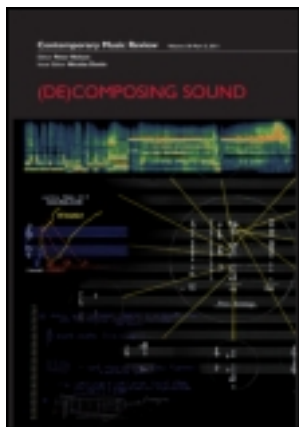


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# Wagner Redux: Badiou on Music for the Future

Martin Scherzinger

*Alain Badiou's book Five lessons on Wagner contests and revises the widespread critical reception of Richard Wagner. Badiou offers a counterpoint to 6 charges made against the composer: (1) Wagner created seductively sensual musical edifices; (2) Wagner indulges identitarian thought; (3) Wagner spectacularizes suffering; (4) Wagner's musical forms contain differences in a false unity; (5) Wagner theatricalizes the drama; and (6) Wagner's temporalities are underwritten by the latent telos of affirmative dialectics. Badiou argues against these charges point by point. Badiou then shifts attention away from plot structures and toward the music's formal protocols. For Badiou, musicalized transitions proffer vectors for transformation beyond the conceptual scope of plot meanings alone. The paper describes and evaluates Badiou's claims. Using Die Meistersinger as a central referent, the paper argues that Badiou unwittingly construes music as a signifying medium at argumentatively crucial junctures, which permits an equivocal case of Wagner to persist.*

**Keywords:** Badiou; Lacoue-Labarthe; Adorno; Wagner; Die Meistersinger; Time; Form; Politics

## Introduction: The Case of Wagner

The music of Richard Wagner has once again become the subject of interest to Marxist-oriented philosophy. In *Opera's second death* (2002) for example, Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek take up the case of Wagner in relation to capitalism and subjectivity; while, in his book *Five lessons on Wagner* (2010), Alain Badiou re-opens the dossier on Wagner, demonstrating the composer's innovative perspectives on a variety of philosophical matters pertaining to identity, difference, suffering, temporality, and, most notably, social transformation. Wagner's reception, both then and now, was notoriously diverse and complex. In the nineteenth century, he was admired by aesthetic decadents and Victorian moralists alike, while his musico-political project appealed equally, on the one hand, to conservative monarchists and folkish nationalists, and, on the other, to political radicals, socialists, and communists. Right up to

today the debate about the case of Wagner has not abated. In musicology, Wagner and Wagnerism studies have become a kind of enterprise in their own right; and in philosophy, the construction and elaboration of the Wagner case remains an almost mandatory sub-genre for exploring the relationship between aesthetics, politics and philosophy.

While complexities abound and persist throughout this reception history, the period following the 1930s can be characterized as taking a largely negative stance toward Wagner. Badiou suggests that the correlation of Wagner's music with Nazism—including the co-opting of Wagner by Nazis as well as the composer's flagrantly anti-semitic statements—has produced a largely critical body of contemporary literature on Wagner. Beginning already with Friedrich Nietzsche and Thomas Mann, and extending to François Regnault and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe by way of Martin Heidegger, Ernst Bloch, and Theodor Adorno, we find numerous accusations delivered against Wagner, often with the suggestion that there is something 'proto-fascist' about Wagner's philosophical case (pp. 58, 72). The critique generally coheres around themes of totalization, sensualism, nationalism, theatricalization, spectacle, etc. The generally negative, or at least skeptical, stance prevails in musicology no less, where the argument sometimes extends to demonstrations of anti-semitism sublimated into various Wagnerian themes, musical tropes, and dramatic characters by way of historical codes. In this literature, Alberich in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, for example, or Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* are construed as prototypical Jews in the iconographic imagination of nineteenth century audiences. Wagner's anti-semitism, it is argued, extends beyond his overt pronouncements and into the texture of the music's signifying associations.

In contrast, Dolar, Žižek, and Badiou offer a different view, often revising aspects of the prevailing critical view. Far from linking the composer with fascism, they broadly detect in Wagner's project a progressive potential largely disavowed in an era of post-modern capital. Their particular genealogical lineage traces to nineteenth century progressive, communist and socialist figures, including Jean Jaurès, leader of the French Socialist party (assassinated by a young nationalist for his antimilitarist stance), Victor Adler, founder of the socialist movement in Austria, and George Bernard Shaw, the progressive literary critic and founder of the London School of Economics, all of whom admired aspects of Wagner's output. In keeping with this side of Wagner's reception, Dolar, Žižek and Badiou demonstrate how Wagner's dramatic and musical techniques introduce innovative modes of philosophical thought, which have not yet been fully acknowledged or understood. Situated within this broader tradition, the article will take up the specific argument advanced by Badiou in *Five lessons on Wagner*.

Badiou is vigilant toward the seriousness of the critical arguments leveled against Wagner. In fact, the dominant mode of argumentation in *Five lessons* consists in showing how the criticism advanced by the prevailing view can, in fact, be curiously inverted across the terrain of Wagner's actual artistic output. For example, instead of emphasizing Wagner's musical continuity (chromaticism, endless melody, etc.) ultimately tethered to a notion of totality (resolution, closure, etc.), Badiou detects an

aspect of dissonance and dislocation—a ‘Wagnerian fragmentation’—at the heart of his music dramas (pp. 82–83). Likewise, instead of accusing Wagner of casting a seductive and unifying veil of sensualism across a variegated mass, Badiou notices the composer’s restraint and asceticism; indeed his renunciation of unrestrained sensuality (pp. 84–87). Badiou makes the argument that Wagner’s renunciation is ultimately tethered to progressive possibility in contexts of transformation, an argument I will address later. By way of introduction, it suffices to note that we find in Badiou analogous arguments-by-inversion across the terrain of Wagner’s apparently identitarian thought, teleological dialectics, theatricalization, and aestheticization of politics. Thus, Badiou advances a series of arguments in defense of Wagner primarily by locating the absence in Wagner of the very characteristics of which he stands accused, as well as the presence of characteristics he is claimed to be lacking in. This might suggest that the values upheld by Wagner’s critics are, more or less, those endorsed by Badiou, even if he specifically upends their reading of Wagner himself. Yet, Badiou’s position seems to suggest that there is something more involved in Wagner’s artistic achievements, which transcends the implied limits of the composer’s critics.

To understand why Badiou’s arguments in defense of Wagner are not merely formal interpretative inversions of the dominant literature, it is necessary to contextualize Badiou’s argument in terms of both the current historical conjuncture and Badiou’s broader philosophical project. This includes Badiou’s theory of situations and events, his theory of the subject, including ethics and affects, as well as his theory of politics. In this article, I will focus primarily on Badiou’s politics, and, in particular, Badiou’s interest in musical transitions construed as a kind of aesthetic analagon to social and political transformations. For Badiou, a fundamental feature of Wagner’s music dramas is the exploration of modes of social/artistic/religious transformation—that is, the passing of powers and the advent of new types of social/artistic/religious order within different ficto-musical contexts. This article will outline, and then assess, Badiou’s general view of the relationship between music and transformation. While there will be references to various music dramas, I will use *Die Meistersinger* as a central referent throughout. Before doing so, however, it is important to outline the limits of, what can be characterized as, the turn toward negation and deconstruction implicit in the arguments of Wagner’s critics after the 1930s.

### Limits of Negation: Lacoue-Labarthe and Adorno Today

In *Five lessons*, Badiou tackles the critique of Wagner advanced by Lacoue-Labarthe and Adorno in separate chapters. While the details differ, he detects in both a commitment, in the final instance, to a kind of critique by negation. Lacoue-Labarthe, for example, criticizes the role of myth, technology, totalization, and, above all, unification in Wagner, arguing that Wagner created a ‘synthetic music’; a music that ‘absorbs its own multiplicities and dissolves them in an undifferentiated *melos*’, thereby absorbing all ‘parametric differences’. We find in Wagner a kind of affirmative (as against a

negative) dialectic, which ‘does not let difference be, that actually engulfs difference in sameness’ (p. 18). In stark contrast to this unifying aesthetic, Lacoue-Labarthe advances a set of implied tasks for contemporary art that resist such dialectical affirmation. This set includes the ideas that high art ‘should be dispensed with’; artists should exhibit a ‘will to detotalization’ by way of fragmentation and experimentation; art should renounce the use of ‘sublime effects’, aiming instead to produce the ‘effectless effect’; the border between ‘art and non-art’ should be challenged; and the artistic process should be ‘self-reflexive’ (pp. 21–22). For example, Lacoue-Labarthe locates ‘detotalization’ in Alban Berg’s *Lulu*, and identifies *Pelléas and Mélisande* as ‘the opera of deconstruction’ (p. 24). Badiou raises 2 questions about this kind of deconstructive checklist of rules for contemporary art. First, is it justified? And, second, does its antithesis pertain to Wagner? To the first question, Badiou—while acknowledging the validity of Lacoue-Labarthe’s diagnosis of contemporary society, characterized by ‘musicolatory’, the production of kitsch, spectacle, technological amplification, and nihilist salvation—offers little comment. He thereby rhetorically permits an ambiguity to accrue to his assessment of contemporary art and music (pp. 2, 23–24). To the second question, Badiou answers in the negative (in later chapters of the book), and thereby permits a fresh investigation into what gestures and events go as detotalizing, deconstructive, self-reflexive, etc., in our times.

In Adorno’s critique of Wagner, Badiou likewise notes a resistance to all modes of totalization and a general suspicion of universalism, which consists in the imposition of ‘the One’ on the many; or, otherwise put, ‘an imposition of identity whereby one thing can apply to everyone, ... reducing everyone to the same insofar as the same is this universal norm’ (p. 31). Adorno thus rejects the Hegelian identity principle that falsely ensures ‘the unity of the Absolute, which sublates all things’ (p. 31). For Adorno, Wagner’s music exemplifies a kind of affirmative dialectics, which ultimately underwrites a universalizing impulse. Instead of being part of the ‘ethical beginning of difference’, Wagner’s art lies in an ‘identitarian closure, a closure he ... brought to the height of its power but which [is] on that account all the more dangerous’ (p. 35). In contrast to Wagner, Adorno advances a mode of dialectics severed from all ‘positive absoluteness’, and wedded to thinking ‘in negations alone’ (p. 29). It is as if difference itself, in Adorno’s lexicon, becomes the ultimate *telos* of negative dialectics. In music, Adorno distinguishes between a ‘configuring music’ and a musical ‘constellation’. The former is music that conscripts its ‘multi-branched system of possible affects’ into an overarching formal ‘unity’, while the latter is ‘a kind of dispersive fragmentation in which the identitarian dominance of form never determines the way the music is either composed or heard’ (p. 37). For Adorno, Wagner is the last great model of music ‘configuring the system of its immanent multiplicity and never allowing it to be dispersed into the figure of constellation’, thereby reducing difference to sameness, foreclosing suffering to false models of redemption, etc. (pp. 37, 39).

As it is with Lacoue-Labarthe’s prescriptions for contemporary art, Adorno advances a set of negative imperatives for contemporary musical production—referred to as ‘*musique informelle*’ or a ‘music of disintegration’ (p. 53). Music on the model of

constellation would permit 'what is truly different' from itself to 'emerge within it' (p. 38). Badiou identifies in such music 3 primary characteristics. First, it is music that disavows the 'unifying processes of form', and thereby allows the appearance of 'real difference or multiplicity' (p. 53). Second, it is music that terminates all occurrence of reconciliation, salvation, and refuses even the appearance of closure or resolution itself, opting instead for 'a suspended gesture' or 'waiting in vain' (p. 53). Third, it is music that resists any process for sublating the immanent negativity it creates, thereby avoiding the affirmative Hegelian model for overcoming difference and contradiction. Once again, Badiou raises questions about the validity (or even the possibility) of such a music ('Can formal transformation itself be absolutely formless?'; 'What kind of form is not really form ...?'; 'What is music's capacity for resolving the system of its own tensions?'; etc.) and whether Wagner in fact fits into such a philosophical framework as its foil (pp. 44, 52, 55). Once again, the first set of questions is, broadly speaking, left unanswered and thereby accrues (by way of rhetorical weight) a paradoxical ambiguity, while the second question is largely answered in the negative (again, in later chapters of *Five lessons*).

Why does Badiou rhetorically raise suspicion about the validity of Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstructive prescriptions for art and music as well as Adorno's system of negative imperatives? Without confronting the limits within the system directly, for example, Badiou writes:

[E]very imperative derived from *Negative Dialectics* is itself a negative imperative; it is not an imperative positively dictating that such and such must be done but rather one that is always determined by what must never happen again, by something whose repetition must be strictly forbidden ... . Any reconciliation with this radical or absolute negativity is inconceivable; any sort of conclusive proposition must therefore be avoided. (p. 51)

Noteworthy in this description is the paradoxically absolutist construal of negative imperatives in conjunction with the total taboo on repetition implicit in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. First, while he does not explicitly cast doubt on Adorno's position here, Badiou does point out an irony of logic in the injunction against repetition elsewhere. For example, Badiou argues that to arrange thoughts and actions 'so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen' is paradoxically to rely on 'the notion of resemblance, of "similarity", hence a form of identity' (p. 42). Adorno's resistance to repetition follows the notion of a non-productive repetition (proposed, amongst others, by Søren Kierkegaard and Sigmund Freud) construed merely as the recurrence of the same. In contrast, Gilles Deleuze and more recently Slavoj Žižek, for example, suggest that the radically new can only emerge through repetition, while routine acts of deconstruction, undecidability, undermining, transgression, negation, etc. may serve more to stabilize than to destabilize the central referent of critique. For critics like Žižek, capitalism itself does not operate on the repetitive principle of production cycles alone; instead, capitalism is inherently creative and operates on the principle of incessant undermining and renewal, cycles of



destruction and production, bust and boom, etc. These cycles of erratic production, in turn, proliferate heterogeneous subjective identities. Similarly, Badiou argues that 'capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities', thereby producing an identitarian flux as against a collective and generic humanity (2003, p. 10). In this context, the operative distinction between non-productive and productive negation hinges less on the distinction between repetition and creation, and more on the relationship of repetition and creation to power. There is, in short, a difference between negations that subscribe to the underlying rules for violating positions within a system, on the one hand, and negations that violate the rules governing positions within a system, on the other. Badiou largely endorses this line of thinking in *Five lessons*, suggesting, at this point of the argument, that repetition should not automatically be construed as dangerously identitarian per se. In short, Adorno's prohibition on repetition is overdrawn.

Second, and once again without addressing Adorno's argument directly, Badiou casts doubt elsewhere on the apparent promise of thoroughgoing critique by negation. For example, against the 'majority opinion' about prescriptions for contemporary art, which entail that 'high art is impossible and should be deconstructed', Badiou offers a 'counter-current', which he locates in the 'high art' of Wagner (p. 82). Pitted 'against the grain of the various accusations targeting Wagner', Badiou prophetically asserts that 'we are on the cusp of a revival of high art and it is here that Wagner should be invoked' (pp. 81–82). The 'greatness' of Wagner's art resides in a kind of 'heroism without heroizing'; a 'high art ... [albeit] uncoupled from totality'; a 'creative project for the future' (p. 83). In other words, Badiou advances a re-valuation today of high art, heroism, future-directed music, etc., against the automatic construal of deconstruction and negation as progressive or productive per se.

It is a curiosity of Badiou's argument in defense of Wagner that he distances himself from the negations of Adorno even as he invokes his own set of negations—Wagner's progressive high art is 'uncoupled' from totality; his heroism is 'without heroizing', etc. Furthermore, as mentioned, Badiou's broader argument largely hinges on inversions, reversals, and negations of what he outlines as the dominant position vis-à-vis Wagner. Here, it is important to note that not all forms of negation are identical. Already in Freud, we find different forms of negation—*verdrängung*, *verleugnung*, *verschiebung*, etc. While these forms follow the Hegelian model in a broad sense, none can be construed as either conceptually similar or having the same practical consequences as any other. In considering Badiou's position, it is important to distinguish between negation as a totalizing all-purpose ethical formula, on the one hand, and the limited negations that are relevant to specific contexts and conjunctures, on the other.

Indeed, in *Theory of the subject* Badiou distinguishes between different *types* of contradiction and reversal in which a 'subject-process' occurs. Using the contrast between Antigone and Aeschylus as an allegorical background, for example, Badiou argues that these embody 2 types of 'reversal' or 'turn around' (*retournement*)—on the one hand, a 'natal reversal', characterized by anxiety, and, on the other, the notion of 'exile', characterized by courage. 'Justice', argues Badiou, 'relativizes the law', while the

‘superego absolutizes it’ (2009, p. 311). Both subject-processes enact modes of negation, but Antigone’s total resistance to, and outright violation of, Creon’s ban on her brother’s burial can only amount to destruction and death, whereas in Aeschylus the reversal permits a new law to emerge; from within the reversal we find ‘the recomposition of a different order’ (2009, p. 133). The problem with destruction, for Badiou, is that it is unsustainable. Violent social outbursts (‘mute and suicidal riots’, etc.) are all too often self-immolating. Destruction fades as soon as it destroys, thereby paradoxically leaving the reigning social order intact (2009, p. 308).

Relatedly, in his book *Metapolitics*, Badiou distinguishes between *destruction* and *subtraction*, the latter characterized by ‘putting the state at a distance through the collective establishment of a measure for its excess’ (2006, p. 158). Far from merely disrupting the state, then, Badiou is concerned with repetition and persistence, or the *continuation* of the disruptive effects of an event, which he sums up in his *Ethics* with the maxim: ‘keep going’ (2003, p. 52). Without taking up the specifics of this particular cluster of related distinctions (natal/exile; anxiety/courage, destruction/subtraction, Antigone/Aeschylus, etc.) in *Theory of the subject* and *Metapolitics*, it is important to note here that Badiou is attentive to the variable political stakes of different modes of reversal and repetition. Badiou does not rule out the productive role of repetition *tout court*, but instead, at various crucial argumentative junctures in his writing, insists on its importance—the value of persistence, a sense of universalism, ethical invariants, etc.

In contrast, Lacoue-Labarthe’s insistence on the ‘effectless effect’, an idea that shares conceptual ground with Adorno’s ‘formless form’, arguably amounts to what Badiou calls a ‘destruction of destruction’, or a termination of the transformative potential of such an effect or form. Badiou calls for transformative protocols that amount to more than the negation of effects and forms (or what Žižek might call an ideologically efficient ‘effect without an effect’ and a ‘form without a form’), but rather the formalization of new effects and forms adequate to our times. In other words, dialectical negation or deconstruction per se is an insufficient response to current political predicaments. In fact, the awareness of the incommensurable as such, including the increasingly ubiquitous and commonplace ‘need for appreciating differences, the respect for otherness, the criminal nature of identitarian disrespect for differences’, etc., can leave the ruling order intact, even functioning as its dissimulatory alibi (2010, p. 32). This is why *Five lessons* demonstrably seeks out the variable modes of reversal and upheaval found in Wagner no less than what persists in the wake of upheaval; in particular, the qualitative character of the ensuing orders was recomposed by those reversals. It is in this respect that Badiou regards Wagner’s work, broadly speaking, as *Aeschylusian* (pp. 115–117).

### Music of Transitions: A Second Wagner

Badiou outlines 6 countervailing arguments against the reasoning of Wagner’s critics. Instead of regarding Wagner as a kind of ‘Hegel of music’, Badiou’s hypothesis is to



seek out a 'second Wagner'—'someone who said something about high art that can be understood in a different way today from how he himself understood it, or in a different way from those who constructed "the case of Wagner" understood it' (pp. 82–83). First, against the charge that Wagner created seductively sensual musical edifices that blend together and dissolve variegations and differences in a deceptive unity, Badiou asserts instead Wagner's 'ascetic resolve' (pp. 57, 84). Badiou makes 2 arguments; the first pertains to musical sound, the second to dramatic action. He makes a simple comparison between Wagner's music and the 'overt sensuality' expressed by many of Wagner's contemporaries, noting especially the hyperbolic erotic charge of Giuseppe Verdi's work (pp. 84–85). Badiou argues that the kind of sensuality expressed by contemporaneous music (ranging from late Mozart to Richard Strauss) is more readily construed as 'something like the multiple murmuring within unity, ... a fragment of the One in which the multiple murmurs', than is the music of Wagner (p. 85). In fact, Badiou argues, Wagner renounces just this kind of sensuality. Of course 'residues' of what Wagner gave up survive in his works, but these often occur at instructive moments in the unfolding plot. For example, the quintet in Act III, scene 4 of *Die Meistersinger* bears witness to Hans Sachs's decision to renounce his authority and pass it on to Walter von Stolzing. The renunciation will proffer a tentative state of peace following a riot scene marked by unrelenting commotion, anarchic disarray, and potential madness (*Wahn*). Despite his love for Eva, Sachs abdicates his artistic authority, and, without slipping into solitude, thereby enables a new kind of relationship between law and love within the community.

Second, against the charge that Wagner indulges identitarian thought (or, musically speaking, that Wagner subordinates intricate rhythmic and melodic details to a seamless whole), Badiou argues that Wagner's melodic lines are, at crucial moments in the plot, refractory, broken, and unpredictable (p. 90). These are not lines 'of identity', but lines 'of transformation' (pp. 62, 87–88). Remaining within the above scene in *Die Meistersinger*, for example, Badiou notes that Sachs's monologue elaborates a kind of decision in the context of great musical fluidity: 'what Sachs goes through here is something that is in no way the unfolding of an identity; rather it is the plasticity of a metamorphosis' (p. 88). Badiou delinks melodic themes in Wagner from their merely indicative role (which would figure *Leitmotifs* as the nineteenth century correlate to eighteenth century topics) (p. 89). Instead, he takes stock of their transformative trajectories, which he links in turn to the overarching affective tone of the music, and thereby also to the subjective development of characters. For Badiou, these innovative musical metamorphoses create dramatic possibilities unforeseen by the dialectics of the plot structures alone. Neither teleological nor necessary, Sachs's decision, itself characterized by 2 modes of negation (abdication of social authority, renunciation of erotic love), is in fact made possible by a kind of musical transformation. Far from the fraudulent musical fluency noted by his critics then, for Badiou, Wagner's music is 'the unpredictable creation of a dramatic possibility that, in terms of the music, could easily go in a completely different direction' (p. 90). In short, what

interests Badiou in Wagner is the way music, through its own internal resources, opens up extra-linguistic perspectives for thinking of social transformation.

Third, against the charge that Wagner's work spectacularizes—putting pain, distress, and heartbreak on radiant display instead of engaging its radical otherness—Badiou describes Wagner's music as a genuine 'music of heartbreak' (p. 91). Instead of simply painting character types or, more complexly perhaps, presenting subjective identity as a 'combinatoire', Badiou locates in Wagner's project a subjective splitting that is irreducible and non-reconcilable. Identity in Wagner's subjects (Tannhäuser, Tristan, Siegmund, Amfortas, Kundry, etc.) is marked by a 'radical split that can be neither dialecticized nor healed' (p. 91). Tannhäuser, for example, is a figure of wandering, ultimately committed to a state of non-resolvable devastation. Following Tannhäuser's pilgrimage to Rome, Badiou writes, 'we are confronted with an absolute present of suffering with no possible remission' (p. 95). Tannhäuser's 'Rome narration' to Wolfram is a 'public expression of the utter devastation caused by irresolvable subjective splitting' (p. 95). Once again, Badiou attributes the distinctively encroaching subjective splitting to the 'pressure' of music itself (p. 96). In other words, the music, instead of Tannhäuser's narrative, is the primary operator giving suffering its presence. Instead of merely dissolving in the endless melodies of 'becoming', Badiou hears in the music fragmented lyricism, broken chords, irreconcilable registral spans, and collapsing thematic phrases (pp. 96–97). Furthermore, for Badiou, the scale of Wagner's project does not of itself spectacularize suffering as much as reinforce the irreducibility of the destructive consequences of the subjective splitting: 'The techniques Wagner used all come together to create this feeling we get of totalized massiveness or of a cracked sonic monument' (p. 97).

Fourth, Badiou argues against the idea that Wagner's musical strategy is to subordinate the differences built up in the music drama to a unified whole. Instead of superimposing resolution or reconciliation on the musical and dramatic details, Wagner explores widely divergent modes of transformation and concomitant possibilities for an ending. Badiou historicizes Wagner's interest in narratives oriented to the future with reference to then-prevalent theories of biological, social, economic, and technological progress. It is important to place Wagner's particular interventions into relief within this general historical background. In a context of ideological ubiquity, or what Roland Barthes would call '*positive* censorship (by repletion)', Badiou estimates Wagner's contribution to theories of transformation more highly than he does those of his contemporaries: 'In Wagner, there is no single, unifying pole towards which the music is somehow oriented as such, but rather an exploration of diverse possibilities' (Badiou, p. 99; Barthes, p. 293). The return of the tonic at the end of *Tristan und Isolde* or *Parsifal*, for example, which apparently resolves the differential *agon* of its respective drama, is, in both cases, too abbreviated and formalistic to be true. These are musical outcomes that could have been otherwise. For Badiou, Wagner's is a music of plural possibility instead of unilinear evolution. The superficial bombast of closure is refracted by an overarching sense of precariousness and hesitation (p. 100). It is important to distinguish hesitation from interruption or 'arbitrary

stopping', which merely appears to elude dialectical resolution by way of random cessation (p. 131).

To demonstrate the point, Badiou outlines various types of endings in Wagner, which he construes as differently articulated (and thus non-definitive) hypotheses for social transition. For example, in *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde's speech following the death of Siegfried announces the 'destruction of the gods', in the wake of which we find the fragile emergence of a generic non-mercantile humanity, gazing out over a catastrophic scene, whose 'non-human elements' have been either destroyed or restored to their natural state (p. 104). For Badiou, the final musical theme of 'redemption through love' is less a sign of sentimental closure than it is an enigmatic 'element hovering about the destruction of [all mythologies]' (pp. 105–106). In contrast, the ending of *Die Meistersinger* dramatizes a synthesis between spontaneity and the law, innovation and tradition, rupture and rule. As it is with institutional politics, the masters' guild is split between conservatives and liberals. It is Walter, wholly outside the institutional apparatus, who ruptures the established forms and ultimately wins the song contest. While reticent about the role of the outcast Beckmesser, most recent commentators appreciate the value of Walter's creativity and originality. It is precisely Walter's 'quest for voice', for example, that opens to the music's progressive dimension (Goehr, 1998). But what kind of progress is imaginable here? Walter's recalcitrance and courage is wholly in sync with the ideological demands of a kind of modern Hollywood hero—the autonomous male figure who bravely subverts a barrage of institutionalized forces pitted against him, singularly driven by love, truth, honor, etc. Is this not the kind of hero that operates precisely within the sanctioned rules for violating positions, rather than actually reconstituting the rules governing positions? Do Walter's anarchic negations not serve thereby as a dissimulatory alibi to the ruling order? Badiou, ever vigilant toward the limits of negation (especially unfettered rupture, sheer innovation, anarchic outburst, etc.), notes that, instead of underwriting shortlived destruction alone, Walter's innovations are ultimately absorbed into a transformed social orbit. Thus, he construes Sachs (not Walter) as the true hero of the music drama. Sachs is the figure of great sacrifice enabling the synthesis between artistic innovation and tradition. This reading is borne out at the end of the drama when Sachs, against odds, finally convinces Walter to become a mastersinger: 'In reality, it is [Sachs] who is the master; through his renunciation he becomes the master. Indeed, the ultimate conclusion of the opera is "Long live our new master Sachs!"' (p. 109). Sachs is able to give up on his own authority, fundamentally altering the rules by which song is henceforth to be socially judged. From these brief sketches, it is clear that instead of simply imposing a false unity, then, Wagner's endings exemplify diverse and provisional responses to the question: What persists in the wake of great social destruction?

Fifth, Badiou argues against the idea that Wagner's theatricalization of the drama ultimately subordinates the music to the text, bestowing thereby a kind of intricate sonic aureole upon what amounts to no more than a coarse and unified dramatic gesture (pp. 60–61, 115). For Badiou, the music's detailed flux and flow does not

merely conspire to enliven the unity of the drama, but opens a diverse sequence of perspectives on the drama. He argues that Wagner's dramas downplay plot elements and emphasize speech sequences, including repetitions of plot events prised through various dramatic characters. For Badiou, speech in Wagner functions as a kind of illuminating babble, oscillating between repetition and invention.

It is because the subject goes on and on about the ins and outs of his situation, about what he is going to do, what he is going to decide, the obstacles he faces, and so on, that he expands, or comes to fill up the stage. (p. 115)

Wagnerian speech thus casts perspectives *on* plot incidents (which are in themselves ornamental); it offers hypotheses and propositions about a situation, and it ultimately expands subjectivity within that situation. By re-telling the story through a variety of points of view, Wagnerian characters effectively theorize modes of encounter between the self and the world.

Badiou illustrates the point with reference, once more, to Sachs's monologue in Act III, scene 4 of *Die Meistersinger* (discussed above), and Wotan's monologue to Brünnhilde in Act II of *Die Walküre*. Wotan's recounting of the whole story from the start does less to structurally advance the plot than to cast a morphing perspective on events hitherto—a philosophical reflection on freedom, law, desire, power, impotence, etc., from a new subjective point of view (pp. 118–120). Despite the fact that repetitions of this sort immobilize the plot to some extent, they also signal how plot events map more fluidly and awkwardly onto the narrative concepts that capture them than it may seem. Recall that Aeschylus's technique of repetition is also associated with persistence in the context of transformation; an ability, against odds, to 'keep going'. It is for this reason that Wagner's techniques of speech recall the progressive dimension of Aeschylus. Wagner, Badiou claims, is the 'real disciple, a peer', of Aeschylus (p. 116).

Sixth, against the charge that the experience of time in Wagner is underwritten by the latent *telos* of dialectical Hegelianism, Badiou argues that Wagner in fact creates new kinds of temporality that cannot readily be assimilated to Hegel (pp. 120–129). As opposed to the developmental time implied by affirmative dialectics, *Tristan und Isolde* marks the 'lengthiest wait in the entire history of art'—a suspended mode of waiting *as such* that fundamentally structures the music drama (p. 120). The already-mentioned tonic chord at the end of *Tristan*, which Adorno interprets as ultimate resolution, is, for Badiou, too brief to disprove the overarching reality of the suspended situation: 'It is a little like a *supplement* to the waiting, rather than its resolution' (p. 121). For Badiou, Wagner is less surreptitiously post-Hegelian than he is pre-Beckettian. Although not as suited to opera as to theater, the waiting we find in *Tristan* foreshadows the bleak, unbearable dereliction of waiting that we find in Beckett's plays. Each of the sequences of waiting in *Tristan* can only be concluded with 'the character's death or loss of consciousness' (p. 122). To figure the waiting as an inmate of the music's redemption through resolution on the tonic (again, a

quasi-mandatory gesture in the context of contemporaneous stylistic saturation) is to miss the kind of dereliction and heartbreak at the heart of waiting.

This Beckettian temporality is but one of the new forms of time we find in Wagner. Badiou discusses a number of other temporalities at work in the music dramas—the time of ‘disparate worlds’, the time of the ‘period of uncertainty’, and the time of ‘tragic paradox’—none of which can be assimilated to Hegelian time. For Badiou, these different times are largely produced by way of musical qualities (p. 123). For example, Act II of *Tannhäuser* is a kind of time of ‘uncertainty’, or ‘in-between time’, marked by Tannhäuser’s journey to the Pope. Musically speaking, Wagner casts a precarious quality on time by introducing ‘thematic uncertainty combined with an effect of dispersion, a scattered orchestral frothiness’ (p. 126). Relatedly, Badiou comments on the time of tragic paradox, detectable as a kind of *agon* between things as they *appear* and things as they *are* in a more extensive and hidden sense. Wagner achieves the sense of an immediate time set against a hidden temporality that secretly (tragically) influences the former by ‘playing off the discourse or the explicit theme, or even the melody at times, against deep, subterranean layers of the music, usually orchestrated in the low register’ (p. 127). For example, toward the end of Hagen’s monologue in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, ‘we hear both the Sword motif associated with Siegfried and the motif of Wotan’s power, but this time around they are entirely submerged in the orchestration that is imposed, so to speak, by the fateful character of Hagen’ (p. 128). Leitmotifs here do less to identify characters with whom they are associated than to express an unsuspected fate that awaits within a different temporal span. This dual temporality may be related to dialectical time, but its outcomes are more wayward, sinister, and erratic than can be managed by a Hegelian model.

To conclude the discussion of Wagner’s innovations, as Badiou understands them, it is necessary to look beyond the 6 arguments-by-inversion, which upend the negative construal of Wagner’s artistic output within a particular critical-historicist paradigm. These arguments play a more strategic than conclusive role in *Five lessons*. By rendering invertible the widespread critique of Wagner, Badiou affords a less secured, and thus more negotiable, figure of Wagner, one that ultimately puts at a distance (or subtracts) the central referents of that critique. In particular, I would like now to consider the question of musical *form*, which is of great interest to Badiou. As Žižek puts it in the Afterword to Badiou’s text: ‘One needs to abstract from historical trivia, to decontextualize the work, to tear it out of the context in which it was originally embedded. There is more truth in *Parsifal*’s formal structure ... than in its original context’ (p. 165). Žižek understands Badiou’s study as an effort to wrest Wagner from an overarching preoccupation with his historical contextualization. Contextualization alone all-too-often traduces a kind of default discourse (or *topos*) that contains Wagner within a zone of aestheticized politics, proto-fascism, etc. Today, ‘after the exhaustion of the critico-historicist and aestheticist paradigms’, in contrast, formal analysis bears witness to another kind of truth in Wagner (p. 165).

The first noteworthy point regarding Badiou's claims about the formal behavior of musical material is its non-signifying potential in the context of transformation. Badiou hereby subscribes to a lengthy philosophical tradition, from Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer to Benjamin Boretz and Carolyn Abbate, by way of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Eduard Hanslick, Ernst Bloch, Gilles Deleuze, Vladimir Jankélévitch, Jean-Luc Nancy, amongst many others, that regards music's inability to represent, depict, refer, conceptualize, symbolize, etc., as both its irreducible condition and its greatest virtue. Nietzsche, for example, with obvious reference to Wagner, subordinates the epistemological status of language against that of music. Concepts in language are 'the separated shell of things; thus they are strictly speaking *abstracta*'; in contrast, music 'gives the innermost kernel which precedes all forms, or the heart of things' (1967, p. 102). For Nietzsche, language is reductive and abstract, while music's becoming is generative and creative. Likewise, for Badiou, the 'very process of formal transformation' in Wagner ultimately reveals an 'inaudible operation, something far more subtle and subterranean, at work within it' (pp. 67–68). Badiou is more interested in the transformative protocols of the music's themes than in the referential narrative meanings they ostensibly proffer.

On the topic of the leitmotif, for example, Badiou creates disinterest in the descriptive function they serve within the narrative, emphasizing instead their permutational trajectories. 'The leitmotif certainly has a theatrical articulation that can be regarded as mythical, or narrative, but it also functions as a non-descriptive, internal musical development, with no dramatic or narrative connotations whatsoever' (p. 20). Badiou highlights this non-signifying aspect in light of comparisons between Wagner and composers associated with purely instrumental music. More than once, for example, Badiou even invokes the compositional approach of Joseph Haydn as the unlikely, yet accurate, analog to that of Wagner. In his opening chapter, for example, Badiou argues that Haydn 'treats little cellular motifs, which are distorted and transformed in his symphonies, producing something that is, strictly speaking, neither a development nor a melody exactly but rather a unique kind of thing' (p. 20). This description of Haydn—positing a kind of emergent entity at the intersection of development and theme—takes its cue from Pierre Boulez's lexicon of compositional techniques concerning the Schoenbergian principle of developing variation. Badiou invokes the Boulezian idea repeatedly in *Five lessons*. In the conclusion to his argument about Wagnerian transformations, Badiou writes: 'In Haydn's music, the systematic use of the plasticity of short cells is in actual fact more important, when all is said and done, than their strictly methodical arrangement' (p. 132). For Badiou, the workings of Wagner's leitmotifs closely resemble Haydn's motivic transformations. He even identifies Wagner as the inventor of a new style; a kind of 'Haydn of Romantic opera' (p. 132). The comparison with Haydn permits Badiou to refocus attention away from Wagnerian narrative, myth, and monumentality, and toward Wagnerian musicality, transformation, and 'microscopic' minutiae (p. 68).

At certain points in his argument, Badiou describes Wagner's leitmotifs in terms of uncertainty and discontinuity—harmonic and diachronic cells or musical modules



'that are actually discontinuous at the cellular level and whose transformative principle structures Wagner's musical discourse' (p. 20). More subtly and pertinently, Badiou, at other points in the argument, detects in the permutational passage of Haydn's musical motifs and Wagner's leitmotifs a unique *nexus* between discontinuity or transformation (with its potential for disintegration and destruction), on the one hand, and continuity or persistence (with its potential for narrative dogmatism), on the other. Badiou thus positions his interpretation of Wagner against both Nietzsche, for whom Wagner was all-too-discontinuous (For Nietzsche, Wagner 'arranged things in such a way that there would be *only* transitions in his music'), and Lacoue-Labarthe, for whom Wagner was all-too-continuous (For Lacoue-Labarthe, Wagner's leitmotifs 'ultimately constitute the mythological dictates in the very fabric of the music'). Eluding the exaggerations of both positions, Wagner's music dramas function as a set of hypotheses that intersect the dichotomies between continuity/discontinuity, stasis/transformation, global/local, persistence/destruction, repetition/difference, etc. (pp. 20, 68, 84). In short, these are studies in the 'nature of transitions' (p. 69).

Badiou's argument about Wagnerian transition does not simply disconcert the overvaluation of Wagnerian continuity and stasis found in Lacoue-Labarthe and Adorno, but advances the idea that Wagner's transformative protocols actually exemplify Adorno's model of formless form better than does most contemporaneous music. In Wagner's music, Badiou argues, 'form resolves or dissolves itself in the process of its own mutation, on the basis of which "*musique informelle*" can be prescribed' (p. 67). Beyond its applicability to Adorno's model, however, Badiou relates the question of formal transitions in music to those found in politics. For Badiou, Wagner's musical innovations open perspectives on the nature of political transformation. In the Afterword to *Five lessons*, Žižek rhetorically asks: 'Was there an artist who questioned more radically the fundamentals of power and domination' (p. 165)? As with Žižek, Badiou emphasizes Wagner's radicalism. Regarding politics, for example, Badiou asks: 'If, in effect, discontinuity is no longer expressed politically in the traditional figure of revolution, how then *is* it expressed' (p. 69)? Broadly speaking, there are 2 approaches to this question when it comes to the case of Wagner. The first emphasizes the dynamism of capitalism, which assimilates rupture and transgression into its fundamentally continuous cycles of production and destruction. This approach, analogous to the idea of the 'end of history', emphasizes discontinuity as mere epiphenomenon. The second approach, favored by Badiou, reverses the emphasis of the first approach, and figures discontinuity concealed behind the 'overwhelming appearance of continuity'—a conceptual reversal that expands Adorno's wholly negative construal of formless form to include a positive moment (p. 69). It is the latter relationship between continuity and discontinuity that Badiou most prominently associates with the 'second Wagner'. This is the Wagner who musically realizes modes of transition, which simultaneously involve the 'passing of powers' from one system of authority to another, without merely submerging 'discontinuity in continuity' (pp. 110, 69). Reading music's formal transformation as the aesthetic analog to political transformation permits Badiou to read in Wagner's music dramas various radical

hypotheses for a social organization to come. In short, 'Wagner still represents a music for the future' (p. 133).

### Music *qua* Music

It is a noteworthy fact that Badiou's philosophical reflections on Wagner's current political relevance should substantially hinge on purely musical analysis. Badiou's discussion of Wagner's transformational protocols (the cellular treatment of motivic permutations, the non-referential subterranean workings of the leitmotifs, the music's multiple temporalities, etc.) itself appears as a leitmotif throughout *Five lessons*. Time and again Badiou claims that the music of its own does the important hermeneutic and affective work in the Wagnerian drama. It is music *qua* music that proffers negations, transitions, and perspectives not readily available within other communicative media. This is an almost Schopenhauerian position, grounded in the idea that, against representation, music forms the closest possible analogy to the reversals, detours, and delays of the Will. For example, Wagner's Aeschylus-like ability to cast multiple perspectives on a story depends fundamentally on musical transformations: 'We are afforded a narration of the story of the world musically structured in such a way that, through its very temporality, it will morph into the subject's deadlock' (pp. 117–118). For Badiou, it is the music's metamorphoses that put forward the different subjective hypotheses in the drama. In Sachs's monologue at the heart of *Die Meistersinger*, for example, 'the decision is made *as the [melodic] transformation is occurring*' (italics in original, p. 88). Musical themes in Wagner are less indicative of character, mood or identity than they are inherently transformative:

It is the transformation that really conveys the subjective metamorphosis, thereby making the decision appear immanently, not in terms of 'I was such and such a way before, but now I am different' but rather in terms of a change from one state to the other in the discourse itself. (p. 89)

Without taking up the specifics of the music analyses themselves, it is worth noting that Badiou figures music as a direct conduit for dramatic agency and change. Instead of supporting the pre-existing text, music creates subjective individuation and dramatic metamorphosis from within its own resources. In the philosopher's words, 'the most important thing to remember is the fact that, in Wagner, *dramatic possibilities are created through the music*' (italics in original, p. 89).

And yet, the musical analyses are also the least convincing aspects of Badiou's argument. Even the descriptions of music are mostly schematic and general, and often derivative. For example, in the aforementioned description of the 'time of the period of uncertainty' Badiou speaks of an 'effect of dispersion' in the music; 'a scattered orchestral frothiness' (pp. 125–126). The dispersion effect clearly recalls the 'dispersive fragmentation' characterizing Adorno's model of constellation (p. 37). But can this musical episode genuinely count as a case of *musique informelle*? Is this the

dispersion of music that makes something of which it knows not what it is or music that allows 'what is truly different ... to emerge within it'; or is it merely configuring an *effect* of such a constellation (p. 38)? How exactly does orchestral 'frothiness' sound? Badiou explains that the listener cannot quite discern the dominant theme in these sections, and that the orchestration, 'instead of coming together in an organic affirmation, tends to stray a bit' (p. 126). Can the 'truly different' emerge when the orchestra tends to 'stray a bit'? While the description may elicit an aspect of the music's general behavior, it strains to capture the precise mode of uncertainty musicalized in these passages. Badiou's example from the Prelude to Act III of *Tannhäuser*, marking Tannhäuser's return from his journey to Rome, is inadequate to the task: Of the music, he writes, 'its rhythm is not ascendant or anything of that sort; it is instead a kind of temporality that is closed up on itself since what is involved is a figure of waiting ...' (p. 126). It is true that the prelude features a hauntingly beautiful panoply of themes by way of orchestral transformations, but Badiou's description of the ambiguity of the music is itself ambiguous and general at best. What is an 'ascendent' rhythm? Or, more accurately, its negation? What is a temporality 'closed up on itself'? How does a temporality that is so ingathered relate to the (opposite?) effect of 'dispersion' (mentioned in the preamble to the example; and which would perhaps more accurately describe the actual music of this prelude)? Furthermore, whether its temporality is open or closed, an extended instrumental section within an operatic setting of itself suggests dramatic 'uncertainty'; an open-ended reflection on events. The question is: What kind of uncertainty is achieved here? And exactly how does the music convey it?

At a general interpretive level, the prelude is in fact programmatically descriptive of Tannhäuser's pilgrimage rather than demonstrably concerned with musical protocols per se. The scene painting recalls then-contemporaneous program music, thematic transformation, and instrumental tone painting (the orchestral works of Hector Berlioz, the symphonic poems of Franz Liszt, etc.) rather than the motivic developmentalism found in Haydn, Ludwig Beethoven, Felix Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann and Johannes Brahms (which Wagner disparagingly labeled 'absolute' music). Wagner's techniques facilitate and encourage the pictorial and narrative associations in sound that absolute music is said to disavow. In fact, one standard argument for the innovations of program music emphasizes the fact that the radical destabilization of established patterns of musical form in the nineteenth century (rondo form, sonata form, minuet and trio, etc.) is precisely made possible by way of extramusical associations, ideas, and images. Liszt's oft-cited principle that 'new wine required new bottles' is frequently invoked to describe the importance for new musical content of new musical forms. From the point of view of formal patterning, it was argued by the representatives of the so-called *Neudeutsche Schule*, absolute music was conservative, overly beholden to tradition. How then does Wagner's leitmotivic technique compare with the traditional developmental techniques associated with absolute music?

Boulez may have detected aspects of Haydn in Wagner's work, but Wagner's recycling of leitmotifs by way of thematic transformation is generally considered less abstract and formal than the reference-free motivicism found in Haydn and others. Boulez's writings on cellular motivic permutations are informed by Arnold Schoenberg's principle of developing variations, a technique not to be equated with thematic transformation. Broadly speaking, thematic transformation involves metamorphoses of a theme whereby the theme retains its basic melodic shape, but undergoes a change in harmony, mode, key, tempo, rhythm, meter, etc. Developing variation, in contrast, involves metamorphoses of musical material in which the smallest details of a theme or motive—including intervals themselves—are continuously modified (Frisch, 1984). The transformations of the latter are in some ways more radical than the former as the very microscopic physiognomy of the motives is constantly altered, possibly even bringing to question the very identity of a motive (considered apart from its local individuation). This is a compositional technique regularly deployed by Haydn and Beethoven, and mastered by the end of the nineteenth century by Brahms. Schoenberg, not surprisingly, identifies Brahms (and not, in this respect, Wagner) as 'the progressive'. Against the dominant interpretive grain, however, Badiou takes up Boulez's Schoenbergian/Brahmsian idea to characterize his own argument as a "microscopic" approach' to Wagner (p. 68). This is not the place to revive the debate between program music and absolute music; nor is it the place to engage the merits of Boulez's countervailing insight regarding the curious affinity between Haydn and Wagner, or even the cellular permutational motivicism at work in Wagner's music dramas. Instead, it is important to note that Badiou's Boulez-derived (contrarian) descriptions of musical behavior in Wagner, at least at the level of simplicity and generality we find in *Five lessons*, do not sufficiently demonstrate how the music is auto-generatively doing the important subjective-conceptual work to which he attributes it.

Relatedly, Badiou's discussion of the time of tragic paradox, marked by a subtle musical antagonism between the local appearance of a plot event and the general reality of the matter (within a more extended time span), lacks the analytic specificity to secure the point about music's ability to impose itself on the drama by its own internal resources. What are the musical referents of this dual temporality? These are mostly left unspecified. Badiou may still be right about the music's subtle polytemporality, but the descriptions of passages giving substance to the point are paltry, and even create the conditions for the undermining of the argument. To argue for a dual temporality on the basis of Wagner's ability to play off the 'explicit' theme/s against 'deep, subterranean layers of the music' requires a more substantial musical analysis than the reference to surface sound qualities. Even these surface references appear all-too-rarely in *Five lessons*. Where they do appear, they are abstract and general. In connection with the time of tragic paradox, for example, Badiou claims the 'subterranean' layers are 'usually orchestrated in the low register' (p. 127). This point is followed with reference to the aforementioned Hagen monologue in Act 1 of *Götterdämmerung*. The question is how is the 'low' orchestration heard by Badiou to be distinguished

from a mere *effect* of something sinister lurking beneath the surface produced by music richly harmonized with low tones (in much the same manner as a Hollywood soundtrack)? Is the tragic paradox of such a temporality achieved by way of the music's own internal resources (such as developing variations in the context of multiple timespans, for example), or simply by way of painting the duality at a local level with ominous bass undertones? And, if a case can be made for the former, why does Wagner double the point by orchestrating the monologue in a way that at once also sonically *signifies* the portentous narrative undertow? Does the musical transformation of itself produce the concealed tragedy to come; or is this merely the sonic mark of music as a secret cipher of something to come?

For Badiou, music's inherently generative transformative protocols—its microscopic unfolding of developing variations, its unique modes of casting multiple perspectives on single events, its ambiguous projection of poly-temporality, etc.—fundamentally undergird his argument that Wagner's project innovatively reflects upon and constructs modes of transition—social transformation, systematic rupture, regime change, and other shifts in power. Music, autonomously unfolding on the terrain of its inherent resources, thereby becomes relevant to aspects of political thought. Recall that, for Badiou, the dramatic possibilities opened by music *qua* music are 'the most important thing to remember' about Wagner. *Musicalized transitions, one might say, transcend the conceptual limits of linguistically mediated transitions.* This is Badiou's piercing insight. However, while the general point about the importance of music *qua* music for Wagner's drama is unobjectionable, the lack of musical precision in the above examples (and elsewhere) creates the conditions for the argument's undermining. If the evident tone painting of the Prelude to Act III of *Tannhäuser* argumentatively can stand for an auto-generated time of uncertainty, or if the sonically marked bass instrumentation in Act 1 of *Götterdämmerung* can stand for an exemplary case of the duality of tragic time, then it is likely that the narrative events play a more decisive role in extending the music's socio-subjective reach than does the music's inherently generative transformational protocols. It must be concluded that the plot analysis in *Five lessons* weighs heavily on the music analysis, even if Badiou's insight is to attempt to show the opposite—how the musical flow substantially weighs upon the content of the unfolding plot.

### The Persistence of Plot: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*

Badiou's stated position notwithstanding, the actual musical argument of *Five lessons* rhetorically gains traction and logically relies on Wagner's *plot* structures. Take the case of *Die Meistersinger*, which Badiou reads as a social/artistic confrontation between 'creative genius, formal rupture, and so forth on the one hand, and rule-bound tradition, on the other' (p. 107). Recall that the true hero of this drama is Sachs, who renounces his authority to facilitate a synthesis between artistic innovation and tradition. Musically speaking, Badiou reads the final chorus praising Sachs in wholly affirmative terms: 'The ultimate conclusion of the opera is "Long

live our new master Sachs!” (p. 109). Sachs abandons his own desires in service of the regeneration of community. His insistence that Walter re-compose his free-form song to align with the dictates of tradition, and thereby to pave the way for Walter’s membership to the guild, enables the sustainable transformation of rules governing art. Badiou contrasts the Sachs-style re-alignment of formal constraints with the excesses of ‘radically new creation, irreducible originality’, or the ‘sheer anarchy of formal rupture’ characterizing contemporary art (p. 108). ‘Art’, claims Badiou, ‘is also historicity; it cannot consist solely in breaking with the past’; it must be grounded in convention to be socially sustainable (p. 108). In sum, *Die Meistersinger* musically engages a ‘dialectic of genius and mastery in the realm of art’ (p. 109). For this reason, Badiou resists reading the ending of *Die Meistersinger* as ‘just a hymn to the glory of Germany’, opting instead to identify it as a constitutive element of a larger philosophical trope (p. 110).

Given the importance, after all, of plot structures for Badiou, how are we to read this interpretation of *Die Meistersinger* when it is actually tethered to musical considerations? How, for example, does the final hymn *musically* engage the dialectic of artistic novelty and convention presented by the drama? To answer this question it is necessary to assess Wagner’s musical renditions of conventional song as against those of innovative song. In other words, precisely what constitutes innovation and, concomitantly, what constitutes tradition in this music? The first point to note about Badiou’s construal of preservation and reversal in *Die Meistersinger* is its evident proximity (if not outright affinity) to Hegel’s affirmative dialectics, which too maintains law-breaking to be a necessary step for historical progress. In her book *The quest for voice*, for example, Lydia Goehr interprets Beckmesser as a figure of unthinking conformity, censoriously circumscribing the art of singing. Beckmesser represents the atrophying forces that short-circuit the progressive tendencies of song. Beckmesser respects the role of craft, inscribed in Fritz Kothner’s *Tabulatur* to establish formal protocols for singing (appropriate prosodical rectitude, ceremonies for singing, etc.). But craft becomes repressive when it loses sight of its limits, which is to say its rules become reified in practice. Like the Lutheran Reform, which valued individual expression over ritualizations, Wagner sought to forge what Goehr calls a ‘gap’ between rule-following and artistic freedom. For Goehr, this gap produces an ‘open-ness’ in society, forging and maintaining a role for natural inspiration, spontaneity, immediacy, love, desire, imagination, and common sense. By preserving this philosophical gap between formed content (or legal structures) and sensuous expression (or individual liberty), we recognize the limits of both, and are thus in a better position to bring both into a productive union; to forge a rejuvenating bond. In short, dialectical thinking opens the horizon of social debate. The struggle for subjective freedom in the context of societal constraint is what Goehr calls a ‘quest for voice’ (1998). Rules can never descriptively exhaust the spirit of music that guides tradition.

How could one support the dialectical interpretation espoused by Badiou and Goehr with musical examples? In the terms set up by *Die Meistersinger*, Walter’s culminating prize song is the sublation of his first 2 attempts (the Trial Song and the Morning



Song), and represents the culmination of genius appropriately guided by craft; an artistic *tour de force* ultimately enabled by Hans Sachs. In contrast, Beckmesser is the figure of blinkered conformity, bookish and pedantic. When the 2 characters encounter one another in an inevitable confrontation, the stakes of their respective authority come immediately to light. Walter's angry outburst toward Beckmesser in a scene from Act 1 incorporates an image of envious winter lying in wait in the thorn bush. This winter, which Wagner describes as *Grimm bewährt* ('authenticated by Grimm'), likely identifies the Grimm brother's notorious anti-semitic folk tale of the Jew in the thorn bush as the source of the allusion. Beckmesser, who is adjudicating Walter's musical efforts here, mercilessly interrupts the singer. For Walter, of course, Beckmesser's fussy chalk scratching is like old winter thinking of ways to stop his joyful singing. Barry Millington makes the musical point that by interrupting the flow of song, Beckmesser misses the fact that the song, while locally aberrant, is an ingenuous extension and harmonic augmentation of the traditional bar form. At the moment of its interruption the form is an ABA *da capo*. This is a Baroque form (already beyond the norms of sixteenth century mastersong and thus no longer in the paradigm of Beckmesserian *Tabulatur*), which has not yet become that of nineteenth century expression (whence it will become a modified Bar Form ABABC). The interruption forecloses this deeper unity toward which Walter was *en route*. This deeper formal unity, revealed only in the prize song as the opera draws to its own close, ultimately exemplifies the appropriate integration of inspiration and form. Translating this to Badiou's terms, one might say that Walter's prize song, made possible by Sachs's sacrifice, enables the musical synthesis between 'creative genius, formal rupture', on the one hand, and 'rule-bound tradition' on the other (p. 107).

But does it? On closer inspection, Walter's prize song is surreptitiously ill-formed. The song does not consist of a series of bar forms; nor do its *Stolle* elaborate musically identical settings of different words as prescribed by Kothner's *Tabulatur*. While its 'musical' superiority over Beckmesser's warbling nonsense is obvious, and may (as Bill Marvin suggests) be captured with reference to its large-scale tonal construction, the song, strictly speaking, violates the rules of mastersong. By deferring to tradition in name alone, the actual music encourages a deafspot that disavows the true dimensions of the formal transgressions underway in the prize song. This is why the euphonious hymn at the end of the drama, heralded by Badiou as the crucial moral gesture in *Die Meistersinger*, also occludes the character of Walter's radical musical transformation. Arguably, the broken formal rules are submerged beneath a seductively triumphalist chorus wholly absorbed by joy for the new love bond. Along with the *Volk*, the audience is invited enthusiastically to laugh the law-abiding pedant off the stage. How is tradition preserved when Walter's voice is, in the final analysis, the voice of sheer inspiration, a conduit for *Vogelweide* Himself? This is the sound of the soulful passionate song, well beyond the sum of its rule-governed parts. As Ludwig Wittgenstein says in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the 'theme in music is not a mixture of tones' (p. 47); it is *musical*. Since being 'musical' is inherently inexpressible in formal

terms, Walter's law-breaking love song is weightlessly ambiguous—a contradiction that transcends its own status as a problem. The clarity of its tonal language hides from the ear its formal incoherence before the law.

Understandably, Carl Dahlhaus is troubled by the highly mediated nature of what goes as inspiration in Walter's singing style; he calls it a 'second immediacy'. Walter's big song is the product of a productive dialectic; an art, in Dahlhaus's words, of 'midwifery'. Hans Sachs meets Walter's dreamsong in midwife-like fashion. That is, Sachs renounces his own desires to deliver the love-child born of an encounter between opposites—inspiration and the rules of craft. But the resulting song is in fact a deformation of those rules, and thus not truly superseding the encounter. Instead, Walter's full-throated escalations bathed in euphonic orchestration risk intoxicating the crowd on the *Festwiese* with empathy and identification. The rousing communal hymn that the *Volk* has been enjoined to sing at the close of the drama bears the marks of violent sensuality; the politics of the 'Invisible Hand'. By disregarding the *Tabulatur* (not in name, but in deed), the rules of the competition have been changed *in medias res*, the goalposts shifted, the agendas submerged. Romantic ideas such as 'inspiration', 'dreams', 'madness', 'musicality' and 'common sense' become surrogate concept-metaphors to supplement the conceptual lacuna. The problem is these concept-metaphors are more rule-governed than they seem, easily freighted all manner of unacknowledged prejudices, groundless aversions, etc. They carry more meaning than their 'open-ness' implies; they are already materially conceived before they can perform their transformative work. After all, Sachs's sacrifice is also a mode of repression, which entails malevolently and secretively setting up Beckmesser for humiliation on the *Festwiese*. Likewise, there are hidden musical rules at play in Walter's inspired virile transgressions, rules that are unacknowledged precisely by being taken for granted, by sounding so sensuously 'natural'.

The problem is compounded by the fact that Walter is not the only singer to break sanctioned laws of music in *Die Meistersinger*. The mastersingers themselves tend to break their own laws, none more spectacularly than Beckmesser himself in his prize-losing song. The scrambled distortions in Beckmesser's song are so radical that they come across as linguistic detritus, a babbling sequence of almost incoherent nonsense: Walter's 'Morgenlich leuchtend im rosigen Schein' (Shining in the rosy morning light) becomes Beckmesser's 'Morgen ich leuchte im rosigem Schein' (Tomorrow I shine in rosy light); 'von Blüt und Duft/geschwellt die Luft' ('The air filled with blossom and scent') becomes 'Voll Blut und Duft/geht schnell die Luft' (Full of blood and fragrance, the air moves quickly); 'ein Garten lud mich ein' (a garden invited me) becomes 'Im Garten lud ich ein/garstig und fein' (In the garden I invited, loathsome and fine); etc. The deformations in Beckmesser's text mount relentlessly as the song unfolds. It is as if Beckmesser has rendered Walter's love song through the filter of partial attention that characterizes the amateurish mnemonics of easy musical listening.

Ironically, in the fight scene marking Sachs's moment of renunciation, Beckmesser presents the only song ('Den Tag seh ich erscheinen') in the drama to actually conform

to all of Kothner's rules. However, Beckmesser's absurd dysfunctional serenade in Act II, replete with artificial neo-Baroquisms, strings of meandering melodic leaps of a fourth, and monosyllabic 16th-note warbling on arbitrary accents and words sounds like an absurd parody. This is the parodic acoustic mark of traditional eighteenth century harmonic movement (Handel in a hall of acoustic mirrors?), severed from the contours of true melodic voicing. Outmoded and outrageous, Beckmesser's shoddy nocturne is an absurdly hyperbolic vehicle for expressing sexual desire. And yet, Beckmesser's serenade seems to disrupt the norms of song more radically than any of Walter's songs do, even if, literally speaking, it conforms to the rules. It is as if, by extravagantly following these rules to the letter, the song transforms into a radical deconstruction of those rules. In other words, the literalism marks an absurd limit, easily lapsing into its wholly intimate opposite. This is the eccentric transgression of unthinking pedantry.

Beckmesser's song on the *Festwiese*, however, does not follow the rules of the *Tabulatur*. Instead, it manages to conjure the unpredictability of Dadaism and the weird word arrangements of surrealism, automatic writing and Russian futurism. Like a string of Khlebnikovian nonsense poetry—abstracted pronunciation without meaning—Beckmesser's scrambled signals elicit striking images from fantastic dream scenes: The description of Eva, 'mit Augen Winkend, die Hand wies blinkend' [with winking eye, signaled with her hand], for example, becomes, in Beckmesser's version, 'die Augen zwinkend, der Hund blies winkend' [the eyes twinkling, the dog's howl waving]. Even the accompanying lute-music, paltry and pathetic against Walter's richly orchestrated prize song, presages the artificially malfunctioning neo-Baroque music of the 1920s, which fractured the external aspects of eighteenth century musical practice (the common practice) into eccentric new mannerisms (early Paul Hindemith, Serge Prokofiev, Eric Satie, Igor Stravinsky in his neo-classical period, etc.). Viewed as a mode of caricature we today call camp or queer, Beckmesser's final song may be akin to these experimental displacements of historical materials from their solid position.

The radical innovations implicit in Beckmesser's perverted word-brew (beyond dialectical oscillations, radically peculiar, un-sublatable, genuinely different, etc.) does not register in Badiou's reading of *Die Meistersinger*. Instead, Badiou simply construes Beckmesser as 'the typical reactionary' (p. 109). At first glance, this seems unobjectionable, but how is it that Beckmesser, the reactionary town clerk officially in charge of preserving the laws and traditions of the art of mastersong, manages to display such fantastic ineptitude? And how is it that the vehicle for displaying the conservatism of scrupulously academic musicianship in fact involves the anarchy of total cacophonous rupture? Wagner sets up Beckmesser as an object of ridicule and contempt by way of song littered with flagrant transgressions, errors and failures, unmistakable even to the untrained ear. The town clerk barely follows even the simplest rules of diction and grammar. He also spectacularly violates considerations of meter, forces his rhymes, over-embellishes his melismas, etc. In other words, rule-breaking serves paradoxically to caricature the pedantry of rule-following. For this contradiction to remain concealed, our attention must shift from the actual

processes of music-making to the indicative markers of the music's meaning. Beckmesser's ridiculous outburst can do no more than musically *stand in for*, or signify, the excesses of pedantry. Far from genuinely engaging the transformational protocols of harmony, form, and counterpoint at their limit then, Wagner's critique of compositional tradition (sublimated in the figure of Beckmesser) dissimulates its object by simply destroying them.

Two points need to be made here. First, the contradiction that underlies the figure of Beckmesser (conservative pedant indicated by radical sonic rupture) gives life to the musicological critique of Wagner's ability to mobilize historical codes for anti-semitic purposes. Barry Millington, for example, associates Beckmesser's technical flaws with a then-imagined Jewish cantorial style, described by Wagner in *Das Judentum in der Musik*. These include the wailing melismata (which could also be described as the outer shells of lost Baroque figurations, replete with single syllables strung out on endless chains of 16th-notes), the disjointed and frequent disruption of the rhythmic flow, the pauses on the final notes of phrases, and the antiphonal response of the lute (as if in a call-and-response with a congregation). Most prominently, Millington (in a point made by Marc Weiner as well) identifies the high lying tessitura of Beckmesser's bass voice as one forced out of its natural register and into falsetto. The voice is thus doomed to fail to render the musical notation felicitously. Beckmesser's voice is the false voice. It is the unidiomatic, distorted, thin, high, nasal, artificial voice, out of kilter with its natural register and resonance—in short, the acoustic sign of Wagner's characteristic outsider Jew. The point is that, by *signifying* so overtly, the ear is diverted from the task of assessing the transformational protocols of the competing musical models the drama sets out to contrast and examine. Furthermore, anti-semitism notwithstanding, the very act of associating Beckmesser with technical deficiencies throughout the drama calls to question his credibility as a technical master in any plausible sense, and thereby curiously naturalizes Beckmesser's over-the-top transgressions in the final act.

Second, the central dialectical *agon* between law-governed tradition and creative innovation really functions as a *front* for what in fact amounts to a contest between 2 types of law-breaking. To sum it up: We might expect transgressive law-breaking from Walter, who, for Badiou is the figure of unfettered 'creative genius, formal rupture and so forth' (p. 108). We no longer expect transgression of this sort when innovation has been tempered by tradition to effect a new musical synthesis. However, Walter's prize song, ostensibly incorporating the rules of the *Tabulatur* into a synthesis, is also, technically speaking, flagrantly in error. We least expect such transgression from the conservative master of musical technique. Yet again, Beckmesser's law-breaking is radical, literal, and overt. In short, in *Die Meistersinger* we have nothing but law-breaking at hand. The question is: What *kinds* of transgression signal innovation, on the one hand, and tradition, on the other? The horizon of possibility apparently opened up by innovation is thus more circumscribed than it appears. We can now speak of an appropriate form of law-breaking and an inappropriate one. The appropriate form seems to be guided by another kind of law. Like an open secret,

this law is palpable but ephemeral; mandatory but silent; a moving target. Far from actually reconstituting the rules governing hegemonic positions, the reconciliation between tradition and innovation in *Die Meistersinger* is finally achieved by way of sanctioned, but unspoken, rules for violating positions. In other words, while seemingly involving a radical pass through illusion, madness and the radically unexpected ('Wahn'), the dialectics of law-breaking in *Die Meistersinger* gain traction on a hidden dogmatism, a curiously normative transgression. At best, under this reading, *Die Meistersinger* elaborates the ethics of hegemonic innovation. At worst, the music drama endorses the secret politics of power mobilizing sensuous signification as an alibi for music's immanent transformational protocols.

### Conclusion: A Second Wagner Criticism?

*Five lessons* offers a revision of the widespread critical description of Wagner primarily by raising to prominence the *musical* aspects of the composer's output. By upending the traditional critical view by way of a detailed argument-by-inversion, Badiou sets adrift the contemporary coordinates of Wagner interpretation, and then draws renewed attention to the music's transformational protocols. By considering the formal character of Wagnerian permutations, Badiou casts perspectives on the divergent dialectics of discontinuity/continuity unfolded in Wagner's music dramas. The different scenarios presented by the various endings in the music dramas articulate with social life less by way of plot considerations than by way of musical hypotheses for social transition. Instead of analyzing narrative alone, Badiou thus concentrates on modalities of leitmotivic transformation, paradoxes of multi-temporality, Aeschylusian developing variations, etc. In short, for Badiou, the purely musicalized transitions proffer vectors for transformation beyond the conceptual scope of plot meanings alone. Herein lies Badiou's theoretical sophistication and innovation. However, the effort to place argumentative weight on musical operations is undermined by Badiou's failure to fully qualify how they function. In short, *naming* musical transformations simulates any *actual* musical transformations. This is not to say musical transformations are secondary in Wagner, but by unwittingly construing music as a signifying medium at argumentatively crucial junctures, Badiou's reasoning creates the conditions for its own undermining. This returns to the plot structures more importance than is acknowledged by Badiou. However, when plot analysis is in fact tethered to musical considerations, a more equivocal case of Wagner (than maintained by Badiou) seems to persist. *Five lessons* may thereby betray a weakness of content rather than method. The question is: Does Badiou's approach in *Five lessons* show the way for a 'second Wagner' criticism to come?

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