



## Wagnerism

by Robin Imhof

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Wagnerism essentially has to do with the music, theoretical writings, political ideas, and aesthetics of the German composer-conductor and essayist Richard Wagner (1813-1883). One of the most influential cultural figures of the nineteenth century, Wagner has had both swooning admirers and rabid detractors.

For some, Wagnerism was above all, a political rallying call, first appealing to class-consciousness, then degenerating into proto-Fascism. For others, it fed the most diverse idealistic beliefs and Romantic sensibilities. Wagner's works brought together mythology and philosophy in a way that was radically different from any opera that had come before.

Simultaneously erotic, death-obsessed, and spiritual, Wagner's music dramas (his preferred term for his art) suggested both sin and redemption, the ideal atmosphere in which a nineteenth-century aesthete could immerse him (or her) self.

It is primarily in this realm that Wagnerism influenced and inspired the so-called Decadents and Symbolists, who were largely concerned with non-conformist sensibility and sexuality, including same-sex desire.

### Influence on Nineteenth-Century Art and Culture

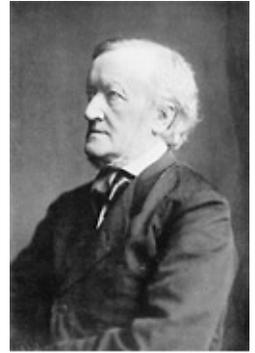
Adherents of the Symbolist movement in art and literature championed Wagner during the second half of the nineteenth century. One of Wagner's early admirers was the French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire. Inspired by the concert overtures of *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, and *Der Fliegende Holländer* performed at the Paris Opera, Baudelaire wrote enthusiastically of the composer's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a unification of all art forms into a single event), linking it to his own aesthetic of synaesthesia (basically, the co-mingling of the senses).

According to Baudelaire, Wagner's music promoted a dream-like reverie and suggested more than it explained. Wagner's theory of the unity of the arts and Baudelaire's idea of correspondences gave the Symbolists a rough framework from which to champion their movement.

Very little of late nineteenth-century European culture was untouched by Wagnerism. A Symbolist periodical *La Revue Wagnérienne* was founded in 1885 to promote the cause of Wagner. Contributors to this journal included J. K. Huysmans, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé.

Wagnerism was by no means limited to French authors and artists, however.

Oscar Wilde included a characteristic comment about Wagner in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* ("I like Wagner's music better than anybody's. It is so loud that one can talk the whole time without other people hearing what one says").



Richard Wagner (top) and his home, Wahnfried, in Bayreuth (above). Northwestern University Library Special Collections.

Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for *The Ring* cycle and his sexually explicit farce, "The Story of Venus and Tannhauser" (also published as "Under the Hill"), complete with his erotic illustrations, also indicate the scope of Wagnerian influence among the *fin de siècle* Decadents.

The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, once a friend and admirer of Wagner, denounced what he perceived as Wagner's decadent aspects: "How closely related Wagner must be to the whole of European decadence to avoid being experienced by them as a decadent. He belongs to it: he is its protagonist, its greatest name." What Nietzsche probably did not intend is that his essay managed to make Wagner's decadence seem downright attractive.

For many, Wagner's music took on quasi-religious overtones, and followers of his music were referred to as "disciples" who "made the pilgrimage" to the festival house in Bayreuth. Concert-goers were reported to have fainted at the performances as if under the influence of some religious fervor or ecstasy.

### **The Swan King**

In spite of his early poverty, Wagner insisted on living in luxurious surroundings and wearing silk and velvet-lined clothing. "I am a different kind of organism," Wagner justified, "My nerves are hypersensitive, I must have beauty, splendor and light."

Given these declarations, it is no wonder that Wagner appealed to nineteenth-century French dandies. When Wagner sent a seamstress to obtain specially-ordered dressing gowns, silk underclothes, and perfumes, she told the customs officials that they were for a countess in Berlin!

Wagner needed much money to settle his debts, build his dream theater in Bayreuth, and live in a style he felt was owed to him. Luckily for him, a dreamy eighteen-year-old Bavarian prince who identified himself with the swan-knight Lohengrin was about to become King Ludwig II.

Ludwig had grown up among paintings and tapestries of the same Teutonic legends Wagner employed in his operas. Attending his first Wagner opera was a deeply moving dream come true for the young prince; and upon ascending to the throne, Ludwig immediately requested that Wagner come to Bavaria.

After accepting Ludwig's ring and portrait, Wagner soon enjoyed the royal patronage of the king. "My only one! My godlike friend!" wrote the monarch to Wagner.

Wagner could hardly believe his good fortune and responded in kind: "O my King! You are divine!"

Because of Ludwig's homosexuality, the passionate letters exchanged between these two have led to some speculation that there was a homosexual relationship between the king and composer. But Ludwig was attracted to Wagner's artistic visions and accomplishments rather than to Wagner the man. (Wagner's physical appearance was undoubtedly a disappointment to the beauty-worshipping king.)

Still, Wagner knew how to manipulate Ludwig on his own terms and was not above encouraging the monarch's fantasies (and generosity). Thus, he responded to Ludwig's purple prose in kind. Thanks to the royal coffers, Wagner was able to mount productions of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger* while finishing the score of the Ring cycle.

But not everyone among Ludwig's cabinet was as enamored of Wagner as the king. Because of Wagner's drain on the treasury, his participation in the Dresden uprising in 1849 (an act of treason), and his liaison with Cosima von Bülow, the wife of Wagner's own concert-master, Ludwig's aides urged the king to sever his relationship with the composer.

Reluctantly, Ludwig sent word to Wagner that he would have to leave Munich. But he continued to help Wagner financially throughout the rest of his life and it is probably not an exaggeration to say that without King Ludwig II's great admiration and financial support, there would not be as many complete Wagner operas as now exist and certainly not the Festival house at Bayreuth for their performances.

### ***Parsifal*: The Restoration of Male Society**

Wagner's last music drama, *Parsifal*, was admired by the Symbolists especially because of its themes of sin and redemption. Many Symbolists viewed Christianity as a mystical inward quest and displayed a morbid fascination with the suffering of Christ. While *Parsifal* is Wagner's clearest Christian opera, it also turns out to be the opera with the most homosexual overtones.

*Parsifal* is an "innocent fool" whose task is to restore the sacred male society that is in charge of protecting the Holy Grail. The Brotherhood has fallen into decline because of the loss of the spear that pierced Christ's side and the illness that the Grail King Amfortas suffers as a result. It was while engaging in sexual relations with the witch Kundry that Amfortas lost the spear that had been his charge.

A queer reading of *Parsifal* notes that the masculine order of the Grail considers intercourse with a woman a sin, a fall from grace, or a crime against the knights. The chaste Parsifal refuses the temptations of the flower maidens and upon Kundry's attempted kiss, pulls away from her and shouts "Amfortas!"--thereby declaring his loyalty to the male order.

By refusing Kundry's seduction, Parsifal regains the sacred spear that will heal Amfortas. In a gesture that suggests both physical and spiritual union, Parsifal touches Amfortas' wound with the spear and the king is healed and redeemed. At the end of the opera, Kundry, the lone female character in the opera, is dead and the Grail Brotherhood is restored.

These aspects of *Parsifal* were not lost on the poet Paul Verlaine, who struggled with his own religious and sexual conflicts; in 1886, he composed a poem of the same name.

An interpretation of the opera in keeping with this reading is a 1983 film version by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg. Emphasizing Parsifal's androgyny, it has the young boy become a woman at the point of Kundry's kiss in Act II. In a nod to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, Syberberg portrays the flower maidens as deformed and ugly, suggesting that any sort of union with these women will result in sickness and death.

It is to Wagner's credit as a composer that the complex themes and interpretations of *Parsifal* are realized by some of the most beautiful music he ever wrote.

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