

# Ambition in Richard Wagner and His Legacy

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**Abstract.** Wagner's music, political pursuit, and his value have been commonly discussed together. It becomes a question of what was Wagner influenced by and what was the effect of it. The focus of this paper will be mainly on Richard Wagner, the Third Reich, and Wagner's Bayreuth Festival. The topic of this paper will be discussing how some of Wagner's most influential childhood experience influenced his future pursuit in different field and how did his work mostly influence the later generations. This paper will be researching on Wagner's family's influence on Wagner, how he was encouraged to build Bayreuth festival, why and how did Nazi use Wagner's music as their political propaganda, and how Wagner's legacy is being perceived during the post-war period. The research method of this paper is based on first hand and secondary hand resource and evidence analysis. The result is that people and ideology who influenced Wagner at a young age continue to show an influence in war time and post-war period German.

**Keywords:** Richard wagner, music, influence.

## 1. Introduction

Richard Wagner, born in Leipzig during the Romanticism period in Europe, is one the most famous German composers in 19th century. Richard Wagner has been considered as one of the role models in using Gesamtkunstwerk, also known as the total work of art. Normally, the composer would take charge of the whole show, including the libretto, props and performance of the whole show. Influence on how nowadays people perceive the total work of art could be shown in modern opera and musicals. An example is "Hamilton", a musical written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who also compose all the song, wrote all the lyric and became the main character of the musical himself. His achievement on the influencing the whole music and composition industry did not simply end here; he is also the main proponent for leitmotif in his era, as it has been shown in his works like *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. His work also reflects his keen on Norse Mythology, Greek Mythology, and other ideologies. Specifically, the whole work of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is based on the background of Norse mythology, mostly from the book *Nibelungenlied*. Beside his contribution on music and art, Richard Wagner himself has been very ambitious and had always wanted to take steps in German's political fields of the day. His contribution in what is beyond the field of music alter the story in later history; his influence has also been involuntarily shaping the 21th century modern world. This paper will first be analyzing Wagner's experience and commentary in proving his political and social ideology; then, this paper will show the effect of his work and ideology in later generation German and the globe.

## 2. Influence on Wagner and His Ambition

Richard Wagner was influence by the people around him since his early life. His family moved to his father's friend Ludwig Geyer's house by the time his father has died. Ludwig Geyer, who Wagner thought his biological father was, is an actor at the time. Because of his stepfather's job as an actor, Wagner was able to get in touch with music and performance at a very young age. In his bibliography he mentioned that he had the chance to act in some play such as *Der Weinberg an der Elbe* [1]. His stepfather's occupation was a key factor in shaping Wagner's profession as a musician. When Wagner was around twelve, he got fascinated into Mozart. His family, including his stepfather's brother, thought that he had a great potential of musical talent. Later on, Wagner was sent across the country to attend different music classes.

After the death of Wagner's stepfather, he got in touch with his biological father's family, including his uncle Adolf Wagner. Adolf has greatly influenced Wagner's view on the society and his political pursue. Even in Wagner's later life he still follows many of these ideologies. Adolf Wagner, who was a playwright, historian and a writer, joined the Burschenschaft at the beginning of its establishment in 1915. Burschenschaft was a student organization that promoted nationalist ideas. Although it was suppressed by the government and had to move underground, Burschenschaft survived for a very long time until the Post WWII Period in West Germany. During Wagner's time spent with his uncle Adolf, his uncle taught him many ideologies he learned in Burschenschaft and also a variety of knowledge from Greek tragedy and philosophies [2]. Some people argue that Wagner had idolized his uncle because of his great influence on him. This could be supported by evidence like that later Wagner was hostile to Kotzebue possibly because during the time when Kotzebue was assassinated Adolf Wagner did not like him. As mentioned above, Burschenschaft kept seeking for their political ideology throughout Wagner's lifetime. During the 1850s and the Imperial period, the late unification and uneven development of German led to Burschenschaft students to promote Pan-Germanism ideologies, which promoted the unification of all people who practice German culture or speak Germany [3]. This influenced Wagner's political pursuit of building a fully united nation. Due to this strong nationalist emotion, his ambition was not only idealistic but grew into extreme. An actor called Edward Devrient wrote in 1848: 'Now it's not enough for him to have a united Germany, now it has to be a unite Europe, a united humanity indeed [4]'. The idolization of uncle Adolf had both direct and indirect on Wagner's music and political career. Many of the ideas that were introduced by his uncle had an influence on later generations too.

Despite uncle Adolf's influence on Wagner, there were also evidence showing that he strongly agreed on some other musician's political ideologies, such as Schiller. Schiller, like many other musicians, was eager to propose his own idea. Two main points he made that greatly influenced Wagner was uniting German through culture and hostility toward the nobles. Schiller once quoted: 'if man is ever to solve the problem of politics in practice, he will have to take the aesthetic route, because it is only through beauty that man makes his way to freedom [5]'. Like mentioned earlier, Wagner was urging to unite German. Schiller's quote ignited Wagner's ambition, as in Wagner's later musical pieces, he devoted his artwork with the idea of uniting German. It could be argued that one main motivation for Wagner's creation was to create a set of artworks that all people who practice German culture feel related to in order to form bond that could later catalyze the unification of German. Secondly, Wagner relate the feeling of disparage toward noble with Schiller. When Wagner found that Schiller's book was banned by the German noble, he could relate himself to it, as he was exiled from the country by the nobles once and King Ludwig II stop supporting him with the money needed to build his own opera house. Surprisingly, his first obvious expression of hostility toward the noble was before his abrupt stop of financial support by Ludwig II. In 1842, he metaphor the German prince into a selfishness noble in 14 century Rome in his play "rienzi the last of the tribunes [6]".

Like how Wagner spend almost 30 years into creating his most well-known opera, often called the Ring, Wagner devoted lots of time and effort into creating his own opera house. This could be dated back to 1950, in his letter he said "I would have a theatre, made of planks, erected here on the spot and have the most suitable singers join me here and arrange everything necessary for this one special occasion, so that I could be certain of an outstanding performance of the opera [7]." Wagner show his dissatisfaction toward the presence opera production "industry". He had to build his own opera house and raise his own actor with everything under his own control in order to full fill the total potential of his ambition in creating the best opera among Germany, or among the world. His planning of Bayreuth festival was simultaneous with his composition of four of his opera in the Ring cycle. Accomplishing his goal, however, was not smooth all the time. Due to his affair with Cosimal, living expense, and constant interference of politic, the citizen asked King Ludwig II to exile him [8]. For the next ten years of his exile, little information was implied on Wagner's work on Bayreuth. By the start of 1970s, the design and construction of Wagner's opera actually started. Though there were many troubles with gaining enough money for construction, the first Bayreuth Festival was finally

begun in 13 August 1876. Unfortunately, the 1876 Bayreuth festival was considered to not only fail in uniting the whole nation but also failed in paying back the costs [9]. In response to this failure, Wagner's wife Cosima recorded in her diary, Wagner thought that countrymen were not worthy for him, that they were too decadent to appreciate his spiritual message or noble suffering [10]. Wagner had spent half of his life span in building the Bayreuth Festival, to achieve his dream of seeing Germany united through his effort. However, his full effort on music composition and the power of unifying the nation through his work and Bayreuth was shown until the next century.

### 3. Wagner's Influence and Legacy

Wagner's ambition in creating a more united and stronger nation on the land of Deutsche could be showed from later political, historical and cultural events. Wagner had huge impact on making German spiritually bounded, bringing German cultural pride, and creating a sense of nationalist feeling for all German. Historical and literature evidence could be found from the start of Prussian Period to nowadays globalize society.

Whether Wagner was conscious of being an anti-Jew and using his art work as a propaganda for igniting Jew hate thought has been debated for years. And the answer to the controversial topic has remain unsolved. Although there is no universal agreement on whether or not Wagner himself is the precursor of Nazi. Nazi using Wagner's work and himself as a political propaganda could be proved with clear evidence.

As Hitler said in his book *Mein Kampf* "and a few months later my first opera, *Lohengrin*. I was captivated at once." Hitler openly admitted his admiration and inspiration from Wagner's opera since the age of twelfth. His fascination and influence toward Wagner's music and ideology can be seen throughout his political life in the years after. Mentioned in the previous chapter, Richard Wagner faced a lot of failure in his political and career pursue. Hitler, who saw German go through the post-World War one period, relates himself with Wagner's experiences. The first step for Hitler's ultimate plan of German was "cultural regeneration". After World War one, not only that Germans had to pay huge number of debts and bear whole guilt for all war crime. Outside of Germany, the rise of Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism marks an economically and culturally flourishing period for foreign countries [11]. This disparaged the cultural pride in domestic German, leading to a deeper social despair in the country. Hitler was seeking for a cultural representation to stimulate and bring hope to post-war German citizens. Throughout the years after Wagner's creation of his opera, his music has been considered as "had the power to dissolve reality" [12]. Many German politician at that time, including Hitler believes that Wagner's opera is great way of easing citizens' post war trauma such as poverty and humiliation into an idealized world. Therefore, Hitler decided to advocate and advertise Wagner's opera so that Germans could build sense of national pride and unite the nation together as a whole again. He hopes that through cultural unification he is able to gather united power from German citizen, therefore establishing his own military power. Moreover, there are also evidence proving that Nazi have been using the Ring Cycle, one of Wagner's most well-known operas as propaganda. In the Ring Cycle, one theme of the whole story is the greed and lust for power.

The Ring cycles fueled the post-World War One Wagnerian into thinking that there needed to be a united power. Therefore, the rise of the Third Reich played a potent role in shaping the Wagnerian's mentality [13]. During the Nazi Period, Wagner, his opera, and his opera house has been a propaganda as justify for Nazi's action with consideration of Hitler's personal preference. One of his most famous music pieces "Die Walküre", evokes the listeners' with an intensive feeling, so Nazi utilize the speciality Die Walküre in the case of German air attack [14].

The direct aftermath of the end of Nazi Social Nationalism and anti-Semitism was the separation of power in Germany. East and West Germany was controlled by capitalism and communism power. The preservation of German culture and culture related with Nazi power was considered prudently. During the post-war period of Germany, a group of students whose parents where mostly from the Third Trench stood up. They wanted to end the silence of the history about Nazi. The musicology

student in the group actively asked to republish the music during the Nazi period and confront the implications German culture had at the time [15]. While one of Wagner's biggest legacy, Bayreuth, was considered as Nazi's propaganda at the time, it was also considered as one of German's most precious cultures. Therefore, it is not surprising that West Germany government decided to revitalize the cultural center of Bayreuth into New Bayreuth. Two years after the Stunde null, Bayreuth, also known as the new Bayreuth, was reopened to the public, and Wagner's children took charge of it few years after it was reopened. Now the question became, how to adjust the content presented in Bayreuth in order to fall into the value of new West German government and distinguish clear boarder between the Nazi-Bayreuth.

This was extremely challenging for musician and artists who participated in the rehabilitation of German traditional music because it needs to detach the music from Nazi period while continuing its nationalistic symbol [16]. In order to solve the problem, the artists had to take the risk of controversy and alter how people traditionally perceive the operas. Like the establishment of a new Germany, the reopening of Bayreuth symbolizes a "new beginning for opera". Before banning Wagner's opera in 1945, artists would emphasize the precise Norse mythology elements in the opera. The complexity of artistic features from costume to staging was referred as maximalism. In contrast, after the unban of Bayreuth, artists shifted toward an avant garde form of aesthetic, changing the stage setting into a minimalism one [16]. Moreover, Wagner's descendants, who were mainly in charge of the Bayreuth festival request the guest to focus on the aesthetic and music of Bayreuth festival rather than from a political perspective [16]. Another important factor to consider is the performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony on Bayreuth Festival. Throughout German culture, the Ninth Symphony has been perceived as a symbol of 'revolutionary peace and freedom.' This could be shown as the Ninth Symphony was performed at similar events to commemorate revolutions, emphasize revolution of the new year, and many more [17]. Therefore, after careful consideration, the artists chose the perfect music to perform at the Bayreuth festival, known for its 'new beginning for opera'.

#### 4. Conclusion

Analyzing from Wagner's childhood experience, we can draw conclusion that his stepfather Ludwig was responsible for providing him the first chance to get in touch with different kind of art form. Ludwig influence Wagner to ignite his passion in music and performance. He gave him the opportunity to perform on stage where he truly understands what being an artist on stage means. Moreover, Ludwig introduced him to Mozart, which quickly made him became fascinated in piano. Ludwig also pointed out Wagner's potential in being a musician. Later throughout his teenage period, Adolf Wagner became the most influential figure in Wagner's life. Adolf Wagner's position as a political activists and playwright enabled the teenage Wagner to understand the aesthetic of literature and the basic concept of being a political activist. As a member of the Burschenschaft, his nationalist ideology was inevitably imprinted into Wagner's lifelong political pursuit. Wagner's political idea still follows some of Burschenschaft's later ideology without the direct influence of Adolf Wagner. Evidence of Wagner's agreement on Schiller's political ideologies were also obvious. He supported that German should be united by culture, and both of them show strong disparage toward the nobles. With the influence from many people and social disturbance, became clear why Wagner wanted to build an opera house with so much eager. His ambition and blueprint for the nation encourage him to devote so much effort into creating his own, complete opera system. However, the success of Bayreuth Festival that Wagner was urging to see did not appear in his period.

After Wagner's death his legacy has been used to serve for different social and political purpose. Hitler frequently relates his personal story with Wagner's experience. He admired Wagner's music piece and was inspired by its political implication. He believes that Wagner's music can unite Germans together, inciting them from realizing Germany's culture richness, and using it as a hidden propaganda. After the end of World War Two, people started to treat Wagner's music differently. West German wanted to used Wagner's music as an adhesive to reunite the nation again, but they

also want to draw clear distinction between the “Nazi Wagner” and the “West German Wagner”. In order to alter the implication without changing the content, artists of the time redesigned the stage art, frankly asked the audience to focus only on the art, and added other musician’s work into Bayreuth Festival.

It led to the conclusion that partly due to his influence by people around him at a young age, he became a musician and actively participated in politic. He was especially ambitious in using music to unite the nation. His artworks and the ideologies that had been indoctrinated into his artwork became significant in the influence it had on later generation. For Wagner’s music has been used by Nazi and West German for social and political purpose. Wagner’s legacy continues to leave a significant influence in modern operatic music realm and a significant impact German culture.

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