

---

---

# *How to Listen to Wagner's Music*

By H. E. Krehbiel



The Wagner Library

Edition 1.0

---

---



## Contents

About this Title .....	4
How to Listen to Wagner's Music. - A Suggestion. ....	5

## About this Title

### Source

*How to Listen to Wagner's Music*

By H. E. Krehbiel

*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*

Volume 80 Issue 478

Pages 530-536

Published in 1890

Original [Page Images](#) at Cornell University Library

(<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa-cgi?notisid=ABK4014-0080-64>)

### Reading Information

This title contains 4713 words.

Estimated reading time between 13 and 24 minutes.

Page numbers of the original source are indicated using square-bracketed parentheses, like [62].

[530]

## How to Listen to Wagner's Music.

### A Suggestion.

By H. E. Krehbiel.

IF there were not so much ill-informed talk about Wagner's lyric dramas to be met with in drawing-rooms, books, and newspapers, and so many evidences on all hands of vagueness of apprehension touching the poet-composer's aims, methods, and achievements, an apology would most properly precede the few hints which I aim to offer as a help to the enjoyment of Wagner's works. For I confess that as I think them over they seem to me very elementary indeed, and fragmentary. But this vagueness is not peculiar to popular thought on Wagner's art. It is grievously general with respect to all forms of music except the lowest. The greatest need in the art culture of to-day is education in the art of listening to good music. Turn where you will, and you will find the greater part of what is said about the art which is the most ethereal, the most influential, and the most general in respect of a certain degree of practical cultivation, to be marked or marred by a twofold affectation. Many persons speak about music in an extravagantly sentimental manner; many more affect not to be able to speak about it at all. Which of these two affectations is the less objectionable I do not know; but this I do know, neither is amiable, and neither reflects credit on the civilization of which this century makes frequent boasts. In the case of the sentimental rhapsodists, who have had the most encouragement from the popular writers on musical subjects, the prompting is too often a desire to publish the conviction that they are persons of peculiarly exquisite sensibilities. This is an unlovely kind of egotism, which not only betrays a lack of true refinement and gentleness in the speakers, but works injury to music by lowering it in the estimation of those who have cultivated normal and sane intellectual and æsthetic gifts. As for the persons of the second class, they are living monuments not so much to a deprivation in natural endowment as to the indifference of our age to an element in education which once was looked upon as paramount to all other such elements in importance. Time was when to utter such words as now we hear almost daily, would be to place the brands of illiteracy and boorishness on the speaker. A cultured Greek of the classical period would as little have dared to say, "I know nothing about music," as we would dare to proclaim inability to read our own language.

This being true, as I believe and deplore, there is no harm in restating briefly what will appear to be self-evident propositions to many. The first of these is that the mission in which Wagner labored as controversialist and composer was a reform of the opera—not a reform of music generally. He was a musical reformer only so far as music is a factor in the sum of the modern opera. Outside of the theatre, it is true, he exerted a tremendous influence on the development of the art; but that influence he exerted only as a gifted musician who stood in the line of succession with the great men who widened the boundaries of the art and struck out new paths for it—let me say Bach, Haydn, Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schumann. As the legitimate successor of these kings, he advanced the musical art indeed; but as a reformer, his activities were directed not to music in its absolute forms, but to an entirely distinct and complex art-form—the opera. The phrase "music of the future," popularly attributed to him, was the invention of his critics; his own phrase which was thus parodied was, "the art-work of the future," by which he meant a form of theatrical entertainment in which poetry, music, gesture, painting, and the plastic arts were to co-operate on a basis of complete interdependence and common aim, the inspiring purpose of all being dramatic expression. The starting-point of his reformatory ideas was that music had usurped a place which does not

belong to it in the lyric drama. It should be a means, and had become the aim. As an æsthetic principle, he contended that it lies in the nature of music to be not the end, but a medium, of dramatic expression. He therefore reversed the old relations of librettist and composer, and made music, which can only address itself to the emotions and imagination, dependent for form, spirit, and character on the poetry, [531] which can appeal to reason as well. As a musical form of expression, Wagner held that rhyme is useless, because it implies the identity of the consonants succeeding the vowels, and these consonants are lost because only the vowels can be dwelt on. The first consonant of a word cannot be lost, however, because it is that which gives physiognomy; and since repetition makes an agreeable cadence, he substituted alliteration for rhyme in the significant portions of his verses. This theory, however, he put into practice only in *Tristan und Isolde* and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*; in *Parsifal* he recurred to rhyme. From the verse melody thus obtained he desired the musical melody to spring, words and music becoming lovingly merged in each other, each sacrificing enough of selfishness to make the union possible. This means that for the sake of truth Wagner brought declamation forward as the first and most essential element in dramatic singing. The melody, in the sense in which the word is generally understood, has to a great extent been relegated to the orchestra, where it is woven into a great symphonic fabric, in which, no less than on the stage, the drama is worked out. In his vocal part the aim is to achieve through the music an increased impressiveness for the poetry, and to this end he raises it to a kind of intensified speech, which retains as much as possible of the distinctness of ordinary dialogue, with its emotional capacity raised to a higher power.

Thus much for some of the most essential things in Wagner's theory. In his exemplification of them he created a system based upon the introduction of a set of melodic phrases, which, as symbols of the dramatic elements, be they persons, ideas, places, or passions, are developed in harmony with the progressive phases of the play. These melodic phrases are the so-called "leading motives" of the books and newspapers, which are looked upon with such dread by persons who fancy that music whose appreciation exacts the slightest activity of the intellect is false art. It is singular that so many persons who would not admit that they had seen a painting if the vision were so fleeting as to leave the impression only of a mass of colors more or less harmoniously combined, are yet willing to permit a musical composition to pass before their senses like a sort of audible phantasmagoria, void of everything save a formless, purposeless something, which occasionally makes a pleasing impression upon the ear. The ultimate question concerning the correctness or effectiveness of Wagner's system of composition must, of course, be answered along with the question, "Does the composition, as a whole, touch the emotions, quicken the fancy, fire the imagination?" If it does these things, we may, to a great extent, if we wish, get along without the intellectual processes of reflection and comparison, which are conditioned upon a recognition of the themes and their uses. But if we put aside this intellectual activity, we will deprive ourselves, among other things, of the pleasure which it is the province of memory to give; and the exercise of memory is called for by music much more urgently than by any other art, because of its volatile nature and the rôle which repetition plays in it.

I cannot help but think that it is something more than a coincidence that the fundamental principle of Wagner's constructive scheme should have had its birth in the first of his legendary dramas in which the beautiful ethical principle, which runs like a golden thread through his tragedies, was exemplified—the principle of erring man's salvation through the self-sacrificing love of woman. The recurrence of reminiscent phrases of music can be found in Weber, Wagner's predecessor, first inspirer and model, and also in Wagner's conventional, vulgar, and noisy opera *Rienzi*; but the consistent use of phrases for the high dramatic purpose which we find them fulfilling in his great dramas, from *Tristan und Isolde* to *Parsifal*, is distinctly foreshadowed in *Der Fliegende Holländer*. The infinite longing for rest of the

Wandering Jew of the sea, and the infinite pity and wondrous love of the woman who, through sacrifice of her own life, achieved for the wanderer surcease of suffering—these are the two fundamental passions of the play. The legend of the Dutchman and his doom is told in a ballad which the heroine sings in the second act of the opera; and this ballad, Wagner himself tells us, he set to music first, and even before he had completed the book. It is an epitome of the drama, ethically and musically, having two significant musical thoughts, which correspond to the longing of the Dutchman and the redeeming love of [532] Senta. The first of these musical thoughts is this:



The second is this:

*Piu lento.*

 Two systems of musical notation, each consisting of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 6/8. The first system is marked *Piu lento.* The melody in the treble clef staff consists of a sequence of notes: a quarter note on G4, a quarter note on A4, a dotted quarter note on B4, a quarter note on C5, a quarter note on D5, a quarter note on E5, and a dotted quarter note on F5. There are fermatas over the B4 and F5 notes. The bass clef staff provides harmonic accompaniment with chords and single notes.

Having invented these two phrases for use simply in the ballad of his opera, Wagner tells us how he proceeded with his work: "I had merely to develop according to their respective tendencies the various thematic germs comprised in the ballad to have, as a matter of course, the principal mental moods in definite thematic shapes before me. When a mental mood returned, its thematic expression also, as a matter of course, was repeated, since it would have been arbitrary and capricious to have sought another *motivo* so long as the object was an intelligible representation of the subject, and not a conglomeration of operatic pieces." This is Wagner's account of the genesis of the "leading motives," or, as I think they would better be called, "typical phrases," and it directs attention to a misconception of their nature and purpose which is pretty general even among the admirers of his works. They were not invented to announce the entrance of persons of the play on the stage; their duties are not those of footmen or ushers. Neither are they labels. Nor can they rightly be likened, as a German critic has declared, to the lettered ribbons issuing from the mouths of figures in mediæval pictures. They stand for deeper things—for the attributes of the play's personages; for the instruments, spiritual as well as material, used in developing the plot; for the

fundamental passions of the story. If they were labels, they could only accompany the characters with which they had been associated at the outset, and this we know is not the case; in fact in some very significant instances they enter the score long before the characters with whom they are associated have been heard of or their existence is surmised. They are symbols, and hence arbitrary signs, but not more arbitrary than words. All language is arbitrary convention. Only the emotional elements at the bottom of it are real, absolute, universal. It would be just as easy to build up a language of musical tones capable of expressing ideas as it was to build up a language of words. In fact, though we seldom think of it, the rudiments of such a language exist. We are all familiar with some of them, or we would not involuntarily associate certain rhythms with the dance, and others with the march. A drone-bass under an oboe melody in 6—8 time would not suggest a pastoral; trumpets and drums, war; French-horn, harmonies, a hunting scene; and so on. More than this, the Chinese have retained in their language a relic of the time when music was an integral element of all speech, not only of solemn and artistic speech, as we see it in the beginnings of the drama in India, Greece, and China. The meaning of many words in the monosyllabic Chinese language depends upon the musical inflection given to them in utterance. In a sense, a phrase of melody, or a chord, or a succession of chords, of harmony, is a "bow-wow word," the only kind of word universally intelligible. A great deal of music is direct in its influence upon the emotions, but it is chiefly by association of ideas that we recognize its expressiveness or significance. Sometimes hearing a melody or harmony arouses an emotion like that aroused by the contemplation of a thing. Minor harmonies, slow movements, dark tonal colorings, combine directly to put a musically susceptible person in a mood congenial to thoughts of sorrow and death; and, inversely, the experience of sorrow or the contemplation of death creates affinity for minor harmonies, slow movements, and dark tonal colorings. Or we recognize attributes in music possessed also by things, and we consort the music and the things, external attributes bringing descriptive music into play which excites the fancy, internal attributes calling for an exercise of the loftier faculty, imagination, to discern their meaning. A few examples in both classes will help to [533] make my meaning plain, and I begin with the second class as the nobler of the two.

In Wagner's *Nibelung* tragedy two of the musical phrases associated with Wotan may be taken as symbols of contrasted attributes of the god. Throughout the tragedy of which lie is the hero, Wotan figures, by virtue of his supremacy among the gods, as Lord of Walhalla, and consequently as the manifest embodiment of law.

In music the first manifestation of law is in form.

It is impossible to conceive of a combination of the integral elements of music—rhythm, melody, and harmony—in a beautiful manner without some kind of form. Form means measure, order, symmetry. In music more than in any art it is essential to the existence of the loftiest attribute of beauty, which is repose—an attribute whose divine character Ruskin proclaimed when he defined it as "the 'I am' contradistinguished from the 'I become'; the sign alike of the supreme knowledge which is incapable of surprise, the supreme power which is incapable of labor, the supreme volition which is incapable of change." Now what are the musical qualities of which Wagner makes use in order to symbolize the Wielder of supreme power? Here is the phrase whose innate nobility and beauty appear to best advantage at the opening of the second scene in *Das Rheingold*:



The melody is built out of the intervals of the common chord—the triad—the first starting-point of harmony, its first and most pervasive law. This chord too supplies the harmonic structure. Its instrumentation (for four tubas with peculiarly orotund voices, specially constructed for Wagner) is unvarying, calm, stately, majestic, dignified, reposeful. Thus does Wagner symbolize musically the chief deity and chief personage of his tragedy in his character as Lord of Walhalla. But through the operation of the curse to which he became subject when he took the baneful ring, another character than that of a supreme god is forced upon Wotan. He has plotted to regain the ring, and restore it to the original owners of the magic gold. He has begotten a new race—the Wälsungen—to execute a purpose which, as the representative of law, he is restrained himself from executing. He becomes a wanderer over the face of the earth, a mere spectator of the development of his foolish plot. How is this new character symbolized? Note the music which accompanies Wotan when, disguised as the Wanderer, he enters Mime's cavern smithy in the second scene of *Siegfried*:



The fundamental harmonies are retained. The solemn instrumental color is held fast. The dignity of the chord progressions is still there. What, then, is gone? *The element of repose.* The harmonies are still triads, but tonality, with its benison of restfulness, has been sacrificed. The phrase is in no key, or rather it is in as many keys as there are chords. There are many of these typical phrases associated with characters in Wagner's music whose delineation goes to moods and moral traits which could be explained in a similar manner. I will cite another instance in which not the attributes of a personage, but the property of a thing, is the composer's objective point. The case is a striking one, for it is a supernatural property which is to be brought to the notice of the listener, the power of the Tarnhelm (the familiar cap of darkness of folk-lore) to render its wearer invisible. The musical symbol of this magical apparatus in the Nibelung tragedy is this:

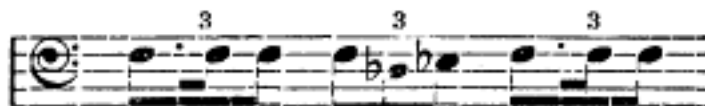


[534] The phrase is not used often, but whenever it appears in the music its mysteriousness arrests the attention. What is the source of that mysteriousness? Nothing more nor less than indefiniteness of mode. The closing harmony is an empty fifth; supply a major third and the mode is major; a minor third, and it is minor. In either case the mystical property of the phrase, which establishes its propriety, vanishes. The device is not new to Wagner. The strange impressiveness of the beginning of Beethoven's *Symphony with Chorus* is achieved in an analogous manner. The colossal yearning of the Dutchman in Wagner's opera, begotten by his endless itineracy, is similarly expressed.

More easily understood than the mood and character delineations are those phrases which are frankly descriptive of external qualities. The giants in *Das Rheingold* are the representatives of brute force. They are huge, ungainly creatures. heavy-witted as well as heavy-footed, and their stupidity and clumsiness are reflected in their musical symbol:



The Nibelungs are the antipodes of the giants—watchful, cunning, industrious. Intellectually and morally they are schemers and tricksters; by occupation they are workers in metals. Wagner characterizes both of their activities in the introduction to *Siegfried*. A descending figure in the clarinets and bassoons, consisting of two harmonies, both thirds, at the distance of a seventh, suggests the brooding cogitation of Mime, while the fact that he is a Nibelung is published in the typical phrase of the race, a rhythmical figure like the pounding of hammers on anvils:



Sometimes Wagner becomes simply scenic, and mimics nature, as when he pictures to the ear (if I may be permitted to use the phrase) the fitful, flickering, crackling crepitation of fire in order to symbolize Loge, the God of Fire, in his elemental form and as the Spirit of Mischief, or the quiet undulation and steady flux and reflux of water in the music associated with the Rhine and its denizens.

These examples must suffice as illustrations of Wagner's method of inventing the melodic material out of which he weaves his musical fabric. His system of composition rests on the development of these themes in harmony with the dramatic spirit of the text. The orchestra is the vehicle of this development. It is preeminently the expositor of the drama. It has acquired some of the functions of the Greek chorus, in that it takes part in the action in order to publish that which is beyond the capacity of words alone to utter. The music of the instruments is the voice of the fate, the conscience, and the will concerned in the drama. It unfolds the thoughts, motives, and purposes of the personages, and lays bare the mysteries of the plot and counterplot. As the tragedy grows complex, the musical texture, into which the themes symbolizing the passions and purposes of the characters are woven, grows more complex and





Note that as the master-singers belonged to the solid burghers of old Nuremberg—a little vain, as was to be expected in the upholders of an institution of great antiquity and glorious traditions; staid, dignified, and complacent, as became the free citizens of a free imperial city, whose stout walls sheltered the best in art and science that Germany. could boast—so these two melodies are strong, simple tunes; sequences of the intervals of the simple diatonic scale; strongly and simply harmonized; square-cut in rhythm; firm and dignified, if a trifle pompous, in their stride. The three melodies belonging to the class presented in opposition to the spirit represented by the master-singers are disclosed by a study of the comedy to be associated with the passion of the young lovers, Walther and Eva, and those influences in nature which are the inspiration of romantic utterance— spring-time, the birds, and flowers. They differ in every respect—melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, as well as in treatment—from the melodies which stand for the old meister-singers and their notions. They are chromatic; their rhythms are less regular and more eager (through the agency of syncopation); they are harmonized with greater warmth, and set for the instruments with greater passion. The first,



most surely tells us of the incipency of the lovers' passion, for it is the subject of the interludes between the lines of the *chorale* which accompany the flirtation in the church scene. The second, [536]



depicts the youthful impetuosity of the lovers. Note the eagerness which the triplet injects into its rhythm, the ebullience expressed in the tendency of its melody to ascend higher and higher in the regions of tonality. Poetical association consorts such attributes with love and youth and spring-time, and it is in the song which Walther sings in praise of spring and love that the phrase receives its most eloquent proclamation. The third melody is the phrase to whose accompaniment Eva shyly confesses her love by a gesture of the eyes in the church scene and which Walther uses in the third ecstatic stanza of the song with which, in the contest of song, Walther wins his lady love as a prize:



There is another phrase which is of less importance in the score than those quoted, but which plays a happy part in the comedy as it is prefigured in the prelude. It is the strongly marked rhythmical figure with which the populace jeer at the malicious clown Beckmesser, and help to effect his discomfiture in the last scene of the play:



It is delightful to observe how this little phrase performs the office of a satirist in the middle part of the prelude where the grotesque elements in the character of Beckmesser are pictured. It is a *scherzando* movement, the master-singers' march melody being presented in diminution by the choir of wood-wind instruments, which persist stubbornly in their fussy cackling in spite of the fact that the strings take every opportunity to send some of the passionate, pushing, pulsating love music surging through the desiccated mass of tones. Here it is that Wagner chastises the foolish manners of the master-singers, as he does later in the actual representation. The jeering phrase, started by the middle strings, eventually cuts through the mass of tones, and when the caricature of the melody typical of the guild has been laughed out of court, the music that symbolizes the freshness and vigor of youth and spring and love, and proclaims their right to free and spontaneous proclamation (this is the corrective idea at the bottom of the comedy), masters the orchestra, and compels recognition and even celebration from the representatives of pedantry and conservatism. Observe, finally, that it is only the perverted idea of classicism that is treated with contumely and routed; the glorification of the triumph of romanticism is not left to the romantic melodies, but is found in the stupendously pompous and brilliant setting given to the master-singers' music at the close of the prelude. This is the supreme lesson of which the prelude has given us the exposition; Wagner is a true comedian of the ancient kind. He administers chastisement with a smile (*ridendo castigat mores*), and chooses for its subject only things which are temporary aberrations from the good.