

Translated excerpt

Martin Geck
Wagner. Biographie

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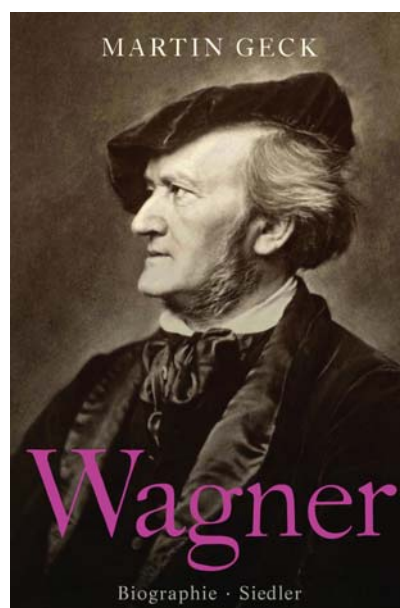
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Martin Geck
Richard Wagner. A life in music

Translated by Stewart Spencer

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CHAPTER ONE

The Archetypal Theatrical Scene

FROM *LEUBALD* TO *DIE FEEN*

“The wildest anarchy” – The paternity issue – Sense of separation in early childhood – Early enthusiasm for the theater – The “more intimate objects” in his sisters’ wardrobe and Proust’s madeleine – The schoolboy drama *Leubald* – The myth of Hero and Leander as Wagner’s archetypal theatrical scene – Composition exercises to set *Leubald* to music – Beethoven’s incidental music to *Egmont* as a model – Early sonatas, overtures and a C-major symphony for the Leipzig Gewandhaus – A “wedding” not to the liking of Wagner’s sister Rosalie – *Die Feen*: a respectable first opera for a twenty-year-old composer – Wagner’s discovery of the redemptive power of music as the embodiment of love – An anticipatory glance at Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* – A look ahead to later chapters: “Redemption through Destruction” as a leitmotif – Congruence between Wagner’s life and works?

Wagner’s childhood memories revolve constantly around two key ideas—chaos and the theater: “I grew up in the wildest of anarchy,” he told his second wife, Cosima, in July 1871.¹ And in his autobiography he speaks of a mother whose “anxious and trying relations with a large family” were never conducive to a “comforting tone of motherly solicitude,” still less to feelings of tenderness: “I hardly remember ever being caressed by her, just as outpourings of affection did not take place in our family; on the contrary, quite naturally a certain impetuous, even loud and boisterous manner characterized our behaviour.”²

Friedrich Wagner died six months after Wagner’s birth, and nine months later his widow, Johanna Rosine, married a family friend, Ludwig Geyer, and, together with the rest of her family, moved from Leipzig to Dresden. Wagner was known as Richard Geyer until his fifteenth year and in maturity he was never entirely certain if he was in fact Geyer’s son. But

it may be significant that he chose a vulture (German *Geyer*, or *Geier*) as a heraldic beast on the first page of his privately published autobiography, the initial volume of which appeared in 1870. And in 1879, in a letter to King Ludwig II, he described a family celebration held to mark his sixty-sixth birthday in the following words: "In front of a new painting of my wife by Lenbach [. . .] stood my son Siegfried in black velvet, with blond curly hair (just like the portrait of the young Van Dyck): he was intended to represent my father Ludwig Geyer, reborn to significant effect."³

The real Geyer seems to have been a good replacement as a father figure, albeit extremely strict. In August 1873 Wagner spoke about his childhood over lunch and recalled (via Cosima) "how he was thrashed by his father Geyer with the whip he had bought with stolen money, and how his sisters cried outside the door."⁴ Known to his sisters as "Master Moody" on account of his hypersensitivity,⁵ Wagner was seven when he was sent to board with Pastor Christian Ephraim Wetzell in Possendorf near Dresden. When Geyer died a year later, the boy found board and lodging with Geyer's younger brother, Karl, in Eisleben, where he spent the next thirteen months. He then spent a brief period with his Uncle Adolf in Leipzig, but was obliged to sleep in a large, high-ceilinged room whose walls were hung with sinister-looking paintings of "aristocratic ladies in hooped petticoats, with youthful faces and white (powdered) hair." According to his—much later—reminiscences, not a night passed without his waking up "bathed in sweat at the fear caused by these frightful ghostly apparitions."⁶

Adolf Wagner was unwilling to undertake any real responsibility for his nephew's education, and so at the end of 1822 Wagner returned to live with his family in Dresden, where he attended the city's *Kreuzschule*. In 1826 his mother moved to Prague with four of his sisters, Rosalie, Clara, Ottilie, and Cäcilie, and the now thirteen-year-old youth was offered a room in the home of one Dr. Rudolf Böhme, whose family life was later described by Wagner as "somewhat disorderly."⁷ At the end of 1827 he finally moved back to Leipzig, where his mother and sisters had settled following their Bohemian adventure. He attended St. Nicholas's School, and it was during this time as a fifteen- and sixteen-year-old schoolboy that he wrote his "great tragedy" *Leubald*.

A decade later we find Wagner writing to his fiancée, Minna Planer: "O God, my angel, on the whole I had a miserable youth."⁸ His youth may not have been any harsher than that of many another adolescent from his social background, but there is no doubt that it was anarchically unsettled: "Who is my father?," "Does my mother love me?," "Where is my home?,"

and “Who are my models?”—these are questions that the young Wagner presumably asked himself more frequently than most other children of his age. And if he was dissatisfied with having to swim with the tide, then he himself would have to provide his existence with a sense of direction and open up new horizons.

Such views are never conjured out of thin air but are found within the subject’s own immediate environment, and this brings us to the second of the key ideas that emerge so forcefully from Wagner’s reminiscences of his youth: the theater. It would be wrong to lay undue emphasis on Friedrich Hölderlin’s lines, “But where there is danger, rescue, too, is at hand,” yet as far as Wagner is concerned, there is no doubt that the theater saved his life in the deepest sense, especially during his early years. From the very outset the anarchy of his environment was directly related to his tendency to indulge in theatrical, self-promotional behavior. More specifically, it was related to his love of the stage. Although his mother warned all her children against the godlessness of a life in the theater, she was so lacking in the courage of her own convictions that four of Wagner’s six elder siblings embarked on such a career: Rosalie was to be the Gretchen in the first Leipzig production of Goethe’s *Faust* in 1829; Clara was only sixteen when she sang the title role in Rossini’s *La Cenerentola*; and Rosalie was seventeen when she took the main part in Weber’s *Preciosa*. Wagner’s elder brother Albert, finally, enjoyed a successful operatic career in Leipzig in a repertory that included Mozart’s Tamino and Belmonte.

Although Friedrich Wagner was a police actuary by profession, he came from a family of artists and academics. He studied law and had an amateur’s love of the theater. Among his circle of acquaintances were Goethe, Schiller, and E. T. A. Hoffmann. But in this regard he could not begin to compete with his eccentric brother Adolf, a well-known figure in Leipzig who held a doctorate in philosophy and was a distinguished translator of Sophocles and the proud possessor of a silver beaker presented to him by Goethe as a token of the poet’s gratitude for the dedication of a collection of Italian verse. According to his autobiography, the young Wagner enjoyed listening to his uncle’s effusions. In the course of their extended walks together, Adolf also declaimed Shakespeare’s plays to him.

Wagner’s surrogate father, Ludwig Geyer, was the quintessential bohemian. A successful playwright, actor, and portrait painter, he also helped to train Wagner’s older brother and sisters for their careers in the theater. It seemed only natural that Wagner himself would follow in their footsteps. In adulthood he recalled “how at the age of 5, since he could not sing, he

imitated Caspar's piccolo and flute trills with 'Perrbip,' climbed on a chair to represent Samiel looking over an imaginary bush, and said, 'Perrbip, perrbip.'⁹ In point of fact Wagner must have been seven when he first encountered *Der Freischütz*, but there is no doubt that he came into contact with leading musicians such as Weber at a very early age. "If I had never had the experience of Weber's things," he told Cosima in October 1873, "I believe I should never have become a musician."¹⁰

Initially it was his love of the theater in general that proved the dominant factor:

What attracted me so powerfully to the theatre, by which I include the stage itself, the backstage area and the dressing rooms, was not so much the addictive desire for entertainment and diversion that motivates today's theatregoers, but rather the tingling delight in my contact with an element that represented such a contrast to normal life in the form of a purely fantastical world whose attractiveness often bordered on horror. In this way a piece of scenery or even a flat—perhaps representing a bush—or a theatrical costume or even just a characteristic piece of a costume appeared to me to emanate from another world and in a certain way to be eerily interesting, and my contact with this world would serve as a lever that allowed me to rise above the calm reality of my daily routine and enter that demoniacal realm that I found so stimulating.¹¹

Nor was it long before Wagner had had his first taste of the theater: "After being terrified by *The Orphan and the Murderer* and *The Two Galley Slaves* and similar plays that traded in gothic horror and that featured my father [Ludwig Geyer] in the role of the villains, I was obliged to appear in a number of comedies. [. . .] I recall featuring in a tableau vivant as an angel, entirely sewn up in tights and with wings on my back. I had to adopt a graceful pose that I had found hard to learn."¹² When he was twelve, he recalled reading aloud from Schiller's *The Maid of Orleans* to the "well-educated" wife of his godfather, Adolf Träger.¹³ That his godfather gave him not only a pike-gray dress coat with an impressive silk lining but also a red Turkish waistcoat may well have helped to blur the distinction between "art" and "life."

But what was all this when set beside the intimacies of his sisters' boudoir! There, according to Wagner's later account,

it was the more delicate costumes of my sisters, on which I often observed my family working, that stimulated my imagination in the most subtly excit-

ing ways. It was enough for me to touch these objects, and my heart would beat anxiously and wildly. Despite the fact that, as I have already said, there was little tenderness in our family, particularly as expressed in the form of hugging and kissing, my exclusively feminine surroundings were bound to exert a powerful influence on my emotional development.¹⁴

Readers so inclined may see in this passage a justification for Wagner's later fondness for choice silks and exquisite perfumes and may dismiss that predilection as feminine or even abnormal. In this they would be following a well-worn path. But it would be more helpful in this context to follow up a remark that the composer made to the music critic Karl Gaillard at the time he was working on *Tannhäuser*: "And so, even before I set about writing a single line of the text or drafting a scene, I am already thoroughly immersed in the musical aura of my new creation."¹⁵ He was aware of his "foolish fondness for luxury,"¹⁶ he admitted to his benefactress Julie Ritter in 1854, but he needed it to survive. Less than a week earlier he had told Liszt: "I cannot live like a dog, I cannot sleep on straw and drink common gin. Mine is an intensely irritable, acute, and hugely voracious, yet uncommonly tender and delicate sensuality which, one way or another, must be flattered."¹⁷

We are still concerned with the young Wagner's most basic question: what prospects did he have within his own anarchistic milieu? We are dealing here not with titillating biographical details but with the impulses that triggered Wagner's creativity. Here our principal witnesses are Marcel Proust and Baudelaire. In a famous passage in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Proust recounts the way in which a madeleine dipped in tea could activate his "mémoire involontaire" and usher in an act of spontaneous memory. He goes on to explain how

Above all in Baudelaire, where they are more numerous still, reminiscences of this kind are clearly less fortuitous and therefore, to my mind, unmistakable in their significance. Here the poet himself, with something of a slow and indolent choice, deliberately seeks, in the perfume of a woman, for instance, of her hair and her breast, the analogies which will inspire him and evoke for him

the azure of the sky immense and round
and
a harbour full of masts and pennants.¹⁸

Proust's remarks about Baudelaire could equally well apply to Wagner,

whom he idolized for a time. And when Wagner, writing in his autobiography, recalls the sensual stimuli that were triggered when he touched his sisters' "more delicate costumes," this is more than a mere reminiscence of his childhood and adolescence: it is also an aesthetic reflection on the part of the composer of *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and *Tristan und Isolde* concerning the synesthetic potential of his works. According to Proust, Baudelaire's linguistic images were the result of a "slow and indolent choice," and it is in this spirit that we should read the above passage from *My Life*, a memoir by no means intended for a mass readership eager for gutter-press sensationalism. In writing this, Wagner was seeking reassurance and expressing his wish that "life" and "art" should be in harmony. If, in his adolescence, he had not known the stimulus of the items in his sisters' wardrobe, he would presumably have invented it or at least devised something similar to clarify his conviction that the oneness of life and art was no accident but was predetermined by fate: everything had to happen just as it did indeed happen.

The reader may find this hubristic, and yet we cannot fail to admire the consistency with which the young Wagner approached his life's work. While still at school, he not only developed a burning enthusiasm for the stage as the only thing that gave meaning to his life—after all, many other budding actors have felt the same—but he also wanted to write his own plays and in that way to create his own world of the theater both as an actor and in his own imagination. He was not content to declaim Hamlet's "To be or not to be" from the classroom lectern. Rather, he perfected his knowledge of Greek in order to be able to read Sophocles and translate passages from the *Odyssey*. And if his account in *My Life* is not an exaggeration, then he was still in his early teens when, an otherwise poor pupil, he wrote a vast epic poem on the Battle of Parnassus.

Whereas we know about such feats only from Wagner's own much later account of them, his five-act tragedy *Leubald* allows us to test its author's claims for ourselves. In maturity Wagner himself no longer had access to the manuscript, which he believed had been lost, and this may explain why he adopted such a mocking tone when referring to a youthful "misdemeanor" that he claimed represented an amalgam of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear* and Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*.¹⁹ The rediscovery of the manuscript allows us to form an impression of what Wagner was capable of achieving between the ages of thirteen and fifteen. *Leubald* is no naïve schoolboy play, as it is usually described by writers on Wagner, but an example of its author's ability to maintain three stylistic registers over an extended period—the play would last around six hours in performance. For

the lofty style deemed appropriate to the characters who inhabit the highest echelons of feudal society, Wagner prefers blank verse—iambic pentameters—in the tradition of Shakespeare’s plays. The common people, by contrast, speak in coarse prose that is again modeled on Shakespeare. Between these two extremes is a third stylistic register that Wagner reserves for members of the spirit world, who converse with one another in rhyme and in song.

Leubald contains much that is hugely impressive alongside other passages that are inconsistent, long-winded or linguistically awkward. And—in spite of Wagner’s own claim in his “Autobiographical Sketch”—it is not true that forty-two people die in the course of the play.²⁰ The actual figure is fourteen. And yet the piece teems with all manner of acts of violence and crudity. Nonetheless, questions of plagiarism and immaturity pale into insignificance beside the undoubted fact that Wagner has succeeded with breathtaking skill in introducing his archetypal scene into the piece and, as it were, fixing it once and for all. In brief, the plot revolves around Leubald’s infatuation with Adelaide. At this stage he does not know that her father, Roderich, secretly poisoned Leubald’s own father. But his father then appears to him as a ghost to demand revenge not only on Roderich but on his whole clan. It is not long before Leubald does as his father’s ghost bids and murders Roderich and his family. Only Adelaide, who has been hopelessly in love with Leubald since their earlier brief encounter, is able to escape. Even though her father informs her with his dying breath that it is Leubald who has visited so terrible a punishment on her family, nothing will sway her in her love for him.

But Leubald himself grows increasingly unhinged as it becomes clear to him that Adelaide belongs to the very family that he has sworn to destroy. His father’s ghost continues to urge him to acts of bloody revenge, driving him to the point of madness and persuading him to consult a witch in the hope of exorcising his father’s spirit. But in the witch’s mirror he sees himself lying lifeless in his dead lover’s arms, whereupon he kills the witch. He is then pursued by a whole army of ghosts demanding his own blood in addition to that of Adelaide. In his deluded frenzy he fatally injures her and dies in her arms.²¹

On the basis of this outline scenario it is possible to reconstruct an archetypal scene grounded as much in the ancient Greek legend of Hero and Leander as in Shakespeare’s tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*: love is invariably bound up with tragedy, and ultimate union is possible only in death. It is against this background that we should see Wagner’s drama about Leubald

and Adelaide: two lovers united by destiny are destroyed by the hostility between their two families. In the case of *Leubald*, Wagner took over this structural obstacle from *Romeo and Juliet*. Although it was to assume different forms in his later stage works, it remains ever present. Only the emphasis was to change, for alongside the tragedy that is found when the lovers' happiness is thwarted we increasingly find the sense of foreboding inherent in love itself. This is what Wagner was referring to in the case of the *Ring*, when he spoke of the way in which the "love which alone brings happiness" had emerged "in the course of the myth as something utterly and completely destructive."²² In the 1865 prose draft of *Parsifal*, the hero similarly announces that "strong is the magic of him who desires, but stronger is that of him who renounces."²³

It would be naïve to assume an unthinking connection between Wagner's archetypal scene and his childhood reminiscences concerning the "wildest anarchy" of his upbringing, to say nothing of his unsatisfactory bond with his mother, the lack of intimacy within the family circle, and his uncertain picture of his father. After all, there are enough imaginative people in the world who have a similar childhood but who do not feel impelled to write plays on the subject. At the same time, Wagner was not dependent on the circumstances of his own life in his quest for models for this scene: the motif of Hero and Leander is found not only in the writings of his favorite authors from Sophocles to Shakespeare and Schiller but also in the gothic novels and dramas about fate by many of his contemporaries. And yet it is difficult not to be impressed by the young Wagner's powers of self-portrayal and his ability to impose a sense of structure on his life and art. And our admiration increases when we note how consistent is his continuing commitment to his plan to turn his own private myth into one that is universal in its appeal.

What was still missing was the music. But even while he was working on *Leubald*, it was already becoming clear to Wagner that a spoken drama was not enough, for although such a work might exorcise the anarchy of an existence overshadowed by baleful ill fortune, it could not redeem such a life. Wagner was not joking when, years later, while he was working on *Götterdämmerung*, he noted with a sigh: "I am no composer, [. . .] I wanted only to learn enough to compose *Leubald und Adelaide*."²⁴ Even at that early date he needed music to open up the drama to the world of myth, for in his eyes myth alone was capable of propelling it in the direction of "redemption."

Within days of this reminiscence of *Leubald*, Wagner was visited at Tribtschen by Nietzsche, and the two men discussed Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, prompting Wagner to comment: "One has only to compare Beaumarchais's (incidentally excellent) play with Mozart's operas to see that the former contains cunning, clever, and calculating people who deal and talk wittily with one another, while in Mozart they are transfigured, suffering, sorrowing human beings."²⁵ A year earlier, while working on a particularly somber passage in act 3 of *Siegfried*, he had told Cosima that "music transfigures everything, it never permits the hideousness of the bare word, however terrible the subject."²⁶

Even as a fifteen-year-old boy whose technical abilities were nowhere near good enough for him to set *Leubald* to music, Wagner was already dimly aware that his future lay in the field of *music* drama. He was not simply a composer. Rather, his musical creativity would be fired by the stage — one is almost tempted to say that this was the *only* way in which it would be fired. In *Opera and Drama* he described music explicitly as a "woman" who may have needed the poet to "impregnate" her, but who ultimately "gives birth" to the musical drama on her own.²⁷

It is against this background that we should see Wagner's encounter with Beethoven's music in 1827 — the year of Beethoven's death. If Wagner had any clearer ideas about the music he planned to write for *Leubald*, then those ideas may have been inspired by Beethoven's incidental music to Goethe's *Egmont*, which would from an early date have encouraged him to believe that music and drama could be combined to create a unique new synthesis of the arts.

But he needed a practical basis on which to implement this idea. A gothic drama like *Leubald*, in which the lovers' ultimate death was preceded by a veritable spree of serial killings and by scenes of sexual violence, chuckle-headedness, and ghostly apparitions, was hardly suited to such a treatment. At the same time Wagner needed a knowledge of music. He was in fact already attempting to learn the fundamentals of composition, initially on his own and then, willingly or otherwise, through private lessons. It was on this basis that he wrote his first songs, sonatas, and overtures between 1829 and 1832. Although most of these early works have been lost, one of them has survived in the form of a Symphony in C Major (WV 29). It was even performed at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in January 1833 and, according to a letter that Wagner wrote to his publisher in March 1878, continued to engage his "powerful interest" to such an extent that only weeks before his

death in 1883 he conducted a performance of it at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice as a birthday present for his wife.²⁸

Following the success of his symphony, the nineteen-year-old Wagner felt ready to face the challenges of his first opera, *Die Hochzeit* (The Wedding), the subject of which was inspired by *Ritterzeit und Ritterwesen* (The Age and Essence of Chivalry) by the German medievalist and folklorist Johann Gustav Gottlieb Büsching: Ada and Arindal are planning a conventional wedding, but on the eve of the ceremony she is almost raped by one of the wedding guests, Kadolt. She manages to force her attacker onto the balcony and catapults him over the parapet. But at his funeral service she sinks lifeless beside his body.

Wagner later destroyed the libretto of *Die Hochzeit*, but it seems clear from his incomplete account of its plot that in death Ada is united with the man with whom she had secretly been smitten—namely, Kadolt.²⁹ If so, the story bears striking similarities to Wagner's archetypal scene in which desire is associated with tragedy, and union is possible only in death. But Wagner's favorite sister, Rosalie, was so appalled by its antinuptial message that Wagner quickly abandoned the project: without the support of his sister, who was one of the stars of the Leipzig stage in addition to being the family's principal breadwinner and spokesperson, the work of the inexperienced twenty-year-old composer stood little chance of acceptance.

Astonishingly, Wagner not only took over the names of Ada and Arindal when drafting a libretto for his next opera, *Die Feen* (The Fairies), he also—and above all—remained true to his archetypal scenario: while trying to make amends to his sister and the rest of his family, he was evidently not prepared to do anything that would compromise his calling. On this occasion no rival seeks to interpose himself into a legitimate relationship. Rather, the plot revolves around the clash between the fairy realm and the world of human beings: the King of the Fairies looks askance at the fact that the fairy Ada is happily married to Arindal, the mortal king of Tramond. He agrees to release her into the world of human beings only on condition that Arindal pass a series of tests, but these are so cruelly demanding that Arindal fails, whereupon Ada is turned to stone. The spell is broken by music when Arindal's enchanted singing restores his bride to life and he can belong to her for all eternity as the immortal ruler of the fairy kingdom. The work ends with a chorus of celebration:

Ein hohes Loos hat er errungen,
Dem Erdenstaub ist er entrückt!

Drum sei's in Ewigkeit besungen,
Wie hoch die Liebe ihn beglückt!

[He's won a great reward indeed and shaken off this mortal coil. And so until the end of time we'll sing of love's most joyous boon!]

But is there really cause for celebration here? In ending the work on this note, Wagner departed radically from his source in Carlo Gozzi's *La donna serpente*. In Gozzi's tragicomic fairy tale, the female protagonist becomes human alongside her human husband, whereas Arindal, having led a relatively unhappy life in his earthly kingdom, is spirited away to fairyland and to a world that is evidently superior to the one he has left behind. The moral of the story is that for mortals true happiness in love can be found only in a world beyond our own.

This is a conciliatory variant of Wagner's archetypal scene, for although the characters are denied happiness in the human world, there is at least the prospect of a higher world by way of consolation. And it almost goes without saying that it is music that makes this conciliatory ending possible, for it is music that allows Arindal to gain access to the higher world.

In *Die Feen*, "redemption through music" is first and foremost dramatic in character: musically speaking, Wagner is less successful at depicting the redemptive function of music than he was to be in *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman) and *Tristan und Isolde* or at the end of *Götterdämmerung* (Twilight of the Gods). At the same time we have no reason to be patronizing toward a work which, however much it may reflect the influence of Spohr, Weber, or Marschner, has been described by Carl Dahlhaus as one of "the typical products of a composing kapellmeister who made ready use of ideas from various quarters."³⁰ Other representatives of what was then the new medium of the German-language "grand romantic opera," as Wagner called *Die Feen*, were likewise struggling at this time to produce works capable of meeting the demands of the sentimental German singspiel in the tradition of *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute) and *Der Freischütz*, while not forfeiting the verve that audiences found so appealing in the operas of Bellini and Auber.

The twenty-year-old Wagner proved surprisingly adept at achieving this twofold aim, and in his depiction of mystic events using "'magic' combinations of chords,"³¹ he stumbled upon "the foundations of his own genius."³² The magic formula of the overture's opening bars recalls not only *Die Zauberflöte* but also the opening of Mendelssohn's inspired overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a piece that Wagner presumably already knew

at this time. In later life Wagner sought to distance himself from *Die Feen*, while nonetheless stressing its importance as an example of the “sacred seriousness” of his “original feelings.”³³

Nor was it any accident that he felt it was music that had led to the conciliatory ending of *Die Feen*.³⁴ There is no doubt, then, that with this last-named work Wagner had taken a decisive step as far as his later output was concerned: the pessimistic idea that underpins his archetypal scene and that may be summed up as the belief that meaningful love is impossible in a meaningless world is now accompanied—contrapuntally, as it were—by the conviction that there is indeed something that extends beyond death: music. Although none of Wagner’s later works features an Arindal opening the gates to another world by singing and playing the harp, it is enough to recall the number of works that end with the sounds of one or more harps to see the importance of such transcendence: *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Das Rheingold* (The Rhinegold), *Die Walküre* (The Valkyrie), *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*, *Tristan und Isolde*, and *Parsifal*.

By writing *music* dramas, Wagner ensured that the corrupt and hostile world with which men and women have to deal in their everyday lives is transcended in the direction of redemption. In his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, Nietzsche—approaching the subject from the standpoint of Schopenhauer’s pessimism—brought his own particular brand of personal enthusiasm to the idea, prompting a no less elated response in Wagner: “He is happy to have lived to read it,” his wife noted in her diary in January 1872.³⁵ His reaction is hardly surprising, for his youthful admirer had provided welcome historical and philosophical backing for his own ideas about the classical synthesis of the arts from the spirit of music. Even more importantly, Nietzsche’s book offered its readers a description of the world uncannily close in character to Wagner’s archetypal scene and aptly summed up in Peter Sloterdijk’s words: “The usual individual life is a hell made up of suffering, brutality, baseness, and entanglement. [. . .] This life is made bearable only by intoxication and by dreams, by this twofold path to ecstasy that is open to individuals for self-redemption.”³⁶

It was in this sense that Nietzsche was later to describe *Tristan und Isolde* as “the actual *opus metaphysicum* of all art”³⁷ and to suggest that love and the death of lovers can rise above the trivial world only by being borne aloft on a wave of music. Wagner’s claim in *A Communication to My Friends* that “I can conceive of the spirit of music only in *love*”³⁸ can be effortlessly inverted: true love can be grasped only in the spirit of music. In turn this leads to an even more crucial point: since Wagner’s understanding of love shifts con-