

Wagner's Musical Thought and Practice: Exemplified by Tristan and Isolde

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Abstract. The studies on <Tristan and Isolde> are very heterogeneous, and most of the articles discussing its relationship with Schopenhauer's philosophy discuss Wagner's connection with Schopenhauer in the time and circumstances of his life or writing. This paper makes more use of the music itself composed by Wagner as material for analysis, taking <Tristan and Isolde> as an example, this article introduces the philosophical ideas implicit in <Tristan and Isolde> and discusses Wagner's philosophical reflections in the light of Schopenhauer's philosophy and its influence on Wagner. The specific use of *versmelodie* in <Tristan and Isolde> is also analyzed to explore the origin and influence of Wagner's *gesamtkunst* ideas. This paper using music and textual analysis as the main methods, in order to distinguishes between Wagner's self-expressed ideas in his writings and those embodied in his musical compositions, attempts to explore Wagner's underlying expressive intentions and the reasons for the enduring popularity of Tristan and Isolde.

Keywords: Wagner;schopenhauer;versmelodie.

1. Introduction

Since Wagner's opera reform in the Romantic period, the debates about Wagner's Musikdrama almost ceaseless, Wagner's musikdrama being widely popular nowadays in these debates, such as <Tristan and Isolde>. This is because the underlying philosophy of Wagner's plays is also enduring: Schopenhauer's philosophy and Wagner's own interpretation and resolution of it. Current research on Wagner's dramatic theory and philosophical thoughts always focused on the controversy with Nietzsche, the connection with Schopenhauer. Most of the analysis centers around the philosophers and Wagner's textual expositions, and lacks in connecting to actual musical works. Analyses of Wagner's musicals are also mostly discussed in terms of *unendliche Melodie*, *Leitmotiv*, or chromatic harmonic vocabulary, and tend to pay less attention to the *versmelodie*. Nor do these musical analyses of Wagner's musikdrama often connect with his musical ideas. This essay will combine the philosophical ideas of Schopenhauer and Wagner at the textual level with the analysis of the *versmelodie* in <Tristan und Isolde>, in order to analyze what kind of ideas drove the writing of <Tristan und Isolde>, and what kind of spirit in it has made it immortal to this day. This paper will analyze two perspectives, one is a brief introduction to Schopenhauer's philosophy and the influence it had on Wagner, and the other is an analysis of Isolde's soliloquy in the first act of <Tristan und Isolde> and how this relates to the ideals of Wagner's musikdrama.

2. Wagner's Philosophical Reflections in the Light of Schopenhauer's Philosophy and Its Influence on Wagner

2.1. Schopenhauer's Philosophy and Its Influence on Wagner

Wagner was recommended by Georg Herwegh in 1954 to read <The World as Will and Representation>, which was still out of favor at the time. This was only the beginning of Wagner's acceptance of Schopenhauer's philosophy. Wagner did not immediately accept Schopenhauer's philosophy, because many of them were different from his previous belief in the Greek view of life which is a kind of optimism (At this time he was still a revolutionary, convinced that revolution could save art)[1], but after a psychological struggle, Wagner embraced Schopenhauer's philosophy. He

believes that after such a difficult choice, "I am ten times stronger than before [2]." What follows is a brief introduction to some of Schopenhauer's philosophical ideas, in order to help us understand Wagner's manifestation at his musikdrama. Schopenhauer mentioned in his philosophical treatise that life is an inevitable tragedy, happiness is only an illusion, every life will be wiped out by death, and human beings are inherently sinful: selfish, cruel, foolish and so on. In Schopenhauer's view, to be alive is itself suffering. According to Schopenhauer, in a world that has already so unbearable, the only thing one can do is turn one's back and distance from the world [3]. The above text can only provide a rough overview of some aspects of Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy. One can observe Schopenhauer's loathing for the world and humanity as a whole, and it is noteworthy that Wagner was in exile when he perused these perspectives. Having understood Schopenhauer's pessimism, the next step is to find out which way Schopenhauer thinks people can see the inner essence of the world. In Schopenhauer's mind, there are only two ways, one is art, the other is sex. Because both have the characteristic of "moving out of the self", and of all the arts, music is the most prominent one. Because music is the only one that is nonrepresentational, a self-expression that cannot be touched by language, that can express the inner existence of the world. Through the analysis of the art of music, Schopenhauer saw the power of opera. For the emotional expression of words or the action performance of opera, music gives them the deepest, ultimate, secret message. Music expresses their true and true nature and allows us to get to know the innermost soul of those events and scenes [3]. Schopenhauer's affirmation of the value of music and his articulation of the tragedy of life resonated with Wagner. Schopenhauer's solution to the tragedy of life was also a response to Wagner's desire for "redemption", even if Wagner did not fully agree with Schopenhauer's approach. In Wagner's musikdrama, "redemption" is a very important theme. "Wagner consistently used 'redemption' to mean liberation from life in his writing [4]". <Der fliegende Holländer>, <Tannhäuser> and <Tristan und Isolde>, The protagonists of these musikdramas end in death, but their deaths are redemptive deaths, self-transcendence redeemed by love. A young man who had taken up the cause of revolution and wanted to save society by doing so, quells his flames after his political illusions are overthrown. Wagner's political convictions are shattered and he meets his philosophical mentor. Tristan und Isolde, written after accepting Schopenhauer's philosophy, is like ashes after the flame has burned. More somber and more profound, but in the depths lies a hidden fire.

2.2. Wagner Musikdrama' Embodiment and Difference of Schopenhauer' Philosophy

After accepting Schopenhauer's philosophy and experience some frustration in his emotion life, Wagner immediately stopped composing of <Der Ring des Nibelungen>, turned to writing <Tristan and Isolde>. The above article introduces Schopenhauer's philosophy, which includes <The World as Will and Representation>. In this book, Schopenhauer believes that the essence of the world is will, This shows his metaphysical thought. In <Tristan and Isolde>, Wagner's orchestration of music and arrangement of plot leads this musikdrama to a non-concrete presentation result. The plot of the whole musikdrama is very plain, and the progression of the story's emotions almost entirely depends on the progress of the music. For example, in the first act, for an hour and a half, the single most important action is to drink the potion. Isolde tries to imbibe the "todestrank" to kill herself in order to cut off the unethical love she's developed for Tristan, but the wrong potion makes her love even more intense. The rest of the hour and a half is paving the way for such a "love potion". What the audience can clear get information through eyes is very simple action and scenery, and all the stories are expressed through words and music. In this way, Wagner pulls the listener into a spiritual world that can only be felt and understood with "will". We cannot see Isolde's pain, but we can sense it through the abstract expression of music. The world constructed by Wagner's musikdrama has a simple appearance, the content contained by the will is far beyond the representation, all love and desire can only be transmitted through the will. This abstract transmission is more profound and more direct than the presentation of representation. Music has the power to strike the human heart, especially in the works of Wagner. <Tristan and Isolde> completes the realization of Schopenhauer's world of will. Conversely, Wagner did not entirely adhere to the philosophical tenets espoused by

Schopenhauer. The scripts of <Tristan and Isolde> were written by Wagner himself, although the story itself comes from a medieval Celtic Myth of love, Wagner's treatment of this ending shows his handling method towards the Schopenhauer's concept of the predicament of distress and boredom faced by human beings. Unlike Schopenhauer's renunciation of desires, Wagner almost adopted an attitude at the opposite extreme to solve the problems. At the end of this musikdrama, Tristan and Isolde died one after another. They did not abnegate their desires, but left the world with their desires. This is actually the way Wagner ideally envisioned to solve the sufferings of the world in his mind. In addition to their differences in addressing life's tragedies and desires, Schopenhauer's and Wagner's attitudes toward music and theater were not essentially the same. Wagner had gone into music so that he could score his own plays, and "it was all secondary to him to engage in music[5]." Wagner explored music for the sake of his own musikdrama, while Schopenhauer tended to focus more on the music itself. Schopenhauer saw the rest of the theater as a torture of music, and he saw music as a way of "removing the self" from mankind. In Wagner's mind, the musikdrama as a Gesamtkunst carries his artistic ideal in a more complete and comprehensive way[6]. Although Wagner and Schopenhauer did not share the same view of music and theater, Wagner conveyed Schopenhauer's philosophy and Wagner's understanding of it in a much larger genre, also known as musikdrama, and its profound and subtle way. While Schopenhauer believed that all other parts of the theater impeded the transmission of musical imagery, Wagner's musikdrama dissolved this impediment and became the true voice of the metaphysical will.

3. Exploring Wagner's Philosophical Reflections and Social Ideals from a Versmelodie Perspective

After discussing the connection between Schopenhauer and Wagner and his musical compositions on a theoretical level, an analysis of an important component of Wagner's musikdrama compositions can provide a clearer picture of how Wagner shaped the music, how he shaped the musical compositions, and how he brought deep feelings to them in this abstract form. Here will select an important foreshadowing before the medicine-drinking actions of the first act mentioned above, the Isolde's narration "Tantris". It is important because this is the part of the original legend that Wagner altered. In the original legend, Tristan and Isolde are in love solely because of the magic potion, but Wagner adapted the original script [7]. Wagner made them meet earlier, love each other earlier, the love potion is just a tool to break Tristan and Isolde's self-repression in Wagner's version. There are a total of 73 subsections in this section, and only the strongest part of the dramatic conflict, the last 28 subsections, will be intercepted in this paper.

*Da schrie 's mir auf aus tiefstem Grund!
Mit dem hellen Schert ich vor ihm stund
an ihm, dem Überfrechen,
Herrn Morolds Tod zu rächen.
Von sei-nem La-ger
blick'er her,
Nicht auf das Schwert,
Nicht auf die Hand,
Ersah mir in die Augen.*

In this verse, Isolde describes herself as attempting to avenge her dead fiancé, but before the sword of vengeance can fall, the flames of love suddenly rise. Isolde is agonizing in his description of hate. The orchestral accompaniment here is tightly paced, with rapid and exaggerated changes in intensity, and the vocal parts are mostly chromatically conducted, giving a tangled, tense, even tortured listening experience. Audience can almost empathize with Isolde's suffering in such music. Analyzing this part on a textual level, in the first half of the expression of pain, the poem here uses the paired rhyme form of aabb[8]. It's a form of rhyme that adds a sense of back-and-forth, naturally emphasizes the words in the sentence that the author wants to focus on, and also helps to fit in with the music.

Take the first sentence “Da schrie’s mir auf aus tiefstem Grund !” for example, where the rhythm of the music is identical to the rhythm of the reading text. The emphatic “shire” “grund” and “tiefstem” in the text are musically paired with longer time periods and placed on strong or sub-strong beats. Such a poetic and musical treatment runs through this entire section (Fig.1).



Fig. 1 Isolde's narration[9]

Regarding the impetus of the versmelodie on the course of the theatre, the changes in the second half of this part come through clearly. After the word “rächen”, which implies vengeance, the music softens, the tempo lengthens, and the melodic line becomes softer. It was Tristan who opened his eyes and looked into Isolde's eyes, Love grows in this moment (Fig.2).



Fig. 2 Isolde's narration[9]

In Wagner's theory of theater, the connection between art and reality is repeatedly emphasized, and theater reflects the human condition and life forms[10]. As the man who wrote these plays, <Tristan und Isolde> naturally hides Wagner's own life and thoughts. After analyzing in detail the specific use of versmelodie in musikdrama, the ideals that Wagner imposed on Gesamtkunst seem to be coming to the surface. In the century in which Wagner composed <Tristan und Isolde>, the German Romantics also based their musical ideas on the concept of holistic art. The notion of metaphysics was also being promoted by the German school of musical aesthetics at this time. Paintings can be seen with the eyes, words can be comprehended by brain and music can be heard by the ears, but if it is a combination of different arts, the aesthetic subject cannot mobilize the senses singly to understand and recognize the art work. For example, in the case of Wagner's musikdrama, the listener appears to be hearing from the music (supplemented by the visual acceptance of the stage and performance), but in fact this musikdrama integrates poetry and music together, and the music is a progressive expression of drama and emotion. This fusion is a metaphysical transmission of “will” that has a deeper impact on the heart than the mere sensory perception of a single art. This is exactly the artistic effect that Wagner wanted to achieve.

4. Conclusion

From the two perspectives of Wagner's acceptance of Schopenhauer's philosophy and the embodiment of Schopenhauer's philosophical thoughts in Wagner's <Tristan and Isolde>, it can be seen that Wagner's works contain extremely profound philosophical thought, and Wagner's empathy for Schopenhauer's thought actually reflects his own artistic thinking and even his thinking about life and human being. Wagner held a positive attitude towards the eternal suffering that life brings, which is also related to his personal experience, but he always believed that this kind of suffering can be solved. The solution is exactly the opposite of the idea of surrendering desires which Schopenhauer supported: the ultimate in desire fulfillment, such as love and again, Wagner's reverence for holistic art, for the abstract expression of will, is seen in his use of the versmelodie. This metaphysical

expression is often more extensive than the metaphysical. While Wagner was a composer, he was a republican in his social ideals. He always had a kind of expectation for the “commonwealth of mankind”, and as an artist, he tried to arouse the common feelings and emotions of mankind through art, so as to achieve the “commonwealth” at the level of artistic feeling. Among all of Wagner's gesamtkunstwerk , the popularity of <Tristan and Isolde> has endured, perhaps because it centers on two themes that all human beings will inevitably experience, regardless of class or geography: love and death. Wagner's ideal of the “commonwealth of mankind” may have been partially realized through <Tristan and Isolde>, in terms of arousing human thoughts on the common theme of love and death. These two unavoidable propositions of life bring redemption and relief to the two protagonists precisely.

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