



## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

### Wagner on Music of the Future

The term “music of the future” was closely associated with the ideas of Richard Wagner during the composer’s own lifetime. The term itself was derived from the title of Wagner’s treatise *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Artwork of the Future*, 1850), in which Wagner speculates about the role of art in a utopian society. Art at this indefinite future time, he says, will merge into a grand totality in which music, literature, and visual arts will represent human nature in its most ideal state.

In 1861 Wagner published a pamphlet titled “‘Music of the Future,’” which is excerpted here. In this writing the composer attempts to summarize his ideas about the utopian artwork. He places the term “music of the future” in quotes because by 1861 he had come to see it as an epithet used by critics to misrepresent his ideas. In this essay he tries to set the record straight about the direction in which opera should evolve, both in the present and in the future.

In the shrill and frequent outcry of our shallow musical dilettanti for “melody, melody!” I find evidence that they take their idea of melody from musical works in which, in the place of melody there stretches an expanse of unmelodiousness, setting the melody they mean in the light they love so dearly. In the opera houses of Italy there gathered an audience which passed its evenings in amusement. Part of this amusement was formed by the music sung upon the stage, to which one listened from time to time during pauses in the conversation. During the conversation and visits paid from box to box, the music still went on, and with the same purpose as one assigns to table music at grand dinners, namely, to encourage by its noise the otherwise timid talk. The music which is played with this object, and during these conversations, fills out the virtual bulk of an Italian operatic score, whereas the music which one really listens to makes out perhaps a twelfth part thereof. An Italian opera must contain at least one aria to which one is glad to listen to. If the opera is to have a success, the conversation must be broken at least six times and the music listened to. The composer who is clever enough to attract the audience’s attention a whole twelve times is lauded as an inexhaustible melodic genius. Now how are we to blame this public if, suddenly confronted with a work which claims a like attention throughout its whole extent and for each of its parts, it finds itself torn from all its habits at musical performances. The public cannot possibly take as identical with its beloved melody—a thing which in the luckiest event may pass for a mere refinement of that musical noise whose naive use before had facilitated the most agreeable interchange of small talk—a melody that now makes the upstart claim of being really heard. The public must cry out again and again for its six to twelve melodies, if only to gain the stimulating and protective intervals for conversation, the main end and object of the opera evening. . . .

We will start with the axiom that *music’s only form is melody*, that it is not even thinkable apart from melody, that music and melody are absolutely inseparable. Therefore, taken in a higher sense, to say that any music has no melody can only mean that the musician has not arrived at the full construction of a form such as to seize and definitely impress the feeling—a statement which simply announces the composer’s lack of talent, his want of originality, compelling him to cobble up his piece from melodic phrases often heard before and therefore leaving the ear indifferent. In the mouth of the less-educated friend of opera, however, and as touching any specimen of genuine music, this remark stands self-confessed as meaning merely a given narrow form of melody which, as we have already seen, belongs to the childhood of musical art, wherefore the delight in nothing else but it must likewise seem to us truly childish. Here, then, it is less a question of melody, than of its earliest appearance in *dance form*.

Now I do not really wish to say anything depreciatory about this earliest rudiment of melodic form. I believe I have already proved that it is the basis of the finished art form of the Beethovenian symphony, and upon that assumption we have to thank it for something quite astounding. But one thing has to be borne in mind: namely that this form, which Italian opera has preserved in all its pristine undevelopedness, has received in the symphony a maturing and expansion such as to give it, in comparison with that earlier form, the relation of the flower to the sucker. I therefore fully endorse the significance of that original melodic form, the dance form, and, true to the maxim that if a form remains undeveloped it must have its origin still stamped upon it, I claim to trace that dance form in the Beethovenian symphony. Nay, I hold that this symphony to be a melodic aggregate that can be looked upon as the idealized dance form itself.

Let us next remark, however, that this form extends to every portion of the [Beethovenian] symphony, which is thus the opposite of Italian opera, where the melody stands entirely isolated and the intervals between the separate melodies are occupied by a manner of music we can only term absolutely unmelodic, since it scarcely quits the character of downright noise. With Beethoven's forerunners we see these nasty gaps still stretching between the melodic chief motives, even in symphonic movements. Haydn, indeed, was mostly able to give these interspaces a very interesting stamp, but Mozart—who here approached much nearer to the Italian notion of melodic form—had often, nay almost habitually, relapsed into that banal build of phrases which constantly places his symphonic movements in the light of so-called table music, i.e., a music which between attractive melodies offers also an attractive hubbub for conversation's sake. For myself at least the perpetually recurring and noisily garrulous half-closes of the Mozartian symphony make the impression as if I were hearing the clatter of a prince's plates and dishes set to music. The distinctive and masterly procedure of Beethoven, on the contrary, was directed to entirely banishing those fatal interspaces, and giving to the connecting links between the chief melodies the full character of melody itself.

To throw more light on this procedure, uncommonly interesting as it might be, would lead us here too far. Yet I cannot refrain from drawing your attention to the construction of the first movement of a Beethovenian symphony. Here we have the actual dance melody divided into its smallest component parts, each of which, often consisting of nothing but two notes, is made expressive and interesting by the predominance of now a rhythmic, now a harmonic character. These parts, again, arrange themselves in ever novel combinations, now swelling to a stream of sequences, now scattered in a whirlpool, yet always so absorbing in their plastic motion that the hearer cannot tear himself from their influence for a single instant, but, on the tiptoe of excitement, must accord to each harmonic tone, nay to every rhythmic pause, a meaning in the melody. The quite new result of this procedure, then, was to stretch out the melody, through richest evolution of all the motives lying in it, to one vast, one solid piece of music, which in itself is nothing but one sole continuous melody. . . .

Thus where the symphonist still timidly groped back to the original dance-form—never daring, even for his expression, to quite transgress the bounds which held him in communication with that form—the Poet now will cry to him: "Launch without a fear into the full flood of music's sea. Hand in hand with me, you can never lose touch of the thing most seizable of all by every human being, for through me you stand on the solid ground of the dramatic action, and that action, at the moment of its scenic show, is the most directly understandable of all poems. Stretch boldly out your melody, that like a ceaseless river it may pour throughout the work: in it say you what I keep silent, since you alone can say it. And silent shall I utter all, since my hand it is that guides you."

Truly, the poet's greatness is mostly to be measured by what he leaves unsaid, letting us breathe in silence to ourselves the thing unspeakable. The musician it is who brings this untold mystery to clarion tongue, and the impeccable form of his sounding silence is *endless melody*.

Necessarily, the symphonist will not be able to shape this melody without his own peculiar implement; that implement is the *orchestra*. That he will employ it in a sense quite other than the Italian Opera composer, in whose hands the orchestra is nothing but a huge guitar for accompanying the aria, I scarcely need impress upon you.

It will enter much the same relation to the drama meant by me, as the tragic chorus of the Greeks to theirs. This chorus was always in attendance. To it were bared the motives of the dramatic action going on before its eyes. These motives it sought to penetrate and thence to form a judgment on the action. Only, this interest of the chorus's was more of a reflective kind throughout. It had neither part nor lot in action or in motives. The orchestra of the modern symphonist, on the contrary, will take so intimate an interest in the motives of the plot, that while, as embodied harmony, it alone confers on the melody its definite expression, on the other hand it will keep the melody in the requisite unceasing flow, and thus convincingly impress those motives on the feeling. If we must regard as the ideal art form that which can be grasped without a shadow of reflection, and through which the artist's idea is conveyed the clearest to the unimpeded feeling; if, subject to the above provisos, we mean to recognize the music drama as that ideal art form, then the symphonist's orchestra is the wondrous instrument for the only possible presentment of that form. Faced with it and its significance, it is obvious that the chorus—which in opera has climbed the stage itself already—will entirely lose the meaning of its antique prototype. The chorus now can only be included as an active personage, and where its presence as such is not required, in future it must seem to us superfluous and disturbing, since its ideal interest in the action will have passed completely to the orchestra, and there be manifested in continual, but never troubling presence.

I have recourse to metaphor once more, to give you finally a picture of the melody I mean, the melody encompassing the whole dramatic tone piece; and for this I will keep to the impression which it is to produce. Its endless wealth of detail is in nowise to reveal itself merely to the connoisseur but also to the most naive layman, if only he has come to the needful collectedness of spirit. First of all, then, it should exert on him somewhat the effect produced by a noble forest on a summer evening upon a lonely visitor who has just left the city's din behind. The peculiar stamp of this impression—which I leave the reader to elaborate in all its psychological effects—is that of a silence that grows more and more alive. For the general object of the artwork it may be quite sufficient to have produced this root impression and by it to lead the hearer unawares and attune him to the further aim. He therewith takes the higher objective unconsciously into himself. But when, overwhelmed by this first general impression, the forest visitor sits down to ponder—when the last burden of the city's hubbub is cast aside—he girds the forces of his soul to a new power of observing. When, as if hearing with new senses, he listens more and more intently and perceives with ever greater plainness the infinite diversity of voices waking in the wood. Ever and ever a new, a different voice peers forth, a voice he thinks he has never heard before. As they wax in number, they grow in strange distinctness. Louder and louder rings the wood, and, many though the voices be, the individual strains he hears, in gleaming fullness streams of sound seem again to him but just the one great forest melody, that melody which from the very first had chained him to devotion, as once the deep blue firmament of night had chained his eye when brighter and ever clearer he beheld its countless multitude of stars, the longer he had plunged his gaze into the spectacle. This melody will echo ever in him, but hum it he cannot. To hear it whole once more he must go into the wood again, and on a summer evening. How foolish, if he tried to trap one of the sweet wood warblers, perchance to have it trained at home to chirp a morsel of that great forest melody! What else would he hear for his pains, but—say now!—which particular melody?

What an infinitude of technical details I have passed over in this cursory, yet perhaps itself too circumstantial statement, you may easily imagine. Particularly if you reflect

how inexhaustibly varied is their nature, even in a theoretic exposition. To clearly set forth all the single features of melodic form, in the sense which I assign to it—to plainly denote its relations with opera melody proper, and its possibilities of extension, not only in respect of periodic structure, but with special regard to its harmony—would straightway throw me back on my fruitless attempt of days gone by. I therefore confine myself to giving the indulgent reader the most general indications, for in truth we now are drawing near the point, even in this address itself, where the artwork alone can say the final word. . . .

But what disheartened me the more was this: in opera I could never meet all these inimitable excellences of dramatic music developed to one pure style, embracing equally each portion of the work. In the most important works, immediately beside the noblest and most perfect, I found the incomprehensibly senseless, the inexpressively conventional, nay, the frivolous. Though the hideous juxtaposition of absolute recitative and absolute aria is retained almost everywhere, preventing any finished style, and everlastingly breaking and barring the musical flow (through the fundamental error of a faulty poem), yet in our great masters' finest scenas we often find this evil quite overcome. To the recitative itself there has been given already the stamp of rhythmic melody, and it opens imperceptibly into the broader structure of the melody proper. With our eyes now alive to the grand effect of this procedure, how painfully must it affect us when the banal chord makes sudden entry without so much as "beg-your-pardon," to tell us, "the recitativo secco will now be taken up again." And just as suddenly thereafter the full orchestra strikes in, with its inevitable ritornello to announce the aria, that same ritornello which the self-same master had elsewhere employed for a connecting or modulatory passage of such deep suggestiveness that we had seen in it an expression of beauty all its own that could give us the most interesting insight into the situation's very heart. But how if a "number" positively reckoned for nothing but a sop to the lowest taste in art should immediately follow one of those gems of art? Nay, how if a noble, a thrillingly beautiful phrase should suddenly end in the stereotyped *cadenza* with the customary cascade of runs and a forced last note, while the singer unexpectedly quits the person to whom the phrase was addressed, comes down to the footlights, turns his face to the claque, and gives the signal for applause?

True enough, these last-named solecisms do not exactly occur with our really great masters, rather with certain composers who make us wonder the more how they could also have come by those superlative beauties. But the worst feature of the whole thing is this: that after all the noble, perfect work already achieved by great masters, bringing opera so near the consummation of a purer style, these relapses could happen again and again; nay, that such an assault upon Nature herself could sally forth more brazenly than ever. . . .

My aim here [in the opera *Tannhäuser*] is to engross the public in the dramatic action before all else, and in such a manner that not for an instant may it be compelled to lose sight of that action, but, on the contrary, the whole musical adornment may seem to it a mere means for displaying that action. It therefore was the refusal of concessions in the subject matter that enabled me also to reject every concession in its musical setting, and in these two points together you might find the most valid definition of my "innovations" but by no means in an absolute musical caprice such as people have thought fit to foist upon me under the name of "Music of the Future."

Source: Richard Wagner, "Zukunftsmusik" (1860), in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, edited by Bryan R. Simms (London: Kegan Paul, 1894).