

## Wagner's Loosely Knit Sentences and the Drama of Musical Form

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In the first volume of *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, Alfred Lorenz introduces the concept of *Barform* with the claim that Wagner “especially loves this form since it is better suited for the dramatic momentum than any other.”<sup>1</sup> For Lorenz, the structure of *Barform* (usually represented as AAB or *Stollen, Stollen, Abgesang*) projects a natural distribution of energy that makes it particularly appropriate for drama. This results, he argues, from its intrinsic forward propulsion:

The *Abgesang* always implies an intensification over the *Stollen*, an intensification [*Steigerung*] which appears at its conclusion; the dramatic life is thus better renewed by this form than if the intensification fell in the middle.<sup>2</sup>

Though Lorenz would have been unaware of the idea at the time, this statement also applies to Schoenberg's concept of the sentence (*Satz*).<sup>3</sup> Both forms grow out of the same gestural core: they both involve the presentation of musical material, some type of repetition, and a balancing third section that develops the material of the preceding sections while providing a sense of emotional discharge (*Gefühlsentladung*).

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Max Hesse, 1924-1933. Reprint, Tutzing: Hans Schneider, 1966): 145, quoted and translated by Stephen McClatchie, *Analyzing Wagner's Operas: Alfred Lorenz and German Nationalist Ideology* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1998): 130-131.

<sup>2</sup> Lorenz, translated by McClatchie, *Analyzing Wagner's Operas*: 131.

<sup>3</sup> Schoenberg presents the sentence most precisely in *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, edited by Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967): 20-23 and 58-63. For a more in-depth account of sentence conventions, see William Caplin, *Classical Form* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 35-48.

The sentence and *Barform* are not entirely synonymous, however, and though they are inextricably bound to one another within the context of Wagner, they can and should be untangled to some degree. Both terms reflect the same open-ended impulse, but they are defined with different degrees of precision and carry different associations. Lorenz's *Barform* is notoriously vague, applying to nearly any formal expression that even remotely relates to a general AAB schema. In terms of size, it is boundless:

The essence of the Bar does not reside in the actual length, but in the distribution of its powers. Whether the Bar occupies 3 measures or 1,000 is irrelevant; it is always a regular Bar if [its] essence is fulfilled: a double appearance as against a single balancing occurrence of equal weight.<sup>4</sup>

The sentence, on the other hand, is defined quite specifically. Schoenberg first introduces it as a practice form for composers, repeatedly suggesting that it not be treated too dogmatically,<sup>5</sup> and in comparison with Lorenz's *Barform* it is significantly restricted. Sentences, for example, rarely exceed a single cadential span. In that sense, they adhere to the grammatical implications of *Satz*: a complete phrase that ends with a period. Schoenberg, moreover, defines the form not as a fixed sequence of distinct sections, but as a developmental process. The sentence essentially consists of a short basic idea that is manipulated in a variety of ways. After it is presented, it is repeated either with exact repetition (sometimes slightly varied), sequential repetition (diatonic or real), or according to some type of tonic-dominant alternation (what Caplin refers to as "statement-response repetition"). It then undergoes a process of liquidation, emphasizing features such as motivic fragmentation, acceleration of harmonic rhythm, and sequence, all of which ultimately lead to cadence. Thus, although the sentence is best understood in three parts—basic idea, repetition and continuation—these parts always progress as a single, unified

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<sup>4</sup> Lorenz, translated by McClatchie: 133.

<sup>5</sup> In the words of Schoenberg, the practice form is "only an abstraction from art forms, sentences from masterworks often differ considerably from the scheme." From *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*: 60.

expression.<sup>6</sup> In that sense, sentence and *Barform* are related (they both involve three main parts and both are based, more or less, on a 1:1:2 proportion), but the two forms are distinguished by the different ways that they were conceived: Lorenz derives *Barform* from Walther's four arias in *Die Meistersinger* and thus, in its most paradigmatic representation, it is a vocal form made up of three relatively large sections, each of which contains its own internal phrases; Schoenberg, on the other hand, conceives the sentence as a developmental process based on a smooth, continuous gesture, enclosed within a single cadential span. This distinction is accentuated by Carl Dahlhaus as part of his general criticism of Lorenz:

The mistake that led Lorenz astray in his analyses lies in the equation of Bar-form with a procedure that derived from symphonic development technique: the construction of a 'model' from two or three motives, transposing it, and finally hiving off details and working at them on their own account. To give the labels AAB to these three elements—the original model, the sequential repetition, and the hiving-off—is to fail to recognize that song form and development form are mutually exclusive: in a nutshell, Bar-form is 'plastic', and development form 'dynamic'.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, despite its differences with *Barform*, Wagner's use of the sentence has gone almost entirely unrecognized in the literature, a remarkable fact considering that it represents one of the

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<sup>6</sup> Conceiving the sentence in three parts differs to some extent from Schoenberg and Caplin, both of whom maintain a two-part division of the form. Schoenberg writes simply of a beginning (normally four bars) and a completion (also four bars), while Caplin uses the terms "presentation phrase" and "continuation phrase." Schoenberg's student, Erwin Ratz, on the other hand, implies a three-part division, using the terms *Zweitakter*, *Wiederholung* and *Durchführung* (2+2+4). This paper will also maintain a three-part division using the terms "basic idea," "repetition" and "continuation." The reason for this deviation from Schoenberg's model is that it most clearly reflects the basic hyper-rhythmic gesture that is so essential to the form itself; namely, the proportion short : short : long.

<sup>7</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, translated by Mary Whittall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979): 77. Warren Darcy makes a similar distinction between *Barform* as a "purely musical procedure" and the "poetic bar form," where the musical structure is determined by the text. See *Wagner's Das Rheingold* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993): 108. Neither Darcy nor Dahlhaus uses the term "sentence" or *Satz*.

few links between Wagner's post-*Lohengrin* operas and the formal rhetoric of the classical tradition (it also carries an immediate association with Beethoven, an issue of obvious importance with regard to Wagner research). Among possible reasons for this is that the sentence has, in some respects, been swept under the giant rug of Lorenzian *Barform*. Many theorists when analyzing Wagner continue to adopt Lorenz's formal perspective despite the fact that his overall analytical project has been widely criticized. As a result, a passage such as the *Todesverkündigung* from Act II, Scene iv of *Die Walküre* (see Example 1) might easily be analyzed as a small *Barform* despite the fact that it shares only a distant relationship with the vocal tradition from which *Barform* originally stems.<sup>8</sup> Another possible reason is that Wagner's form, at the level of the phrase, has itself been neglected. Many theorists have studied Wagnerian form from the perspective of Wagner's own aesthetics (especially with regard to *Oper und Drama*), and a number have considered large-scale issues relating to key structure, motivic development, and the possibilities of Schenkerian prolongation, but few have studied the conventions of Wagnerian phrase structure in detail. An obvious exception to this is William Rothstein's study of Wagner in *Phrase Rhythm and Tonal Music* (the only published work to my knowledge that explicitly relates sentences to *Barform*).<sup>9</sup>

The goal of this article, then, is to clarify the role of the sentence in Wagner's music by focusing on two specific issues: first, the way that Wagner's sentences relate to other formal perspectives, including *Barform*, model-sequence technique, and Rothstein's concept of the "Stollen Process;" and second, the way that Wagner capitalizes on the basic dramatic potential of the form. Sentences in Wagner essentially act as *rhetorical gestures* that parallel the physical movements, intentions, and emotions of the characters

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Grey, for example, identifies the passage as a small *Barform* in *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 233. This should not, however, be read as a criticism of Grey. In many cases, it is useful to think in terms of Lorenz's formal paradigms. It only becomes a problem when it obscures obvious relationships with the formal rhetoric of the classical period.

<sup>9</sup> Rothstein, however, does not devote much space to Wagner's use of the sentence and essentially equates them with small *Barforms*. See *Phrase Rhythm in Tonal Music* (New York: Schirmer, 1989): 288-289.

onstage, and unlike sentences in classical form, they are not motivated as much by a larger formal design as they are by a specific dramatic situation. Thus, this paper will build upon recent extensions of the Schoenberg *Formenlehre* tradition, especially William Caplin's *Classical Form*, by emphasizing the rhetorical and dramatic aspects of conventional sentence structure. Before discussing these dramatic aspects, however, it is first necessary to clarify the rather complex relationship between the sentence and other Wagnerian formal paradigms.

*Example 1. The "Annunciation of Death," from  
Die Walküre, Act II, Scene iv.*

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system, labeled 'Orch.', contains the 'Basic Idea' and 'Repetition' sections. The 'Basic Idea' is marked 'pp' and features a woodwind melody with a sustained note. The 'Repetition' section follows, also marked 'pp'. The second system, labeled 'Continuation', shows the woodwind melody continuing with more active figures. The score is written for orchestra (Orch.) and piano (piano).

### I. *Bar oder Satz?*

The terms "sentence" and "Barform," though related, are not equivalent with regard to Wagner's operas. We need to clarify, then, the meanings of these two terms with regard to analysis and interpretation of the music. In particular, why should we use the term "sentence" at all? From a Lorenzian perspective the term is entirely unnecessary, since "Barform" covers any AAB pattern regardless of size. Using a single term for all AAB patterns, moreover, has the advantage of equating similar patterns at different structural levels, especially when—to use Lorenz's

terminology—they are “potentiated,” i.e., when one is embedded within another. For Lorenz, potentiated *Barform* represents “the peak of organic-dramatic beauty,”<sup>10</sup> and though many of his examples are hard to accept, it is, without question, an important aspect of Wagner’s compositional process. The prelude to Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*, for instance, can easily be analyzed as a series of small AAB patterns (sentences or small *Barforms*) within a larger AAB form (Example 2). Similarly, Example 1, the “Annunciation of Death” from Act II of *Die Walküre* represents the “A” section of a larger AAB structure. Thus, one can hardly blame Lorenz for applying a single term to a formal impulse that appears in a variety of different sizes, especially when that formal impulse—two *Stollen*, followed by an *Abgesang*—was thematized by Wagner himself in both the music and libretto to one of his most famous operas.

The sentence, however, does not just represent small AAB patterns, and unlike Lorenz’s *Barform*, it is not so flexible that it resists clear definition. Thus, what it adds to understanding Wagner’s music—and what *Barform* obfuscates—is a degree of specificity that shows how certain small AAB patterns relate to a larger tradition of formal expression. “Sentence” represents an abstract gesture characterized by a variety of specific compositional options. These include presentation, repetition, continuation, and cadence as suggested by Schoenberg, Ratz and Caplin. Each of these options gives rise to certain basic listener expectations, and the degree to which a given sentence either conforms to or contradicts these expectations says a great deal about its expressive power. “Barform” elicits an entirely different set of expectations and associations, and when we come across a passage as in Example 3, the so-called “Guild Theme” from *Die Meistersinger*, we are presented with two possibilities: we can hear it either as a small *Barform*, which would immediately associate it with the larger songs heard throughout the opera, or as a sentence, which would associate it with many similar tightly knit phrases from the classical

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<sup>10</sup> Lorenz, as quoted in McClatchie: 137.

*Example 2. The prelude to Act III of Tristan und Isolde.*

**A**

**A'**

**B**

period.<sup>11</sup> Neither term is invalid, but nor are they equivalent. They each tell us something different about the music.

*Example 3. The "Guild Theme" from the prelude to  
Die Meistersinger.*

The musical score is for the 'Guild Theme' from the prelude to *Die Meistersinger*. It is written for orchestra (Orch.) and is divided into three sections: 'Basic Idea / 1st Stollen', 'Repetition / 2nd Stollen', and 'Continuation / Abgesang'. The first section begins with a forte (f) dynamic and a 'molto tenuto' marking. The second section is a repetition of the first. The third section, 'Continuation / Abgesang', features a more complex melodic line with various ornaments and a final cadence marked with an asterisk (\*).

In that sense, what is most important in considering the differences between sentence and *Barform* in Wagner is not the specific semantic distinctions that we can draw between them, but the associations that these terms bring with them. Since Lorenz derives *Barform* from a vocal tradition (specifically the four songs that Walther sings in *Die Meistersinger*), it carries with it an association with song, even when applied to instrumental forms. The sentence, on the other hand, is primarily tied to the instrumental phrase structure of the classical period, and is rarely associated with vocal music.<sup>12</sup> Thus, by identifying certain passages

<sup>11</sup> The difference between tightly and loosely knit themes is best thought of in terms of a spectrum of tonal stability and metric balance. Primary themes from sonata movements, for instance, tend to be tightly knit, whereas themes within transition or development sections tend to be loosely knit. For further clarification, see Caplin, *Classical Form*: 84-85.

<sup>12</sup> The use of the sentence in vocal music is a topic that has been almost entirely overlooked both in the classical period and in the music of Wagner. I treated some of these issues in a paper presented at the conference for the Society of Music Theory in Philadelphia, 2001 entitled "Some Vocal Resistance to an Instrumental



in Wagner as sentences, we place them in dialogue with classical form in a way that *Barform* cannot.<sup>13</sup> It also enables us to trace more easily certain stylistic changes. As Janet Schmalfeldt writes, "the paradigm of the sentence thrives within a wide range of musical styles; thus to compare the unique ways in which the sentence is treated by composers as diverse as, for instance, Haydn and Chopin is to gain a point of reference for characterizing changes in stylistic and aesthetic goals."<sup>14</sup> More specifically, by studying the ways in which Wagner handles sentence form, we gain a perspective from which we can trace similarities and differences between Wagner's formal practice and those of his predecessors.

## II. The Sentence, Model-Sequence Technique, and the "Stollen Process"

The significance of the relationship between sentence and *Barform* in Wagner's music is obvious, but equally important is the relationship between sentence and sequence. Indeed, many of Wagner's sentences begin with the statement of an idea and an exact, sequential repetition. The "Faith" theme from the prelude to *Parsifal* is a characteristic example (see Example 4); it opens with a short basic idea and is followed by a sequential repetition up a minor third. The continuation also begins up a minor third, but instead of another complete statement, the basic idea is broken down into a series of descending sequential fragments that ultimately spill into cadence. Naturally, this procedure has its roots in classical form; although exact sequence is rare, many classical sentences involve sequential repetition of the upper voice in the first four bars, usually accompanied by some type of tonic-

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Form: Wagner's Use of the Sentence in *Tristan und Isolde*." This topic, however, falls beyond the scope of the present paper and will not be dealt with here.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that sentences have their origins strictly in Classical form. On the contrary, the gesture of the sentence can easily be traced to a variety of Baroque forms, an issue that often arises in connection with Wilhelm Fischer's *Fortspinnungstypus*. See, for instance, his famous article "Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Wiener klassischen Stils," *Studien zur Musikwissenschaft* 3 (1915): 24-84.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Schmalfeldt, "Towards a Reconciliation of Schenkerian Concepts with Traditional and Recent Theories of Form," *Music Analysis* 10 (1991): 243.

dominant alternation.<sup>15</sup> The famous Beethoven sentence from the first movement of Op. 2, No. 1, for instance, repeats the melody up a step while the harmony changes from tonic to dominant (see Example 5). This pattern of repetition is then altered over the course of the nineteenth century to include exact repetition of the *entire* basic idea, an act that immediately destabilizes the initial tonic.<sup>16</sup>

Yet we have to ask what this means with regard to those many passages in Wagner's music that involve sequential repetition of an idea without a traditional continuation. As mentioned above, very little has been written about the role of the sentence in Wagner's operas, but the use of "model-sequence technique," especially with regard to the first seventeen bars of *Tristan*, has been discussed thoroughly. Indeed, Schoenberg himself never applies the concept of the sentence to Wagner. Instead he associates Wagner with sequence, especially in contrast to the "developing variation" of Brahms.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, most sequential repetitions in Wagner's music *are* followed by some type of liquidation leading to cadence, and thus the following question arises: To what degree does the statement and sequential repetition(s) of an idea imply a subsequent continuation leading to cadence? In other words, do we hear sequential repetition in Wagner's music as informed by a larger, overriding sentential impulse? The opening of *Tristan*, usually given as a paradigm of Wagner's model-sequence technique,

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<sup>15</sup> As Caplin points out in *Classical Form*, model-sequence technique is also a common feature of continuations as well. See, for instance, the continuation of the *Parsifal* sentence in Example 4.

<sup>16</sup> For an interesting discussion on the relationship between sentence and sequence in Liszt, see Dieter Torkewitz, "Modell, Wiederholung—Sequenz: Über Liszts Technik der Intensivierung, mit einer Anmerkung zu Wagner," in *Franz Liszt und Richard Wagner: Musikalische und geistesgeschichtliche Grundlagen der neudeutschen Schule* (Eisenstadt: Serge Gut, 1983): 177-188.

<sup>17</sup> This occurs both in "Brahms the Progressive" and especially "Criteria for the Evaluation of Music," essays that became the basis for many of Carl Dahlhaus's later arguments about the development of nineteenth-century music. Schoenberg, however, never invokes the concept of the sentence in these essays. See Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, edited by Leonard Stein with translations by Leo Black (London: Faber & Faber, 1975): 124-137 and 398-441.

Example 4. The “Faith” Theme from the prelude to Parsifal.

Orch

Basic Idea

Repetition

Continuation

PAC in V

This musical score for the 'Faith' Theme from the prelude to Parsifal is written for orchestra. It is in E-flat major and 3/4 time. The score is divided into four sections: 'Basic Idea' (measures 1-4), 'Repetition' (measures 5-8), 'Continuation' (measures 9-12), and 'PAC in V' (measures 13-16). The 'Basic Idea' and 'Repetition' sections are marked with a forte 'f' dynamic. The 'Continuation' section features a more complex melodic line with chromaticism. The 'PAC in V' section concludes the theme with a perfect authentic cadence in the fifth position.

Example 5. Beethoven, Piano Sonata Op. 2, No. 1/I, mm. 1-8.

Piano

Basic Idea

Repetition

Continuation

This musical score for the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 2, No. 1, measures 1-8, is written for piano. It is in E-flat major and 3/4 time. The score is divided into three sections: 'Basic Idea' (measures 1-4), 'Repetition' (measures 5-8), and 'Continuation' (measures 9-12). The 'Basic Idea' and 'Repetition' sections are marked with a forte 'f' dynamic. The 'Continuation' section features a more complex melodic line with chromaticism. The 'Continuation' section concludes the theme with a perfect authentic cadence in the fifth position.

has little in common with traditional sentence structure, but the opening statements are followed by a brief moment of motivic fragmentation (E♭ to F♯) leading to cadence, and thus it is not hard to recognize a somewhat loose sentential pattern: statement—repetition(s)—continuation—cadence (see Example 6).

*Example 6. Tristan und Isolde, Prelude, mm. 1-17.*

Orch.

The musical score for Example 6, Tristan und Isolde, Prelude, mm. 1-17, is presented in three systems. The first system shows the initial statement of the motif. The second system shows a repetition of the motif with some variations. The third system shows a continuation of the motif, leading to a cadence. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals.

What this suggests is that many of the sequential passages in Wagner's music can be heard as expansions or distortions of conventional sentence proportions. In particular, the basic hyper-rhythmic gesture of the sentence—the proportion short: short: long—is often expanded with extra statements of the basic idea at different sequential levels. This occurs in Example 7, the famous accompanying theme to Siegmund and Sieglinde's gaze, where the basic idea is sequenced first up a minor third, then again up a major third. The continuation finally begins at the point of melodic climax, initiating an extended dissolution toward cadence.

Particularly interesting in this example is that Wagner still maintains a balance between the statements of the basic idea and the continuation: 3+3+3+9.<sup>18</sup> Of course, in this case, the expansion is still contained within a relatively tight knit construction, but there are many other examples where the sequential repetitions and interpolations are far less restricted. Indeed, the continuation is sometimes put off indefinitely, and occasionally avoided altogether. William Rothstein refers to this phenomenon as the “Stollen Process,” which he defines as:

The progressive setting up *Stollen*, or first parts of bar forms (or sentences), in such a way that the fulfilling *Abgesang* or cadential segment is pushed farther and farther into the indefinite future—finally, perhaps, to be elided altogether or (more likely) transformed...<sup>19</sup>

*Example 7. Die Walküre, Act I, Scene i.*

Orch.

Basic Idea

Repetition

Repetition

Continuation

HC

<sup>18</sup> The second theme of Mozart's D minor Piano Concerto, K. 466/I offers a similar, classical example (2+2+2+6); see mm. 33-44.

<sup>19</sup> Rothstein, *Phrase Rhythm and Tonal Music*: 296.

In that sense, the concept of the sentence in Wagner is stretched between two more traditional Wagnerian paradigms: on the one hand Wagner's sentences—when expressed with a conventional short: short: long proportion—relate to the larger *Barforms* scattered throughout the operas. But on the other hand they provide a framework with which we can understand more extended sequential and developmental passages, traditionally lumped under the term “model-sequence technique.” This is not to say that every repetition of an idea should be heard as the opening of an implicit sentence structure, nor does it suggest that we hear every sentence pattern in relation to larger AAB forms. What it does suggest is that much of Wagner's music is informed by a certain sentential impulse, and—as we will see—it is an impulse with distinct dramatic and rhetorical associations.

Consider for instance the passage given in Example 8a, a loosely knit sentence occurring toward the beginning of Act III of *Tristan*. To begin with, this sentence differs in many ways from traditional classical themes. It clearly projects an F-major tonality, but the basic idea and its repetition are suspended over a dominant pedal, creating a sense of tonal instability at the outset. The continuation, moreover, begins by sequencing the basic idea up a fourth, which, after reaching a climax, initiates a chromatic slide that renders the goal of the passage uncertain. The sentence then concludes with an implied tonicization of C (the dominant of the controlling F-major tonality), but the cadence is evaded, and the music sweeps onward, simply leaving the key of F major behind.

Naturally, part of what makes this sentence loosely knit is the fact that it ends without distinct tonal closure. Indeed, cadences in Wagner are often evaded and some sentences end by simply resting on a dissonant harmony. Within the rhetoric of Wagnerian form, however, deceptive and evaded cadences essentially stand in for the traditional tonal cadences of the classical period. They serve the same basic function and—like the cadences of classical sentences—they occur as a direct fallout of the liquidation process. Thus, what is most important with regard to Wagner's sentences is that they generally *point* toward a specific cadence, even if that cadence itself is ultimately denied.

*Example 8a. A sentence from Tristan, Act III, Scene i.*

Tristan

sie zu zu - chen, sie zu se - hen sie zu fin - den in der

Basic Idea Repetition

Orch.

ein - zig zu ver - ge - hen zu ent - schwin - den Tri - stan ist ver - gessen.

Continuation

*Example 8b. The "Lausch Geliebter" theme from Tristan, Act II, Scene ii.*

Orch.

In that sense, Wagner's sentences would normally be characterized as loosely knit, a quality that strongly reflects the general aesthetics of "*unendliche Melodie*": in order to avoid obvious formal periodicity and tonal closure, Wagner's sentences cannot be too tightly knit. They differ from classical loosely knit sentences on a number of levels. In particular, classical loosely knit sentences tend to appear within development or transition sections, usually in reference to a prior tightly knit theme. Wagner's sentences, on the other hand, tend to emerge out of more fluid formal structures, usually responding to a distinct dramatic situation. Example 8a, for instance, is, in a sense, the "development" of a prior motivic idea, namely the "Lausch Geliebter" theme from Act II (see Example 8b), but it would be futile to attempt to relate it to classical procedures by identifying a specific function for the passage within a larger architectural scheme. The basic idea does originally appear within a relatively tightly knit framework, and thus the sentence of Act III could be heard as a "symphonically" developed restatement of the initial theme. But the motivation for this sentence has nothing to do with a large-scale formal plan that would link the initial statement in Act II to this varied restatement in Act III. The motivation in this case is entirely dramatic. The sentence emerges amidst the frenzied delirium of Tristan's awakening at Kareol, responding specifically to Tristan's cries for a final reunification with Isolde ("to seek her, to see her, to find her, in her alone to fade away..."), and the "dramatic" content of the passage results from the fact that the head motive of the "Lausch Geliebter" theme is extracted from its original context and restated according to a different dramatic impulse. The motive does not so much initiate a sentence as much as it is subjected to the process of the sentence. This process includes statement, repetition, and most importantly, liquidation. Every sentence has a certain self-destructive tendency, and this tendency is exemplified most strongly by the process of liquidation, a process defined by Schoenberg as one that "consists in gradually eliminating characteristic features until only uncharacteristic ones remain."<sup>20</sup> The appearance of the love theme as the basic idea of the sentence creates a momentary flashback to the passion of Act II, but the

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<sup>20</sup> Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*: 58.



gradual dissolution of the theme over the course of the passage emphasizes the impossibility of such fantasy. The motivic idea is “developed” not in response to an overarching formal scheme, but according to a specific dramatic moment.

Naturally, the dramatic motivation for this sentence strongly resonates with Wagner's own formal aesthetics. Wagner, of course, rarely discussed the technical aspects of composition—the issue of form in particular, though a common subject for Wagner's polemics, never emerges in concrete terms over the course of his writings—but he does make a distinction between instrumental forms based on the dance and those based on dramatic ideas that proves to be illuminating with regard to his frequent use of loosely knit, open-ended structures such as the sentence. As Thomas Grey writes, “the opposition between conventional (dance-based) forms rooted in the principle of alternation (*Wechsel*) and reprise and a new ideal of musical form based on the dramatic principle of development or evolution (*Entwicklung*)...was central to Wagner's musical-aesthetic program.”<sup>21</sup> This distinction emerges throughout the Zurich writings of the 1850s and is restated with familiar nationalistic zeal in his 1860 essay, “Music of the Future”:

It is extremely interesting and at the same time enlightening with regard to the nature of all musical form to observe how German composers (*deutsche Meister*) have taken the simple dance melody...and sought to impart to it a gradually richer and broader development (*Entwicklung*). The melody originally consisted of a short four-bar period that could be either doubled or quadrupled. It seems to have been the chief aim of our composers to expand this single melody into broader form, which thereby provided the opportunity for a richer harmonic development, as well.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, this praise that Wagner bestows on such development is always tinged with a polemical edge. Though he congratulates composers such as Beethoven for their skills in pushing the limits of the dance toward a more dramatic, developmental conception of form, he ultimately views these endeavors as futile: the

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<sup>21</sup> Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose*: 147-148.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Wagner, “Zukunftsmusik” from *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen* (SSD), vol. VII: 108-109, translated and quoted by Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose*: 272.

development of themes within the realm of “absolute music” is always limited by the ever-controlling form of the dance. This comes across clearly in his well-known letter “On Liszt’s Symphonic Poems”:

The Symphony’s formal germ survives till this day in its third movement, the minuet or scherzo, where it suddenly appears in utmost naivety, as though to tell the secret of the form of all of the movements...What it was possible to express in this form, we see to our utmost delight in the Symphony of Beethoven...On the other hand it was always disturbing, the instant it was employed—as in the Overture—to accommodate an Idea whose enunciation rebelled against the stricter rule of dance. In place of *development*, such as is necessary for a dramatic subject, this rule demands that *change* (*Wechsel*) inherent in all forms arisen from the March or Dance: namely the following of a softer quieter period after the livelier motion of the commencement, and finally a repetition of that livelier motion...Now it will be obvious that, in the conflict of a dramatic idea with this form, the necessity must at once arise to either sacrifice the development (the idea) to the alternation (the form), or the latter to the former.<sup>23</sup>

Naturally, there is a danger in ascribing too much significance to Wagner’s writings about musical form – even relatively specific commentary such as that regarding the “poetic-musical period” in *Oper und Drama* remains open to multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, Wagner’s praise of *Entwicklung* as a means of expressing “poetic intent” resonates quite strongly with his use of loosely knit sentences as reflections of the dramatic moment. The open-ended flow of these sentences as well as the “looseness” with which they are expressed defies any dance-like periodicity. And their use in service of the “poetic intent” is enhanced by the rhetorical possibilities inherent in the form itself.

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<sup>23</sup> Richard Wagner, “On Liszt’s Symphonic Poems,” in *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, translated by William Ashton Ellis, vol. III, reprint of 1st edition (Saint Clair Shores, Mich.: Scholarly Press, 1972): 244-245.

### III. The Sentence as a Dramatic Gesture

The orchestra's power-of-speech relies in the first place on a kinship with the language of gesture...<sup>24</sup>

At the end of *Siegfried*, Act II, Siegfried is exhausted. By this time, he has journeyed through the forest with the dwarf, Mime, slayed a dragon, killed Mime, and then pushed the dragon's dead body in front of its cave, burying the dragon's hoard within. According to Wagner's stage directions he then proceeds to look down into the cave for a time, before turning slowly to the front, "as if tired." He "passes his hand over his brow" and exclaims, "Hot am I from the heavy toil. Rushing flows my ardent blood! My hands burn on my head."<sup>25</sup> The music that accompanies this text is given in Example 9. Many of its features depict the sense of exertion, agitation, and weariness that permeates Siegfried's onstage presence.

Example 9. A sentence from *Siegfried*, Act II, Scene iii.

The musical score for Example 9 consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line for Siegfried and the orchestra accompaniment. The vocal line is in G major and 4/4 time, with a tempo of 'Lento' and a mood of 'passive'. The lyrics are: 'Heiss ward mir von der har - ten'. The second system continues the vocal line and orchestra accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'Last. Braus- und jagt mein brin- ge's Blut! Die Hand brennt mir an Haupt.' The score is divided into three sections: 'Basic Idea' (measures 1-4), 'Repetition' (measures 5-8), and 'Continuation' (measures 9-12).

<sup>24</sup> Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, vol. II: 322-323.

<sup>25</sup> Translation by Frederick Jameson, from Richard Wagner, *Siegfried*, vocal score (New York: Schirmer, 1904): 225.

For the most part, this involves simple, natural associations such as the slow tempo, the *pesante* articulation, and the relative harmonic stasis, all of which project the overall sense of exhaustion. This effect is also enhanced by the sharp dissonance of the augmented harmonies as well as the more arbitrary associative meaning of Wagner's leitmotifs (the primary motivic material of this passage is a distortion of the youthful and energetic horn call normally associated with the young Siegfried; see Example 10).<sup>26</sup> Each of these musical features has dramatic significance; they all emphasize the physical exertion and struggle expressed in Siegfried's words and actions, some through natural associations, some through arbitrary motivic signifiers.

*Example 10. Siegfried's Horn Call.*



However, it is not just these isolated elements that reflect the overall “poetic intent,” but also the form in which these elements are expressed. This example is organized as a loosely knit sentence, and though the individual elements are themselves dramatic, it is the form that unifies the passage into a single, coherent dramatic gesture. This raises an important question with regard to the potential meaning of Wagner's sentences, namely, how does the sentence act as a dramatic gesture that is, in some sense, separable from the various dramatic elements that constitute its form? In other words, how does the form generate meaning in addition to (but not independent of) its content? Naturally, sentence form, as an abstraction, has no specific dramatic quality. This, of course, is true of any formal abstraction. Even sonata form—associated with some of the most dramatic pieces of Western music—has no intrinsic dramatic expression. What it does have is a great deal of dramatic potential. The basic three-part structure of sonata

<sup>26</sup> This motive also arises in connection with the forging of the sword. See the end of *Siegfried* Act I, scene iii.

form—exposition, development and recapitulation—has a certain dramatic potential in and of itself, and this potential is enhanced even further by the infinite ways that composers can choose among and manipulate the different conventions within each section: What key will the second theme occur in? Which themes might appear in the development? How will the recapitulation be prepared? Furthermore, these choices interact with a whole body of works designed in a similar fashion and, thus, the specific choices that a composer makes become meaningful as they engage in dialogue with other pieces within the larger tradition.<sup>27</sup> The sentence operates in a similar way, but on a much smaller level. The basic form is made up of a single, fundamental gesture, expressed in three phases: basic idea, repetition, and continuation (cadence is understood as a fallout of the continuation process). Each phase, however, offers a variety of possibilities, and the primary dramatic expression of the sentence results both from the way that the basic idea is filtered through these various options as well as the way these choices interact with the larger, discursive background of sentences in general.

In Wagner, the range of possibilities for sentence expression is actually quite limited. Of the three primary phases, the presentation of the basic idea is the least restricted. Basic ideas tend to be short and usually consist of at least one or two distinct motivic ideas (in Caplin's words, the material is usually characteristic as opposed to conventional),<sup>28</sup> but in reality they can comprise just about anything, assuming they are small enough to be perceived as a distinct unit within a larger cadential span. Once the basic idea is stated, however, Wagner's sentences proceed according to a relatively small number of potential options. The standard, default options for repetition are exact repetition (sometimes with minor variations) and sequential repetition (usually real sequence); all other types of repetition are anomalous. The continuation offers a wider range of possibilities but the basic

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<sup>27</sup> This perspective owes much to James Hepokoski's seminars on sonata theory, which I attended at Yale University in 2000 and 2001. See also James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types and Deformations in the Late Eighteenth-Century Sonata*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>28</sup> Caplin, *Classical Form*: 37.

shape is usually the same: it either begins at or quickly leads to a melodic climax and concludes with descent into cadence (often evaded). This is normally accompanied by features such as motivic fragmentation, acceleration of harmonic rhythm, and increased rhythmic activity, all of which contribute to the liquidation of the basic idea. Though none of these individual features are necessary for continuation, some combination must occur.

When combined, the three phases of basic idea, repetition, and continuation usually produce a wave-like pattern of tension, climax and release. If the basic idea is repeated exactly, it creates tension based on the natural expectation for something different. This tension is further enhanced when the basic idea is repeated with exact sequence: the expectation for change is now coupled with the suspense of not knowing what the tonal goal of the sentence is. In either case, the sentence normally proceeds with an accelerated burst into climax, followed by the spilling-out of liquidated, uncharacteristic material (stepwise descent, arpeggiations, etc.). Such patterns are common in the classical period, exemplified most frequently by the famous sentence from the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 2, No. 1. As shown above (Example 5), the Beethoven sentence begins like a rocket blast, with a sharp rise in contour accompanied by relentless acceleration of harmonic rhythm. It concludes, however, with a defeated collapse into cadence, as if all of the sentence's energy was expended in reaching climax leaving nothing for closure other than a weak spill of melodic residue.<sup>29</sup>

Such wave-like sentences occur throughout the Wagner operas but with a crucial difference: whereas classical sentences usually act as a conventional means of expressing a primary referential theme, Wagner's sentences emerge in conjunction with specific dramatic scenarios. Naturally, sentences in the classical period often act as dramatic gestures as well—the Op. 2, No. 1 sentence is, without question, dramatic—but whatever meaning they might have is

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<sup>29</sup> Though this theme is an excellent example of the sentence it is often inappropriately used as a presentation of the sentence in its definitive form. Just as theorists would never think to exemplify sonata form (or even periods, for that matter) with one primary example, the sentence as an abstraction should not be exclusively identified with the opening of Op. 2, No. 1.

usually far from explicit. As Wagner might say, they raise the question "why" (*Warum?*) but do not supply a definitive answer.<sup>30</sup> In Wagner's music, the dramatic associations are far more obvious.

Returning, for instance, to the *Siegfried* sentence of Example 9, notice how much of the content of this sentence reflects Siegfried's onstage gestures and emotions; the dissonant harmony, the *pesante* articulation, and the motivic distortion of the horn call all help to project Siegfried's frustration as he wipes his hand across his forehead in a gesture of agitation and weariness. The form of the passage, however, also contributes to the overall dramatic expression. Because this material is organized as a sentence, it immediately interacts with a large intertextual community of sentence forms, and much of its dramatic meaning results from the ways the sentence engages with conventional listener expectations. Consider what happens, for example, when we compare this sentence to the Beethoven example from Op. 2, No. 1. First off, the static presence of the augmented harmony comes across as a complete antithesis to the forward drive of the Beethoven example. Like most classical sentences (and sentences in Wagner, for that matter), the sentence from Op. 2, No. 1 is extraordinarily goal directed. The *Siegfried* sentence, on the other hand, is entirely anchored to a prolonged augmented harmony based on F. It briefly struggles to ascend from this harmony at the onset of the continuation, but quickly gives in to its gravitational pull, ultimately returning to the initial sonority. This creates a friction between the stasis of the augmented harmony and the conventional wave-like expression of the sentence. As in many other sentences, the exact repetition of the basic idea builds tension as a result of the expectation for something different; in other words, it creates a buildup of "potential" energy that waits for its "kinetic" release toward climax. In this case, the continuation does rise to climax (this occurs at the moment Siegfried recognizes his feverish heat: "Brausen jagt mein brünst'ges Blut!"), but it never breaks away from the static grip of the controlling harmony. Ultimately, this frustrated inability of the sentence to release itself from the static augmented harmony acts as a dramatic parallel to Siegfried's own

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<sup>30</sup> This is a central thesis of his essay "Zukunftsmusik" and recurs again in his later essay "Über die Anwendung der Musik auf das Drama."

frustration and physical weariness. In that sense, the dramatic expression of the sentence depends both on the specific features that are emphasized as well as the way these features relate to other sentence forms.

Since Wagner's sentences most often emerge in response to a particular dramatic scenario, the features that he privileges are those that most clearly communicate a specific dramatic intent. In addition, most of Wagner's sentences can be grouped into categories based on the features that they emphasize and the rhetorical meanings that they convey. The contexts in which these sentences emerge are often quite different, but they achieve similar dramatic effects nonetheless. The final section of this paper will explore three different sentences that reflect the primary rhetorical categories of sentence expression in Wagner's music. The first and most common of these categories involves sentences that traverse a path of *agitation and collapse*. These sentences begin with sharp, dissonant basic ideas that surge upward toward climax, but conclude with a descending collapse into cadence. (Beethoven's sentence from Op. 2, No. 1 can be taken as a diatonic, tightly knit model for this category.) Such sentences are normally associated with characters and gestures that reflect storminess, anger, and the rise of violent, heated emotions. A second category involves sentences that act as gestures of *exhaustion and dissolution*. These sentences emphasize incessant repetition (often exact), they lack a distinct melodic climax, and project a marked deterioration over the course of the continuation. They are usually associated with characters that are wounded, dying, or simply reduced to a state of hopeless despair. A third and final category involves sentences that act as gestures of *emergence and evolution*. These sentences are normally expressed in slow tempos and represent states of gradual awareness and recognition, usually conveyed with an emphasis on the overall wave-like contour of the sentence. Needless to say, these categories do not account for every sentence in Wagner's music, nor do they occur every time that a corresponding emotion is expressed (if a sentence were used every time a character became agitated there would be interminable strings of sentences across entire scenes). They do, however, reflect the primary rhetorical uses of the sentence as a dramatic gesture. Each of the following



three sentences exemplifies one of these categories and further examples will be provided in the footnotes.

#### IV. Agitation/Collapse: A Sentence from *Parsifal*, Act III

Among all of the post-*Lohengrin* operas, *Parsifal* perhaps relies the most heavily on the language of gesture. In the words of Frank Glass, "the religious life, as treated in the opera, practically demands a dramatic use of ceremony and the concomitant motions of ritual."<sup>31</sup> One of the most dramatic of these gestures occurs toward the end of Act III. Shortly after his prayer to Titurel, Amfortas cries out in anguish for the knights to set their weapons upon him and put an end to his misery. He tears open his garment, exposing his incurable wound and shouts, "Here I am! Here is the open wound that poisons me. Here flows my blood."

##### Example 11. Agitation and collapse: a sentence from *Parsifal*, Act III, Scene ii.

Amfortas

Lebhaft

Hier bin ich, die off'ne Wun - de hier! Das mich ver-

Basic Idea

Repetition

Orch.

gif - tet, hier fließt mein Blut.

Continuation

<sup>31</sup> Frank Glass, *The Fertilizing Seed: Wagner's Concepts of the Poetic Intent* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983): 204.

This gesture emerges from a state of fury and anguish and is accompanied by one of the most agitated sentence expressions in the opera (see Example 11). The basic idea itself encapsulates the frenzy of the entire sentence with its syncopation, its dissonant augmented harmony, and its disjunct melodic leaps.<sup>32</sup> The intensity is then raised even further when the basic idea is shifted up a whole tone, creating an upward surge that ultimately leads to a melodic climax on F. This climax is especially emphasized by the fact that the basic idea has now been sequenced up a minor third, overshooting the prior whole-tone sequence. This signals both the onset of the continuation as well as the inevitable collapse of the preceding ascent. The rest of the sentence simply dissolves with descending fragmentation of the basic idea. Nothing is left other than the liquidated spill into cadence, rapidly descending with a grotesque depiction of the blood flowing from Amfortas's wound.<sup>33</sup>

As is typical, the wave-like gesture of this sentence creates a pattern of tension and release, but because of the loosely knit construction it does not provide any strong tonal closure (the presence of D minor in this scene is completely subverted by the augmented harmony and the sequential progression). In that sense, the wave-like structure of the sentence provides a sense of closure despite the lack of a traditional tonal cadence. The agitated rise, climax, and collapse all combine to create a single, unified gesture that is, in some sense, "closed," even though it is based on a loosely knit tonal framework. When the sentence finally crashes down on an A-minor triad (vaguely recalling the overall D-minor tonality), it is both a point of arrival as well as a point of departure. The music continues to sweep along with more loosely knit sentence gestures that surge upward, begging along with Amfortas for the knights to "slay both at once: sinner and his sin."

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<sup>32</sup> The basic idea of this sentence is derived from a motive that occurs throughout the opera in association with the sickness and agony of Amfortas.

<sup>33</sup> This type of sentence expression is the most common in Wagner's music and, thus, examples abound. Example 8a, for instance, falls into this category. Also, for another fairly obvious example, see *Siegfried*, Schirmer vocal score, p. 289, system 5, m. 4 to p. 290, system 3, m. 1; a sentence that arises at the moment when Siegfried experiences fear for the first time.

## V. Exhaustion and Dissolution: A Sentence from *Das Rheingold*, Scene ii

Example 12 presents a sentence from the second scene of *Das Rheingold*. In some ways it is no different than any other sentence presented thus far: it begins with a two-measure basic idea, it repeats the idea with exact sequence, and concludes with acceleration of harmonic rhythm and motivic fragmentation leading to cadence. In fact, the sentence is remarkably traditional; it not only features an exact 2+2+4 proportion, but concludes with a perfect authentic cadence as well.

### *Example 12. Exhaustion and dissolution: a sentence from Das Rheingold, Scene ii.*

Loge

Oh - ne die Ap - fel, alt und grau, greis und grün-lich,

Basic Idea

Repetition

Orch.

*p* *pp* *p* *pp*

wel-kend zum Spott al - ler Welt, er - stirbt der Got - ter Stamm.

Continuation

*p* *p* *pp*

Nevertheless, the orchestral sentence expresses the three phases of basic idea, repetition, and continuation in a way that is unlike any of the examples given above. Whereas most sentences arrive at

a point of melodic climax before they conclude, this sentence traverses a steady, downward path into its *pianissimo* G-minor cadence. There is no melodic climax and no wave-like structure. The basic idea and repetition simply initiate a downward trajectory, and the continuation literally continues this process. There is none of the tension, climax and release of the *Parsifal* sentence given above. Instead, the sentence projects a simple, continuous process of decay.

Of course, to say that there is no distinct melodic climax in this example is to ignore the voice part, which conveys a more familiar arch-like contour. Thus, the rhetoric of exhaustion and dissolution essentially lies in the orchestra, and is resisted to a certain extent by the voice. This situation is quite common in Wagner's music and although the relationship between orchestral sentences and the voice is beyond the scope of this paper it is worth noting that there is typically a certain amount of conflict between the two. Nevertheless, the voice and orchestra are aligned at the moment of cadence and communicate, more or less, the same dramatic message—namely, that according to Loge's prophecy, if Wotan hands Freia over to the giants, Fasolt and Fafner, they will lose the golden apples that keep them young. Thus, the exhausted descent of the orchestral sentence provides the perfect dramatic analogue to Loge's text, "Without the apples, old and gray, worn and weary, withered and mocked by the world, the godly race will perish." In that sense, the sentence creates a musical gesture that essentially acts out and encapsulates the process of aging, death, and decay that Loge warns is the fate of the gods.

Sentences such as this are far less common than the agitated wave-like sentences that permeate much of Wagner's music, but they do provide important dramatic commentary throughout his later operas.<sup>34</sup> As discussed above, part of this rhetorical power

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<sup>34</sup> Two famous examples of this type of sentence occur at the opening of the prelude to Act III of *Tristan* (given in Example 2). The first sentence from the prelude (mm. 1-10) features a repetitive struggle to ascend and concludes with a simple thinning out into the upper register (without any wave-like contour). The next sentence (mm. 11-15) involves repetitive downward sequences that gradually dissolve into a half-cadence in F minor. The two sentences move in opposite directions, but both feature a continuous dissolution without a traditional wave-like structure.

Example 13. Emergence and evolution: a sentence from the prologue to *Götterdämmerung*.

**Soprano**

*Mässig langsam*

**First Norn**

Welch' Licht leuch - tet dort?

**Second Norn**

Däm - mert der Tag schon

**Orch.**

*ppp*

**Basic Idea**

**Repetition**

**Third Norn**

auf?

Log - e's Heer lo - det feu - rig - um den Fels.

Noch ist's Nacht.

**Continuation**

*ppp*

results from the way that these passages relate to the larger community of sentence forms. Most sentences have a powerful forward drive, surging up toward climax before collapsing into cadence. The *Rheingold* sentence of Example 12 is also based on a strong, directed impulse, but with a more consistent process of dissolution (in a way, the entire sentence collapses into cadence). The following section presents a final category of rhetorical expression, which also achieves its effect in contrast to more traditional sentence forms.

## VI. Emergence and Evolution: A Sentence from the Opening of *Götterdämmerung*

*The Twilight of the Gods* begins with a question: "What light shines forth?" It is a question asked by the first Norn, the oldest of the three. Her vision at this stage of life is clouded, leaving it up to her younger sisters to illuminate the situation. The second Norn, however, is also confused. "Is the day already dawning?" she asks. Finally, the third Norn answers, "Loge's fire is burning around the Fell, it is still night." This whole exchange is accompanied by a gradually evolving sentence that unfolds with an emerging wave-like contour, a slow tempo, and a lack of emphasis on forward-driving features such as motivic fragmentation and acceleration of harmonic rhythm (see Example 13). Its overall shape is not too dissimilar to the agitated sentence from the end of *Parsifal*, but the degree to which it downplays the forward drive and acceleration common to most traditional sentences sets it apart into a different category of rhetorical expression. Wagner often employs sentences such as this in conjunction with moments of dramatic awakening, situations where characters begin to recognize the weight of certain emotions and events. The basic features of such sentences are nothing new (presentation, repetition, and continuation, a general 1:1:2 proportion, wave-like contour, etc.), but they unfold without an agitated drive toward climax, projecting instead a gradual process of growth and development.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The opening cello theme from the Prelude to Act I of *Tristan und Isolde* (mm. 17-22) is a good example of a sentence in this category. For further examples of each of the above categories see Matthew BaileyShea, "The Wagnerian Satz: The

Naturally, these sentences do not avoid all sense of accelerated motion. In this example there is acceleration in terms of metric grouping—the basic idea and repetition are grouped as 2+2 while the continuation begins with 1+1—but the acceleration is undercut by a lack of obvious motivic liquidation. Whereas typical continuations begin with a quickening of harmonic rhythm and fragmentation of the basic idea, this continuation introduces a new motive that sounds quite static: a simple oscillating pattern, shimmering over Neapolitan harmony. The final two measures do, in some sense, “liquidate” the previous material, but instead of a gradual stripping away of the basic idea, the sentence concludes with an abrupt, unraveling gesture (ultimately prolonging the preceding Neapolitan harmony). The passage simply dissolves at its end without tonal closure.<sup>36</sup> The basic idea, moreover, is repeated in a rather unconventional manner: whereas most basic ideas in Wagner are either repeated exactly or sequentially, this idea essentially splits in two different directions: the upper part rises up a third while the harmony is shifted down a third (E♭ minor to C minor).<sup>37</sup> Thus, the basic idea is not just repeated, it is developed.

Nevertheless, what makes this sentence especially dramatic is that it parallels the Norns' gradual process of recognition. The sentence begins its rise toward climax while the first two Norns attempt to decipher the light in the distance, and as the third Norn responds, the sentence dissolves. Moreover, the wave-like contour of the sentence is facilitated by the range of each vocal entry: alto to mezzo-soprano to soprano. The dramatic meaning of this sentence, however, is based on more than just a wave-like form. In this case, the sentence is built from the combination of four different motives that accumulate many different dramatic associations over the course of the *Ring* cycle: the basic idea combines the motive of the

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Rhetoric of the Sentence in Wagner's Post-Lohengrin Operas," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> All of the motivic ideas in this sentence are derived from various leitmotifs, each of which will be discussed below. Also, note that the continuation of this sentence is itself structured as a sentence (1+1+2), a feature that is not uncommon in the classical period.

<sup>37</sup> The root motion is down a third even though the G♭ is held over in the bass, creating a ♯ chord.

“World Ash Tree” and the “Annunciation of Death” motive (both originally presented in *Die Walküre*, Act III and Act II respectively), the continuation begins with a dimmed version of the “Magic Fire” motive (usually associated with Loge), and the sentence ends with the dissolving “Rope” motive (presented for the first time in *Götterdämmerung*). Nevertheless, though each of these motives colors the text in different ways, the rhetoric of awakening is most powerfully communicated by the formal evolution of the sentence itself. The slowly rising basic idea, the sequential repetition, the climax and collapse, all enhance the interrogative quality of the opening as well as the dismissive conclusion. The sentence serves as a vehicle that unifies the different motivic ideas into a single unified gesture. Ultimately this gesture reflects the overall trajectory of the entire scene, the central dramatic goal of which is the Norns’ gradual awareness of the future downfall of the gods. This awareness is attained only through their strained perception of clouded auguries and distorted visions, and the opening sentence encapsulates this path both through its motivic presence (each of the four motives contained in this sentence strongly relates to characters and events in the subsequent narration) as well as its evolving contour. The sentence projects a distinct dramatic meaning both through the features that it emphasizes in relation to other sentence forms as well as the dramatic scenario that brings it to life.

## VII. Concluding Remarks

Considering the excess of secondary literature on Wagner, it is often difficult to argue that a given subject warrants further research. Yet it is clear from the discussion above that more can be said regarding Wagner’s formal conventions at the level of the phrase. Over the course of his career, Wagner’s music shifted from balanced “dance-like” forms to the asymmetry and open-endedness of his so-called “musical prose.” He never entirely abandons the formal structures and conventions of the classical period, however, and among those that he retains one of the most significant (and salient) is his use of the sentence. As shown above, sentences in Wagner essentially act as dramatic gestures that convey a variety of expressive meanings. In *Tristan*, for example, we hear a love theme



both appear and dissolve, marking the path of Tristan's hope and despair. In *Das Rheingold*, a sentence slowly deteriorates along with Loge's description of dying gods. And in *Götterdämmerung*, an evolving sentence generates a wave of motivic material as the three Norns strain to perceive a flickering fire in the distance.

Because many of Wagner's sentences behave in similar ways, moreover, they can easily be grouped into general categories based on the dramatic meanings that they convey. Three such categories have been presented here, each of which provides a dramatic effect that need not be confined solely to Wagner's music or even to text-based genres. Sentences appear in much of the instrumental music of the nineteenth century, and when heard in dialogue with Wagner's use of the sentence, they often reveal similar dramatic meaning. Consider, for instance, the opening theme of Brahms's Intermezzo in A minor, Op. 76, No. 7 (Example 14). This sentence is entirely unlike the forward-striving Beethovenian sentences that have become so strongly associated with the form: instead of accelerating upward, it is marked by languid, sluggish descent.

Example 14. Brahms, *Intermezzo in A minor*, Op. 76, No. 7,  
mm. 1-8.

The musical score for Brahms's *Intermezzo in A minor*, Op. 76, No. 7, measures 1-8, is presented in piano notation. The tempo is marked *Moderato semplice* and the dynamics are *mp*. The score is divided into three sections: **Basic Idea** (measures 1-4), **Repetition** (measures 5-6), and **Continuation** (measures 7-8). The **Basic Idea** section features a descending melodic line in the right hand, starting on G4 and moving stepwise down to D4, with a supporting bass line in the left hand. The **Repetition** section repeats this basic idea. The **Continuation** section continues the melodic and harmonic development, showing a further descent of the melodic line.

The sentence does, however, resonate quite strongly with Wagner's sentences of exhaustion and dissolution; its manner of repetition and decay is remarkably similar to the descending trajectory of the *Rheingold* sentence given above. The Brahms example, of course, does not relate to a specific character or event, but it does take on dramatic meaning through its dialogue with other sentence forms.<sup>38</sup>

Naturally, there is more to be said about the role of sentences in Wagner's music. Most of the examples presented here constitute distinct and easily presentable sentence constructions (most of them conform to the common 2+2+4 proportion) and do not necessarily reflect the complexity of Wagner's compositional practice. More often than not, Wagner's sentences are broken down, refracted and recombined into long chains of sentential expressions (*Satzketten*) that bubble up across large spans of music. The voice, moreover, often interacts with orchestral sentences in a variety of complex ways; sometimes they resist sentences in the orchestra, sometimes they call them forth. Each of these issues warrants further discussion, but they are beyond the scope of the present paper.

By examining the dramatic possibilities of Wagner's loosely knit sentences we open a window to Wagner's formal practice at the level of the phrase. These sentences not only raise questions about the nature of form as a dramatic gesture, but also tell us a great deal about the ways that Wagner appropriates classical form within a radically different context. Nevertheless, the sentence, like Lorenz's *Barform*, should not be understood as an all-pervasive element in Wagner's music—it does not, by any means, provide an answer to the "Mystery" of Wagnerian form. What it does do is present an easily recognizable vehicle for dramatic expression, and though Webern may be overstating the case when he refers to the sentence as "the form most favored by post-classical music,"<sup>39</sup> its significance in Wagner's operas is undeniable.

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<sup>38</sup> The opening theme of Chopin's Nocturne in F minor, Op. 55, No. 1 is remarkably similar to the Brahms theme, and reveals a similar sentence rhetoric.

<sup>39</sup> Anton Webern, *The Path to New Music*, edited Willi Reich and translated by Leo Black (Bryn Mawr: Theodore Presser Company, 1963): 30.