

Anastasia Siopsi

**INFLUENCES OF ANCIENT GREEK SPIRIT ON MUSIC
ROMANTICISM AS EXEMPLIFIES IN RICHARD
WAGNER'S *GESAMTKUNSTWERK*¹**

Abstract: The romantics' ideal of the arts' collaboration (*Mischgedichte*) finds its most substantial equivalent in Richard Wagner's (1813–1883) "total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). This theory for the restoration of the 'lost' unity of arts was elaborated in many theoretical essays of Wagner and 'applied' in his music dramas. Unity of arts, as well as unity of arts with nature, existed according to Wagner in Ancient Greece while drama was the epitome of all expressive elements of nature. This "new art of the future", which Wagner envisaged, would restore the 'wholeness' of ancient Greek drama. It is the purpose, therefore, of this study to analyze mainly from an aesthetic point of view the influences of ancient Greek spirit on romantic thought, by focusing on Wagner's work.

Key-words: Richard Wagner, "Total work of art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), ancient Greek drama, music romanticism, unity, myth, organic growth (*Werden*).

Arts' union: a brief historic account

Since Ancient Greece, all arts have shared one common principle: numbers. Though the raw materials were different, the laws of harmonic proportions were generally accepted as a basic and unifying bond. Counting, measuring and numbering were the criteria used to judge all the arts.

This situation changed profoundly with the re-evaluation of human senses. Around 1750, Alexander Baumgarten first used the term *Aesthetica* as the title of his most influential work, derived from the Greek word *aisthenomei* which means to perceive sensually, thus becoming the forerunner of the philosophical discipline of aesthetics. For the first time, he posed equal rights and dignity between empirical-sensual knowledge, at the time considered inferior, and ratio-logical knowledge, leading consequently to a hierarchy in the arts (now significantly termed fine arts).

¹ This essay is a revised version of an announcement with a homonymous title (Greek), in a conference entitled *The influence of the Olympic spirit in human progress*, Thessaloniki, Greece, 5–7 December 2003; the paper was published in the conference's annuals (Anastasia Siopsi, "Influences of ancient Greek spirit on music romanticism as exemplified in Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*" (Greek), in *The influence of the Olympic spirit in human progress*, conference's annuals, Thessaloniki, April 2004, 59–64).

Sensual pleasure –a less and less important feature beginning with Greek and medieval music theory, though Aristotle and his student Aristoxenos did accent this aspect more than the influential mathematical theory of Pythagoras –now led to a ranking of arts and gave rise to a more or less openly hedonistic consideration of artistic effects.

Philosophies of art, like Friedrich Hegel's (G.W.F.Hegel, 1770–1831) and Arthur Schopenhauer's (Arthur Schopenhauer, 1788–1860) constructed a complex hierarchy of the fine arts and excluded or devalued disciplines like ballet. Deciding factors in this context were the different capacities of each discipline to convey a so-called spirit through a specific sensual reception. Music was considered at the top, but architecture lost importance and was lowered.

The notion of the “spirit”, for the romantics, was identified with “truth”, with “essence” or the “inner world”. The arts, subsequently, had to be “pure” and “absolute” to be artistic in the aesthetic sense of the word. All these, as they believed, were expressed in the most appropriate manner through music.

The perception of art's effectiveness through the senses dominated nineteenth century. Arts had to be created “naturally” and not “artificially”; in other words, they had to direct themselves towards their identification with nature. Music, in such a perception, supersedes her “artificiality” and becomes a “language of soul” (end of 18th century). It is understood, therefore, as a language of feelings.

The route towards separation of arts depended upon the various degrees of their abilities to produce results which could arouse the senses; also with the fact that artists were becoming ‘specialists’ in a certain field of creation.

The idea of the “union of arts” is reflected on the romantic term *Mischgedichte*, which refers to the collaboration of the arts. In an opera, the arts participate through an “organic” union, which strengthens music's role as stated above, that is, its articulation of feelings in a “natural” manner. The ideal union of the arts, according to these romantic views, is ideally substantiated in Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

“Nature/human nature” and ancient Greek art

For Wagner, ancient Greek art, which was based on myth, was an ideal example of art since, as he believed, it had an immediate contact with nature. In ancient Greek mythology, according to his views expressed in a letter to Liszt on 20 November 1851,

...Social relations were drawn in lines as simple, plastic and distinct as [he] had earlier recognized them in the human shape itself.

Also, as he observes two years earlier, in his essay *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (1849),

...with the Greeks the perfect work of art, the Drama, was the abstract and epitome of all that was expressible in the Grecian nature. It was the nation itself –in intimate connection with its own history– that stood mirrored in its art-work, that communed with itself and, within the span of a few hours, feasted its eyes with its own noblest essence.²

In another less known essay of his of the same period (*“Kunst und Klima”* (1849)), he expresses his belief that

...the Greek, proceeding from the bosom of Nature, attained to Art when he had made himself independent of the immediate influence of Nature: *w e*, violently debarred from Nature, and proceeding from the drillground of a heaven-rid and juristic Civilization, shall first reach Art when we completely turn our backs on such a civilization and once more cast ourselves, with conscious bent, into the arms of Nature.³

Thus, for Wagner, the union with nature as humanity’s final goal, can be realized when humanity’s materialism and antagonism will be replaced by an interest in an aesthetically renewed mythology which will introduce man once again to archaic experiences.

His essay *Die Kunst und die Revolution* was the first one in a series of revolutionary and polemic theoretical works, which Wagner wrote, inspired by Dresden’s uprising, in 1848. In these studies, the artist defends the idea that art has to distance itself from the aims of capitalism and from materialism. The new “art of the future”, according to Wagner, would restore the perfection of ancient Greek drama by re-uniting all kinds of art in a music drama (the most perfect of artworks, as he believed). In his next two essays, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1849–50) and *Oper und Drama* (1851), these ideas were further developed. Wagner comprehends the Greek word “mousiki”, as embodying the three purely human artistic genres in their original unity, that is, *dance, music and poetry*. The new genre of art which he envisions, namely *Gesamtkunstwerk*, combines those three genres by taking into account the particularities of each art so that the union of them in a “total work of art” would be based upon the “highest” form of expression of each of them. At the same time, architecture, sculpture and painting would regain their authentic classical value.

At the period that Wagner writes these essays, he has already read at least Aeschylus, Aristophanes and Plato (all in German translations). I say “at least” because in his library in Dresden, (which Wagner left behind when he fled the city in 1849) were found translations of other Ancient Greek

² *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, ed. and eng. tr. W.A. Ellis, 8 vols, (London, 1892–9), vol. I (*Art and Revolution*), 21–65:52.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. I (*Art and Climate*), 249–265: 258–9.

books by Euripides, Herodotus, Homer, Pindar, Sophocles, Thucydides and so forth.

Wagner's reading of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, in particular, made an impression on him and influenced decisively, as he himself admits, his ideas on the importance of drama and, especially, theatre.

Also, we know, especially through Cosima's Diaries, that Wagner tried to imitate ancient style of writing, in drafts which he wrote for the following unfinished projects:

- Alexander, 1849, in three acts, first drafts (information concerning the projected Alexander comes from Cosima's Diaries),
- Achilles, 1849–50, a few first drafts (a few preliminary notes have survived), and
- comedy in the antique manner, 1870, indebted to Aristophanes' *Frogs*, drafts. It is worthy mentioning that Wagner admired Aristophanes very much.⁴

From 1847 until his death, in 1883, the Greeks were to be of undiminished importance for Wagner. Wagner's characteristic "belief", expressed in his essay entitled *Kunst und die Revolution*, is as follows:

If we reflect even for a moment on present-day art, we are bound to be struck at each step we take by its links with *Greek Art*. Indeed, our modern art is but a link in the chain that binds the whole of Europe together in a single artistic development, a development which begins with the Greeks.⁵

I should mention, however, that Wagner's such approach towards Ancient Greece was romantic, since it was conditioned by historicism; in other words, returning to the Greeks was characterized by a constant awareness of their historical remoteness, or else, a sense of historical distance. Such an attitude becomes clear in a later essay of Wagner entitled *Was ist Deutsch?* (1865), where we read,

Through the most intimate understanding of antiquity the German spirit has acquired the ability to imitate the purely human in all its original freedom, which it does, not by using classical forms to depict a particular subject, but by using the classical view of the world to produce the new and necessary form.⁶

⁴ See, especially, *Cosima Wagner: Die Tagebücher 1869–1883*, 2 vols, ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack (Munich, 1976–7).

⁵ Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen, Volks-Ausgabe*, 16 vols, (Leipzig, n.d.), vol. III (*Die Kunst und die Revolution*), 8–41:9.

⁶ *Ibid*, vol. X (*Was ist Deutsch?*), 36–53: 41.

***Myth as an expression of archetypal ideas, exemplified
in Ancient Greece:***

Historicism is an attitude present in the romantics' thought, like Friedrich Schlegel's (1772–1829), since the end of eighteenth century. Schlegel, having ancient Greece as his focus of interest, developed his ideas about his contemporary art. In his essay entitled *Gespräch über die Poesie* (1800), he stated the problem of modern poetry as follows:

I will speak directly about the problem which bothers me. Our poetry has not an intermediate point of reference as mythology was for ancient Greeks.

The works of literature of his contemporaries were not considered by Schlegel as equal to those of classical antiquity for the following reason:

We do not have a mythology. However, I can say in addition that we must seriously cooperate with each other in order to create such an one.

In different eras Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843) and Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) expressed through their poetry their lament for the lost mythology.

By reflecting towards the direction of creating a “new mythology”, Friedrich Schlegel invented and contextualized in his texts the notions of *Organismus* and *organisch*. The context of these notions is dualistic. The one side refers to that perfect “organism” which recreates mythology and poetry of ancient Greeks. The parts are inseparable with each other creating thus one “whole”. The artist, however, who wants to articulate “new mythology” has to rebuilt the given material in order to create something new. The work of art, in this way, becomes organic, but the organism that is within its form has a different structure and formation of material than that of ancient poetry. It is, in a way, unfinished, or incomplete.

In new, modern art, according to Schlegel, the dialectical system which is being developed contains insoluble oppositions. The criteria for the expression of truth, according to Schlegel, have to do with the way that a system expresses an organic unity and an unfinished whole. Every work has to be developed towards the unfinished whole through the introduction of extremely opposed elements which, due to the deepest unifying power of the work of art, create one whole.

According to the above, new poetry, or new mythology, is constructed upon a system which includes two types of unities: “homogeneity” and “multiplicity”.

Wagner, in his theoretical writings, perceives the unity of a work of art in the same way. The authentic work of art, according to him, that is, the music drama, is in a state between “organic being” (*Sein*) and “organic becoming” (*Werden*). The organic work of art, therefore, has a unifying form which functions through its content; such a function takes place by

means of the work's development in relation to the so-called "melodic moments" which are directed by the poetic intent of a music drama. So, there is an internal and organic development towards the "whole".

According to the points I presented so far, the vision of the reunion of man and nature (or else, the regaining of the lost unity of nature) is responsible for the exploration of ways for achieving an essential unity in Wagner's music drama: on the one hand, every art has to have an internal unity (that is, a unity with itself), on the other, it should be united with the other arts which participate in a music drama. Essential unity is achieved through successive moments in a music drama, which are related to each other and produce thus the effect of continuation. In this respect, motifs, through their repetition, connect a moment with its previous, as well as the next one, according to the principle of "organic growth" (*Werden*).

The fact that Wagner is seeking for such a dialectical correspondence between the arts in a music-drama is evident in the multiple kinds of hierarchy which are developed in his theory of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In this theory, Wagner perceives a music-drama, as well as its communication with the audience as being in a process of "organic growth". One characteristic argument, referring to the above concept, written in *Oper und Drama* (1851), runs as follows:

...By leading forth his Artwork in continuous organic growth, and making ourselves organic helpers in that growth, the poet frees his creation from all traces of his handwork...The Drama, alone, is the artwork that so addresses itself in Space and Time to our eye and ear, that we take an active share in its becoming, and therefore can grasp the [having] *Become [das Gewordene]* as a necessity, as a thing which our Feeling clearly understands.⁷

Wagner believes in the value of mythological symbols to the extent that the artist succeeds in discovering their deeply hidden truth. Because, as he argues, the incomparable thing about myth is that it is true for all time, and its content, however compressed, is inexhaustible throughout the ages. (*Religion und Art* (1880), SSD, IV, 64). Wagner intended to explore this timeless quality of Myth in order to restore the lost unity of nature. Through art, at a certain distant point in the future, humanity should be able to return to its "fundamental origin" (*Ursprung*). Moreover, it should be my means of myth that art will succeed in proposing a restoration of the lost harmony and unity of nature and society, something already realized in ancient Greece's civilization.

⁷ Richard Wagner's *Prose Works*, vol. II (*Opera and Drama*): 337.

Music drama and Ancient Greece

So, Wagner's art is based on myth as a means which expresses archetypal ideas. The notion of "nature", expressed through myth, is symbolically juxtaposed to the constricting laws of society of that era. This idea is a central one in the Tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1848–1874).

A characteristic example of art as depicting nature is the beginning of *Das Rheingold*, the first part of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, which takes place on the Bed of the Rhine. Stage instructions are as follows:

Greenish twilight, brighter towards the top, darker below. The upper part of the stage is filled with swirling waters that flow restlessly from right to left. Towards the bottom, the waters resolve into an increasingly fine damp mist, so that a space of man's height from the ground seems to be completely free of the water, which courses like a train of clouds over a dusky bed...⁸

The E flat arpeggio of music, respectively, depicts nature's absolute balance.⁹

I should mention that, in general, ancient Greece is not "embodied" directly to music dramas which, without exception, take place in medieval settings or adapt medieval themes. However, the medieval aspect seems to be present only in the characters, their costumes, and the plot structures; whereas the classical material is buried within the drama's deep structure, or else, its mythic construction. Wagner uses ancient Greek myth as an ever-present interpretive model both in drawing comparisons and in interpreting even the most everyday things. Within this perspective, we can observe similarities between characters of ancient Greek mythology and those of music dramas. I mention briefly the juxtapositions between the following characters:

– Odysseus and the Flying Dutchman (*Der fliegende Holländer*, 1841), the sense of longing which is even more intense and enriched in content in *Tannhäuser* (1845),

– Zeus and Wotan (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*),

– relation of Zeus with Hera and Wotan with Fricka (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*),

– Achilles and Siegfried (they are similarly vulnerable in only a single spot, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*),

⁸ Richard Wagner "The Ring of the Nibelung", End. Tr.. Andrew Porter, (London, 1976): 3.

⁹ At the end of the Tetralogy, on the contrary, "a red glow breaks out with increasing brightness" (*ibid.*: 328). Green is a supplementary color to red; thus, by being at the two 'edges' of the range of colors, they articulate by means of color the beginning and the end of the Tetralogy which is focused on the juxtaposition of two opposite notions: of "nature" and of "civilization".

- Goddess Gaea, the mother of Prometheus and Erda (*Der Ring des Nibelungen*),
- Prometheus and Amfortas (they both suffer from a wound that keeps on reopening, and are unable to die, *Parsifal*, 1882)
- Heracles and Parsifal (Heracles finally releases Prometheus as Parsifal releases Amfortas, *Parsifal*, 1882) and so forth.

The influence of Aeschylus is apparent in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. We can go as far as to claim that this tetralogy can be seen as a re-working of the *Oresteia*. The Aeschylean influence is both thematic, in the construction of a mythic world where gods and men interrelate, and also structural: The Ring has the form of a trilogy with prologue (*Das Rheingold*). Therefore, it corresponds to the (Athenian) Greek tetralogy of four dramas (generally related in content and comprising either three tragedies and a satyr play or four tragedies), written by a single poet for the tragedy competition held in Athens on the occasion of the Greater Dionysia and performed, in succession, in the course of a single day. The classical model that Wagner knew was the *Oresteia*, the only dramatic trilogy to have survived complete and one of the most frequently read works in the composer's library.

Other general characteristics which relate Wagner's music drama with ancient tragedy is the epic element and structure, the large-scale epic narrations, the involvements and relations between gods and mortals and, finally, the raising of symbolism of a drama, dealing with individual characters, to the level of a universal poem understood in Aeschylus' sense.

Orchestra, for Wagner, should play an important role in a music drama. As he argues, at crucial moment of the plot, orchestra plays the role of a chorus in ancient tragedies. That is, it plays the role of a commentator and, also, an interpreter of the deeper symbolism of the plot, replacing thus chorus's dramatic personae. Wagner himself has expressed such intention, that is, the function of the classical chorus to pass to the orchestra. In this way, as he states in the *Drama of the Future*,

...the *orchestra*...plays an uninterrupted and, from every point of view, a leading and elucidatory role in the overall impression that the performer conveys both to the ear and to the eye; it is the teeming womb of music from which the unifying bond of expression grows. – *The chorus of Greek tragedy* has bequeathed to the *modern orchestra* the significance that is felt as being necessary to the drama, for only in the orchestra can it be developed free from all constraint, and achieve so immeasurably varied an expression.¹⁰

As an example, I should mention Siegfried's "Funeral March", from *The Twilight of Gods*. Here, orchestra "narrates" Siegfried's life. Wagner's

¹⁰ SSD IV, 190–191.

own remarks about the *Trauermusik* of September 29, 1871, quoted in Cosima's *Diaries* are as follows:

I have composed a Greek chorus...but a chorus which will be sung, so to speak, by the orchestra, after Siegfried's death, while the scene is being changed, the Siegmund theme will be played, as if the chorus were saying: "This was his father"; then the sword motive; and finally his own theme...¹¹

Apart from music, dramatic characters and the plot, stage instructions by Wagner himself have also references to ancient Greece. A characteristic example is the use of cycle, as an archetypal symbol, on stage. The cycle of dance, in Aeschylus language, is related to the spatial scenery of Athens; also, as an archetypal symbol, it refers to the earth's shape, in which the heroes of mythology and mortal men play their parts. Similar ideas are depicted in Wagner's music dramas in which this symbol is used quite often. In the Tetralogy, for example, the ring, as a cycle, symbolizes, first of all, the unending life. The Rhine's daughters are swimming in cycles when they appear on stage. Teams of people gather on stage in cyclic shapes, as for example,

– Brunnhilde's sisters, the eight Valkyries, in order to warn Brunnhilde that her life is in danger because of Wotan (*Die Walküre*),

– the cycle of the audience who surround Siegfried in order to listen to his narration of life (*Götterdämmerung*),

– also, the cycle of the Knights (round table) (*Parsifal*), and so forth.

Finally, elements of nature, like the cycle of fire which surrounds Brunnhilde in order to protect her, create such references to the archetypal symbolism of a cycle.

Festival Theatre (Festspielhaus) of Bayreuth

Apart from a music drama, whose various elements and plot refer to ideas and approaches of art, as well as of the whole civilization, of ancient Greece, the Bayreuth theatre, as a building itself, creates similar references.

The Festival Theatre in Bayreuth, was built in 1872–1876. It has a seating arrangement of an amphitheater which allows each member of the audience to have a similar view of the stage as the others. The audience, therefore, was not to be divided up according to social class, but would sit together in democratic equality, as in a classical *theatron*, confronted by the events on stage and controlled by them. This has to do with Wagner's belief that art should be reestablished as a "public art" and, thus, exist in the public consciousness (not only in the individual consciousness), as was the case of the Greeks.¹²

¹¹ CD, I, 417–8.

¹² See *Kunst und die Revolution*, SSD III, 28.

Also, the orchestra is “sunk” in a lower level so that the spectator should be able to have an immediate view of the stage. Wagner himself named the position of the “invisible” orchestra between performers and the audience as *mystic abyss* (*mystischer Abgrund*).

As Wagner states, this “mystic abyss” would enable the spectator to experience “the clarity of real proximity”, a clarity “leading to another illusion, ensuring that the characters on stage appear to be magnified and superhuman in size” as in the classical theatre.¹³

Epilogue

In conclusion, romantics’ ideal medium of communication, that is, feeling, which presupposes immediacy in communication, is the one that is embodied in Richard Wagner’s theory and practice. In his quest of the ideal, the artist discovers and studies thoroughly the theories and art of ancient Greece. In ancient Greece, as he believed, one could find a thorough, complete and, at the same time, immediate communication, between society and nature, ancient drama and society and, finally, ancient drama and the audience. Ancient Greece is re-interpreted and re-structured at all these levels in theory and the music dramas of Wagner. At the same time, however, this critical approach towards ancient Greek civilization takes place through the looking glass of his contemporary romantic ideas and of historicism; for Wagner, Greek antiquity is not a model to be copied but a challenge to explore and to recreate anew and to do so, moreover, in full consciousness of the historical distance involved.

¹³ *The Stage Festival Theater in Bayreuth (1873)*, SSD IX, 336–338. It is worthy mentioning that Wagner becomes increasingly interested in interpretation by means of performance as this aspect of art-work which expresses “immediacy”, that is, “truth”. Also, Wagner attempts to apply the notion of “immediacy” as something which expresses temporality, at the building of the theatre itself: in 1872, in the speech which he delivered at the ceremony in Bayreuth, Wagner recalled as models for his own theatre these festival halls “with wooden structures” which were “knocked together in German towns for gathering of singers and the like, and pulled down again as soon as the festival [was] over”. (PW, V, 324).

Anastasiacija Siopsi

УТИЦАЈИ АНТИЧКОГ ГРЧКОГ ДУХА НА МУЗИКУ
РОМАНТИЗМА НА ПРИМЕРУ ВАГНЕРОВОГ
GESAMTKUNSTWERK-A

(Резиме)

Романтичарски идеал сарадње, односно садејства уметности (*Mischgedichte*), налази свој најсуштинскији еквивалент у „свеукупном уметничком делу“ (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) Рихарда Вагнера. Ова теорија о рестаурацији „изгубљеног“ јединства уметности била је елаборирана у многим Вагнеровим теоријским есејима и примењена у његовим музичким драмама. Према овом ствараоцу, у античкој Грчкој је постојало јединство уметности, али и јединство уметности и природе, а драма је на сажет начин представљала све изражајне елементе природе. Нова „уметност будућности“ је, према Вагнеру, требало да обнови ту „свеобухватност“ грчке драме.

Циљ студије је био да се са примарно естетичке тачке гледишта и са ослањањем на Вагнерова дела, анализирају утицаји античког грчког духа на романтичарску мисао.

У уводном делу даје се кратак историјски преглед теорије и праксе идеје о уједињавању уметности који се завршава представљањем Вагнерових ставова о том проблему. У наставку се разматрају Вагнерове интерпретације веза између природе и античке грчке уметности. За њега је стара грчка уметност, заснована на миту, била идеални пример уметности јер је, како је веровао, имала директан контакт са природом. На такав Вагнеров однос према античкој грчкој уметности, који носи типичне романтичарске црте, утицала је идеологија историцизма. У раду се, на примерима из античке Грчке, расправља и о перцепцији мита као израза архетипских идеја код романтичара, посебно Вагнера. Предмет пажње је и романтичарски став према једној новој митологији која се артикулисала у уметности, а била је у статусу између „органског бића“ (*Sein*) и „органског настајања“ (*Werden*). У следећем делу овог рада подсећа се на главне античке идеје и указује на драме те епохе које су извршиле битан утицај на Вагнерове музичке драме. Најзад, начињен је и осврт на Фестивалско позориште (*Festspielhaus*) у Бајројту, и то пре свега на његове референције, као грађевине, на античке узоре. Закључак ове студије је да је у Вагнеровој теорији и музичким драмама наслеђе античке Грчке реинтерпретирано и реструктурирано на више нивоа.

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