Richard Wagner, The Life Of Essay, Research Paper

One of the key figures in the history of opera, Wagner was largely responsible for altering its orientation in the Nineteenth Century. His program of artistic reform, though not executed to the last detail, accelerated the trend towards organically conceived, through-composed structures, as well as influencing the development of the orchestra, of a new breed of singer, and of various aspects of theatrical practice. As the most influential composer during the second half of the Nineteenth Century, Richard Wagner’s conception of music remains very much with us even a century after his death. Wagner thought his music dramas were to be the models for Twentieth Century opera, but he could not foresee the path of total abandonment of traditional harmony that was to revolutionize music in the early Twentieth Century.

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany in 1813 as the son of a policeman, Friedrich Wagner, who died soon after the composer’s birth. His mother remarried the painter-actor-poet, Ludwig Geyer, in August 1814. Many people believe that Geyer was Wagner’s biological father, since the mother and Geyer had been friends long before Friedrich Wagner s death. There is much evidence that Richard believed this as well.

Wagner attended school in Dresden and then Leipzig. At age fifteen, he wrote a play, and at sixteen he composed his first music: two piano sonatas and a string quartet. In 1831 he attended Leipzig University, and he also studied piano and composition with the Cantor of St. Thomas Choir School. Wagner’s formal training in music was brief, and he was largely a self-taught musician. He composed a symphony, and it was successfully performed in 1832. In 1833 he was employed as the chorus master at the W rzburg Theater where he wrote the text and music of his first opera, Die Feen (The Fairies). His first opera was never produced during Wagner’s lifetime. It was first performed by Hermann Levi in Munich in 1888.

Wagner married the singer, Minna Planer, in 1836 and went with her to K nigsberg, where he became musical director at the city theater. But he soon resigned from the position and took a similar post in Riga. In Riga he gained much experience conducting the symphonies and overtures of Beethoven. His marriage suffered from displays of his personal character as the couple’s financial debts mounted in Riga. In 1839 the Wagner’s “slipped away” from creditors in Riga by ship to London and then to Paris, where he was befriended by the composer, Meyerbeer.

In Paris Wagner did musical arranging for publishers and theaters. He also labored on the text and music of an opera based on the “Flying Dutchman” legend. But in 1842 Rienzi, his large-scale opera with a political theme, set in imperial Rome, was accepted for production in Dresden, and Wagner went there for its highly successful premiere. Its theme reflects something of Wagner’s own politics. The Dutchman, produced the next year, was less well received, though it was a much better constructed music drama than Rienzi was. The Dutchman began Wagner’s movement away from the “number opera” tradition. The success of these two operas gained for Wagner the prestigious post as Orchestra Conductor at the Dresden court.

Wagner was largely his own librettist in his music dramas, and the theme of redemption through a woman’s love, in The Dutchman, recurred in Wagner’s works and perhaps his life also. In 1845 Tannh user was completed and performed, and Lohengrin was begun. In 1848 he was caught up in political revolution, and the next year he fled to Weimar where Firencz Liszt helped him. Later he fled to Switzerland and also France. Politically suspect, Wagner was unable to return to Germany for several years.

In Z rich during his exile of 1850, he wrote his ferociously anti-Semitic tract: Jewishness in Music. Some passages of this short work were an attack on Meyerbeer, who had previously befriended him in Paris. Also while in Zurich, he completed his basic statement on musical theater, Opera and Drama. Wagner also began sketching the text and music for a series of monumental operas based on the Nordic and Germanic myths. By 1853 the texts for this four-night cycle of music dramas, Der Ring des Nibelungen, were completed and published. Wagner read his texts to his friends, among whom were his generous patrons, the wealthy Swiss industrialist, Otto Wesendonck and his wife Mathilde.

Wagner became involved in an extramarital affair with Mathilde Wesendonck who had fallen in love with him. Mrs. Wesendonck wrote love poems to Wagner that he set to music. He also composed the Piano Sonata in A-Flat Major for Mathilde. This affair inspired the music drama Tristan und Isolde which was first conceived in 1854 and completed five years later. The basic plot of Tristan is the theme of forbidden love. By 1854 Wagner had completed more than half of the music to Der Ring des Nibelungen. But he abandoned Siegfried in the middle of the second act in 1857, not to resume work on this opera until 1869.

In 1855 Wagner conducted in London, and tensions with his wife Minna led to a prolonged stay in Paris where Minna eventually joined him in 1860. In 1862 he was freely allowed to return to Germany, and that same year Wagner and Minna separated permanently. Minna could accept most aspects of Wagner’s less-than-sterling personal character, but she could not endure his marital infidelity. In 1864 King Ludwig II invited Wagner to settle in Bavaria, near Munich. The king paid all of the composer’s considerable debts and agreed to provide Wagner with an annual salary so he could be free to compose.

Wagner did not stay long in Bavaria, because of opposition at King Ludwig’s court. This disdain for the composer surfaced when it became public knowledge that he was having an extramarital affair with Cosima Liszt von B low, the wife of the conductor Hans von B low and daughter of Franz Liszt. Hans von B low (who condoned Wagner’s affair with his wife) conducted the music at the premiere of Tristan und Isolde in 1865.

Before returning to his composition of The Ring, Wagner composed The Mastersingers of Nuremberg beginning in 1866. This work was in quite a different vein; a comedy set in Sixteenth Century Nuremberg in which a noble poet-musician wins. The analogy with Wagner’s view of himself is obvious. The opera was premiered with von B low as conductor in 1868.

Wagner had been living at Tribschen, near Lucerne, since 1866, and during this year his estranged wife Minna died. Cosima von B low joined Wagner at Tribschen shortly after Minna’s death and she subsequently gave birth to two children before they were married in 1870.

The first two Ring music dramas, Das Rheingold and Die Walk re, were first performed in 1869 in Munich, on King Ludwig’s insistence, since Ludwig was still providing Wagner with an annual salary years after their first acquaintance. Wagner was very anxious to have a special festival opera house constructed for the complete cycle of The Ring, and he spent much energy trying to raise money for it. Eventually, when he had almost despaired, Ludwig came to the rescue, and in 1874, the year the fourth opera, Die G tterd mmerung (”The Twilight of the Gods”), was finished, King Ludwig provided the necessary funds.

The theater was built at Bayreuth, and it was designed by Wagner himself as the home for his concept of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total art work). The first festival, an artistic triumph but a financial disaster, was held there in 1876 when the complete Ring of the Nibelungs was performed. It took Wagner twenty-two years to complete The Ring entirely, and it stands as one of the most remarkable and profoundly influential achievements in Western music.

In 1877 Wagner conducted in London, hoping to recoup some of his Bayreuth losses. Later in the year he began a final music drama, Parsifal. Wagner continued his musical and political writings, concentrating on “racial purity” as his primary theme. He spent most of 1880 in Italy. Parsifal, a sacred music drama based on a theme of man’s redemption through the acts of communion and renunciation, was first performed at the Bayreuth Festival in 1882. Wagner went to Venice following the festival and died there in February 1883 of heart failure. His body was returned for burial at Bayreuth.

Richard Wagner remains for many the most fascinating figures in Nineteenth Century music. His life and his music arouse passions like that of no other composer. Wagner’s works are hated as much as they are worshiped in the world, even today. As a man, Wagner was prepared to sacrifice his family and friends in the cause of his own music, and he will never be known otherwise. But as a composer alone, he was a man of great genius.