860 letter written to Mathilde Wesendonk.\footnote{Mann, in \textit{Fragmente zu “Geist und Kunst.”} Reproduced in Mann-Vaget, 32.} Here, Wagner told her that his eye was not insatiable, but that it seemed to him as if that organ was not a sufficient means by which he might perceive the world (\textit{es scheint aber, dass es mir als Sinn der Wahrnehmung der Welt nicht genügt}). His verdict was that he was “too decidedly an Ohrenmensch.” Whenever he found himself in a state of “inner unease,” then “no picture” or “plastic work of art” was able to move him, much like a “toy of no substance.” Wagner contrasted himself with Goethe, who was “a complete and perfect Augenmensch.”\footnote{Richard Wagner, \textit{Richard Wagner an Mathilde Wesendonk: Tagebuchblätter und Briefe (1853-1871)}, ed. Dr. Wolfgang Golther (Berlin: Alexander Duncker, 1904), 203.} Wagner appears to have recognized the need for an accomplished stage designer to create an appropriate counterpart to his music. Whether such a visual style might encompass more than the naturalism of the productions he oversaw in his lifetime is not clear.

\textit{Tristan und Isolde} as a Gesamtkunstwerk? The Influence of Schopenhauer’s Philosophy

Mann argued that the whole notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk was theoretical nonsense. Even if Wagner’s theories were sound, one might still raise the question of whether \textit{Tristan und Isolde} should be considered an exemplar at all. That work was conceived while under the spell of Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy, and Wagner developed his theory of the total work of art before discovering \textit{Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung}. Compared to the Ring operas or \textit{Parsifal}, \textit{Tristan} contains far less stage action and fewer dramatic scene changes that might challenge the skills of the lighting designer and stage director. This is, after all, a work focused on the inner world of the protagonists. Although there is the dramatic change from night to dawn in Act II, this transition is not as complex as the \textit{Verwandlung} scenes in \textit{Parsifal} or the descent into and emergence from Nibelheim in \textit{Das Rheingold}.

If we consider the essential element of the Gesamtkunstwerk to be the fusion of many arts into one unified spectacle, then the more complex the staging of a work, the more closely it would resemble this ideal, since more collaborators would be involved in
crafting the total spectacle. Wagner repeatedly stressed the importance of a communal partnership of artists, but there is no reason why a work that downplays stage action, such as *Tristan*, should be any less of a Gesamtkunstwerk. The role of the stage designer is no less important in a more static work, though that of the choreographer might well be. Ultimately, the influence of Schopenhauer altered Wagner’s thinking about operatic composition in a manner that might have undercut his drive towards a combination of the arts on equal terms.

In *My Life*, Wagner described his first encounter with Schopenhauer’s *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* through his friend Georg Herwegh, who introduced him to the book in 1854. Wagner recalled his lifelong interest in philosophy and his inability to retain interest in any particular philosopher or school of thought for very long. Schopenhauer’s masterwork, however, had a profound effect on him. He was captivated by the “great clarity and manly precision” with which Schopenhauer treated the “most abstruse metaphysical problems” throughout the work.¹⁶⁷The overriding pessimism of the philosophy, especially the stress placed upon self-abnegation that Schopenhauer had absorbed from his study of Buddhism, was initially an obstacle for Wagner. He did not want to abandon the “‘cheerful’ Greek view of the world” that had guided him in developing his artwork of the future. Yet he came to realize that the resignation at the heart of this philosophy was already a part of his conception of the Ring. Only after studying Schopenhauer did he fully understand the character of Wotan that he had developed, especially the resignation of Wotan as the Wanderer in *Siegfried*. He was now able to examine rationally things he had previously “grasped only instinctively,” and he credited Schopenhauer as a major influence on all his subsequent writings about “artistic matters of special interest” to him.¹⁶⁸

The philosopher’s views on music were especially attractive to the composer. Schopenhauer stated in Part I, Book 3 of his masterwork that music was different from the other arts. These were the image of the “ideas,” comparable to Kant’s phenomena and the objects of the visible world in Plato’s philosophy. Music, however, was the “direct objectification and image” of the Will itself, comparable to the unseen realm of Kant’s

¹⁶⁷ *ML*, 509.
¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 509-10.
noumena and Plato’s ideal forms. It was for this reason that the effect of music was “so much more powerful and vivid” than that of the other arts. These spoke “only of the shadow,” whereas music spoke of the “essence.”¹⁶⁹ Music also expressed not individual and specific instances of emotions such as joy, sadness, or pain, but instead joy, sadness, or pain themselves “in abstracto.”¹⁷⁰ This view of music as an art innately more capable of expressing the essence of any particular idea resonated with Wagner the composer. In Oper und Drama he stated that the orchestra had the ability to “enunciate the ineffable” (das Vermögen der Kundgebung des Unaussprechlichen; p. 329). In On Franz Liszt’s Symphonic Poems (1857), written just a few years after his first exposure to Schopenhauer, Wagner seemed to fundamentally change his stance on the relative importance of the arts in musical drama. He wrote that music, the “most glorious, incomparable, autonomous, and peculiar” of the arts can never, “regardless of whatever it might be combined with,” cease to be the “highest and most redemptive art.”¹⁷¹

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This overview of Wagner’s statements about the Gesamtkunstwerk in his published essays reveals several significant points. For one, Wagner did not use the term “Gesamtkunstwerk” repeatedly in the essays, although he equated this concept with his “music drama” and “artwork of the future.” Secondly, the socialist and anarchist influences of his Dresden years can be perceived clearly in these writings. The Gesamtkunstwerk is inherently utopian, and Wagner may have been moved to argue...

¹⁶⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, Band I (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1987), 370. “Die Musik ist nämlich eine so unmittelbare Objektivation und Abbild des ganzen Willens, wie die Welt selbst es ist, ja wie die Ideen es sind […] Die Musik ist also keineswegs, gleich den andern Künsten, das Abbild der Ideen; sondern Abbild des Willens selbst, dessen Objektität auch die Ideen sind: deshalb eben ist die Wirkung der Musik so sehr viel mächtiger und eindringlicher, als die der andern Künste: denn diese reden nur vom Schatten, sie aber vom Wesen.”

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 375-6. “Die Musik ist nämlich eine so unmittelbare Objektivation und Abbild des ganzen Willens, wie die Welt selbst es ist, ja wie die Ideen es sind […] Die Musik ist also keineswegs, gleich den andern Künsten, das Abbild der Ideen; sondern Abbild des Willens selbst, dessen Objektität auch die Ideen sind: deshalb eben ist die Wirkung der Musik so sehr viel mächtiger und eindringlicher, als die der andern Künste: denn diese reden nur vom Schatten, sie aber vom Wesen.”

passionately for it because of his bitter disappointment at the failed revolutions of 1848 and his hopes for a better future. It is significant that Wagner stressed the ethical element of his ideal art (das gemeinsame Kunstwerk) in his writings. The collective work of art was to be the product and symbol of the German people. The aesthetic side of his conception (Gesamtkunstwerk), however, was what most people focused on. We now associate him with art as multimedia spectacle rather than art as cultural product. Finally, the role of music in relation to the other arts in his conception of the music drama became more prominent after reading Schopenhauer, who felt that music was the art best capable of expressing the Will to Live. As a work conceived in the wake of his first experience with this philosopher, Tristan und Isolde does not appear to be the best exemplar of the Gesamtkunstwerk. The music powerfully expresses the inner state of the protagonists to a greater degree than any other art likely could. In spite of this, the 1903 Vienna Court Opera production of the opera under Mahler’s direction and with Roller’s stage designs has often been considered a true realization of Wagner’s synthetic ideals, notably by contemporary critics. We next turn to Mahler and Roller and their collaboration in Vienna.
CHAPTER 3

MAHLER’S ENGAGEMENT WITH WAGNER’S MUSIC AND GESAMTKUNSTWERK IDEAL

The music of Richard Wagner formed an essential part of Gustav Mahler’s repertory as a conductor, and some of the latter’s greatest successes on the podium involved the former’s works. Mahler’s interest in the German’s ideas and music developed during his studies at the Conservatory in Vienna. After his first conductorial posts in small provincial theaters, Mahler developed his skills as a Wagnerian in Leipzig, Budapest, and Hamburg, before becoming director of the Viennese Court Opera in 1897. Contemporaries paint a picture of him an obsessive leader who strove always for the utmost precision and fidelity to the work being performed. Mahler also instituted orchestral and organizational reforms, primarily in Budapest and Vienna, that revealed an artistic seriousness and commitment to first-rate performances reminiscent of Wagner’s ideals. The latter had his own opera house built in a small Bavarian town in order to present his works to the public on his own terms. Mahler could never have transformed the Vienna Court Opera into the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, but he did everything within his power to improve all facets of operatic productions there, from lowering the orchestra pit, to improving overall discipline amongst his musicians, to darkening the hall and forbidding late-comers admittance until appropriate pauses in the music and stage action.

Although it was a powerful new production of Die Walküre that made Mahler’s name in Budapest, his legacy as an innovative conductor and director in Vienna rests largely upon the groundbreaking 1903 production of Tristan und Isolde at the Court Opera. The success of that production was a result of Mahler’s direction and conducting, as well as the magnificent stage design of the recently-hired Secession artist Alfred Roller, and the magisterial performance of Anna von Mildenburg as Isolde. Roller and Mildenburg were two of Mahler’s closest allies in his quest for powerful and earnest Wagner performances in a city known for the light-hearted waltzes of the Strauss family and a certain relaxed attitude towards life. He was interested in more than the musical aspects of opera, as his hiring of Mildenburg and Roller indicates. Both were masters of
their respective crafts and strong-willed as well. A vocal score of *Tristan* owned by Mildenburg and now in the Austrian National Library suggests that she learned much about the personification of Isolde onstage from Mahler. The director’s correspondence with Roller also reveals someone with more than a passing interest in his stage designer’s ideas. Before examining more closely Mahler’s relationships with Mildenburg and Roller, an overview of his goals as a conductor-director, the reforms he instituted, and his engagement with Wagner’s works between 1886 and 1903 will reveal the depth of his commitment to bringing first-rate productions before the public eye and ear.

Mahler began studies at the Vienna Conservatory in 1875. His major focus was initially piano, which he studied with Professor Julius Epstein (1832-1926). Henry-Louis de La Grange credited Epstein with introducing Mahler to the music of composers such as Mozart, Schubert, and Brahms, thus providing a “salutary counterbalance” to Mahler’s fervent “Wagnerianism.” Among Mahler’s fellow students at the conservatory was Felix Mottl (1856-1911), an aspiring conductor who in 1872 at the age of sixteen founded the Vienna Wagner Society. Along with his friends Anton Krisper and Rudolf Krzyzanowski, Mahler joined the society in 1877. The Wagner Society was dominated by students from the University and the Conservatory who met to sing music from Wagner’s operas and discuss his ideas. De La Grange speculated that Mahler probably met musicologist Guido Adler for the first time at a meeting of the society, where many of the members experimented with vegetarianism, in emulation of Wagner. He also surmised that Mahler’s Wagnerism originated in his pre-conservatory years, since Epstein labeled some of his early piano works “Wagnerian.” Mahler and many of his fellow conservatory students would have idolized Wagner, both for his musical values and his lifestyle choices.

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173 De La Grange cited Epstein’s reminiscence of Mahler published in the *Neues Wiener Journal* on May 19, 1911, shortly after the great composer’s death. Bernhard Mahler had brought his son to play for Epstein in hopes of gaining admittance to the Vienna Conservatory. Mahler first played some of his own compositions, which Epstein found to be Wagnerian. De La Grange added that an early “melodic fragment” of Mahler’s completely justified Epstein’s judgment. See: Ibid., 30. Viennese Wagnerians tended to align themselves with the supporters of Anton Bruckner, himself a Wagner devotee. These progressives formed an artistic camp opposite the supporters of Johannes Brahms and critic Eduard Hanslick, who represented conservatism in music to them. For de La Grange, Mahler’s modern tendencies would have put him under “the spell of Wagner’s art” and drawn him to the Bruckner faction. See: Ibid., 44.
Wagner visited Vienna during the Winter of 1875-1876 to attend performances of his works that were being conducted by Hans Richter at the Court Opera. Mahler’s friend and fellow Wagnerite Hugo Wolf spoke with Wagner on several occasions during his visit, but Mahler was shyer and did not engage the famous composer in conversation.\(^{174}\)

Bruno Walter, Mahler’s longtime friend and assistant in Hamburg and Vienna, illuminated his mentor’s attitude towards Wagner in his 1957 book *Gustav Mahler: Ein Porträt*. From their conversations and interactions in Hamburg, Walter recalled his friend’s “well-reasoned Wagnerism” which helped him deepen his own “Wagner obsession.” Mahler was a “committed Wagnerite” who remained one “until his death.”\(^{175}\)

Wagner’s music formed an essential part of Mahler’s conducting repertoire beginning with his activity as Kapellmeister at the Leipzig Neues Stadttheater (1886-1888). The reforms that Mahler instituted, or attempted to institute, in Leipzig, Budapest, Hamburg, and Vienna reflected his familiarity with Wagner’s theories and performance practice at Bayreuth. They also signaled his wish to create model performances requiring the utmost effort from everyone involved, a recurring theme in depictions of his professional goals.

**Mahler’s Work in Leipzig, Budapest, and Hamburg**

In a recent article on Mahler’s work in Hamburg, musicologist Sabine Siemon noted that Mahler enhanced his reputation as a Wagnerian in Leipzig, where he added works such as *Lohengrin*, *Rienzi*, *Der fliegende Holländer* and *Siegfried* to his repertoire.\(^{176}\) Indeed, Mahler’s first conducting post in which he had an expert ensemble at his disposal was at the Leipzig Neues Stadttheater, which he joined in 1886. There he was subordinate to Arthur Nikisch, which was a source of tension between the two.

Nikisch, like Mahler, had studied conducting at the Vienna Conservatory. The Hungarian

\(^{174}\) Mahler’s and his friends’ passion for Wagner’s music emerged in a humorous story he related to Alma. According to her, Mahler, Wolf, and Krzyzanowski were once evicted from a room they shared in Vienna for making too much noise. They were evidently singing the trio of Gunther, Brünnhilde, and Hagen from Act II of *Die Götterdämmerung* around the piano when their landlady showed up and forced them to leave with their belongings. One can only imagine the racket that they produced. See: Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, translated by Basil Creighton (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), 63-64.


was five years older than Mahler and had been employed in Leipzig since 1878. He had received numerous honors for conducting and violin while at the Conservatory, and Mahler would have found him a natural rival.

Mahler’s big break occurred in February 1887, when Nikisch fell ill during preparations for a new *Ring* cycle in Leipzig. Director Max Staegemann had entrusted all the productions to Nikisch, which greatly irritated Mahler. De La Grange observed that Mahler took advantage of his rival’s illness to “put into practice some of his theories about Wagnerian performance.” These included the elimination of Fricka’s chariot and rams in *Die Walküre* in favor of greater abstraction, the lowering of the orchestra pit as in Bayreuth, and the procurement of some Wagner (tenor) tubas to replace the trombones that had been used for certain passages previously. The *Siegfried* premiere on May 13, 1887 was Mahler’s greatest triumph in Leipzig. Even reviewers such as Martin Krause, who had often been highly critical of Mahler’s work, were won over by this new production. Krause praised the clarity of performance, as well as Mahler’s choice of tempos and the excellent diction of the singers.

Although Mahler began to build his reputation as a Wagnerian while in Leipzig, his relationship with the Bayreuth leadership was somewhat problematic. Cosima Wagner became director of the Bayreuth festivals after her husband’s death in 1883. Mahler first met her six months after the *Siegfried* premiere in Leipzig, in November 1887 when she visited the city. The Wagner family was quite conservative in production style, closely following productions Wagner himself had overseen. We do not know exactly how Cosima reacted to Mahler’s Leipzig Wagner performances, but she never invited him to conduct at Bayreuth, whether for racial reasons or a disagreement over interpretive style. Although his path to conducting at the center of the Wagnerian universe was blocked, Mahler’s destiny in crafting model productions of the master’s works lay elsewhere.

In spite of Mahler’s success with the *Ring* in Leipzig, Director Staegemann returned control to Nikisch upon his recovery. This contributed to Mahler’s decision to ask to be released from his contract. He subsequently assumed the conducting and

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177 De La Grange (1973), 158.
178 See: Ibid., 161.
directorial posts at the Royal Hungarian Opera in Budapest (1888-1891) and Hamburg State Theater (1891-1897) before becoming director of the Vienna Court Opera in 1897. These positions allowed him to gain valuable experience conducting opera, while he exerted more influence over non-musical aspects of performance than he had been able to in the past. Mahler also had to deal with bureaucratic matters, which would prepare him for life at the Viennese Court.

Budapest

Mahler became director of the Royal Hungarian Opera in Autumn 1888. The institution had been founded in 1884 and was undergoing artistic and financial difficulties when Mahler arrived. He was only twenty-eight at the time and hardly an ideal candidate for the position. As Zoltan Roman observed, Mahler’s disadvantages included his age, race and religion, and lack of ability to speak Hungarian. In spite of this, he improved the financial condition and performance quality of the Hungarian Opera in his three years as director.

The Royal Hungarian Opera was a leading cultural institution in a country where national pride was a major issue because of Habsburg control. Commissioner Ferenc Beniczky instituted a policy at the beginning of the 1888-1889 season mandating Hungarian as the only language to be sung at the opera, with exceptions made only for guest artists. Mahler was committed to building a strong national opera with native talent rather than foreign artists. He even pledged to learn Hungarian, though without much success. Mahler and Beniczky sought to transform the institution into a true Hungarian musical theater by drawing on the Academy of Music as a source of vocal talent, eliminating or greatly reducing the number of guest performances by foreign singers, and by instilling a sense of discipline and hard work that had previously been lacking. By requiring eighty rehearsals for the premiere of Die Walküre during his second season in Budapest, Mahler demonstrated his commitment to excellence through hard work. This production was a great success and won Mahler admiration and respect in that city.

180 Ibid., 356-58.
Ede Ujházy, a celebrated actor at the Hungarian National Theatre, was appointed as Mahler’s assistant and helped the singers with their Hungarian pronunciation. His appointment was just one example of the company’s commitment to transforming the Royal Opera into a truly Hungarian institution. Roman observed that such personnel decisions had a significance that transcended mere Hungarianization. These moves highlighted for him how, “from the very beginning of his first position of overall control, Mahler laid equal weight on all facets of a production.” The breadth of control given to Mahler in Budapest allowed him to hone his organizational and directorial skills, which prepared him for his work in Vienna.

Prior to Mahler’s appointment, programming at the Royal Hungarian Opera tended to favor French and Italian operas often of average quality. Hungarian audiences also enjoyed ballet to a much greater degree than did Mahler. His tastes therefore did not quite align with that of his public. Throughout his tenure he was compelled to program ballets and mediocre works in several different languages to please audiences, although he also introduced new works and crafted impressive productions of masterpieces such as Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Don Giovanni, and Le Nozze di Figaro. He instituted a number of innovations for a production of Lohengrin, which were enumerated in the Budapester Tagblatt (14-15 September 1889): an “intermediary curtain (Zwischenvorhang) in the Bayreuth style,” a “sunken orchestra,” and “new decorations.” These innovations were met with “lively interest” from the crowd in attendance at the dress rehearsal. Mahler hoped to stage all four of the Ring operas in Budapest, but was only able to perform the first two before difficulties with superiors hastened his departure.

Mahler attempted to “Wagnerize” the Royal Hungarian Opera, and his aims were linked with the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal by several critics who witnessed his work in Budapest. In Meister des Taktstocks Carl Krebs made the connection clear when he stated that as an opera conductor Mahler “worried not only about the music, but about the entire

181 Ibid., 362.
183 Beniczky retired and was replaced by Count Géza Zichy in January 1891. Zichy was more strongly nationalist than his predecessor, and was given directorial control, choice of repertoire, and veto power over any of Mahler’s decisions. See: De La Grange (1973), 222-23.
work, about decorations, costumes, and the progression of the play, so that a totality emerged from one spirit [aus einem Geist aufwuchs] and came alive, like what one witnessed earlier with Carl Maria von Weber and Richard Wagner.” Friedrich Herzfeld, in *Magie des Taktstocks* (Berlin, 1953), noted that Mahler was the “best Wagner disciple,” the one who understood the composer most deeply. No other conductor of Mahler’s time, for Herzfeld, possessed “so magnificent a conception of the Gesamtkunstwerk.”

Mahler’s years in Budapest prepared him for greater challenges in Hamburg and Vienna. He had been given a great deal of control over the rebuilding of the Royal Hungarian Opera, and his preference for the works of Wagner and Mozart, in spite of audience taste, foreshadowed his programming at the Vienna Court Opera. He also faced several personal tragedies that would in some way prepare him for the death of his daughter during the Vienna years. Both his parents and his sister Leopoldine died while he was director in Budapest. Mahler was now officially the head of the family and had to balance caring for his siblings with his compositional and conducting work. In Hamburg he had less control over stage matters than in Budapest, but a greater ensemble of singers was placed at his disposal. There he also met the artists Bruno Walter and Anna von Mildenburg who became close friends and artistic allies for the rest of his life. These two helped preserve Mahler’s memory after his death in 1911.

**Hamburg**

In 1891, at the age of thirty, Mahler became Erster Kapellmeister of the Hamburg Stadttheater. Director Bernhard Pollini (1838-1897) had offered Mahler a contract as early as the 1886-1887 season, which Mahler declined in order to take the position in Budapest. Interpretations of Wagnerian operas had become the core of Mahler’s conducting activities, and the Hamburg Theater was an ideal place for a Wagner enthusiast. Under Pollini’s direction the number of Wagner performances steadily increased from year to year. He introduced an annual cycle of Wagner performances at

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186 See: Siemon, 54.
the Stadttheater in 1880, which was held in May at the end of each season. Ten works were regularly performed during these festivals: *Rienzi, Der fliegende Holländer, Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Tristan und Isolde, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and the complete *Ring des Nibelungen*. Siemon characterized Hamburg as “foremost among the leading opera houses at the end of the nineteenth century” for the number of Wagner performances. Director and Kapellmeister were therefore united in their commitment to Wagner’s works.

Although the favored repertoire in Hamburg was more to Mahler’s liking, he had less control over the entire production of operas in his new position than he’d enjoyed in Budapest. As Siemon observed, in Hamburg he was “no longer responsible for an entire opera house,” but “only for orchestra, chorus, and the ensemble of singers.” The staging of operas was handled by lead stage director Franz Bittong (1842-1904); a “stage and costume designer in a modern sense” was not listed on playbills at that time. Bittong was a former actor who caused countless difficulties for Mahler. In a letter to critic Ferdinand Pfohl, Mahler complained of the “dead weight” of Bittong’s inertia, with which he opposed all of Mahler’s ideas.

In contrast, Mahler had an outstanding ensemble of singers at his disposal, thanks to Pollini’s emphasis on what Siemon termed a “profit-making star-system.” The director was an expert judge of fine voices, and he actively sought vocalists who would attract the largest audiences possible. He placed less emphasis on other aspects of the production, such as sets, decorations, and costumes. Henry-Louis de La Grange depicted Pollini as a man “not entirely devoid of artistic sense,” but nonetheless one who “considered art and artists mainly as merchandise.” According to Siemon, sets and costumes were “rarely adequate” and were often reused. Leadership in directing productions was “thoroughly inadequate.” De La Grange noted that Pollini often had

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187 Ibid., 73. For the 1890-1891 season, Siemon gives the following numbers of Wagner performances: Hamburg (64), Berlin (50), Dresden (49), Leipzig (38), Munich (34), Vienna (32) and Frankfurt am Main (32).
188 Ibid., 55.
189 See: De La Grange (1973), 308-09.
190 Siemon, 62. The vocal ensemble in Hamburg included dramatic soprano Katharina Klafsky and heldentenor Max Alvary. Mahler had not only a group of fine voices at his disposal, but singers who also specialized in Wagnerian roles.
191 De La Grange (1973), 229.
singers wear “improvised costumes” rather than seek a distinct visual style for each production. Old sets were frequently used for new productions, one example being the employment of Egyptian décors from Die Zauberflöte to “evoke the splendors of Solomon’s court in Goldmark’s Die Königin von Saba.”

Mahler tried to implement his ideas regarding artistic unity through extensive rehearsing of the orchestra. The number of rehearsals with individual singers was increased, during which Mahler sought, according to Siemon, to make clear “the emotional content specified by the music,” with the hope of progressing towards a “better scenic realization.” He also pursued artistic integrity by performing works such as Tristan und Isolde and Die Meistersinger without cuts, which was unusual at that time. He would continue this practice in Vienna. These works had traditionally been cut because of their length, particularly passages of extensive dialogue. Portions of the Act II dialogue between the lovers in Tristan und Isolde, where they delve into the metaphysics of their relationship to the world, were a particular target for cuts. Mahler aimed to present Wagner’s works the way that their creator had conceived them.

Mahler’s desire for sets and costumes well suited to the musico-dramatic nature of individual operas and for fine singing actors, often conflicted with Pollini’s narrower focus on beautiful voices and profitability. Mahler nevertheless strove for the utmost perfection in all aspects of a stage production, as in earlier conducting posts, and drove his musicians relentlessly towards that goal. This practice was not universally accepted by the personnel at the theater. As he related to his sister Justine in an August 1891 letter:

I can tell you that the orchestra really likes me, which was never previously the case. It’s so much more pleasant than in Budapest! That applies to the chorus too, only the singers are of mixed opinions: the majority of them detest me, but the minority, among them the most important, are on my side.

Those singers with whom he developed a productive and respectful relationship included bass-baritone Leopold Demuth, soprano Anna von Mildenburg, soprano Bertha Foerster-Lauterer, and tenor Wilhelm (Willy) Birrenkoven. Mahler worked so well with Demuth, Foerster-Lauterer, and Mildenburg that he summoned them to Vienna after being

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192 Ibid., 309.
193 Siemon, 73-74.
194 See: Ibid., 59.
appointed at the Court Opera there. He also wanted Birrenkoven to join him, but the tenor chose to remain in Hamburg.

In her memoirs contralto Ernestine Schumann-Heink provided a glimpse of Mahler and his reception during the Hamburg years. She spoke of him as a great conductor, but also one of the most-hated because of the “fights and spites” his perfectionism caused wherever he went. Yet he was still the “most lovable and kindest creature” imaginable—except while conducting. As soon as he grasped the baton, he became a “despot,” though an idealistic one. She credited Mahler with helping her achieve success in interpreting Wagner. “He would sit and bang and bang on one note at rehearsals,” she recalled, “but he would have it perfect.”

De La Grange has noted that late-nineteenth-century conductors often emphasized feeling above all else. While singers tended to accelerate the tempo or hold on to certain notes during the excitement of performance, Mahler demanded an “almost instrumental precision” from them. The scores of his own works are filled with specific instructions for instrumentalists, including subtle dynamic effects, articulation marks, and prose descriptions of mood and tempo. As a conductor and director, Mahler made similar demands of his singers: that they follow the letter of the score.

For reasons beyond Mahler’s control, the Hamburg orchestra was overworked and underpaid during his tenure. Musicians often played in numerous venues each week and taught or held other jobs to supplement their meager income during the summer months. Siemon characterized Mahler’s relationship with the orchestra as “thoroughly ambivalent,” although he paid for better instruments out of his own pocket. Director Pollini had purchased new instruments for the orchestra, but Mahler was dissatisfied with their sound quality, describing the brass instruments as “completely inadequate” and the

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195 See: Mary Lawton, Schumann-Heink: The Last of the Titans (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 358-61. Alma Mahler reported in her reminiscences of her late husband that Gustav had rejected Schumann-Heink’s romantic advances, which might explain the singer’s antipathy towards him, in spite of his virtues. See: Alma Mahler, 109. “Once during a rehearsal he preached a sermon to a singer on her loose morals, whereupon she swung herself on to the piano and slapping her thighs informed him that the purity of his own morals aroused her utter contempt. (The same thing happened to him in Hamburg. When the singer, Sch.-H. saw that her attentions were thrown away she gave them up and talked malicious scandal about him instead.)”

196 De La Grange (1973), 307.

197 Siemon, 69.
strings as “toneless” and having “rough tone colors” (rohe Klangfarben). 198 Mahler’s expenditure demonstrated his commitment to artistic excellence, as well as Pollini’s lack of concern towards orchestral upkeep as director. Beautiful singing voices were what mattered most to the administrator.

Pollini was indeed not the easiest person to work for. De La Grange characterized his directorial style as “discovering singers, engaging them, and retaining them at any cost.” 199 Singers were also overworked and, as previously mentioned, staging matters were of secondary importance to him. By the 1896-1897 season, Mahler’s position in Hamburg was growing tenuous. Pollini hired Rudolf Krzyzanowski, a friend of Mahler’s from their student days at the Vienna Conservatory, as Kapellmeister and gave him many of Mahler’s preferred works to conduct, including Tristan und Isolde, Die Meistersinger, and Die Zauberflöte. Mahler’s influence over the adoption or rejection of new operas of dubious quality in the Hamburg repertoire was also curtailed. He was now required to rehearse and conduct operas he would never have touched previously, such as Danish composer Emil Hartmann’s one-act Runenzauber and Ignaz Brüll’s Gloria. 200 By this time, Mahler was already campaigning behind the scenes to become director of the Vienna Court Opera. As Siemon described the Hamburg years, they were ones of “further artistic development,” in which Mahler was able to learn much through his trials with Pollini and Bittong that later “leveraged his fame in Vienna.” 201 Only in Vienna, and then only with great difficulty, would Mahler have the opportunity and resources to achieve something approaching his vision of the model production.

Reforms in Vienna

“The Mahler-Roller Tristan proved the truth of the theory that today’s experiment is tomorrow’s law”

-Marcel Prawy202

In taking the directorship of the Vienna Court Opera, Mahler began working in a city and within an institution where the kinds of reforms he hoped to initiate often met

198 See: Ibid., 71.
199 De La Grange (1973), 229.
200 See: Siemon, 58-59.
201 Ibid., 79.
stiff resistance. Willnauer observed that Austrian creativity always displayed an “ambivalent relationship towards tradition.” The desire to create something new while still preserving what came before has characterized Austrian, especially Viennese, art “since the days of the Baroque and Classicism.” Although groundbreaking artists have often been criticized for the “indiscriminate renunciation of secure positions” or a “loss of bearing through subjective experimentation,” those artists were often reflecting upon and transforming earlier ideas, not completely abandoning them. In Willnauer’s formulation, revolutionary artists have always viewed themselves as “guardians of the historical continuum.”

In commemorating Mahler’s contributions to German theater the great Viennese writer Hermann Bahr (1863-1934) noted that Vienna was not the ideal location for the director’s “demonic power” to achieve the “conception of a heroic life” typified by his productions of Tristan, Die Walküre, and Fidelio. Vienna, after all, was the city in which the music of Anton Eberl (1765-1807) was once preferred to that of Beethoven. Bahr noted that, after the premiere of the Eroica, “a contemporary admonished Beethoven not to write such ‘wild fantasies,’ and advised him to follow ‘the style of Eberl’” in the future. Eberl was a great pianist whose “friendly demeanor” ensured his widespread popularity. Bahr finished his ode to Mahler with the resigned conclusion that “Vienna has retained this kind of taste, for the Eberls are still always preferred all over town.”

**Orchestra Reforms**

Mahler’s reforms of the Court Opera Orchestra and the attitude he took in carrying out those reforms are typified by how he put an end to the practice of player replacements. When Mahler began his tenure as director in 1897, orchestral musicians occasionally had instrumentalists from outside the orchestra substitute for them. At one rehearsal Mahler became enraged when a percussionist sneaked out without his noticing, in order to catch the last train home, leaving behind a hapless replacement. Mahler

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204 Paul Stefan, _Gustav Mahler: ein Bild seiner Persönlichkeit in Widmungen_ (Munich: R. Piper, 1910), 21. Eberl was an Austrian pianist, teacher, and composer who may have studied with Mozart and whose own works were often misattributed as those of Mozart. His Eb-major Symphony was performed on the same program as the premiere of Beethoven’s Eroica and was “judged the better of the two.” See: A. Duane White, “Eberl, Anton (Franz Josef),” _New Grove Online_ (accessed 10 June 2008).
summoned this player to his office early the next day and threatened to dismiss him unless he moved closer to the city center. According to de La Grange, Mahler arranged for a salary increase for some orchestra musicians after learning they did not earn enough to live in the heart of Vienna. This would be offset by “economies in other fields.” Thus Mahler “finally put an end to the system of last-minute replacements in the orchestra.”

He did not care how things had always been done, an attitude that would perplex many of the laid-back Viennese musicians.

Mahler’s major reforms in Vienna included the expansion of the orchestra from 104 to 120 players, the incorporation of skilled foreign musicians, the achievement of greater rhythmic precision from the musicians, a wider range of dynamic gradations, especially at the quieter end of the spectrum, and, most importantly, a new-found sense of discipline, something foreign to the easygoing demeanor of many Viennese. Mahler also introduced the Böhm flute to the Hofoper orchestra, which projected more powerfully than the older Viennese flute. Finally, he was the first in Vienna to raise the conductor’s podium and have it positioned near the strings. His predecessor Wilhelm Jahn, for example, sat in a round cane chair in the middle of the orchestra, and before Jahn the podium was next to the footlights, between orchestra and stage.

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206 See: Herta Blaukopf, “Mahler und das Hofopernorchester,” *Studia musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 31/1-4 (1989): 249. Mahler’s perfectionism is a recurring theme in descriptions by his contemporaries. For Willnauer, the two qualities that best characterized Mahler’s achievements as conductor, stage director, and theater administrator were precision (Genauigkeit) and clarity (Deutlichkeit). He was careful to mention that such attention to meticulous detail did not mean the “slavish following of the letter of a score or libretto,” but rather the fulfillment of the sense of the “notes, words, or scenic instructions.” See: Willnauer (1979), 102, 109-10. In a speech given in 1912 Arnold Schoenberg quoted Mahler as once saying that his highest aim as a conductor was to “force the musicians to play exactly what is in the notes.” See: Arnold Schoenberg, “Gustav Mahler,” translated by Dika Newlin in *Style and Idea*, edited by Leonard Stein (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975), 465. Mahler demanded utmost precision not only from his Viennese musicians, but had left his mark on the theaters in Budapest and Hamburg in large part because of a similar meticulousness. Karl Krebs, in *Meister des Taktstocks* (Berlin, 1919), recalled that Mahler understood the art of balancing the individual groups of instruments “according to his personal inclinations,” while ensuring the greatest precision of performance at all times, revealing the “sense of the sounds,” and the “ethos of the work.” See: Krebs, 185. In 1912 Anna von Mildenburg recalled in an article for the *Neue Freie Presse* Mahler’s adage that “correctness is the soul of an artistic achievement,” and reported that he was troubled by artists who did not set new goals for themselves or were content to rest on their laurels. For Mahler, there was “never an end” to his searching and discovering. See: Anna von Mildenburg, “Meine ersten Proben mit Gustav Mahler,” *Neue Freie Presse* (26 May 1912). Reproduced in Willnauer (1979), 103.
**Vienna Philharmonic years.** The Philharmonic consisted of members of the Vienna Court Opera Orchestra, but it was an independent entity run by its members who elected the musical director and had control over his retention. Mahler directed the Vienna Philharmonic for three seasons, from Fall 1898 until Spring 1901. Willnauer appraised Mahler’s three years as head of the Philharmonic as a “highlight of Viennese music history,” much like his ten years as director of the Court Opera.  

Mahler’s inaugural performance with the Philharmonic on 6 November 1898 was praised by Eduard Hanslick in the *Neue Freie Presse*. His tenure with the orchestra would not be untroubled, however. He created controversy through his *Retuschen* (retouchings) of the works of other composers. His performance of an edited Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony with the Philharmonic in the annual Nicolai Concert, a benefit for the orchestra’s pension fund, was especially controversial. Ultimately, Mahler’s demands on the musicians spelled his end as director of one of the world’s greatest orchestras. Willnauer observed that if the “Herren Philharmoniker” saw themselves as “musical servants” at the Court Opera, who had to accept Mahler’s demands, they saw “absolutely no reason” to bow to his exhortations in their “concert-republic.” After his first year in charge of the orchestra only 84 of 107 members were present to vote on his retention, with 61 favoring him. This kept him from being ousted but revealed the precariousness of his relationship with the orchestra.

**Opera Reforms**

If Wagner was the creator of the Gesamtkunstwerk, in Willnauer’s opinion one should use the expression “Gesamtkünstler” for Mahler. As director of one of the most prestigious opera houses in the world, Mahler had to combine conducting, directing, and administrative skills. In addition to directing and conducting performances, he also rehearsed singers and orchestra, influenced decisions on stage design, and balanced his artistic visions with the “technical, dispositional, and financial realities” at hand. He ensured that his assistant conductors could focus on bringing works they conducted to life.

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207 Willnauer (1979), 149.
208 Ibid., 148.
without having to worry about other matters. Mahler also had to deal with the court bureaucracy and officials who wished to exert their own influence over affairs at the opera. An 1899 letter from Mahler to his superior, Obersthofmeister Fürst Montenuovo, provides a glimpse into his attitude concerning the relationship between administrative and artistic divisions within the opera. He characterized the Court Opera as a “complicated and integrative mechanism” that was also an organism and a “totality that rests on the interaction of its components.” As a result, interference with any one aspect of the organism affected all others. Nothing was done “lackadaisically” or without purpose, and only the “uninterrupted operation” of this machine, the theater, could ultimately reveal the importance of elements that might seem insignificant at first.

**Mahler’s predecessor: Wilhelm Jahn.** The Vienna Court Opera moved into its new building on the Ringstrasse in 1869. Its first director in that location was Franz von Dingelstedt (director: 1869-70), an administrator whose main love was spoken theater and who produced operas with lavish decorations in the style of Austrian painter Hans Makart. He was followed by Johann Herbeck (1870-75), whom Willnauer considered the first modern Viennese conductor. Herbeck replaced amateur orchestra musicians with professionals and was the first Viennese opera conductor who also served as opera director. Wagner conducted two concerts in Vienna to raise money for Bayreuth during his tenure. Herbeck’s successor Franz von Jauner (1875-80) did not conduct performances himself and engaged notable singers, including Emil Scaria and Amalie Materna. The Viennese premiers of the *Ring* and *Carmen* occurred under his directorship. He placed greater emphasis on ballet than his predecessors, and his leading conductor was the Wagnerian Hans Richter (1875-97). The roles of director and conductor at the Court Opera were distinct before Mahler’s tenure, with only Herbeck providing an exception to this situation.

Mahler’s predecessor was the long-serving Wilhelm Jahn (1880-97), who succeeded Jauner. The Vienna premiere of *Tristan* (1883) occurred under Jahn’s directorship, with Richter conducting. Jahn secured a talented group of singers during his tenure. De La Grange observed that Jahn loved beautiful voices just as much as Pollini.

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209 Ibid., 111.
had in Hamburg, though he paid greater attention to visual and dramatic elements and did not neglect the theatrical side of productions. In spite of this, de La Grange characterized Jahn as something of an Epicurean, a man incapable of “fighting a battle or passionately defending an idea or even of taking a risk,” least of all of “being unpopular.” He also lacked the will to break free from the old-fashioned realism that dominated the stage at that time.\(^{211}\) Jahn was criticized for nepotism and poor decision making. He appointed his nephew Hubert Wondra as choir director and gave him administrative duties that were beyond his abilities. De La Grange noted that productions under Jahn were often “tawdry and fragmented” and that singers often feigned illness at the last moment, resulting in the cancellation of a performance. Jahn’s “lack of authority,” poor health, and the “incompetence of his subordinates” left Mahler with a lot of work to do when he became director in 1897.\(^{212}\)

**First reforms.** Upon beginning his appointment as Court Opera director on 1 June 1897 Mahler began to implement a series of reforms he had recently devised. His reforms touched upon disciplinary issues, audience behavior, and matters of fiscal responsibility. In order to save money, for example, Mahler discontinued the practice of granting complimentary tickets and required newspapers to pay for their critics’ seats.\(^{213}\)

One of the first and most difficult reforms was that of forcing singers to give up their connections with the claque, people who were paid or given free tickets to cheer loudly for them during a performance. Mahler issued a directive on 11 October 1897 banning contact between singers and the claque. This reform proved to be quite difficult to enforce, while singers initially followed Mahler’s wishes they ultimately resumed their old ways of paying for guaranteed adulation. Mahler even went so far as to place “detectives” in the gallery of the Opera to observe audience behavior and determine if the claque was still at work.

In order to reduce general audience disturbances during performances, Mahler forbid latecomers from entering the hall except during intermissions or immediately after the overture. Occupants of private boxes or the standing area at the back of the main floor area were exempted from this policy since they would cause fewer disturbances upon

\(^{211}\) De La Grange (1995), 55.
\(^{212}\) Ibid., 58.
\(^{213}\) See: Ibid., 62.
arriving late. Mahler forbade latecomers from entering during the entirety of first acts of Wagner operas. As de La Grange observed, this prevented latecomers from hearing all of the one-act Das Rheingold! Mahler also eliminated public dress rehearsals, presumably to allow the full effect of his new productions to be saved for opening night.

Mahler improved the quality of stage productions by instituting various innovations. These included the rotating stage, the lowering of the orchestra pit to achieve an improved, “Bayreuth-like” sound balance between stage and pit, the complete darkening of the theater, and the removal of cuts that had previously been made in many operas, especially those of Wagner. In terms of the Opera’s repertoire, Mahler cut the number of ballet productions and performed more Wagner and Mozart than had been the case under previous directors. He established two separate casts for each production to reduce the likelihood of last-minute cancellations due to illness or the whim of a singer. For Mahler, every performance would bear the “character of a festival,” as Bayreuth productions did, far from the “daily routine” of the theater. Each work was to be “born anew” in every performance.

The music dramaturg Stephan Stompor has written that Mahler demanded “active music-making” from his singers. The “personification of form” and “aura of personality” were more important to him than purely vocal qualities. Opera was more musical drama than a showcase for pretty voices. Stompor has argued that Mahler often “gave advantage to a less ‘beautiful’ voice in favor of a truthful and convincing performance that did justice to the work.” Anna von Mildenburg and Marie Gutheil-Schoder exemplified his ideal of the singing actor. In addition to reintroducing sung recitatives accompanied by the harpsichord and securing the services of Max Kalbeck for a new German translation of The Marriage of Figaro, Mahler cleaned up Mozart performances by eliminating the excessive ornamentation that had crept into the vocal lines of his operas over the years. Arias were to be lyrical moments within a larger dramatic structure rather than purely showcases of vocal technique and agility.

214 Ibid., 59.
216 De La Grange notes that in Mahler’s first year in the position, there were “ten times as many Mozart operas, and twenty more Wagner performances than in the previous year.” De La Grange (1995), 62.
217 Willnauer (1979), 51-52.
218 See: Willnauer (1979), 65.
**Willnauer’s three periods.** Willnauer has divided Mahler’s years at the Vienna Opera into three periods. The first stretched from his appointment in 1897 until 1900. This was the time in which Mahler was first and foremost a conductor who sought to impress his personality upon the musicians, technical staff, and court officials. The second period encompassed the years 1900-04, when he placed greater emphasis on repertoire and ensemble development, and also transformed the Court Opera from a “sonic museum” into a repertoire theater. The final period occupied his last years in Vienna (1904-07). Mahler’s conducting activities diminished significantly as his administrative duties became more important. In part through the simplification of visual presentation, he strove to create model performances and interpretive cycles that would secure the Court Opera a greater legacy in musical history.

Mahler’s second period began in the 1900-01 season with a shift in activity from conducting to directing work. Mahler now knew the potential of his performers, and had firmer control over the Opera’s resources; he better understood the strengths and weaknesses of his “singers, conductors, stage directors, stage designers, audience, and critics.” Between 1900 and 1904 Mahler also replaced older singers with younger ones that better fit his ideal of the singing actor, secured Kapellmeisters such as Bruno Walter and Franz Schalk who understood and could communicate his intentions, freed the scenic design from what Willnauer termed “Meiningerei” and “Hoftheaterpomp” through stage designer Alfred Roller, and established central works in the repertory that became model productions. Mahler sought to shape his singing ensemble into a “collective of individuals” that presented itself as an “organic whole” and whose parts were “equivalent” and “interchangeable.” Productions that for whatever reason had become stagnant would not continue to be performed regularly but rather put away until “time, strength, and money” were once again available to present them as true “works of art” with new staging if possible.

In the third and final period (1904-07), he receded further from public view as his conducting appearances grew less frequent. Willnauer termed this final phase as one of *Zyklusbildung*, the development of cycles of model productions such as Wagner’s *Ring* or

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219 Willnauer (1979), 74. Willnauer provides a chart detailing works conducted by Mahler at the Court Opera, including the number of performances he conducted by year. See: Ibid., 273-78.
220 Ibid., 75.
Mozart performances for the 150th anniversary of the composer’s birth. Mahler now had a strong group of singers at his disposal, as well as the services of Roller, who was engaged full-time in 1903. Through the “renunciation of merely external effects” and increasing stylization and abstraction, Roller proved a powerful ally in Mahler’s attempts to further simplify stage productions. 221 Prawy characterized Mahler’s final five years in Vienna as his most revolutionary period, a time in which he devised “entirely new productions of all the great German operas” in accordance with Wagner’s “Gesamtkunstwerk ideal.” 222

**Mahler as Conductor and Director**

By all accounts, Mahler was a tireless reformer as conductor and administrator in Budapest, Hamburg, and Vienna. Contemporaries also attested to the essential style of his conducting and directorial work. Some of the most important recollections of Mahler at work come from conductor Bruno Walter, soprano Anna von Mildenburg, and stage designer Alfred Roller. Walter became a close friend and colleague of Mahler’s after joining the Hamburg Opera in 1894. He later worked under him at the Vienna Court Opera. In *Gustav Mahler: ein Porträt*, Walter wrote extensively on Mahler’s gifts as a director and conductor. His recollections and those of other Mahler contemporaries stress two broad themes: his fidelity to the work being performed and the careful balancing of music and dramatic elements in each production.

**Fidelity to the Work**

In Walter’s opinion, Mahler’s productions were models of what he described as an “expanded notion of fidelity to the work.” 223 For Walter, the essence of musical interpretation was the combination of “faithful servitude” and “dominating freedom” on the part of the conductor. This he observed was how music was performed under Mahler’s baton, emerging “pure and strong” through the “union of both souls,” those of

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221 Ibid., 87.
222 Prawy, 69. The author also mentions the influence of Adolphe Appia’s ideas on Mahler.
223 Walter, 66.
composer and conductor. Referring to Mahler’s work in Hamburg specifically, Walter noted that his mentor was able to allow his imagination free reign as an opera director, because the art of theater at that time still lacked a precise technique of indicating stage actions that approached the specificity of musical notation. But in spite of this freedom, the skillful director had to select and emphasize the most essential elements of the work out of the many available possibilities. At the same time he had to avoid unimportant elements and behave in a stylistically-correct manner in all decisions.

This included the right to alter a work if necessary. Mahler’s Retuschen (retouchings) of the scores of other composers were often harshly criticized during his lifetime, especially changes to the instrumentation of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony when he performed the work with the Vienna Philharmonic. David Pickett has suggested that information about Mahler’s Retuschen of this symphony may have been leaked to the press by “disaffected” orchestra members, since most listeners would have been unable to detect many (or any) of the changes after hearing only a few performances. Most of Mahler’s changes in the score were similar to ones that Wagner had made years earlier, though, according to Pickett, Mahler seems to have left hardly a page of the score untouched.

Walter observed that Mahler only altered a work when the original version was not expressive enough for important scenes to be easily appreciated, or when an “easily

224 Ibid., 72. Walter compared this penetrating into the soul of the composer with Wagner’s performances of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, which resounded “completely in Beethoven’s spirit,” while also giving Wagner’s personality room for “complete expression.” Indeed, the “full outpouring of Wagner’s being” liberated Beethoven’s spirit through the music.

225 This was more the case during Mahler’s life than in 1957 when Walter finished his book. Rudolf Laban’s influential method of dance notation was first published in 1928 (Kinetographie Laban). Earlier methods of dance choreography dating back centuries were less precise than Labanotation, and a comprehensive system that could precisely indicate all visual elements of stage production in as concise a format as musical notation was not in existence during Mahler’s lifetime. Disposizione sceniche, published texts which described blocking, lighting, and other visual elements of individual operas and productions, often with blocking diagrams, could be quite detailed and certainly predated Mahler. They usually did not include enough information about posture or facial expressions for the reader to form a vivid mental picture of what was being described. In the published study of her interpretation of Isolde discussed later in this chapter, Anna von Mildenburg provided far more detail about gesture, pose, and demeanor than did disposizione sceniche.

corrected insufficiency” stood in the way of the intentions of the author. He added that the works of Mozart and Wagner were naturally left untouched. But in the works of lesser masters, such as Les Contes d’Hoffmann (Offenbach), Die weiße Dame (Boieldieu), The Merry Wives of Windsor (Nicolai), La Juive (Halévy), and The Taming of the Shrew (Goetz), Walter explained that Mahler felt more license to alter a work and lend his stage experience to the author. His skills might be used for the completion of a work as only “dreamt” by the author, and his familiarity with the author’s very intentions imbued his interpretations, for all their boldness, with the impression of “certainty and authenticity.”

Problems of divining “intention” aside, the Mahler portrayed by Walter seems to have enjoyed a direct psychic link to the great masters of the past. Walter indeed emphasized Mahler’s ability to summon the spirit of the composer of the work being performed. His music making was imbued with “soulful” qualities, “powerful eloquence,” and the elements of a “personal confession.” Listeners might well have doubts as to whether “the composer himself” was speaking through Mahler’s performance, or whether more likely Mahler’s “impetuous soul” had taken possession of the composer’s musical language in a “subjective outpouring of feeling.” Walter labeled the confusion that resulted as to whether the soul of the composer, the conductor, or a mixture of both was speaking during a performance as the “true secret of musical recreation.”

Several observers noted the gradual calming of Mahler’s gestures on the podium during his ten years in Vienna. Caricatures at that time often depicted Mahler as a wildly

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227 Walter, 66.
228 Ibid., 67.
230 Walter, 71.
gesticulating figure in front of the orchestra. Even though his demeanor calmed, some said he was also able to more precisely communicate his intentions from the podium. Critic Ferdinand Pfohl wrote of Mahler’s conducting in Hamburg that it displayed a calm assurance in comparison with the extreme mobility of the earlier years of his career. Mahler achieved great precision of gesture with no wasted energy, poses, or “conspicuous gestures.” He was able to sustain a musical line with “almost mathematical precision” and never covered the singers with the orchestra or allowed the orchestral sound to become “shrill or inexpressive.” This conducting was, in essence, the “triumph of a musical ear.” According to Walter, while at the Vienna Court Opera Mahler always conducted from a sitting position, yet he still displayed exceptional mobility until his final years there. His conducting never appeared exaggerated, rather like a “fanatic incantation.” A spiritual quality accompanied his increasingly calm and focused gestures, allowing him to effortlessly achieve “musical freedom” and “unerring precision” with an apparently simple beat and “almost immobile posture.” A mere glance and the most “economic gestures” were enough to produce what he earlier attained only through dramatic motioning. In their final years together in Vienna, Walter observed that Mahler’s conducting evinced an “almost unearthly calm” with no concurrent loss of intensity and expressiveness.

**Balance between Music and Drama**

In addition to precision and fidelity to the work, Mahler was an expert at balancing musical and dramatic interests in his performances. According to Walter, Mahler had an innate sense of the proper balance between music and drama, sensing exactly when the music might “unfurl all its powers and overrun the drama,” and when and to what extent the music “had to serve the drama.” Mahler had the “absolute will” to carry out the composer’s directives, but they were not always clearly translated into staging. A composer such as Mozart gave no scenic instructions for Mahler to implement, and only in Wagner and post-Wagnerian opera was there a “pre-established harmony”

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231 K. M. Knittel explored the topic of visual depictions of Mahler and anti-Semitism in her article “‘Ein hypermoderner Dirigent’: Mahler and Anti-Semitism in ‘Fin-de-siecle’ Vienna,” *19th-Century Music* 18/3 (Spring 1995): 257-76.

232 See: De La Grange (1973), 311.

233 Walter, 72-73.
between music and stage action. His creative formula in Vienna was to create a modern interpretive style that viewed “text, plot, music, and representation” as one unit that did not “degrade the opera” as a “concert in costume,” but expressed its “music-dramatic conception.” For Willnauer, Mahler was the originator of an idea of “music theater” that has maintained its influence to the present day. More accurately, as the preceding chapter has shown, Mahler upheld Wagner’s conception of the Gesamtkunstwerk as expressed in the mid-century essays, and transmitted this to a new audience at the fin-de-siècle.

Mahler, like Wagner after his reading of Schopenhauer, stressed that the music was the most important element of a production, though visual concerns were not to be neglected. For Bruno Walter, the most difficult problem in opera was how to suffuse the drama with the “spirit of the music.” According to him, Mahler gathered information regarding dramatic expression in any particular scene from the music and ensured that the visual presentation of an opera, including facial expressions and bodily movements, “received its stimuli and directives” from the music. Such a pairing of music and gesture was not done “in the sense of the pantomime,” such as the string figures and Beckmesser’s “chalk scratching” in Wagner’s Die Meistersinger. Instead, Mahler imbued a scene’s mood with the “respective sense of the music” and adapted nuances such as a glance or a smile to the music, allowing no gesture that could disturb the musical mood. He was able to “penetrate into the heart of the music,” and relive the “dramatic vision of the composer” through his music, while also showing visually how each scene should properly be acted.

Soprano Marie Gutheil-Schoder, one of Mahler’s best singers in Vienna, observed that he was not unconditionally tied to realistic stagecraft. Instead, the style and spirit of his stage arrangement (Bühnengestaltung) always sprang from the style and spirit of the work that he intended to stage. Although Mahler strove to make sure no elements of a production were neglected, the music “came before everything” and every scenic detail originated from it.

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234 Ibid., 63.
235 Willnauer (1979), 109-10.
236 Walter, 63.
Several observers have linked Mahler with the creation of “stylized” art, that which avoided perfect naturalism and was imbued with the spirit of modern artists such as those of the Viennese Secession. His best productions were felt to have evinced an idiosyncratic style in every detail, perhaps analogous to the interior decors of certain Secession artists. Critic Oscar Bie, writing in *Gustav Mahler: Ein Bild seiner Persönlichkeit in Widmungen*, a commemorative set of essays published in the wake of the 1910 world premiere of Mahler’s Eighth Symphony, characterized him as one who strove for the “stylized work of art,” “calm gestures,” “scenes of eternity,” and “illustrative music.” Mahler strove to create “so strictly stylized a stage” that contemporary tone-poets would be tempted to write for it.

Gutheil-Schoder explained that upon arriving in Vienna she already possessed extensive knowledge about realistic acting, but that Mahler taught her that every opera is a “stylized artwork” and that everything depends on the style that the music and poetry demand. She offered an additional glimpse into Mahler’s artistic integrity and serious nature in describing his efforts to ensure dramatic continuity in performance:

> Dead moments in the presentation were never allowed. The mood that had been achieved was held onto by any means necessary and nothing could bring Mahler out of his equanimity more than when the public disturbed through a din of applause a scene that should die away quietly. In those cases it might happen that he swung around on the podium lightning quick and demanded silence.

The image of Mahler the conductor and director that emerges is that of an earnest advocate for professional and meticulously-crafted productions. Noted art collector Carl Hagemann remarked that Mahler was the man to “fulfill the life work of a Richard Wagner,” the one who found the proper style for the German “word-tone-drama,” and who integrated all the many aspects of operatic direction into a greater whole. In championing Mahler, Hagemann also took a swipe at Wagner’s “anointed disciples,” noting that Wagner “thought and felt more broadly, deeply, and freely than those who nowadays call themselves his disciples and, to some extent have his inheritance to manage.” He was likely aiming his attacks at Cosima and Siegfried Wagner, the

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238 Stefan (1910), 25.
239 Ibid., 34. “Mahler hat mich darauf geführt, daß jede Oper an sich ein stilisiertes Kunstwerk ist und daß alles auf den Stil ankommt, den die Musik und die Dichtung verlangt.”
240 Ibid., 36.
composer’s widow and son, who directed the Bayreuth festivals at that time. In Hagemann’s opinion, Mahler, the man with the “eyes for the tableau,” the “disciple of art” and “sovereign of the stage,” was a more suitable heir and disciple of Wagner.\textsuperscript{241} Wagner certainly thought of himself as a revolutionary artist, one consciously breaking with the operatic conditions of his time and envisioning the ideal art of the future. Mahler, who once remarked that his “time would come,” also looked to the future as a golden age for his own works.\textsuperscript{242} Although Cosima and Siegfried Wagner maintained the strictly naturalistic style of the productions Richard himself oversaw, it is difficult to imagine that the composer would have never considered updating the production style of his music dramas. By employing Mildenburg and Roller, a great singer-actor and a leading member of the Secession, for his 1903 production of Tristan, Mahler demonstrated a commitment to Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk ideal.

**Work with Mildenburg and Roller**

Mildenburg as singer and actress. In *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, Wagner wrote that:

> The completely artistic person “must completely let oneself go, in order to embrace an unfamiliar personality so completely, according to its own essence, as is necessary in order to portray it; the artist achieves this only when she explores and apprehends this individual so precisely that it is possible to become sympathetic to this contact, interpenetration, and addition [Ergänzung] in her own being.”\textsuperscript{243}

Anna von Mildenburg was such an artist who identified strongly with the characters she portrayed onstage. She studied with Rosa Papier in Hamburg and made her debut at the Hamburg Opera in 1895. She was known for her portrayal of Wagnerian heroines, became very close friends with Mahler, and was one of the first singers that he

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 55-56. “[Wagner,] der darin viel weiter, tiefer und freier gedacht und gefühlt hat als die, die sich heute seine Jünger nennen und zum Teil sein Erbe zu verwalten haben.”


\textsuperscript{243} KdZ, 159. “[der vollkommene künstlerische Mensch] muß vollständig aus sich herausgehen, um eine ihm fremde Persönlichkeit nach ihrem eigenen Wesen so vollständig zu erfassen, als es nöthig ist, um sie darstellen zu können; er gelangt hierzu nur, wenn er dieses eine Individuum […] so genau erforscht, so lebhaft wahrnimmt, daß es ihm möglich ist, diese Berührung, Durchdringung und Ergänzung an seinem eigenen Wesen sympathetisch inne zu werden.”
summoned to Vienna after being named director in 1897. He worked closely with her in Hamburg, rehearsing her roles tirelessly and encouraging her to read Wagner’s writings to gain a deeper understanding of Wagnerian aesthetics. By enthusiastically recommending Mildenburg to Cosima Wagner, Mahler essentially “opened the gates of Bayreuth to her,” where she made her debut as Kundry in 1897.  

Paul Stefan, one of Mildenburg’s early biographers, wrote in 1922 that only Mahler’s orchestra could capture the audience’s attention when Mildenburg commanded the stage. He alone had the “same demonic indomitability” as Mildenburg, and only the powers he might call forth “gripped the soul with the same magic” as did she. Whoever saw Mildenburg as Isolde, “bedecked in runes and charms,” found himself “groping for primordial words.” In her eyes lay “antiquity,” upon her head “wisdom.” Where she came from, there was “no coincidence, no daily routine, no human-all-too-human,” but rather “being […] fate, […] drama through intoxication and immolation [and] tragedy.”

After retiring from the stage, Mildenburg taught singing and acting for many years at the Akademie für Tonkunst in Munich. Stefan reported that she reminded her students repeatedly to “avoid meaningless action” and to use the most economic of movements. Her “beautifully sorrowful countenance” would often change according to changes in the music, and students who grasped her “doctrine of handicraft and spirit” also experienced such transformations. She always stressed that the singing-actor’s character was to visibly change by means of changes in the music, “only by means of music.” She clearly internalized Mahler’s insistence that everything was “in the score.”

Stefan characterized Mildenburg’s portrayal of Isolde in Vienna as the perfect embodiment of the intentions of Mahler and Roller’s Tristan production. Her early study of the role of Isolde is reflected in a vocal score of that opera that is now part of the Mildenburg Collection in the music division of the Austrian National Library. She, or perhaps Mahler, wrote on the title page of the score that the handwritten notes within were by Gustav Mahler (“Einzeichnungen von Gustav Mahler”). They indicate stage movements and gestures for Mildenburg to incorporate into her portrayal of the role.

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244 See: Siemon, 65.
246 Stefan (1922), 37.
247 Ibid., 26-27.
These bear some resemblance to the more detailed notes that she published in 1936. Together they demonstrate the seriousness of her conception of Isolde and the level of detail that she wanted to pass on to a new generation of actor-singers as a professor at the Akademie für Tonkunst.

In the preface to her 1936 publication titled *Darstellung der Werke Richard Wagners aus dem Geiste der Dichtung und Musik: Tristan und Isolde* (Leipzig: Musikwissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1936) she discusses the role that Wagner’s own writings about his art played in shaping her view of proper Wagnerian acting. Mildeburg mentions Wagner’s ideas on music and gesture and on the important role of music in the music drama. She demonstrates a firm commitment to precision in following the letter of the score, something she likely absorbed from Mahler as well. She states that she had written down almost “bar-by-bar” everything of importance in portraying Isolde. Only through “step-by-step consideration of all directions, observance of the slightest note value and rest, and the comprehension and internalization [Durchfühlen] of every word” can the singer guide the listener to experience the totality of the production. Gestures were not to be made for their own sake, but only as the “natural consequence” of much thought and deep feeling. It is far better, she argued, for less experienced singers to avoid all motions onstage rather than risk supporting the unearthly music and poetry with “senseless, groundless, meaningless gestures.” Wagner advised artists who wished to help the content of the true work of art blossom to “suppress all intentional and egoistic tendencies” lest they emerge at an untimely moment.  

Mildenburg explained that her shaping of the role of Isolde was guided always by the music and poetry, and that the music was for her like a native language.

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248 KdZ, 159. “Um in diesem einen höchsten Kunstwerke sein besonderes Wesen zur höchsten Blüthe seines Inhaltes zu treiben, hat aber der einzelne Künstler, wie die einzelne Kunstart, jede willkürliche, egoistische Neigung zu unzeitiger, dem Ganzen undienerlicher, Ausbreitung in sich zurückzudrängen.”

A few examples from Mildenburg’s interpretive notes will suffice to demonstrate
the thoroughness of her portrayal of the character and the earnestness of her teaching. At
the beginning of Act 1, Scene 1, where she rages against the Marke’s “degenerate” clan,
Isolde was to stand with arms “hanging down at both sides, hands balled into fists, and
staring wildly straight ahead” (“hängen die Arme an beiden Seiten herab, Hände zu
Fäusten geballt, sie starrt wild vor sich hin”). This remark captured the intensity with
which her interpretation of the role was credited. She also stressed repeatedly that a lack
of motion could be more effective than exaggerated gestures (“Ohne Bewegung” is a
common direction in her notes). Another common injunction to the student was to follow
musical expression marks in the score, especially dynamic markings, very carefully.

When Isolde mocks Tristan in Act 1, Scene 2 with the words “dort den Helden” (“the
hero over there”), Mildenburg advised the student to follow dynamic marks as carefully
as possible. This would allow the expression to flow naturally of its own accord (“Die
musikalisch-dynamischen Zeichen sind hier, wie überhaupt, stets auf das genaueste zu
beachten, der Ausdruck ergibt sich dann förmlich von selbst”). Finally, in the Liebestod
just after the words “höre ich nur diese Weise,” Isolde’s movements were to appear
completely “unintentional” (ungewollt) and “incorporeal” (unkörperlich). Her arms were
to be stretched out to both sides of her body like “heavy wings” (wie schwere Flügel).

Mildenburg’s dramatic stage presence and fanatical devotion to Wagner’s ideas made her
an ideal partner for Mahler in his quest to reform artistic standards at the Vienna Court
Opera. In Alfred Roller, the conductor found a stage designer who brought a similar work
ethic and high level of inspiration to the reinvigoration of Wagnerian performance there.

Roller’s introduction to Mahler. Roller was born in Brünn (now Brno in the
Czech Republic) in 1864, studied painting and architecture at the Vienna Academy of
Fine Arts and was a co-founder and later president of the Viennese Secession. He was the
first editor of the Secession’s official journal, Ver Sacrum, and designed many of the
posters that advertised the group’s exhibitions. Roller was a professor at the Vienna
School of Arts and Crafts (Kunstgewerbeschule) when Mahler appointed him as stage
designer for the Court Opera in 1903.

Musik und Dichtung leiten lasse, so ergibt sich aus meinen Angaben auch zugleich die Charakteristik der
einzelnen Figuren, die sich uns ja einzig und allein in voller Wahrheit offenbaren, wenn wir die Musik so
inne haben ‘wie eine wirkliche Muttersprache.’“
Peter Vergo has observed that the story of the “decisive meeting between Mahler and Roller” has been retold often, and is “perhaps partly invented,” but it is helpful to include it here.\footnote{Peter Vergo, *Vienna 1900: Vienna, Scotland, and the European Avant-Garde* (Edinburg: National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, 1983), 73.} The two men likely first met at the Secession’s special Beethoven Exhibition of 1902, which boasted as its centerpiece Max Klinger’s famous statue of the legendary composer. Roller had evidently been impressed with Mahler’s conducting of an older *Tristan* production at the Court Opera, but claimed to have had to avert his eyes from the stage because he greatly disliked the sets.\footnote{See Max Mell, *Alfred Roller* (Vienna: Wiener Literarische Anstalt, 1922), 20.} He made some sketches of his vision for the work and arranged a visit with Mahler. The Court Opera director was so impressed with the drawings that he facilitated Roller’s appointment as stage designer for the Court Opera.\footnote{See: de La Grange (1995), 516; also: Franz Willnauer, “Gustav Mahler und Alfred Roller: Die Reform der Opernbühne aus dem Geist des Jugendstils,” in *Gustav Mahler und die Oper. Schriftenreihe der Gustav Mahler Vereinigung Hamburg: No.2*, ed. Constantin Floros (Hamburg: Arche, 2005), 91.
Willnauer (2005), 88. De La Grange observed that Mahler curiously showed an interest in the plastic arts while at the University of Vienna. He stated that Mahler was “relatively unmoved by this form of beauty” as a youth, and that it was “not until the end of his life that,” because of Alma’s influence, “his eyes were opened onto this new world.” See: De La Grange (1973), 51.}

Willnauer surmised that Mahler’s wife Alma, whose father and stepfather were both painters and who was closely connected with Viennese artistic circles, “most likely facilitated [Mahler’s] connection with Alfred Roller.”\footnote{Willnauer (2005), 88. De La Grange observed that Mahler curiously showed an interest in the plastic arts while at the University of Vienna. He stated that Mahler was “relatively unmoved by this form of beauty” as a youth, and that it was “not until the end of his life that,” because of Alma’s influence, “his eyes were opened onto this new world.” See: De La Grange (1973), 51.} Alma’s memoir, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, seems to confirm this. She related that the newlyweds often visited her mother up at the Hohe Warte, an area in the hills north of the city center. This was a place where “painting was the chief interest,” and Mahler got to know many of her childhood friends, “among others Alfred Roller.” According to Alma Mahler, the two men:

Fell at once into a discussion of the technique of the stage and Roller remarked that he had never missed a performance of *Tristan*. But he could only listen to the music—never look at the stage, because the stage-setting as it was managed up to now destroyed the whole illusion. Mahler asked him what he would do about it himself and Roller replied by unfolding schemes of such magnificence that Mahler gave him an appointment at the Opera next day. “That’s the man for me—I’ll engage him,” he said to me on our way home.

[…]

253 Willnauer (2005), 88. De La Grange observed that Mahler curiously showed an interest in the plastic arts while at the University of Vienna. He stated that Mahler was “relatively unmoved by this form of beauty” as a youth, and that it was “not until the end of his life that,” because of Alma’s influence, “his eyes were opened onto this new world.” See: De La Grange (1973), 51.
Sure enough, Roller was commissioned the very next day to design new scenery for Tristan, and shortly afterwards he was appointed permanent stage-designer.\textsuperscript{254}

But Roller was not, as Alma’s recollection might suggest, hired as the stage designer immediately. He was first a guest at the Hofoper by the end of 1902 and contributed his talents to the costumes for \textit{Euryanthe}, which premiered 19 January 1903. The new production of \textit{Tristan} was his first major project as permanent state designer. Willnauer has noted that there are some sketches by Roller in the Austrian Theatermuseum (HG 19.032-19.034) for scenes for the Court Opera \textit{Rienzi}, which premiered on 21 January 1901.\textsuperscript{255} I have not seen these sketches myself, and this is the only suggestion I have encountered of a collaboration between Mahler and Roller prior to 1902. It seems far more likely that Mahler and Roller did not begin working together at the Opera until late 1902.

Mahler and Roller developed a very close and productive relationship based on mutual admiration and complementarity. Willnauer labeled Mahler “not enough of an Augenmensch” to grasp the beauty of ballet, an artform centered on the “composition of bodies in space.”\textsuperscript{256} Roller brought a visual sophistication to the Opera that expanded the creative possibilities of that company when combined with Mahler’s musical and directorial skills. Oscar Bie, writing in 1910, described Roller as the “suitable man” for helping Mahler carry out his plans of implementing a “stylistic principle” at the Opera that “could become significant for the development of music.” In this artistic partnership Roller was the “strict architectural one (\textit{der strenge Architektoniker}),” while Mahler’s role was to allow greater freedom for the imagination.\textsuperscript{257} Bruno Walter recalled that Roller had come to a similar conclusion as Mahler, that the ideal of unity in operatic productions could not be achieved until decorations, costumes, and lighting were filled with the spirit of the music. In Roller’s sketches for \textit{Tristan}, Mahler “found a deep

\textsuperscript{255} Willnauer (1979), 125.
\textsuperscript{256} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{257} Stefan (1910), 25.
understanding for the work expressed visually.” Mahler and Roller were both “inflamed with the desire for the infusion of soul (Durchseelung) into stage design in opera.”

The Mahler-Roller relationship. Information about the Mahler-Roller relationship may be gleaned from Mahler’s letters and Roller’s recollections of his friend. In a letter written in May 1902, Mahler invited Roller to lunch and expressed his desire to “talk a little about Tristan.” He indicated that he had given some type of instructions to Heinrich Lefler and Anton Brioschi, respectively the stage designer and head scene painter at the Opera at that time, without mentioning Roller’s name. This suggests that Mahler had not officially announced his intention of commissioning new designs from Roller, and that Lefler and Brioschi were being given advance notice of Mahler’s plans. In a second letter written between 10 and 13 June 1902, Mahler expressed his anxiousness to see Roller’s “models” for Tristan, though he did not elaborate. Another letter from June 1902 described Mahler’s delight with Roller’s color sketches for the production, which “far excel even my very high expectations.” He also mentioned “modifications in Act III (regarding the layout)” and confirmed that he was sending the sketches straightaway to Lefler, in accordance with Roller’s wishes. Mahler concluded the letter by expressing his hope of “much future collaboration” and signed his name as “your sincere admirer.” The tone of these letters suggests a very new and warm relationship, not a working one that may have begun as early as 1901 with Rienzi.

In a letter written not long after the premiere of the new Tristan production Mahler praised Roller for the “great and wonderful things” he had given to the Court Opera. He wrote that the two of them were similar in that they both shared a “completely unselfish devotion to art,” even if they approached it “by different roads.” He finished by stating how sad he would be if that was the end of their collaboration, but added that he was certain that their “collaboration hitherto is only a beginning and an indication of things to come.” This suggests that their working relationship began with the Euryanthe and Tristan productions of early 1903.

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258 Walter, 64-65.
In a letter written from New York, dated 20 January 1908, Mahler expressed his hopes of luring Roller to the Metropolitan Opera to be his stage designer there. Roller was the “one man with the artistic and personal ability to clear up the mess” that Mahler perceived existed on the Met’s stage. He noted that he had expressed to the Met directors the “necessity of handing over the stage, and everything to do with it, lock, stock and barrel,” to Roller. This was “rather the way I always saw our position in Vienna.” Unfortunately, this partnership in New York was not to be. In a letter to Roller dated February 1909, Mahler expressed his relief that his colleague had finally left the Court Opera to return to the Kunstgewerbeschule as professor. He likely felt that the artist’s talents were not put to their best use at the Opera because of financial constraints imposed by bureaucrats skeptical of new and expensive visual designs. Mahler wrote that a new life was beginning for him and that Roller was not “saying goodbye to the theater.” Anyone who had such a “vocation” for the stage could never entirely give it up, or theater itself “certainly will not give you up!” Now Roller could work “purely as an artist,” free from the “petty [financial and bureaucratic] considerations” at the Opera.261

Roller on Mahler. Roller expressed his admiration and respect for Mahler in several tributes written after the composer/conductor’s death. In a brief statement on “Mahler and the Staging of Opera,” (1920) he wrote that operatic staging by many popular contemporary directors was to him like a tree having its “leaves and branches trimmed and the bare limbs now hung with colorful tinsel and Christmas decorations.” One could no longer recognize “the tree itself and its anatomical logic.” But when Mahler staged a work, Roller believed he saw a “sapling made to grow through magical force.” He watched it “develop its trunk and branches, send out its twigs in ever more delicate ramification,” witnessed it become covered with leaves and, in the end, “stand there in the completely intoxicating splendor and aroma of its flowery richness.”262 He later told Max Mell, his early biographer, that Mahler had loved him “like an older brother does the younger.” He admired Mahler as the “greatest and purest man, with whom my good fortune has brought me in contact.” The virtues that Mahler imparted to him were numerous. As Roller enumerated them, they included “strength and self-confidence.”

262 Stefan (1910), 33.
“fearless devotion to the work,” the “nobility of conscious service,” the “pride of humility towards the genius whose work I had to make visible,” the proper organization of work, making the best use of time, how to make the most of available resources, and how not to “devalue that which was possible for the sake of the desirable.” Finally, this “most impatient man” had taught him patience.263

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Soon after the 1903 Tristan premiere, Mahler sought to secure his new collaborator for the Court Opera on a full-time basis. Roller was to be given complete responsibility for stage design, lighting, and even costumes. His official title included “director of decors,” (Leiter des Ausstattungswesens) “diorama draftsman,” (Figurenzeichner) and “costume designer” (Costumier). Eva Luschinsky, in her dissertation on Roller’s stage designs, observed that he had more responsibility and more diverse tasks than his predecessors. Costumes, lighting, and stage sketches had often been designed by separate artists in the past, but Roller was the first person who “occupied all of these positions at the same time.” He made use of new stage technology and created “carefully and thoroughly-drawn (durchgezeichnete) plans” for the stage, something new in Vienna at that time.264

By entrusting his stage designer with such a variety of tasks, Mahler demonstrated his belief in Roller’s abilities to reform the staging of works at the Court Opera. This work would complement his own musical reforms with the orchestra and individual singers. Roller’s contributions to the 1903 production of Tristan und Isolde would dominate most press accounts of its premiere. It is to his visual conception of that work that we now turn. His writings on the theater and the role of the stage designer also demonstrate the level of his commitment to working with Mahler in a spirit of mutual collaboration.

263 Mell (1922), 26-27.
CHAPTER 4

ROLLER AND STAGE DESIGN

To experience a work means to be able to experience it just as its creator did. Therefore, the greatest moments in the life of a stage designer are when he truly feels inspired by divine spirit, as if while working on stage designs Shakespeare were to suddenly look over his shoulder and say ‘yes.’ Such a thing naturally occurs—very rarely.

-Alfred Roller (1930)

In Alfred Roller, Mahler found a talented and dedicated associate with whom he would craft opera and ballet productions of extraordinarily high quality until 1907. Their first major collaborative project was the new production of *Tristan und Isolde* that opened in February 1903. The critical reception was largely positive with most reviewers focused on Roller’s striking visual style; they particularly noted his use of light and color. Although he followed Wagner’s basic visual instructions for each scene, Roller departed from the naturalistic style that still dominated stage design at Bayreuth and the Vienna Court Opera around 1900. Before examining Roller’s preliminary and final sketches for the 1903 *Tristan*, which differ dramatically in style, it is worth considering his views on theater and stage design. In several significant articles on stage reform and stagecraft, he revealed himself to be a serious thinker about issues of visual presentation and the social role of theater in the modern world.

**Views on Stage Design**

Roller published two important articles that specifically addressed the field of stage design. “Bühnenreform?” (‘Stage reform?’) appeared in the journal *Der Merker* in

1909, just two years after Mahler left the Vienna Court Opera for New York.266 “Bühne und Bühnenhandwerk” (“Stage and stagecraft”) was written later in Roller’s life and published in 1930 in *Thespis, das Theaterbuch*.267 These articles reveal an artist who was passionate about the theater and dedicated to insuring its continued relevance in the modern world. Roller stressed three major themes in these two significant writings. The first was the important relationship between actor and audience in the theater. Second was the general question of whether staging methods alone should be reformed, or if the entire concept of the theater needed rethinking. Finally, Roller addressed the duties and proper attitude of the stage designer towards the work to be staged.

**Actor and Audience**

Roller devoted much of his discussion to the subject of the actor-audience relationship. He compared the actor to a projector and the spectators (*Zuschauer*) to a projection screen. Without the latter, he argued, “the projector shines into emptiness.” Without the actor, however, “the screen remains lifeless.” He nevertheless observed that this comparison was faulty because “it comes from the machine world and excludes the living reflection of the spectator back upon the actor.”268 Wagner had expressed a similar sentiment in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* when he wrote that everything in his ideal theater should be governed by the needs of art. This required both “giving” and “receiving” from those onstage. The spectator transported himself or herself “completely onto the stage” through attentive looking and listening, and the actor became a true artist only by “completely merging with the public.”269

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267 Roller (1930), 137-45.
269 *KdZ*, 151. “In einem vollkommenen Theatergebäude giebt bis auf die kleinsten Einzelheiten nur das Bedürfnis der Kunst Maß und Gesetz. Dieß Bedürfniß ist ein doppeltes, das des Gebens und des Empfangens […] denn das Verlangen des gemeinsamen Zuschauers ist eben das Verlangen nach dem Kunstwerk, zu dessen Erfassen er durch Alles, was sein Auge berührt, bestimmt werden muß. So versetzt er durch Schauen und Hören sich gänzlich auf die Bühne; der Darsteller ist Künstler nur durch volles Aufgehen in das Publikum. Alles, was auf der Bühne athmet und sich bewegt, athmet und bewegt sich durch ausdrucksvolles Verlangen nach Mittheilung.”
The audience was just as essential to the effectiveness of a theatrical event as the actor for Roller, though the former had to, in his words, “be capable of being and willing to be receptive.” This receptiveness was dependent upon the spectator’s cultural background and understanding of theatrical style and dramatic content. For Roller, a fine performance of *Faust* would only work as a “curiosity” upon an audience of Chinese, the same kind of impact Chinese theater would make upon Europeans. This resulted from a “lack of ability to be receptive.” The receptivity of an audience could also not be forced. “There are professional critics,” Roller noted, who hate the theater since they are required to be there, “even when they aren’t prepared to be receptive.”

Roller observed that what drew most people to the theater was the desire to peer into another world (*dieses Hineinschauen in eine andere Welt*), to experience the extraordinary. Most modern theaters, however, were “ever-present” and wanted to “offer the extraordinary 300 times a year.” Theater lost its appeal by becoming a simple part of everyday life. Actors in general were no longer the strong personalities they used to be. Those onstage were at one time “transients” (*durchgängерische Naturen*) and people with “tarnished existences” (*bemakelte Existenzen*) who had been driven to the stage to escape the confines of a “bourgeois existence.” Now they were “scholars, homeowners, professionals, merchants, professors of art,” people who have carefully chosen their stage profession. Actors, in other words, now had much more in common with their audience, socio-economically, than in the past. How could such actors transmit the extraordinary when “exactly the same good citizens and proficient men also sit in the stalls,” and the public knew the singers from daily life.

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271 Roller (1909), 193. “Aber die ständigen Theater! 300 mal im Jahre das Außerordentliche bieten wollen! Und jede gute Aufführung eines Kunswerkes soll doch als etwas Außer[194]ordentliches wirken. […] Das ist es ja, was die Leute immer zum Theater zog, dieses Hineinschauen in eine andere Welt […] wenn nun das Theater selbst ein Teil des gewöhnlichen Lebens wird, verliert es allgemäß diesen Reiz.”

272 Ibid., 194. “Wer anders als die starken Persönlichkeiten sollen uns auf der Bühne interessieren? […] Und was anderes als Langeweile kann die ungeheure Mehrzahl all der Anderen verbreiten, die die Schauspieleri zum Beruf gewählt haben? Gewählt haben! Das ist es. – Wenn früher die Enge des bürgerlichen Existenz so manchen zum Theater trieb – heute gehen die meisten Leute aus Überlegung zur Bühne. Früher waren sie durchgängersche Naturen, bemakelte Existenzen, denen ihr Leben in beständiger
Roller lamented that much of the contemporary theater-going public did not support recent attempts at stage reform circa 1909, thinking perhaps of the work of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig, whose theoretical ideas went largely unrealized. For Roller, “weakness and sentimentality” (Schwäche und Sentimentalität) were reasons why the public often desired a new form of staging but could not give up its cherished old-fashioned theater. Writing in 1930, he noted the growing sensitivity to historical accuracy in stage design among the educated classes. Yet the “stylistic correctness” (Stilgerechtheit) demanded of decorations, costumes, and stage props led inevitably for Roller to the loss of “theatrical correctness” (Theater-Gerechtheit). Such a striving for “authenticity” led inevitably to one of the greatest theatrical sins in his eyes, the “horrible intrusion of the falling curtain” for every scene change.

Roller noted that at the old Viennese Burgtheater stagehands enabled quick scene changes by coming onto a semi-darkened stage and calmly removing props and replacing them with items for the next scene. The audience remained silent during these scene changes. In the modern theater, where scene changes occurred behind closed curtains, one noticed in the audience an “embarrassed throat clearing, whispering, and twisting around in the seat.” This created a noticeable break in the dramatic flow. The show never stopped when scene changes were accomplished with an open curtain, maintaining the public’s “attention and good will.” Yet when the curtain had to be lowered and raised for each scene change, the actors were forced to seek to “revive the public anew” (das Publikum gleichsam immer erst wieder von neuem ankurbeln). In order to avoid such scene changes, Roller lamented, poems conceived as dramatic wholes were “torn to pieces” and then “rearranged differently.” For him, the inner rhythm of the poetry should control dramatic pace, not a stage apparatus that was awkward and at its core “foreign to the theater.”

Gefahr einen wilden Reiz angezüchtet hatte. Aber die vielen Ehrenmänner, die heute auf der Bühne stehen, diese Gelehrten, Hausbesitzer, Professionisten, Geschäftsleute, Kunstprofessoren: können die das Außерordentliche vermitteln, das wir vom Theater erwarten? Ebensolche gute Bürger und tüchtige Menschen sitzen ja auch im Parkett, die kennt das Publikum ja aus seinem täglichem Leben.”

273 Ibid., 197.
274 Roller (1930), 141.
275 Ibid., 142. “Im alten Wiener Burgtheater traten zur Verwandlung bei leicht abgedunkelter Bühne von rechts und links Figuranten auf, trugen die Möbel, Zelte und andere Setzstücke ab und stellten die für die nächste Szene erforderlichen auf, alles in voller Ruhe, ohne jede Hast. Das Publikum verhielt sich während dieser offenen Verwandlungen lautlos. Das verlegene Räuspern, Flüstern und Herumwetzen auf dem Sitz,
Roller also noted the interconnectedness of staging styles in each era and the expectations of contemporary audiences. He observed in 1930 that people in the modern world had come to expect all difficulties to be solved by “technical progress.” He felt that stage designers should certainly make use of technological advancements, since technology profoundly influenced the spectator in everyday life and changed the “functional method of his sensory tools” (die Funktionsweise seiner Sinneswerkzeuge ändert). The modern spectator was thus inclined to demand technical progress onstage, since daily life in an urban environment was so infused with technology. Likewise, for Roller, any attempts to reconstruct older methods of performance or staging were pointless. He asked in the 1930 article whether the historical spectator could be simultaneously reconstructed. Neither historicism nor “original hack work” (Originalitätshascherei) could move staging styles forward.

Stage Reform or Theater Reform?

In his 1909 article on stage reform, Roller observed that daily life had become more “richly stimulating” than it was previously, while theater in general had become “all the more boring.” If, as Roller argued, the theater no longer pleased its more serious audience, then how should it be reformed? He criticized those who wished to focus on the die heutige Verwandlungspause bei geschlossenem Vorhang zu einem so stark betonten Einschnitt machen, fehlte gänzlich. Das Theater hört nämlich während der offenen Verwandlung nicht auf und deshalb hält auch die Aufmerksamkeit und Empfangsbereitheit des Publikums an. Nach dem Hochgehen des Verwandlungsvorhanges aber müssen die Darsteller das Publikum gleichsam immer erst wieder von neuem ankurbeln. Um Verwandlungen zu ersparen und zu umgehen, wurden nun vollendet gebaute dramatische Dichtungen zerstückelt und die Stücke dann anders zusammengesetzt. Pausen entstanden, wo das Werk keine verträgt, des’ Umbaues’ wegen. […] Der eingeborene Rhythmus der Dichtung soll den szenischen Ablauf beherrschen, nicht ein ungeschickter, weil im innersten Wesen theaterfremder Apparat.”

Ibid., 143. “Dem heutigen Menschen ist angewöhnt worden, die Behebung von jederlei Schwierigkeit durch den ‘technischen Fortschritt’ zu erwarten. Tatsächlich hat die Bühne in den letzten Jahrzehnten viele neue Hilfsmittel von der Technik geschenkt bekommen. Das Theater kann gar nicht teilnahmslos an der Entwicklung der Technik vorbeigehen, weil diese ja das eine Grundelement seiner Zweihheit: den Zuschauer –im Alltag—nachdrücklichst beeinflußt und die Funktionsweise seiner Sinneswerkzeuge ändert. […] So unveränderbar das Wesentliche des theatralischen Vorganges ist, so wenig ist ein starres Festhalten an den Formen des Unwesentlichen möglich.” In his 1909 article Roller also mentioned technical advancements in staging, warning that modern techniques such as the rotating stage, electric lighting, and chemical steam were nothing but masks and disguises for the old scenic stage. See: Roller (1909), 196.


Roller (1909), 193.
décor alone. Staging, in his words, was “thoroughly a peripheral art, never an end in itself, a completely secondary thing” (eine Rahmenkunst, niemals Selbstzweck, eine durchaus sekundäre Sache). Staging could only draw its laws and guidelines “from the work with which it is concerned,” and could have no other law than “to fulfill the specific and often completely unique demands of this work.”

Although he did not view staging as the dominant element of a production, he felt that intense study of each individual work would yield the proper visual style. The stage designer was not expendable.

In 1909 Roller was highly critical of contemporary methods of theatrical staging. He felt that the current practice was no more developed than that of 1809. Poets and composers of the early nineteenth century knew the stages for which they wrote poetry and music intimately. Modern artists, on the other hand, wrote for “an arena,” or a “tiny hall stage,” or perhaps no stage at all. Nonetheless, all of these works, which originated under widely different circumstances, were then performed in “one and the same theatrical space.” Was it any wonder, he asked, that none of them was “given full justice” and that the effect remained weak?

One of the problems of the contemporary stage for Roller was that the actor and singer remained mired in the conventions of an outmoded Romantic theatrical tradition, and still usually stood on the same spots on the “old scenic stage” (alte Kulissenbühne). No matter what setting was recreated, whether “a primeval forest, or a salon, or the North Pole,” the actor stood “stage right” or “stage left,” or at center stage. In addition to

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279 Ibid., 195. “Unser Theater befriedigt also sein ernsteres Publikum nicht und um es neu zu gestalten, will man beim Ausstattungswesen anfangen. Aber ist das nicht ganz verkehrt? Die Inszenierung ist doch durchaus eine Rahmenkunst, niemals Selbstzweck, eine durchaus sekundäre Sache, die ihre Gesetze und Regeln immer nur dem Werke entnehmen kann, um das es sich gerade handelt, und die kein anderes Gesetz haben kann, als die ganz besonderen, oft ganz einzig dastehenden Forderungen dieses Werkes zu erfüllen.”

One of Roller’s best-known maxims was that “every work of art contains the laws of its staging within itself” (“Jedes Kunstwerk trägt das Gesetz seiner Inszenierung in sich”).

280 Idem. “Die Wahrheit ist, daß wir heute im Inszenierungswesen noch durchaus auf demselben Punkte stehen, wie etwa vor 100 Jahren. Eher sind wir zurückgegangen; denn damals waren sich die Dichter und Musiker dessen klar bewußt, daß das Theater Spiel ist, und sie kannten die Bühne genau, für die sie ihre Spiele dichteten und komponierten, mochten es Weihefestspiele oder Hanswurstkomödien sein. Heute schreibt der eine für eine Arena, der eine für eine ganz kleine Saalbühne, der dritte möchte seine Stücke am liebsten im Freien gespielt haben, oder im Panorama, das das Freie vortäuscht, und die meisten denken überhaupt an keine Bühne, wenn sie dichten oder komponieren. Höchstens an die schlechten Gewohnheiten des Bühnenbetriebes. Vergessen wir auch nicht, daß das Repertoire unserer Theater zu drei Vierteln aus Werken der Vergangenheit besteht. Und all diese Werke, die unter so verschiedenen Voraussetzungen entstanden, werden dann in ein- und demselben Theaterraum aufgeführt. Ist es zu wundern, daß keines zu seinem vollen Rechte kommt, und daß die Wirkung schwach bleibt?”

281 Ibid., 196.
this, Roller observed that in classical theater the proscenium was for the main actors, the orchestra behind the proscenium for visual elements (stage sets and massed actors). Romanticism, however, had “lost an understanding of this ordering.” The proscenium, which represented “everything and nothing,” was removed and the actor placed “into the middle of the [artificial] decoration itself.” This “collision” of the three dimensional actor and the “decorative world of appearances” led, in Roller’s opinion, to “grotesque relationships,” tastelessness, and ridiculousness.\(^{282}\)

Swiss stage reformer Adolphe Appia had also strongly critiqued the juxtaposition of living, three-dimensional actors with flat painted backdrops. In *Music and the Art of the Theater* (1897), he observed that the illusion created at the center of the stage with painted backdrops was often disrupted by the wings and other areas around that central painted illusion. Because the actor’s place was not always at the center of the stage, the focus of our attention (the actor) was forced to move about in areas of the stage where the scenic illusion was at a minimum. The actor was therefore made subservient to the inanimate setting, which was established using one convention, the action itself using another. Appia likened the inanimate setting to “colored engravings,” with the actor merely serving as their “description at the bottom of the page.”\(^{283}\) His distaste for the collision of artificial, two-dimensional creations of place with living, moving actors fueled his desire to create a stage space devoid of artificiality and clutter.

What Roller felt was required was not stage reform but a more wide-ranging theater reform. The stage artist should renounce “silly tricks” (*Spielerei*) and create a stage on which it was understood that “everything only implies, nothing is real or pretends to be real!”\(^{284}\) Thus Roller clearly distanced himself from the naturalist tradition of the nineteenth century and the concept of the stage as museum. Although he had

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\(^{284}\) Roller (1909), 197. “Also nicht ‘Bühnenreform’, sondern Theaterrreform! Es handelt sich darum, mannhaft Verzicht zu leisten auf Spielerei und angewöhnte Geschmacksroheit (genannt ‘Tradition’) und wieder ein lebendiges Theater zu gewinnen, auf dessen Bühne eingestandenermaßen Alles nur bedeutet, nichts wirklich ist oder wirklich zu sein vorgibt!”
characterized staging as a “peripheral art,” it remained an essential part of an effective theatrical production. The only way to create a strong theatrical effect, in his view, was in the “equal striving of all the elements that are active on the stage” (die Gleichstrebigkeit aller auf der Bühne tätigen Elemente). Roller here sounds quite sympathetic to Wagner’s concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk. Yet in spite of his extensive discussion of stage theory, he saw “countless earnest attempts,” not theoretical arguments, as the way to move closer to the goal of a living theater.²⁸⁵

Duties of the Stage Designer

In his 1930 article “Bühne und Bühnenhandwerk” Roller emphasized the duties and role of the stage designer in relation to the larger production. He commented upon the imprecisely-defined scope of the stage designer’s role in the entire production, noting that the designer’s activities varied from one project to the next. He also espoused ideas similar to those of the Wiener Werkstätte and Gustav Mahler. Roller’s emphasis on the selflessness required of the stage designer evoked his creative partner at the Court Opera, while the Werkstätte’s philosophy was reflected in Roller’s conception of a production where every moment and detail were integral components of the total impression to be made upon the audience.

Roller decried the fact that stage design was a “nameless profession” (namenloses Métier). He noted that a person who made pots (Töpfe) was called a pot-maker (Töpfer), and one who made tables (Tische) a table-maker (Tischler). But “stage designer” (Bühnenbildner) and “scenic artist” (Szeniker) were “wooden, screwed-up terms” (hölzerne, geschraubte Bezeichnungen) in his opinion. Ultimately, the scope of the stage designer’s activities had never been standardized and clearly defined. This work, he argued, was a vital component of the overall theatrical production, but it differed in substance “from one case to the next.”²⁸⁶

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 196-97.
Roller expressed the concept of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk in his 1930 article, but without using the term. He stressed that what must be demanded of stage and décor was an “equal striving with all other active powers of the performance” (Gleichstrebigkeit mit allen anderen wirkenden Kräften der Aufführung). Each individual moment was dependent on the others in its “emotional [seelisch], acoustical, and optical effects,” and “mutually conditional” upon the others in its effect on the spectator. Thus nothing was unimportant in creating the desired total effect. This philosophy reflected Mahler’s aesthetics as well. According to Oswald Bauer, Mahler’s goal as director was the “convincing total aesthetic impression” (der überzeugende ästhetische Gesamteindruck). This might be achieved by lending expression to the “particular musical essence” of the work being produced through the “totality of the visible performance.” The visual would thus reinforce the aural.

This view resembled in some ways the philosophy of the Wiener Werkstätte, a commercial enterprise founded in 1903 by members of the Secession and directed by Josef Hoffmann and Kolo Moser. The workshop’s members were dedicated to creating all aspects of interior design for buildings, including furniture, metalwork, wallpaper, and textiles. The venture was doomed to financial failure because of the emphasis placed upon using the finest and costliest materials available, without making use of technologies for mass production. The Werkstätte was likely inspired by the nineteenth-century English Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris, which sought to recreate the production style of the medieval craftsman. Peter Vergo has observed that an interior designed by the Werkstätte “could not be changed even in its smallest details for fear of disrupting the unity of the designer’s artistic conception.” What were meant to be functional living spaces often turned into museum pieces. People within these “hermetically conceived” areas might serve as a “jarring note,” unless they just happened

\[287\] Ibid., 144-45. “Alle die einzelnen Momente einer Aufführung sind in ihren seelischen, akustischen und optischen Wirkungen voneinander abhängig und gegenseitig durcheinander in ihrem Eindruck auf den Zuschauer bedingt.”

to be dressed in clothing designed by the Werkstätte (their fashion department was established in 1910). For many Secessionists in Vienna, interior and stage design were clearly associated with some notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk.

Roller also echoed Mahler in advocating devotion to the work being performed. The stage designer should be selfless and able to sacrifice, rather than place himself “into the scene” and betray the work. Instead, the stage designer had to realize that each work of art carried the “laws of its staging within itself” (*Jedes Kunstwerk trägt die Gesetze seiner Inszenierung in sich selbst*). This philosophy ran counter to the nineteenth-century tradition of using a stock of set pieces for many productions at the Vienna Court Opera. For Roller, truly experiencing a work meant being able to “experience it just as its creator did.” The greatest moment for a stage designer would thus be if he felt himself “truly inspired by divine spirit” (*wirklich numine afflatus*), as if while working on stage designs “Shakespeare were to suddenly look over his shoulder and say ‘yes.’” Roller was humble enough to add that such a thing occurred “very rarely.”

**Roller’s Visual Style in Tristan**

Roller’s theoretical writings reveal a stage designer concerned with the expressive power of the modern theater. His ideas were shaped by Gustav Mahler, Adolphe Appia, and his Secession colleagues. Yet he also stressed that theorizing about the theater was not the best way to reform it. Practical experiments would be much more effective in modernizing the art. Roller’s first complete production with Mahler was the new *Tristan und Isolde* that premiered on February 21, 1903. How did this, his first practical experience with stage design, signal a break with tradition at the Vienna Court Opera? A comparison of Roller’s various sketches for this production with the older 1883 Court production...
Opera version reveals a decisive move away from the historicist or “Makart style,” towards a more symbolic interpretation of Wagner’s work.

The 1883 Vienna Tristan

The premiere production of Tristan und Isolde in Vienna occurred in 1883 at the Court Opera. This was during the lengthy and influential directorship of the Wagnerite Wilhelm Jahn (1881-1897), and featured Hans Richter as conductor. The sets were primarily designed by Carlo Brioschi (1826-1895), one of a family of stage designers who worked at the Court Opera for much of the nineteenth century. This was the production that Mahler first conducted in Vienna on 24 October 1897. Brioschi’s visual designs were the source of Roller’s negative reactions when he attended a Tristan performance under Mahler’s baton and had to turn his face away from the stage. He recounted this experience to the director when presenting his own ideas for a newer Tristan staging in 1902.

Oswald Bauer has observed that the Court Opera stage in 1890s Vienna, the decade in which Mahler took over the directorship, was dominated by the style known as Historicism, which Wagner had rejected as “inadequate for his works.”291 The historicist style, by means of which the opera stage was transformed into a sort of museum, was characterized by the accurate reproduction of historic artifacts, costumes, and other scenic elements.292 Stage clutter was a common result. This style was practiced and perfected at the Court Opera by three generations of the Brioschi family: Giuseppe (1801-1858), Carlo (1826-1895), and Anton (1855-1920).

There was a long history of Italian influence at the Opera, not surprising considering the origins of opera in Florence, the tradition of talented Italian visual artists, and the proximity of Vienna to Italy. Before the country’s unification in the nineteenth century, parts of what is now northern Italy were under Habsburg control, including Milan, the city in which Giuseppe Brioschi studied before moving to Vienna in 1838.

Wolfgang Greisenegger has observed that Viennese opera remained essentially an Italian

291 Bauer, 55. “Im Szenischen dominierte der Stil des Historismus, den Richard Wagner als unzulänglich für seine Werke immer abgelehnt hat.”
292 For Wolfgang Greisenegger, mid-nineteenth-century productions “came increasingly to resemble a museum in which striking scenes were positioned next to each other.” Wolfgang Greisenegger, “Set Design and Costumes,” in The Vienna Opera, edited by Andrea Seebohm (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), 188.
art form until the time of Mozart, and that the Viennese utilized composers, singers, librettists and designers from Italy. \(^{293}\)

Baroque opera was a lavish court entertainment, and productions were often intended to be one-time events. Lodovico Ottavio Burnacini and Francesco Galli-Bibiena dominated set design in seventeenth-century Viennese opera. Burnacini (1636-1707) was a court architect and theater engineer who came to Vienna from Venice as a boy. He designed Viennese performance spaces such as the Theater in the Cortina and was known for his sumptuous scenic effects and technologically-modern stage designs. His work on Cesti’s *Il Pomo d’Oro* (1668), which included a gruesome portal to hell that resembled a giant monster’s gaping maw, was particularly acclaimed. Galli-Bibiena (1659-1739) built the new court theater after the Turkish invasion. He and members of his family worked on décor and costumes at the court theater for roughly half a century. His sets were characterized by their magnitude, and included giant flights of stairs and elaborate suites of rooms. His son Antonio (1700-1774) rebuilt Karl I’s theater in the Redoutensaal during Maria Theresa’s reign.

Italian set designers active in Vienna during the Enlightenment and early Romantic eras included Lorenzo Sacchetti (1759-1834), who worked in the city from 1794 until 1810, and Antonio de Pian (1784-1851) active there from 1816 until the middle of the century. Giuseppe Brioschi came to the capital in 1838 and took over the painting workshop at the Court Opera. He was primarily a painter of historical scenes, had studied with Alessandro Sanquirico in Milan, and was head of the workshop until 1854 when his son Carlo took over. Carlo retired from the position in 1885, and was succeeded by his son Anton, who remained in that position until his death in 1920. Greisenegger concludes that the Brioschis had a “decisive, even dominating, influence over several generations of set designers in central Europe.” \(^{294}\)

Carlo was a pupil of the landscape painter Thomas Ender. He was an outstanding designer and organizer who helped facilitate movement from the Kärntnertor Theater into the new opera house in 1869. He also supervised the transition from gas to electric lighting at the Court Opera in 1883. His visual style represented a movement away from

\(^{293}\) Ibid., 175-77.  
\(^{294}\) Ibid., 188.
flat scenery towards a more three-dimensional style that incorporated walls, platforms, and opulent set pieces. Anton was highly praised and profiled in the press. Greisenegger characterized him as the last exponent of the “voluptuous art of subtle arrangement” at the Court Opera, someone with a “virtuoso’s feeling for the luminosity of colors, the proliferation of intriguing and surprising touches, and the visual cameo.”

Evan Baker has detected the influence of the Viennese painter Hans Makart on the stage designs of Carlo and especially his son Antonio Brioschi. Makart (1840-1884) often used lush colors and exotic elements in his grandiose paintings. His style dominated the Viennese visual arts during the 1870s. In 1879 he took a leading role in designing and organizing the parade to honor the silver wedding anniversary of Emperor Franz Josef and his wife Elizabeth, further cementing his reputation in the city. Makart depicted scenes and themes from Wagner’s *Ring* in some of his paintings, likely causing Thomas Mann and Theodor Adorno to link Makart’s opulent visual style with Wagnerian aesthetics. As Thomas Grey has noted, most comparisons of the Wagnerian and Makart styles have centered on the role of color, “visual, harmonic, and timbral,” as a compelling force that dominated the form and idea of a painting or music drama.

One of the final productions on which Giuseppe Brioschi worked was Paul Taglioni’s lavish and expensive ballet *Satanella oder Metamorphosen*, which opened in 1853. Brioschi and Theodore Jachimovicz worked together on the set designs, a practice that was common during the nineteenth century. Individual painters often designed specific scenes for productions, yielding what Greisenegger has termed a “jigsaw of individual efforts.” The fragmentation or compartmentalization of stage design was still common practice at the Vienna Opera upon Mahler’s arrival in 1897. Specialists in particular historical styles were recruited to play a specific role in the stage design process. These artists formed workshop cooperatives, which often developed into studios that produced sets and set pieces for customers in and outside of Vienna.

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295 Ibid., 189.
297 Thomas Grey, “Wagner and the *Style Makart*,” paper read at the 2007 national meeting of the American Musicological Society (Quebec City, 2 November 2007).
298 Greisenegger notes that the final cost for this production was 18000 guilders, whereas the total annual budget at Vienna Court Theater for 1850 was 70000 guilders.
299 Greisenegger (1986), 188.
such business partnership was founded by Carlo Brioschi and his two major scenic collaborators in Vienna, Johann Kautsky and Hermann Burghart; it remained in business until 1889. The 1883 Court Opera *Tristan* was likely the product of the compartmentalized, collaborative style so common during the nineteenth century. Marcel Prawy identifies the designs for each act of the 1883 *Tristan* as the work of a different artist: Act I he attributes to Burghart, Act II to Carlo Brioschi, and Act III to Kautsky.  

Mahler became director of the Vienna Court Opera in 1897 and in 1900 made a change in personnel that would begin the process of modernizing the visual presentation of opera and ballet to better match his ideals. He appointed Heinrich Lefler as “head of set design, artistic advisor and costume designer” on 1 August 1900, replacing the previous costume designer Franz Gaul (1837-1907). Lefler had been trained at the academies of fine arts in Vienna and Munich and was co-founder of the Hagenbund, a community of artists that in Greisenegger’s view mediated between the “impetuous passions of the youthful Secession” and the academic traditionalists. Lefler began the process of modernizing stage presentation by eliminating backdrops and moving away from the practice of using a permanent stock of scenery for multiple productions.

He helped to reduce the clutter that was a major feature of the nineteenth-century stage and also emphasized practicality over exhaustive detail in stage design. He developed machinery such as a swivel stage for dealing with heavy set pieces, much like Roller would later make use of a rotating stage to facilitate rapid scene changes. Lefler was a master at creating mood with lighting and was especially talented at costume design as well. He left the Court Opera in October 1903, around the time of Roller’s appointment as stage designer, to teach at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts. Greisenegger characterizes Lefler’s primary aim as the designing of a stage that created “total illusion,” a concept that built on the work of Carlo and Anton Brioschi. Roller was clearly not the first stage designer at the Court Opera to steer the company in a new direction, away from stuffy naturalism. He shared many of Lefler’s values and would continue the work initiated by him. With Mahler, Roller would help to create model productions of primarily Mozart and Wagner works in the years 1903-1907.

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301 Greisenegger (1986), 191.  
302 Ibid., 192.
Pen and Ink Sketches: Roller’s First Conception of the Production?

Wagner’s music dramas became closely associated with a literal and naturalistic style of stage presentation entirely in keeping with nineteenth-century convention and the subject materials of the works themselves. What became known as the “Bayreuth style” epitomized this naturalistic visual mode of presentation. Wagner’s works inspired bold new forms of stage machinery, such as those for creating the dragon in Siegfried or suspending the Rhine Maidens in Das Rheingold. The difficulties that such contraptions created for stagehands and stage designers were an expected consequence of such a focus upon strict naturalism in production design.

Although this style came to define Wagner’s works, not everyone was pleased with the results. Bauer has criticized the work of landscape painters such as Josef Hoffmann, who designed the scenery for the Bayreuth Ring productions during Wagner’s lifetime, for not fully realizing the “active function” that Wagner assigned to nature and the landscape in the Ring. For Bauer, Hoffmann failed in his task, because he created “stereotypical heroic landscapes” in the style of the nineteenth century. Those who might respond more sensitively to Wagner’s conception were the impressionists and secessionists whose pleinair style “brought the values of light, mood, motion, and personal feeling to landscape painting,” and Alfred Roller was just such an artist. An examination of his sketches for Tristan reveals a keen sensitivity to the work’s dramatic themes and a more creative use of light and color than was evident in the sketches for the 1883 Court Opera production.

The Alfred Roller Archive, housed at the Austrian Theater Museum in Vienna, includes visual materials and correspondence connected with his work at the Vienna Court (and later State) Opera. Among the materials related to the 1903 Tristan production is a set of nine sketches that depict characters and scenes from the opera. One is a pencil drawing of Tristan standing alone, without a background scene. The other eight sketches

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were made in black and white ink on paper and present dramatic, close-up views of specific scenes from Acts I and II. Six of the nine sketches include short musical excerpts in staff notation, drawn by hand just below the image. These clearly indicate the exact context for those scenes.

I discovered these sketches, which have never been published or described in the Mahler, Roller, or Wagner literature, even in Manfred Wagner’s 1996 monograph Alfred Roller und seine Zeit, while examining a portion of the Roller archive during the summer of 2007. The sketches are quite unlike any of the other visual materials that I viewed, which included materials from all of the productions on which Mahler and Roller collaborated. Instead of colorful depictions of entire stage sets, images of specific characters in costume, or diagrams of stage layouts, these show individual characters in dramatic focus who bear no strict resemblance to the singers who actually sang the roles in 1903. They are also the only sketches that include musical notation, possibly in Roller’s own hand. These may be some of the first sketches that Roller made of his conception of the work in 1902, which helped convince Mahler to hire him as stage designer at the Court Opera. The visual style and inclusion of musical notation suggest they may have served as Roller’s “audition materials” during the initial presentation of his vision for the work to Mahler.

I have divided the nine unpublished sketches into four groups based on content (see Table 1). Two images of Tristan comprise the first group, one a sketch of a knight without a dramatic context and the other a specific scene from Act 1. The second group consists of three scenes from Act 1 focusing on Isolde. Two of these are very similar in content, depicting Isolde reclining on her bed aboard the ship, raising herself with her left arm and looking towards the open door to her tent. The other sketch shows her standing in the tent, gazing at Tristan in the distance over her right shoulder. The third group consists of two images of the lovers embracing. Sketch #6 is less detailed than and may be a preparatory study for the more polished Sketch #7. Two images of Isolde from Act II comprise the final group.
Table 1: Format and Content of the Unpublished Sketches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sketch</th>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Layout</th>
<th>Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.1</td>
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<td>vertical</td>
<td>pencil on paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>vertical</td>
<td>B/W ink on paper</td>
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<tr>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>Isolde (Act I)</td>
<td>horizontal</td>
<td>B/W ink on paper</td>
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<td>4.2</td>
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<td>vertical</td>
<td>B/W ink on paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Isolde (Act I)</td>
<td>vertical</td>
<td>B/W ink on paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Tristan and Isolde</td>
<td>vertical</td>
<td>B/W ink on paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>4.3</td>
<td>Tristan and Isolde</td>
<td>vertical</td>
<td>B/W ink on paper</td>
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<td>(music)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<td>vertical</td>
<td>B/W ink on paper</td>
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<tr>
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<td>4.5</td>
<td>Isolde (Act II)</td>
<td>vertical</td>
<td>B/W ink on paper</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Detail of Sketch 9</td>
<td>(music)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Figure 4.1 shows a male figure with a sword facing forwards at a slight angle towards the viewer. The grim expression on his face and his deep-set, darkly shadowed eyes are quite striking. This is the only pencil sketch among the set of nine and is the only one with Roller’s initials included. The hairstyle and facial features resemble those of the male figure in Sketch #2, who is clearly meant to be Tristan (see Figure 4.1).

Sketch #2 shows Tristan from the right side, with right hand on his scabbard and left hand brandishing his unsheathed sword hilt-first in front of him. His jaw is clenched and his facial expression is serious. The shape of his face and his wiry hair closely resemble that of the figure in Sketch #1. His dark cloak has a stylized pattern of light circles with three smaller dark circles within them. The detail on his clothing suggests chain mail. Tristan’s attire closely resembles that found in a portrait made in 1923 and presented as a gift to the Danish tenor Erik Schmedes, who sang Tristan in the 1903 production. The cloak with the black and white circle motif is clearly identifiable. The musical excerpt included below the image is Tristan’s vocal line with the accompanying words “War Morold dir so wert” (“If Morold meant so much to you”) from Act 1, Scene 5 (see Example 4.1). Isolde has just recounted to Tristan how he slew her lover Morold in Ireland and was critically wounded himself. She discovered and

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304 I was only able to gain permission from the Austrian Theater Museum to reproduce the sketches with Figure Numbers given in this table.

305 Vocal score: p. 81/system 3/bars 1-3; full score: p. 152/1/4-6.
healed the injured Tristan, not recognizing him at first. After realizing who he was, she attempted to slay him with his own sword, but his eyes opened at the critical moment and his piercing gaze caused her to waver and lower the weapon. Tristan now realizes the suffering he has inflicted upon Isolde and offers his sword to her so that she might finish the job she had begun at that time. Roller’s sketch reflects the desperation and intensity of
this moment. The diagonal lines on the floor suggest floorboards on a ship, appropriate for this scene. In this sketch, Tristan’s jaw is clenched, so he is not literally singing those words in this image. He may have just finished singing the phrase, or may be about to begin singing.

In Sketch #3, Isolde is reclined on her bed on-board the ship sailing for Cornwall in Act 1. She raises herself up with her left arm and stares towards the open door of her tent, through which the sea and a stairway are visible. Brangäne stands at the door in the background, looking out through the opening of the tent. The amount of detail is impressive, and the geometric patterns on the bedposts and sheets, as well as the texture of Isolde’s clothing, are well-rendered. Numerous chests and perhaps a fur rug are also visible. This sketch is particularly dramatic, presenting Isolde in a striking and sensual pose and allowing the viewer to gaze over her shoulder in the same direction as she does. This is also the only one of the nine sketches created in a horizontal format, just over twice as wide as it is tall.

The musical excerpt included below this sketch presents the melody and text of Isolde’s first utterance in Act 1 (Scene 1): “Wer wagt mich zu höhnen?” (“Who dares to mock me?” – see Example 4.2). The musical excerpt included below this sketch presents the melody and text of Isolde’s first utterance in Act 1 (Scene 1): “Wer wagt mich zu höhnen?” (“Who dares to mock me?” – see Example 4.2). She has just heard the song of the young sailor that follows the Act 1 prelude, in which he sings to his “Irish maiden,” his “wild, adorable girl.” Wagner’s score instructions indicate that she begins the act lying on a bed with her face buried in pillows, but that she “suddenly springs up” (jäh auffahrend) just before her first utterance. Roller’s sketch accurately reproduces Wagner’s scenic instructions, which describe a tent-like chamber on the foredeck of a ship, richly hung with tapestries. The walls of the tent are completely closed in the background at the beginning of the act, and a narrow stairway at the side leads up to the deck. Brangäne, holding open a flap of the tent, looks to the side over the railing. Roller biographer Max Mell recalled the posts of Isolde’s couch as being “decorated with heathen painting and carvings” and “covered in black and gold.” The casket with the death potion had a “roof-like cover, glistening

306 Vocal score: p. 5/5/2-3; full score: p. 21/4/2-3.
307 Wagner’s instructions read: “Zeltartiges Gemach auf dem Vorderdeck eines Seeschiffes, reich mit Teppichen behangen, beim Beginn nach dem Hintergrunde zu gänzlich geschlossen; zur Seite führt eine schmale Treppe in den Schiffsräum hinab. (Rechts vom Zuschauer.) Isolde auf einem Ruhebett, das Gesicht in die Kissen gedrückt. –Brangäne, einen Teppich zurückgeschlagen haltend, blickt zur Seite über Bord. (Links im Hintergrund.)”
golden like a small church, covered with large semi-precious stones, with celtic ornamentation like the curtains and couch.” The total effect of this scene is evidence that the stage designer was intimately familiar with the “modern Viennese artistic trade.” In Anna von Mildenburg’s staging notes for this moment (1936), Isolde was to appear “unsettled” (verstört) and seek Brangäne with a “forelorn gaze” (mit verlorenem Blick).

Example 4.2. Tristan und Isolde, Act I, Scene 1, mm. 25-26

Sketch #4 is very similar to #3, though there is no musical excerpt included (see Figure 4.2). The orientation is vertical, rather than horizontal, thus we see less of Isolde’s chamber. The focus remains on Isolde on the bed and Brangäne by the tent opening in the background, now facing more towards Isolde. The sea and ship railing are a little more visible through the opening than in Sketch #3.

In Sketch #5, Isolde stands in her chamber aboard the ship in Act 1 and looks over her right shoulder. We see that she is looking towards the silhouette of Tristan in the background, visible through another open flap in the tent. The level of detail is impressive, as we also see pennants, ropes, and other people on the deck in the background with Tristan. Isolde’s long, flowing hair gives her a wild appearance that perhaps mirrors her internal state.

The musical excerpt included below the image consists of the vocal line and text of Isolde’s first utterance in Act 1, Scene 2, immediately after the voice of the young sailor is heard again, intoning a portion of his song from the beginning of the act.\textsuperscript{309} She sings “*Mir erkoren, mir verloren*” (“fated for me, lost to me” – see Example 4.3).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image}
\caption{Roller: Isolde reclining in Act I (courtesy OETM)}
\end{figure}

Wagner instructs that her gaze finds Tristan and remains fixedly raised towards him as she sings these words. Roller follows these instructions in this image and presents a more intimate view of the scene than a spectator would have been afforded from the auditorium. Wagner’s stage instructions for this scene indicate that:

The ship is visible along the length of its starboard side, across the deck and out to sea and the horizon. Sailors are located around the main mast in the center of the scene, busy with the ropes: beyond them knights and squires are visible on the starboard side; at a distance from them is Tristan, standing with folded arms and staring at the sea as if deep in thought, Kurwenal carelessly lying at his feet.\textsuperscript{310}

Roller chose not to depict all that detail in these sketches, but focused on the dramatic tension between the title characters, upon which Isolde elaborates through her narration,

\textsuperscript{309} Vocal score: p. 15/1/4 – p. 15/2/1; full score: p. 36/1/1-4.
\textsuperscript{310} “Man blick dem Schiff entlang bis zum Steuerbord, über den Bord hinaus auf das Meer und den Horizont. Um den Hauptmast in der Mitte ist Seevolk, mit Tauen beschäftigt, gelagert: über sie hinaus gewahrt man am Steuerbord Ritter und Knappen, ebenfalls gelagert, von ihnen etwas entfernt Tristan, mit verschrankten Armen stehend, und sinnend in das Meer blickend; zu Füßen ihm, nachlässig gelagert, Kurwenal.”
and which the music vividly depicts. Such an intense focus and zoom as we find in this image could not have been directly reproduced onstage.

Example 4.3. *Tristan und Isolde*, Act I, Scene 2, mm. 23-26

Sketch #6 is one of two depicting the lovers embracing. Isolde has her arms wrapped around Tristan’s neck, her face upwards towards the sky, and seems to be hanging from him with her legs bent and feet barely touching the ground. He has his arms wrapped around her upper back and his face hidden behind hers. There is no musical example included with this sketch, which might be a study for the embrace of Sketch #7, which is more clearly situated in Act II through its musical excerpt. The level of detail in #6 is much less than in #7, especially in the figures’ faces and hair. Figure #6 might also depict the lovers’ embrace in Act I after consuming the love potion, thinking that they were drinking poison. The diagonal lines on the floor may suggest floorboards on a ship, which Roller clearly indicated on other sketches for Act I.

Sketch #7, in contrast with #6, shows a much greater level of detail and appears more polished in general (see Figure 4.3). The background resembles a starry sky or thick foliage, appropriate for the Act II setting, a bright and charming summer night and a “garden with tall trees in front of Isolde’s chamber.”311 Their clothing is much lighter in color than in the Act I sketches, and the use of white pencil or perhaps chalk evokes moonlight reflecting off of their bodies.

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311 “Garten mit hohen Bäumen vor dem Gemach Isoldes, zu welchem, seitwärts gelegen, Stufen hinaufführen. Helle, anmutige Sommernacht.”
The musical excerpt included below this sketch is the two bars of orchestral music that immediately precedes their impassioned and rapid dialogue in Act 2 ("Bist du mein?,” “Hab ich dich wieder?” etc. – see Figure 4.4). Isolde had planned a rendezvous with Tristan and had waited impatiently since the beginning of the act for Brangäne to extinguish the torch that would signal to Tristan that it was safe to approach. Isolde finally extinguished the torch herself by throwing it to the ground, signaling that King Marke and his hunting party were safely away; the ensuing hungry embrace of the lovers is vividly captured in Roller’s picture.

Figure 4.3. Roller: Tristan and Isolde embrace (courtesy OETM)

312 Vocal score: p. 140/2/2-3; full score: p. 266/1/4-5.
In Sketch #8 we see a figure with left arm raised standing at a balcony with a starry sky in the background. The musical excerpt included below the image reveals that this is Isolde holding her veil or handkerchief aloft and waving it towards the approaching Tristan. The music comes from near the end of the transition to scene 2 of Act II, as Isolde eagerly awaits her lover’s arrival after she extinguished the warning torch (see Example 4.5).\footnote{Vocal score: p. 138/3/1 (with p.u.); full score: p. 261/2/2 (with p.u.).} Wagner’s score instructions indicate that, beginning thirteen bars before the brief excerpt included on this sketch, Isolde is to begin “waving a handkerchief, occasionally at first, then more often, and finally faster and faster, in passionate impatience.”\footnote{“[Isolde] winkt mit einem Tuche, erst seltener, dann häufiger, und endlich, in leidenschaftlicher Ungeduld, immer schneller.”} Roller conveys a sense of motion and energy in this sketch.
through the use of wavy lines to suggest both the waving of the handkerchief in Isolde’s left hand and her motion in rushing to the wall to look for her approaching lover. In her notes on portraying Isolde, Mildenburg indicates that the handkerchief is to be raised and then lowered every two bars.

Sketch #9 shows Isolde standing as if in an ecstatic trance, with her long hair flowing behind, as in a strong wind, and seeming to blend with the stars overhead (see Figure 4.5). Her clothing also trails behind her, perhaps blown by the wind in a graceful loop. The arms are held near her side with palms facing outward, and she appears to be opening herself up to some sort of supernatural influence, as if receiving a vision. Her eyes and mouth are wide open and suggest a state of heightened emotion.

The musical excerpt included below this sketch comes from Isolde’s impassioned scene in which she implores Brangäne to extinguish the torch so that Tristan might come to her (see Figure 4.6). The melody and text of the passage “Frau Minne will es werde Nacht” (“Lady Love desires night to come”) are included here.  

Frau Minne was a Medieval poetic figure characterized by Barbara Newman as an “imperious goddess” who initiated the poet Mechthild of Magdeburg “into the joys of love” in her The Flowing Light of the Godhead. In medieval sources Lady Love was a figure who might

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even exert power over Almighty God. Roller’s image of Isolde invoking the goddess captures the transcendental power of Lady Love over her subjects. The contrast of night and day, a crucial element in Wagner’s drama, emerges as well. Tristan and Isolde both desire to escape from the harsh light of day, associated with civilization and social
obligation, into the realm of night and unconscious bliss, far from the prying eyes of others. More literally, however, Isolde’s pleas for nightfall reflect her desire for the darkness caused by the extinguishing of the warning torch. Mildenburg’s notes indicate that she is to assume a dramatic pose in her interpretation of this moment. At the words “Frau Minne will,” Isolde is to spread her arms widely in a “powerful upswing” with hands flat and thrust out [in mächtigem Aufschwung, beide Arme weit ausbreitend (Hände flach ausgestreckt)]. At the words “es werde Nacht,” she is to make a large, “commanding,” and “invoking” gesture out into the world around (Eine große, wie befehlende, beschwörende Gebärde, in die Welt hinaus). She added that this should be a larger-than-life gesture (überlebensgroße Gebärde). Roller depicts Isolde with hands flat, but less agitated in her stance than Mildenburg’s interpretation suggests.

**Evaluation.** In these nine Tristan sketches Roller engages intensely with Wagner’s music drama. His focus on highly dramatic moments, starkly rendered in black and white and in close focus upon the characters depicted, differentiates these sketches from his better-known drawings of entire stage sets or the actual singers in costume for the 1903 Tristan production. The musical excerpts included on six of the nine sketches
are transcribed reasonably accurately. Time signatures are reproduced correctly, although five of the six excerpts have time signatures written with a thick horizontal dash between the two numbers, like a fraction. Figure #4 has a standard time signature without the dash. The writing of time signatures like a fraction (with the dash) is not standard in printed music. However, Roller’s predecessor as stage designer at the Court Opera, Heinrich Lefler, used a dash in the time signature of a musical excerpt (“Ach, du lieber Augustin”) in his illustrated novel Die Prinzessin und der Schweinehirt (The Princess and the Swineherd, 1897). The dash in the time signature was thus not a complete anomaly in these Tristan sketches. Perhaps this was a convention among visual artists at that time. Dynamics are indicated in only two of the examples: #8 (fff) and #9 (ff). It seems reasonable to conclude that Roller would have included these musical excerpts to signal his knowledge of the score to Mahler. Nevertheless, I have as yet been unable to definitively match the handwriting in these musical examples with other examples of Roller’s or Mahler’s handwriting.

The musical notation seems generally cruder in execution than the visual images themselves. The staff lines, for example, were clearly drawn without a straight edge and are unevenly spaced and not perfectly parallel. This could be the result of a hand not trained in writing music (such as Roller’s would have been), or because the notation was written right at or very near the bottom edge of the paper in each notated example. It is more difficult to write anything at the very bottom of a sheet of paper than towards the middle or top.

Roller imbued all eight sketches with a dramatic intensity that is heightened by the stark contrast of black and white. The level of detail is exquisite, including intricate depictions of clothing, flowing hair, and Isolde’s bed from Act I. Roller’s focus upon characters in emotionally-charged situations, including two depictions of the lovers embracing, rather than on panoramic images of the whole stage, distinguish his conception of the work from earlier Vienna productions. Brioschi’s 1883 Vienna Tristan suggested the neo-Baroque influence of Hans Makart, for example. Sketches related to earlier productions tended to showcase the entire stage setting, as in Figure 4.10 (see below). The intimacy of these sketches is well-suited to the spirit of Tristan und Isolde, a work in which the emotional connection between the protagonists is the major focus,
rather than the world of appearances and societal expectations. The inclusion of musical
excerpts would have indicated to Mahler that Roller was intimately familiar with
Wagner’s score and that he had an original visual conception of the work closely tied to
the music.

Final Conception

Roller’s bold use of light and color in the 1903 Tristan modernized the visual
element of Wagner productions and also invigorated critical debates about the relative
importance of music and stage spectacle in the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk. In her
dissertation on this opera Eva Luschinsky cites light and color as “perhaps the most
important” of Roller’s innovations in the production.317 Several critics associated the
visual style of the Mahler-Roller Tristan with the Secessionists. Max Graf noted that
when Tristan asks Kurwenal in Act III “Which flag?” was flying on the approaching ship,
the latter could rightfully have answered: “the flag of the Secession.” For him, every
brushstroke and arrangement of colors “shouts the motto of the Viennese Secession
Group down to the stalls: ‘To the Age its Art—to Art its Freedom.’” Roller’s visual style
marked a “new chapter” and a “new way,” though perhaps only a “byway” (Seitenweg),
in the history of stage design.318 Likewise, Mahler biographer Richard Specht praised the
1903 Tristan primarily because at no point in the production were there any presumptions
(etwas vom ‘Requisit’) about what a Tristan production must show onstage. Even the love
potion, in his view, was “superfluous” and functioned only as a symbol, “as Wagner
intended.”319

Lighting. Roller’s innovations with light were of particular importance in this
production. Roller attempted to bring expressive light to the Vienna Court Opera by
revamping the lighting system, moving away from a reliance upon footlights and strip
lighting, and towards the use of powerful focused light and innovations like the

University of Vienna, 1977), 114.
318 Max Graf, review in Hamburger Nachrichten (15 March 1903).
319 Richard Specht, Gustav Mahler (Berlin: Schuster & Loeffler, 1913), 134. “Das war an dieser
Aufführung so erschütternd: daß sie in keinem Moment mehr etwas vom ‘Requisit’ hatte; sogar der
Liebestrank wurde als solcher überflüssig und wirkte, wie es Wagner will, nur als Symbol.”
Oswald Georg Bauer cited the introduction of electric lighting at the Court Opera in the early 1880s as one of the technological advancements that most facilitated Roller’s advancements in operatic staging. For Bauer, gaslight had poorly lit the painted backdrops of the typical “illusion-stage” of the nineteenth century. But in Roller’s time, light and color were no longer bound to canvas surfaces. The introduction of electric light allowed the music to be “made visible” ("ließ sich die Musik sichtbar machen"), and this “supple, color-variable” light could be synchronized to the “fluctuations of the music.” The visual could become an active partner to the aural.

Bauer goes so far as to state that for the first time in the history of staging Wagnerian works, Roller attempted to “create an impression of what the music expresses” using light. Roller’s expressive lighting has therefore been interpreted by many as an essential tool in the quest for the true Gesamtkunstwerk.

Max Graf described Roller’s use of expressive and symbolic colors in the 1903 Tristan in much greater detail than his use of light alone, although the two elements were intimately connected. In regards to the production as a whole, Graf memorably noted that “light and air make music with the Wagnerian orchestra” ("Licht und Luft musizieren mit dem Wagnerschen Orchester"). In the first act the tension between Tristan and Isolde was intensified through the intensity of the sunlight simulated by Roller. For Graf, the sun burned “hotly through the brown-red awnings” (heiß brennt die Sonne durch die braunroten Sonnensegel) and “in almost unbearable oppressiveness,” representing the “deceitful day” that Tristan cursed during the act (Die Sonne brennt in fast unerträglicher Schwüle: es ist der ‘tückische Tage’, den Tristan verflucht). The sky, meanwhile, glistened in a “luminous blue” (Der Himmel glänzt in leuchtender Bläue). In recounting the second act, the bright summer night with its famous love scene for the title characters, the star-filled sky glistened with a “violet glow” and the violet light crawled “down the white stone walls of the castle, along the high staircase that leads to the chamber, and

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320 For more on Roller’s lighting designs, see: Baker (1993), 88-90.
321 Bauer, 65. “Das bewegliche, farblich veränderbare elektrische Licht konnte synchron zum Fluktieren der Musik geführt werden, es wird zum Handlungspartner der Musik.”
322 Ibid., 66. “[Roller] hatte […] gewagt, das, was die Musik zum Ausdruck bringt, durch das Licht Eindruck werden zu lassen.”
over the blooming bushes and stone seats.”

Emil Lucka, recalling his first impressions of Roller’s lighting in *Tristan*, observed that:

Suddenly everything was different. The scenery had disappeared, there was no longer any platform lighting, a wondrous flood of light, the likes of which had never before been seen on any stage. Roller had discovered completely new methods of stage lighting, he built his fantasy of the stage-image out of light and gushing colors.

Based on the enthusiastic descriptions of such critics, we may safely conclude that Roller created striking and new images using light.

His lighting scheme was not universally praised, however. The critic in the *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung* called attention to a few deficiencies in the second act. The all-important contrast between night and day, so vital to the plot in Act II, had been translated to the stage a bit too strongly. Whereas the castle wall reflected moonlight, the bench on which the lovers sat was placed in deep darkness, rendering their gestures practically invisible.

Nonetheless, for Graf the “fundamental chords of each act became a gleaming light” (*die Grundakkorde jedes Aktes warden zu leuchtendem Schein*). Roller’s sensitive use of colors, however, seems to have made an even stronger impression on critics.

**Use of color.** Numerous scholars and critics have noted Roller’s basic approach to color in his *Tristan* sets: the use of a dominant color (*Grundton*) for each act. For Max Kalbeck, Roller sought to capture the mood of each act using these fundamental colors: shades of yellow and orange for Act I, an “oppressive, seductive purple” (*ein schweres, verführerisches Lila*) for the longing for love in Act II, which turns into a cold, bluish-white and then into an “envious yellow” (*neidisches Gelb*) towards the end of the act, and finally an ashen gray (*fahlem Grau*) for the final act.

Max Graf observed that the “nervous color Romanticism of the moderns now reigns in the new *Tristan* decorations

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323 Graf. “In violettem Scheine glänzt der sternbesäte Himmel und das violette Licht kriecht an den weißen Steinmauern der Burg herab, dort an der hohen Treppe, die zur Warte führt entlang, da über die blühenden Büsche und Steinsitze.”


325 *Wiener Allgemeine Zeitung* (25 February 1903).

326 Max Kalbeck in the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* (22 February 1903).
by Alfred Roller” and that the décor might be labeled “Secessionist” or even “Impressionist.” For him, the highest goal of the modern art of colors, as exemplified by Impressionism, was to trace the “mood content” (Stimmungsgehalt) and to discover the “independent, inner poetry” of color. Graf reflected that his own words were unable to “compensate for colors” and his stories unable to “replace images.” Roller’s “poetically-contrived, novel decorations,” displayed colors that arose “from the music.” The visual style was able to “transform something of the sensitive ‘Tristan’-chromaticism into decorative art,” and to “achieve musical impressions with vibrations of air and color.”

Graf described each act of the 1903 Tristan as a “Symphony” in a particular color, imitating the American painter James Whistler’s use of musical terminology in the titles of many of his paintings. Act I for Graf was a “Symphony in Red,” whereas the second and third acts were Symphonies in Violet and Gray, respectively. Reddish hues indeed dominated Roller’s conception of the first act set, as evident in his color sketches (see Figures 4.7 and 4.8). Graf noted the intense heat of the sunlight coming through the brown-red awnings of Isolde’s tent and the red flag that waved in the wind at the stern of the ship. He described the entire set as a “hot, oversized, self-contained and, as a result, scorching interior, excruciatingly suffocating and set to erupt, against which the ‘Ho! he! ho! he!’ of the sailors pounds like a nervously pulsating touch.”

Roller’s sketch for the end of the act revealed the transformative power of light to change the mood of a scene, as the suffocating curtains were opened.

Roller’s Act II setting was noted by many critics for its lush beauty and the dramatic change in lighting upon the entrance of King Marke and his party. Graf, however, saw color, and described the stage design as follows, specifically referencing Whistler:

The second act is a “Symphony in Violet,” as Whistler would call it. A tall castle upon a hill, along the slope of which the forest flows downwards. Night-violets, lilacs, and white roses glisten in the garden and arch over stone banks and over a short wall that encloses the garden. The star-filled sky gleams with a violet glow, and a violet light creeps down the white

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327 Mell (1922), 22. “Der ganze Raum ein heißes, überlang in sich geschlossenes und davon hitzebrütendes, in seiner Qual erstickendes, ausbruchtreifes Inneres, an welches das ‘Ho! he! ho! he!’ der Matrosen wie eine schreckhaft pulsierende Berührung stößt.”

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stone walls of the castle, upon the high stairway that leads along to the chamber, over the blooming bushes and stone seats.\textsuperscript{328}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure47}
\caption{Roller: \textit{Tristan und Isolde}, Act I Beginning (courtesy OETM)}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure48}
\caption{Roller: \textit{Tristan und Isolde}, Act I End (courtesy OETM)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{328} Max Graf, \textit{Hamburger Nachrichten} (15 March 1903).
Roller’s is a lush setting bathed in moonlight, and less cluttered and darker in tone than the design by Carlo Brioschi for the 1883 Vienna Tristan (see Figures 4.9 and 4.10).

Figure 4.9. Roller: Tristan und Isolde, Act II Beginning (courtesy OETM)

Figure 4.10. Carlo Brioschi: Tristan und Isolde, Act II (courtesy OETM)
What Roller’s sketch shows is perhaps a greater focus on different shades of a single color, in this case violet, rather than a bold use of widely contrasting colors. Graf rightly saw this movement as a “Symphony in Violet, as Whistler would call it.” In Whistler’s *Nocturne in Blue and Silver* or *Symphony in White No. 2* (1864), much like in Roller’s sketch for Act II of *Tristan*, the artist explored multiple shades of one central color. Graf was clearly familiar with Whistler’s work, or at least the artist’s propensity for using musical terms in his painting titles.\(^{329}\) For the dramatic change in lighting that accompanies sunrise and the entrance of King Marke’s party at the end of Act II of *Tristan*, Roller provided a sketch exploring varying shades of pale orange and brown (see Figure 4.11). Graf identified violet as pervasive throughout the nighttime portions of the act, and Roller provided a stark counterpoint to that color for the intrusion of the external world.

\[\text{Figure 4.11. Roller: Tristan und Isolde, Act II End (courtesy OETM)}\]

\(^{329}\text{Whistler did not use musical terminology in order to create a composite artwork with an ethical or regenerative purpose along the lines of Wagner’s collective artwork, but had aesthetic matters alone in mind.}\]
Max Mell remarked that Roller’s lighting accompanied the “emotional events” of the drama, the “dull and heavy night” in Act II being “transfigured into a deep shimmer in the harmonies of the love-dream.” The brilliant blue light that was dominant during the love duet yielded to a “pale, bleak day with a weak dawn sky dispersed among impure clouds,” which broke above a “low, pale-blue series of hills” upon Melot’s treachery and the return of the hunting party.  

Roller’s sets for Act III further demonstrated his distinctive use of color, and critics overwhelmingly praised his conception. Graf characterized this act as a “Symphony in Gray,” because of the gray “ruined walls of Tristan’s castle,” the sky, “on which scraps of cloud hang,” and the sea, stretching into the distance (see Figure 4.12).

Graf even surmised that an autumn storm might have blown through the top of the great lime tree, because of the “silver-gray leaves” strewn about its base. “Desolation” and

“desertedness” characterized the act for him, one which was also an “enormous altered minor-chord of decay.” The deathly-ill Tristan, wrapped in a white wool blanket and half buried in the earth, seemed to have “blended with his home-soil of Kareol,” and to have actually “taken root in it.” 331 Compared with earlier stagings, such as the 1865 world premiere in Munich, with naturalistic designs by Angelo Quaglio, Roller’s conception of the act was much more sensitive to Wagner’s minor-key themes and Tristan’s intense longing for Isolde.

Roller’s visual style aroused passionate responses both positive and negative. The pervasive blending of aural and visual terminology in press reactions, such as “Lichtmusik” (“Light-Music”) or “Symphony in Violet,” indicate that a Mahler-Roller collaboration was often a feast for multiple senses. Franz Willnauer observed that Roller was not attempting to create a synaesthetic effect of “producing tones through colors,” but instead created “colorful experiential spaces” and expressed the “inner plot” through “symbolic colors and forms.” 332

**Influences.** Many important and influential theater reformers at the turn-of-the-century engaged with the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk. One of the most prominent stage reformers was Adolphe Appia. He was born in 1862 in Geneva and studied music in Paris, Leipzig, and Dresden. Marcel Prawy has asserted that many of Mahler’s ideas for opera reform in Vienna were inspired by Appia’s writings, in which the author “postulate[d] settings” in which the scene was “no more than indicated.” 333 Two of his most significant works would have been available for Mahler or Roller to explore. In 1898 Appia published his conception of modern operatic staging, *La Musique et la mise en scène* (music and the art of the theater). A German translation was published the following year in Munich. In his article “Light and Staging” (“Das Licht und die Inszenierung”) which appeared in the journal *Wiener Rundschau* in 1900, he distinguished “light” from mere “brightness.” Light, for him, did not mean the “ability to see,” just as “music” was not the same thing as “sound.” Light differentiated itself from

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331 Graf. Luschinsky observes that a “bright, cold gray” dominates this act, reflecting the “atmosphere of bleak desolation” (*die Atmosphäre trostloser Verlassenheit*). Luschinsky, 117.

332 Willnauer (2005), 94. “Roller hat farbige Erlebnisräume geschaffen, hat die ‘innere’ Handlung in Symbolfarben und –formen zum Ausdruck gebracht.” Synaesthesia is the phenomenon by which the stimulation of one sense produces a stimulus in at least one other sense. An example would be someone visualizing a particular color or experiencing a certain taste when hearing a distinct musical pitch.

333 See: Prawy, 69.
brightness through its “power of arrangement” and “expressive ability.” For Appia, modern theaters unfortunately offered “the ability to see,” but “without light.”

Appia rejected theatrical naturalism and the desire for scenic illusion that was accomplished through flat painted scenery, while advocating a simplification of stage presentation and the use of light and three-dimensional stage space to create appropriate atmosphere. He felt that painted scenes were the most artificial and overused element of theatrical presentation, and that the need to illuminate painted scenery properly made light a subservient element. Likewise, the free use of three-dimensional stage space was restricted by the artificiality of the painted backdrop. Stage design and construction should allow for the proper development of each visual element of production, and the existing stage should be rejected to the extent that it hindered the “growth of spatial arrangement and lighting.”

Roller echoed Appia’s glorification of the spatial possibilities of the stage in his 1930 article. He stated that the stage offered no “pictures,” but instead “spaces,” which were “tailored to the poet’s work and the actor’s word and gesture.”

How did Appia envision a proper staging of Tristan und Isolde? Based upon a sketch made in 1896, it would appear that general darkness characterized his conception of Act II. As the curtain opened, he presented this image:

A large bright torch in the center of the picture. The rather limited space of the stage is illuminated by a diffuse light, just enough to make the characters clearly distinguishable without entirely depriving the torch of its somewhat blinding brightness, nor above all, destroying the shadows projected by this brightness.

After Isolde extinguished the torch, the stage was to take on a “uniform chiaroscuro” in which the eye lost itself, “unarrested by any line or object.” As she rushed to meet Tristan, she was “plunged into a mysterious darkness” which increased the “impression of depth” which the setting gave to the right half of the stage. Only when King Marke

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334 Adolphe Appia, “Das Licht und die Inscenierung,” *Wiener Rundschau* (1900): 426. Marcel Prawy observes that Roller also “did not always equate light with brightness,” and that his sets were often criticized as being too dark. See Prawy, 70.
335 Appia (1962), 50.
337 Appia (1962), 200.
338 Idem.
and his hunting party entered did daylight slowly increase, “cold” and “colorless,” revealing to us the “full severity” of the setting.³³⁹

Appia’s Act II setting was darker and exhibited starker contrasts between light and dark than Roller’s sketches. The closest resemblance between the two artists’ conceptions was the layout of the scene and the design of the castle and its staircase. The staging instructions in the original orchestral score indicated merely a “garden with high trees in front of Isolde’s chamber, which is set to one side with steps leading up to it,” and that it was a “bright and inviting summer night.” The lit torch was placed beside the open door. It is not certain whether Roller would have seen Appia’s sketch when he designed the Court Opera production in 1902. He would likely have been aware of Appia’s ideas, however, since a German translation of La Musique et la Mise en Scène was published in Munich in 1899, and the essay “Das Licht und die Inszenierung” (“Light and the Art of the Theater”) appeared in Wiener Rundschau in 1900. Mahler would also have been familiar with this publication. Roller seems to have been aiming more for a striking use of color than a dramatic Appian use of lighting effects, contrasting darkness with brightness.

Appia’s conception of the third act included perhaps his most detailed sketch of expressive light in the service of the drama. Light particularly disturbs Tristan in this act, because it reminds him of his separation from Isolde. Appia noted that “as long as light is only a source of Tristan’s suffering, it must not fall on him directly.” But as soon as Tristan sees and associates light with “blissful visions,” it “comes and illuminates his face.” In order to achieve this effect, Appia stressed that it was necessary to limit the light, leaving much of the space in darkness.³⁴⁰

The lighting was also meant to change dramatically over the course of the act. At one point in his third-act sketch, Appia provided lighting details cued to page numbers in the vocal score. During Tristan’s tortured monologue in which he curses the love potion that united him with Isolde, he noted:

³³⁹ Ibid., 201.
³⁴⁰ Appia (1962), 204.
On page 215, the light, turning increasingly more golden, begins to touch Tristan’s feet; on page 218 it reaches up to his waist; on page 221 it touches his face; on page 223 Tristan is fully lighted; on page 225, the beam extends to his surroundings.

During Isolde’s Liebestod, “the light continues to fade, plunging the setting into an even deeper twilight. The curtain closes on a quiet and uniformly lighted picture in which the eye can distinguish only the last touch of the waning sun which faintly colors Isolde’s white dress.”

Appia’s detailed lighting instructions certainly go well beyond anything indicated by Wagner in the score. It is likely that Roller’s style derived more from his training as a painter and from influences such as his Secession colleagues and French Impressionism. The Secession hosted an exhibit of Impressionist works in early 1903. Roller would likely have been aware of Appia’s ideas, but seems to have been aiming more for an intense focus on certain key colors matched to musical moods.

Roller’s lighting for the Court Opera production of *Die Walküre* (1907) demonstrated a more thorough application of darkness to the stage than that in *Tristan und Isolde*. Anna von Mildenburg sang Brünnhilde in the production and wrote a letter to Roller during the rehearsal period before the premiere. In this letter, recently discovered and published by theater historian Franz Willnauer, she criticized the stage designer for the general darkness onstage, which hindered her ability to act properly by reacting to the expressions of her colleagues onstage. Mildenburg’s major complaint was that she was “crying out for light” from Roller. “Just imagine,” she wrote, “I’m standing next to Weidemann [Wotan] during the third act, but unable to determine what is happening in his face.” She suggested that it might be an offense against Roller’s ideas as a painter, but that he ought to “let dawn emerge in place of night.” If this offended his sensibilities, it was nothing in comparison to the “sin and injustice” that he did to “the work, the whole, the idea of the music-drama.” The poor opera-goers, she felt, sat there “at first waiting— then attempting to orient themselves to the stage—to catch something of the scenery— something of the events in our show.” But they were only able to sense or guess at what was happening onstage. More importantly, they lost the “thread of the music” through

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341 Ibid., 205.
sheer “searching and groping.” Fragments of music sounded in their ears, but the connections to the drama suffered under the “constant attempt to see something.” The audience became “enraged” and everything lasted “too long for them in the end.” She added that, after all the hard work on Mahler’s part to craft such a marvelous production, in which “for the first time the spirit of Richard Wagner permeates and fills everything free and unhindered,” Roller’s dark sets “dampen[ed] and dim[med] our joy with a malicious shadow.” She concluded her letter with Brünnhilde’s own words: “Auf Dein Gebot entbrenne ein Feuer” (“May a fire burn at your command”).

Another aspect of Appia’s aesthetics that found expression in Roller’s work, albeit in later productions such as Don Giovanni (1905) and Iphigenie en Aulide (1907), was the uncluttering of the stage. In the former, Roller made use of four movable towers, one placed at each corner of the stage. These towers were visible in each scene, lending continuity to the production’s visual style. They might be hung with tapestries in one scene, or feature windows with people looking out of them in another. Greisenegger wrote that many in the audience were offended by Roller’s simplification of the décor, expecting opera to present a “visual feast” and an “enlightening spectacle.” Many did not appreciate that such functional stage sets allowed for quicker scene changes and thus a smoother flow of the drama and music. But the benefits of such visual clarity were in keeping audience attention focused on the essence of the dramatic action rather than on stage clutter or lengthy and obtrusive pauses for the change of scenery.

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In his writings on stage design and reform, Roller acknowledged the difficulties of defining the specific role of the stage designer. He also stressed the importance of a visual style in tune with the inner laws of each individual work to be staged. Like Mahler, he was dedicated to the creation of model productions at the Vienna Court Opera in the first decade of the twentieth century. Roller’s visual conception of Tristan und Isolde, as revealed in his various sketches, reflected his desire to modernize Wagnerian staging at

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343 Greisenegger (1986), 198.
the dawn of the twentieth century. For Bauer, Mahler and Roller “bridged the gulf between theater and contemporary art,” freeing Wagner’s works from nineteenth-century staging conventions and their “artistic deficiencies.” They thus adapted his work to the expressive language of their time, that of the twentieth century. ⁴⁴

Wagner’s grandson Wieland, himself a significant stage reformer at post-WWII Bayreuth, characterized his grandfather’s staging instructions as nothing but “additional descriptions of his scenic visions for those not familiar with the score.” The staging ideas were intended, in his view, to help the interpreter “decipher the symbols in the score” and to illustrate to the reader of the libretto how Wagner the dramatist had conceived the complete performance. Though the ideas expressed in the music dramas were eternally valid because of their humanity, the visual and directorial instructions were applicable exclusively to his grandfather’s contemporary nineteenth-century theater. ⁴⁵ If this visual style was outmoded by 1903, to say nothing of by the 1950s and 1960s, was his music also a relic of the past at the turn of the century? In the next chapter, I will examine in greater detail possible affinities between Roller’s visual imagery and Wagner’s music in Tristan. Even as styles in the visual arts changed dramatically in the decades following Wagner’s death, his music continued to inspire musicians and non-musicians alike.

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CHAPTER 5
ROLLER’S DESIGNS AND THE GESAMTKUNSTWERK

“We live in an age where musicians want to be painters and painters want to write music”
-Adolphe Appia (1899)346

The Influence of Wagner on Visual Artists

After developing the theory of the Gesamtkunstwerk in the early years of his Swiss exile period, Wagner attempted to put it into practice with his subsequent stage works, the music dramas.347 His idea of the collective art work inspired a wide range of responses, from the dismissive to the enthusiastic. Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick criticized Wagner’s ideas in many of his writings. For him, music was stripped of its unique expressive power by being made subservient to drama in the music dramas. In his preface to the seventh edition of Vom musikalisch Schöne, Hanslick characterized Wagner’s development of “infinite melody” as “formlessness exalted into a principle.”348 His sharpest criticisms were leveled at the composer’s libretti. After hearing the first performances of Parsifal at Bayreuth in 1882, he wrote that the poetic style was a great improvement over that in Tristan or the Ring. “At least we are rid of the childish clatter of the stem-rhymes and alliterations,” he observed. The speech of Parsifal was “simple and natural” in comparison with the “language-butcher ing diction” of Siegfried or

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347 The first works that might accurately be called music dramas are Tristan und Isolde (1859) and Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (1867). Wagner developed the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk primarily in Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft (1849; first published in Leipzig in 1850). Wagner used multiple designations for his earlier works, including Romantische Oper (Der fliegende Holländer and Lohengrin), Grosse romantische Oper (Die Feen and Tannhäuser), Grosse komische Oper (Das Liebesverbot), and Grosse tragische Oper (Rienzi). Parsifal, his final work, he designate a Bühnenweihfestspiel (stage consecration festival).
“At least,” he added, “insofar as Richard Wagner is capable of speaking simply naturally.”

In spite of the opposition of such influential figures as Hanslick, many fin-de-siècle visual artists embraced the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk. Karin Von Maur, in *The Sound of Painting*, observed that Wagner’s theories “set off a wave of synesthetic enthusiasm” throughout Europe. This was intensified in France after the scandal created by the first *Tannhäuser* performances (1861). This work premiered at the Paris Opéra on 13 March 1861. Tensions between France and Germany at that time led to political demonstrations, and Wagner’s refusal to add a ballet in the second act enraged many in attendance. The production was cancelled after only three performances. Not all of the French were opposed to Wagner, however. Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1898) became ardent defenders of Wagner, the former even developing his own synaesthetic theory of *correspondances*. The *Revue Wagnérienne*, a French journal founded in 1885, provided a venue for the discussion and promulgation of new ideas inspired by Wagner’s art and theories. The symbolist poets and impressionist painters were particularly influenced by Wagner’s art and theories. As historian Gerald Turbow has observed, the French “developed a strong, self-conscious Wagnerian movement over a decade before any other country except Germany.” Starting in the 1850s in that country, he also noted, to be “Wagnerian in thinking” was to be “progressive in artistic taste.”

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351 See: Barry Millington et al., “Wagner, Richard,” in *Grove Music Online* (accessed 15 February 2009). Operas performed in France were expected to include ballet. Many composers, including those of the stature of Verdi, added ballets to their operas when performed in France to appeal to French tastes. Wagner resisted this practice, though he did add ballets for *Tannhäuser*.

352 Von Maur, 12-13. She added that this journal “triggered a strong tendency towards a unification of the arts on the basis of synesthesia” in France. It should be noted that Baudelaire’s theory of *correspondances* was not truly Wagnerian, since the composer did not intend for arts that stimulated individual senses to awaken impressions in others. He instead wanted the component arts of his Gesamtkunstwerk to work in cooperation, or even in counterpoint with one another, to intensify the overall dramatic effect. I am grateful to Douglass Seaton for stimulating my thinking along these lines.

Poets and philosophers were not the only non-musicians to be influenced by Wagner’s ideas. Many visual artists and architects also found inspiration in the idea of a collective work of art, often using the term Gesamtkunstwerk in their writings. The Austrian architect and urban planner Camillo Sitte (1843-1903), for example, wrote in 1889 that urban planning was part of a “great and true art of the people.” This was all the more important in his view, because his age lacked “just such a popular synthesizing of all the visual arts in the name of an all-encompassing and unified national work of art [nationales Gesamtkunstwerk].” For him, as for Wagner, the ancient Greeks served as inspirational models. The ancient Greek temple districts in Eleusis, Olympia, and Delphi united architecture, sculpture, and painting into an “artistic synthesis [Gesamtwerk]” in Sitte’s estimation.\(^\text{354}\) American architect and skyscraper pioneer Louis Sullivan, who deeply admired Wagner’s music, designed buildings in America that were both modern in their functionality and that sought to inspire and elevate the condition of common people through colorful ornamentation on their facades.\(^\text{355}\) The Transportation Building that Sullivan designed for the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago was a prime example of his use of polychromy, a wide array of different hues meant to reflect the colors found in the natural world. According to musicologist and critic Klaus Kropfinger, many of the visual artists who advocated the Gesamtkunstwerk did so because of their belief in its potential “regenerative function for human life.”\(^\text{356}\)

As a result of the influence of his music dramas, artists in many different fields found inspiration in Wagner’s ideas. Peter Vergo has observed that around the year 1900 the term Gesamtkunstwerk was tossed about like a “kind of verbal projectile,” and was applied to things that “Wagner himself would never have conceived of,” such as book design, typography, and interior décor. In many of his writings Wagner referred to art as a communal activity using terms such as “Gesamtvolkskunst,” “das Kunstwerk des Gesamtvolkes,” or “das gemeinsame Kunstwerk” more often than he referred to the

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multimedia “Gesamtkunstwerk.” Nevertheless, the idea of a total work of art was much debated and embraced in diverse artistic circles, especially following Wagner’s death in 1883. The resonance of his ideas was widespread, and the Gesamtkunstwerk was discussed and idealized in countries such as France, Russia, England, and the United States. Before returning to Roller and ways in which Wagner’s music and texts might have influenced his designs for Tristan, the works and writings of Sitte, Sullivan, and Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) bear closer examination as representative examples of Wagner’s influence on non-musicians. These artists from varying locales all responded to Wagner’s theory of the Gesamtkunstwerk to a significant degree.

**Louis Sullivan**

The American architect Louis Sullivan (1856-1924) was one of the pioneers of skyscraper design and helped to shape the face of American cities such as Chicago, St. Louis, and Buffalo. In the case of Chicago, he helped rebuild and modernize the city after the great fire of 1871. The primary characteristics of his skyscrapers were the uniform façade, consisting of one storey reproduced many times, and the colorful ornament incorporated into the design. This ornament might take the form of the polychromatic “artistic brick” used in many of the banks he designed later in his career, or perhaps the sinuous forms of the plant-inspired relief-work often found on his buildings. Such motifs were meant to reconnect humans with nature, a relationship that had been fractured by modern technology and urban living. Sullivan’s connections with Wagner included his

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358 Hanslick’s Vom musikalisch Schönen (1854) was one of the first significant and widely-circulated responses to Wagner’s ideas in German. French engagement with his theories developed in the 1860s after the composer’s visit to Paris, and intensified after 1885 and the founding of the Revue Wagnérienne. In England, William Ashton Ellis translated Wagner’s writings during the 1890s, and Oper und Drama first appeared in French translation in 1913-1914 and in Italian in 1894. See: Klaus Kropfinger, notes to: Richard Wagner, Oper und Drama (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1984), 524.

359 Another artist who was deeply influenced by the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk was Belgian architect Henry Van de Velde (1863-1957), who notably expressed his ideas on the subject in the serial Pan 5/4 (1899-1900): 263.

360 Plant-like forms were common elements in fin-de-siècle styles such as art nouveau and Jugendstil. The English art theorist John Ruskin (1819-1900), in writings such as The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1880) and The Stones of Venice (1853), advocated a return to the gothic architecture of the Middle Ages and the
fanatic devotion to the composer’s music, the similarities between the Bayreuth Festspielhaus (1876) and the Chicago Auditorium Building that he designed with Dankmar Adler (1889), and his creation of commercial buildings such as skyscrapers and banks that fused the urban modern with the natural world and counteracted the purely commercial nature of those buildings. His work had a clear ethical purpose: the alleviation of the daily cares of Americans through the fostering of a closer connection with nature and beauty. Like Wagner he advocated art that would represent the highest ideals of the culture from which it emerged.

In his *The Autobiography of an Idea* (1926), Sullivan recounted his first experience with Wagner’s music, in the objective third person voice:

> In Philadelphia, one hot summer’s evening, Louis had gone to the Academy of Music to hear a [Theodore] Thomas Concert. During the course of the program he had become listless, when of a sudden came the first bars of a piece so fiery, that, startled, all alert, he listened in amazement to the end. What was this? It was new—brand new. The program, now consulted, said: *Vorspiel*, Third Act, Lohengrin—Richard Wagner. Who was Richard Wagner? Why had he never heard of him? He must look him up; for one could see at a glance that this piece was a work of genius.\(^{361}\)

After this first taste of Wagner in the summer or early fall of 1873, Sullivan frequented concerts of Hans Balatka’s orchestra with his friend John Edelmann.\(^{362}\) Balatka featured the music of Wagner on his programs, and Sullivan was able to hear many of the most popular orchestral excerpts, such as the overtures to *Die Meistersinger*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, the Ride of the Valkyries, the “amazing fabric” of the prelude to Act I of

primacy of the curved line as a proper basis for modern architecture. This was an attempt to counteract the classicism and straight lines of much contemporary design, such as Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace (1851).

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361 Louis H. Sullivan, *The Autobiography of an Idea* (New York: Press of the American Institute of Architects, 1926), 208. Theodore Thomas (1835-1905) was an ardent champion of Wagner’s music. He conducted it frequently during his concerts, and led the American premiere of the overture to *Der fliegende Holländer*. He founded his orchestra in the mid-1860s and, in 1884, conducted festivals of Wagner’s music in major American and Canadian cities. He was also music director of the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition and commissioned Wagner’s *Centennial Grand March* for this occasion. See: Ezra Schabas, “Thomas, Theodore,” in *Grove Music Online* (accessed 5 April 2008).

Tristan und Isolde, and the “exquisite shimmering beauty” of the Waldweben from Siegfried. For Sullivan, this music was “as though addressed to himself alone,” requiring “no interpreter.” He came to view Wagner as a “Mighty Personality,” a “Free Spirit,” “Poet,” and “Master Craftsman.” The German’s music had “lifted a great veil” and increased his courage “ten-fold.” Sullivan possibly alluded there to Schopenhauer’s discussion of the Veil of Maya in Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung, a concept borrowed from the religious traditions of India. Maya was a deity in Eastern religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism who fostered illusion and prevented people from recognizing the unity of everything in the universe. Sullivan then mentioned the philosopher directly. John Edelmann had advised Sullivan to keep his mind anchored in reality and not get too lost in his artistic passions. Edelmann felt that Schopenhauer was intelligent because he was a “man of the world,” not someone “weaving, in the gloom of obscurantism, festoons of cobwebs” like many other philosophers. Whether Edelmann or Sullivan considered Wagner one of those unanchored philosophers was not clear.

The Auditorium Building. The Chicago Auditorium Building was designed primarily by Dankmar Adler, with his younger partner Louis Sullivan, who was responsible for the interior decorations. They completed the grand building, including not only a theater, but also a hotel and office space, in 1889. Several affinities with Wagnerian aesthetics can be observed in the conception of this project. These include architectural similarities with the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, a democratic ideal for the opera house as a social institution, and Sullivan’s symbolic murals that alluded to multiple art forms in an effort to inspire and empower audience members.

The architects designed the Auditorium Building in conscious imitation of Wagner’s Bayreuth Festspielhaus, which opened to great fanfare in 1876, just ten years before the Auditorium Building was commissioned. Roula Geraniotis has traced the influence of German theaters, especially Bayreuth, on Adler and Sullivan’s conception. Adler, a German by birth, traveled to Europe to view the latest developments in theater design and stage technology while construction was under way

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363 Sullivan (1926), 208-09.
364 Ibid., 209.
on the Auditorium Building. Geraniotis observed that Chicago architects were
“surprisingly aware of contemporary European architectural developments and frequently
attempted to emulate in their own work what they considered the most important aspects
of European architecture and design.” 366 Adler was a specialist in theater design, and
hired the Austrian Asphaleia-Gesellschaft to install a state-of-the-art stage system that
was both fire-resistant and allowed portions of the stage to be raised and lowered,
permitting dramatic stage effects to be achieved.

Wagner had taken an active role in designing the Bayreuth Festspielhaus with
architect Otto Brückwald. The composer had collaborated in the mid-1860s with his
friend Gottfried Semper, the renowned German architect, on a festival theater to be built
in Munich under the patronage of King Ludwig II. This project, however, was never
realized, although many of its stylistic elements were later used at Bayreuth. The planned
Munich theater included a sunken orchestra pit, good sightlines for all seats, and an
amphitheater-like layout of the main seating area. By darkening the hall during a
performance at Bayreuth, Wagner assured that the audience would focus on the work
being performed rather than on who was in attendance and what they were wearing. That
is to say, as much as the hard wooden seats would allow non-artistic matters to be
ignored. 367 This was a practice that Mahler instituted at the Vienna Court Opera after
being appointed director in 1897.

Ferdinand Peck, president of the Chicago Auditorium Association, held
traditional opera houses and their associated elitism in similar contempt. In one of his
annual reports to his stockholders, he remarked that: “The great opera houses of Europe
are all smaller in capacity, exclusive boxes occupying much of the space. They are built
rather for the few than for the masses—the titled and the wealthy rather than for the

366 Ibid., 43.
367 Joseph M. Siry examined the tumultuous social context in which the Auditorium Building was
conceived in “Chicago’s Auditorium Building: Opera or Anarchism,” The Journal of the Society of
Architectural Historians 57/2 (June 1998): 128-59. An excellent account of Wagner’s planning of his
festival theater and the practical and aesthetic issues involved in its realization is: Evan Baker, “Richard
Wagner and His Search for the Ideal Theatrical Space,” in Opera in Context: Essays on Historical Staging
from the Late Renaissance to the Time of Puccini, edited by Mark A. Radice, 241-78 (Portland: Amadeus
Press, 1998). Baker noted that Wagner never intended to completely darken the theater at Bayreuth, only
dim the gas lamps significantly.
people—lacking the broad democratic policy of [our] Auditorium.” Adler and Sullivan designed the Auditorium with private boxes along the sides of the hall only, not right at the proscenium or along the back wall, the traditional location of the royal box in many European theaters. The boxes were only separated by half walls or single columns, making them less private as well. Mark Clague observes in his dissertation on this theater that sitting in a private box brought notoriety, since “even if occupants went unrecognized, their names might appear in local newspapers.” The architects therefore designed the boxes to limit their “traditional use as private space.”

The general seating areas on the main floor and in the expansive balcony provided great sightlines and were designed to limit the distance between balcony and stage as much as possible. This created an unusual degree of intimacy for a hall that could seat 4200 people. The proximity of performers and public would have undoubtedly influenced those onstage as well, as Wagner and Roller stressed in their aesthetic writings. One observer noted of performances in the Auditorium: “the performers can neither sing to the boxes nor play to them, but must address themselves to the public.”

The wealthiest segments of society were literally pushed to the side by the idealistic planning of Peck, Adler, and Sullivan. What use would an American theater have for a royal box anyway?

Albert Fleury (1848-1925) designed several murals for the interior of the Auditorium that symbolized the changing of the seasons and the passage of the human life cycle. The themes of the Auditorium murals were drawn from Sullivan’s lengthy prose-poem, “Essay on Inspiration,” which was read before the third annual convention of the Western Association of Architects in 1886. The poem was a rambling meditation on nature and the life and creative cycles and was divided into three sections: I. Growth—A Spring Song, II. Decadence—Autumn Reverie, and III. The Infinite—A song of the Depths. Sullivan’s Whitmanesque prose was filled with musical terminology. Near

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369 Clague, 173.
the end of his essay Sullivan concluded that “a spontaneous and vital art must come fresh from nature, and can only thus come.”

The proscenium frieze depicted a winged central figure holding a lyre, and several surrounding figures, along with the words “The Utterance of Life is a Song, the Symphony of Nature” (see Figure 5.1). This was only one of numerous references to music in the Auditorium murals. Each of the side walls adjacent to the stage also contained one of the giant murals designed by Fleury and connected in content to the proscenium frieze. On the southern wall the “Spring Song” mural depicted a youthful landscape with a forest meadow, stream, and the lone figure of the poet “abroad to greet the lark” with an “early tinge of green” over the entire scene. The mural does indeed seem to have a greenish tint to it, perhaps to emphasize youth and vitality when observed in plant life. On the northern wall, the “Autumn Reverie” mural depicted a wild landscape at twilight in which “brown leaves settle through the air” and harsh winds “breathe shrill funeral lamentations.” Blues and grays dominate this mural, as do the bare branches of the trees in the foreground (see Figures 5.2 and 5.3).

In his notes on the meaning of the murals, which were printed in the program for the inauguration of the Auditorium Theater in December 1889, Sullivan made comparisons between music and the imagery of the designs. He first observed that “the direct expression” of the paintings tended “towards the musical.” The words on the proscenium frieze, which mentioned the “symphony of nature,” he characterized as the “burden” (refrain) of the entire set of wall designs. The “Spring Song” mural was the “allegro,” and “Autumn Reverie” the “adagio” of the entire conception. The poet in the latter scene observed that “a great life has passed into the tomb,” and there awaited the “requiem of winter’s snows.” Sullivan made clear that “the light and the grave in music”

371 Louis Sullivan: The Public Papers, edited by Richard Twombly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 27. Twombly noted that Sullivan was “never again invited to address the Western Association” after this 1886 lecture.
372 Ibid., 74-76.
373 Ibid., 75.
Figure 5.1. Proscenium Frieze in the Chicago Auditorium Theater (photograph by Denise Von Glahn)

Figure 5.2. Fleury’s Autumn Reverie Mural in the Chicago Auditorium Theater
were naturally suggested in these works, as were “the joyous and the tragic in drama.”
For art historian Lauren Weingarden, Sullivan’s description of the Auditorium murals represented “his most overtly Wagnerian statements about the correspondences between
the arts.”

The proscenium frieze symbolized for Sullivan the present, future, and past. The
centerpiece and focal point, a figure holding a lyre and sitting upon a throne, personified
the present. Flames at the right and left ends of the frieze, the former burning strongly,
the latter beginning to flicker out, signified youth (the past) and old age (the future). The
central figure was “the embodiment of song, of the utterance of life,” towards which “all
the elements of composition tend.” Sullivan concluded that “it is from the present that we
take the bearings of the future and of the past.”

The murals were crafted to inspire those in the audience to contemplate their own
mortality and empower them to improve themselves and society. Sullivan was committed

Figure 5.3. Fleury’s Spring Song Mural in the Chicago Auditorium Theater (photograph
by Denise Von Glahn)

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374 Lauren Weingarden, “The Colors of Nature: Louis Sullivan’s Architectural Polychromy and Nineteenth-
reproduced in Twombly, ed., 76.
to viewing the artist as nature’s champion. According to Clague, he viewed people as basically good, but “only when connected to nature,” which reversed the corruption inherent in modern urban society. It was the task of the artist to facilitate the interaction of urban citizen and nature. The murals of the Auditorium contained a “rich philosophical program asserting the symbiosis of man and nature,” which “urged attentive engagement from the viewer.” Clague characterized the audience as the “fourth wall” in the mural scheme. People were meant to connect the autumn and spring murals by means of the proscenium frieze, thus becoming “part of nature’s symphony” and, unwittingly, actors in the Auditorium’s “cultural narrative” and players in Sullivan’s “social symphony.”

The belief in art as a means of taming the baser instincts of people in a modern capitalist society was expressed by noted American music critic John Sullivan Dwight in an 1870 article in *Atlantic Monthly* entitled “Music as a Means of Culture.” Dwight voiced the Transcendentalist hope for a society renewed through art and social cohesion:

> We as a democratic people, a great mixed people of all races, overrunning a vast continent, need music even more than others. We need some ever-present, ever-welcome influence that shall insensibly tone down our self-asserting and aggressive manners, round off the sharp, offensive angularity of character, subdue and harmonize the free and ceaseless conflict of opinions, warm out the genial individual humanity of each and every unit of society lest he become a mere member of a party or a sharer of business or fashion.

Louis Sullivan might have written these same words in his notes on the Auditorium murals. Just as Wagner hoped that the Bayreuth Festspielhaus would create the illusion of the stage as the entire world by hiding the orchestra, dimming the lights, and removing distracting boxes along the side walls, Sullivan wanted murals for his theater that symbolized the entirety of human life and provoked those in the audience to consider issues more important than their daily cares.

For Clague, the Auditorium approached the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal because of Sullivan’s combination of painting, poetry, music, and sculpture in his interior.

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376 Clague, 194.
377 Ibid., 192, 209-10.
378 Ibid., 203-04.
decoration. A further example of this concept is a feature that dominates both the interior of the hall and the exterior of the building: the arch. Clague observed that the arch symbolized “the cycle of life, its rise and fall, its growth and decay,” and that Sullivan varied this form in a way reminiscent of Wagner with his leitmotifs, which “recur in subtle transformations throughout epic structures.” The arch motif dominates both the interior and exterior of the building. A series of four magnificent, broad arches spans the auditorium as a whole. Smaller arches can be found in the private boxes, in the back of the theater, and atop the designs along the sides of the hall.

Actual representations of Wagner occur within the Auditorium. His name appears on the stage curtain among a list of notable composers associated with theater: Gluck, Gounod, Verdi, Mozart, and Rossini. Wagner’s portrait bust also appears at the side of the stage beside those of Shakespeare, Demosthenes, and Haydn, groundbreaking artists in theater, oratory, and orchestral music, respectively. In Clague’s view, Sullivan’s love of Wagner’s music shaped his “zealous, all-consuming approach to art.” Furthermore, the Chicago Auditorium Building fused “art, engineering, and symbol in an architectural work that sought to create community and a vision for the future.”

**Sullivan’s prose: Wagnerian?** In a recent article, Richard Etlin drew parallels between Wagner’s music, artistic theories, and Sullivan’s work. Etlin highlighted Sullivan’s views concerning the role of the arts in bringing humans into closer contact with nature. He drew numerous creative, if not always convincing, parallels between Wagner’s music and Sullivan’s prose, architecture, and the ornamentation that he incorporated into his buildings. Sullivan’s general philosophical views reflected the influence of Transcendentalist thought and the ideas of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The architect would likely have encountered and absorbed Emerson’s ideas because of the time and place in which he grew up. His formative years were spent in Boston during the heyday of *Dwight’s Journal of Music* (1852-1881), published by John Sullivan Dwight, who had resided at Brook Farm, a utopian community intimately connected with the

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380 Clague 206. Roula Geraniotis, the author of a 1991 study of German influence on the Auditorium’s design, also made a connection between the theater interior and Wagnerian aesthetics. She noted that Sullivan’s contributions to ornamentation, decorative patterns, and mural design helped turn the “ingeniously conceived and designed [interior] work into a true Gesamtkunstwerk.” See: Geraniotis, 65.
381 Ibid., 209.
Transcendentalist movement. Dwight was a staunch advocate of German orchestral music, especially the symphonies of Beethoven. Although not a wholehearted devotee of Wagner’s music, Dwight published many articles about the composer’s life, work, and ideas, including translations of some of Wagner’s own writings.\footnote{Dwight, like Emerson, was also a passionate reader of German literature and poetry, and published \textit{Select Minor Poems Translated from the German of Goethe and Schiller} in 1838. For more on Dwight and Wagner, see: Edward N. Waters, “John Sullivan Dwight, First American Critic of Music,” \textit{The Musical Quarterly} 21/1 (January 1935): 83-85.}

The worship of nature and the desire to achieve a higher state of being through contact with nature was evident in Sullivan’s writings, especially in \textit{Kindergarten Chats}. For Etlin, Sullivan “invested his writings, his architecture, and his ornament with rhythms that conveyed nature’s vital energies.” His basic artistic task was to “sensitize his audience to nature’s rhythms” through an “account of nature itself” and indirectly through an art which expressed “the same vital energy.”\footnote{Etlin, 166.} According to Etlin, Sullivan’s artistic products, whether verbal or visual, might be considered reflections of what the architect called “the Infinite Creative Spirit” and “the ultimate One,” terms which evoke Emerson’s writings.\footnote{In his essay “The Over-Soul” (1841), Emerson spoke of that within man as “the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE.” See: Ralph Waldo Emerson, \textit{The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings}, edited by David M. Robinson (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 134. In “Nature” (1836), Emerson discussed the concept of Unity, remarking that every single entity in the natural world was a “microcosm” which “faithfully renders the likeness of the world.” Ibid., 43.} These artistic products might operate in a “mutually reinforcing symbiosis of concerted effect and shared principles.”\footnote{Etlin, 167.} This is the first of several parallels that Etlin drew between Sullivan and Wagner. Different arts were designed to work in tandem to produce a more powerful effect than each art by itself.

Etlin first examined Sullivan’s prose style, and determined that the architect achieved dynamism in this area largely through the prolific use of rhetorical figures of elocution such as \textit{systrophe} (the heaping together of attributes), \textit{incrementum} (successive items which build in intensity), and \textit{anaphora} (use of the same word to begin successive phrases or clauses). In Etlin’s formulation, Sullivan’s employment of these created either a “sense of crescendo” or a “bursting forth of the spirit.”\footnote{Ibid., 168.} According to Etlin, Beethoven and Wagner wrote music that, more than that of any other nineteenth-century
composers, “operated directly in the realm of vital feeling.” This was probably meant to contrast German Romantic music with that of French Impressionist composers such as Debussy, who focused much more strongly upon tone color and surface detail than underlying motivic or harmonic relationships and goal-oriented processes. Etlin suggested a stronger link between Sullivan’s prose style and the music of Beethoven than that of Wagner. The effective combination of figures of elocution might produce structures that Etlin posited mirrored Beethoven’s music with its “building motion” that reached “temporary plateaus before continuing to build upward once again.”388 This characterization could apply equally well to Wagner’s practice in Tristan und Isolde. Etlin quoted the following passage from Sullivan’s The Autobiography of an Idea to support his point:

Open the mind, open the heart to impressions at the very beginning. These are to the human heart what sunlight, soil and rain are to plants. Then let utterance of these impressions begin as soon as it is evident that they are impressions. Then new impressions, then new utterance – ever reciprocal, ever penetrating, ever broadening, slowly but surely organizing, upbuilding, unfolding, ever growing more coherent, more plastic, more fluent, ever growing in receptivity, ever growing in aspiration, ever growing in mobility, ever growing in serenity, ever growing more complex – paralleling the complexity of life, ever growing more simple – paralleling the simplicity of life; ever gaining in strength, ever gaining in delicacy, ever fermenting, ever clarifying those elemental qualities which are so subtle, and the most potent of all – the power of receiving, the power of uttering!389

Sullivan’s prose perhaps evoked German never-ending sentence structure more than German music, but Etlin’s comparisons do ring true to a certain extent.

Sullivan was clearly passionate about Wagner’s music and imbued his writings and architecture with elements common both to German Romanticism and American Transcendentalism. These included a love of nature, earnest commitment to art as a means for improving society, and an organicism that sought to connect humankind and nature. Both Wagner and Adler & Sullivan created theaters that expressed a commitment to a quality presentation of opera and a democratic ideal, even though Bayreuth became (and remains today) associated with prestige and the elite social classes. Mahler and

388 Ibid., 169.
389 Sullivan (1926), 228.
Roller likewise showed a commitment to the integrity and quality of each operatic performance in Vienna, even though the Court Opera itself was an enormous bureaucratic machine with a theater modeled after the old-fashioned La Scala horseshoe design.

**Camillo Sitte (1843-1903)**

Sitte was an influential Viennese architect, painter, and theoretician whose most significant publication was *Der Städtebau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (*City Planning According to Artistic Principles* – 1889). His father was architect Franz Sitte (1808-1879), whose biggest project in Vienna was the completion of the Altlärtchenfeld church after the untimely death of the original architect, Johann Georg Müller. This project was part of a larger trend around the middle of the century towards Germanic, medieval-inspired styles and away from a more Renaissance-inspired classical one.390 At the University of Vienna (1863-1868), Camillo studied art history, archaeology, and medicine (anatomy and dissection). In addition to his publishing activities, he organized and directed a new State School of Applied Arts in Vienna from 1883 until his death in 1903.

Sitte was not able to transform Vienna through the ideas he espoused in *Der Städtebau*, though he aspired to. He made proposals for improvements to the Ringstrasse, which included creating public squares in front of major buildings and creating, in Carl Schorske’s formulation, “islands of human community in the cold sea of traffic-dominated space.”391 Though these proposals were not adopted, his theories nonetheless became quite influential. As Andrew Herscher has noted, Sitte’s book was “specifically directed at Vienna, the imperial capital,” but also assumed a “universal relevance.”392

390 See: Sitte-Collins, 21-22. John Ruskin, and later William Morris, in England were advocating a similar shift around the same time.
392 Andrew Herscher, “Städtebau as Imperial Culture: Camillo Sitte’s Urban Plan for Ljubljana,” *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 62/2 (June 2003): 212. Herscher situated Sitte in a political and nationalist context. He aligned the architect with humanist and Germanizing forces in examining the competition to win a contract for reshaping the city of Ljubljana in 1895. Vienna, as Herscher noted, was often viewed by pro-Imperial observers as a border city on the frontier of civilization. Sitte’s plan for Ljubljana emphasized monumental structures that were symbols of Imperial might. Ljubljana Castle, for example, was used as an Imperial prison in 1895, and Sitte wanted to reshape the city so that better sightlines of the castle could be gained.
Three broad elements expressed in Der Städtebau link this architect with general trends in Romantic thinking: praise for ancient cities that had grown organically over many centuries (that is, they expanded in harmony with natural features rather than having a grid system artificially imposed on them); advocacy of bringing nature into the city through added green space; and the view of urban design as a total work of art that impacted great numbers of people on a daily basis.

By praising the character of medieval towns and cities that had retained a sense of their pre-industrial character, Sitte opposed himself to the modern grid system of city planning, perhaps most evident today in Manhattan. In Appendix II of Der Städtebau (‘’To Our Readers’’ - 1904), Sitte declared that the urban planner must ‘’break radically with the traditional stereotype of geometric street layouts,’’ and allow the ‘’greatest possible flexibility’’ in details. Curved streets should also be embraced, along with diverse widths of streets and sidewalks. Cities should each have a completely unique character, determined by location, history, and ethnic influences:

Nature and art, historical wisdom and fresh effervescent life should always go hand in hand, so that dry, tedious patterns may be dispensed with and once more each town can achieve a unique character in its layout and architecture in keeping with its location and ethnic idiosyncrasies. Every new town the world over need not end up with the identical monotony of appearance, as if stamped out by the same mechanical mold.393

Cities should be allowed to grow and adapt to changing conditions over time, almost like a living creature, rather than have the straightjacket of a grid system imposed upon them. Sitte echoed the love for curvilinear shapes that was passionately advocated by theorist John Ruskin in England, and which was such a noted element in the art of the Viennese Secession, the English Arts and Crafts Movement, and Art Nouveau.

Many Romantic artists, including Wagner, emphasized the importance of nature in their work. Whether depicted as menacing, as in the Wolf’s Glen scene from Weber’s Der Freischütz, or peaceful, as in the Waldweben from Wagner’s Siegfried, nature often played a major role in nineteenth-century art. Sitte devoted an entire appendix in Der Städtebau to ‘’Greenery within the City.’’ He began by noting that:

393 Sitte-Collins, 326.
Our ancestors since time immemorial were forest dwellers; we are apartment-house dwellers. This alone suffices to explain the irresistible craving for nature on the part of the residents of cities [...] it explains why for townspeople in their longing for nature each tree, every little patch of grass, every flowerpot is something sacred.  

The city that best expressed his ideal of urban greenery was Istanbul (he called the city Constantinople). The “miracle” of green space within large masses of buildings in that city was a result of natural processes. “Since time immemorial,” he stated, “vegetation grew naturally” and was removed “only when it disturbed the effect.” Where it could still be found, it was “right, natural, and perfect.” He opposed the creation of broad boulevards with imported greenery, favoring instead smaller islands of natural growth within the concrete jungle. 

Sitte reflected Wagnerian aesthetics through his characterization of the city as a total work of art. The architect was a devoted follower of the German composer and attended the first complete performance of the Ring at Bayreuth in 1876 as a guest of his old school friend, the great Wagnerian conductor Hans Richter. George and Christiane Collins, translators and scholars of Sitte’s writings, have mentioned a letter from Sitte to Ferdinand von Feldegg (6 July 1899) in which the architect characterized his writings as merely “supporting efforts and training” for his “planned national Wagnerisch creative works.” They also observed that Wagner was not only a hero for Sitte, but that he also “patterned himself on Wagner’s Germanic heroes, giving battle […] to the ill-informed and evilly motivated forces that repressed artistic creativity in his century.”

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394 Ibid., 303. Sitte’s idealization of the forest and of greenery grew out of a long tradition of associating German identity with the German forest. Interest in their pagan ancestors, for whom the forest was of immense religious importance, was expressed in works as diverse as Franz Josef Mone’s Geschichte des Heidenthums im nördlichen Europa (Leipzig: Carl Wilhelm Leske, 1822-1823), Jacob Grimm’s Deutsche Mythologie (1835), and Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings depicting cromlechs (German pagan graves - Hünengräber). See: George S. Williamson, The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 98-120.

395 Ibid., 320.

396 See: Ibid., 26. The authors noted that Sitte actually met Wagner at the inaugural Bayreuth festival and may have been commissioned to design sets for Parsifal at that time. Sitte’s planned eight-volume magnum opus included a “Vol. VII: Das deutsche Kunstwerk der Zukunft.” Ibid., 31.

397 Ibid., 32.
The Collinses have noted that, for Sitte, “the building of cities was simply one aspect of a greater totality of arts and culture.”\textsuperscript{398} In the final appendix to \textit{Der Städtebau}, Sitte remarked that city planning represented the “fusion of all the technical and creative arts into a great and integrated whole.”\textsuperscript{399} He also used the terms “Gesamtwerk” and “Gesamtkunstwerk” in relation to cities in his treatise, as noted in the introduction to this chapter. After elaborating his views on the role of greenery within the city, he concluded that city planning was truly “no mere mechanical office task,” but “an important and inspired work of art.” This understanding of city planning, the “true art of the people,” was vital in the modern world, because his age lacked “just such a popular synthesizing of all the visual arts in the name of an all-encompassing and unified national work of art \textit{[nationales Gesamtkunstwerk].}”\textsuperscript{400}

Wagner advocated the Gesamtkunstwerk, yet still maintained strict control over all aspects of his own works. Likewise, Sitte hoped that individual artists, rather than committees of planners or politicians, would direct the shaping of modern cities that emulated those that had developed naturally over the centuries. Such cities that grew organically over time were examples of the \textit{Volkskunstwerk} [folk artwork], and for Sitte knew “nothing of author or public.”\textsuperscript{401} He further characterized city planning as the “monumental expression of civic spirit” and the “soil that nurtures true patriotism.”\textsuperscript{402} Echoing a sentiment that might have been uttered by Louis Sullivan or Ferdinand Peck in Chicago, Sitte opined that the various arts must be an integral component of city planning, because this endeavor formatively affected “the great mass of the population” every day and every hour, whereas the theatre and concerts were available “only to the wealthier classes.”\textsuperscript{403} Peck, Adler, and Sullivan hoped to allow a wide segment of the public to experience theater by rotating the possession of private boxes in the Auditorium Building and by offering discounted tickets for certain types of shows. Sitte strove to create cities that would essentially function as large-scale works of art. The Russian

\textsuperscript{398} Ibid., 31-32. They also noted that the architect’s ideas about a synthesis of the arts could be traced partly to the influence of Wagner and partly to his father’s influence.
\textsuperscript{399} Ibid., 323.
\textsuperscript{400} Ibid., 321.
\textsuperscript{401} Ibid., 15-16, 18. The Collinses observed that such sensitive and knowledgeable artists would have to know how to use Sitte’s principles as “guidelines.”
\textsuperscript{402} Sitte, 323.
\textsuperscript{403} Ibid., 249-50.
painter Wassily Kandinsky maintained a view of art in which elements within each work, and even multiple sensory stimuli, were interdependent and cooperated in creating a powerful impression on the viewer, much like Sitte’s organic cities composed of interconnected parts.

**Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944)**

Kandinsky first studied law and economics at the University of Moscow, later teaching law at the University of Dorpat before turning to an art career around the age of thirty. He studied painting in Munich with Anton Ažbe and at the Academy of Fine Arts there. His painting *Der Blaue Reiter* (1903) lent its name to a group of artists, including Franz Marc and August Macke, of whom he was the figurehead. This group was active in the years just before the outbreak of World War I, and their work displayed a bold use of colors and highly abstract style. Kandinsky later taught color theory and analytical drawing at the Bauhaus from 1922 to 1933.

Kandinsky’s interest in color was not limited to its visual qualities alone. He was convinced that each shade of color had its own unique character that could be compared to human personality traits or even sounds. His advocacy of synaesthetic experience linked him to a larger community of individuals, such as Sullivan and Sitte, who strove to join multiple arts into a more powerful whole. In examining Kandinsky’s ideas about color and mood more closely, we should not forget how subjective a topic the classification and perception of color can be. As Charles Riley noted in *Color Codes: Modern Theories of Color in Philosophy, Painting and Architecture, Literature, Music, and Psychology* (London, 1995), recent scientific studies have shown that a difference in a single amino acid, the “minimum genetic difference between two people,” can cause a “perceptible difference in color vision.” If, Riley added, the studies also show that there are almost countless ways of seeing a single color such as red, “what theoretical models [of color] have a chance?”

This subjectivity of color perception did not deter Romantic artists and philosophers in their artistic creation and theorizing. Subjectivity and individual perception were essential to the Romantic worldview. Kandinsky developed a

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unique and highly-subjective theory of color that blurred the boundaries between visual and aural perception.

**Color and music.** In April 1861, French poet Charles Baudelaire wrote in the *Revue Européenne* that:

> It would truly be surprising if a musical tone could not elicit a color, if colors could not evoke a melodic motif, and if notes and colors were not suited to conveying thoughts; especially since these things have been expressed by means of mutual analogy from time immemorial, ever since the day God created the world as a complex and indivisible totality.\(^\text{405}\)

His view reflected that of many German Romantic artists. More generally speaking, color is an important aspect of music, though a more subjective one from a listener’s point of view than elements such as pitch organization, rhythmic patterns, or formal schemes. The tone color, or timbre, of individual instruments, and their combination by composers are perhaps the most obvious references to color in music. Timbre took on added significance in nineteenth-century musical aesthetics and was thoroughly explored in the treatise on instrumentation published by Hector Berlioz in 1843 (revised in 1855), and later expanded by Richard Strauss (1904). Berlioz’s use of *col legno*, the striking of the strings with the wood of the bow rather than the horsehair, in the final movement of his *Symphonie fantastique*, Wagner’s use of the Wagner tuba, and Debussy’s emphasis on woodwind and brass timbres at the expense of the strings in much of his music are notable examples of creative instrumentation in the nineteenth century. In more recent times, as Riley has observed, the Early Music Movement introduced new colors to old classics through a “renovation of the coloristic quality of the music.”\(^\text{406}\)

Color also relates to music through the use of chromatic pitches located outside the diatonic framework for an individual work from the common practice era. Chromatic harmony has long been considered a destabilizing force in music, often associated with exotic Others such as Carmen in Bizet’s opera. Carmen leads astray the innocent corporal Don José, as chromaticism leads listeners away from a home key; her “Habanera” is a good example of seductive chromaticism at its finest. Riley has noted that in music, as in


\(^{406}\) Riley, 3.
painting, color is related to a “dangerous antiformal force that threatens the very fabric of musical symmetry and organization,” and that since Rameau’s *Traité de l’harmonie* (1722), musical colorists have been the target of critics who “feared a complete dissolution of the necessary periodic matrices on which composition must be based.” He added that many skeptics of color in music still treated it as “a metaphor at best, or at worst a misleading catachresis, synesthetically weaving visual and aural impressions on a rhetorical level without really saying anything about how music is actually made.” Riley felt that color was a confusing term for modern musicians in part because timbre was based upon an “impurity of tone” that predated the “growth of electronic synthesizers.”

As a painter, Kandinsky’s interest in colors was intense and involved synaesthetic qualities. In his essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910), he devoted much of his discussion to the qualities of different colors, often comparing specific ones to musical instruments and their timbres, or to human personality qualities. This was the reversal of what composers such as Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Alexander Scriabin attempted when they associated specific harmonic keys with colors. Instead of starting with music and making an association with color, as when Rinsky-Korsakov associated E major with sapphire blue, Kandinsky began with a color and made a musical or human character association. He felt for example, that the darkest shade of blue was like an organ, while orange was “like a man, convinced of his own powers,” and its note was “that of the angelus, or of an old violin.”

Von Maur has noted that both composers and painters have frequently “gleaned new ideas from an approximation to, or borrowings from, procedures used in the sibling art.” For her this relationship runs like a “continuous thread” through the nineteenth century. The popularity of Wagner’s music helped draw attention to his theories, which contributed to the expansion of synaesthetic experimentation in the arts and sciences in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Kandinsky continued this interdisciplinary trend in his art and writings. The titles of some of his stage plays alone are suggestive of this: *Green Sound, The Yellow Sound, Black and White, and Violet.*

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407 Ibid., 274.
408 See: Ibid., 276.
410 Von Maur, 8.
For Kandinsky, colors could have a powerful psychic effect on the sensitive viewer. Looking at them produced a “corresponding spiritual vibration” in such a person. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, he observed that some of his contemporaries spoke of “scented colors,” while also noting that the sound of colors was “so definite” that it would be hard to find anyone who would “try to express bright yellow in the bass notes, or dark lake in the treble.” In addressing the power of colors to influence the soul, he poetically stated that color was “the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings.” The artist was the “hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.”

Viennese critics such as Max Graf, as noted earlier, linked Roller’s dominant colors in the 1903 Court Opera *Tristan* with Wagner’s music. Kandinsky also associated specific colors with instrumental timbres. Blue he labeled a “heavenly color” that resembled a flute in its lighter shades, a cello when slightly darker, a “thunderous double bass” when still darker, and an organ when “the darkest blue of all.” Violet, which for Kandinsky was “red withdrawn from humanity by blue,” was sad in character and like the English horn or the deep notes of a woodwind like the bassoon. Even though he made these connections, he also acknowledged that the impressions made by shades of color and sound were too fine to be accurately expressed in words. Therefore, words were, and would always remain, only “hints, mere suggestions of colours.”

Kandinsky clearly perceived colors through more than purely visual means. Charles Riley observed that in Kandinsky’s paintings color no longer stood as a “medium between observer and scene or object depicted,” but became the “atmosphere within which the observer dwells.” The artist seemed to have experienced an entire world of sensations through color. As to how individual colors were to be combined in modern painting, Kandinsky singled out the principle of contrast as essential. The modern age was one of “questioning, experiment and contradiction” for him, with the result that any “harmonization on the basis of individual colors” was unsuitable. The music of Mozart

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411 I’m not familiar with a color called “dark lake,” though there are colors called “dark sea gray” and “dark sea green.” When translating from the German original text (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst*), Sadler may have been confused as to whether *Dunkel-See* meant “dark sea” or “dark lake.”

412 Kandinsky, 24-25.

413 See: Ibid., 38-41.

414 Riley, 142.
might inspire “envy” or “mournful sympathy” in the modern artist, granting a “welcome pause in the turmoil of our inner life” and representing an “echo of something from another age long past and fundamentally strange to us.” Modern harmony consisted of the “strife of colours, […] tottering principles, unexpected assaults, great questions, apparently useless striving, storm and tempest, broken chains, antitheses and contradictions.” He accurately expressed the spirit of an age that produced the Italian Futurists, the Nabis, Les Fauves, and Der Blaue Reiter. The bold use of orange-red and blue in Matisse’s paintings marked a decisive move away from the use of color in impressionist paintings, for example. This principle of contrast that Kandinsky isolated would become a major component of musical theater immediately after the First World War. Although Roller’s use of color in the 1903 Tristan was bold, the colors did not really clash with one another. The production served as a transition between the naturalistic Makart style and the jarring colors of Le Sacre du Printemps (1913).

**Synaesthesia.** Jerome Ashmore, in an article on “Sound in Kandinsky’s Painting,” highlighted the artist’s “full acceptance of synaesthesia and study and application of it in the field of color.” One of the leading advocates of synaesthesia during the latter half of the nineteenth century was Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891). She was born in Russia, traveled widely, and founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. *The Secret Doctrine, the Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (1888) was her major work, in which she attempted to reconcile ancient wisdom and modern science. Blavatsky’s ideas influenced Kandinsky, who remarked in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* that she was the first person to see a connection between supposed “savages” and modern “civilization.” Her Theosophical Society sought to

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415 Kandinsky, 43.

416 Jerome Ashmore, “Sound in Kandinsky’s Painting,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 35/3 (Spring 1977): 333. He observed that there were two dominant theories of synaesthesia during Kandinsky’s time, those of the Associationists and of Francis Galton (1822-1911). The former held that a visual stimulus preceded a corresponding aural one, while Galton, a proponent of eugenics and cousin of Charles Darwin, advocated a simultaneous response of several senses to a single stimulus. Galton’s major work including his theories of synaesthesia was *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London & New York, 1883). Kandinsky partly echoed Galton’s view of synaesthesia when he stated that it was possible that “in highly sensitive people, the way to the soul is so direct and the soul itself so impressionable, that any impression of taste communicates itself immediately to the soul, and thence to the other organs of sense […] This would imply an echo or reverberation, such as occurs sometimes in musical instruments which, without being touched, sound in harmony with some other instrument struck at the moment.” See: Kandinsky, 24-25.
“approach the problem of the spirit” by way of the “inner knowledge,” all of which appealed to Kandinsky’s mystical nature.  

Kandinsky’s synaesthetic experiences inspired his art, and he wrote that “there has never been a time when the arts approached each other more nearly than they do today.” As a result of the arts striving towards greater and greater abstraction, they were also coming closer together. In so doing, however, they were “finding in Music the best teacher,” since, with few exceptions, music had long been the art which devoted itself “not to the reproduction of natural phenomena,” but to the “expression of the artist’s soul, in musical sound.” Music was, for Kandinsky, an art “outwardly unfettered by nature,” needing no “definite form for its expression.” He ridiculed program music, an “affected absurdity,” and recent attempts to imitate the sound of “croaking frogs,” “farmyard noises,” and “household duties” in music, the latter surely a jab at Richard Strauss’s *Symphonia Domestica* (1904). Such attempts were fine for a “music hall turn” meant to inspire laughter, but wholly inappropriate for serious music. Nature, in his view, had her own language which could not be imitated. The *Stimmung* (mood or essence) of nature could be communicated in art not by imitation, but by the “artistic divination of its inner spirit.” In spite of this, he strongly praised Wagner’s Leitmotiv technique, which gave characters personality by “something beyond theatrical expedients and light effect,” creating a “spiritual atmosphere” with a musical phrase that preceded the character, that he radiated forth “from any distance.” Wagner created a thick web of sound and interpretive possibilities through the subtle use of his Leitmotivs, though some of the motives were by their nature quite imitative. Examples include the undulating wave motion of the Rhine-maidens’ theme, the glistening magic fire music, and the angularity of the spear motive (see Examples 5.1-5.3).

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417 Kandinsky, 13. Many Western artists around 1910 were interested in tribal art and culture. Gauguin’s work in the South Pacific (1891-1903), Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* (1913), and Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) were representative of this trend. Bartók and Kodály became increasingly interested in traditional Hungarian folksong in the years 1905-1907 as well.
418 Ibid., 19.
419 Ibid., 20.
420 Ibid., 16.
Example 5.1. *Das Rheingold*, Act I, Scene 1, mm. 137-142 (Rhinemaiden Theme)

Example 5.2. *Die Walküre*, Act III, Scene 3, m. 694 (Magic Fire Music)
What Kandinsky advocated was not a superficial interaction of the arts, but something more fundamental, if still a bit hazy in meaning. He admitted that the idea of one art form assisting another in creating a greater impact on the viewer/listener might amount to a “denial of the necessary differences between the arts.” But, he argued, no two art forms could achieve an “absolutely similar inner appeal” in the recipient. Most important for the affinity between art forms was the repetition of an idea or feeling. Because individuals were more receptive to certain arts over others:

repetition of the same appeal thickens the spiritual atmosphere which is necessary for the maturing of the finest feelings, in the same way as the hot air of a greenhouse is necessary for the ripening of certain fruit.  

The power of an idea was thus intensified through the bombardment of the senses by multiple arts working in tandem. Walter Pater, in his famous essay on the “School of Giorgione” in *The Renaissance* (1873), observed that each art “brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other,” and that each “has its own special mode of reaching the imagination.” However, he noted that:

Each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art, by what German critics term an *Andersstreben*—a partial alienation from its own limitations, through which the arts are able, not indeed to supply the place of each other, but reciprocally to lend each other new forces.

Pater’s ideas reinforced Kandinsky’s convictions that the arts could be used in tandem to strengthen the effect of the larger work, what Wagner or Kandinsky might have called the Gesamtkunstwerk.

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421 Ibid., 42.
423 Ibid., 110.
Artists in different fields and parts of the world expressed a sincere interest in inter-art relations during Wagner’s lifetime and continuing after his death in 1883. They often expressed their ideas on art in terms of the total work of art. Sullivan, Sitte, and Kandinsky all supported, each in his own way, the idea of the cooperation of the arts in the service of a worthy cause. This might be the betterment of the lives of the working classes, the reunification of humans and nature in a vibrant city, or perhaps the offering of a deeply spiritual/mystical experience as a respite from modern urban life. That all three reformers were admirers of Wagner and his music is no surprise. There were certainly those who advocated a blending or cooperation of the arts before Wagner’s time, including German intellectuals such as Goethe, the Schlegels, and Friedrich Kind. Renaissance figures such as Leonardo da Vinci were interested in and skilled at many different arts as well. Nonetheless, Wagner’s notoriety and popularity ensured that his ideas on the Gesamtkunstwerk were widely disseminated and discussed in the nineteenth century and beyond. The visual artist whose relation to Wagnerian aesthetics most interests us in the present study, Alfred Roller, was a leading member of an artistic group that particularly engaged with affinities between the arts: the Viennese Secession.

The Viennese Secession and Gesamtkunstwerk

The year 1897 was significant for Vienna both artistically and politically. Johannes Brahms, a symbol of nineteenth-century German Romanticism, died that year, while the anti-Semitic Karl Lueger was elected mayor, against the emperor’s wishes. This was also the year that Mahler assumed the directorship of the Vienna Court Opera. The Vienna Secession was also founded in that year. Theater historian Franz Willnauer, in a recent article on the Mahler-Roller partnership and Jugendstil influence, remarked that the ethical postulates of the Secession were “lack of prejudice” (Vorurteilslosigkeit), “immediacy” (Unmittelbarkeit), and “progressiveness” (Fortschrittlichkeit). He added that the only item on which all members really agreed was the rejection of historicism and all its “outward forms.”

The Secession artists, however, also desired to raise the

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status of modern art in the city and to forge stronger bonds with progressive artists abroad. Graphic art was of particular importance. Issues of the society’s journal *Ver Sacrum* often included original prints, and the entirety of the fifth Secession exhibition (1899) was devoted to drawings and graphic art.

For Oswald Bauer, the art-reform movements of the *fin-de-siècle* found in Wagner’s theory of Gesamtkunstwerk “the model of their own utopia of an intermediary artwork,” in which the “artistic genre-boundaries” were overcome, and in which synaesthesia, the “fusion and delimitation (Entgrenzung) of the individual arts,” was achieved. Likewise, the members of the Secession sought to blur the distinctions between the different arts and to break down traditional barriers between the fine and applied arts. Like the artisans of the English Arts and Crafts Movement (active from the 1860s until around the time of the first World War), many Secession members sought to create unique and highly stylized objects for everyday use. For them, high art should be a part of everyday life, not just something to view in a museum or hang on the wall. Unlike William Morris and his followers, however, Secessionists were far less concerned about social issues and reforms, taking primarily an aesthetic interest in their English contemporaries.

**Secession exhibitions as Gesamtkunstwerke.** The Secession artists supported the modern urge to combine the powers of single arts into a greater whole in numerous ways. These included the group’s exhibitions, the journal they published, and even homes designed by Secession members. Their first exhibition was held in the spring of 1898 in the Viennese Horticultural Society Building. The financial success of this show led to the construction of the society’s own famous building, designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich, near the Naschmarkt and Karlskirche. Karl Wittgenstein, one of Gustav Klimt’s patrons and the father of philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, helped finance the construction of the Secession Building. This edifice legitimized the young progressive artists in their attempts to revitalize the Viennese visual arts. The bold design, with its distinctive golden

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426 See: Sitte-Collins, 17.
sphere on top, and the prominent motto displayed on the front: Der Zeit ihre Kunst, Der Kunst ihre Freiheit (“To the age its art, To art its freedom”), signaled the arrival of a new force in the visual arts in Vienna.

One of the most significant events held at the new building, not only for the Secession but also for Mahler and Roller as future collaborators, was the 1902 Beethoven Exhibition. This show epitomized the tendency of the group to explore the effect of multiple arts working in tandem to create a powerful total impression on the visitor. The centerpiece was the sculpture of the composer by Max Klinger (1857-1920), which was presented publicly for the first time at this exhibition. Klinger depicted the composer like an ancient Greek or Roman god, bare-chested and with a cloth draped around his lower body. His Beethoven clutched his hands together as fists and stared intensely ahead.

Gustav Klimt created his celebrated Beethoven Frieze for the exhibition, in which he included quotations from Schiller’s “An die Freude” to reinforce the imagery drawn from

Figure 5.4. The Vienna Secession

Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Alfred Roller also contributed a mural entitled “Sinkende Nacht” (“Sinking Night”), which served as the backdrop to Klinger’s statue. Mahler even participated in the proceedings, conducting a small brass ensemble on the opening day in an arrangement of melodies from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. This was likely the occasion on which Mahler and Roller first encountered one another.

Writing about the 1902 Beethoven Exhibition, Bauer has noted that “in the staging of Klinger’s Beethoven Monument,” the elements of sculpture, painting, space, light, words, and music were “collected into a synaesthetic total-impression.” Upon entering the central room in which Klinger’s statue was displayed, the visitor would have been awed by not only the monumental statue, but also by the height of the room, the lighting, Roller’s mural in the background, and perhaps by the sounds of a brass ensemble playing themes from the Ninth Symphony. That symphony was clearly a common theme and focal point in much of the art created for the exhibition, and visitors would have been stimulated both visually and aurally, at least on the first day of the show.

The issues of the journal Ver Sacrum were also multidisciplinary, featuring not only modern graphic art, but also theoretical discussion of art and aesthetics, as well as original poetry. As Peter Vergo has noted, the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal was striven for not only at special Secession exhibits, but also in homes designed by some of its members. The modern architect became “his own interior designer” and consulted with his client on “every detail of the internal arrangements, the furnishings, the fabrics, the décor, the cutlery.” Roller’s stage designs for Tristan und Isolde at the Court Opera were a product of this culture of widespread interest in the Gesamtkunstwerk. He did not make decisions on color and lighting entirely divorced from Wagner’s music, libretto, and the staging instructions in the score. These influenced Roller’s lighting and color decisions in significant ways.

Wagner’s Score as Inspiration for Visual Design

[Roller’s] stage designs were so very much lifted from the spirit of the work that they helped it permeate the senses in an incomparable manner-

"Seine Bühnenbilder waren so sehr aus dem Geist des Werkes gehoben, daß sie ihm unvergleichlich in die Sinne eingehen halfen.”


A common observation of the Court Opera Tristan, both circa 1903 and in more recent times, was that Roller created visual images that reinforced or intimately reflected the essence of the music, perhaps answering Wagner’s call for a Gesamtkunstwerk to a greater degree than the master himself was able to accomplish. Edith Dutzer, in her 1949 dissertation on Wagner productions at the Vienna Court and State Operas, concluded that Roller’s stage designs for the 1903 Tristan “entered into a symbolic-intellectual relationship” with the plot through the use of light as a primary means of expression. Insofar as his designs were “born out of the spirit of the music,” she added, they “fulfilled Wagner’s strivings towards the Gesamtkunstwerk completely.”

Regarding the 1903 Tristan, de La Grange has written that Roller helped Mahler to “eliminate all that was merely ‘decorative’” in order to attain the supreme ideal of the Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk: “total harmony between music and stage, score and text, word and gesture.”

Bauer observed in a 1997 article that in the collaborative work of Mahler and Roller, scenery and music corresponded in a “fusion that could be called symbiotic.”

Roller’s creation of stage imagery seemingly taken directly from the spirit of the music was not limited to the Tristan production alone. The designs for Don Giovanni (1905), Fidelio (1904), and Das Rheingold (1905) were also characteristic of Roller’s expression of musical mood through visual elements. Writing about the Don Giovanni production, Willnauer noted that within the strict frame of the movable towers that Roller employed in each scene, he “attempted his painterly interpretation of Mozart’s music” in


the background. He did not always provide the “appropriate image for the dramaturgical situation,” with suitable shades of color, but rather offered a “painterly parallel to the mood content of the music.” As an example, Willnauer mentioned the Champagne Aria, which was sung “in front of gleaming red rosebuds, whose garish tone emphasized the aria’s exuberant robustness (Lebensfülle).”  

In Fidelio, Roller’s use of light and color followed, for Willnauer, the “recognized,” or “intuited” facts and developments of the drama’s “inner logic and its figures.” Roller’s interpretation of this opera led him to use gray as his central color motif, with the contrast of dark and light, night and day, imprisonment and freedom, as the central focus. Writing about this opera, Roller stated that whoever listened to Beethoven’s music in Fidelio, would “not be able to imagine Florestan’s dungeon cramped, oppressive, or above all dark enough.” Through the creation of an extremely tenebrous and sinister prison, he was able to accentuate the joy of freedom experienced by the prisoners at the end of the opera, following the theme of “from night to light.” The Viennese critic Julius Korngold found a visual equivalent to the music in Roller’s stage designs for Das Rheingold (1905). Writing in the Neue Freie Presse, he observed that the visual artist listened to the “mood of the music,” and orchestrated on the stage with “light, color, forms.” Alexander Witeschik, writing in 1962, labeled Roller’s prison courtyard scene from Fidelio, with its glorious light, an “optic transposition of the exulting C-Major finale.”

In his 1920 article on “Mahler and Staging” (“Mahler und die Inszenierung”), Roller remarked that the composer always had “the deepest contempt for every merely

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434 Willnauer (2005), 112. Willnauer and others use the term “painterly” repeatedly (think of Kind’s “painterly play” Van Dyck’s Landleben), so it is worth briefly considering what this term implies in relation to artistic style. Heinrich Wölfflin has distinguished the “painterly” from the “linear” aesthetic in the visual arts. The former “sees” in masses, the latter in lines. The painterly emphasizes “unstressed boundaries which favour combination,” whereas the linear prefers “uniformly clear lines which separate” one object from another. Finally, the linear represents things as “they are,” the painterly things as they “seem to be.” Impressionism in the visual arts, a style with which Roller was associated by at least one Viennese critic, would seem to be an especially painterly style, one in which edges are blurred almost to the point of unrecognizability. See: Wölfflin, Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art, translated by M.D. Hottinger (New York: Dover, 1950), 18-20.

435 Willnauer (2005), 131.


437 Julius Korngold, Neue Freie Presse (25 January 1905).

superficial piece of stage finery,” for everything “merely decorative” or for that which did not spring with “inner necessity from the grand conception of the staging,” for “ornamental detail,” even if it were “magnificent and captivating.”

Mahler and Roller clearly shared certain aesthetic premises, which would have contributed to a productive working relationship. In an interview conducted in 1934, the year before his death, Roller again emphasized ideas he had espoused in earlier writings. Stage decoration must never be an “end in itself.” It must never “awaken the impression of something existing for its own sake,” or of a reality existing “next to or above the poetry.” On the contrary, staging existed “to set up the mood” [einen Auftakt der Stimmung zu geben] that the poet or musician wished to transmit to the public as the curtain opened. Scenic elements thus played a “secondary role,” and the painter was a “subordinate servant of the work.” Perhaps echoing Adolphe Appia, Roller added that the stage designer did not “decorate” and was no “illustrator of stage scenes,” but created in “utmost selflessness” the “frame which the artwork demands.”

Roller’s sketches for *Tristan und Isolde*, subsequently realized by the workshop of Antonio Brioschi, were discussed in the previous chapter. Here it is worthwhile to briefly revisit them in order to consider how Wagner’s music, text, and staging directions in the score may have shaped Roller’s visual style. Critic Max Graf’s characterization of Act I as a “Symphony in Red,” Act II as a “Symphony in Violet,” and Act III as a “Symphony in Gray” established Roller’s basic color scheme for each act. But it behooves one to inquire in what ways did his choice of dominant colors reflect the character of the drama and music?

For Act I, Wagner specified a “tentlike chamber on the fore-deck of a ship, richly hung with tapestries, completely closed at the back at the beginning of the act.” He provided no color scheme. The act is dominated by Isolde’s rage against Tristan for wooing her for King Marke. Tristan once slew her betrothed, Morold, and impetuously sent her his severed head. She cured Tristan of his battle wounds before recognizing who he was, then failed in her attempt to slay him after his piercing gaze caused her to drop

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the sword. Red would be a natural choice for representing the mood of this act, because of its associations with blood, fire, and anger.  

Red was, however, a dominant color in the design of Isolde’s chamber in the original Munich production of the opera (1865). Cosima Wagner closely followed that production when she designed her own for the 1886 Bayreuth festival. Frederic Spotts, in *Bayreuth: A History of the Wagner Festival*, noted that rust-brown and dark red were the dominant colors for Isolde’s tent in the 1886 production, and that the ship’s sails were golden brown. Roller did not deviate much from Wagnerian tradition in his dominant color, but instead emphasized red to a greater degree than previous productions had. Max Mell described Roller’s Act I set as a “hot, oversized, self-contained and, as a result, scorching interior, excruciatingly suffocating and set to erupt, against which the ‘Ho! he! ho! he!’ of the sailors pounds like a nervously pulsating touch.”  

Isolde implores Brangäne to open the curtains at one point in the act, exclaiming “Air! Air! My heart suffocates! Open the curtain! Open it wide!” Roller’s designs would have intensified the emotions expressed onstage.

Wagner provides no score instructions indicating a gradual increase in light in Act II. He specifies merely that the act begins as a “bright, charming summer night.” The lovers are reunited, only to be rudely interrupted at the climax of their extended love duet by the return of the hunting party. This intrusion is accompanied by the onset of day, which uncovers their deception. The score indicates “dawn” shortly after the return of King Marke and his party, which was anticipated by Brangäne’s warnings from her watch post. At one point in the love duet she sings that “night will soon slip away!” (*bald entweicht die Nacht*), and later observes that “night already yields to day” (*schon weicht dem Tag die Nacht*).

The contrast of night and day plays a major role in this act. The lovers characterize day as deceptive (*tückisch*), impudent (*frech*), and dreary (*öd*), associating it with vanity, vain splendor, and the pursuit of glory. They wish to become dedicated to

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441 The face flushes red when one experiences intense emotion, as blood flow to the brain increases as does blood pressure.
443 Mell (1922), 22. “Der ganze Raum ein heißes, überlang in sich geschlossenes und davon hitzebrütendes, in seiner Qual erstickendes, ausbruckrefes Inneres, an welches das ‘Ho! He! Ho! He!’ der Matrosen wie eine schreckhaft pulsierende Berührung stößt.”
blessed night (*Nachtgeweihte*), the realm of love’s bliss (*Liebeswonne*). Roller’s lush use of purples and blues, as well as his star-filled sky, contrasted strongly with the morning light and the lovers’ rude awakening. Max Graf characterized the night scene as heavy and dull, and as if one were “inside the enormous blue bell of a gentian violet” (*in einem riesigen blauen Enziankelch*). With Melot’s treachery and the arrival of the hunting party, Graf described the new scene as a “pale, bleak day with a weak dawn sky dispersed among impure clouds over a pale-blue series of hills.” Roller used his skills as a visual artist and his sensitivity to color in creating such expressive scenes. As in the first act, Roller here did not stray too far from the naturalistic color palette of nineteenth-century Wagner staging. He used colors vividly, however, and from many press accounts, used light in expressive ways. Unfortunately, his stage drawings give little indication as to how the lighting might have gradually changed over time. Critic Robert Hirschfeld, writing in the *Wiener Abendpost* (22 February 1903), felt that Roller’s creativity usurped the power of the music in this act. He criticized Roller’s lush star-filled sky, remarking that “Wagner’s music knows nothing about that” (“*davon wisse Wagners Musik nichts*”).

Act III is dominated by the injured Tristan, who raves and rages against the love potion that set the events of Act II in motion, and against the world of day that separates him from Isolde. Time passes slowly for much of this act, as there is little stage action. The tempo of the F-minor introduction is moderately slow (*Mäßig langsam*), in contrast to the very lively (*Sehr lebhaft*) introduction to the previous act. The opening bars are heavy and gloomy, featuring strings alone playing much of the time in a low register with numerous diminished seventh chords and dissonant suspensions to mirror Tristan’s physical and mental anguish. The famously long and mournful English horn solo of the shepherd follows this introduction. Roller’s primary color here is gray, appropriately brooding and associated with old age and a lack of vitality. We might naturally expect some gray onstage because of the stone in the castle or fortress courtyard and wall. Roller once again saturated the stage with multiple shades of this focal color, instead of creating a perfectly naturalistic stage picture in which gray plays a smaller part.

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444 Graf, 23.
445 Kandinsky labeled gray a color in which there is “no possibility of movement,” because it consisted of “two colours that have no active force [black and white].” See: Kandinsky, 37.
Critic Julius Korngold reacted dramatically to Roller’s Act III designs: “what a chord of weariness, disease, disrepair, presentiment of death! Painted Tristan-Music” (“Welcher Akkord von Müdigkeit, Krankheit, Verfall, Todesahnung! Gemalte Tristanmusik”). Max Graf likewise characterized the scenery as “dreariness, desolation, a powerful altered minor chord of disrepair” (“Öde, Verlassenheit, ein mächtiger alterierter Moll-Akkord des Verfalls”). Willnauer cautioned against the assumption that Roller was attempting some sort of synaesthetic experiment in this production, attempting to reproduce musical tones through colors. For him, Roller instead created “colored experiential spaces” and expressed the “inner plot” of the opera in symbolic colors.

In a certain sense, Roller’s gray Act III set was a continuation of the mood of the end of Act II, where the harsh light of day intruded upon the lovers in Cornwall. Tristan repeatedly curses the glaring and scorching daylight throughout the final act. He longs for shadows, even as he lies under a giant lime tree. When Isolde finally arrives at Kareol and her voice is heard in the distance, Tristan exclaims deliriously, and perhaps somewhat synaesthetically, “Do I hear the light? The lights, ha! The lights go out. To her! To her!” Although Wagner gives no score indication of a change in lighting throughout this final act, the text gives stage designers ample opportunity to vary the lighting and color schemes. Felix Mottl (1856-1911), who conducted Tristan und Isolde frequently throughout his career (notably at the 1886 Bayreuth festival), favored a “delicate sunset” in the background during Isolde’s Liebestod at the words “Do I alone hear this tune?” (“Höre ich nur diese Weise”).

As is evident, critical response to Roller’s visual style in Tristan was overwhelmingly positive. Reviewers such as Oscar Bie (1864-1938) in Berlin, blended aural and visual terminology in describing elements of the staging as “light-music”

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446 Korngold, in Neue Freie Presse.
447 Willnauer (2005), 94. The author drew a parallel between Roller’s externalization of internal forces and Freud’s contemporaneous exploration of the Unconscious.
448 See p. 640 of the Dover full score of the opera. It is not clear whether Roller too favored this Hollywood-style ending which became a standard feature in many Westerns, notably High Noon (1952). Sunsets also featured prominently in Gone With the Wind (1939), providing added atmosphere for Scarlett and Rhett’s first kiss, and for the endings to both sections of the film. More recent examples of the sunset ending include Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade (1989) and The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King (2003).
(Lichtmusik) or “painted Tristan-music” (gemalte Tristanmusik). A minority of reviewers criticized the visual elements for drawing audience attention away from the music.  

Max Graf and Julius Korngold assessed the production’s visual style in terms of modern artistic trends and in relation to Wagner’s theories. For Korngold, Roller seemed to have been guided by “the most modern principles of art.” The stage images dominated the overall impact of the production and moved in “symbolic and spiritual relationships” to the plot. The designer’s efforts seemed to “fully embrace Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk,” yet Korngold wondered whether Wagner would have passively accepted such a dominance of the “pictorial” over the total “reality of the scene.”

Graf echoed a similar sentiment in his review when he speculated whether Wagner would have recognized that the “poetic power of his vision” had made “painters into poets,” or whether he would have viewed with displeasure the “unleashing of the picturesque arts,” which no longer wished to serve as assistants to the poet, but wished instead to “rule as poets themselves.” For Graf, every stroke of Roller’s brush and every arrangement of colors shouted the motto of the Secession, “To the age its art—to art its freedom,” into the boxes of the Vienna Court Opera. This marked a new chapter in the history of modern stage design, and he labeled the decors both “secessionist” and “impressionist.” This production, in his estimation, marked the arrival of impressionist painting upon the operatic stage. Whether he used the term “impressionist” in a positive or negative sense is not entirely clear. He viewed the musician as symbolically “extend[ing] his hand to the painter.”

This assessment reflected the difficulty of finding the right balance between different arts in striving for the Wagnerian ideal. There were indeed critics who rejected the mere idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, and there were those for whom the new Vienna Tristan went against their own ideal conception of the work.


The Viennese architect Adolf Loos, a dedicated opponent of ornamentation in the arts, wrote about his experience at the Mahler-Roller Tristan in Trotzdem: Gesammelte Schriften 1900-1930. He was overwhelmed by the visual elements, which diminished his appreciation of the music. In order to fully understand his critique of Roller’s visual designs, it is essential to realize just how important this work was for the architect. He wrote that he never missed a performance of the opera if one were being given wherever he happened to be. He never understood the emotional response of many people at theatrical performances, but Tristan alone was able to pierce his reserved demeanor. The music caused him to “forget the names of the people onstage” and the utter tragedy of the first act always caused him to blush.

Regarding Roller’s Act 1 set, Loos remarked that “the curtain rose, but I didn’t hear the voice of the young sailor. My eyes were too busy. What kind of a ship is that?!”. Loos would be visually bombarded throughout the performance, his mind wandering as a result of distracting visual elements. These included the sight of Tristan both handling the sails and steering at the same time, which reminded him of friends on vacation on the Attersee, where he surmised that Roller might have seen someone handling a boat in such a manner. Loos felt that Brangäne’s pretty outfit would look fine on his wife, and recognized the carpet used onstage, made by Rudniker of Prague, as the style he had often used for decorating antechambers. It appears as if he stayed only for the first act, because he concluded his account of the evening as follows:

the curtain fell and there was applause. I suddenly sprang up. So this is how you listened to Tristan. I was ashamed, ashamed, I tell you. I ran out of there. No, one can’t sit through Tristan like that. I went home. My most sacred thing had been taken away from me.452

This humorous jab at Roller’s elaborate set designs reflected Loos’s dissatisfaction with the relative impact of visual and aural stimuli at the Court Opera on this occasion. How could the ideal Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk be achieved in practice? For Loos, clearly not by presenting such striking visuals to the audience. The music was most important to him, and the visual elements of the production were an artistic excess that distracted from the true essence of the work. His account also reveals the extent to

452 Adolf Loos, Trotzdem: Gesammelte Schriften 1900-1930 (Vienna: Prachner, 1982), 38. The emphasis is his own.
which Roller was still indebted to nineteenth-century stage practice, in spite of his modern visual style. Loos derided the “woman’s boudoir in the Norman style” and the excessive number of caskets onstage in the first act. The location of the love potion was unknown to him until Brangäne finally removed it from one container. He noted at the end of his critique that he did not know if other audience members experienced this Tristan as he had. This is unfortunate as such information would have yielded a deeper picture of how non-journalists responded to this production.

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As an active participant in the creative reform movements of the fin-de-siècle, Alfred Roller was deeply aware of the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of the arts during that period. Even if he did not actively experiment with synaesthesia in his own work, he would likely have been cognizant of synaesthetic experiments that were conducted during his lifetime. His designs for the 1903 Court Opera Tristan provoked responses that hinted at or overtly drew parallels with synaesthetic thinking and the notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk. Even though he characterized stage design as a “peripheral art” in his prose essays, his visual style was nevertheless so striking and original that viewers such as Loos found it difficult to focus primarily on the music, which was Mahler’s intention. Although Roller’s achievement might seem to have counteracted the director’s wishes by diverting attention from the music, Mahler praised his stage designer for his spectacular visuals in a letter shortly after the first performances. In hiring Roller, who was not trained as a professional stage designer, Mahler made a decision that greatly improved the quality of Court Opera productions for the rest of his tenure there. This decision also signaled a new approach to musical drama, one in which we can speak of true collaboration between artists in different fields rather than the use of preexisting stock sets for operatic productions or the creation of formulaic visuals according to preexisting criteria. This new approach would become increasingly prevalent in twentieth-century theatrical spectacles. The spirit of the Mahler-Roller collaboration, the championing of bold innovation in visual design, manifested itself in Wieland Wagner’s work as artistic director of the postwar Bayreuth Festivals and in the
work of two influential dance troupes active in Paris in the quarter century after the 1903 
*Tristan*: the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois.
CHAPTER 6

TWENTIETH-CENTURY COLLABORATORS

“The task of the creator should be to set up rules, not to follow rules. Whoever follows prescribed rules ceases to be a creator.”

-Ferruccio Busoni (1916)

In the twentieth century, artists often sought to break free from the standards and rules of the past, reflecting perhaps Busoni’s exhortation to fellow composers during the First World War. James Joyce developed a stream-of-consciousness prose style in literature with *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* (1922; 1939), Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque developed a cubist style of painting in the first two decades of the century, and Arnold Schoenberg developed the twelve tone method of composing atonal music in the early 1920s. Significant developments were also made in multimedia stage performance. Three groups of artists deserve special consideration for the degree to which they reflected both the bold spirit of many twentieth-century artists, and that of the Mahler-Roller collaboration in Vienna in the first decade of the century. The Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois were dance troupes in Paris that flourished in the twenty five years after the 1903 Court Opera *Tristan*. They demonstrated a commitment to novelty, but more importantly to the combined impact of multiple arts in the stage spectacle. After the Second World War, Wieland Wagner and his artistic team revitalized the performance of his grandfather’s works at Bayreuth. Their work also demonstrated the desire to combine visual and aural stimuli in creating bold new productions. The 1903 *Tristan* did not itself directly influence any of the productions that will be discussed. An assessment of the basic collaborative styles of these three groups, however, reveals the degree to which the Mahler-Roller partnership anticipated their spirit of innovation, which would later overwhelm worldwide audiences, and the ongoing spirit of the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal.

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Ballets Russes

The Ballets Russes, founded by Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev in Paris in 1909, was one of the most influential artistic troupes of the twentieth century. The group utilized the talents of innovative artists in the fields of dance, the visual arts, and music. These included, among others, the visual artists Leon Bakst, Alexandre Benois, and Pablo Picasso, dancer-choreographers Vaslav Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska, and Michel Fokine, and composers Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, and Erik Satie, among others. The group disbanded on Diaghilev’s death in 1929, though it was later briefly reconstituted as the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo by Count Vassily de Basil and René Blum from 1933 until 1938.

Diaghilev came from a family with strong interests in the arts. He received musical training as a child and also played piano and composed. Before moving to Paris and founding the Ballets Russes, Diaghilev had been an active member of the St. Petersburg modernist movement known as “World of Art” (“Mir Iskusstva”). Artists associated with the group included future Ballets Russes collaborators, notably Bakst, Benois, and Nicholas Roerich, as well as Ivan Bilibin, Mstislav Dobujinsky, Konstantin Korovin, and Alexandre Shervashidze. The group published its own journal (Mir Iskusstva) and contributed to the modernization of Russian culture, bringing the country, according to art historian John Bowlt, into the European cultural mainstream of the late nineteenth century. The group displayed a general fascination with Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk ideal and, in Bowlt’s estimation, with the theater as a vital resource for the “renewal of esthetic experience.” Mir Iskusstva did not advocate a single artistic style, but, like contemporary artists in movements such as the Viennese Secession and French Impressionism, remained skeptical of realism in art.

Bowlt identified major characteristics of Mir Iskusstva as the striving towards “artistic synthesism,” the development of new concepts of design, a fascination with past cultures, especially those of Greece, Egypt, and the Middle East, and an “emphasis on the

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creative expression of the individuum." Many of these interests would motivate the productions of the Ballets Russes. In the troupe’s early years, for example, its productions were often set in exotic locales such as Egypt (Night in Egypt) and the Near East (Sheherezade). The visual elements of the earliest Ballets Russes productions were designed primarily by Bakst and Benois, who brought the World of Art style to Paris.

With the Ballets Russes, Diaghilev brought together some of the most accomplished artists in their respective fields. They worked to create productions that integrated dance, music, and the visual arts into a cohesive and unified whole. Unlike the Ballets Suédois of Rolf de Maré and Jean Börlin (1920-1925), a Parisian troupe that often emphasized visual design at the expense of dance, the Ballets Russes represented one of the most successful attempts at creating “total works of art” since Wagner’s death in 1883.

**Basic Collaborative Style**

Diaghilev was undoubtedly the glue that held the Ballets Russes together. His choice of collaborators was crucial to the achievements of the troupe. Although he only took public credit for lighting design, the impresario was involved with other production elements to varying degrees, and he played an important role in all aspects of creating a new production.

With *Pulcinella* (1920) Diaghilev took a very active role in the ordering of plot elements and helped guide Stravinsky’s musical decisions. The composer recalled that Diaghilev discovered a book of Pulcinella stories in Rome and selected scenes from it with his assistance. The impresario had also transcribed and annotated chamber works and arias by Pergolesi, taken from various sources in several libraries, some of which he thought would be appropriate for the ballet. While Stravinsky orchestrated many of these pieces and made the ultimate decisions regarding the music, the influence of

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455 Ibid., 29.
Diaghilev was profound. Composer and impresario also collaborated with choreographer Leonid Massine on the order of dances and final plot structure.

Diaghilev’s influence on musical decisions was also readily apparent in productions such as *The Good-Humoured Ladies* (1917) and *La Boutique fantasque* (1919). For the former, he chose sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti, which he then had orchestrated by Vicenzo Tommasini. For the latter production, Diaghilev selected piano music by Gioacchino Rossini. Dance historian Lynn Garafola noted that he not only selected individual pieces, but also “pruned bars and passages, changed chords, keys, and tempi,” corrected orchestrator Ottorino Respighi’s contributions, and wrote notes to himself like, “Don’t forget all the chords must approximate stylistically the old Rossini of *Barber.*” Diaghilev thus played a vital role in guiding not only the overall shape of a production, but also influenced essential musical choices as well.

The collaborators selected by Diaghilev also sought mutual influence from one another. Nijinsky told his sister Bronislava, who danced the role of the Chosen Maiden in *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913) to visualize certain paintings by Nicholas Roerich, the visual designer for the production, in working on her interpretation of the role. Diaghilev, according to Henri Prunières, asked his painters for not only models of their decors and costumes, but also for “ideas for [their] plastic-realization.” Nijinsky even based much of his choreography in *Le Sacre du Printemps* on Roehrich’s costumes.

*Parade* (1917) was one of the troupe’s most important productions, because of the transposition of cubism to the ballet stage and the ways in which the “New Spirit” in French music was made apparent. Elements of this spirit included the use of jazz, pistol shots, and a typewriter. The collaborators included Jean Cocteau (scenario), Erik Satie (music), Léonide Massine (choreography), Pablo Picasso (costumes and sets), Ernest Ansermet (conductor), and Guillaume Apollinaire (program book). Although each artist had his own specific responsibility, Cocteau provided inspiration for the others as the creator of the overall scenario. For example, he gave Satie notes and sketches during the course of work on the production that were intended as inspiration for the music of the

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Chinese magician, the American girl, and the acrobat. Cubism informed the visual design as well as the choreography. As Vaughn observed, Léonide Massine developed a “choreographic equivalent of certain elements of Cubism in the passages of naturalistic but nonnarrative pantomime.” The ballet ended with all characters repeating their basic movements at the same time. This strange juxtaposition of clashing motions created a collage-like effect similar to the striking effect of cubist art.\(^\text{462}\)

Diaghilev might also have influenced musical decisions in *Parade*, in this case, through the use of noises in the score. He was in Italy, the birthplace of Futurism, at the time that Cocteau first presented the scenario to him. The musical value of noises was acknowledged in Futurist musical aesthetics, as Luigi Russolo’s *intonarumori* (noise machines) demonstrate. *Parade* epitomized Diaghilev’s commitment not only to creating art in touch with the modern world, but also to gathering together groundbreaking artists in multiple fields to produce a work of art that approached the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal.

**Ballets Russes and the Aesthetics of Gesamtkunstwerk**

Diaghilev and his collaborators actively sought the productive combination of multiple art forms within the total theatrical spectacle. In 1914 Michel Fokine opined that the new ballet refused to be “slave to the music or stage scenery” and recognized the “collaboration of various arts only on the condition of their complete equality.”\(^\text{463}\) Léon Bakst, according to Bowlt, understood that the set and costume designer, actor, and singer were of “equal importance within the spectacle.” Bakst also strove to move away from the “painterly” and “pictorial” style of nineteenth-century stage design, and helped to bring audience and actor closer together in sharing a “real, constructive space.”\(^\text{464}\) This did not entail audience participation, but instead the conception of the stage in three dimensions and an emphasis on the physicality and rhythmic motion of the dancers. The audience was not to perceive the stage as an “extension of the easel” but as a dynamic and physical space.

For reviewer George Dorris, Diaghilev made ballet the art form that united dance, music, and design as part of a “great synthesis created by some of the greatest artists of

\(^{462}\) Vaughn, 136.
\(^{463}\) From his letter published in the *London Times* (July 6, 1914).
\(^{464}\) Bowlt, 35-36.
the age.”465 Mikhail Larionov, who designed the sets and costumes for several Ballets Russes productions, observed in 1949 that Diaghilev came to understand that décor “should be conceived as one of the integral parts” of ballet “in tandem with music and movement.”466 Dance style and pose were often influenced strongly by the visual arts as well. In Le Sacre du printemps, repetitiveness pervades the music and choreography. Stravinsky used ostinato patterns to evoke pagan rituals, and Nijinsky’s choreography included circle dances and repetitive sequences of poses and motions. Dance historian Millicent Hodson, who reconstructed the original production of Le Sacre du printemps (premiered by the Joffrey Ballet in 1987), drew a connection between this repetitiveness and the form of Slavic idols in this ballet, which were an important motive in Roerich’s designs for the production. Idols were often carved on all four sides of a post and placed at crossroads. The same figure would appear on each face, presenting a “visual repetition” that might have struck Nijinsky as an “analogue” to Stravinsky’s music.467 Garafola observed that in Liturgie, Midnight Sun, and Contes Russes, dance poses often reflected a “painterly as opposed to kinetic model,” presenting static images to the viewers, and were often inspired by visual sources such as ethnic art and customs.468 As mentioned earlier, Nijinsky was inspired by Roehrich’s costumes when creating the choreography for Le Sacre du Printemps. No visual element was to be completely divorced from the spirit of the music and other components of the spectacle.

Another production that clearly demonstrated the troupe’s interdisciplinary spirit of cooperation was Le Chant du rossignol (1920), for which Henri Matisse provided the visuals. He not only designed and helped make the costumes, but also created the jewelry and makeup. He conceived and painted the curtain for the production as well, thus leaving his mark on almost all visual design elements.469 In My Life in Ballet, Massine recalled his work with Matisse on this production. He noted that the painter designed each element of every costume as an integral part of the total spectacle. Massine worked in close collaboration with him to create a “fusion of costumes, décor and choreography.”

466 Mikhail Larionov, “Diaghilev and His First Collaborators,” Ballet and Opera (Sept 1949): 15.
467 Hodson, 9.
He found this ballet to be one of his most successful collaborative efforts with a designer. Matisse treated the stage set like a canvas, remarking in 1941 that his work with Massine taught him “what a décor might be.” The choreographer felt that it was to be “conceived like a picture,” with the costumes serving as “moving colors.”

Similarities to the Mahler-Roller Partnership

Diaghilev’s troupe primarily crafted entirely new works with original music, sets, costumes, and choreography. By contrast, the Vienna Court Opera produced operas and ballets that often had extensive performance histories and conventions of staging associated with them. While the productions of the Ballets Russes were essentially different from those of Mahler’s Vienna Court Opera, there were nevertheless some distinct similarities between the artistic and aesthetic goals and working methods of both organizations.

Like Alfred Roller, Diaghilev’s visual artists were not trained as stage designers, but as studio painters. These included Bakst, Benois, Picasso, Natalia Goncharova, and Mikhail Larionov. Goncharova and Larionov were particularly critical of stage realism. They felt that décor should not function merely to recreate the time and place as indicated in the libretto, but rather to support the spirit of the work. Roller’s decors for Tristan und Isolde were grounded in naturalism, but with a bold use of color and dramatic lighting that was not common on the operatic stage at the time and which reinforced the spirit of the music.

Stage performers in the Ballets Russes were expected to suppress exaggerated gestures and to place the integrity of the production ahead of their individuality. Garafola has traced the influence of Futurist aesthetics on the development of the Ballets Russes. Regarding dance style, she has noted that beginning around the time of the first world war, dancers were encouraged to “suppress histrionic displays.” They were to strive to

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appear as “embodiments of their roles” rather than as mere interpreters.\(^{473}\) This depersonalized style might reflect the influence of Edward Gordon Craig and his ideal of the Übertarionette. Anna von Mildenburg was widely acclaimed for her interpretation and embodiment of Isolde under Mahler’s directorship. In her writings and teaching she stressed the importance of eliminating unnecessary gestures onstage and taking inspiration for interpretation of a role directly from the music.

**The Importance of Diaghilev**

Diaghilev was not only instrumental in the final choice of the artists who contributed to each production, but also designed the lighting of many of the early ballets and functioned as the primary negotiator who helped smooth out any tensions that might arise within the company. According to Remi Labrusse, Henri Matisse was convinced to remain on the production of *Le Chant du rossignol*, for example, only after Diaghilev used a “well-judged mixture of threats and blandishments” to retain him.\(^{474}\) Garafola also credited Diaghilev with spearheading the efforts that produced such groundbreaking modernist efforts as *Pulcinella* and *Parade*.\(^{475}\)

Connections may also be drawn between the lighting styles of Diaghilev and Roller, both of which were praised for reflecting the spirit of the music being performed. Barry Jackson, in detailing Diaghilev’s work as the lighting designer for certain Ballets Russes productions, concluded that he integrated light, movement, music, and color to make a lasting impression on audiences. Diaghilev also gave each production a unique atmosphere that brought the works to life in a vivid way. Jackson characterized the impresario as an “ideal lighting man” whose work served the dramatic needs of a ballet and who integrated lighting with the music, scenery, costumes, and choreography. He sought to establish the proper atmosphere for a work from the first moment, and helped to ensure this by having the curtain rise on a blackout, so that the whole stage picture would strike the viewer at once when the lights came on. Diaghilev’s lighting plots, in Jackson’s estimation, were “constantly changing” and subtly “reinforcing the emotional spirit of the

\(^{473}\) Garafola (1988), 27.

\(^{474}\) Labrusse, 597.

moment,” acting in “conjunction with the music.”476 This description recalls critical assessments of Roller’s lighting in the 1903 *Tristan*.

The Ballets Russes depended entirely on the leadership of Diaghilev, and it is not surprising that the group disbanded on his death in 1929. His company faced tough competition in the early 1920s from a competing dance troupe that also promoted the collaborative work of leading artists in multiple fields. Unlike the Russian Ballet, however, Rolf de Maré’s Swedish Ballet would become more a showcase for visual artists than for dancers.

**Ballets Suédois (1920-1925)**

The Ballets Suédois (Swedish Ballet) was founded in Paris in 1920 by Rolf de Maré (1888-1964), a wealthy Swede with a deep love of painting. During the half decade of its existence (1920-1925), the troupe would challenge the dominance of Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in Paris and produce bold ballets with a visual style that often dominated the dance elements. In *La Creation du monde* (1923), for example, Fernand Léger’s sets and costumes turned the dancers essentially into stagehands that carried the unwieldy costumes around the stage. Like Diaghilev, de Maré assembled a team of accomplished artists from multiple fields for each new production. Although the sole choreographer for most of the troupe’s productions was lead dancer Jean Börlin, notable visual artists who collaborated included Fernand Léger and Francis Picabia, and notable composers included the members of *Les Six*, Maurice Ravel, and Cole Porter.

It was perhaps de Maré’s desire to see many of the paintings in his extensive collection come to life onstage that influenced his founding of the ballet company. The early ballet *El Greco* (1920) was likely conceived because of the director’s passion for and possession of works by that artist. He founded his company in Paris partly because of the cosmopolitan and tolerant nature of the city. As a homosexual, like Diaghilev, he would have faced far more severe treatment for this in Swedish than in Parisian society. His lover and lead dancer/choreographer was Jean Börlin (1893-1930). Börlin had studied at the Royal Swedish Opera ballet school with Michel Fokine, who had left the

476 Jackson, 19.
Ballets Russes in 1913. The solid technique that he learned from Fokine was combined with a strong affinity for the visual arts. Börlin was the ideal dancer to lead de Maré’s company. His dominance onstage and monopoly of leading roles, however, would anger many of his fellow performers, as would the increasing emphasis over the years on visual design at the expense of the dancers and choreography.

**Basic Collaborative Style**

The working method of the Ballets Suédois was similar in many respects to that of the Ballets Russes. De Maré, like Diaghilev, was the driving force behind the company, and leading artists were brought in to contribute to the productions. The director sought to compete with Diaghilev’s troupe by renting the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, where *Le Sacre du printemps* premiered in 1913, and by employing several artists who had also worked for Diaghilev. These included Ravel, Cocteau, and the painter Pierre Bonnard. He also founded the journal *La Danse*, which Garafola has noted was the only dance magazine in Paris at that time. De Maré naturally devoted most of the space in this journal to promoting his own troupe and afforded his rivals much less coverage.⁴⁷⁷

Like Diaghilev, and like Mahler before him, de Maré sought to distance his productions from the formulaic nineteenth-century style by which an inhouse staff of artisans created sets and costumes according to certain formulas and conventions. The hiring of visual artists of the caliber of Henri Matisse (Ballets Russes), Fernand Léger (Ballets Suédois), and Alfred Roller (Vienna Court Opera) signaled a new approach to theatrical stage design in the twentieth century. Art historian Nancy van Norman Baer observed that Jean Börlin’s “single choreographic voice” for the Ballets Suédois was offset by the work of thirty two different painters representing eleven nationalities over

the lifetime of the troupe. These artists helped the company showcase “virtually every artistic style of the period.”

The productions of the Ballets Suédois tended to resemble living paintings, with Börlin’s choreography centered towards the front of the stage. For van Norman Baer, de Maré’s designers “tended to treat the stage as if it were a canvas, with the proscenium arch serving as a frame.” She characterized the company as essentially “an extension of its founder’s art-collecting activity.”

Two ballets with décors by Léger, *Skating Rink* (1922) and *La Création du monde* (1923), were representative of the troupe’s painterly aesthetic. In *Skating Rink*, based on a poem by Ricciotto Canudo and with music by Arthur Honegger, Léger created an abstract set in which the dancers’ colorful costumes blended completely into the total stage image. His designs, as van Norman Baer has noted, reflected many of the ideas he laid out in his essay “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle.”

Léger and Börlin worked closely on this production, even though they were not often in the same city (Börlin was with de Maré on tour in the French provinces and Honegger was in Zurich). As Judi Freeman revealed in an essay on Léger’s work with de Maré’s troupe, Börlin based much of his choreography on Léger’s costumes, especially since costume design could greatly impact the freedom of movement for each dancer. Léger seems to have completed the costumes before Börlin did much of his choreography, even though the painter would have preferred to know more about the intended movement style while designing the costumes. Léger desired a simultaneous development of ideas on the part of the different artists, a sort of “ideal communion with other creators.”

Léger advocated a stage spectacle in which the dancers, including the star performer, were absorbed into the overall stage picture. In “The Spectacle: Light, Color, Moving Image, Object-Spectacle,” published in *Bulletin de l’Effort Moderne* (Paris,

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480 Van Norman Baer, 24.

1924), he declared that the stage spectacle should present a complete contrast in mood from that in the audience. Where “immobility, darkness, silence” reigned in the auditorium, the stage was to present “light, movement, life.”\textsuperscript{482} His abstract designs for \textit{Skating Rink} accomplished this goal. According to van Norman Baer, his drop curtain provided a “pictorial equivalent for the complex patterns of motion created by the dancers onstage.”\textsuperscript{483} Garafola emphasized Léger’s conception of this ballet as an “interplay of moving shapes and shifting color constellations,” a changing set of images that fully absorbed the dancers into the scene.\textsuperscript{484} Art historian Maurice Raynal wrote of the ballet after its premiere that the stage designer had done away with the dancer “as a representation of human elements” and made the performer a part of the décor.\textsuperscript{485} Roller’s Act III designs for the 1903 \textit{Tristan} achieved a similar effect, as critic Max Graf found that the dying Tristan seemed to have “blended with his home-soil of Kareol,” and to have actually “taken root in it.” What Léger achieved, however, was a more developed and pervasive example of this depersonalization, rather than Roller’s localized effect.

In \textit{La Création du monde}, Léger took this depersonalization of the dancer further. His costumes, evoking figures from African creation myths, were unwieldy and often completely obscured the dancers behind large two-dimensional shapes. Not surprisingly, many of the dancers resented being relegated to the role of stagehands and left the company that season. In his essay “The Ballet Spectacle, the Object-Spectacle” (1925), Léger expressed the philosophy that had guided that production. He concluded that by “destroy[ing] the human scale” and having scenery move about, he could “obtain the maximum effect” of spectacle by creating a stage which presented a total contrast with the audience. For him, any similarity between the spectator and actor compromised the effect of the spectacle.\textsuperscript{486} Léger realized that his costumes put heavy demands on the


\textsuperscript{483} Van Norman Baer, 24.

\textsuperscript{484} Garafola (1995), 72.


performers, and he praised them for their efforts, despite being “condemned to the role of moving scenery.”  

Blaise Cendrars, who created the scenario of the ballet, worked closely with Léger in selecting collaborators. This was much like Cocteau’s role in Parade, as the creator of the scenario exerted the most influence over the other collaborators. Cendrars and Léger wanted Satie to write the music, but settled on Darius Milhaud after learning Satie was unavailable. De Maré would have had the ultimate say in the choice of composer, but Cendrars and Léger were eager to make their opinions on the matter known. They also made their opinions known through extensive notes for stagehands, choreographer (Börlin), lighting designer, and composer, suggesting specific dance types to be used in each scene.  

Like those of the Ballets Russes, Swedish Ballet productions such as La Création du monde demonstrated the commitment of the artists involved to close collaboration in imbuing all production elements with the essence of the show’s overriding theme. These companies emerged as natural successors to the spirit of the Mahler-Roller collaboration in Vienna.

The Ballets Suédois and the Gesamtkunstwerk Ideal

De Maré embraced the collaborative ideals advocated by Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes. For Garafola, he viewed ballet as a “fully collaborative medium” in which artists met as equals and performance “combined the functions of art gallery, concert hall, and theatrical showcase.”  

In 1926, de Maré characterized modern ballet as the “synthetic fusion of four fundamentally divergent” arts: choreography, painting, music, and literature. His company had always striven to combine these arts such that they mutually supplemented each other and offered a “possible approach to a perfect totality.” He added, however, that these artistic media must be made to “follow the lead of the choreographer” who was the only contributor “capable of grasping as a whole the

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488 Milhaud’s jazz-inspired score was heavily influenced by his experiences in Harlem jazz clubs.

489 See: Freeman, 98-100.

490 Garafola (1995), 68.
work of the various artists.” This may have been another reason why he gave Börlin the role of choreographer in all of his productions: he knew his style intimately and wished to maintain continuity from one production to the next. Although de Maré downplayed dance in the final years of his troupe, his words reinforced the importance he placed upon Börlin as choreographer in each production. He also characterized his troupe as the “synthetic expression of the modern mind.”

Ricciotto Canudo, who developed the scenario for Skating Rink, wrote in 1911 that dance should be “an art of synthesis and not solely choreographic entertainment.” He also yearned for the “perfect harmony of all elements of performance,” aligning himself with the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal championed by so many of that era. Fokine wrote in 1914 that modern ballet should recognize the alliance of the arts “only on the condition of complete equality” which allowed “perfect freedom both to the scenic artist and to the musician.” The synthetic ideal clearly permeated the troupe, from the director to his collaborators.

Börlin, like de Maré, was highly sensitive to painting. His inspiration for dances often began not with movements but with visual images. He once stated in an interview that “each painting that moves me is transformed in me into dance.” He added that although rhythm would always remain “the principal and most mysterious element of choreographic creation,” painting could be “the point of departure” for his first inspiration. In 1925 he stated that he did not try to make tableaux vivants out of paintings, but allowed them to awaken “reflections, ideas, new dances” in him. In a 1922 interview, Börlin recalled his early conception of a “new kind of theater art, perhaps opera, perhaps drama, perhaps ballet,” in which “everything would fall into a definite

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492 Ricciotto Canudo, “Ballets russes et snobs latins,” La Renaissance Contemporaine (24 August 1911). “un art de synthèse et non plus comme un divertissement chorégraphique […] l’harmonie parfaite de tous les éléments du spectacle”
style” and “melt together into a harmony of song, speech, dance, costumes, scenery, music.” This spectacle was to be a “unity of everything, like in a painting.”

In spite of his passion for painting, Börlin likely could not have approved of the growing dominance of stage sets and costumes at the expense of the dance in the troupe’s productions. In the first couple of years, as van Norman Baer observed, dance was the “binding element in the creation of three-dimensional stage pictures.” The company would, however, come to be identified as much with the “dynamic interpretation of visual art” as with dance, even willingly yielding control of production aspects to the visual artists. The Ballets Russes also showed a tendency towards greater emphasis on stage design around 1915. *Parade* (1917) exemplified this, since the cubist designs were so prominent, and the choreography tended to emphasize static poses rather than dynamic motion. For Garafola, the new goal of choreographers in Diaghilev’s troupe was to “enhance the inventions of scene painter and costumier.”

One of the final productions of the Ballets Suédois was *Relâche* (1925), with music by Erik Satie and production design by Francis Picabia. This show represented the culmination of the troupe’s developing style, now featuring cinematic elements as well. In addition to the sets and costumes in black, silver, white, and gray, a short film entr’acte separated the show’s two acts. For Erik Näslund, the company by this time had ceased to be a ballet and had become a “multiart and total theatre.”

### Importance of de Maré

Diaghilev and de Maré both had significant backgrounds in the appreciation of the visual arts. The former had promoted modern painting through *Mir Iskusstva*, and the latter was strongly influenced by his grandmother’s, Countess Wilhelmina von Hallwyl’s taste in painting through her extensive collection. De Maré came from a wealthy family that encouraged an interest in the visual arts. Their backgrounds go a long way towards explaining the growing emphasis on stage design in the productions of these two companies over the years. Van Norman Baer characterized the Swedish Ballet as an

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496 From a 1922 interview. See: Näslund, 51.
497 Van Norman Baer, 10. Garafola concludes that by 1923, dance had become “little more than an accoutrement of the décor.” See: Garafola (1995), 75.
499 Näslund, 52. See also: Van Norman Baer, 33.
“artistic refuge” for the director, an outlet for indulging his love of painting that was not
dependent on “box-office receipts or the whims of patrons.” With little worry of the
immediate demise of his company as a result of his family’s enormous wealth, his
experiments could be bolder than Diaghilev’s.500 Garafola noted that de Maré’s dancers
wore costumes by designers such as Marie Muelle and Max Weldy, his sets were built by
the Paris Opera’s head scene painter Georges Mouveau, and guest conductors and even
special orchestras were sometimes brought in for performances.501

De Maré, like his counterpart with the Ballets Russes, was an involved director.
He was always at rehearsals and performances, even when the troupe was on tour; he also
handled administrative details. Not surprisingly, he seems not to have taken any interest
in furthering his dancers’ technique. The focus of his company was not on the brilliance
of the dance, but on the total visual conception. He did not hire a ballet master to train the
dancers, but had Börlin direct company classes. This was probably an additional reason
why many of the more talented dancers in the troupe decided to leave around 1923. De
Maré’s growing interest in the work of modernist painters such as Picabia and Léger also
directly contributed to the increasing dominance of visual elements within the company’s
productions. As Garafola has noted, this trend upset the balance between set design and
dance that had marked the earliest years of the group’s existence, threatening to “evict
dance entirely” from the “avant-garde performance gallery that the company had
become.”502

The Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois created multimedia spectacles that
featured the combined talents of accomplished artists in a variety of fields. Like the
Vienna Court Opera under Gustav Mahler, musicians, visual artists, and performers
worked closely to craft productions that expressed a unified spirit, at least in the minds of
many who experienced them. Although the Gesamtkunstwerk ideal had both ethical and
aesthetic components, the Parisian dance theater troupes tended to foreground aesthetic
issues, as did many artists after Wagner. Roughly a quarter century after the demise of

500 Van Norman Baer, 12.
501 Garafola (1995), 68. Muelle’s company was one of the most prestigious in Paris. Marjorie Howard
wrote in The New York Times (25 April 1915) that Muelle enjoyed the title of “First Theatrical Costumer”
for both Paris and the entire world. Weldy designed costumes for numerous productions in Paris and on
Broadway, and also provided costumes and curtains for the Folies Bergere, Moulin Rouge, and other
renewed cabarets in Paris.
502 Ibid., 82.
the Parisian troupes, the two grandsons of Richard Wagner, Wieland and Wolfgang, would revitalize the Bayreuth Festival. By staging his grandfather’s works using striking visuals, including a bold use of light and color, Wieland showed his indebtedness to the work of stage reformers such as Roller, Appia, and Craig. His productions were certainly collaborative efforts, though he, like Diaghilev and de Maré, maintained firm control over artistic decisions. Unlike his Parisian predecessors, Wieland Wagner was a talented artist who designed the visual elements himself. He emphasized the ethical component of the Gesamtkunstwerk to a greater degree than the Parisian artists had, seeking to bring out the timeless messages within his grandfather’s works. He did not want his productions to become symbols of German culture, however, but of the international community of Wagnerians. It is with his work at Bayreuth, specifically his modernization of Wagner productions, that this chapter closes.

Wieland Wagner and Postwar Bayreuth

Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, the grandsons of Richard Wagner, took over the Bayreuth Festival in 1949. The U.S. Army took control of the festival theater near the end of the war, and many of the sets and costumes had been either looted or locked away in storage in the Russian-controlled sector. Possession of the theater and the Villa Wahnfried was ultimately transferred to the city after the war, with oversight by the regional government. When the brothers regained control of the festival assets, they faced daunting obstacles to the resumption of the annual event. The theater needed repairs and the enterprise was largely bankrupt. The brothers traveled widely in the immediate postwar years, seeking financial backing for a new festival.

Bayreuth had also been ideologically tainted by the use Hitler had made of it and Wagner’s music before and during the war. Although the Führer only attended the festival once during wartime, he compelled party officials and other dignitaries to do so. He exempted Wieland from military service, which allowed the budding opera director to develop his skills in relative safety and comfort. German soldiers were even used to augment the Bayreuth chorus in works such as *Die Meistersinger* during the war.

Winifred Wagner, the widow of Richard’s son Siegfried and mother of Wieland and
Wolfgang, ran the festival during the war. She was a passionate supporter of Hitler and the Nazi ideology, thus the festival became closely connected with Third Reich politics. Historian Frederic Spotts has noted that “political resentment” against the brothers lingered when they took control of the festival, as did “doubts about their professional abilities and intentions.”

The brothers divided the labor of preparing for and running the festival according to their interests and training. Wolfgang was primarily in charge of administrative and financial matters; he apprenticed under Heinz Tietjen in Berlin after being discharged from the German army in 1940. He also designed several Bayreuth productions before taking full control of the festival after Wieland’s death in 1966, but his main role from 1951-1966 was administrative. Wieland had long been interested in stagecraft and the visual arts and had studied art in Munich. The first productions for which he designed sets included his father Siegfried’s *Bärenhäuter* in Lübeck (1937) and his grandfather’s *Parsifal* at Bayreuth in 1938. The composer and conductor Kurt Overhoff expanded Wieland’s knowledge of and interest in Wagner’s works after first meeting him in 1940 in Munich. Overhoff would remain Wieland’s close friend and adviser for at least a decade, helping him to penetrate the musical and psychological elements of many operas. They gained experience working together on operatic productions beginning in 1941, when Joseph Goebbels appointed Wieland as operatic producer in Altenburg, with Overhoff as music director. In Altenburg, Wieland produced an entire Ring cycle, Weber’s *Der Freischütz*, and accepted commissions for new productions of other Ring operas and *Die Meistersinger* from Nuremberg and Bayreuth.

Shortly before the end of the war the Wagner family fled Bayreuth for the relative safety of Winifred’s villa on Lake Constance. There Wieland broadened his intellectual horizons, studying the works of authors and artists who had been frowned upon at Villa Wahnfried or banned outright under the Nazis. These included Freud and Jung, Picasso, Adorno, Greek dramatists, and even the music of Mozart. As Spotts observed, the Greek writings likely revealed to Wieland the many similarities between

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Greek and Norse mythology.⁵⁰⁴ These studies expanded the intellectual foundation upon which he later drew in shaping new productions for the postwar Bayreuth.

Upon taking over the Wagner festival, Wieland worked to recruit many new musicians and assistants who were untainted by association with prewar or wartime Bayreuth. He retained Kurt Palm as costume director and Paul Eberhardt as lighting designer, both veterans of the festival, but otherwise excluded those who had worked there previously. In order to establish his artistic credibility, Wieland likely felt it necessary to distance himself from artistic styles that had dominated the Bayreuth stage in previous eras. He even left Villa Wahnfried un-repaired as a relic of the past; it had been badly bombed in the war. The core singers of Wieland’s Bayreuth included Astrid Varnay, Martha Mödl, Wolfgang Windgassen, Paul Kuën, Hermann Uhde, Ludwig Weber, and Gerhard Stolze. Most of these were in the early stages of their careers, and all became respected Wagnerians through their work with Wieland at Bayreuth. The chorus was placed in the hands of Wilhelm Pitz. This core group of artists would help to bring to life the director’s scenic visions both visually and aurally at the New Bayreuth.

### Staging Style

The new productions that greeted festival visitors beginning in 1951 were shocking to many because of Wieland’s bold new style. Design elements helped to distance Bayreuth from its wartime past, in which many productions had essentially been used as propaganda by Hitler and the Nazis. A circular acting area, perhaps suggesting the orchestra of the ancient Greek theater, was utilized. In works such as the Ring, this circular stage would have possessed an added symbolic dimension, representing the ring itself or perhaps the world as a whole. Costumes and stage gestures were simplified, which gave the characters more of a timeless quality or even suggested, as Spotts noted, ancient Greek statues.⁵⁰⁵ Characters were also treated more as symbols or archetypes rather than as specific people in a more naturalistic sense. Light and color were used dramatically to link musical mood with the onstage imagery. The German word Entrümpelung, or “clearing out,” has been used in connection with Wieland’s reforms.

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⁵⁰⁴ See: Ibid., 208-09.
Like Roller’s visuals for the 1903 Tristan, Wieland’s 1951 visuals shocked many viewers through their boldness and departure from convention. The wartime Ring production in Altenburg gave him valuable experience in exploring new ways of staging the works. The uncluttering of the naturalistic stage was already apparent in these productions. He used lighting to suggest solid objects and began to simplify costumes, even if, for Spotts, he had not fully stripped the characters of all their Nordic attributes at that time. He would go even further in implementing his reforms at Bayreuth. This de-Germanizing of Wagner’s works shocked many viewers, but has also influenced many Wagner productions since his time. Richard Wagner had clearly indicated detailed staging directions in his scores, which suggested naturalistic settings quite unlike those Wieland would create. Wieland sought to visually express the dramatic essence of his grandfather’s works, not blindly follow his staging directions. He stated unequivocally that those directions in the score were valid only for the nineteenth-century theater and that they were intended for those not familiar with the score.

Wieland justified his reforms in part by emphasizing the need for Wagner’s works to speak to a new generation of festival attendees. Many older listeners would undoubtedly react strongly to productions that in no way resembled the older ones they were used to from the war years or earlier. The younger generation, however, living in a nuclear age and disillusioned by war, needed a Wagner that spoke to them. Wieland emphasized this in his 1951 essay printed in the Bayreuth program:

The conventional image that has congealed over the past decades might still pleasingly remind the old, stalwart, and distinguished veterans of the happy and secure days of old—for the generations this side of quantum theory and atomic research, however, that can never again have any value. For them it would be a fatal error to confuse appearance with reality and to

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506 Ibid., 197-98.
507 A notable example was Patrice Chéreau’s controversial centennial Ring production at Bayreuth, in which an anti-Capitalist theme was emphasized.

“Wagners Anweisungen sind nichts anderes als zusätzliche Beschreibungen seiner szenischen Visionen für Partiturunkundige […] Wagners Bild – und Regievorschriften jedoch gelten ausschließlich dem zeitgenössischen Theater des 19. Jahrhunderts.” “Wagner’s instructions are nothing other than additional descriptions of his scenic visions for those unfamiliar with the score […] Wagner’s visual and directorial instructions, however, are valid exclusively for his contemporary nineteenth-century theater.”
hand over to the past the timeless in Wagner’s work along with the faded.509

Wieland had to resurrect Wagner in a world that had changed dramatically in the previous ten years, and prevent Bayreuth from becoming a museum of stale old productions. In order to further distance the festival from political issues of the past, he and Wolfgang had posters displayed on the festival grounds declaring that music was to be the focus of the festival. Visitors were asked to refrain from political discussions if at all possible.

**Floor area and sets.** The early presentations of the 1950s expressed Wieland’s conviction that Wagner’s staging instructions, and the Bayreuth style of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were old-fashioned and limiting. He aimed to recreate what he saw as Wagner’s intentions rather than what was possible during his grandfather’s lifetime. What was expressed by the music need not be simply repeated again onstage. The music itself was much more powerful an expressive force than the visual elements, in Wieland’s opinion. “We now recognize,” he wrote in 1951, that “in the best case the stage can only show a weak reflection of that which triumphantly reaches our ear from the mystic depths of the orchestra and which needs no optical illustration.”510 Spotts ably summed up Wieland’s sparse and abstract approach to his sets when he observed that just as “silence is an essential element of music, so emptiness can be a vital part of staging.”511 The musical experiments and thinking of composers such as John Cage thus found a contemporary visual analogue in Wagner productions. Cage published *Silence*, his artistic manifesto, in 1961 and explored the possibilities of silence in music most notably in *4’33*” (1952). Wieland felt that the traditional sets associated with prewar Bayreuth did an injustice to the score, turning the complex works into mere

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510 Ibid., 22. “Und so stehen wir auch heute […] vor der Erkenntnis, daß die Bühne bestenfalls nur einen schwachen Abglanz dessen zu zeigen vermag, was aus dem mystischen Abgrund des Orchesters sieghaft und keinerlei optischer Verdeutlichung bedürftig unser Ohr erreicht.”

511 Spotts, 216.
fairy tales. One of his maxims was that *Inszenieren heißt interpretieren*, to stage is to interpret. The significance of this quote for twentieth-century stage practice is clear in light of controversial productions of Wagner’s works such as Patrice Chereau’s *Ring* for the centennial Bayreuth Festival (1976).

Wieland’s productions offered viewers more room to use their imaginations than previous ones at Bayreuth had, much as Appia’s productions once did by suggesting landscapes and objects without presenting them in intricate detail. Roller’s designs also permitted viewers to consider possible connections between color choices and musical mood. The first production of the New Bayreuth was Wieland’s 1951 *Parsifal*. As Spotts observed, what struck the first audience was not what it saw but “what it did not see.”

The opening scene featured an almost empty stage rather than a wooded meadow in the realm of the Grail. Likewise, in Wieland’s first Ring cycle at Bayreuth, he stripped the characters of their traditional props and costumes, such as Wotan’s spear or Siegfried’s fur garments, giving a more timeless quality to the stage visuals. Although Roller did not go as far as Wieland in stripping the stage of non-essential elements in the 1903 *Tristan*, his use of symbolic color schemes highlighted the core mood of each act, just as Wieland emphasized the universal elements of his grandfather’s works.

Wieland’s 1956 *Meistersinger* was especially controversial. Many critics felt that the simplified staging was far less appropriate to the story of this work, which was situated in a specific time and place to a much greater degree than Wagner’s other operas. One critic designated this production the “*Meistersinger* ohne Nürnberg,” since all traces of sixteenth-century Nuremberg were removed from the stage. Boos were heard in the Festspielhaus for the first time in its history after the first performance. In the 1958 *Lohengrin*, Wieland treated the stage as a “geistiger Raum” (imaginary space), in Spotts’s formulation, using simple decors, “radiant color and light,” and a uniformly-dressed chorus that often faced the audience, to create a bold new production.

Roller also used brilliant color and lighting effects at the Vienna Court Opera and, in the production of *Die Walküre* under Mahler’s direction, he suggested the valkyries through cloud and storm effects rather than with actual singers on horseback.

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512 Ibid., 213.
513 Ibid., 222.
The simplification of sets and costumes was not entirely a product of Wieland’s artistic imagination, however. As Gerard Bourke has noted, there was a more practical reason that likely influenced the director’s choices. The old sets and costumes had mostly been destroyed or stolen during or shortly after the war. There was limited funding available in the early years of the reopened festival, so the simplified and economical postwar decors were much more practical than more elaborate and naturalistic ones would have been.  

**Dramatic core and psychological issues.** Wieland’s approach to staging Wagner’s works was highly intellectual and philosophical. He strove to isolate and elucidate a central theme or dramatic idea in each work. These productions were to stimulate the imagination and comment on modern life rather than provide mere entertainment. His productions were to be, in Spotts’s formulation, “opera with a didactic purpose,” intended more for the mind than the senses, and “disturbing rather than satisfying.”  

By removing specific markers of time and place from the dramas, he was better able to focus on the universal moral or message of each individual work. Wagner’s use of mythological sources in many of his music dramas might have suggested to Wieland that his grandfather intended for the works to assume a timeless resonance rather than be tied down by overly naturalistic stagings. Such a justification, however, would hold truer for some works (the *Ring*), than for others (*Die Meistersinger*). *Tristan und Isolde* was a work with both historical and mythical elements. Roller studied ancient Celtic art in great detail in preparing his visual designs for the 1903 production, and also sought to capture timeless elements of the emotional content of the story and music through his choice of symbolic color schemes.  

Spotts, in writing of Wieland’s purging of Bayreuth’s past, observed that “expunging history” was a “deep psychological and artistic need” for him.  

This was apparent not only in the stagings themselves, but also in the request that festival attendees avoid political discussions in 1951. Spotts characterized the productions of the 1950s as lacking in sentimentality and “happy endings.” Opera became instead “living and universal drama,” that took on the universal resonance of works by Aeschylus and

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515 Spotts, 228.  
516 Ibid., 238.
Shakespeare that had inspired Wagner himself.\(^{517}\) Nike Wagner (Richard’s great-granddaughter) echoed this sentiment in a 1994 article on the Bayreuth legacy of innovation when she observed that Wieland’s “abstract stage space made up of light, form, and color” helped to create a “de-Germanized and de-ideologized” Wagner who was “universally Western” and an “heir to ancient Greece.”\(^{518}\) For a composer who upheld Greek drama as a model for Western art, these comments would certainly have been welcomed wholeheartedly. Wieland’s productions bear a resemblance in certain respects with the Laokoon statue, especially as interpreted by Winckelmann and Lessing. The restraint on the Trojan priest’s face presented a timeless model of control in the midst of chaos and left interpretive possibilities open to the viewer by avoiding a grotesque expression of agony. Wieland’s productions likewise left interpretive possibilities open to the viewer through the use of neutral costumes and sets, which indicated no specific nationality or time period.

**Relation to the Mahler-Roller partnership.** Wieland, like his grandfather before him, demonstrated a keen interest in and talent for realizing multiple aspects of operatic production. Like Mahler, he aimed to create model productions of Wagner’s works that appealed to modern audiences. The Mahler-Roller *Tristan* did not depart as radically from traditional Romantic stage practice as did Wieland’s two interpretations, but the visual style of the Vienna and Bayreuth productions was so striking that strong critical response was generated, both positive and negative. Wieland assumed for himself many of the roles taken by both Mahler and Roller in their partnership. Like Roller, he designed stage sets, costumes (with Kurt Palm), and lighting (in collaboration with Paul Eberhardt). Although he did not take an intense interest in musical matters, he was concerned with assembling a first-rate ensemble of singers and instrumentalists. Like Mahler, he often coached singers on matters of dramatic interpretation. Joseph Wechsberg, for example, described witnessing Wieland rehearse a childrens’ choir as Nibelungs for *Das Rheingold*.\(^{519}\)

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\(^{517}\) Ibid., 244.


Wieland was always reticent about acknowledging potential sources that might have shaped his visual style. He severed ties with onetime mentor Kurt Overhoff prior to the 1951 festival and liked to present himself as an autodidact. He occasionally mentioned a debt to stage reformers such as Craig and Appia, both of whom were linked with Roller’s visual style in Vienna. Spotts linked Wieland’s emphasis on bold lighting and color directly with the ideas of Craig.\textsuperscript{520} Like Mahler, Wieland felt he was justified in making changes to scores (even those of his grandfather) if he deemed them necessary. In \textit{Tannhäuser}, for example, he combined elements of the Paris and Dresden versions of the opera, creating what was for him an ideal version of the work. Only \textit{Tristan und Isolde} was spared cuts. His philosophy of the ideal Wagnerian singer was also similar to Mahler’s. Both men sought not just fine voices, but mature and sophisticated actors. Bayreuth had traditionally showcased fine younger talent as opposed to the biggest superstars of the stage. In Spotts’s estimation, Wieland continued this practice, seeking performers who used both brain and voice, and could be “moulded to suit his requirements”.\textsuperscript{521}

\section*{Critical Reaction to Wieland’s Productions: Ignoring the Master’s Intentions}

David Levin surmised in 1997 that many opera companies are reluctant to pursue critical readings of works because the old debate of \textit{prima la musica, dopo le parole} has “long since been settled in favor of the primacy of music” in most opera houses.\textsuperscript{522} This might account for the strongly negative reactions of some critics to Wieland’s productions at Bayreuth, or to critiques of the Mahler-Roller \textit{Tristan} for that matter. Adolf Loos’s critique comes immediately to mind in this context. The degree to which tradition reigned at the Festspielhaus prior to 1951 also helps to explain the animosity expressed by many critics towards some of the new productions. Many of Wagner’s works had only received two previous stagings at Bayreuth prior to Wieland’s arrival on the scene: those supervised by Cosima and Siegfried Wagner, and those by Heinz Tietjen

\textsuperscript{520} See: Spotts, 235.
\textsuperscript{521} Ibid., 246.
\textsuperscript{522} David J. Levin, “Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading,” \textit{Cambridge Opera Journal} 9/1 (March 1997): 56.
and Emil Preetorius under Winifred’s directorship (only the complete *Ring* and *Parsifal* were performed at Bayreuth during Richard Wagner’s lifetime).

Levin also asserted in his 1997 essay that European audiences and opera directors in general have been more receptive than American audiences and opera companies to the idea of a staging being essentially a reading or interpretation of a work, rather than a literal reproduction in a traditional style. He singled out the Metropolitan Opera in New York as an institution particularly resistant to alternative stagings.\(^{523}\) Though this might be true of contemporary European audiences that have grown more accustomed to the style of productions initiated by Wieland Wagner in the 1950s, many critics were initially skeptical or outright hostile towards the new images they saw onstage at Bayreuth in the 1950s and 1960s.

Though reaction to the 1951 *Parsifal* was mixed, critics such as Heinz Joachim of *Die Welt* decried Wieland’s staging as nothing more than “oratorios and optico-melodrama” that threatened the timelessness of Wagner’s original creation.\(^{524}\) Joachim’s response was a natural one for someone not used to the restrained stage motion and sparse sets of Wieland’s postwar style. Hans Schnor wrote in the *Westfalen Blatt* of the “unremitting symbolism” of Wieland’s *Parsifal*, characterizing the production overall as a “symphony in darkness” and a “boring spectacle of shapes and shadows.”\(^{525}\) Based on this review, it appears that the director might have learned some lessons from Appia and Roller concerning the use of darkness onstage.

Not all criticism was presented as simple emotional or visceral displeasure. Spotts observed that many of the more rational critics of Wieland’s productions objected that Wagner’s score directions had often been blatantly ignored in the new stagings. The composer had surely known what he wanted in providing such detailed score indications. The disjunction between Wagner’s romantic music and his grandson’s sparse, twentieth-century sets and costumes was also shocking to many. Critic Gerard Bourke, writing in 1955, observed that Wieland’s sparse style was less acceptable in the *Ring* than in *Parsifal*. For him, this was because *Parsifal* had music of such “supreme grandeur and significance” that audience attention could suitably be “diverted from the visual to the

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\(^{523}\) Ibid., 52.

\(^{524}\) Reproduced in Spotts, 212.

\(^{525}\) Spotts, 212.
aural.” The action of the *Ring*, however, was so much more complex, and the music often “too weak to stand alone.”\(^{526}\) For Andrew Porter, writing in *Opera* in 1954, Wieland’s major fault as a director was in placing “visual spectacle before the music” and imposing his own designs, which did not fit, on the music. “It is Richard Wagner who draws us to Bayreuth,” he concluded, and Wieland’s only duty was to be the “composer’s humble servant.”\(^{527}\)

Spotts provided an example of Wieland’s perceived weakening of dramatic effect in *Lohengrin*. The director completely omitted Elsa’s final glance towards Ortrud at the end of the second act, even though the orchestra thunders out the warning motive as she does. The director may have felt that what the music expressed need not necessarily be reproduced onstage, but this was read as a definite weakening of a clear dramatic effect intended by the composer.\(^{528}\)

Adolph Aber, writing in *The Musical Times* after the first postwar festival, rejected the idea that Wieland’s stagings were that “new” at all. His view was that the director’s innovations were only really new in Bayreuth, and that he had brought the theater into line with a movement that had “long been going on in other Wagnerian centres.” Aber discussed the reforms of Adolphe Appia, whose name, he noted, was not heard at all during the 1951 festival. Appia, as Aber explained, had advocated a simplification of stage design and the removal of unnecessary clutter as early as the 1890s. Aber listed productions from earlier in the twentieth century that proved Wieland was a “latecomer” to revolutionary staging. These included Carl Hagemann’s *Ring* in Baden and Wiesbaden, Leo Pasetti’s *Parsifal* and *Ring* in Munich, and Paolos Aravantinos’s *Parsifal* in Leipzig. All of these demonstrated the influence of Appia and thus, for Aber, “nothing new came from the hill” in 1951.\(^{529}\)

According to Levin, Wagner himself would likely have reacted negatively to modern attempts to stage his works in ways that departed radically from his own productions or that attempted to “critically read” those works. Wagner was acknowledged

\(^{526}\) Bourke, 29.
\(^{527}\) *Opera* 5/9 (September 1954): 535.
\(^{528}\) See: Spotts, 230.
by Viennese critic Eduard Hanslick as “the world’s first Regisseur” in 1885.\textsuperscript{530} A Regisseur is the stage director who coordinates all aspects of a theatrical production. While this was likely a jab at one of the critic’s arch-nemeses, the designation possessed more than a grain of truth. Wagner conceived grand visions of the staging of his works, including having his own opera house constructed. He had a hand in virtually every aspect of the creation of these works, writing his own libretti and providing elaborate staging directions and scenic details within the score.

Levin observed that although Wagner left evidence both to support productions that endeavored to replicate the composer’s own style and those that sought to shake traditional productions out of “dramatic and dramaturgical complacency,” by meticulously documenting his own staging style, Wagner likely revealed his determination to preserve his own readings and also showed defensiveness towards the “threat of alternative readings.” Wagner wanted others to read his works as he read them and viewed critical interpretations as suspicious and alien to a true work of art.\textsuperscript{531} Levin supported his thesis by detailing Wagner’s attitude towards the reading of an artwork in the final scene of \textit{Die Meistersinger}. Beckmesser, the parody of Hanslick and a stickler for the singing rules of mastersingers, fails to effectively perform Walther’s prize song. Walther, the hero who wins the hand of the beautiful young Eva, proceeds sings the song brilliantly without need of the sheet with the text. Levin remarked that Walther “supplants reading” through his dramatic performance and ignoring the sheet with the words. The mastersingers join him in abandoning the text and listen enraptured as he sings. This signals the “advent of song in league with word and gesture” and the birth of the “artwork of the future.” Reading becomes, for Levin, a “privileged medium” for Wagner’s polemic.\textsuperscript{532} The hero creates art and achieves success without need for extensive training, much like the innocent Siegfried slays the dragon Fafner. The villain is unable to succeed even with the text and a carefully worked-out melody. The moral of this story, for Levin, is that “true art and reading are deeply incompatible.”\textsuperscript{533}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{530} Eduard Hanslick, \textit{Die moderne Oper, 3: Aus dem Opernleben der Gegenwart} (Berlin, 1885), 324.
\bibitem{531} Levin, 54, 59.
\bibitem{532} Ibid., 62.
\bibitem{533} Ibid., 63. He adds, citing Carl Dahlhaus, that this proposition creates serious problems: \textit{Die Meistersinger}, the work that advocates the abandonment of reading in artistic creation, must itself be read.
\end{thebibliography}
Wieland’s two Tristans

Wieland staged Tristan und Isolde twice during his directorship at Bayreuth, crafting new productions in 1952 and 1962. These differed in visual style to a great degree, though the director’s probing intellectualism remained evident in both versions. Both productions bear comparison with the Mahler-Roller Tristan, primarily for their dramatic use of light and color onstage. In the 1952 production, he eliminated any onstage elements that would distract the audience from the two protagonists. This included much of the ship detail from Act I, including the sailors. Only a bare outline of a ship deck was visible, along with a large tarp and simple couch. Spotts identified the major themes of this production as the “deadly power of eros and thanatos” and the “inevitable clash between sexual freedom and social oppression.”\footnote{Spotts, 242.} The sparseness of Wieland’s style was especially apparent in Act II, a sea of darkness in which only the heads of the lovers were visible during the love duet. As in Act I, only the principal singers appeared onstage. The critic writing in Opera applauded this production, which had merged all elements of operatic production into “a unity such as Wagner could only have dreamed of.”\footnote{Opera (1952): 517.} Bourke found this production to be “exquisitely tender.” Like Wieland’s Parsifal of the year before, this Tristan did not distract attention from the score, instead it stimulated the viewer through symbolism. He singled out the second-act set as “well nigh perfect in its simplicity” and perhaps the best single act up to that point in postwar Bayreuth.\footnote{Bourke, 30.} Wieland’s lighting accomplished through visual means what Wagner’s music did for the two lovers: unite them as one with the cosmos.

The 1962 production, which was used at Bayreuth through the 1970 Festival, marked a distinct change in Wieland’s style. The intense darkness of the earlier production yielded to a somewhat brighter stage in which each act was dominated by an enormous, totemic object. These monoliths were made intentionally non-representational, so that the viewer might freely interpret their significance for each act. Spotts characterized these mysterious objects as both “erotic and phallic” and also “suggestive of the Celtic origins of the story.”\footnote{Spotts, 225.} In Wieland biographer Walter Panofsky’s

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534 Spotts, 242.
535 Opera (1952): 517.
536 Bourke, 30.
537 Spotts, 225.
estimation, the first-act object resembled a ship’s prow, suggestive of a Viking ship.\(^{538}\) The object was tower-like in act 2, with a rounded top and two large holes resembling eyes. The third-act totem was straight on one side and curved on the other, also with a large hole. Wieland’s dynamic use of green, blue, and red lighting added to the dramatic impact of the totems, and signaled a break with his earliest visual style at Bayreuth. He brought the sailors and courtiers back onstage in the first act, after banishing them in 1952. The focus was no longer primarily on the principals but also on the intrusion of the harsh world of day represented by those figures. The night/day contrast plays an important role in Wagner’s drama, as mentioned in ch. 4. It seems fitting that Wieland not only brightened the stage considerably throughout the 1962 production, as compared with the 1952 one, but also brought the lesser characters onstage again, perhaps reinforcing the world of day/society connection that is explicit in the opera.

**Wieland’s Stagings as Gesamtkunstwerke**

In the productions of the New Bayreuth, Wieland Wagner created costumes, sets, and lighting that would work in tandem with the music to achieve a desired effect on the spectator: the imparting of the central moral or dramatic point that the director perceived in a particular work. He was assisted towards this end by his brother Wolfgang, who handled the financial and administrative matters, by his wife Gertrud, who created the choreography for choral scenes, by chorus master Wilhelm Pitz, wardrobe master Curt Palm, and lighting master Paul Eberhardt.

Wolfgang Sawallisch, who conducted at Bayreuth in the 1950s, recalled his conversations with Wieland concerning the relationship between the aural and the visual in Wagner productions. The two discussed at length how best to “transpose the music onto the stage” and how musical gestures were to impact stage gestures.\(^{539}\) For Panofsky, the director gave greater weight to the music in his early productions, but shifted to a greater emphasis on the drama in his later ones. Wieland felt the music was secondary in importance, because “without the dramatic idea it would never have been written.”

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\(^{538}\) Walter Panofsky, *Wieland Wagner* (Bremen: Carl Schünemann Verlag, 1964), 64.

scene and the idea behind it were “paramount.””

He paid so much attention to the stage image that he remarked to Wechsberg that costumes for him were dramatic rather than decorative in function and that “the colour of a costume” was as important “as the sound of a violin.” Eberhardt boasted of the theater’s twenty lighting men and of the lighting scores that were “as complicated as the musicians’ scores.”

The relationship between color and music was also very important to Wieland’s conception of his grandfather’s works. Sawallisch once told the director that if the staging was dominated by a color which he felt did not correspond with the music, it was very difficult for him to conduct it. The two men worked extensively, for example, on how to express by means of color the “clear, bright and radiant sound of A major” in *Lohengrin.*

During his long meetings with Eberhardt, Wieland would often play excerpts from the operas at the piano while the lighting director would try to find appropriate colors to match the music at the lighting panel. Spotts spoke of Wieland’s *omnicompetence* as a director, since he “developed the concept, sketched the costumes, chose the singers and conductors, coached the performers,” and directed each of the productions. Wieland, like Mahler and Diaghilev, had elements of the *Gesamtkünstler* in him.

He also had specific ideas about the kind of sound he wanted his musicians to produce to fit in with his visual conception of the works. These qualities bore some resemblance to those desired by Mahler from his Court Opera Orchestra. According to Spotts, Wieland desired an orchestral sound that was characterized by the “lightness, clarity, delicacy, transparency and fast tempi” that he associated with what he called his “Latin conductors.” He also strove to lighten the choral sound. Karl Böhm was among the conductors who approached Wagner’s music in this manner, and he was the chief conductor of Wieland’s 1962 *Tristan.* His recording of that work with Birgit Nilsson, Wolfgang Windgassen, and the Bayreuth ensemble (1966) is one of the few complete recordings that now fits on three as opposed to four compact discs (DG 449-772-2).

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540 Panofsky, 18-19; translated and reproduced in: Spotts, 233.
541 Wechsberg, 73.
542 Buda and Bockelmann, 41.
543 See: Spotts, 237.
544 Ibid., 244.
545 Idem.
takes just under 219 minutes to get through the opera, whereas Furtwängler’s celebrated
1952 account (EMI) takes almost 256 minutes, and von Karajan’s EMI studio recording
(1971-72) clocks in at just over 246 minutes. Although critics did not discuss Mahler’s
tempos in the 1903 production, he was repeatedly praised by those who worked with him
for the precision of execution that he demanded from all his musicians.

Richard Osborne has written of Böhm’s desire to put Tristan und Isolde on a
“cholesterol-free diet” by favoring brisk tempos and fiery orchestral playing. The
clarity of the diction is also one of the remarkable aspects of his Bayreuth recording. In
his autobiography, A Life Remembered, Böhm credited his long engagement with
Mozart’s music as an important preparation for his “purification of Wagnerian style.” The
conductor thus revitalized the performance of Wagner through the spirit of Mozart.
In the 1905 Vienna Court Opera production of Don Giovanni, one could argue that
Mahler and Roller revitalized Mozart through the spirit of Wagner. Willnauer has argued
that they essentially turned this Classic-era masterpiece into a music drama by
performing the work in German (standard practice in Vienna at that time, though with a
new translation by Max Kalbeck), with swift scene changes for dramatic continuity,
striking visuals, and without the final moralizing ensemble after the Commendatore drags
the Don down into the abyss.

Wieland Wagner bears comparison with Mahler and Roller and their achievement
in the 1903 Court Opera Tristan in the ways previously enumerated. Wieland and Mahler
both epitomized the artist as intellectual, passionately committed to the creation of model
productions of operatic works. Like Roller, Wieland made creative use of lighting and
color to reinvent the operatic stage. Finally, the director of New Bayreuth revitalized
Wagner performances at an institution that had become burdened by the weight of
tradition and associations with Nazism. Likewise, Roller was motivated to create a new
visual style for Tristan und Isolde after reacting negatively to traditional naturalistic
decors in an earlier production in Vienna that he witnessed. His work with Mahler helped
to move the Vienna Court Opera away from the aesthetic of the stage as a museum of

546 Richard Osborne, notes to DG 449-772-2, 7.
historical artifacts and towards a more suggestive one in which color and lighting reinforced the mood of the music and drama.

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The theme of artistic collaboration links the work of the artists presented in this chapter. The Ballets Russes, Ballets Suédois, and Wieland Wagner and his team at Bayreuth crafted influential productions marked by their own individual styles. Each group was anchored by one influential figure who oversaw the work of the others. Wieland Wagner, however, actually designed more production elements than did his counterparts Sergei Diaghilev or Rolf de Maré. Wolfgang Wagner at Bayreuth replicated their administrative functions. In spite of his far-reaching control, Wieland was still dependent upon the work of others, especially his lighting master Eberhardt. The spirit of collaboration demonstrated by these twentieth-century artists reflects the legacy of the Mahler-Roller partnership at the turn of the century.
CONCLUSIONS

The concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk was an influential and highly-contested one for many in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the subject of inter-art relations occupied the best minds in earlier periods as well. Figures of the German Enlightenment had advocated a clear delineation between the different arts, and years later Lessing’s *Laocoon* became one of the most influential examples of this school of thought. He established firm boundaries between the content and style of poetic and pictorial artworks, and in doing so, reinforced the classicizing ideals of the mid- to late eighteenth century. According to Lessing, works of art should be easily classifiable according to a rigorous organizational system. Each type of art was not to confuse the mind through the borrowing of expressive techniques more appropriate to other art forms. The ancient Greeks, after all, to whom many Enlightenment thinkers looked with wonder, assigned each type of art to a different muse.

This makes Wagner’s observation about the wallpaper at the café in Zurich all the more interesting. The wallpaper reminded him of a painting by Genelli that he had seen as a boy which depicted the education of Bacchus (Dionysus) by the muses. Perhaps Dionysus was just the figure to unite the arts of the muses. The Gesamtkunstwerk ideal as developed by Wagner certainly leaned more towards a Dionysian aesthetic than an Apollonian one. Romantic artists generally favored the former over the latter in their own work. The Athenians also performed drama, Wagner’s ancient model of an integrated art, during the festival of Dionysus. I would argue that a spectacle combining multiple arts with the goal of a unified and overwhelming sensory experience should naturally be associated more with the god of intoxication than with the god of restraint in emotional expression.

Wagner himself expounded at length on the Gesamtkunstwerk, though he used the term sparingly and focused more extensively on related concepts such as music drama and the “artwork of the future.” The socialist and anarchist influences of the 1840s profoundly influenced his ideas on the total work of art as expressed in the exile writings. The picture he painted in *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* was that of an idealized artistic community in which all artists contributed as equals towards the art that arose out of their
“common need.” In this regard the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois appear to come close to his vision. Wagner, on the other hand, created music dramas on his own, exerting control over all aspects of their production. The influence of Schopenhauer probably tempered the revolutionary fervor of the author of Die Kunst und Die Revolution and Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft and led him to reassert the primacy of music in the artwork of the future.

Mahler and Roller participated in this aesthetic and philosophical tradition through their collaboration in Vienna, which began with the 1903 production of Tristan und Isolde. Mahler did not leave us detailed writings on the subject of his art or that of Wagner. We learn of his dedication to first-rate performance and precision of musical execution through the words of others. The hiring of Roller demonstrated his commitment to operatic performances that would appeal to a modern audience. Roller, through his writings and visual designs for Tristan, revealed himself to be a dedicated stage designer who brought the bold use of color and light found in some modern painting to the opera stage. Although he stressed that stage design should remain a peripheral art in relation to the production as a whole, the novelty of his visual style at the Vienna Court Opera insured that many eyewitnesses focused almost exclusively on visual elements. Reviews of that production suggest that the visuals clearly dominated the music in the perception of many. Most critics, however, were intimately familiar with the Tristan music, which was over forty years old in 1903. The novelty of the visual spectacle would have been far more newsworthy than a particular musical interpretation, no matter how polished and compelling.

The spirit of the Mahler-Roller partnership can be felt in the work of twentieth-century artists such as the innovative Parisian ballet troupes of the 1910s and 1920s, or that of Wieland Wagner and his reinvigoration of the Bayreuth Festival after World War II. Boldness came to define the artistic style of those creators, as did a willingness to challenge their audience to explore new ways of communicating by means of stage spectacle. Ultimately, no single definition of the Gesamtkunstwerk emerges from the materials examined in this study. There is no pure exemplar. The concept of a spectacle combining the power of multiple arts into a unified whole has long fascinated people in a variety of disciplines and provided inspiration for collaborative artistic ventures beyond
Wagner’s imagining. The emergence of opera in late sixteenth-century Florence provides only one example of this. Yet a fascination with the Gesamtkunstwerk became more evident and widespread during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in part because of Wagner’s influence both in his music and his prose writings.

Mahler and Roller enriched the artistic life of Vienna at the turn of the century and moved towards the goal of the total work of art. If the press and other eyewitness accounts are to be believed, their productions stimulated both eye and ear. Mahler clearly realized that the older naturalistic visual style of many of the productions he inherited upon being appointed director of the Court Opera no longer matched the emotional impact of music of masterworks such as Tristan und Isolde, the Ring, or Don Giovanni. Although Mahler stressed that the music should remain the primary element within the operatic production as a whole, the trust he placed in his stage designer, and the powers and responsibilities that Roller assumed, indicate the director’s commitment to providing visuals to complement and equal the music under his command.

Leonard Bernstein provided one of the most definitive proclamations of Mahler’s music as a bridge between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in his 1967 article in High Fidelity entitled “Mahler: His Time has Come.” He asserted that the composer anticipated in his music the horrors of the twentieth century, such as the “smoking ovens of Auschwitz,” the JFK assassination, and the “frantically bombed jungles of Vietnam.” He probably had the Sixth Symphony foremost in his mind. The menacing march that opens that work could easily serve as the soundtrack to a film set in the Second World War. For Bernstein, Mahler’s name evoked images of a figure “straddling the magic dateline 1900,” with one foot firmly in the “rich, beloved nineteenth century,” and the other “rather less firmly, seeking solid ground in the twentieth.” His ultimate destiny, for Bernstein, was to sum up and “lay to ultimate rest” the long tradition of German music beginning with Bach. This “divided man” had his “eyes on the future” and his heart “in the past.”

While Bernstein perhaps exaggerated the degree to which Mahler’s music anticipated twentieth-century events, his understanding of the composer/conductor

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550 Ibid., 53-54.
nevertheless contained much truth. Mahler’s enormous symphonies, written for large-scale performing forces and imbued with soaring melodies and colorful orchestration, provided a fitting summation of Romantic symphonic style at the end of the “long” nineteenth century. After Mahler, modernist developments such as atonal composition and neoclassicism signaled new directions for the course of twentieth-century music. Mahler’s music therefore marked an end in one sense, but also anticipated future styles. The cluster chords in the final movement of the Tenth Symphony and his incorporation of “trivial” musical elements, such as the Posthorn melody in the third movement of the Third Symphony or the children’s song “Frère Jacques” in the third movement of the First Symphony, signaled the great diversity of styles evident in the music of the coming century.

Mahler’s music has been extensively studied and discussed in both scholarly and popular circles, especially since the middle of the past century. His conducting and directorial activity, however, deserves greater attention. This study has shown the degree to which Mahler participated in a long tradition of addressing the proper sphere of the arts in the theatrical spectacle through his work with Alfred Roller in Vienna. Their partnership also anticipated the spirit of cooperation and mutual encouragement that characterized the work of influential troupes such as the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois, both of which represented the “modern” in the twenty years after Mahler’s death. The spirit of the Mahler-Roller 1903 production of Tristan und Isolde can also be detected in Wieland Wagner’s bold postwar productions at Bayreuth. The degree to which Wieland was personally familiar with Roller’s work is not entirely clear, though the two men may have met around 1934 when Hitler invited Mahler’s old partner to design a new Parsifal at Bayreuth. The spirit of the Mahler-Roller partnership can be felt anywhere that artists seek to stimulate their audience on multiple sensory levels and to reinvigorate their art in the face of stale tradition and inertia. Therein lies Mahler’s great achievement as an operatic director, first realized in his initial collaboration with Alfred Roller.


“Tag und Nacht in Wagners Tristan und in Mahlers siebenter Symphonie.”


_______. “‘Ein hypermoderner Dirigent’: Mahler and Anti-Semitism in ‘Fin-de-siecle’ Vienna.” *19th-Century Music* 18/3 (Spring 1995): 257-76.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Stephen Thursby was born on August 6, 1979 in Tallahassee, FL. He is the son of Pam and Howard Thursby, and has one younger brother, John. He received a Bachelor of Arts in music and minor in German at Florida State University in 2001. After spending one year living in Germany, teaching English and American culture at the Brandenburg Technical University in Cottbus, he began Master’s studies in music history at the University of Washington in Seattle. There he met his future wife, Joanna Cich, and received a Master of Arts in music history in 2004 with a thesis on Gustav Mahler’s *Bach Suite*. He then began Ph.D. studies in musicology at FSU, and received the degree in May 2009. In addition to conducting research on Mahler’s activities as a conductor and operatic director, he plays violin and treble viol and has read papers at academic conferences in the United States and Canada.