

# The Secret of Music-Dramatic Form

## *Music Drama as Opera*

### 1.

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

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

The most comprehensive statement of these insights can be found in the 1971 book *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas*.<sup>2</sup> The ideas presented there were repeated and further developed on a number of occasions, the most important of which are another book of 1971, *Richard Wagners Musikdramen*, and two

late statements: “The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera,” first published in Italian in 1988, and “What Is a Musical Drama?,” first published in English a year later.<sup>3</sup> My reconstruction of Dahlhaus’s thought will be based primarily on these four texts, and on the first one in particular. And it will be a reconstruction rather than a straightforward summary. Dahlhaus’s thinking is too nimble-footed and mercurial, too ready to digress and follow its quarry along some obscure but promising byway, to allow for a simple summary. But there is a systematic structure hidden beneath the luxuriant overgrowth, and I shall try to bring it out into the open.

## 2.

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

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

That the main means employed by spoken drama is language, and that that employed by opera is music, is obvious. Less obvious, and crucial, is Dahlhaus’s next step. The main discursive form of modern spoken drama, he claims (taking his clue primarily from Peter Szondi’s 1956 *Theorie des modernen Dramas*),<sup>6</sup> is dialogue: “The medium of modern drama, as it developed since the sixteenth century,

is the dialogue. And dialogue, as the carrier of form, tends to be exclusive. Epic and contemplative moments, which were constitutive for the ancient and medieval theater . . . , were eliminated from drama.<sup>7</sup> And similarly: “The medium and the sole formal principle of modern drama since the Renaissance is dialogue. . . . The goal of dramatic dialogue is a moment of decision when a character becomes aware of his moral autonomy and acts according to his inner motivation.”<sup>8</sup> Since the late sixteenth century, modern spoken drama develops its action, a series of events in each of which one situation is changed into another, primarily by means of a dialogue in which the participating characters come to decisions concerning how they will act. Other discursive forms, such as the monologue or the chorus, forms that might introduce contemplative or epic components, are either absent or marginal; in any case more often than not monologues are in effect interior dialogues designed to allow the character to arrive at a decision.

In opera, a dramatic type that developed simultaneously with modern spoken drama (“opera came into the existence at the same time as the drama of the modern era—the drama of Shakespeare and Racine”),<sup>9</sup> the principal means are both language and music and Dahlhaus never tires to remind us that, contrary to popular misrepresentations, the Wagnerian reform of the early 1850s did not envisage putting the music in the service of the words, but rather putting it, along with the words, in the service of the drama: “The text, the poem, is—just like the music—understood by Wagner as a means of the drama, not as its essence.”<sup>10</sup> But if in theory both the language and the music are to serve the drama, in operatic practice, in singing, the music overwhelms the language and becomes the opera’s principal and defining means. “When, therefore, we speak of ‘musical dramaturgy’—dramaturgy that makes use of musical means—we should refer only to the function of music in the creation of a drama. . . . Music does not alight from somewhere outside upon a drama that already has an independent existence, but rather . . . the music alone creates the drama, which is that drama of a special kind.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the main discursive form of opera is not one that would correspond to the dialogue of the spoken drama, that is, recitative dialogue, but rather one corresponding to the spoken monologue, the aria. What is central in the spoken drama is marginal in the opera, and vice versa. The predominant forms of operatic discourse are the “closed” forms of “melody” (primarily the aria but also others, such as the duet and the ensemble), not the “open” form of “declamation” (the recitative). Conflict between characters is expressed in a configuration of arias, not in dialogue:

The emphasis has shifted from dialogue, where it lies in a play (which expresses conflict in arguments), to a configuration of monologues in which the affects, as the underlying structure of the drama taking place among the characters, are made musically manifest. . . . If modern European spoken drama . . . rests on the premise that everything important which happens between people can be expressed through

speech, then opera . . . has at its core a profound distrust of language. It is not arguments exchanged in recitatives, but affects expressed in arias—i.e., in soliloquies—that reveal the true substance of relationships between characters in a musical drama. . . . Presenting a configuration of characters in a drama of affects is the stylistic principle opera imposes on the action represented, just as expressing human conflicts in dialogue is the stylistic principle of a play.<sup>12</sup>

The different means and discursive forms emphasized, respectively, by the spoken drama (speaking, dialogue) and opera (singing, aria) are correlated with the difference of the essential features of what gets represented in them—correlated, since it would be hard, and perhaps unnecessary, to decide what is the cause and what the effect in this case. Speaking is a medium of reflection that allows the characters to connect the experienced present with the recollected past and anticipated future, and a dialogue involves at least two such reflective characters. Hence a spoken play emphasizes external action (what happens between individual characters) and its protagonists are reflective in the sense that they relate the present moment to the past and the future: one acts on motives deriving from the remembered past, attempting to change the presently experienced situation into an anticipated future one. Singing, on the other hand, and in particular the solo aria, is a medium of self-expression that allows the character to vent his presently experienced affect without connecting it to the past or the future. Hence an opera emphasizes internal passion, what happens not between individual characters but within this individual character who remains unreflective, that is, imprisoned in the present, and passive, that is, interested not in acting but in passionate self-expression. Thus, Dahlhaus argues:

[In opera] the stress falls on the scenic-musical moment which is fulfilled by itself and therefore encloses a lyrical aspect. Any given situation is unreflectively experienced in its presence, rather than interpreted on the basis of the relationships that link it with the past and the future. And it seems that the difference with drama is rooted in the nature of music . . . : The musical tone, just as the affect that it expresses, is “fettered to the sensuous present,” so that what went on before and what is still to come pale in significance. Paradoxically speaking, the decisive moments of the action in opera are those when the action stops and is suspended. . . . The musical-scenic present is not a function of the dramatic aim-directed process that transcends them, but the reverse, the process is a function of the self-sufficient present.<sup>13</sup>

The correlation of the difference in the way time is handled in drama and in opera with the difference between the dominant medium of each is repeatedly emphasized by Dahlhaus: “If, in a play, emphasis lies less on what is happening at the present moment than on the relations to past and future that generate the dialectics of the moment, it is because of the primacy of speech over scenic elements. . . . In opera, conversely, the focus on the present moment has to do with music’s affinity to the scenic.”<sup>14</sup> And again:

TABLE 1 Ideal Types I: Drama versus Opera

Aims
Represented object: action versus passion
Temporality: the present related to the past and future versus the present isolated
Means
Kind of discourse: speaking versus singing
Form of discourse: dialogue versus aria

In spoken drama, . . . a large . . . part of the action is usually unseen. The language of the dialogue adds other meanings to what is shown onstage and these may be remote in both space and time. Music, by contrast, is tied to the place in which it occurs and relates to the moment in which it belongs. . . . Singing is the essence of operatic music, expressing as it does the present moment . . . ; and the musical present manifested in it is simultaneously the scenic present. Melodic expression, unlike verbal expression, does not reach beyond the present moment but exists entirely in the given situation; it isolates that situation and lifts it out of its context, so that what has gone before recedes into oblivion with no thought given to the consequences which will follow the particular moment.<sup>15</sup>

In short (table 1), the spoken drama centers on action (dynamic change of situation), and opera on passion (static expression of affects released by the situation). The protagonist of the former relates his present to the past and future, and the protagonist of the latter remains imprisoned in the present. This contrast is correlated with (that is, it is either the cause or the effect of) the contrast between the means and discursive forms emphasized in each type of drama—spoken dialogue and sung aria, respectively. While Dahlhaus’s view of opera as centering on passion and aria rather than on action and recitative is something of a commonplace, the second component of his analysis—the observation that opera, unlike spoken drama, emphasizes the present moment at the expense of its connections with the past and future—is highly original. As we shall see, it is crucially important for his understanding of Wagner’s dramaturgy.

## 3.

“The name ‘music drama,’” writes Dahlhaus, “seems to have established itself in the 1860s as a designation for what was specific to Wagner’s works that one . . . did not want to classify as operas.”<sup>16</sup> The Wagnerian music drama, Dahlhaus implies, can be understood only with reference to the contrast between spoken drama and opera: it is a new dramatic type that falls somewhere in between the two older ones. The music drama aspires to the condition of the spoken drama, without

wanting or being able to give up entirely on its operatic heritage and musical means—that is, on being, precisely, a *music* drama:

Wagner proceeds in an ambiguous fashion. While the intention to realize drama musically as a dialogue-drama is unmistakable, the subterranean operatic tradition remains paramount. . . . On the one hand, music drama confers on dialogue the rights that were reserved for it in the modern spoken drama, but not in opera; and the epic-contemplative parts, chorus and monologue, are pushed back. . . . On the other hand, however, the dialogic structure of music drama that was Wagner's aim is not infrequently endangered by relicts of compositional technique deriving from operatic tradition from which he did not emancipate himself as completely as he believed.<sup>17</sup>

The aspiration to the condition of spoken drama means that an attempt had to be made to shift the point of gravity from monologues to dialogue, that is, from arias to recitative. But for this shift of the point of gravity to be effective, it was not enough simply to phase out or attenuate the arias; rather, the recitative dialogue had to become musically more emphatic, more substantial and interesting, more weighty. Moreover, and this is a crucial point, it would not do simply to make the recitative more like aria, to transform the recitative dialogue into something akin to a duet. The closed forms of vocal melody—the aria, the duet—tend to isolate the present from the past and future, and this isolation was precisely what the music drama wanted to overcome. Thus, what was needed was a new way to compose the recitative, a way that would preserve its “open” declamatory character and yet make it musically more substantial, and, most important, put these new musical means at the service of the drama: it is on them primarily that the burden of binding the present with its past and future was to rest. Indeed, in an entry in her *Diary* on January 12, 1873, Cosima Wagner noted her husband's remark: “That is my real innovation: that I have incorporated dialogue into opera, and not just as recitative.”<sup>18</sup>

This new way of composing recitative dialogue Wagner found by examining and adapting the developmental discourse of the Beethovenian symphony. In a nutshell, his solution was to leave the style of the vocal lines in principle intact (the declamation was pushed in the *arioso* direction already in the Romantic operas of the 1840s) and to concentrate the musical and dramatic interest on the developing variation of the accompanying orchestral discourse based on motives of reminiscence and anticipation—on the *Leitmotivtechnik* that provided a present moment with a recollected past and expected future. Wagner's aim, says Dahlhaus, was “to create a rapprochement between the *arioso*-declamatory style of vocal melody and the expressive and allegorical motivic writing for orchestra.”<sup>19</sup> And the main point of the latter was not merely to provide the orchestral discourse with melodic substance and interest, but to accomplish by musical means what in a spoken drama was accomplished by means of language:

TABLE 2 Ideal Types II: Open versus Closed Composition

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Syntax: irregular prose versus regular poetry
Tonality: floating versus stable
Motivic relationships: developing variation versus patterns based on contrast and repetition
Texture: contrapuntal versus homophonic
Form: logical versus architectonic

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The symphonic style in Wagner is the foundation of a leitmotivic technique which forms a counter-instance to the predominance . . . of the musical and scenic present. Leitmotifs, which dramaturgically nearly always function as reminiscence motifs, link the present moment, the visible event, with earlier events or with ideas whose origins lie in the pre-history. However, the delineation of a second, unseen action . . . belongs . . . to the dramaturgy of the spoken genre.<sup>20</sup>

In short, “the symphonic style of orchestral composition, as Wagner recognized, assists the dialogizing of music and the musicalizing of dialogue, and dialogue in turn constitutes the primary medium of a drama whose poetics reflects that of the spoken genre.”<sup>21</sup>

Here, too, Dahlhaus relies on an implied contrast between two ideal types, two ways of composing (table 2)—implied, since, admittedly, I am systematizing his thoughts on the subject perhaps beyond the limits he himself would find comfortable. Taking his cue at least in part from Jacques Handschin, who in his 1948 book *Musikgeschichte im Überblick* distinguished the “architectonic” and the “logical” form, Dahlhaus contrasts two compositional systems—systems in the sense that the individual components of each strongly imply, though do not absolutely require, one another.<sup>22</sup> The open system favors prose-like syntax of irregular phrase-lengths, floating or modulating tonality, developing variation of motives, and contrapuntal texture with the main melodic line freely circulating among the inner and outer voices. Its overall result is the open logical form based primarily on a web of motivic relationships spun over the entire length of the musical discourse, relationships that ensure that every present moment of the discourse is connected to moments in the past and future. (Dahlhaus has a weakness for Schoenbergian terminology: “musical prose,” “floating tonality,” and “developing variation” are all Arnold Schoenberg’s locutions.) The closed system, by contrast, favors a “poetic” (or “quadratic”) syntax of regular phrase-lengths that do not merely follow one another but form hierarchical patterns (such as the antecedent and consequent phrases in a period), stable tonality, patterns of phrases based on contrast and repetition (such as ABA or AAB), and homophonic texture with the main melodic line staying in one voice. Its overall result is the closed architectonic form that, instead of emphasizing the passage of time, tends to isolate and, so to

speak, “absolutize” the present moment so that the discourse as a whole is an extended *nunc stans*.

The individual components of each system are correlated. Thus, for instance, since musical comprehensibility depends on both the regularity of phrasing and the motivic connections, Wagner, “who always aimed at musical innovation, but on the other hand wanted to be immediately and precisely understood,”<sup>23</sup> compensates for the irregular syntax with the increased interconnectedness of leitmotifs: “To make a rough contrast, *Lohengrin* is regular in the musical syntax and difficult to grasp—poor in melodic connections—in its form. . . . *Ring*, on the other hand, is rich in form-creating pregnant motivic connections . . . , but complicated and irregular in the musical syntax.”<sup>24</sup> In general, “Between symphonic style, emphasis on dialogue, dissolution of ‘quadratic’ syntax in ‘musical prose’ . . . , leitmotivic technique, and the delineation of an unseen action beyond the seen, there exists in Wagner a nexus, the individual elements of which can be derived as consequences of each other.”<sup>25</sup> In short: “The compositional technique of the *Ring* tetralogy constitutes a ‘system’ and was described as such by Wagner himself. The ‘musical prose,’ the ‘floating’ tonality, and the constitutive leitmotivic technique are just as correlated or complementary as are the ‘quadratic’ rhythmic syntax, the stable tonality, and the accidental leitmotivic or reminiscence technique.”<sup>26</sup>

When conceived at their most abstract, the two systems are clearly independent of the distinction between vocal and instrumental genres. In opera, elements of the open system can be adapted to serve the purpose of “declamation” in recitative, while the closed system serves “melody” in arias, duets, and ensembles. In symphony the themes are articulated in the closed system, while the open system serves to formulate the transitions and developments. Accordingly, one might claim that throughout the long nineteenth century open and closed systems of composition coexisted and that their interplay defined the large-scale form in both opera and instrumental music. Dahlhaus’s own claim that “in the evolution of the sonata allegro from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth, the focus shifted progressively from architecture to logic” is certainly correct and can be extended to embrace opera, too, provided one does not take this shift of focus to signify a complete replacement.<sup>27</sup> In both symphony and opera, for Wagner and his contemporaries the overall form remained based on the interplay of the two principles. Dahlhaus would probably not deny all this, but he might persuasively argue that a natural affinity of some sort exists between the open system of composition and the dynamic developmental temporal logic of the symphony, on the one hand, and the closed system of composition and static atemporal architecture of the aria, on the other. Wagner’s post-1848 reform, then, would consist of importing into the composition of recitative dialogue the full resources of the symphonic open system, in particular the developing motivic variation and contrapuntal texture, and thus providing the vocal dialogue with the orchestral substance and

weight it required, while ensuring that these resources (the resources of the *Leitmotivtechnik*) serve the drama by connecting the present with the past and future.

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

Accordingly, if in the “closed” form of drama the speech is exclusively the expression of the acting personages and not of the dramatist who remains as it were aesthetically anonymous, in music drama, the prototype of which is the *Ring* tetralogy, the author intervenes with his comments in the proceedings, and he does so as a composer, not as a poet. In the musical speech of the leitmotifs, the “orchestral melody,” it is Wagner himself who speaks and reaches an understanding with the listeners above the head of the acting personage, so long as the listeners are able to comprehend the musical metaphors.<sup>28</sup>

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

It is unmistakable and was never doubted that what is being expressed musically in the motives is sometimes the conscious and not infrequently the unconscious remembrance of the speaking personage. But a significant number of motives express . . . a sense or a meaningful connection implied in the text or in the stage situation, about which the composer reaches an understanding with the public. . . . Thus, in those leitmotifs that are not grounded in psychology, it is the author—as the narrator in a novel or epic—who is aesthetically present.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4.

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

One finds in Dahlhaus’s writings two separate answers to this question, answers that neither support nor contradict one another, but rather run along parallel and independent lines. The first answer, and the one to which he devotes the most space and attention, centers on Wagner’s notion of the “poetic-musical period,” which Dahlhaus wants to save from Lorenz’s misinterpretations, but in which he, like Lorenz, sees the key to the secret of the Wagnerian form. Lorenz, Dahlhaus argues, misunderstood the nature of the poetic-musical period, but he was right to

see in it the principal formal unit of the music drama, articulating the flow of “endless melody” and giving shape and formal coherence to what otherwise would be merely a stream of events. Correctly understood, all poetic-musical periods would be of roughly comparable size of some twenty to thirty measures, similar to the size of a normal nineteenth-century period, and each would be defined by its distinctive poetic and musical contents—its specific configuration of characters and events, on the one hand, and its specific configuration of the constitutive principal motives and the inessential secondary motives, on the other.<sup>30</sup> The form these periods articulated was hierarchical. Motives were grouped into configurations; these constituted periods; these in turn combined into scenes; and finally the whole drama was a series of such scenes: “Musical form, in so far as it is intended, is realized hierarchically as it were: motives are combined into motivic complexes or groups, groups into ‘poetic-musical periods,’ periods into scenes or parts of scenes . . . , and scenes into the whole drama.”<sup>31</sup>

“In so far as it is intended” is the key clause here. The tidy picture is disturbed by Dahlhaus’s admission that not everything in the music dramas can be accommodated by it. In addition, the dramas contain sections that are, quite simply, formless. “The Wagnerian exegesis,” writes Dahlhaus, “should not presuppose the existence of form throughout, and then assume a failure when the discovery or construction of what was presupposed does not succeed; rather, it must try to decide whether or not it at all makes sense to analyze a complex of motives, a ‘poetic-musical period,’ or a scene as a form.”<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, in an act, individual hierarchically organized units (scenes divided into periods) could swim in a shapeless stream of events. Moreover, Dahlhaus refrained from investigating the shapes of whole acts and dramas and limited his analyses to a few selected scenes. It is a measure of his impact on subsequent research in this area that so did his most interesting successors in Wagnerian analysis.<sup>33</sup>

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

But twice in *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, Dahlhaus offers glimpses of another vision, one that seems to me much more promising. He writes: “The theory that the distinction between recitative and aria or arioso is completely annulled in Wagner’s ‘endless melody’ is one of those dogmas which by over-insistence turn insight into error; the difference is certainly diminished in music drama but not wiped out, and far from being a tiresome relic of traditional form, it plays a structural role.”<sup>34</sup> And further: “To ignore the presence of degrees that to some extent recall the division of a scene in opera into recitatives, ariosos and arias would

merely be to exchange one kind of simplistic listening—the search for lyrical passages—for another—the immersion in an undifferentiated stream of music. . . . The differentiation within endless melody must be recognized before the form can be understood.”<sup>35</sup>

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

Why then did Dahlhaus himself not take this particular road?

The answer surely had something to do with his desire to correct Lorenz. It was Lorenz who offered an understanding of the Wagnerian music-dramatic form that was still authoritative when Dahlhaus began his own Wagner studies, and it was this understanding that had to be addressed at the time. More fundamentally, however, it was probably the result of his desire to capture what was specific and new to Wagner’s post-1848 reforms, to emphasize the way the music drama differed from the romantic opera. And there can be little doubt that Dahlhaus’s understanding of what was new in later Wagner corresponded to the composer’s own understanding of his reforms. In a “Prologue to a Reading of the ‘Götterdämmerung’ before a Select Audience in Berlin,” published in 1873, Wagner wrote:

People talk of innovations made by me in Opera: for my own part I am conscious of having, if not achieved, at least deliberately striven for this one advantage, the raising of the dramatic dialogue itself to the main subject of musical treatment; whereas in Opera proper the moments of lyrical delay, and mostly violent arrest of the action, had hitherto been deemed the only ones of possible service to the musical composition. The longing to raise the Opera to the dignity of genuine Drama could never wake and wax in the musician, before great masters had enlarged the province of his art in that spirit which now has made our German music acknowledgedly victorious over all its rivals.<sup>36</sup>

Specifically new was Wagner’s extraordinary ability to create long stretches of recitative dialogue capable of holding the listener’s interest as much for dramatic

as for musical reasons. And hence this was what Dahlhaus and his followers concentrated on, singling out for particular attention Wagner's own famous comment on one such stretch in a letter of October 29, 1859, to Mathilde Wesendonck:

I recognize now that the characteristic fabric of my music . . . , which my friends now regard as so new and so significant, owes its construction above all to the extreme sensitivity which guides me in the direction of mediating and providing an intimate bond between all the different moments of transition that separate the extremes of mood. I should now like to call my most delicate and profound art the art of transition, for the whole fabric of my art is made up of such transitions. . . . My greatest masterpiece in the art of the most delicate and gradual transition is without doubt the great scene in the second act of *Tristan and Isolde*. The opening of this scene presents a life overflowing with all the most violent emotions,—its ending the most solemn and heartfelt longing for death. These are the pillars: and now you see, child, how I have joined these pillars together, and how the one of them leads over into the other. This, after all, is the secret of my musical form, which, in its unity and clarity over an expanse that encompasses every detail, I may be bold enough to claim has never before been dreamt of.<sup>37</sup>

But—even though Wagner's pride here was completely justified, even though the musical-dramatic density, richness, and interest of his dialogue goes far beyond anything attempted by his predecessors and contemporaries—the conjunction of the dialogue and the open system of composition is the discursive norm not only of music drama, but of opera in general. To investigate the large-scale structural implications of the distinction between open and closed sections of an act would deemphasize the specificity of the music drama, treat it as in principle no different from opera. By concentrating on what was new about the music drama, Dahlhaus opened fruitful ways of investigating individual sections of Wagnerian dialogue, but may have obscured access to a comprehensive vision of complete acts and dramas. And the reverse: by turning to the question of large-scale form, I am proposing to treat the music drama as opera.

One implication of such a turn (let the reader be forewarned) is that the analyses that follow will refer relatively rarely to this central staple of the Wagnerian music-dramatic commentary since the days of Hans von Wolzogen's "thematic guidebooks" (the publication of the earliest one, devoted to the *Ring*, coincided with the first Bayreuth Festival; guidebooks to *Tristan* and *Parsifal* followed in 1880 and 1882, respectively), the leitmotif.<sup>38</sup> I do not wish to suggest that leitmotifs are unimportant. Far from it: they are likely to continue to engage the attention of Wagner critics for the foreseeable future and I too will need to invoke them every now and then.<sup>39</sup> But they will not be central to my enterprise. Instead I propose to make liberal use of the vocabulary more at home since the days of Abramo Basevi (whose book on Verdi's operas appeared in 1859) in the world of (*horribile dictu*) the Verdi commentary, the vocabulary associated with the *solita forma* (the usual

form) of a multipartite “closed” number in Italian and French operas—terms such as *tempo d’attacco* (an optional “open” introductory section of a duet, ensemble, or aria), *cantabile* (the obligatory “closed” slow opening section), *tempo di mezzo* (an optional “open” middle section motivating a change of mood), and *cabaletta* (the obligatory “closed” fast closing section, usually repeated).<sup>40</sup> My aim throughout is not to provoke traditional Wagnerites (should they still be surviving anywhere) with this distinctively *welsh* terminology and certainly not to diminish our appreciation for the originality of the composer’s achievement. Quite the contrary: the originality is likely to stand out even more impressively when we realize that the music dramas are not completely unrelated to the operatic traditions from which they sprang.

When he reconsidered “Wagner’s Relevance for Today” in 1963, Theodor Adorno particularly stressed the individuality of Wagner’s forms:

Wagner is the first case of uncompromising musical nominalism . . . : his work is the first in which the primacy of the individual work of art and, within the work, the primacy of the figure in its concrete, elaborated reality, are established fundamentally over any kind of scheme or externally imposed form. He was the first to draw the consequences from the contradiction between traditional forms . . . and the concrete artistic tasks at hand. The contradiction had already made itself felt, rumblingly, in Beethoven, and in essential ways generated his late style. Wagner, then, realized without reservation that the binding, truly general character of musical works of art is to be found, if at all, only through the medium of their particularity and concreteness, and not by recourse to any kind of general types.<sup>41</sup>

The claim is correct, as is the postulate Adorno drew from it: “The task of the Wagner interpretation that is needed would be to describe . . . how his forms, without borrowing, express, develop, and create themselves with compelling necessity from within.”<sup>42</sup> In proposing to treat the music drama as opera, I intend to deny neither the profound gulf that separates Wagner’s dramaturgy from that of Verdi, nor the uniqueness of each of his individual formal solutions. But I do want to suggest that, in creating his unique forms, Wagner reached not only for devices of Beethovenian symphonic development, but also, and centrally, for traditional operatic distinctions and methods.