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**CONDITIONAL NATIONALISM:
A STUDY OF THE NATIONALISTIC IDEOLOGY OF RICHARD
WAGNER WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO HIS MUSIC-DRAMA
*DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NUREMBERG***

by

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Abstract

The nationalism of Richard Wagner has been a hotly contested matter in the popular and academic spheres since even his own lifetime. While it is generally agreed upon that Wagner's work celebrates German nationalism and identity to some degree, a debate rages on under the banner of this discussion, straying into interpretations of his works as antisemitic, white supremacist, or simply chauvinist and bombastic. Surprisingly, few studies have yet examined the nationalism of Richard Wagner beginning with the man himself, and instead, begin the study at whichever opera or piece of prose is deemed as meriting discussion. This thesis instead looks to the personal experiences of Richard Wagner as the primary influencing elements in what we will show to be an ever-evolving and malleable ideology, informed by the composer's successes and failures as much as traditional nationalist philosophy, and events on the European stage. We have found that Wagner's nationalism is therefore not nearly as stalwart and unwavering as previously thought; his love of Germany is a precarious and volatile phenomenon apt to change at moments notice when confronted by disappointment, apparent disrespect, or if there is a financial gain to be made. This conditional nationalism peaks ideologically with the production of his music-drama *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*. Completed as the unification of the German Empire was looming, the *Die Meistersinger* artistically compiles Wagner's nationalistic journey from the previous twenty years of his life, and acts as yet another example of Wagner's manufacturing of nationalism for political or personal gain. The widespread popular success of the opera did not, however, afford Wagner a place of pride in the new regime, and despite repeated mercenary attempts to use the new Empire as a staging ground for his artistic utopia, it was not to be. By the end of his life, Wagner had sunk entirely into the characteristic bitterness which had defined his nationalist journey. He railed against the German establishment, and even the German people. It is our contention, therefore, that Wagner's nationalism was transactional and conditional throughout his life, and merits further study concerning his other operas through the lens of personal experience.

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*For Mum and Dad.
Obviously.*

Introduction

The life, music, and beliefs of Richard Wagner have been and continue to be subject to intense scrutiny both in scholarly discourse and in widespread discussion. Even during his lifetime, the public debate surrounding opinions expressed by Wagner in his musical works, and publications was divisive, and the same issues raised in the mid-nineteenth century about the composer are being raised today. Be it during the yearly Bayreuth festival, the announcement of a Wagnerian work to be performed in Israel, or even when a documentary about the Nazis uses of Wagner for its musical backdrop, divisive and often reactionary discussion and condemnation continue to appear. Typical topics of debate include Wagner's alleged antisemitism, ideological alignment with the Nazi party and, by extension, responsibility for the actions of the architects of Hitler's final solution. Much of this debate on Wagner relies on the presupposition that the composer is an immovable bastion of German nationalism, unwavering in his dedication to the fatherland, whose beliefs are perfectly aligned with those of national socialism. However, the reality is far more complicated than this. While we would concur that Wagner was nationalist in the sense that he was devoted to the overall concept of his homeland, and German identity, his lifelong journey with nationalistic ideology is instead a meandering, often contradictory set of beliefs which change regularly depending on a wide range of influences as will be discussed. This study seeks to understand where Wagner's nationalism came from, how it progressed throughout his life under various influences, and how this nationalism manifested in his music-drama *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*. Following the premiere of the opera, we will examine what form Wagner's nationalism took in the lead up to, and immediate aftermath of the declaration of the German Empire in 1871.

For the sake of clarity throughout the paper, any reference to 'Germany' should be read as the rough geographical area that would eventually comprise the territory of the German Empire of 1871. Early nationalist writers and Richard Wagner regularly refer to Germany as an ideological cultural home in central Europe with a mainly German speaking population.

Another term worth clarifying is ‘nationalism,’ which is mainly referred to in this study as a set of beliefs in support of the cultural concept of a unified German identity, and not necessarily a unified German state. Early German nationalism considered German identity as an inherently tangible phenomenon in central Europe. As German nationalism became more codified in the nineteenth century, it steadily came to refer to a politically motivated idealism whose goal was a unified German State. This distinction will be discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.

Writing in his diary in 1865 Richard Wagner declares ‘I am the most German being, I am the German spirit.’¹ Wagner writes this during a time when the issue of German identity was becoming more hotly contested on the European stage; the Austro-Prussian war was on the near horizon, and the steadily building anti-French sentiment present in the Northern Confederation would, with a little help, eventually boil over into the Franco-Prussian war. Writing privately with confidence on his apparent role as a paragon of what it means to be German, Wagner gives a clear insight into the very essence of his nationalism following twenty years of evolution. Wagner’s concept of German identity is a steadily evolving and malleable ideology, often contradictory in its conviction and subject to change based primarily, as this study has found, on personal misfortune and ambition of status.

Literature Review

A crucial literary starting point for this study of Wagner is in the seminal biographical studies on the composer, of which there are many. While Ernst Newman’s seminal *Life of Wagner* is regarded as one of the most important and exhaustive works about the composer, it suffers from the kind of nineteenth century editorialising that has not dated well in the interim. Much of the material is terrific for establishing base context, but a more essential and reliable work under the banner of Wagner biographies is by Martin Gregor-Dellin.

Richard Wagner: His Life, His Work, His Century is a priceless biography for many reasons,

¹ Wagner, Richard: *The Diary of Richard Wagner 1865–1882. The Brown Book*. Presented and annotated by Joachim Bergfeld. Translated by George Byrd. Cambridge 1980., 73.

not least of which for his use of then-newly unearthed letters, allowing for greater insight into Cosima Wagner, who is so often undervalued. As for the content of the work itself, it generally steers clear of discussions on nationalism, or in identifying specific episodes as contributing to the perception of Wagner as a nationalist composer, which is curious given the ongoing debate as to whether or not that is true.

Music Makes the Nation by Benjamin Curtis is an interesting examination of how composers have historically fit into state-building and identity. This piece does not necessarily focus on the musicology of the compositions themselves, but instead examines a series of composers and how their work is essentially a sociopolitical phenomenon. He combines an introduction to theories of nationalism with a practical look at the impact of music in nation-building. During the third chapter, Curtis looks at how folk sources are used in the context of building national music and makes specific reference to Wagner's operas in the study. However, much of what is covered concerning Wagner in this work is cursory. This does not make the work inherently lacking in quality, but as our study contends, an in-depth investigation into the cause and intent of Wagner's nationalism, the lack of an investigation into the causality of Wagner's nationalism is missed. The work does, however, succeed in illustrating a commonality in how nationalistic music is constructed, and much of Curtis's work has been useful for our own study.

One of the most pointedly relevant collections on the subject of music and German nationalism is *Music & German National Identity* edited by Celia Applegate & Pamela Potter. This collection of articles constitutes a broader discussion of how Germans came to be known as a musical people, and how music in and of itself is considered by some as an inherently German art form. The collection covers a wide array of subjects in this field, ranging from a discussion of Schumann's utopia, to a contemplation of where a sense of musical superiority originated in Germany. One article in the collection is most relevant to this study, as it explicitly discusses *Die Meistersinger*. Thomas S. Grey's *Wagner's Die Meistersinger as National Opera* examines how the reception *Die Meistersinger* led to its interpretation as an opera that best represents Germany. After initially giving background as

to the writing of the opera, and elements of the opera that might be considered nationalistic, the study promptly shifts gears into the twentieth century examining the reception of the opera in the Nazi regime. Although the study is well executed, it would have been prudent to spend more time looking at the reception of the opera in its own time, which we have done with this study.

Dieter Borchmeyer's *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner* looks to the major thematic through lines in Wagner's operas. Redemption through love, an uncertainty of parentage, and other elements are almost universal themes in Wagner according to Borchmeyer. One major concern with the work is the author's unwillingness to draw a connecting line between the events in Wagner's life and the product eventually seen on stage. While he concedes that events in Wagner's life are ultimately important when considering the composer's work, he places the emphasis on these events happening in parallel as opposed to in direct relation. However, the work excellently examines Nuremberg as an aesthetic state for Wagner, and how he would draw on it to create his *Meistersinger*. As will be clear throughout this thesis, we are using Wagner's personal life as the first port of call to understand why he made decisions the way he did, and how he created works that reflected his life.

Imagined Germany: Richard Wagner's Imagined Utopia by Hannu Salmi has been an immensely important and instructive work for this study, examining in detail Wagner's concepts of what it means to be German. Salmi looks at Wagner's early writing and how the composer envisaged a future German utopia built from lessons of the German past, where the *Volk* can be found. However, to Salmi, Wagner is far less opportunistic than this study gives him credit for. He points to Wagner's relationship with King Ludwig II as evidence to support this idea, but somewhat plays down elements in Wagner's private writings which we examine in this thesis. Salmi believes that Wagner is misrepresented as a bitter idealist who was unable to fulfil his dreams, pointing to the Bayreuth festival as evidence to support this idea, but this view precludes Wagner's reaction to the new Bismarckian regime, of which he had attempted so earnestly to be permitted access. As with many of the works discussed

here, Salmi does not place Wagner's personal life at the centre of the discussion over the development of his nationalism, which is an element that will be examined in this thesis.

Richard Wagner and His World edited by Thomas S. Grey is a collection of essays examining different aspects of Wagner's life through a biographical lens. The collection is incredibly well-curated and examines a wide range of common Wagner issues, including his alleged antisemitism, his relationships, and significant events in his life and how they affected him. However, one investigation that is glaringly absent from the collection is a thorough examination of Wagner's developing nationalism and how it was represented in his work. Our study attempts to answer these questions as they are bewilderingly absent from such an exhaustive and otherwise successful collection of work.

In *Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand* by Nicholas Vazsonyi, the author considers how Wagner packaged and marketed his work in Germany. He presents Wagner as a precocious artist with a shrew ability to market his work to the widest audience possible. However, this is an assumption about why Wagner craved success, and an assumption that Wagner wanted success for the sake of success does not reflect the findings of this research paper. Where Vazsonyi succeeds is in accounting for how Wagner marketed himself to a general audience, but the study falls short by not giving any reason for the attempt at success in the first place. As will be shown in this thesis, one of Wagner's primary motivations for his work was the accumulation of wealth and status in order to usher in his national utopia.

While there is demonstrably a great deal of valuable scholarship concerning Richard Wagner and nationalism, much of the research conducted ignores the importance of biographical progression when searching for answers. The motive for Wagner's nationalism is as important as the resulting artwork, publication, or diary entry. Previous examinations of Wagner's nationalism provide essential context for Wagner's beliefs by discussing how they necessarily apply to his artwork. However, few of these studies have attempted to identify the reasons for the composer's fluidity of ideology. Furthermore, although *Die*

Meistersinger is often identified as nationalist, and examinations of the libretto frequently point to nationalist elements in the opera, previous studies have not considered that the reason for Wagner's writing of the opera might have been motivated by personal ambition, financial reward, or status.

We believe that this thesis will be a welcome contribution to the broader scholarship of Wagner's nationalism by demonstrating the importance of interpersonal and locational factors in his ideology, along with the impact of artistic rejection.

Research Questions

The purpose of this thesis is to discover the sources and motivations for Richard Wagner's nationalism as it developed through his life. To do this, it is necessary to investigate the background of German nationalism as a whole. To determine the most pertinent developments in German nationalism, we are using an inverted triangle to investigate the phenomenon, with Richard Wagner's nationalism at the base. From where did German nationalism develop? What elements of Imperial Holy Roman tradition coalesced to form an early sense of national identity. By the time the Holy Roman Empire fell, the state of German nationalism in both popular and philosophical discourse had changed dramatically since its early inception; eventually, the ideology became more focused after the German War of Liberation, when the Napoleonic occupying forces had been removed from German lands. It was into this nationalistic environment that Wagner stepped as a young man.

Using this portrait of German nationalism as the context for the study, we will next look to Richard Wagner himself to address several questions, to wit: From where did Wagner draw his early inspirations for nationalistic thought? These early ideological explorations in the composer's early manifest themselves in his public and private writing during this period, and we will examine this work to discover his early findings. By the time he struck out beyond Germany, his ideas about nationalism must have been influenced by his experiences in other countries. This may have led to a reactionary, knee-jerk form of nationalism defined

by what was extrinsically German, given that he was experiencing different cultures. Additionally, during this period, Wagner may have been influenced by a broader nationalistic discourse present during the mid-nineteenth century. Young Germany, Young Europe, and German Liberalism are prominent movements in the 1840s and added much to the political discourse of the time, in which Wagner may have participated. Following Wagner's involvement in the ill-fated Dresden Uprising, he was exiled from Germany, beginning a nearly thirteen-year extended stay away from his homeland. This absence must have been impactful on his Nationalist ideology in some way. As Wagner was repeatedly denied repatriation to Germany, his nationalism may have diminished. If this happened, does his faith in Germany fail to the point of being actively opposed to the German political establishment? By looking at his personal and public writings, it might be possible to find evidence that displays a cavalier attitude to his loyalty to Germany. Ultimately, this chapter asks if the primary evidence shows whether or not Wagner is willing to bend or break his beliefs if there are gains in finance or status to be obtained.

When Wagner was finally repatriated to Germany, he began writing *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg* in earnest. It stands to reason that his experiences over the previous fifteen years find their way into the central thesis of the opera. Additionally, Wagner must have drawn from elements of Germanic history to construct his idealised Nuremberg for this opera, a city steeped in a historical significance that will be explored in this thesis. The opera is Wagner's artistic manifesto for his idealised Germany, an aesthetic state built on the concept of the *Volk*, as discussed in the early nationalistic works of Herder which were highly influential on Wagner. Further nationalistic theory may have been immediately present in the opera, along with commentary on the developing situation in Germany leading up to the Unification of the Empire, of which Wagner must have been aware. Current events in Germany, including an increased sense of popular nationalism fuelled by, among other things, anti-French sentiment, must have been present in the opera. Given that, for many, the establishment of the German Empire is an inevitability by 1868, is there evidence to show that Wagner used the opera to try and further his standing with the German political elite, banking on being offered a position of cultural centrality once the Empire is established?

On the opera's premiere, *Die Meistersinger* was enthusiastically received by audiences across Germany, with many even recognising the importance of such a nationalistic work amid a turbulent political climate. We seek to determine Wagner's perception of his work in the sea of glowing reviews, and whether or not he was pleased with the outcome. As the opera is essentially a declaration of nationalistic intent for the composer (a statement which he hoped would secure himself a position as a poet-laureate of sorts in the soon to be declared empire), we consider whether or not Wagner was successful in this endeavour. The lead-up to the Franco-Prussian war stoked nationalistic enmity in Germany, and Wagner may have tried to capitalise on this feeling to advance his political standing where the opera failed and may have even adjusted or abandoned previously held beliefs to do so. When the German Empire was finally declared in January 1871 due to the diplomatic machinations of Bismarck, Wagner hoped his nationalistic efforts would pay dividends. Was Wagner successful in his attempts? Indeed, we seek to establish whether or not Wagner was acknowledged by the political elite at all. By the time Wagner begins staging his Bayreuth music festival, his nationalism must have shifted in light of the events since the declaration of the empire. If the empire rejects him, Wagner would likely fall back into the characteristic bitterness that defines his nationalism. If he does not get the return he desires through the lens of nationalism, he may turn against Germany, further evidence that his patriotism is conditional at best, and wildly volatile at worst.

Hypothesis

Our findings conclude that Wagner's ideological journey was essentially a highly malleable and often contradictory system of beliefs. His developing nationalism throughout his life was informed far more by personal ambitions of status and wealth, alongside petty and bitter reactions to perceived mistreatment at the hands of his occasional host countries and German political and artistic establishment, rather than by high minded conviction and selfless hope in the name of German-speaking peoples. Although his lifelong relationship with the notion of a German cultural identity displays a sincere love of a shared German

past, this does not prevent him from turning on his homeland during times of personal struggle. Furthermore, while early convictions about the necessity of a pan-European artistic fraternity appear in his publications, he is only too eager turn on nations like France, Italy, and Switzerland if he believes himself disrespected — professionally, artistically, or personally — by each nation respectively. Indeed, Wagner’s continuing exile paints a portrait of a petulant expatriate quick to praise the virtues of his homeland in one breath and curse its name in the next. By the time he returned to Germany, his collected nationalistic experiences had coalesced into his comic opera *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*. This work represents Wagner’s ideological tapestry up this point and is a combination of the composer’s appreciation of German history, his desires for an aesthetic state of the future, his belief in the spirit of the people as a vehicle for this state. However, it is also clear that the events leading up to the Franco-Prussian war and the unification of the empire had an impact on Wagner during the writing process, and his attempts to ingratiate himself with the political establishment is similarly present in the opera. Following the widespread success of *Die Meistersinger* Wagner would be disappointed by the new Bismarckian regime, who did not value his kind of artistry despite is repeated attempts to please them, including fundamentally changing his views on Bismarck’s character, his chauvinistic nationalistic writing of the time, and in compositions in support of the new Empire. As final evidence for Wagner’s mercenary nationalism, once he is locked out of his desired position in the new empire, he once again returns to bitter disdain for the regime and resigns to the curation of his Bayreuth music festival for the remainder of his life.

Structure

To build a solid footing for the main focus of the study, we have included a brief examination of how German nationalism developed from its early stages into the nineteenth century. Early German nationalism presents itself more as identity through administrative and confessional necessity during the Reformation, developed by the ruling monarchy of the Holy Roman Empire and the expansion of the protestant faith. Intermingled with this is a crucial element that acts as a through-line of German identity to Wagner’s time, and beyond:

to define what is intrinsically oneself by what is extrinsically oneself. Significant events on the European stage such as the Thirty Years War contributed to this rise of suspicion and outright hostility to those who did not fall within the boundaries of the empire. By the eighteenth century, writers had begun to discuss historical precedent as a reason for identity, claiming that those with German ancestry possessed qualities unique to them. This was reinforced by a new historiographic method which places the historic Germanic conflict with the Roman Empire as the genesis for the German nation. By the time Napoleon was defeated, German nationalism was becoming more codified and political, with groups calling for the unification of the German nation, now that the Holy Roman Empire had fallen and the invaders repelled. It was into this environment of discussion and patriotism that Wagner was born. Although there is exhaustive literature on the development of German nationalism, this chapter will focus mainly on the elements that are eventually found in the ideology of Richard Wagner.

The second chapter is a biographical sketch of Wagner's nationalism as it developed through his early life. Richard Wagner's first explorations with national identity began at a young age through mythological and historical literature which informed his early assumptions about German identity and this appreciation of the past is one of the few constant pillars of his ideology. Using a chronological biographical structure as a backdrop, this chapter looks at elements that influenced Wagner's early life and how they impacted his belief system. Wagner began his adult life as a somewhat directionless disestablishmentarian, joining in student unrest at his University, but by the time he had struck out into the world as a working musician, his views start to become more coherent. His publications around the time display a kind of pan-European idealism, deciding that most Europeans possessed virtues of some kind and this was to be admired. However, as will be examined at length, his time spent trying to find financially supportive work, alongside creative fulfilment, severely impacted his early thoughts on how Europe should work toward artistic unity. Here, looking at his private letters and published essays, alongside his involvement in political organisations in university, during the failed Dresden uprising, and then into his exile of more than ten years, it is possible to see Wagner's

nationalism evolve. Wagner's experiences during his exile and on his return have developed what we have defined as 'Transactional Nationalism,' that is to say, nationalism that peaks ideologically when there is a possibility of a return, be it in terms of finance, employment, status, or esteem. This chapter ends with Wagner's repatriation to Saxony, as once he is back in Germany, he adds to and completes the most significantly nationalistic piece of work in his *oeuvre*.

Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg is Wagner's only comic opera and is subject of many examinations as a work of nationalism. In this third chapter, we discuss the ideological origins of the opera, and how the composer's concept of history, hopes for an aesthetic state of the future, experiences over the previous fifteen years, and contemporary events on the European stage inform the overall message of the opera. Wagner draws on essential elements of German history to build his idealised Nuremberg and populates it with historical figures all of whom reinforce his belief that to find the Germany of the future, one must take lessons from the past. Here, we look at why Nuremberg is a place of such historical significance which explains why Wagner used it for his opera, and how he echoes philosophers like Herder in their assertion that it is in the past where one can find the *Volk*, a concept which is essentially the very spirit of the people themselves. Wagner's Nuremberg is apolitical in the sense that he believes the German state of the future can only exist through the dismantling of the current structure in favour of an aesthetically focused state of the future that values the artist. However, as contemporary events on the European stage display, the issue of German unification was hotly debated, and Wagner may have been trying to position himself favourably through his opera once it became clear that a unified empire was a certainty. Wagner's ideas about Germanness, informed by a reverence for tradition and also by what is un-German, appear in the opera prophetically, intermingling with historicism to ultimately create a manifesto of Wagner's peaking nationalistic idealism.

Whether or not it was received in the manner in which it was offered, along with Wagner's final expression of transactional nationalism, is the subject of the final chapter. If Wagner intends for the opera to be an artistic expression of his desire to be a central figure in the

new empire, does the critical public and political establishment pick up on these desires? After the release of the opera it was performed throughout Germany to great success, and a few prominent opera critics expressly identify the nationalistic idealism in the work, along with its potential as a creation that might be representative of the popular spirit. The opera would eventually be performed throughout Germany, but it did not give him the political traction which he needed to make his artistic utopia possible. His final period of active nationalism is in the lead up to unification following the premiere of the opera, and specifically during the Franco-Prussian War. Here, we can identify through letters and publications a marked change of heart with regard to the political establishment, adopting a positive view of Bismarck and attempting to persuade the Prussian that he holds value to the new empire. Throughout this period, Wagner adopts an aggressively pro-German stance, attempting to ride the wave of popular nationalism present during the late 1860s. Ultimately, he was locked out of the new regime, which was functional to the point that it did not value Wagner's kind of art in any meaningful way. Following this, Wagner sank into bitterness against the new regime and prioritised his Bayreuth festival until the end of his life.

Ultimately, this study seeks to identify the forces that influenced Wagner's developing nationalism throughout his life, against the backdrop of broader nationalistic discourse and the lead up to German unification in 1871. The exploration of nationalism in early life, his revolutionary period, his exile, and ultimately his return to Germany all had a profound effect on his nationalistic outlook and peaked creatively with his writing premiering of *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*. His ideological beliefs and personal ambitions are intertwined in this work, but ultimately it did not have the desired effect for the composer, and despite his final attempts at securing a place of honour in the new regime, he was not successful.

Chapter 1

The Historical Formation of a German Identity

Understanding the trajectory of Wagner's nationalism, with its emphasis on historical precedent, language, and Germanic sensibilities requires an examination of the origins of German nationalism itself. The purpose of this brief chapter is to give an account of the early formation of national consciousness in the area comprising what would eventually encompass the German Empire in 1871. Scholarly discourse surrounding the beginnings of German nationalism is generally in agreement that a sense of national identity had its most productive moments of development during times of conflict, where it was possible to define oneself primarily by what is extrinsic. That is to say, it was and remains possible to define a shared community by the very existence of those who are not in that community, the 'other.' Much of the literature concerning this early period, namely the sixteenth century, is in agreement about the nature of how what can now be called national consciousness formed. The debate becomes more complicated with the question of nineteenth century German nationalism, namely concerning what constitutes true nationalism in a period of political and cultural disunity. Of course, the ultimate aim of this study is to discover what forces influenced Richard Wagner during his life, and how those influences informed his nationalism both publicly and privately. Therefore, we will not be engaging the discussion on what nationalistic forces influenced the ultimate unification in 1871, and will instead focus on the ideological developments that may have influenced Wagner only.¹ This chapter will examine the early years of steadily forming 'national' identity in the Holy Roman Empire, mainly defined through a series of conflict with neighbours, and the reformation. The main point of focus where Wagner is concerned lies with the theorists of the eighteenth century who first began to explore the concept of *Volk*, most notably Herder, Abbt, and

¹ For a terrific breakdown of the competing historiographies of German national thought, comparing seminal works of literature on the topic and ultimately concluding that no single explanation can provide all the answers, see: John Breuilly, "Nation and Nationalism in Modern German History" in *The Historical Journal*, no. 3 (1990), pp 659-675.

Zimmerman, whose work concerning the value of History as precedent for national identity permeates the public and private work of Wagner in the mid-nineteenth century. We will then look at the conditions by which a concept of national unity developed in the wake of the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, and as a reactionary ideology to occupation by French forces before the War of Liberation. Leading into the next chapter we will identify the conditions of nationalistic thought around the time of Wagner's early life. Further information on national thought during the second half of the nineteenth century will be in later chapters, to contextualise the work of Wagner, primarily around the time of his writing and premiering of his music-drama, *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*.

Peter Wilson — in his highly informative and functional study of the Holy Roman Empire — contends, that the formation of a national consciousness began roughly at the end of the fifteenth century.² Heer has classified 'Germans' as existing before this, asserting that during the tenth century the four main tribes of central and northern Europe — Saxons, Bavarians, Franks, and Swabians — were essentially Germans, but does not offer any evidence of any apparent unity among them, save for military alliances during times of emergency.³ Previously, *Deutsch* in imperial documents referred simply to the inhabitants north of the Alps and east of the Rhine, many of whom did not actually speak German.⁴ Political marriages and negotiations created 'quasi territorial' states, and phrases such as 'German nation,' and 'German language' appear around this time alongside a humanist interest in the German past, leading questions regarding German identity to arise.⁵ Emperor Maximilian I used political propaganda to generate support for a series of wars, emphasising the threat from the Turks in the east, and the Burgundian French in the west. The rhetoric emphasised a need for national self-defence which organically introduced a new vocabulary of imperial identity into the language of imperial politics.⁶ Previously, inhabitants of the

² Peter H. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire, 1495-1806*. (Basingstoke, 1999), p. 105

³ Friedrich Heer, *The Holy Roman Empire*, (New York, 2002), p. 23.

⁴ *Wilson*, p. 105

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 105.

⁶ Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2012), p. 53.

empire would simply identify with the area from which they came.⁷ The emperor's literary imagination began to overlap with the philosophical and mythological discussions of contemporary humanists, who were beginning to examine the concept of a collective German past. Attempting to define the character of the empire itself, they emphasised what was inherently not of the empire, and the need to defend against those threats. During the reign of Maximilian I, there were 37 poet laureates crowned in the Empire with the aim of creating a legion of literary propagandists, expressly to enhance the unity of the Reichstag in defiance of those threats.⁸ Friedrich Heer's *The Holy Roman Empire*, examines Maximilian's role as political propagandist and his utilisation of artists to spread the sentiment of this unity. Using cheap wood engraving, he was able to disseminate his literary projects to the people of the empire at low cost. He gathered great artists in the cultural centres of the period, Augsburg, Nuremberg, and Strassburg for this project, to manufacture an aesthetic which reinforced identity. Heer calls this process an 'invention of ancestors,' supported by the humanists of the time.⁹

Therefore, in the early sixteenth century, humanists would unite imperial inhabitants through a common political culture. They traced the genealogy of European peoples to help define a sense of ancestral precedent for a steadily forming German identity. Although contemporary writing that refers to the 'German nation' frequently defines it as areas where the local populace spoke the German language,¹⁰ According to Wilson, Language was only one of seven characteristics which might distinguish one nation from another. Virtues and qualities like honesty, loyalty, and diligence were given greater emphasis as signifiers for a national identity.¹¹ Although Richard Wagner would examine the German language in his nationalistic journey, he too emphasises human qualities that he believes identify a person's

⁷ Wilson, p. 104.

⁸ Whaley, p. 55.

⁹ Heer, p. 143.

¹⁰ Whaley, p. 53.

¹¹ Wilson, p. 105.

nationalism. It is clear, therefore, that even in the Germany of the middle ages, there was such a thing as national consciousness. Naturally, it is not the same kind of active nationalism as in the nineteenth century, but there was an awareness of cultural commonality, calling back to Germanic conflicts with the Roman Empire to reinforce an identity defined by conflict with others.¹² This awareness was most pronounced during the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century, as Protestantism came to be a relevant factor in German identity, defined by opposition to the Catholic Church in Rome.¹³ This shift from an assumption of the Roman genesis of the empire to a German creation myth was pioneered by prominent humanists Hutton and Jakob Wimpfeling who demanded liberation from the yolk of Rome.

The issue of language as a signifier of identity becomes more relevant in the mid-sixteenth century. Where previously Saxon and low-German dialects were predominantly used in Northern Europe, now high-German was being used as a communicative tool throughout the empire.¹⁴ This paradigm shift of communication begins with the publication of Luther's bible, and the newly defined *Deutsch* becomes a cultural touchstone of commonality based on language and ethnicity.¹⁵ Communication became an essential unifying force for the empire. The dissemination of knowledge throughout the empire, not just religious texts, helped to steadily codify national identity through letters; discussions of economic and culture addressed political questions which frequently included descriptions of principalities and other administrative regions. Along with the development of imperial taxation, this widespread communication helped to raise consciousness in imperial subjects that they were part of a greater whole than just their immediate vicinity.¹⁶ Benedict Anderson discusses the

¹² *Whaley*, p. 51.

¹³ *Wilson*, p. 107

¹⁴ Further exploration of how the German language developed can be found in this text. Whaley examines how German developed as both a language of religion under Martin Luther, and one of administration due to the apparent codification by the emperor Maximilian and the elector Frederick. *Whaley*, p. 52.

¹⁵ *Wilson*, p. 107.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 111.

printing press as a communicative tool, acting as one of the most important elements in the development of a national consciousness. Anderson concludes that the development of a 'national print language' is attributed largely to the establishment of a hierarchy of dialect, with whatever language of power the ruling class used assimilating lesser dialects, growing the community.¹⁷ Maximilian I, for example, accomplished this through his system of cultural propaganda.

During the peace of Prague, Spanish diplomats sought to capitalise on this apparent presence of German identity by producing pamphlets intended on mobilising German national sentiment against France. The concept of a 'German nation' that had to defend its greatness against myriad enemies appeared in Spanish official documentation in the early 1630s.¹⁸ Although very few princes were convinced that a military alliance with Spain was a productive way to promote German nationalism, the 'beloved German fatherland' was frequently referred to in German language pamphlets of the same era.¹⁹ This bolstered a sense of national identity, alongside the unwelcome presence of foreign armies on German soil.²⁰ By 1643, Hermann Conring had formulated the theory of the specific German genesis of the Reich, as contrast to the traditional assumptions of Roman origins, helping to solidify the rhetoric of a German fatherland using historical precedent.²¹

Throughout this period and into the eighteenth century, the use of imperial symbols as signifiers of identity become more prominent both at home and abroad. Most notably, the double-headed eagle came to represent the empire; each head representing the imperial and German royal titles respectively, an important distinction when considering the development

¹⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (New York, 2006). p. 53

¹⁸ Ronald G. Asche, *The Thirty Years War*; (London, 1997) p. 110-11

¹⁹ *Wilson*, p. 106.

²⁰ *Asche*, p. 111.

²¹ *Whaley*, p. 57.

of German identity.²² The eagle was adopted by Germans travelling abroad, appearing on merchant ships, caravans, and on the badges of student societies in Italian universities. Even after the fall of the Holy Roman Empire, the double headed eagle would still symbolise a shared fatherland.²³

More solidified examples of national awareness and codification appear in the mid-eighteenth century with writers such as Zimmerman, Abbt, and Moser defining nationalist idealism even before the romantics began to explore the idea. In Zimmerman's 1758 'On National Pride,' he examines the possibilities of whether the love of fatherland was possible in specific governing structures. He contended that the core feature of nationalism in a republican citizen's love of country, and other national qualities such as ethnicity or active contribution were unnecessary.²⁴ Despite considering nationalism a necessary element of a cohesive republic, Zimmerman also identified national pride as a double-edged blade, writing, 'national hatred arises from the very same sources which create national pride.' National pride was in and of itself inherently prejudice, and the product of collective imagination. He cautions that such harmful elements of national pride could lead to such extremes as death in the name of one's fatherland.²⁵ Only three years later, Thomas Abbt published 'Death for the Fatherland,' in 1761. Here, Abbt offers a new ranking of virtues in those who would be German. However, unlike his predecessors holding honour and goodness as the prime virtues, Abbt instead holds the ultimate sacrifice for one's Nation as the most important virtue one can have. However, some of the early romantics held that the fatherland for which they would die did not yet exist and that the Holy Roman Empire must die for this to be realised.²⁶ As we will show in a later chapter, this resonates strongly with

²² Heer devotes much of his work on the Holy Roman Empire to the importance of symbolism, imperial regalia, and the double-headed Imperial eagle. *Heer*, p. 22-25

²³ *Wilson*, p. 115.

²⁴ Christian Jansen, "The Formation of German Nationalism, 1740-1850," in Helmut W. Smith (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Modern German History*, (New York, 2011), p. 237.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 237.

²⁶ *Wilson*, p. 107.

Wagner's hopes for an aesthetic state of the future; apolitical in structure and centrally concerned with art and aesthetic beauty. Wagner would hope that the empire of 1871 would be this aesthetic state, but he is disappointed, as we shall see. However, as Jansen points out, the writings of Abbt and Zimmerman are not referring to Germany in their examination of national pride, but Prussia as this 'Greater Prussian nationalism,' did not have any elements of pan-German identity building.²⁷ When Abbt and Zimmerman published their treatises, the Seven Years War was ongoing, so it makes sense that they point their nationalist examinations toward Prussia. Jansen considers 'On the German national Spirit,' by Friedrich Karl Moser to be the predecessor of greater German nationalism, published on the conclusion of hostilities. His thesis is as follows:

'We are one people with one name and language. We live under a common leader, under one set of laws that determine our constitution, rights, and duties, and we are bound together by a common and great interest in freedom [...] In our internal power and strength we are the first Empire in Europe [...] and yet, as we are now, we still remain a puzzle as a political system, the prey of our neighbours, the subject of their mockery, [...] disunited among ourselves, enfeebled by our divisions, strong enough to hurt ourselves, powerless to save ourselves, phlegmatic towards the honor of our name, indifferent to the dignity of the law, envious of the leader, suspicious of each other, [...] a great and, at the same time, despised people, one who has the potential to be happy, but is, in reality, much to be pitied.'²⁸

Here, it would seem that Moser is highly critical of the disunion of the particularist regions and principalities of the Empire. Yet importantly, we can identify elements of later nationalism appearing in this work, the *Sprachnation* (a people unified by the same language), the *Kulturnation* (a people unified by the same culture) and the nation as an *Erinnerungsgemeinschaft* (community of remembrance). Since Moser considered 'the Germans' to share the same language, culture, and historical experiences, he opposed the

²⁷ Jansen, p. 238.

²⁸ Jansen, p. 239.

particularism of the German states. These elements appear in the writings of romanticists as we shall now see.

While this outline of the development of German Nationalistic thought establishes the set of essential ideas which Wagner was eventually influenced by in one way or another, it does not account for the whole of his experience; that is to say, the artistic forces which moulded his creative vision. Such forces are found in Nineteenth Century German Romanticism. Romanticism took an adoringly favourable view of the Germanic and Scandinavian past, glorifying and, revering old tracts of Germanic literature and historical writings. Early trendsetters of the movement itself were the Schlegel brothers, who, in their enthusiasm for the Germanic past, held up Romanticism as ‘a beacon light for European literature, and brought nationalism into bold relief.’²⁹ Interestingly and pointedly, Hayes additionally mentions how the Schlegel brothers contributed a great deal to the ‘popularity of ideas about racial superiority, purity of blood, purity of language, and national soul,’ sinister ideas which will, eventually, worm their way through culture, reaching the most extreme and disturbing heights of German nationalism both in the nineteenth and Twentieth centuries.³⁰

According to the romanticists, art was a kind of new religion. In reaction to the functionality of the early eighteenth century, they contended that the more impassioned the man was, the more fully he was able to live. They looked back to medieval history with a sense of wonder and desire and believed that such wonder was pointedly and dreadfully absent from the world. Drawing from traditions of the past, the art of the knights and guilds could inspire the present, for therein lies the true national soul. Kohn writes that the romanticist ‘found himself rooted in the past and determined by it,’ which is an apt way of describing the ideology.³¹ The nation is, to the romanticists, an organic phenomenon of nature and history.

²⁹ Carlton J. H Hayes, *The historical evolution of modern nationalism* (New York, 1968), p. 102.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 108-9.

³¹ Hans Kohn, "Romanticism and the Rise of German Nationalism" in *The Review of Politics*, no. 4 (1950), pp 443-472.

In terms of nationalism, identity was not based upon a modern constitution or political structure but upon traditional customs which form organically, and which are not interfered with by external forces. The true folk-spirit, the *Volksgeist*, lay at the heart of the nation, and it is what defined it, it is where true wisdom can be found.³²

Arguably the most instrumental romantic theorist in the case of Richard Wagner is Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder's vision was much broader than other early nationalists, and like the other romanticists, he saw creative forces at work in every phenomenon of nature and History. Herder's ideas explore the notion of a nation as an organic entity, with individual strands of culture contributing to the larger whole. Culture and national identity are created by the very existence of the group mind and is set apart from other similar national entities by such differentiating factors as language, tradition, and communication, to name a few.³³ To Herder, truth value and beauty are found only in History and manifest themselves in the national spirit, the *Volk*. Therefore, according to Iggers, true art and true poetry for Herder are thus always national and historical.³⁴ Until the late eighteenth Century, the term *Volk* predominantly acted as a signifier for the lower classes and contained a pejorative undertone.³⁵ Here, however, it had become a central signifier of national identity. As shall be shown in a later chapter, this eventually became an essential cornerstone for Wagner's nationalism in the context of *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, as his concept of the German past was vital in his ultimate message propagated through the work.

A crucial aspect to his work when considering the attitudes that Wagner would eventually espouse is that Herder considered any imitation or attempt to emulate neighbouring cultures

³² *Ibid*, p. 454.

³³ Royal J. Schmidt, "Cultural Nationalism in Herder" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, no. 3 (1956), p. 407.

³⁴ For a comprehensive breakdown of German historiography, including a detailed map of Herder's beliefs, see Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present*, (Hanover, 1988), p. 37.

³⁵ *Jansen*, p. 240.

to be inherently damaging to social process and progress. Wagner himself would eventually write about how traditional German Opera's attempt to replicate and play to French and Italian styles amounted to regressive folly, but more on that later. Herder's pointed avoidance of other cultures in order to secure the progression of one's own is unusual in that it possesses a decidedly non-aggressive quality, in stark contrast to later nationalist's both in the Nineteenth and, naturally, Twentieth centuries. Indeed, other cultures are to be avoided but only in order to realise the potential of one's Nation. The Nation did not need to impose itself on another to become great; it had all the greatness within itself already and needed to look within to locate that distinction.

Herder would also look back to the History of German-speaking peoples as evidence of cultural identity, of a German nation. Wagner would use historical precedent to his nationalistic ends, eventually and most notably with his Opera *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg* which will be dealt with in due course. On signalling to the German people that they were indeed members of a culturally united historical people and not merely the residents of any number of different states (as under the Holy Roman Empire), Herder paved the way for the German nationalism that was to come in the early Nineteenth Century.

According to Schultz, it was the catastrophic Prussian defeats and the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806 to which we owe the spark of true German nationalism. What people thought of the empire is demonstrated by their reactions to its demise. Hegel lamented Germany no longer being a state and contended that the empire best represented the German character. Richard Wagner thought so too, through his idealised Nuremberg. By setting his Opera in a commercial and cultural hub-city of the empire, Wagner celebrated an idealised German past that defined the spirit of the *Volk*.³⁶ After the humiliating defeats at the hands of Napoleon, the anti-French motif that had been a common motif of the German

³⁶ *Wilson*, p. 117.

middle classes since the late eighteenth century — a large part due to the writing of Moser and Abbt, as examined above — was more refined than ever before. Schultz writes ‘the people and their language were discovered as the only and final legitimising basis for the nation.’³⁷

In the winter of 1807-8 Johann Gottlieb Fichte gave a lecture to the people of French-occupied Berlin entitled *Lectures to the German Nation*. Here, he asserted that Germans are the ‘unadulterated people,’ fighting for against military and cultural subjugation.³⁸ He envisioned a political entity representative of the cultural bedrock of the German people. Culture, to Fichte, was indeed an essential element for the German people, but culture could only be effectively promoted and driven by the state itself. The federal state, such that it is, must promote and act as the catalyst for cultural progress and identity: a circular relationship resulting in a wholesome national union.³⁹ Fichte sees the German cultural entity as positively central to, and the genesis of, civilised moral righteousness, at least by his definition. Yet at his time of writing the German state did not yet exist, and he observes that these most upstanding traits of German universality have been farmed out abroad, and it is only there were, contemporarily, the German may find them, not having a nation of his own in which to cultivate such qualities:

‘...Magnanimity, humanity, gallantry, fortitude. All these were originally German traits and have been acquired from the Germans. The German always seeks a higher universality, but at present, he can develop this only abroad.’⁴⁰

³⁷ Hagen Schulze, *The Course of German Nationalism*, (Cambridge, 1998), p. 49.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 50.

³⁹ H. C Engelbrecht, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte; a study of his political writings with special reference to his nationalism* (New York, 1968). p. 152-153.

⁴⁰ *Ibid* p. 141.

Such observations are, as this study will show, profoundly influential on the early writings of Wagner, who traces many artistic virtues found internationally, to the benevolent wandering German, the 'Weltbeglucker.'

Where originally Herder developed nationalism as a cultural phenomenon rooted in idealism, the later philosophy of Ernst Arndt would bring a political element to the concept, with the goal of German statehood a priority.⁴¹ Indeed, Herder's assertion on how unique the German nation has necessitated the existence of, in Arndt's view, the inherent 'other.' The nation must avoid corruption from these other groups. If these groups were to be permitted access and influence, then communities would develop within communities, leading to the subversion and destabilisation of the state itself.⁴² For Arndt, this distrust strayed into highly emotional hatred, venomously attacking the French, the Jews, and the English. This venom demanded, in Arndt's eyes, an appropriate series of wars in order to 'inspire humanity to heroic deeds and great sacrifices...' which would ultimately 'reawak[en] and regenerate men.'⁴³ The necessity of establishing a national sense of distrust can perhaps be attributed to this political element mentioned earlier, as Arndt sought a German State, and not merely a unified cultural community as desired by Herder. Effectively, the fundamental differentiation between peoples was highlighted by the very separation of their identities through conflict. This meant that war with the French created an individual national character defined by what was essentially not- German.⁴⁴

During the inter-war years, when it became clear to Germans that Napoleon intended on using Germany as a recruitment ground for his *Grande Armée*, and as an abject of economic

⁴¹ Hans Kohn, "Arndt and the Character of German Nationalism" in *The American Historical Review*, no. 4 (1949), p. 787.

⁴² Alfred G Pundt, *Arndt and the nationalist awakening in Germany [dissertation] by Alfred G. Pundt, ..* (New York (Columbia University Press), 1935). p. 133.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 134.

⁴⁴ *Jansen*, p. 242.

exploitation, this identification of national identity through what was an ‘other,’ became even more pronounced. The wider population, initially indifferent to the issue, began to find common cause in the hatred of an occupying power. This led to the organisation of a series of clubs and organisations, often primarily concerned with athletic and cultural pursuits, but many of which constituted a forum where the debate on the nature of identity could be held.⁴⁵ Organisations such as the *Turngesellschaft* (Gymnastics Society) allowed members to improve their physique but also their sense of willpower and communal spirit and would hold night marches and military manoeuvres in preparation for an uprising against the occupying forces. When the War of Liberation finally broke out, terms such as ‘Fatherland,’ and ‘Volk,’ were in common usage, and a wave of pro-German propaganda appeared across the nation through political discourse and the arts, especially poetry, and bands of volunteers would refer to themselves as ‘the nation in arms.’⁴⁶

Institutions such as the German Confederation had been long established by the time Napoleon was defeated, and with this new victory, they sought to capitalise on the wave of patriotism to strengthen themselves politically. However, according to Jansen, the liberal and democratic opposition simply considered these organisations as organs of foreign rule, and so did not identify with the state-nationalism present at the time. Therefore, the *Volk* was seen as a powerful representation of ‘Germanness’ in the face of an undesirable political system, an apolitical statement of identity much in the way that Wagner would eventually harness it in his opera. The Germans had fought for a vague fatherland during the War of Liberation, but this concept of a fatherland was at once more connected to the national spirit than a political structure. Jansen argues that the essential components of early during this period were, therefore:

1. The understanding of the German ‘Volk’ or the German Nation as an ethnic entity, given by nature and based on common descent;

⁴⁵ *Schultz*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 55.

2. A sense of superiority over other peoples;
3. Extensive territorial ambitions which were bound to cause wars with neighbouring states;
4. A revaluation of nationalism turning it into an ersatz religion;
5. Strong resentments towards France.⁴⁷

Jansen goes on to argue that these elements are part of a through-line of German nationalism present from the Congress of Vienna through to the eventual unification in 1871. Although these criteria might mirror the ideology of politically charged nationalists of the 1860s, the same cannot consistently be said for Richard Wagner. As will be discussed in the following chapters, Wagner's nationalistic beliefs are as volatile as they are made malleable by personal ambition.

The thirty years that passed between the congress of Vienna and the 1848 revolutions were characterised by steady radicalisation and by general disappointment in Germanic rulers who had not advanced the cause of German unification.⁴⁸ Different political camps developed with different demands for the ruling class, including an idealistic pan-German group, aligned with the mid-century Young Europe movement. We will deal with Richard Wagner's involvement in the movement in the next chapter.

Throughout the mid nineteenth century, the feverish and often chaotic course of German nationalism pushed forward under the influence of these cultural and political forces, now manifest in revolutionary movements, culminating eventually in the declaration of the German Empire in 1871. The predominant cultural element of this nationalism was heavily informed by the promotion of a sense of cultural unity, through multiple strands of the arts as a whole, with Wagner being but one of many artists — albeit an influential one — pushing the ideal for which the romanticists strove. On the day of victory, as we will see, cultural nationalists like Wagner found themselves sorely disappointed, selfishly or

⁴⁷ *Jansen*, p. 242.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 243.

selflessly, when the cultural utopia they had dreamed of was swept aside in favour of the clinical statecraft espoused by Bismarck. It would seem that German cultural glory was not to be proclaimed alongside the empire in the hall of mirrors on 18 January 1871. The cultural zenith had come and gone; its glory owed to the very national disunion against which the idealists had so earnestly fought.⁴⁹

As detailed in Ernest Newman's seminal work on the life of Richard Wagner, the conditions into which the titular composer emerged in his heyday was similar enough to what prevailed when the empire rose and had been as oppressively unwelcome for some time. Every aspect of the German musical scene was suffering, with small under-skilled orchestras playing alongside singers who were enticed to Germany from Italy, and composers struggled with attempting to stage their creations with generally pitiful financial return.^{50 51} Fate decided to award this period of German history to the newborn Richard Wagner on 22 May 1813. As Newman puts it, 'A man was needed to focus in himself all the elements of revolt, artistic, political and social, that had been slowly forming in German music during the last half-century, and in Richard Wagner, nature threw up the man.'⁵² The next chapter will draw a focused biographical sketch of Wagner through the context of his developing nationalism.

⁴⁹ Rudolf Rucker, *Nationalism and Culture* (Montréal, 1998), p. 153-4.

⁵⁰ Ernest Newman, *The life of Richard Wagner: Vol I* (New York, 1976), p. 132.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 155-161.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 171.

Chapter 2

Wagner's Explorations in Germanness

Where the previous chapter dealt with the state of German nationalism into which Wagner would emerge, including concepts of history and folk identity, this chapter will chart a biographical sketch of Wagner's nationalism as it evolved and morphed under the influence of those ideas previously discussed, along with events in his own life and artistic theoretical peregrination. We will detail the major milestones through the analysis his public and private nationalistic writings, over the backdrop of biography. Early artistic influences sparked a sense of identity not yet fully formed in the mind of the composer, and as he moved with purpose into the world of music, his exploratory concepts of what it means to be German, along with what artistic sensibilities that German might possess, flowered and meandered through this series of articles and reflections. His time in university was defined by a commonplace juvenile hunger for directionless rebellion, until Wagner found common cause in the idealism of 'Young Europe,' seeing Germany as part of a greater whole rather than a nation with any necessary supremacy. During this period, he began his lifelong series of publications concerning artistic theory. These early articles seemed to mirror his pan-European idealism, calling for artistic unity rather than division, even if there are minor references to the latter. As he struck out into the wider world, Wagner's perspective began to shift, and found that a pragmatic approach to nationalistic loyalty was required in order to eventually see a financial return for his efforts and left for Paris. In the French capital, he found nothing of substance, and we are convinced that it is in his perceived treatment at the hands of the French where Wagner's nationalism took root.

International developments may also have had an effect on Wagner at this point, as his writings became somewhat more supportive of German culture during and after the Rhine crisis, and the ascension of Frederick William IV to the throne of Prussia led the composer to appeal to the new monarch's artistic sensibilities. In the midst of all this, Wagner's prose

works and letters begin to explore German artistic identity; ‘Germanness’ by definition of what is inherently non-German. It is difficult to see Wagner’s ideological progression as anything other than reactionary choices made to help with his standing at any given moment depending on his host country. For example, in his series of letters, which were published both in France and Germany, he writes in a very different tone depending on where the articles are published. His opinion on international artistic unity begins to change in favour of Germany throughout the 1840s, and this was intermingled with private readings on German history and myths which served as the early inspiration for *Die Meistersinger*. His political ideals of the time appear in publications which make their way into the opera as well. After the failure of the Dresden Revolution he made another attempt at success in Paris which did nothing but further enflame his anti-French rhetoric, and for the next decade he would lean into his pro-German idealism while being careful to exclude the existing establishment in his praise. When Wagner finally returned to Germany in 1862, the sum of his experiences over his early life manifested themselves in his opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, which will be dealt with in the next chapter. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to establish the conditions and influences which affected Wagner’s nationalism up until his return to Germany from exile, and how these conditions were malleable and contradictory depending on his treatment, or his perception of his treatment, at the hands of others.

Early in his life, Wagner had little interest in being a composer, and instead was drawn to the classics, hoping to become a poet. It was in Dresden where he first dabbled in romanticism through making the acquaintance of the famed operatic composer Carl Maria von Weber. Wagner was enamoured by Weber’s romantic *Opera der Freischütz*, opening his eyes to a romantic connection to Germany itself. Weber himself referred to the opera as ‘the kind of opera all Germans want — a self-contained work of art in which all elements, contributed by the arts in cooperation, disappear and remerge to create a new world.’¹ Naturally, this approach to art was directly influential on the young Wagner, who would build on such sentiments in theory and practise later on. In what might be one of his earliest

¹ Burton D Fisher, *A History of Opera* (Miami, 2005), p. 83.

active emotional connections to a sense of nationalistic identity, albeit written in retrospect: ‘I knew where lay my native land. I felt myself a German. That feeling never left me.’² Weber so influenced Wagner with his remarkably innovative approach to the form that, on the removal of Weber’s remains from London to Dresden, Wagner composed special music and for and delivered the eulogy at the memorial service.³ Indeed, when the family moved to Leipzig in 1827, and Wagner found himself increasingly uninterested in his studies, his preference began to drift more toward the music of great German composers, like Beethoven, and ultimately decided he would become a musician.⁴

By 1830 Wagner had composed his first piece, which was performed late in the year at a charity concert. Throughout rehearsals, the orchestra and conductor had severe misgivings about the strange piece, and sure enough, the final performance was profoundly embarrassing for Wagner. Following this Wagner enrolled at the University of Leipzig.⁵ If there is a definitive location where Wagner’s nationalism flowered — albeit in a youthful, directionless flowering — then surely it must be Leipzig. Immersed in a frantic environment of intellectual discourse, Wagner latched on to the students and professors who embodied the spirit of resistance so often found within institutions of higher learning. Indeed, when news of the July Revolution reached his ears, Wagner was inspired by the French revolutionaries writing, in retrospect:

‘The world as a historic phenomenon began from that day in my eyes, and naturally my sympathies were wholly on the side of the Revolution, which I regarded in the light of a heroic popular struggle crowned with victory and free from the blemish of the terrible excesses that stained the first French Revolution.’⁶

² Carl Friedrich Glasenapp, trans. William Ashton Ellis, *Life of Richard Wagner* (London, 1900), p. 88.

³ *Fisher*, p. 86.

⁴ *Glasenapp* p. 102.

⁵ Martin Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner, his life, his work, his century* (San Diego, 1983) p. 45-46.

⁶ Richard Wagner, *My life* (London, 1911), p. 47.

Emboldened by this sense of revolutionary urgency, Wagner began partaking, wholesale, in the rising fervour gripping the student population of Leipzig. The fact that he was not yet a registered student seemed immaterial to the young Wagner, who took part in many of the more intense demonstrations, including attacking the house of a police chief, breaking windows, and protesting the overly hands-on supervision styles of university academics. Despite having pointedly lofty notions about his role in all of these localised disturbances, Wagner surprisingly allows that his youthful sense of rebellion had a rather substantial role in his zeal:

‘It was the purely devilish fury of these popular outbursts that drew me, too, like a madman into their vortex.’⁷

Whether the magnetic pull toward this ‘vortex’ was purely or selfishly motivated, what remains certain is that in the revolutions of the mid-Nineteenth Century erupted throughout Europe, Wagner found himself continually inspired. The July Revolution in France was, demonstrably, one source of deep emotional resonance, and The Polish War of Independence was another. After this period of discontent, he finally formally enrolled at the University of Leipzig and spent a customary few months practising the usual academic distractions of the time: drinking, duelling, and gambling.⁸ However, he soon became bored with this and immersed himself in his musical studies. Having received only these six months of formal training, this seemed to have been enough to establish the technical bedrock on which he would develop the artistic mannerisms for which he has become so well known.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 49.

⁸ *Gregor-Dellin*, p. 47.

By 1833, his career had begun in earnest, and he was employed in Würzburg as chorus master.⁹ Here he worked on his first opera, *The Fairies*, and entered a period of reflection on the state of developing an interest in the Romantic concepts of ‘Young Europe,’ and ‘Young Germany,’ movements that called for progressive development in many areas using a democratic, rationalistic approach.¹⁰ These areas included raising the status of women, the separation of church and state and, most interestingly in the case of Wagner, the recognition of the Jewish people within their respective political and social environments.¹¹ Interestingly, at this point, he was much more attracted to the idea of ‘Young Europe,’ as ‘Germany appeared in my eyes a very tiny portion of the earth.’¹² Even as his enthusiasm for this early pan-European idealism was developing, he was unashamedly disgusted by people of Italian extraction. On encountering one particular Italian soprano, he was taken aback by the sound of the Italian language itself, which he considered ‘the diabolical work of this spectral instrument.’¹³ Reflecting on the incident in *My Life*, he shares that his early ‘dislike for everything connected with this nation,’ was so very intense that, ‘even in much later years I used to feel myself carried away by an impulse of utter detestation and abhorrence.’¹⁴ It is in the context of these turbulent personal developments that Wagner began his long series of published articles; observations and solutions for the contemporary crises facing the German artistic community. The first of these was ‘*On German Opera*,’ published in *Zeitung für Die Elegant Welt* on June 10, 1834.¹⁵

⁹ *Glaserapp*, p. 137.

¹⁰ Frank Josserand, "Richard Wagner and German Nationalism" in *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, no. 3 (1962), pp 223-234.

¹¹ Daniel C Gilman, Harry Thurston Peck and Frank Moore Colby, *The New International Encyclopædia* (New York, 1905), p. 787.

¹² Richard Wagner, "Autobiographic Sketch," in *Prose Works, Vol. I*, trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York, 1966), p. 9

¹³ Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination*, (Nebraska, 1997), p. 177.

¹⁴ Wagner, *My Life* p. 32-33

¹⁵ *Gregor-Dellin*, p. 63.

In ‘On German Opera,’ Wagner sets out his thesis on why the Germans have fallen behind in the pursuit of artistic mastery in the context of the rest of Europe. He believes that the Germans are the rightful owners of instrumental music, yet are deficient in the forms of opera and drama due to their intellectual and learned approach to creation. Here, the Italians and the French supersede the Germans by using the fruit of Germany’s cultural destiny to create superior forms of their own. Germans could not recreate this themselves as they had lost the ability to create what Wagner called ‘Dramatic truth.’¹⁶ While some German composers — notably Weber — occasionally came close to creating this truth, making fine attempts of their own, they ultimately fell short of something truly learned. Dramatic truth was well practised by the French, by Wagner’s assertion, leading the reader to assume perhaps that the composer would set these foreign styles on a pedestal, necessarily ahead of German. Wagner cuts this assumption off at the pass, however, pointing out that he does not ‘wish French or Italian music to oust our own, that would be a fresh evil to be on our guard against — but we ought to recognise the true in both and keep ourselves from all self-satisfied hypocrisy.’ The attempt at artistic truth was the ultimate goal for Wagner; nationalism and identity did not factor into this pursuit, as he concludes writing ‘we must take the era by the ears and honestly try to cultivate its modern forms; and he will be master, who neither writes Italian, nor French, nor even German.’¹⁷ This article is a genuinely fascinating observation in the context of his later writings, which this study will explore in due course. While there are whispers of nationalistic chauvinism in this early piece, it is not until his time spent in Paris where the more vitriolic elements of his nationalism begin to make themselves known in a series of bitter, venomous articles nitpicking at the state of French artistry and the supremacy of that of Germany.

Despite the sharp tone of critique in *On German Opera*, complete with lofty suggestions on how to correct the imbalance, Wagner prepared himself for an international tour in search of

¹⁶ Richard Wagner, “On German Opera,” in *Prose Works, Vol. VIII* trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York, 1966), p. 56

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 57.

fame and fortune. In a letter to Theodor Apel, Wagner confided that once he makes a name for himself with his new opera *Liebesverbot*, he will go to Italy and compose an Italian opera, ‘When we are sun tanned and strong again, we shall turn our gaze towards France, I’ll write a French opera in Paris, and God alone knows where I’ll end up then! But at least I know *who* I shall be — no longer a German philistine.’¹⁸ This letter so clearly establishes for a modern reader how connected Wagner felt with his native artistic identity, that is, not in the slightest: only too happy to sketch a grand plan of European artistic conquest, leaving Germany to its own devices. Here Wagner seems mercenary in his intentions, and one may question the sincerity of his artistic declarations in his early writings, and indeed the integrity of his many commitments later in his career. As this chapter will continue to demonstrate, Wagner’s most emotionally charged assertions on the greatness of Germany or the delinquency of a foreign nation are generally contextualised by the discovery of a written account of seeming disrespect at the hands of his host country or that of Germany itself. More often than not, it is a combination of a perceived slight brought on by the pressures of financial burden or debt, which chased him most of his life.

Wagner’s *Liebesverbot* was finally ready to be staged at the end of the 1836 season in Magdeburg. As the first step in his grand scheme of fame and riches, he hoped that all would run smoothly. A thin and unenthusiastic audience, along with the calamity of the lead tenor forgetting his lines, meant that it did not.¹⁹ After this disaster, Wagner attempted to shop around his new opera in Leipzig and Berlin, to no avail. The failure alienated him further from the German cultural centres, and he committed himself still more zealously to finding success outside of Germany. Over the course of two years he had taken conductor positions in *Königsburg*, and later Riga, which he sorely needed due to his state of financial disrepair. While working on a new opera — *Rienzi* — in Riga, he found time to compose an article much in the same spirit as his earlier ones. Sinking deeper into his disillusionment

¹⁸ R. Wagner to T. Apel, “Letter on 27 October 1834,” in Stewart Spencer, and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987), p.24

¹⁹ *Groves Dictionary of Music*, p. 583

with the state of German artistic affairs, and recognising foreign forms as inherently superior, asking his readers ‘why don’t we acknowledge freely and openly that the Italian in his song, the Frenchman in his lighter and livelier treatment of operatic music, have an advantage over the German?’²⁰

So, in the style of the ‘Frenchman,’ Wagner created his *Rienzi*. It was made to be performed on a grand scale; on a Paris stage, for Parisians to appreciate, and resulting in Parisian fame. Paris was and remained for many years, a trendsetting central society of European artistry, and Wagner had decided to make an attempt; making similar, repeated efforts throughout his life. A sketch of an opera centred around *Die Hohe Braut* had been sent to the great Eugene Scribe for consideration, to no reply.²¹ Wagner, undeterred by this lack of response, sent on a copy of his *Liebesverbot* in the spring of 1837. Newman writes that Wagner made inquiries with an agent — recently married to his sister, Cécile — of the Brockhaus publishing firm in Paris, asking if he would raise the matter with Scribe. Scribe had, it would seem, a vague recollection of Wagner’s sketch of *Die Hohe Braut*, which was seemingly more than enough to finally encourage Wagner and his then-wife Minna, to make their move, by way of London to Paris.²² While Wagner had finally left his artistically stunted Germany behind in favour of the rosy foreign pastures of France, he could not know yet that it would be Paris where the core of his nationalism would begin to develop in earnest.

²⁰ *Glaserapp*, p. 63-64.

²¹ *Gregor-Dellin*, p. 78.

²² *Newman*, p. 222

In Paris

Almost immediately on Wagner's arrival in Paris, his high hopes of grandeur were dashed by the relentless struggle of finding rewarding work. He worked on arrangements for other composers, attempted writing in the French style as he intended, to no avail. The cultural establishment ignored his music, along with, more catastrophically, the singers who refused to perform his melodies. He was forced into roles that he considered to be 'harmful' and detrimental to his career, such as editing operas or working on piano and string arrangements.²³ Additionally, he could not abide by the attitudes of French artists, so impersonal were they to the attempts of their contemporaries 'In Paris, no artist has time to form a friendship with another, for each is in a red hot hurry of his own advantage.'²⁴ A series of tumultuous events marked the first year spent in Paris; hopes raised and dashed, original writing, and patchy employment. After being tasked by the director of the opera to compose a score for a French libretto dealing with the *Flying Dutchman*, the opportunity was promptly pulled from underneath Wagner, who took it upon himself to write his own libretto on the subject instead.²⁵ At this point, Wagner existed in a state of disillusionment with both his home country and Paris. The artistic haven into which he had poured all of his hopeful planning was not open to him. This low period, along with developing events on the European stage at large may indeed have been the spark of nationalism for the composer.

Events unfolding on the international stage may have also influenced his growing faith and sense of allegiance to Germany. Developing international turmoil in the early 1840s — eventually leading to a sharp divide between the powers of France and Prussia — along

²³ Wagner, "On German Opera," in *Prose Works Vol VII*, p. 8.

²⁴ Wagner, "Autobiographic Sketch," in *Prose Works Vol I*, p. 15.

²⁵ Gregor-Dellin, p. 106.

with the succession of King Frederick William IV, may have contributed to Wagner's blooming pro-German sentiments.

The Rhine Crisis of 1840 served as a source of nationalistic inflammation on both sides of the River. There is no need to explore the details of the Crisis here, as detailed histories are readily available for perusal. However, there is certainly evidence that a growing sense of divide bloomed during this period, with notable examples appearing in artworks and popular music. One notable piece to emerge from the Franco-German enmity was the song *Die Wacht am Rhine*. With pointedly hostile lyrics translated as 'Dear Fatherland, no danger thine / Firm stand thy sons to watch the Rhine / They stand, a hundred thousand strong / Quick to avenge their country's wrong.'²⁶ Although this song did not become popular until the Franco-Prussian War, Max Schneckenburger composed it during the Rhine crisis.²⁷ While it is rather challenging to find direct answers in the primary sources as to Wagner's thought process in light of the Rhine crisis, it is notable that the composer's publications and writings see a marked shift toward nationalistic sentiment after this point. Naturally, this study will engage with these more nationalistic writings shortly.

In addition to the Rhine Crisis, the ascension of Frederick William IV to the throne of Prussia certainly piqued Wagner's interest. The new king seemed to Wagner to be a progressive monarch who understood the importance of art and science in the culture of a nation. In his exhaustive work on Wagner, Newman writes: 'Wagner, already conscious of the gulf that was beginning to yawn between himself and the ordinary world of the theatre, believed he saw in this royal idealist an instrument pre-appointed by providence for the

²⁶ Charles Dudley Warner, Hamilton Wright Mabie, Lucia Isabella Gilbert Runkle and George Henry Warner, *Library of the world's best literature, ancient and modern* (New York, 1902), p. 16437.

²⁷ For a terrific breakdown of how impactful the Rhine crisis was in establishing a deep-seeded sense of nationalism in Germany, with specific attention paid to music and patriotic songs, see: James M. Brophy, "The Rhine Crisis of 1840 and German Nationalism: Chauvinism, Skepticism, and Regional Reception" in *The Journal of Modern History*, no. 1 (2013), pp 1-35.

realisation of his ideals.²⁸ Should he manage to become close to the new king, whose ideals reflected his own very closely, surely he would be able to free himself of this artistic doldrum in Paris and return to a country where he would be given support for his efforts.²⁹ Glasenapp further writes that Wagner sends a missive to the king, detailing how there is a pressing need for a ‘resolute powerful patron of Art in the German Fatherland, at a time of such subservience to foreign influence; so far it had it gone, that men of parts, especially musicians, had had to seek their livelihood abroad — in Paris. How many a talent must therefore still lie slumbering, but almost rotten away!’³⁰ Setting aside how glaringly autobiographical this letter was, one must take note of this reference to the ‘German Fatherland,’ as underlined. Indeed, as has been mentioned previously, it can be difficult to discern whether or not Wagner was motivated out of a sense of genuine national loyalty, or a need for financial backing. In this case, given his financial troubles, it would seem to be the latter.

It is around this time, in the midst of international intrigue and Parisian misery, that Wagner began putting considerable thought and effort into the writing of articles for publications in both Paris and Germany. Here, in these literary works, Wagner’s sense of national identity begins to take form through the lens of the factors mentioned above. What comes of this perfect storm of circumstance is a steady heightening of how Wagner perceived Germany and German art, especially in stark contrast to what he believes to be intrinsically un-German, or *außerdeutsch*. According to Hannu Salmi, in his work on Richard Wagner, Wagner developed the concept of *außerdeutsch* (extrinsically-German) to be the opposite of German. He saw Germanness very much in terms of binary oppositions: things were either *Deutsch* or *un-Deutsch*.³¹ More on this later. The first of these new articles, *On German Music*, dealt with this idea rather explicitly; what German art actually meant: what was it

²⁸ Newman, p. 403.

²⁹ Glasenapp, p. 331.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 331.

³¹ Hannu Salmi, *Imagined Germany* (New York, 1999), p. 13.

about the German artist that sets him apart from all others? This aspect is crucial: The unique position of German art exists pointedly in the context of foreign art. The French and Italians have their merits, it seems, but it is the German who is unique in his engagement with art. The German, in contrast to the other nationalities, is pure in his relationship to music he ‘worships [music] as a divine and lovely art that, if he gives himself to her, becomes his one and all.’³² A German approach to art is, therefore, Wagner writes, purer and more unique than that of the other nationalities. He discusses, as in his previous work ‘On German Opera,’ how instrumental music is instinctively German at heart, how it is ‘the exclusive property of the German, it is his life, his own creation.’³³ While vocal music itself might come more naturally to foreign artists, it is only the German who can ultimately unite all of the art forms in a manner that befits genius. Wagner points to Mozart, and his hero Weber as shining examples of those kept who ‘their birthright pure and undefiled; and that birthright is purity of feeling and chasteness of invention.’³⁴ However, even as Wagner draws a line in the cultural sand in much of his sentiment, there is still an appreciation for the French quality of artistry. French artistry, he believes, when combined with the natural proclivities of the German artist, will usher in ‘one of the greatest artistic epochs.’³⁵ Clearly, Wagner is optimistic about the direction of European culture, and about the necessity of artistic unity: ‘Because the two nations are joining hands and imparting mutual strength, the basis of a great artistic epoch has, at all events, been laid. May this noble union never be dissolved, for one can conceive of no two peoples whose mingling and fraternisation could produce greater and more perfect artistic results than the Germans and the French, the genius of each nation being entirely capable of supplying whatever is deficient in the other.’³⁶ Wagner’s early exploration of German artistic supremacy is not necessarily at the expense of other cultures. Subsequent writings see this sense of hostility develop, fuelled by

³² Wagner, “On German Music,” in *Prose Works Vol. VII*, p. 85.

³³ *Ibid*, p. 91.

³⁴ *ibid*, p. 95.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 101.

³⁶ *Gregor-Dellin*, p. 102.

further financial disappointments and a series of rejections by the Parisian artistic community.

Despite this call for fraternity, the articles from Paris continue in a characteristically critical, and volatile, manner, occasionally switching targets from the French to the Italians, to the English, and occasionally back in the face of the Germans. In 1841 he published 'On the Overture,' here Wagner again looks to Germans as the historical source of development of the art form itself: Beethoven, Weber, et al. The Italians, on the other hand, degenerated its artistic value by directing what the Germans had accomplished toward pure entertainment value.³⁷ In addition to the articles, Wagner began his series of 'Letters from Paris,' to a Dresden evening paper. In these 'Letters,' he let loose with a somewhat unfiltered take on the state of the music scene in Paris. The first letter establishes his unenviable position of being forced to live within the Parisian way of life as it is so very abhorrent to the German, in addition to ridiculing the king (Louis-Philippe I) for his apparent fawning over Italian singers.³⁸ The second letter presses still heavier on the Italians, along with the *Opéra* directors themselves.³⁹ The third letter is a devotional one in praise of Hector Berlioz, famed French composer of *Symphonie Fantastique*. However, naturally, Berlioz has Germany to thank for his particular genius: 'From our Germany, the spirit of Beethoven blew across to him, and there certainly have been ours when Berlioz wished to be a German...'⁴⁰ The fourth letter returns to ridiculing the king for his love of Italian singers,⁴¹ and the fifth letter blusters about the hot summers of Paris, along with 'satanic clothing,' and the declining

³⁷ Wagner, "On the Overture," in *Prose Works Vol. VII*, p.154

³⁸ Richard Wagner, "Letter from Paris I," in *Prose Works Vol. VIII*, p.115.

³⁹ Wagner, "Letter from Paris II," *ibid*, p. 121.

⁴⁰ Wagner, "Letter from Paris III," *ibid* p. 132.

⁴¹ Wagner, "Letter from Paris IV," *ibid* p.146.

standards of the *Opéra*.⁴² The sixth letter again is aimed at Italian singers, a gripe which often appears in Wagner's writing.⁴³

When Weber's *Freischütz* premiered in Paris, it had been given a run-over by Parisian artistic sensibilities, which upset Wagner greatly. Writing his 'Report to Germany,' Wagner was scathing in his critique of how the French dealt with his beloved *Freischütz*. Beginning with arguably his most overtly nationalistic language until that point, Wagner writes:

'My glorious German fatherland, how can I else than love thee, how fondly must I dote upon thee, were it only that from out thy soil there sprang the *Freischütz*! Needs must I love the German folk that loves the *Freischütz*, that even today believes the marvels of its most naive sage, that even today in full-grown manhood, still feels those sweet mysterious thrills which made its heart beat fast in youth! [...] Happy he who understands you, can feel, can believe, can dream and lose himself with you! How dear it is to me, that I, too, am a German!...'⁴⁴

He proceeds to deconstruct the French attempt at his opera with varying examples of cutting pointed critique, and blatant ridicule, ultimately leading him to abandon his earlier assertion regarding the inevitable fraternity of German and French art. It was no longer possible for this to come to pass, as the French practised 'artistic isolationism' in the face of the German's 'over-upright and good-natured' ways.⁴⁵ These sentiments, and those that came shortly after seem a far cry from the unifying, from the idealistic man who once wrote: 'it is impossible to conceive two nations whose fraternity could bring forth grander and more fruitful results for art, than the German and the French, since the genius of each of these two nations is fully competent to supply whatever may be lacking in the one or other.'⁴⁶ From

⁴² Wagner, "Letter from Paris V," *ibid* p.149-153.

⁴³ Wagner, "Letter from Paris VI," *ibid*, p. 154-155.

⁴⁴ Wagner, "Report to Germany," in *Prose Works Vol. VII*, p. 183.

⁴⁵ *Ibid* p. 202.

⁴⁶ Wagner, "On German Music," in *Prose Works Vol. VII*, p. 101

here Wagner began penning a series of articles that cast the French in ever more negative lights. Ever the dramatist, these articles included a melodramatic story of a young German composer who had gone, wide-eyed, to Paris to make his fortune or die in the attempt; Wagner assumed the role of his companion. After finding no success there, he calls Wagner back to watch him die. Referring to Paris as a ‘swamp,’ and a ‘quagmire,’ the parting words of this composer are a kind of gallows-manifesto, accounting for the divine source of Art, condemning those who have ‘dared to play the huckster’ with uninspired artistic endeavours, therefore necessarily violating the truth that art must aspire to. He ends by prognosticating the nirvana awaiting the ‘true disciples of high art’ in death.⁴⁷

In another example of Wagner’s heightened sense of nationalistic bitterness, ‘Parisian Fatalities for the German’ outlined the individual struggles faced by the Germans living in Paris. Much of this piece meanders through casual elements of Parisian racism against local Germans (although it is naturally not labelled as such). By Wagner’s account, Germans are simply too honest, honourable, and virtuous to assimilate to a city like Paris, and those who manage to shake free from these limits to social progress, ultimately become unrecognisable; adopting the mannerisms of the Parisian elite, leaving their Germanness behind.⁴⁸ In ‘Parisian Fatalities,’ alongside his myriad publications of the time, Wagner felt the spark of patriotism in the wake of his negative life experiences. Nicholas Vazsonyi remarks on this phenomenon in ‘Marketing German Identity: Richard Wagner’s Enterprise.’ Vazsonyi writes: ‘His professional failure, accompanied by financial hardship and misery, well documented by Wagner himself, awakened feelings of homesickness and patriotism. [...] In this tale, to be German was to be poor, to be honest, genuine, to do things for their own sake, and not to be interested in success or commercial gain. To be a German artist was to be willing to suffer for that art, to martyr oneself for it. Wagner was all of these; thus, he

⁴⁷ Wagner, “An End in Paris,” in *Prose Works Vol. VII*, p. 67.

⁴⁸ Richard Wagner, “Parisian Fatalities for the German,” in *Prose Works Vol. 6. trans. William Ashton Ellis* (London, 1898). p. 93-98.

and the art he produced were “truly” German. Fortunately for Wagner’s image, Paris made him a martyr.’⁴⁹

Cognisant of this martyrdom or not, Wagner had enough of Paris. In a series of letters to his family and friends, he relayed his displeasure with his lot, and his desire to return home. Writing, exasperated, to his mother in 1841, he wrote: ‘It is absolutely impossible for me to prevail here [...] I have been bound to despise whomever I have seen succeed...’⁵⁰ Writing then to Wilhelm Fischer, ‘... after five years absence from Germany, I long for my dear fatherland...’⁵¹ Wagner left Paris behind in April 1842 with Minna, for Dresden, where a production of *Rienzi* was scheduled.

Writing in retrospect, Wagner remembers the moment that Minna and himself crossed back into Germany: ‘For the first time I saw the Rhine - with hot tears in my eyes, I, poor artist, swore eternal fidelity to my German Fatherland.’⁵² However, what might be more telling than this ostentatious internal declaration of loyalty, is the penultimate line of the same essay: ‘As regards Paris itself, I was completely without prospects for several years: I therefore left it in the spring of 1842.’⁵³ He later clarified his experiences in his essay ‘A Communication to My Friends’ — published in 1851 — in which he retroactively describes how desperately he longed for the German homeland: ‘It was the feeling of utter homelessness in Paris, that aroused my yearning for the German homeland.’⁵⁴ Back to his

⁴⁹ Nicholas Vazsonyi, “Marketing German Identity: Richard Wagner’s Enterprise,” in *German Studies Review* 28, no. 2 (2005), pp 327-346.

⁵⁰ R. Wagner to his mother M. Wagner, “Letter on 12 September, 1841,” *Family Letters*, p. 41.

⁵¹ Wagner, *Letters to his Dresden Friends*, trans. Shedlock, p. 330.

⁵² Richard Wagner, “Autobiographic Sketch,” in *Prose Works, Vol. 1*, p. 15.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.15.

⁵⁴ Richard Wagner, “A Communication to My Friends,” in *Prose Works Vol. 1*, p. 307.

newly beloved Germany Wagner went, to Dresden, where the spark of revolution would further inflame the momentum of his ever-growing nationalism.

Dresden, History, Revolution

Back in Dresden, Wagner temporarily found a place of comfort in the very homeland he desired. Here, his nationalism blossomed further, and he was inspired by the city, the buildings, and became fascinated with German mythology; a core component of his most famous works in the future.⁵⁵ After the success of his production of *Rienzi*, Wagner was carving out a popular name for himself throughout Germany, although this popularity did not extend to the critical sphere. As a result of this success, Wagner was appointed Kapellmeister at the Royal Theatre, giving him some financial security.⁵⁶ The premiering of *The Flying Dutchman* also assisted in Wagner's establishment. *Dutchman*, received less enthusiastically than *Rienzi*, was a slow-burning success as it eventually made its way to other theatres.⁵⁷ In the early Dresden years, Wagner was happy with the choices he had made in returning to his homeland, the success of which he attributed to divine providence when writing to his sister '... it comes straight from my soul when I say, praise God that he let me find my fortune in my native land!'⁵⁸ Not just financial fortune, it would seem, as the native security of Dresden marks a major inspirational shift for the composer. Here, he fully immersed himself in the exploration of the German past and spirit, experimenting with politics and history, before eventually landing on a folkish tale in Raumer's *History of the Hohenstaufen*, which would eventually become his *Tannhäuser*.⁵⁹ He began to collect books on German literature, and history, into a personal library full of 'many a costly

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 316.

⁵⁶ *Gregor-Dellin*, p. 124.

⁵⁷ *ibid*. p. 121.

⁵⁸ R. Wagner to C. Avaniarius, "Letter on 22 October 1843," *Family Letters of Richard Wagner*, p. 111.

⁵⁹ Wagner, "Communication to my friends," in *Prose Works Vol. I*, p. 257.

volume...’ on the subjects.⁶⁰ These works included the inspiration for *Die Meistersinger*, a sketch of which he drafted by the end of spring 1844, apparently drawn from a reading of Gervinus’s *History of German Literature*.⁶¹ ⁶² A notably inspiring work for Wagner was, for those who have read it, Grimm’s *Germany Mythology*, which so inspired Wagner that he wrote of how the book threw up ‘a whole world of figures,’ to him, and that “the effect they produced upon the inner state of my soul I can only describe as an entire rebirth.”⁶³

Despite this innate sense of inspiration, however, Wagner was struggling for critical recognition across Germany. Although his operas were performed, reviews had him painted as an outlier to what was considered appropriate art and opera of the period. This struggle to attain critical acclaim made it challenging to publish and sell his scores to theatres across Germany, and so he was in financial difficulties once more. He had hoped that a successful premiere of his *Tannhäuser* would make him a household name in the eyes of the German people, winning him ‘the hearts of my fellow Germans in far greater numbers than my earlier works have thus far succeeded in doing!’⁶⁴ However, this was not to be so, as the audience was instead perplexed by the innovative aspects of the opera.⁶⁵ Indeed, Wagner placed the blame squarely with the audience itself: if they did not understand this new form of art, he must make them.⁶⁶ During 1847 and 1848, he struggled to make this happen, and therefore could not sway the tone of the myriad critics who dismissed his work as mere eccentricity. In his role as Kapellmeister, he was given only unchallenging pieces which upset him greatly. He distracted himself through further exploration of literature, and in

⁶⁰ *Wagner*, p. 316.

⁶¹ *Dannreuther*, p. 588.

⁶² *Wagner*, p. 366.

⁶³ *ibid*, p. 314.

⁶⁴ R. Wagner to K. Gaillard, “Letter on 5 June 1845,” in Stewart Spencer, and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987), p. 120.

⁶⁵ *Gregor Dellin*, p 127.

⁶⁶ *Dannreuther*, p. 589.

composing his *Lohengrin*. During this period of great despondency, it seems as though Wagner was almost unconsciously searching for something to rouse his interest, something to raise him from his state of misery, to inflame his passion once more. Wagner temporarily found it: the kindling had been his years of building nationalistic loyalty through literature and histories, and the spark was the spreading wildfires of mid-nineteenth Century European revolution.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, Wagner intended to use this period of political uncertainty for his own ends, namely in the wholesale reorganisation of the theatre itself. He would piggy-back on the revolution to instigate artistic change, allowing him to realise his creative vision once and for all. In his ‘Plan of Organisation of a German National Theatre for the Kingdom of Saxony,’ he outlined that support for the arts must necessarily come from the state itself to achieve the highest quality. Additionally, foreign art was only to be admitted after a majority vote at the committee level. Other details include the creation of a music school, higher wages for the orchestra, and how a state might see a more active populace through the support of a German art-form inspired by German artists.⁶⁷ At the organisational level, nothing came of Wagner’s plan. However, a newly formed local club, the *Vaterlands-Verein*, was a vehicle for liberal change in which Wagner might see his plan realised. He joined in May 1848.^{68 69} While he certainly seems to have walked into a political stance with a somewhat selfish motive in mind, his outspokenness on political issues from this point on became much more pointed. He wrote on political development, and the direction in which it would be prudent to take the country was the monarchy to fall. It would seem to him that the best future would be one in which the most practical elements of both republic and monarchy existed in governance, and gave a speech on the topic at a meeting of his club

⁶⁷ Wagner, “Plan of Organisation for a German National Theatre for Kingdom of Saxony,” in *Prose Works Vol. VII* p. 321-326.

⁶⁸ *Glaserapp*, p. 238.

⁶⁹ *Wagner*, p. 441.

in June 1848.⁷⁰ In this speech, since published as part of his collection of prose works as ‘What Relation bear Republican Endeavours to the Kingship,’ Wagner moves through a fascinating series of solutions and hopes for the future of Germany. It is pan-German, yes, but also it strays into elements of anti-capitalism, selective egalitarianism, aristocratic deconstruction, and liberal idealism; Money is an abhorrent thing, it is the duty of men to enrich and benefit one another, dismantling of the royal court, and full emancipation of the human race.⁷¹

He contends that these reforms are the prologue to a worldwide expansion of Germanic culture. This concept of the *Weltbeglückter* will be dealt with later as it appears in Wagner’s other publications, but here in this speech we see some of the most pointed examples of how his nationalism evolved; the first glimmers of Germanic cultural supremacy:

‘Then we will take shop across the sea, plant here and there a fresh young Germany [...]. We will do things Germanly and grandly; from its rising to its setting, the sun shall look upon a beautiful free Germany [...] The rays of German freedom and German gentleness shall light and warm the French and Cossacks[...].’⁷²

Both the speech itself and the dramatic petition on changing the status quo did not go down well for Wagner. So intense was the storm of discontent following his remarks, that he appeared most contrite and regretful in a letter of appeal to his friend Eduard Devrient — court theatre dramatist — asking him smooth things over with court.⁷³

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 442.

⁷¹ Wagner, “What Relation Bear Republic Endeavours to the Kingship,” in *Prose Works Vol. IV*, p. 137.

⁷² *Ibid* p. 140-41

⁷³ *Gregor Dellin*, p. 150.

In response to this whole affair, Wagner pulled back away from politics, and instead entered another period of artistic exploration. This period was one of consolidation: all of Wagner's literary studies over the last few years, combined with his increasingly focused nationalism, had made an impression on the composer. He used this time to combine the fragmented ideas borne of German literature and folk stories. In his *Wibelungen*, released in 1848, Wagner synthesised the folk, mythical, and historical elements of his studies to create an image of the unified German past.⁷⁴ The piece is a milestone in his ideological development that would go on to inform the precedent of his artistic nationalism; indeed the artistic direction of his *Meistersinger*.

Later in 1848, Wagner was left disappointed and frustrated when the theatre ended up pulling their production of *Lohengrin*. Wagner was incensed and used another publication, 'Theatre Reform,' to air his grievances with the directors, the theatregoers, and the performers who capitalised on the status quo.⁷⁵ The next few months saw a tumbling series of escalations and confrontations with theatre directors and officials who were exasperated by his conduct. He considered abandoning art entirely, as expressed in a letter to Liszt, after an encounter with a rude manager he writes 'I was discussing with myself whether I should bear any longer to be exposed to such infamous treatment for the bite of bread that my service here gives me to eat, and whether I should not rather throw up art and earn my bread as a labourer, to be at least free from the despotism of the malignant ignorance.'⁷⁶ He returned to political activity alongside the increasing build-up to a revolution in Dresden, writing articles and poetry in an inflammatory, rallying style. In 'The Revolution' he writes of impending instrumental change, that revolution bears the fruits of paradise, the sweeping away of the old and the ushering in of the new:

⁷⁴ Wagner, "Wibelungen," in *Prose works VII*, p. 266

⁷⁵ Wagner, "Theatre Reform," in *Prose works VIII*, p. 222

⁷⁶ Wagner to Liszt, "Letter on 20 February 1849," in *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt Vol I*, p. 14.

‘Nearer and nearer rolls the storm, on its wings Revolution; Wide open now the quick hearts of those awaked to life and... revolution pours into their brains, their bones, their flesh, and fills them though and though. In godlike ecstasy they leap from the ground; the poor, the hungering, the bowed by misery, are they no longer; proudly they raise themselves erect, inspiration shines from their ennobled faces, a radiant light dreams from their eyes, and with the seven shaking-cry, I am a man! The millions, the embodied revolution, the God become man, rush down to the valleys and plains, and proclaim to all the world the new gospel of happiness.’⁷⁷

Wagner came to his revolutionary peak on 3 May 1849, when he participated in the ill-fated Dresden Uprising.⁷⁸ In the introduction to *The Overture to Tannhäuser* by Franz Liszt, Dave Trippett briefly refers to Wagner’s role in the revolution, as per a common-sense investigation into the incident by Ernest Newman.⁷⁹ Briefly, in early May 1849, Wagner aligned himself with the provisional government. Wagner made himself a key player in the revolutionary movement and was soon a trusted confidant among the republican firebrands of the city. As the uprising unfolded, Wagner apparently ordered hand grenades and hunting rifles for the revolutionaries, manned the barricades with the same men, became a lookout atop the Dresden *Kreuzkirche*, and printed flyers and placards with slogans such as ‘Are you with us against the foreign troops?’⁸⁰ Newman contends that ‘far from his being a mere curious spectator of events, [Wagner] was as active a participator in [the Dresden uprisings] as most.’⁸¹ On the failure of the uprising, Wagner became a wanted man for his involvement and promptly fled to Zurich.⁸² Following this disaster, Wagner would eventually travel to Paris and focus more intensely on his own artistic endeavours rather

⁷⁷ Wagner, “The Revolution,” in *Prose works VIII*, p. 118.

⁷⁸ Kenneth Hamilton, “Wagner and Liszt: Elective Affinities” in Kenneth Hamilton and Thomas Grey (eds.) *Richard Wagner and His World*,. (Princeton, 2009) p. 27.

⁷⁹ Newman, p. 87.

⁸⁰ David Trippett, “The Overture to Tannhäuser” in *Richard Wagner and His World*, Kenneth Hamilton and Thomas Grey ed. (Princeton, 2009) p. 251.

⁸¹ Newman, p. 87.

⁸² Katherine Syer, “From Page to Stage: Wagner as *Regisseur*” in *Richard Wagner and His World*, Kenneth Hamilton and Thomas Grey ed. (Princeton, 2009) p. 9.

than active politics, surreptitiously building on his revolutionary energy while publicly denying his role and creating some of his most notable operas and works of prose.⁸³

Lashing Out

After leaving Zurich, Wagner made his way to Paris for another attempt at artistic success.⁸⁴ Now that Wagner's beloved homeland was denied to the him - due to his ill-fated involvement in the Dresden Revolution - he had to find sanctuary in the city he had hated so viscerally. Wagner had concerns, as the artistic landscape in Europe's cultural capital had not changed in the years since his unhappy time there. Indeed, in a revealing letter to Liszt, the despairing composer resigns to his new lot, writing, 'I will work as I can,' confirming that the artistic outlook and priorities of Paris had not changed for the better, that the manner in which the Parisians conducted art was 'vile,' and that, 'this horrible Paris presses on me with a hundredweight. How lonely I am amongst these people!'⁸⁵ In a similar letter to Minna, he expressed his disgust with Paris, and hoped to convince her of infinitely more fruitful experience they could have back in Zurich: 'what I *can* offer you is a place where you can recover your health of body & mind, & that place is the splendid town of Zurich in Switzerland.'⁸⁶ Wagner arrived in Zurich on July 6 in an impotent flurry of resentment, writing that 'I shall no longer be exposed to the temptation of working in the detestable gibberish of the French language.'⁸⁷ Unfortunately, Zurich did not prove to be as green a pasture as he had originally hoped. Newman writes that aside from not writing any music of note in this period, his local friends were similarly exiled revolutionaries who commanded a less than desirable renown. As such, he found himself with a continuously suffering

⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 9.

⁸⁴ *Gregor Dellin*, p. 184.

⁸⁵ R. Wagner to F. Liszt, "Letter on 5 June 1849," *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt Vol 1*, p. 26.

⁸⁶ R. Wagner to M. Wagner, "Letter on 8 June 1849," in Stewart Spencer, and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987), p. 172.

⁸⁷ R. Wagner to T. Uhlig, "Letter on 9 August 1849," in Stewart Spencer, and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987), p. 175.

reputation.⁸⁸ He began a series of articles all aimed squarely at the state of artwork as he saw it. Continuing from his previous publications, he offers critique and solutions to the sorry state of artistic culture. His next significant publication did not do anything to dilute his perceived image of an exiled firebrand revolutionary, even though the focus of the piece was purely artistic and cultural rather than political (stances of which he had — publicly — all but abandoned in the wake of the revolution). He published the provocatively titled ‘Art and Revolution’ in 1849.

Public and Private Frustration

In this first article, Wagner damned the artistic status quo of his day as unfeeling and barbaric. Once, in Grecian antiquity, art had been a pursuit which reflected the unifying idealism of genuine democracy, yet as the Greek ideals fell away, the Christian Church took over the task of nurturing and producing art. The church was found wanting in this task, however, as they emphasised religious posturing instead of the purity of a lost Greek nobility. Through this mismanagement of such an important responsibility, the Church let art fragment into different creative disciplines, such as opera, ballet, and visual works.⁸⁹

Interestingly, however, and possibly in an attempt distance himself from the revolutionary pan-German idealism he had publicly held until recently, the solution to the problem offered in ‘Art and Revolution’ was to embrace the religion of mankind itself. Combining the unifying elements of Greek thought with the compassionate teachings of the Christian church would result in a new order free from ‘every shackle of hampering nationality, its racial imprint must be no more than an embellishment, the individual charm of manifold diversity, and not a cramping barrier.’⁹⁰

⁸⁸ *Newman*, p. 164.

⁸⁹ Wagner, “Art and Revolution,” in *Prose works I*, p. 39-51

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 53-54

Wagner's thoughts on a unified internationalist artistic movement are curious indeed given his previous assertions of German artistic supremacy, yet as mentioned, this might be a reactionary stance given his revolutionary fugitive status. In his next piece, 'The Art-Work of the Future,' he continues developing a concept of artistic universality. Here, Wagner contends that the individual would not have the necessary scope to produce great artwork. Instead, it would be the collective folk, the spirit of the people, which would possess that capability, channelled through an individual whose genius was simply the expression of the whole. The State of the future would cultivate the open creativity of its people, rather than impose the apparent limitations on artistic freedom which defined the present artistic landscape, as per Wagner.⁹¹

Despite this newfound idealism, Wagner's next publication turned back to his characteristic bitterness by directing his ire, infamously, towards the Jewish people. *Judaism in Music* has been extensively researched and analysed in secondary literature, so this examination will only deal with elements we consider pointedly nationalistic, since the writer points towards an apparent threat to the German national identity. The article damned the Jewish control of modern art through financial means and contends that the Jewish artist is unable to successfully create expressive art in the German language due to his inherent otherness.⁹² Additionally, Jewish composers who attempted to create art were simply poor imitators of the great Germanic composers of the past; they had 'entered into the old forms like insects into a carcass.'⁹³ The reason for this collective resignation to imitation rather than an attempt to innovate was, according to Wagner, due to a distinct lack of a passion which 'might thrust him [the artist] on to art-creation.' Any attempt at the form would result in a 'trivial and indifferent' expression.⁹⁴ To overcome this, Wagner contended, the Jew must simply rid himself of all Jewishness. If he could accomplish this, he would find himself

⁹¹ Wagner, "Art work of the future," in *Prose works I*, p. 147-148.

⁹² Wagner, "Judaism in Music," in *Prose works III*, p. 80-82

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 93-99.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 86-91.

successfully assimilated into his adoptive culture, allowing him to express with the artistic certainty and naturalness of the authentic German. With this publication, Wagner crossed a nationalistic threshold which would become more conservative throughout the rest of his life, but here he threw down the gauntlet establishing a clear ideological standard for what was he considered German and un-German. Salmi writes that this concept is developed during the lead up to German Unification in 1871 through his personal writings along with letters to benefactors such as King Ludwig II of Bavaria.⁹⁵ It would seem that Wagner's 'Judaism in Music,' published in 1850, is an early example of this concept of nationalistic binaries. Although Salmi points out that these early writings are concerned mainly with aesthetic theory, there is still a good deal of material intermingles artistic theory with racial determinism.⁹⁶ While there were particular accusations and assumptions about other nationalities in contrast to the capabilities of Germans in these earlier writings, 'Wagner's texts prior to 1864 were not based on the deployment of conceptual contrasts to the same extent as the later writings.'⁹⁷ This much is true, but in a study explicitly concerning Wagner's evolving nationalism, early examples of Wagner painting other nationalities as an inherent 'other' are important to note.

With regards to 'Judaism in music,' it would be fair to assume that Wagner's outlook stemmed from a commonplace contemporary feeling. Indeed, Pasachoff writes that 'dramatic change had swept across Europe during the course of the century, and the Jews provided a convenient scapegoat for many of those whose existence was destabilised.'⁹⁸ However, this is overly simplistic in the case of Wagner, and one can look to his private writing to get to the truth of the matter, as found in a letter to Liszt, following the

⁹⁵ Salmi, p. 11

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 10.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 11.

⁹⁸ Naomi Pasachoff, *Jewish History in 100 Nutshells*, (Michigan, 1995), p. 215.

publication of the article: ‘I felt a long-repressed hatred for this Jewry, and this hatred is as necessary to my nature as gall is to my blood.’⁹⁹

‘Judaism in Music,’ therefore, serves as another publication of Wagner’s which stems from a bitter resentment of his treatment at the hands of those whom he feels are unjustly critical or overlooking of his greatness. This article is a vitriolic, aggressive rant aimed at those critics who had not been favourable towards Wagner in their reviews. A lifetime defining threshold of German identity-building had been crossed and defined here, and all from the pen of impotent rage. Though these loose anti-semitic ideas came from a sense of focused disgruntlement, they would become steadily more solidified over the next few years both in private and in his operatic work. One such example is the character of Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*, who was likely based on a vocal critic of Wagner’s, Eduard Hanslick.¹⁰⁰

Wagner’s final publication, ‘Opera and Drama,’ returns into his already established artistic theories on the ideal state of art. It deals primarily with the apparent existence of a conspiracy between church and state to repress the spirit of the people who, when free of such oppression, would be able to embrace the new humanistic order fully.¹⁰¹ While much of this work does not deal with nationalistic ideology per se, there is a rather interesting point about heritage, and how the German language is most suited to the spirit of the pure drama. Although he accepts that other European nations had their part to play in the development of opera as a whole, Wagner contends “the German alone possesses a language whose daily usage still hangs directly and conspicuously together with its roots.” He brushes away the Latin languages as being too disconnected from their source to be used proficiently to create art.¹⁰² Here, again, Wagner establishes German culture as being

⁹⁹ R. Wagner to F. Liszt, “Letter on 18 April 1851,” *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt Vol I*, p. 145.

¹⁰⁰ *Gregor-Dellin*, p. 321.

¹⁰¹ Wagner, “Opera and Drama,” in *Prose works II*, p. 202.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 357.

entirely separate and superior to others in Europe. While not mentioned directly, this concept of *Deutsch* and *Undeutsch* as it will later be defined is very much at play. Additionally, there is the delicate presence of how vital heritage and national tradition are to Wagner. Later writings will explore this concept in much more depth, alongside the practical application of these beliefs in his artistic creations such as the *Ring des Nibelungen* and *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*.

Interestingly, around this time Wagner's proclivity for revolutionary idealism made itself known once more through a letter to a Parisian friend: 'I long passionately for the revolution, and only hope of experiencing it and partaking in it is what gives me the courage to live.'¹⁰³ The revolution he longed for fizzled out, however, with the French coup d'état of 1851 and Louis-Napoleon's seizure of power. Finally, he firmly abandoned his revolutionary idealism writing retrospectively in *My Life* that he 'turned away in disgust from contemplation of external affairs to my inner self.'¹⁰⁴

During this period following the ill-fated Dresden uprising, Wagner is unclear about his true feelings towards Germany. The articles are written to support theoretical ideals of German paramountcy, but his animosity regarding the artistic landscape in his homeland is still very much on the surface. In 'A Theatre at Zurich,' Wagner condemns the lack of originality of German contemporary theatre and art, claiming that all of what is in Germany is merely a copy of Parisian works, and that German composers had simply 'tried to localise, in a measure, the foreign content of those pieces,' written by French composers leading to an unenlightened 'hybrid' genre.¹⁰⁵ Yet, as per Newman, the composer wished to return home that he might see a production of his *Lohengrin*.¹⁰⁶ When it became apparent that he would

¹⁰³ R. Wagner to E. B. Kietz, "Letter on 2 July 1851," in John N. Burk (ed.) *The Letters of Richard Wagner: The Burrell Collection*, p. 184.

¹⁰⁴ *Wagner*, p. 578.

¹⁰⁵ Richard Wagner, "A Theatre at Zurich," in *Judaism in Music and Other Essays* (Nebraska, 1995) p. 29-32.

¹⁰⁶ *Newman*, p. 438.

be unable to do so given his political status, he swung back in the opposite direction claiming, of a potential return ‘I hold no hope or wish for it.’¹⁰⁷ Finally, his frustrations with Zurich forced Wagner to beg Liszt to appeal the court on his behalf, writing ‘I entreat you now with the greatest decisiveness and determination: prevail upon the Weimar court to take the definitive step of finding out once and for all whether I have any real prospect of seeing Germany open her borders to me again in the near future. I must find this out for certain, and soon.’¹⁰⁸ A year later, the situation had not changed, and Wagner asked Liszt ‘Would it be of any use if I sent you a letter to the King of Saxony’¹⁰⁹ to help with his situation, yet by the time Liszt had responded with a reserved acceptance,¹¹⁰ Wagner had once more sunk into a depressive state, resigning to abandon the effort.¹¹¹ Throwing his arms up, Wagner then relocated to London, an experience which was marred by poor reception, dwindling finances, and uninspiring work.¹¹² Following this, he moved back to Zurich.¹¹³

Much of the sentiment expressed through the letters and publications included here acts as a signpost leading towards the more codified philosophies of the composer’s later writing. While the sentiment was often contradictory in places, scattered and unfocused in others, it is possible to identify the seeds of later ideology amid Wagner’s inconsistency, which seems to have been driven by a depressive state. In ‘Art and Revolution,’ he looks to the unity of ancient Greece, and the compassion of the church as cornerstones in creating his unified artistic future. He speaks of race and nationality as ‘shackles,’ hampering the effort to attain this future. This view, of course, flies in direct contrast to his next article. In ‘Judaism in

¹⁰⁷ R. Wagner to F. Liszt, “Letter 13 April 1852” in Francis Hueffer (ed.) *Correspondance of Wagner and Liszt Vol I*, p. 200.

¹⁰⁸ R. Wagner to F. Lizst, “Letter on 30 March 1853,” in Stewart Spencer, and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987), p. 283

¹⁰⁹ R. Wagner to F. Liszt, “Letter of mid-1854,” in Francis Hueffer (ed.) *Correspondance of Wagner and Liszt Vol II*, p. 23.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 25.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 27.

¹¹² *Gregor-Dellin*, p. 261.

¹¹³ *Ibid*, p. 263.

Music,' we see the early appearance of Wagner's beliefs on 'Deutsch' and 'un- Deutsch,' what is intrinsically German versus what is extrinsically German. For Wagner, Jewish mannerisms had no place in Germany as they inhabited an essential otherness that was completely incompatible with the German folk. The fact that the primary motivation for this work was based on a personal grudge is indicative of Wagner's world view at the time, yet still builds a rough skeleton for more developed ideas about racial supremacy in later writings. Lastly, *Opera and Drama* is an early examination of the German language as being more suited to passion and expression than other European languages. This, again, is an early example of Wagner's concept of binary opposites; Germanness and non-Germanness. The article series are further contextualised by looking at the series of letters Wagner sent, mainly to Liszt, during this period in which he paradoxically expresses both how much he misses Germany and takes steps to try and secure his passage home, alongside how he remains disgusted by the artistic scene and the people who remain there. This is, as mentioned, a period defined by a sense of aftershock to the Dresden revolution, in which Wagner is trying to find his ideological nationalistic feet while remaining at odds with the then state of German art: a barrier to the artistic utopia he desired so earnestly. Over the next decade, Wagner would submerge himself in artistic pursuits, producing work that would hint at these developing ideas on art, nationality, and heritage, joining them most pointedly in his music-drama *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg* which is a component of the next chapter in this study.

Back to Zurich

Returning once more to Zurich, Wagner immersed himself in his art by continuing work on *Tristan und Isolde*.¹¹⁴ Yet the most notable pursuit of Wagner during this period is his ongoing series of petitions and attempts to be granted readmission to Germany. As mentioned previously, Newman writes how Wagner desperately wanted to be present to direct and conduct his work, although as seen in a letter to Louis Schindelmeisser, he was

¹¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 271.

apprehensive about the ‘distressful state of things’ back in Germany, referencing the substandard artistic status quo that he had so acidly raged against.¹¹⁵

In a letter to Wilhelm Fischer in late 1858, Wagner thanks him for bringing a production of *Rienzi* to Dresden, writing ‘I was delighted at your bringing *Rienzi* out again in such a grand way, and the fact awakened some of the pleasantest remembrances of my life.’¹¹⁶ Wagner had previously written to Minna hoping that such development would surely bring about his amnesty,¹¹⁷ yet this was not to be. The reasons for this are speculative, yet one can perhaps surmise that not enough time had passed for the Dresdenites to forget the name of a one-time firebrand revolutionary. Despite being unable to make any demonstrable progress for the amnesty on Wagner’s behalf — or in his petitions to the court — Liszt was unyielding in his surety of Wagner’s position in German art, writing ‘You have struck your roots entirely in German soil; you are, and remain, the glory and splendour of German art.’¹¹⁸ Despite this, Wagner remained unable to assume that mantle of responsibility and remained far from home.

This remained the case for the next few years as Wagner repeatedly attempted to secure a benefactor to grant him amnesty, all the while working privately on *Tristan und Isolde* and considering various avenues to achieve financial stability. His nationalism in this period is, therefore, defined by this sense of frustration when it appears. A great deal of his writing simply does not display any kind of demonstrable idealism regarding Germany; most mentions of his homeland are clinical in the context of attempting to secure his passage home. Occasionally, there are characteristic flares of bitterness to which we have become accustomed, such as during the brief Franco-Austrian war in mid-1859. Wagner's

¹¹⁵ R. Wagner to Schindelmeisser, “Undated Letter,” in *Letters of Wagner I*, p. 291.

¹¹⁶ R. Wagner to W. Fischer “Letter on 9 October 1858,” in J. S. Shedlock (ed.) *Richard Wagner’s Letters to his Dresden Friends*, p. 428.

¹¹⁷ R. Wagner to M. Wagner, “Letter on 20 June 1858.” In William Ashton Ellis (trans.) *Richard to Minna Wagner*, p. 347.

¹¹⁸ F. Liszt to R. Wagner, “Letter on 9 October, 1858,” in Francis Hueffer (ed.) *Correspondance of Wagner and Liszt Vol II*, p. 252

commentary on the war indicates a distinct lack of faith in his homeland which now seems to have expanded beyond his original animosity towards the artistic scene. This same letter sees the resurgence of Wagner's typical petulant mocking tone when referring to those who have displeased him in some way. In a flare of arrogance, he blames the Germans for failing to protect the 'most Germanic of all Germanic opera composers from this grim ordeal.'¹¹⁹ This 'terrible trial' not only includes his present exile, it would seem, but additionally a recently considered move to Paris, even though it would be 'It is after all terribly unpatriotic of me to want to make myself at home in the principle haunt of the enemy of the Germanic Nation.'¹²⁰ Finally, in a kind of petulant ultimatum, he writes that, if the German Confederacy does not permit him repatriation, he would 'go to Paris and betray the length and breadth of Germany.'¹²¹

In a letter to Minna, Wagner, speculating about the possible defeat of Germany should she become involved in the conflict, writes: 'if they [the Germans] get really whipped, I should not know whether to cry or laugh.' He concludes the same letter with 'I have lost all patriotism under such miserable circumstances.'¹²²

At this point it is clear to see that Wagner will tailor his opinions towards a place or a people based heavily on how receptive, or more typically unresponsive, are to his art, presence, or wishes. Previously the main thrust of his ire had been directed at subversive artistic forces that might thwart his plans for cultural revolution, along with the specific foreign elements that he deemed to be unworthy of producing art at the potential level of the German. Yet here, he seems to entirely turn his back on the German confederacy as a political entity.

¹¹⁹ R. Wagner to F. Lizst, "Letter on 8 May 1859," in in Stewart Spencer, and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987), p. 454

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* p. 454

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 456.

¹²² This letter also contains a little of the spite that is characteristic of Wagner. In a jab at the German princes who enjoy his music, he writes: 'I'm glad that several princes are favourably disposed toward me; it is the more shameful that they don't have the energy to help me out decently. God bless them all!' R. Wagner to M. Wagner, "Letter on May 2 1859," in John N. Burk (ed.) *The Letters of Richard Wagner: The Burrell Collection*, p. 536.

Eventually, Wagner does go to Paris in an attempt to stage his work, yet he faced a familiar resistance to his productions by local authorities. In *My Life*, he naturally places the blame for this unfortunate spell on his ‘traditional’ detractors such as Meyerbeer.¹²³ After finally gathering enough money to put on a few concerts, he did so in early 1860, which increased public interest in his work, but also put him into considerable debt. Wagner’s continued exile led him to sink even further into that characteristic bitterness which has come to define his character. To Liszt in 1860, Wagner writes:

‘It is with a real sense of horror that I now think of Germany and of the future plans I reckon on undertaking there. May God forgive me, but all I see there is pettiness and meanness, the semblance and conceit of solidity but without any real ground or basis. Half-heartedness in everyone and everything, so that I would ultimately prefer to see the Pardon de Ploërmel here in Paris than in the shade of the famous, glorious German oak! I must also confess that setting foot on German soil again made not the slightest impression upon me, except, at most, a sense of surprise at the foolishness and unmannerliness of the language that was being spoken all around me. Believe me, we have no fatherland! And if I am “German”, it is no doubt because I carry my Germany around with me.’¹²⁴

Under the influence of his court, Napoleon III announced that he would stage Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* at the Opera in Paris. Wagner looked upon this as an opportunity to gift the French people with his art, expanding the limits of their cultural sensibilities. Wagner was given the full support of the crown in the lead-up to the performances and had final decision on every aspect of the eventual performances. Indeed, he wrote to Liszt that he had never experienced such creative freedom in the production of an opera: ‘Never before have I been so fully and unconditionally provided for with whatever material I need for an outstanding performance as is the case here in Paris with the performance of *Tannhäuser* at the grand

¹²³ *Wagner*, p. 719-720.

¹²⁴ R. Wagner to F. Liszt, “13 September 1860,” in Stewart Spencer, and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (London, 1987), p. 503.

opera.¹²⁵ In spite of this unparalleled freedom afforded to Wagner, the first performance of the Opera in 1861 was a disaster which drove Wagner into a deep depression. In a further display of how deeply entrenched his anti-german feeling was at this point, he turned the blame for this disaster squarely upon those Germans who did not offer him a pardon for his revolutionary activity. To Wagner, it was hypocritical of them to feel sympathetic towards his sufferings when they, in turn, would not give him a platform back in his home country, lamenting ‘the obtuseness of my high protectors in Germany, who never give a thought to the indignity of an artist of my seriousness strictly remaining exposed to all the chances of an adventurer's life. Which of them will offer me a respectable den for my person, a fit atelier for my art.’¹²⁶ During this period in Paris, he began working on *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, which is the focus of the next chapter. Finally, Minna bid him apply one final time to the Saxon government to end his exile. He did so emphasising Minna’s poor health as the primary reason for his desired return. Wagner writes in *My Life* that he experienced ‘great bitterness and resentment’ having to write yet another letter to those at court to whom he had felt such bitterness and hatred.¹²⁷ Remarkably, and perhaps mercifully, after 13 years in exile, Wagner finally was permitted re-entry to his homeland. The next chapter deals with the period of nationalistic exploration that follows, and ultimately leads to the production of his comic opera, *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, which displays evidence of a lifetime of nationalistic exploration.

It is clear that through Wagner’s early life, moving through his early artistic period, on to political activism, followed by his participation in revolutionary activity, and ending with his exile post-revolution, that his exploratory nationalism is influenced by a number of key factors. Firstly, his musical and literary education which give him a grounding of German history which sparks his interest in how a shared past can be used as a precedent for national identity. Secondly, his treatment outside of Germany, specifically France, cause a shift in his

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 502.

¹²⁶ R. Wagner to L. Brockhaus “Undated, end of March 1861,” in John Deathridge (ed.) *Family Letters of Richard Wagner*, p. 240

¹²⁷ *Wagner*, p. 805.

ideology which initially display a desire for a pan-European artistic effort, with the most artistic nations offering their strengths to a more unified whole; he soon begins to place Germany as the most inherently suited to artistic expression ahead of others. Also, during this exploration, his series of letters from Paris give an interesting insight as they pander to different audiences depending on where they're published. Thirdly, his participation in the Dresden uprising seems to be the peak of his liberal reformist nationalism, but this faded during his exile out of necessity for his efforts at repatriation. Lastly, his exile and continued exploration defined by a twofold sense of bitterness; little support for his return back in the confederation, and frustration with his various host countries. Each of these factors contributed to a broad, complex concept of nationalism in the composer, which was incredibly flexible and prone to sharp changes when Wagner was going through difficult times in his personal life. This wide tapestry of views all culminates when he finally returns to Germany, and in the writing of his most nationalistic piece *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, which combines chauvinistic nationalism, distrust of foreigners, appreciation and reverence of a shared past, and a vision for a desired aesthetic state of the future. This will be discussed in the following chapter in detail.

Chapter 3

Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg

As explored at length in the previous chapter, Richard Wagner's nationalism developed throughout his early life in a manner that can be described variously as opportunistic, meandering, and genuinely personalised. Driven alternately by bouts of nationalistic fervour and pan-German idealism, he equally betrays a base level of bitter reactionary nationalism when faced with apparent mistreatment at the hands of the French, British, and Italian musicians and political leaders with whom he comes into contact over the years. Additionally, there are moments of outright abandonment of his love of country in the moments where he, once more, is snubbed or ignored by the German political or artistic establishment. As we have seen, by the end of the 1850s Wagner settles into an idealistic form of nationalism. Publicly and privately, Wagner opined of a future where the artist is highly valued, even central, in the hierarchy of the state. It is here that he begins to explore the concepts of national identity and delves further into historical precedent to find his justification for the assertion that Germany holds artistic supremacy in Europe. During this period, he returns to work on what we believe to be his most nationalistic piece of work, *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*. *Meistersinger* is the sum of myriad experiences and readings by Wagner, along with the developing political situations of the day, and private and public writings on matters relating to art, identity, and Germanness. The purpose of this chapter is to explore *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg* by constructing a historical framework to explain why this opera finds itself as the most openly nationalistic of all of Wagner's work.

As a choice of location, Nuremberg's significance might be well known to scholars of the twenty-first century as the home of the Nazi party rallies, yet in the nineteenth century was it appreciated in the same way? As a central free imperial city, Nuremberg was a hub of trade and commerce for many centuries before declining in the wake of the Thirty Years War. The rediscovery of Nuremberg by the romantics may have contributed to Wagner's appreciation, whose aesthetic adoration of the city is front and centre of the opera itself.

Indeed, Wagner's use of historical material for his most nationalistic opera is hugely influenced by his developing concept of the past itself as a tool for identity building in Germany. The romanticist influences of Wagner's early life shed light on how his writing process unfolded, emphasising the treasures of the German past. When he began *Die Meistersinger* in the mid-1840s, these ideas were in their formative stages and the sources and experiences from which drew his inspiration make for a very different piece of work than what eventually appeared on stage in 1868. It is known that he visited Nuremberg, but is it possible to readily locate a nationalistic quality in the early attempts at writing? Then, as the work was shelved for over a decade, it is vital to detail the events that transpire on the international stage during the interim years. German nationalism flowered in Germany at the end of the 1850s through a series of wars and colloquial movements aimed at creating a unified German state which eventually took place. Seen by some observers as a revolution from the top-down, with Bismarck's *realpolitik* leaving little room for public opinion informing policy, does Wagner's writing provide any insight as to his political affiliation or concerns during the period leading up to the 1871 unification of the German Empire? When the composer eventually picks up *Die Meistersinger* to continue work on the libretto, do we see an active or passive awareness of nationalist ideology in the writing process? There must at least be a passing awareness of the developing international situation: when writing to a friend, he declares that "in the midst of this chaos, I am finishing *Die Meistersinger!*"¹ In light of such chaos, do his intentions for the opera change from his early desires of producing a "comic opera in three acts"?² Then, we will look at the complete opera itself to determine what elements of nationalism are prevalent throughout the work. The opera is a profoundly nationalistic piece of work in its final form, and through an analysis of the libretto, setting, characterisation, and philosophy, this chapter will seek to understand how and why that is the case. Some scholarly work exists on the analysis of the score as being inherently philosophical or nationalistic in and of itself, but this study will deal only with the narrative content of the opera, as such musicological analysis of Wagner has been well-

¹ Martin Gregor-Dellin, *Richard Wagner, his life, his work, his century* (San Diego, 1983). p. 496.

² Richard Wagner to B. Schott's Söhne, 30 October 1861, in Richard Wagner, Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, *Selected letters of Richard Wagner* (New York, 1988). p. 527.

covered. When Joseph Goebbels decides that *Die Meistersinger* as "the most German of all German operas," is it possible to understand how that might be true, or is such a characterisation nothing more than nationalistic bluster?³ Even with the presence of seemingly harmless dreams of unity through a national artistic spirit, *Die Meistersinger* is exactly as chauvinistic and nationalist as it has been characterised throughout its long history of study, and here we will piece together why.

Why Nuremberg?

The question of why Nuremberg held cultural significance for Wagner may not be readily known to the casual observer, though this is understandable. From an outside perspective with no context, the city may be one of a great many beautiful medieval towns in Germany. Alternatively, a connection at the tip of the tongue might be through the events of the mid-twentieth century. The importance of Nuremberg in German cultural history has mostly been overshadowed in modern times by its recent dual roles as both the celebratory city of the Nazi ideology and, subsequently and pointedly, the host-city of the post-war Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals. Nuremberg itself as a German cultural phenomenon extends beyond Wagner, as it is well known. The ancient city did indeed become a central point of congregation during Adolf Hitler's regime, where great rallies were held to propagate the darker, more violently exclusionary aspects of German nationalism.⁴ The rallies would use Wagner's music as a backdrop, as heard during Leni Riefenstahl's infamous 'Triumph of the Will' which includes elements of *Die Meistersinger* as an uncomfortably upbeat backdrop to the 1934 Nazi party rally.⁵ Of course, the level to which Wagner bears responsibility for the events of the 1930s and 40s is a hotly contested debate and one to which this study offers no conclusion. However, the town had previously commanded the respect of German romantics

³ Dennis, David B.. "The Most German of All German Operas': *Die Meistersinger* through the Lens of the Third Reich." In Nicholas Vazsonyi (ed.) *Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation* (New York, 2003) pp 98-119.

⁴ Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London, 2000), p. 211.

⁵ Stefan Strötgen, "'I Compose the Party Rally...': The Role of Music in Leni Riefenstahl's Triumph of the Will" in *Music and Politics*, II, no. 1 (2008), p. 6.

and nationalists for the same reasons as it would the Nazis, albeit without a necessarily supremacist ideological attachment. A brief historical background of the city is necessary to contextualise the nationalistic reverence afforded to Nuremberg by Wagner and German romantics over the past few centuries.

In 1219 Friedrich II gave Nuremberg the title and rights of a free imperial town, and by 1424 the imperial regalia was held in the city. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Nuremberg experienced increased importance as a bastion of German culture, becoming, in essence, the centre of the German Renaissance.⁶ A significant centre of trade and commerce, its historical importance was utilised by the Nazi party who intended that, for their purposes, "Nuremberg will combine the testimony of a glorious German past with the testimony of a possibly even greater present, and will bear its former honorary title with renewed justification: 'the little treasure chest of the German nation!'"⁷ Indeed, the city lay at the heart of the Holy Roman Empire, acting as a point of confluence for all major trade routes of the day. Indeed, several factors led the city to be considered the *de facto* capital of the empire, being the seat of the Imperial Government.⁸ It was long the favoured location to hold imperial diets, and the Golden Bull designates Nuremberg as the city where a newly elected emperor was to hold his first congress with the estates.⁹ By the early fifteenth century, on the back of valuable trade routes, Nuremberg was becoming one of the leading cities of the Empire.¹⁰ The artistic and administrative institutions of Nuremberg, along with its laws, were widely copied throughout the empire.¹¹ In 1424, after several years moving from place to place, the most essential symbolic treasures of the empire objects symbolic of the empire's divinity and power, relocated to Nuremberg. These included the crown jewels,

⁶ Wenderhorst, Alfred Nuremberg. 'The Imperial City: From its Beginnings to the End of its Glory,' in Ellen Shultz, Gerhard Bott (eds.) *Gothic and renaissance art in Nuremberg 1300-1550*, (New York, 1986) pp 14.

⁷ Stephen Brockmann, *Nuremberg: An Imaginary Capital* (Rochester, NY, 2006), p. 181.

⁸ Joachim Whaley, *Germany and the Holy Roman Empire Vol 1*. (Oxford, 2012), p. 213.

⁹ Gerald Strauss, *Nuremberg in the sixteenth century* (New York, 1976), p. 47.

¹⁰ *Strauss*, p. 46.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 7.

sceptre, orb, sword, and the holy lance, all for use in coronations.¹² By 1500, Nuremberg was the pre-eminent artistic centre of Germany.¹³ Many prominent figures of German historical-artistic importance come from Nuremberg. No other German city produced as many significant artists in as many fields as Nuremberg: Albrecht Dürer, Martin Behaim, Peter Vischer the Elder, and of course Hans Sachs to name but a few.¹⁴ Artistic innovations originating in Nuremberg included pyrotechnic displays, fireworks, and illuminations.¹⁵

Additionally, in 1525, Nuremberg stood against the Catholic Church during the reformation, adopting Lutheranism and ushering in a new period of artistic exploration informed by protestant philosophy and aesthetic approach.¹⁶ So vital was Nuremberg to the spread of reformation ideology, that Martin Luther once called the imperial city ‘the eyes and ears’ of Germany.¹⁷ The City had been farther along in its process of reformation than anywhere else, even before Martin Luther made himself known.¹⁸ Eventually, Nuremberg’s prosperity would falter in the face of the Thirty Years War, which had a dramatic effect on the population of the city. Additionally, this gradual decline was due in part to the voyages of discovery moving business and trade routes from Venice in the Mediterranean — with whom Nuremberg had strong economic ties — to the Atlantic Coast.¹⁹ Losses were compounded by poor governance and petty squabbles between local leaders and merchants, and eventually, the town was annexed by Bavaria in 1806.²⁰ In the nineteenth century, Nuremberg became a hub for economic recovery and growth. Indeed, as Stewart Spencer

¹² *Whaley*, p.18.

¹³ Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *Nuremberg a renaissance city, 1500-1618* (Michigan, 1983), p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁵ *Whaley*, p. 528.

¹⁶ *Chipps Smith*, p. 4.

¹⁷ *Brockman*, p. 181.

¹⁸ *Strauss*, p. 47.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 147.

²⁰ *Brockman*, p. 33.

points out, throughout the greater part of the century, Nuremberg was the centre of Bavaria's wholesale trade, dealing chiefly in groceries, hops, and tobacco.²¹

However, although the list of cultural treasures found in Nuremberg is long and illustrious, it took time for contemporary Germans to appreciate the city in the manner one would come to expect given its eventual centrality to German culture. To the Enlightenment thinkers, Nuremberg was an ugly, uninspiring city. Enlightenment poet Christian Schubart characterised Nuremberg as 'a gray... city, lost in debt cowardliness, and despicable silence,'²² Moreover, in 1797 one Jonas Ludwig von Hess wrote that the atmosphere prevailing in the medieval city reminded him of 'the low of the highwayman, of the old German, constantly trembling in fear, writhing, betrayed by itself, and bristling with weapons.'²³ So where did the change in appreciation occur? The enlightenment sensibilities had no place for Nuremberg with its archaic aesthetic, so it took the romantics to find the irresistible charm beneath the crumbling exterior.

In *Herzensergießungen eines Kunstliebenden Klosterburders (The Heartfelt Effusions of an Art-Loving Monk, 1797)*, written by Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, we see a twofold change of historical appreciation concerning both Nuremberg, and Germany: the work at once points to the Northern Renaissance, Germany included, as being of the same cultural and historical value as the Italian Renaissance. This trans-national appreciation is an interesting concept in the case of Wagner when considering his eventual enmity towards Italian art. Secondly, the book contains a segment of high praise towards the town of Nuremberg. The passage is in honour of Albrecht Dürer and Hans Sachs, a profoundly emotive tribute that resonates loudly with the later sentiment expressed by Wagner:

²¹ Stewart Spencer, "Wagner's Nuremberg" in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, no. 1 (1992), pp 21-41.

²² *Brockman*, p. 35.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 35.

‘Nuremberg! O town of erstwhile universal fame! How gladly I wandered through your narrow crooked streets; with what childlike love I observed your ancestral houses and churches, which bear the firm imprint of our fatherland’s ancient art! What heartfelt love I feel for the creations of that age, creations that speak so vigorous, powerful and true a language! how they draw me back to that grey century when you, Nuremberg, were the life-teeming school of our fatherland’s art and when a truly fruitful and prodigal spirit flourished within your walls: when master Hans Sachs and Adam Kraft the sculptor and above all Albrecht Dürer and his friend Wilibaldus Pirckheimer and so many other highly praised men of honour were still alive! How often I longed to return to that age!’²⁴

The spirit of German romantic entanglement with the German past is undeniably at play here, and we already know that such romantics influenced Wagner’s developing philosophies. Alongside this new romanticism came a new nationalism informed by the renewed interest in the cultural value of historical Nuremberg, and German history generally. The longing for a vague united past manifested itself in the language of romanticists like Schlegel, writing in 1808: ‘The poetry of the ancients was that of possession, ours is that of yearning.’²⁵ It is a common phenomenon in nationalism of any era to yearn for a hazy period of glory in the vague, not too distant past. This is of course pointedly present in the twenty-first century through the rise of nationalist movements worldwide each of whom long for a mostly fictional past that might be their respective nation’s future (Far right slogans such as ‘Make America Great again,’ and the heart-string rhetoric of advocates for the British exit from the European Union are evidence of this).²⁶ The difference of course is how such ideas are actually utilised. The romantic writers who examined Nuremberg attempt, as seen in the above passage by Wackenroder, to create a sense of beauty out of something that is necessarily unpleasant to contemporary observers. For example, on the actual layout of Nuremberg itself, one writer notes how ‘even the irregularity and crookedness of the narrow streets strikes one as not unpleasant, for it

²⁴ Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, (Princeton, 2003), p. 184.

²⁵ *Spencer*, p. 24.

²⁶ ‘Nostalgia and the Promise of Brexit’ <https://www.ft.com/content/bf70b80e-8b39-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543> (10 July 2019)

increases the picturesqueness of the same and, bearing the imprint of freedom, has an attractive side in a figurative sense as well.²⁷ Visual artists began to explore the aesthetics of aggrandising this rich imperial past, often through the reconstruction and outright fabrication of events involving famous figures. One such example is a painting by Friedrich Carl Mayer who shows a meeting in St. Sebaldus's Church between the artists Peter Vischer and Veit Stoß, and the Emperor Maximilian I. The painting emphasises an idealism of past harmony, especially by portraying the craftsmen and their royal patrons as having a casual, even rosy, relationship. Another, as mentioned by Spencer, provides substantial evidence as to how romantic nineteenth-century artists viewed imperial Nuremberg, at the top of the painting is written:

If Germany thou'dst fathom, and Germany thou'dst love, / Hear tell the name of
Nuremberg / Where noble arts once throve: / O faithful and hard-working, /
Untouch'd by mark of time, Where Dürer's might once flourish'd / And Sachs
did sing and rhyme.²⁸

Most interestingly, the July 1861 *Deutsches Sängerkunstfest* held in Nuremberg gives a wonderful example of this romantic, idealistic nationalism applied to the popular spirit, no doubt inflamed by the prevailing political climate as discussed later in this chapter. During the festival, the town was transformed into a living celebration of the German past, with houses decorated and identified for their importance in the tapestry of Nuremberg's historical narrative. Indeed, as the Nuremberg *Bürgermeister* said of the festivities, 'Out pageant is in fact a unique event in Germany's history. Here in the heart of Germany, German heart has spoken to German heart.'²⁹ Less than three weeks later, Wagner and his friends arrived in Nuremberg, and it is difficult to imagine that the lingering sense of nationalistic unity did not affect the party, least of all Wagner himself.³⁰

²⁷ Spencer, p. 25.

²⁸ Herbert Barth, Dietrich Mack and Egon Voss, *Wagner* (London, 1975), p. 161.

²⁹ Spencer, p. 32

³⁰ Gregor Dellin, p. 307.

Indeed, in an 1866 letter to Ludwig II Wagner looks to Nuremberg as the only place from which the tremendous artistic rebirth of Germany would occur, led by the young Bavarian king:

“Nuremberg, the old, true seat of German art, German uniqueness and splendour, the powerful old free city, well-preserved like a precious jewel, reborn through the labours of its serenely happy, solid, enlightened and liberal populace under the patronage of the Bavarian throne. It is there, my beloved, that I wanted to invite you next year. . . . It was a question. . . of restoring and elevating the dear old town of Nuremberg. Our success cannot be judged too highly: there - and there alone, the eyes of all Germany would suddenly have been open to the significance of what lies behind our ‘model performances.’”³¹

This letter is part of a series which Wagner would eventually compile into his essay ‘What is German,’ published in 1878. The nationalistic elements of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

It is worthwhile to examine how Wagner consumed and utilised history under the influence of German romanticism in more detail. As we have seen, Wagner had already explored the importance of history in his early writing, especially in the interim period between the first draft of *Meistersinger* in 1845, and the second draft of the libretto completed in 1862.³²

Indeed, in his 1851 publication ‘Opera and Drama,’ he points to history as the most potent source of inspiration:

‘We shall not win hope and nerve until we bend our ear to the heart-beat of history, and catch the sound of that sempiternal vein of living waters which, however, buried under the waste-heap of historical civilisation, yet pulses on in all its pristine freshness’³³

³¹ Richard Wagner to King Ludwig II of Bavaria, 6 June 1866, in Richard Wagner, Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, *Selected letters of Richard Wagner* (New York, 1988). p. 701.

³² *Warrack*, p. 37.

³³ Richard Wagner, “Opera and Drama,” in *Prose Works Vol. 2. trans. William Ashton Ellis* (London, 1898). p.374.

In the same year, on the publication of ‘A communication to my friends,’ he explores this idea further:

‘Since my return to Germany from Paris, my favourite study has been that of ancient German lore. I have already dwelt on the deep longing for my native home that filled me then. This home, however, in its actual reality, could nowise satisfy my longing; thus I felt that a deeper instinct lay behind my impulse, and one that needs must have its source in some other yearning that merely for the modern homeland. As though to get down to its roots, I sank myself into the primal element of home, that meets us in the legends of a past which attracts us the more warmly as the present repels us with its hostile chill. To all our wishes and warm impulses, which in truth transport us to the future, we seek to give a physical token by means of pictures from the past, and thus to win from them a form the modern and present never can provide.’³⁴

The decided romanticist views of Wagner in the above publication appear only 16 years after the great romantic composer Robert Schumann would write, on the agenda of the recently founded *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*: ‘In the short time during which we have been active, a number of facts have come to light. Still, our way of thinking was fixed from the outset. Simply put, we intend to. Honour the past and its works, to call attention to the ways in which new artistic creations can only be invigorated by acknowledging a source so pure...’³⁵ While it is unclear as to whether Wagner actually read this artistic manifesto, we know that the two had become friends only a year before its publication, so it stands to reason that Schumann's romantic idealism made an impression on Wagner given his later views on the matter, and the fact that they remained close for a number of years before eventually falling out.³⁶ Despite the clear connection between Wagner’s appreciation of the past and that of Schumann and the romantics, Wagner’s diary entries show us that he understood the reality of the past could only take one so far and required an element of embellishment for the art-form to reach its ideological heights essentially: ‘even the romance could only reach its appointed height, as an art form, by sinning against the truth of

³⁴ Richard Wagner, “A Communication to my Friends” in *Prose Works Vol. 1. trans. William Ashton Ellis* (London, 1898). p.375.

³⁵ John Daverio, *Nineteenth-century music and the German romantic ideology* (New York, 1993), p. 12.

³⁶ *Gregor Dellin*, p. 64.

history.’ So, although there was an evident reverence for the past, there was a pragmatic comprehension of the limits of transforming historical information into evocative art. history was, to Wagner, primarily a source from which one could draw a national identity. In *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, he does so precisely: constructing a fictionalised historical version of imperial Nuremberg to glorify the German past while delivering moral lessons on how best to manage a future led by German values and aesthetics. As will now be shown, the actual writing of the opera draws from the elements discussed so far in this chapter. Wagner’s combined usage of historical texts for material, along with his romantic interpretation of the past provide a nationalistic foundation for his comic opera. As we will see, however, these are not the only elements that affect the writing of the opera, and the developing political situation will have an effect too.

Early Writing Process and Intent

Wagner’s earliest encounter with the stories of the Meistersingers is in 1928 when at Leipzig during his period of existential exploration, finally settling on pursuing music after leaving the university. Borrowing from a lending library owned by Friedrich Wieck, he came into contact with Wagenseil’s *Von der Meistersinger holdseliger Kunst (Of the Mastersinger’s Delightful Art)*. Here he read about the Mastersinger’s berets, the prize song, and the various traditions of the old Mastersinger’s guild.³⁷ By the composer’s own account, the first conscious genesis of *Die Meistersinger* arose from a period of illness during a stay in Marienbad in 1845. Wagner’s doctors had apparently instructed him to take some time off from the stress of creative work, and instead take in some reading.³⁸ Writing in *Mein Leben*, he describes the material he had with him at the time, including editions of Wolfram von Eschenbach and the Lohengrin epic. In an effort to distract himself from the torment of

³⁷ Gregor Dellin, p. 37-38.

³⁸ John Warrack, *Richard Wagner, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 3.

trying to finish *Lohengrin*, Wagner defied his doctor's orders and made an attempt at writing a more light-hearted opera: ³⁹

'Owing to some comments I had read in Gervinus's *History of German Literature*, both the Meistersingers of Nürnberg and Hans Sachs had acquired quite a vital charm for me. The marker alone, and the part he takes in the master-singing, were particularly pleasing to me, and on one of my lonely walks, without knowing anything particular about Hans Sachs and his poetic contemporaries, I thought out a humorous scene, in which the cobbler as a popular artisan-poet with the hammer on his last, gives the marker a practical lesson by making him sing, thereby taking revenge on him for his conventional misdeeds. To me, the force of the whole scene was concentrated in the two following points: on the one hand the marker, with his slate covered with chalk-marks, and on the other Hans Sachs holding up the shoes covered with his chalk-marks, each intimating to the other that the singing had been a failure. To this picture, by way of concluding the second act, I added a scene consisting of a narrow, crooked little street in Nuremberg, with the people all running about in great excitement, and ultimately engaging in a street brawl. Thus, suddenly, the whole of my Meistersinger comedy took shape so vividly before me, that, inasmuch as it was a particularly cheerful subject, and not in the least likely to over-excite my nerves, I felt I must write it out in spite of the doctor's orders.'⁴⁰

As with most of Wagner's retrospective writing, one must attempt to parse truth from fiction to understand how developed an idea was at any given time. As mentioned in Warrack's Cambridge Opera Handbook on *Die Meistersinger*, some specific inspiration of what is described here come from actual events in Wagner's life. A series of real-world events provided ample inspiration for certain scenes which would eventually appear in the opera. An early visit to Nuremberg in 1835 is one such example of this.⁴¹ When mocking a local

³⁹ Gregor Dellin, p. 141.

⁴⁰ Richard Wagner, *My Life Vol. I*. (New York, 1911) p. 366.

⁴¹ Gregor Dellin, p. 72.

carpenter's dream of becoming a singer during a particularly mean-spirited episode, Wagner found the chaotic real-world inspiration for what would eventually become the closing piece of the second act of *Meistersinger*:

‘Out of this situation evolved an uproar, which through the shouting and clamour and an inexplicable growth in the number of participants in the struggle soon assumed a truly demoniacal character. It looked to me as if the whole town would break down into a riot, and I really thought myself to be once again involuntarily witnessing a revolution of which no-one had the slightest idea what was all about. Then suddenly I heard a heavy thump and as if by magic the whole crowd dispersed in every direction ... One of the regular patrons ... had felled one of the noisiest rioters... and it was the effect of this which shattered everybody so suddenly. Scarcely a minute after the fiercest tumult had been raging among hundreds of people, I was able to stroll arm in arm with my brother-in-law through the lonely moonlit streets, laughing and joking.’⁴²

The first draft also benefits significantly from rather heavy reliance on the source material he had on hand.⁴³ The material contained in his Dresden library which seem to have been of great use to Wagner in regard to his *Meistersinger* include Grimm's *Über den altdeutschen Meistergesang*, a collection of Hans Sachs's plays compiled by J. G. Büsching, along with Freidrich Furchau's life of Sachs.⁴⁴ Additionally, Millington points out that Wagner must have found his copy of J. C. Wagenseil's *Nuremberg Chronicle* of 1676 an instructive source of information on the old guilds, crafts, and traditional aspects of life in Nuremberg.⁴⁵ Interestingly, this first draft portrays Hans Sachs as, to quote Newman, ‘a rather cynical, ironic, and embittered character, who, apart from his advocacy of the cause of the young knight, reminds us comparatively little pf the wise, kindly, mellow, poet-

⁴² Warrack, p. 2.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Barry Millington, *The New Grove Guide to Wagner and His Operas* (New York, 2006), p. 85.

philosopher he ultimately becomes in Wagner's treatment of him.⁴⁶ A notable change in the character of Sachs is found on a later pencil addition to the 1845 draft, presumably added following the bitter disappointment in German idealism Wagner experienced following the failure of the Dresden Uprising, it reads: 'Were the Holy Roman Empire to dissolve into mist, we still should have holy German art.'⁴⁷ This addition famously makes its way to the final draft, albeit with slightly different wording. Eventually, Hans Sachs would stand out as a prominent force of German identity to the composer who wrote to his friends that the cobbler-poet was 'the final manifestation of the artistically creative popular spirit.'⁴⁸ Indeed this manifestation appears most notably in *Die Meistersinger* and the *Wahn* monologue of Sachs himself, where the cobbler-poet declares his love for 'his' city of Nuremberg.

It is additionally worth noting that, much like Nuremberg itself, Wagner idealised Hans Sachs, the Mastersinger's, and their role in the city beyond the historical reality. Wagner's representation of the institution of the Mastersingers places them as some kind of reverent collection of elders, respected by all when the reality seems to have been somewhat different. Indeed, far less attention was paid to them in their day than Wagner would have us believe. Other artists would generally regard them with derision, but by calling themselves masters, they were able to present themselves as experts of a craft in opposition to the laity who sang and rhymed with no formal structure or apparent reason.⁴⁹ Wagner plays on this difference in the opera through the *Volk*, which will be discussed later. Additionally, and possibly pedantically, Wagner places Sachs as a contemporary of the named *Meistersinger* in the opera, even though he did not live at the same time and did not hold a position as one of the twelve Mastersingers of Nuremberg.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ernst Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner, III* (London, 1945). p. 156.

⁴⁷ *Gregor Dellin*, p. 142.

⁴⁸ *Borchmeyer*, p. 186.

⁴⁹ *Strauss*, p. 264.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 265.

Wagner was inspired by the idyllic version of sixteenth-century Nuremberg and brings this colourful aesthetic, however exaggerated, to his *Meistersinger*, accentuating the idea of a glorious imperial past, which this chapter will address later, along with other nationalistic aspects of the opera. After completing a first draft dated ‘Marienbad, 6 July 1845,’ the opera went through a number of revisions until it was shelved for over a decade.⁵¹

Rising Identity in Europe

It would seem that Wagner was unable to satisfactorily complete the project until the question of German Unification came to the fore of European discourse in the 1860s. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Wagner settled into a period of disillusionment following his revolutionary days, partly driven by an attempt to clear his name of any wrongdoing in the eyes of his homeland, but additionally due to his shaken beliefs in the progressive Young Germany. The revolutionaries had failed due to, among other things, the lack of a firm national centre, owing to the fracturing of the Holy Roman Empires years before.⁵² Renewed conflict and a developing unified idealism beginning at the end of the 1850s coincide with Wagner’s own resurgence of nationalistic thought after the ‘low period’ described previously. During this tumultuous period, Wagner began an exploration of nationalistic singularity. In the midst of this, the fair copy of *Die Meistersinger* was produced by the end of January 1862, in Paris.⁵³ At this time, the idea of a unified Germany seemed more attainable than ever before, if not an outright inevitability.⁵⁴ Under new leadership, Prussia had won a series of conflicts to become one of the most powerful nations on the continent. This period of national assertiveness seems to have been an essential catalyst for Wagner’s exploration of what it meant to be German if the German spirit exists,

⁵¹ Warrack, p. 10.

⁵² Karin Friedrich, ‘Cultural and intellectual trends’ in Mary Fulbrook (ed.), *German history since 1800* (London, 2010), p. 104.

⁵³ Warrack, p. 37.

⁵⁴ This belief was cemented later in the year by Bismarck with his famous ‘Blood and Iron’ speech. F. B. M. Hollyday, *Bismarck*. (New Jersey, 1970) p. 16-18.

and if so, how it can be nurtured and maintained. Briefly, we will give a background to the international developments that eventually led to the establishment of the German Empire in 1871, to clearly show the environment in which Wagner wrote his most nationalistic piece.

In 1859 the second Italian war broke out between Austria and Sardinia to finally decide on the possession of Lombardy. Within a few months, the Austrian army was forced to admit defeat. Prussia was poised to enter the war on the side of the Austrians to defend the Po against the hereditary enemy, France if needs be.⁵⁵ Here the seeds of a national identity are being carefully tended to by Bismarck, writing clinically that he would ‘prefer the word ‘German’ rather than ‘Prussian’ to be written on our flag only after we have been more closely and more usefully connected with our countrymen than hitherto.’⁵⁶ Indeed, the national feeling was becoming more pronounced and unified at home than before, where the centenary celebrations of famed poet and philosopher Friedrich Schiller’s birthday unleashed a great wave of national enthusiasm throughout the whole of Germany.⁵⁷ Bismarck sought to use this once contemptible German national movement as an essential ally for Prussia.⁵⁸ Ultimately, the goal of the Prussians under Bismarck was a pan-German unified state under the stewardship of Prussia, as Bismarck apparently said during a dinner at the Russian Embassy in London in 1862: ‘... When the army has been brought to such a state as to command respect, then I will take the first opportunity to declare war with Austria, burst asunder the German Confederation, bring the middle and smaller states to subjection, and give Germany a national union under the leadership of Prussia.’⁵⁹ While this statement could be taken as the intentions of a noble idealist offering his nation’s stewardship to a future unified Germany, it is essential to remember that Bismarck was, at his core, a pragmatic monarchist most interested in advancing the strength of Prussia itself

⁵⁵ Edgar Feuchtwanger, *Bismarck: A Political History* (Routledge, 2014) p. 63.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 64.

⁵⁷ Robert-Hermann Tenbrock and Paul J Dine, *A History of Germany* (Munich, 1979), p. 201.

⁵⁸ *Feuchtwanger*, p. 65.

⁵⁹ William Carr, *A History of Germany, 1815-1990* (Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 83.

rather than a dream of German ideological unity; his *realpolitik* had no room for sentimental ideology unless it was directly useful in the struggle for power. Yet to the public he was able to maintain the appearance of such a nationalist in his belief that the larger German states with their own sense of identity were truly German in that they all shared a common *Volksgeist*, a view held, albeit more culturally than politically, by Wagner.⁶⁰ When the war with Denmark loomed in 1864, a historical precedent was put above that of the paper treaties to encourage the population to volunteer for a war to reclaim a historically German territory.⁶¹ Denmark had signed a new constitution which included the province of *Schleswig* under its power, which seemed like a downright annexation to the observing Germans who clamoured for their national interests to be protected. Denmark was swiftly defeated.⁶² When the fraternal Austro-Prussian war broke out in 1866, German-speaking states stood facing each other in the field, yet this did not seem to dilute the national feeling of kinship; solidarity had become strong between Germans since the wars of liberation and under the influence of nationalist ideas, stronger even than the dynastic considerations gave way before it.⁶³ Bismarck established the North German confederacy in 1867 following the end of the Austro-Prussian war. This saw the creation of the *Bundesrat* which required delegates to be sent from individual states of the federation for democratic unity. This was the first step towards a unified Germany.⁶⁴ The next and final was the Franco-Prussian War. Amid a growing sense of enthusiasm from Pan-German idealists, along with Bismarck's concepts of *Realpolitik*, the creation of a unified German state seemed more attainable than ever before, the role of nationalism in forging the identity of the future state seemed central.

The Franco-Prussian War began over a matter of succession, as European wars often did. When Queen Isabella of Spain was dethroned in 1868, the monarchist engineers of the coup

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p83

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.91

⁶² Koppel S. Pinson, *Modern German: It's History and Civilisation*, (Michigan,1968) p. 134.

⁶³ *Tenbrock*, p. 204.

⁶⁴ *Ibid* p. 206.

looked for a candidate to assume the throne. Prince Leopold von Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen was suggested. He was a distant relation of the Prussian Hohenzollerns and was therefore subject to the authority of the head of the family: King William of Prussia. The chief promoter of this new candidate was Bismarck.⁶⁵ Under the instructions of a French diplomat, Agenor, Duc de Gramont, one Count Vincent Benedetti went to see William at the Hessian spa of Bad Ems. Here, he instructed the king to force his nephew to renounce the Spanish crown.⁶⁶ Soon after this encounter, Leopold stepped out of the running for the position. This might have been the end of the matter, but for the telegram Bismarck received detailing the icy exchange at Bad Ems. After a prompt edit of the document to make the king sound as if he were responding to a challenge by the French, Bismarck dispatched it to German embassies abroad and the newspapers.⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ Bismarck had shown the ‘red rag to taunt the Gallic bull,’ to force a war with France as the instigator. With the publishing of the telegram, and the implication that the Prussian king had been insulted by the French ambassador, Anti-French sentiment flowered and the Prussian population was incensed.⁶⁹ Bismarck informed the King William of “the growing exasperation of public opinion over the presumptuous conduct of France.”⁷⁰ When war finally broke out after French mobilisation, the public anti-French sentiment led to a rallying behind the national cause of unity. However, it is mentioned by Breuille that the anti-french sentiment and apparent patriotism hid plenty of conflicting beliefs regarding how the new state would eventually be governed.⁷¹ For all the clamour of nationalism that developed through this period, it must be noted again that Bismarckian State building and *realpolitik* did not

⁶⁵ Pinson, p. 143.

⁶⁶ Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-71*, (Cambridge, 2003) p. 35

⁶⁷ Wawro p.35

⁶⁸ Carr, p. 114

⁶⁹ Tenbrock, p. 207

⁷⁰ Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France 1870-1871* (Routledge, 2005), p. 55.

⁷¹ John Breuille, ‘Revolution to Unification, German history Since 1800,’ in Mary Fulbrook (ed.), *German history since 1800* (London, 2010), p. 104.

concern itself with the idealistic fantasies of those who called for a unified Germany unless it explicitly assisted in expanding Prussia's power. The period has been classified as a revolution from the top-down, even though at a superficial glance one could perhaps assume that increasing popular nationalistic sentiment had a direct impact on the establishment of the empire in 1871.⁷² It was through this tumultuous period of German history, with the backdrop of rising German nationalism and a desire for unity, that Richard Wagner completed and premiered his *Meistersinger*.

Rediscovery and Completion

Meistersinger reappears during Wagner's stay in Venice in 1861. He details a plan for *Meistersinger* to Schott in a letter dated October 30, 1861.⁷³ In a letter to his publisher, Wagner outlines his intentions to create a central piece of German art inspired by the very history that he so values:

"I am counting on having depicted *the* real nerve-centre of German life and on having displayed its originality, which is also recognised and loved abroad. I remember, for instance, the time when the Director of the Grand Opera in Paris was examining examples of highly original German 15th and 16th Century costume with me, and how he sighed and said: 'if you could only bring us an opera in these costumes! Unfortunately, I can never use them'"⁷⁴

One Peter Cornelius saw to it that the Imperial Library lent Wagner all of its relevant texts on the subject of the meistersingers, such as Grimm's *Über den altdeutschen Meistergesange*, and J.C. Wagenseil's *Von der Meistersinger Holdseliger Kunst*.⁷⁵ Returning to the texts he had once explored in his youth, Wagner found much of the source material for his artistic Nuremberg. Additionally, he managed to get access to Wagenseil's

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 140.

⁷³ *Gregor Dellin*, p. 308.

⁷⁴ Timothy Mc Farland, 'Wagner's Nuremberg,' in Nicholas John (ed.) *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, (London, 2011), p. 27.

⁷⁵ *Gregor Dellin*, p. 310.

Nuremberg Chronicle from which he *Meistergesang* is derived. As mentioned in Warrack, other possible sources for Wagner include August Hagen's *Norika*, which was a series of sketches of old Nuremberg with detailed descriptions of its monuments and buildings, along with biographical elements covering famous inhabitants such as Albrecht Dürer. Furthermore, the text contains an account of a mastersinger competition supposedly happened upon by the original author, with none other than Hans Sachs in attendance.⁷⁶ Another inspiration may have been Deinhardstein's *Hans Sachs* and Albert Lortzing's opera of the same name which Wagner attended. The plot for the former is as follows:

'The young Hans Sachs is in love with Kunegunde, daughter of the rich jeweller Steffen, who disapproves of him as a mere artisan, But Sachs is proud of his calling, and will not change it. Steffen favours instead the absurd young Eoban Runge, a foppish councillor from Augsburg who turns up in time to catch Sachs with Kunegrunde and create a scene. In act II, Eoban needs some shoes and orders them disdainfully from Sachs. Kunegund pretends to agree to drop Sachs if it can show that he is really nothing more than a mere cobbler. However, when she presses him to give up his trade, he breaks from her and decides to leave Nuremberg. In Act III, he meets on the road but does not recognise Emperor Maximilian, an admirer of his poetry. Sachs guides him to Nuremberg. Steffan has been elected Burgomaster, he believes in the influence of Eoban. He presses Eoban on Kunegunde, who still loves Sachs and refuses. Sachs intervenes and resists the order of the magistrate to let her go. In Act IV, the Emperor steps in to release Sachs from arrest: Eoban is routed, the lovers receive both paternal and imperial blessing, and Sachs wins the crown for his poetry.'⁷⁷

The plot changes by the time it reaches its operatic form, of which Wagner attended a performance in 1840, and elements therein certainly pop up in his eventual *Die Meistersinger*, such as the arrival of a hopeful singer, the promise of marriage, and a competition of sorts. Other potential sources of inspiration include Goethe's poem on Hans

⁷⁶ Warrack, p. 20.

⁷⁷ Warrack, p. 22.

Sachs, which paints a picture of a wise and contemplative figure. Another book found in Wagner's Dresden library is Friedrich Furchau's *Hans Sachs* which presents its own portrait of Sachs as a young man and the manner in which he composes his poetry.⁷⁸ The prose sketch produced in late 1861 was informed by both his revisiting of this material and in his new conceptual philosophy of art as coloured by Schopenhauer in the mid-1850s. As we have seen, the political situation in Germany had provided ample inspiration for Wagner's opera, evident through his publications and private writing. He rewrote the libretto between December 1866 and January 1867.⁷⁹ This late rewrite gives a clue as to possible further influence on this political development. The eventual premiere of the opera was held on 21 June 1868 at the *Königliches Hof- und National theatre*.⁸⁰

Synopsis of Die Meistersinger

Die Meistersinger is set, as we have discussed at length, in Sixteenth century Nuremberg, and concerns the attempts of a young knight, Walther von Stolzing, who attempts to win the hand of Eva Pogner through a singing contest. Walther is eliminated from the contest early on because his unconventional style of singing is in violation of the strict rules of the Meistersingers. Also, in the contest for Eva's hand is the town clerk, the Meistersinger Beckmesser, who decries the new arrival's attempts at victory by loudly marking his flaws on a chalkboard. However, the cobbler-poet Hans Sachs recognises how beautiful Walther's song is: a pure and unguided force of genius, which simply needs direction to win the contest. Beaten, Walther instead attempts to elope with Eva secretly and attempts this by night just as Beckmesser arrives to try and woo her with a serenade. Sachs, who lives nearby, gives Beckmesser a taste of his own medicine by hitting his outdoor workbench loudly with his hammer on each of Beckmesser's mistakes. When the neighbours come out to see what the commotion is all about, a mix up leads a local man to conclude that

⁷⁸ Warrack, p. 23.

⁷⁹ Hannu Salmi, *Imagined Germany: Richard Wagner's National Utopia* (New York, 1999), p. 135.

⁸⁰ Millington, p. 84.

Beckmesser is attempting to serenade the woman he is in love with, attacking the town clerk. A riotous scene ensues, and Walther is brought into Sachs's house. The next day, Walther sings to Sachs a song which appeared to him in a dream. Sachs helps the knight to form the piece into a beautiful poem and manages to get it into Beckmesser's possession. Beckmesser assumes the author to be Sachs himself and decides that by using it with his own music, he will be made victorious at the contest. Finally, at the festival, Beckmesser makes a disastrous attempt at the song, missing the spirit entirely. Walther is called upon by Sachs to reveal the beauty of the piece, which he does successfully. The young Walther wins the contest, the hand of the beautiful Eva, and is offered the title of Meistersinger of Nuremberg, but refuses. Sachs warns Walther not to be too hasty with his dismissal, as the masters are the keepers of artistic unity, and will remain so regardless of what happens in history.⁸¹

Wagner's Deutschtum and Dreams of the Future

As examined by Walter Frisch in his excellent study 'German Modernism: Music and the Arts,' Wagner's concept of '*Deutschtum*' relies on the supposition that the abstract concept of 'Germanness' is more definable than a similar phenomenon in other cultures and nationalities.⁸² That is to say; there is a direct connection between the German identity and a shared cultural past — as we have explored above. Frisch looks to Salmi's argument that this connection to the cultural past is exemplified in the contemporary demand for unification. This turbulent political time, Salmi argues, herded German's into a kind of 'imagined community' relying on manufactured tradition to foster genuine community.⁸³ This 'imagined community' is pointedly present in *Die Meistersinger*, where tradition, ritual, and practice are presented to the audience as not merely part of the pageantry on stage but are in fact a tangible cultural heritage, represented simply through entertainment to awaken

⁸¹ Millington, p87-94

⁸² Walter Frisch, *German Modernism*, (California, 2005), p. 9-12

⁸³ *ibid*, p. 12.

German unity; beginning the first steps on the road to his dream of an artistic utopia. Based on the writings of the period, Salmi describes Wagner's 'national vision':

'The new rising Germany would develop into a cultural power comparable to Classical Antiquity, provided it fulfilled certain conditions. Germany would be modelled on a united monarchy, in which the highest executive power would be given to the King; art would be given a central position in society, and the German genius would rise to be the spiritual leader of the nation: This genius would be Wagner, whose *Gesamtkunstwerk* would take its position as the channel to an understanding of the world, and *Deutschtum* would be comprehended in its original significance as genuine, creative, and universal. . . . Germany would attain its true political and spiritual greatness.'⁸⁴

As mentioned in Curtis's *Music Makes the Nation*, Wagner's exploration of this possible utopia first arose during his miserable Parisian episode.⁸⁵ Retrospectively describing his feelings in *A Communication to My Friends*, he wrote that he desired not 'any old familiar haunt that I must win my way back to, but [...] a country pictured in my dreams, an unknown and still-to-be-discovered haven.'⁸⁶ In *Die Meistersinger*, however, we can see an idealised middle ground between the two extremes. Sachs closes the opera by paying respect to his meistersingers, telling the townspeople that true Germaneness would be lost forever if not for the masters themselves, while also longing for a brand-new German future.

The prominent message of the opera is pointedly directed towards the promise of this future German utopia.⁸⁷ In the idealised Germany of Wagner's visions, the future of Germany comes from an arguably non-existent glorious imperial past built from 'holy German art,' as sung by our cobbler-hero, Sachs. Wagner, writing in '*The Artwork of the Future*,' explains the importance of folk sources in building the national identity. For him, it is the great

⁸⁴ Salmi, p. 195.

⁸⁵ Benjamin Curtis, *Music Makes the Nation* (New York, 2008), p. 53.

⁸⁶ Richard Wagner, "Artwork of the Future," in *Prose Works Vol. 1. trans. William Ashton Ellis* (London, 1966). p. 310.

⁸⁷ Salmi, p. 134-138.

unifying force, where one must look to find ‘...our great redeemer and well-doer, Necessity's vicegerent in the flesh...’⁸⁸ This line of thinking is reflective of Herder, who theorised that the underlying, unifying force of a national structure was not built of language, customs, geography, or indeed race, but rather by the spirit of the people. In Wagner’s mind, this spirit, or *Volksgeist*, was the way German art would guide national consciousness.

Volk

Meistersinger is the culmination of Wagner’s ideological progression through the years, and includes his understanding of the *Volk*; how a primitivist national history can be utilised to engender a sense of national unity, all tied together through his romantic lessons of the past. In the same year as the publication of *Die Meistersinger*, Wagner published one of his prose articles entitled *Deutsche Kunst und Deutsche Politik*, and displayed an attitude that reminds us of Wagner’s influence by Herder, writing that “only art is the creator of the Volk.”⁸⁹ Herder, as discussed in the first chapter, asserted that the unifying force in any imagined community, to borrow the concept of Benedict Anderson’s, is the very spirit of the folk itself rather than customs, location, or even language. He viewed the *Volk* as the basic unit of human history, the very core of the spirit of a culture. Before luxury and civilisation, the *Volk* was at its most aesthetically creative, Herder contends. It is essentially the most primitive form of a collected people, and therefore it manifested itself in creations like folk tales and mythologies, cultural treasures untouched by cosmopolitanism, stories which have come to define a respective culture.⁹⁰ For Wagner, the *Volk* was the simplified unifying force of a nation, and this appears in his *Meistersinger* through Hans Sachs, Walther, Eva, and crucially, the people themselves.

⁸⁸ Richard Wagner “Artwork of the future” in *Prose Works Vol. I* trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York, 1966), p. 16.

⁸⁹ *Curtis*, p. 50

⁹⁰ George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany*. (Chicago, 2014). p. 33.

Most notably, Wagner's ideas around the *Volk* appear at the end of the third act of the opera. Walther is attempting to discover his song. During his practice, Eva encounters the melody for the first time. He tells her that this is a master-song, yet she already intuitively senses that this is so. Her intuition is the spirit of the *Volk*, echoing Wagner's assertions for years that the German has simply forgotten what it is to be him or herself in an artistic sense. The pure German *Volk* still exists deep down and can come back again, free of the shackles of political interference. Later, during the festival scene, we are greeted to a "vision of the nation as a sacred space, and an emphatic middle-class orientation."⁹¹ Here, with no monarch or ruler of any kind present, the people are given the space to celebrate the very *Volk* that they may not even be conscious of, led by the manifestation of the German spirit itself, Hans Sachs.

Sachs

As mentioned, the character of Hans Sachs is the personification of Wagner's concept of the German *Volk*, or at least the one who would guide the German's to their artistic destiny.⁹² Wagner himself said that he wanted the opera to 'present the German public with an image of their own true nature.'⁹³ As early as 1851, even after he had shelved the opera for a period, we would write in 'A Communication to my Friends': "I took Hans Sachs as the final manifestation of the artistically creative popular spirit, and set him, in this sense, in contrast to the pettifogging bombast of the other Mastersingers; to whose absurd pedantry of *Tabulatur* and prosody, I gave a concrete personal expression in the figure of the 'marker.'⁹⁴ In this sense, *Die Meistersinger* corresponds to the idea of representing to the

⁹¹ Koepnick, Lutz. 'Stereoscopic Vision: Sight and Community in *Die Meistersinger*.' In Nicholas Vazsonyi (ed.) *Wagner's Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation* (New York, 2003) p. 91.

⁹² Although Sachs is held up in Wagner's opera as a "grave and wise" patriarch, he, had no higher power or freedom of expression than any other official at the time. Documents from the period are full of petitions and apologies accompanying scripts of plays he wished to put on. See *Strauss*, p. 217.

⁹³ Richard Wagner, *Religion and Art, in Prose Works Vol. VI* trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York, 1966), p. 114.

⁹⁴ *Wagner*, 'A Communication to my Friends,' p.329.

nation its own national self. This 'national self', this *Volk* spirit, is clearly evident in the crescentic finale of *Die Meistersinger*, where Wagner's nationalistic thought is fuelled by a sense of historical determinism and the perceived 'national self' that comes from it. Here, his mythologised story of Holy Roman Imperial history is evidence of an intrinsically interwoven German past, present, and future. Hans Sachs sings:

Therefore I say to you:
honour your German masters,
Then you will conjure up good spirits!
And if you favour their endeavours,
even if the Holy Roman Empire
should dissolve in mist,
for us there would yet remain
Holy German Art!⁹⁵

Our most German of heroes desires that, 'which is German and true' and bids his audience to 'Honour your German masters!' Wagner intends that his audience understands their own link to a glorious imperial past; that even Hans Sachs knew what constituted 'holy German art.' Here we see that Wagner's idea of 'Germanness' is intrinsically linked with the perceived truth and authenticity of German history, as per this final song sung by Sachs. As we have seen, Wagner's essay *Opera and Drama* explains these beliefs, concluding that without careful attention paid to the rich trove of artistic inspiration and originality found in German history, victory cannot be attained: 'We shall not win hope and nerve until we bend our ear to the heartbeat of history and catch the sound of that sempiternal vein of living waters which, however buried under the waste heap of historic civilisation, yet pulses on in all its pristine freshness.'⁹⁶ Wagner understood that careful planning and meticulous narrative was vital in constructing a unified nation, along with the romanisation and 'rediscovery' of an apparently bygone age of German glory was central to this. The composer believed he was a benevolent force in his composing of the opera, going so far as

⁹⁵ 'Meistersinger Libretto' http://www.murashev.com/opera/Die_Meistersinger_von_Nürnberg_libretto_English_German (23 March, 2018)

⁹⁶ Richard Wagner "Opera and drama" in *Prose Works Vol. II* trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York, 1966), p. 186.

to write to King Ludwig II of Bavaria that *Die Meistersinger* would be ‘a gift to the German nation.’⁹⁷ Wagner gave his Sachs a kind of messiah quality, a saviour of German art, one who would take the best of the past and help guide a national destiny unified through art. Interestingly, Wagner was living vicariously through his own character and believed similar things about himself. In fact, he was known to sign his letters ‘Sachs,’ for a time.⁹⁸ Sachs is to Wagner as Walther is the potential of the German *Volk*. Sachs recognises Walther’s potential — his innate *Volk* — despite the young knight’s laity, and helps compose the winning poem. The final competition takes place on Sachs’ baptismal day, *Johannistag*. This provides insight into Wagner’s intentions as to what his role might be in the ‘new’ Germany. Wagner hoped to initiate the prospering of Germany through his art, unifying the *Volksgeist* around a new national identity. As will be shown in the next chapter, this was not a success.

Cultural Redoubt

While it is worth exploring the qualities of Germanness personified by Hans Sachs, so too do we find reinforced national belief in Wagner’s definition of what is definably ‘un-German’; the definition of Germanness by what it does not encompass, as opposed to what it does. Indeed, by what is foreign. Salmi also deals with this in his book *Imagined Germany*. According to Salmi, Wagner developed the concept of *außerdeutsch* (extrinsically- German) to be the opposite of German. He saw Germanness very much in terms of binary oppositions: things were either *Deutsch* or *un- Deutsch*.⁹⁹ These sentiments can be read from Hans Sachs’s final monologue In the finale of *Die Meistersinger*, Sachs sings of a severe threat from “false, foreign majesty,” which is likely to be directed at

⁹⁷ Richard Wagner to King Ludwig II of Bavaria in Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (Trans. and eds), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, (New York, 1987), p. 592

⁹⁸ Salmi, *Imagined Germany*, p. 136.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 13.

France.¹⁰⁰ In this part of the opera, when the masters are being glorified as the paragons of German artistic virtue, a reference to the French is an extension of Wagner's idea of opposites. In addition to this, the composer considered qualities such as *undeutsch* and *kosmopolotisch*, embodied by the French, to be a threat to their opposites, *Deutsch* and national, both representing true *Deutschtum*. Wagner's conception of the oppositional relationship between these elements is apparent in the following diary entry, translated by Hannu Salmi: 'The Frenchman borrowed from [the Italian reproduction of antiquity] whatever might flatter his national sense of formal elegance; only the German recognised antiquity in all its purely human originality and as something that enjoyed a significance which was uniquely suited to reproducing the purely human.'¹⁰¹

In January of 1867 when Wagner was putting the final touches on the libretto, we can see the presence of a pointedly nationalistic attitude that is not present in the early drafts to such an extent as it appears here. Indeed, it is reflective of the prose essays that Wagner wrote during the 1860s such as 'What is German' which are in turn arguably responsive to the developing international situation as mentioned above. Specifically, the anti-foreign sentiment is undeniable, possible in response to rising tensions with France. Also, there is the stressed importance of the bond between the *Volk* and the leaders of the German nations, here 'princes':

Beware! Evil tricks threaten us:
if the German people and kingdom should one day decay,
under a false, foreign rule
soon no prince would understand his people;
and foreign mists with foreign vanities
they would plant in our German land;
what is German and true none would know,
if it did not live in the honour of German masters.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ 'Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg by Richard Wagner, Libretto' http://www.murashev.com/opera/Die_Meistersinger_von_Nürnberg_libretto_English_German (23 March, 2018)

¹⁰¹ 'Wagner Quotations' Hannu Salmi, <http://users.utu.fi/hansalmi/sit2.html> (04 April, 2018)

¹⁰² 'Meistersinger Libretto' http://www.murashev.com/opera/Die_Meistersinger_von_Nürnberg_libretto_English_German (23 March, 2018)

It is clear to see the chauvinistic elements here, especially in idea that German culture needs defending in the face of foreign interference. However, as has been documented already in this study, Wagner's sense of nationalism was subject to wild change, inconsistencies, and outright hypocrisy across his life. So when one reads that German art apparently needs defending from 'Latin' influences, one cannot help but think back to Wagner's previous assertions about art and how each culture had its own strengths and weaknesses, Germany included. In much the same way, Wagner understood what was 'national art' to be that which was utterly untouched by foreign thought or influence. This development of German purity stands in contrast to his thoughts in 'Opera and Drama,' where he finds all nations equally wanting in artistic quality and integrity. Thomas S. Grey notes that in 'Opera and Drama,' Wagner's views on the role Germany has to play in the development of art is decidedly feminine, receiving and nurturing the artistic offerings of other cultures to draw out the best elements of them respectively.¹⁰³ Here, however, the gendered element has shifted to a more masculine form that would eventually dominate the German nationalism of the twentieth century. Now, it was these foreign nations who were responsible for the reprehensible state of the art. On Italian opera, Wagner concluded that it was nothing more than an excuse for conversation and social gatherings.¹⁰⁴ He decided that the primary cause of the woes of German artistry was the degenerate compositions of the *Deutsch*. He wrote, 'So sorry is the state of the drama in Germany,'. Wagner lamented, 'so infected is it by harmful foreign influences, that the theatre must be regarded as the betrayer of German honour.'¹⁰⁵ This is to say that Germany has, by Wagner's assertion through *Die Meistersinger*, reached a new stage of independence. Even beyond that, Germany has settled into a new stance, prepared to defend the fruits of her culture against the ever-

¹⁰³ Thomas S. Grey, 'Die Meistersinger as National Opera,' in Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter (eds.) *Music and German National Identity*. (Chicago, 2002) p. 84

¹⁰⁴ Richard Wagner, "Zukunftsmusik," in *Prose Works Vol. III* trans. William Ashton Ellis (New York, 1966), p. 334.

¹⁰⁵ *Curtis*, p. 49.

encroaching foreign influences.¹⁰⁶ Of course, Wagner had warned against such things in the past, and his worry that French and Italian artistic sensibilities had too significant an influence in Germany is evident in his earlier publications. However, even then, with its bombastic language, it did not assume such a combative stance as in the closing piece of *Die Meistersinger*.

Curiously and despite this decidedly xenophobic element to *Die Meistersinger*, the Nuremberg of Wagner's imagination was generally apolitical. The nationalism it displays points primarily to a popular sense of spirit, a celebration of the *Volk*, and what it means to be German. Despite the volatile political situation in Europe around the time of writing, the opera does not seek a solution to such things and makes no mention of the hopes for a unified German State. In fact, it is quite the opposite when one examines the libretto. While Bernard Williams in his seminal *On Opera* contends that *Meistersinger* is indeed political, we would argue otherwise. Williams points to the same closing monologue as evidence for his assertion, yet in concluding 'the passage about German art [...] is explicitly political,' we would counter that he misses the point entirely.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, as a diary entry in 1865 — eventually published as part of 'What is German?' in 1878 — will attest to, Wagner instead saw the very absence of political structure as the necessary conditions in which to cultivate a new German character, quoted in Borchmeyer: 'only with the loss of external political power, i.e., with the abandoned significance of the Holy Roman Empire, whose demise we lament today as the end of German majesty: only now is the essential German character really beginning to develop.'¹⁰⁸ As Borchmeyer points out, this idea, alongside the closing lines of the opera itself, finds a likeness in Schiller's 1797 poem 'German Greatness' which claims 'the Germans have established their own independent worth, which has nothing to do with any politic worth that they may have, and even if the empire were to perish, German

¹⁰⁶ Grey, p. 84.

¹⁰⁷ Bernard Williams, *On Opera*, (Yale, 2006), p. 109.

¹⁰⁸ Borchmeyer, p. 195

dignity would still be unassailable.¹⁰⁹ Although Wagner has clearly had a history of political exploration, it would seem to be pointedly absent from the *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, replaced instead with his most idealistic dreams of the future of Germany where art itself is the guiding instrument of the people.

Wagner's *Meistersinger* stands as a unique addition to the composer's extensive and varied oeuvre in several ways, ranging from compositional style to the application of artistic philosophy. However, as a work of nationalistic art, *Die Meistersinger* draws on elements of historical precedent as evidence for the necessity of Wagner's utopian Germany of the future. By digging into the historical value of Nuremberg, Wagner is able to artistically expand upon his personal idealism and hopes for his art and its place in the future. Through this, Wagner investigates the character of the German *Volk* and how it, as a cultural phenomenon, constitutes the very identity that his idea of Germanness, or *Deutschtum* represents. However, *Meistersinger* is not singularly informed by this historical precedent. As shown in this chapter, the developing international situation at the beginning of the 1860s, along with the build-up to unification, informed Wagner's personal writings and are manifestly present in the final product of *Meistersinger*. Increasing anti-French sentiment blossomed as nationalistic chauvinism in the opera itself, as Wagner's nationalism is displayed both as an inward-looking romantic idealism, along with an outward-looking fearful one. On the publication of *Meistersinger*, reactions were broadly positive, but it remains to be seen as to whether positive public reception of the opera was enough to establish Wagner's apolitical cultural German utopia. Through the lens of the Franco-Prussian war and the build-up to unification, the following chapter will deal with these questions.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, p. 195.

Chapter 4

Reception, Results, Resignation

Die Meistersinger Von Nuremberg is essentially the most pointedly nationalistic of all Richard Wagner's music-dramas. It draws upon the theories and ideologies which developed and evolved throughout his life, as demonstrated in the previous chapters. Indeed, Wagner's hopeful intentions for Germany and his artistic centrality to the country are made clear in his published prose works and private observations during the late 1850s and 1860s, ultimately peaking with *Die Meistersinger*. However, one must consider whether the idealistic offering of *Die Meistersinger* was received in an intended manner, and if so, did it establish Wagner as the central artistic force in the new Germany of 1871. This chapter will briefly look at the period from the premiere of *Die Meistersinger* in 1868 to the declaration of the German Empire in 1871, and shortly afterwards. As we have already seen, Wagner must have been affected by the growing sense of nationalism in Germany during the Austro-Prussian War, the build-up to the Franco-Prussian War, and the inevitability of German unification. We have shown that the sentiments of somewhat antagonistic German nationalism found its way into Wagner's private and public writing during the 1860s, and in turn, appears in his *Meistersinger* in the form of chauvinistic bombast. We will look at how the opera was received during this short period. A series of positive reviews following the premiere of *Die Meistersinger* would seem to show that the critical public was aware of how important his work was to German idealism. Although generally nonplussed by the attention, Wagner ultimately capitalised on the widespread nationalistic feeling to try and ingratiate himself more with the new regime, headed by Bismarck. Here, we will look to publications written by Wagner during this period which display a markedly more politically accepting tone than previous works, which had previously called for the dismantling of all political structures in favour of his artistic utopia. Additionally, the diary of Cosima Wagner is essential here; she gives us a unique, if possibly biased, account of

Wagner's reaction to the world around him in the lead up to the Unification. Where a letter to a friend might show apathy toward his homeland, Cosima's writings around the same time record a Wagner genuinely enthusiastic about German conquest. Wagner would attempt to use the wave of nationalism leading up to the unification as the vehicle for his artistic idealism, trying to make inroads with Bismarck to secure his desired position. Ultimately, it did not pay off for the composer, and eventually, he settled into the maintenance of his Bayreuth music festival, writing bitterly about how this new Germany was certainly not the one of which he had dreamed.

Following the premiere of *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg* on 11 June 1868, a wide array of reviews appeared in colloquial and international German-speaking publications. As the opera was Wagner's only comic piece in his oeuvre, it is possible that reviews could have overlooked the nationalistic message of the opera in favour of the naturally present comedy. A review by R. Pohl celebrates Wagner's genius, looking first to the background of the piece and to the music, sound, and actors. According to the writer, several prominent musicians attended, along with the Bavarian king, Ludwig II, and representatives from the Padeloup symphony orchestra from Paris. One can only imagine what these attendees thought of the material, especially in light of the opera's warnings against the 'false foreign majesty.' The reviewer asks 'who can imagine — in order to make a start — Wagner as a composer of a comical opera? Wagner, the musical poet of natural myths, the poetic magical cycles of an ideal world and the highest tragic pathos? ... Is that not strange enough?' Perplexed as the reviewer might have been, it is in his closing remarks that he comes close to the kind of response Wagner desired, concluding 'the highest art has been achieved here: the idealistic natural truth.'¹ While this is a high compliment indeed for Wagner, the comments do not display an awareness for the nationalistic elements in the work.

Another review of the 1868 premiere offers a general review of the music only. This piece notes that the king of Bavaria supported Wagner but passes no apparent judgement on this

¹ 'Die Meistersinger von nuremberg. Erste Aufführung in Munich am 21 Juni 1868' R. Pohl (Richard Wagner Museum, Bayreuth, B 682)

relationship. The audience liked the opera, but there was a divide between the audience and critics. This critic believes the music to be boring, remarking ‘the text itself would draw you to sleep, and the mixture of historical character from 16th and 19th centuries and the music have weaknesses.’² Three articles in the *Freie Presse* similarly note that the King of Bavaria was in attendance and was a loyal supporter of Wagner’s. The reviewer notes that no other royal family members are present, which might be indicative of their feelings about the relationship between Wagner and the King.³

In a review of the same performance written by Julius Lang, we find the first of many ecstatic endorsements of the opera as a ground-breaking work of German art. The review begins with an enthusiastic introduction declaring that the opera can be regarded as an epoch-defining event for both German culture and artistic life. The first section of the review notes that the pre-performance attracted many guests, eager to hear what all the fuss was about. By the time of the first official performance, Lang writes, around 120 foreigners arrived in Munich for the event coming from as far-flung corners of the German-speaking world as Berlin, Vienna, Prague, Karlsruhe, Leipzig, Weimar, Dresden Darmstadt, Coburg, Hannover, and Baden. What is worth noting is that these include most of the significant provincial cultural centres of the eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century. Naturally, these provincial hubs would send a representative to check out the situation, as part of the proud tradition of wanting better art than their Germanic neighbours. At the end of the last test-performance, Wagner thanked the audience with the words:

‘As often the art has fallen, apparently Schiller said, so it fell by the artists. If the contemporary decline of art is solemnly the fault of the artists, he [Schiller] did not want to say, but he appears to be right, that art can only rise again with the artists. A real evidence of this is in the now presented performance of the Meistersinger, at which everybody involved, from the first time to the last, from

² Review of the first performance of *Die Meistersinger* in Munich 1868, unnamed critic in *Allg Musikal Ztg* (Richard Wagner Museum, Bayreuth, B50IV). A scribbled note at the base of the original document, itself a compilation, speculates that this review might be another composition of Eduard Hanslick.

³ *Freie Presse*, 24-26 June, 1868.

the master to the apprentice have contributed to the rose of the long misunderstood German art.’⁴

Lang recalls the previous version of the libretto which was published in 1862, mentioned in the previous chapter, of which readings by Wagner himself were highly popular. The writer then makes specific reference to the line concerning the Holy Roman Empire dissolving in mist, as one must if examining this opera through the lens of idealistic nationalism. Lang closes his review with a triumphal conclusion ‘Germany and German art have gained their Sadowa and won!’ ‘Sadowa’ is presumably in reference to the Battle of Koenigraetz or Sadowa in 1866, the decisive engagement of the Austro-Prussian War, with Prussia defeating Austria in the field. Such a reference is a most interesting use of metaphor to use for this opera; the battle itself led to the establishment of the Northern Confederation, a significant milestone of Germanic pride.⁵ Perhaps this reviewer is implying that this opera would lead to the establishment of a new German artistic order? One wonders if Wagner read this review and if, for just a moment, he was convinced of the inevitability of his utopia.

Following the premiere, the opera was licensed to other cities, and these too garnered varied reviews of their own. In a series of mild to negative reviews, it would seem that the reviewer is bending over backwards to cast the production in a negative light. However, this short series of reviews are potentially all written by Eduard Hanslick, as they come from the same publication where Hanslick held the position of opera reviewer. The review of the Vienna performance pointedly notes that no audience member was allowed in the rehearsals so that information would not leak and the story would not be spoiled. Somehow, the review gives this information as an example of how the opera is not worth the time.⁶ In Hannover,

⁴ ‘Uber die erste Aufführung von R. Wagner’s “Meistersinger von Nürnberg” in München’ by Julius Lang (Richard Wagner Museum, Bayreuth, B 472)

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Review of Vienna performance in *Allg. Musikal. Ztg*, unnamed critic, 1870 (Richard Wagner Museum, Bayreuth, B50IV)

the audience seemed to enjoy the show, but according to the reviewer, opinions remain divided. He also decides that the audience see Wagner as too pathetic to do comic opera, but gives no reason as to this conclusion. In Berlin, he says the work was played by the orchestra and the singers but is overall received worse than in Vienna. He goes on to remark that the opera's reputation is sullied through a series of developing scandals on which the author does not elaborate. However, one rather amusing anecdote from this review is that General von Moltke, in attendance, was asked by a high-ranking guest how he felt, and he answered that in the Reichstag he could 'at least apply for a conclusion.'⁷ The second review of the Berlin performance is much more fleshed out and cynical than the first. The reviewer devotes a great deal to describe the reaction of the audience at large, whom he says are nonplussed at the proceedings. The writer notes that there were several vocal protestations against the music, and decides that it does not matter if the *Meistersinger* would ever be played again. The writer compares the whole production to the dreams of a cat, and notes that the smell of the music is even worse than putting a handful of street musicians together! While the overall reaction of the audience is dismal, he notes that an unnamed woman defends the opera and Wagner's music as a whole. Apparently, at points, the production was so dull that the musicians simply laughed.⁸ Again, it is essential to note that these reviews likely come from the same source, which is known to be less than disposed to Wagner's music. This, of course, presents us with the glaring issue of likely bias against Wagner's work. Although it is certainly interesting to read the comments of an opera critic who has it in for Wagner before the show even begins, it does not help in concluding whether or not the opera was received as particularly nationalist.

So far, the reviews are generally in agreement that the opera is a success, Hanslick notwithstanding. However, only one review of the premiere seems to be acutely aware of the presence of nationalistic rhetoric in the work. However, during the build-up to the Franco-Prussian War, as detailed in the last chapter, a performance in Karlsruhe receives a

⁷ Review of Berlin performance in *Allg Musikal Ztg*, unnamed critic, 1870 (Richard Wagner Museum, Bayreuth, B50IV).

⁸ Review of Berlin performance, H. Ehrlich, 1870 (Richard Wagner Museum, Bayreuth, B868e)

glowing review from R. Pohl. Pohl had previously reviewed the premiere, but now appears keen to shine a light on these nationalistic elements. His review notes:

‘One should be proud that in our highly practically oriented times, which already becomes afraid of its famous realism, it is possible that a genius is able to develop who can successfully unfold the flag of idealism in victory, and be able to show all unbelievers that the artistic power of creation, with the battles on this side of the Main, and the other, have not died yet! One will be able to read in the history books, that just in that epoch, in which the national awareness of the Germans was stronger than ever, that it awoke and fought, and during this time an artist developed amongst us, who appealed to the people and not just the reviewers, and who saved us the meaning of a German national opera which nearly sank and disappeared amongst the Romantic spring tides, and to become a permanent monument of German spiritual sovereignty. That is also a historical position - but certainly not a backwards one!’⁹

This last line must call upon the closing monologue of the opera, in which Sachs counsels that the fall of the Holy Roman Empire would not leave Germans without holy German art. ‘A historical position, but certainly not a backwards one,’ certainly mirrors Wagner’s writing on historical precedent for why the German people have a natural proclivity for art. Pohl goes on to compare *Die Meistersinger* to German gothic architecture and the great cathedrals which give the German people “the feeling of our presence in the German spiritual home [*Geistesheimat*], which no foreigner can rob from us and no censorer is able to sadden it.” This too calls back to the lines of the opera, specifically Sach’s warning against ‘false foreign majesty’ alluding to the French and Italian modes of artistic endeavour. Interestingly, this critic seems so taken by the hostile defensiveness of this line that he includes a similar sentiment in his review. Finally, much like Sachs calling upon the German people to protect their national art, Pohl calls upon ‘you large court theatres of Vienna, Berlin, Hannover etc. — now go and do the same!’ Implying that they must emulate this production. This reviewer asks that the other cities take *Die Meistersinger* as the cultural standard, and to create a like-minded form of art. This pan- German cultural

⁹ ‘Die Meistersinger in Karlsruhe (6. Febr. 1869)’ R. Pohl, (Richard Wagner Museum, Bayreuth, B 682)

idealism is most notable given the recent establishment of the North German confederation, and the impending unification of the Empire.¹⁰

Other reviews of *Die Meistersinger*, as mentioned in Newman, were generally supportive of the opera. The opera's nationalistic overtones resonated with the increasing sense of national consciousness present in Germany. Some of these reviews contended as we have seen above in Pohl that the German folk had found its soul in Wagner's work: *Meistersinger* had awakened the German spirit to its destiny of freeing itself from the historic cultural influence of the French.¹¹

Although the reception opera was overwhelmingly successful, with many reviewers explicitly commenting on the cultural value of the work, Wagner's reaction, in turn, was more anxious than gratified. In a letter to King Ludwig II, he mentions that although he knew German theatres would accept the opera with open arms, he was unsettled by the inevitable changes which would be made to his work: 'The work itself, which I have just described to you as my most perfect, will live on. But how? I expect that all the German theatres will attempt to appropriate it; but not once of them has shown the inclination or intention to give it complete and unmutated [sic]. the utter wretchedness and deep decline into which the German theatre has sunk is something I shall discover to an even fuller extent by what happens to this very work of mine.'¹² He had desperately tried to avoid altering the original work in any way, approving only those performances which he decided would give the opera the respect it deserved. He would rely on the German theatrical directors 'sense of honour' to stage *Die Meistersinger* as it should be, but this trust would not be rewarded. His publisher eventually intervened, and Wagner relented.¹³ Already it would seem that

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Newman life of wagner IV p 146, 290. Footnote 27.

¹² R. Wagner to King Ludwig II, 'Letter on 14 October 1868,' in Stewart Spencer and Barry, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), p 732.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 732

Wagner's dream of a utopian resurgence of German art was fracturing due to the old theatrical establishment against which he so oft raged.

Additionally, the dissemination of his works throughout Europe was having some unintended consequences which Wagner did not appreciate. In another letter to Ludwig II, for example, he mentions that the Italian people expected 'a rebirth of the quite degenerate Italian artistic taste.'¹⁴ As has been noted previously, Wagner believed the destiny of German art was to spread and touch the world with its purity and supremacy. The Italians' degenerate' artistic taste didn't need a resurgence, as German art would simply take the place of that of the Italians, it being a superior form. Therefore, when the librettist Arrigo Roito agreed to write an Italian translation of *Rienzi*, Wagner was pleased with the opportunity for German art to spread down and bring the blessings of German culture to the Italians.¹⁵

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the end of the 1860s is defined by a series of conflicts ultimately culminating in the Franco-Prussian war. As these events progressed, Wagner's reaction was decidedly mixed, depending on whom he happened to be talking. Newman writes that Wagner was in a state of 'high excitement' and as the war progressed the 'German spirit of which he had so often sung the praises when more and more to his head.'¹⁶ Yet to his French friends, he saw divine providence in the outbreak of war. The final result of the conflict would provide conclusive evidence one way or the other about the value of his predictions on the ultimate fate of Germany. Should Germany lose, it would be evidence that his past proclamations on German destiny were hollow. However, if the Germans win, it would usher in a period of a cultural renaissance for the French. The fall of Paris would mean 'perhaps— no, certainly! — the rebirth of the French people would have

¹⁴ R. Wagner to King Ludwig II of Bavaria, "Letter on 29 December 1868," quoted in F. Jossierand, *Wagner's Nationalism* (Austin, 1957), p. 302.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 302

¹⁶ *Newman*, IV, p. 270.

its starting point. For Paris has been the crevasse in which the true spirit of the nation lost itself.’¹⁷

However, this seemingly non-partisan attitude towards the war may have been a front for his Parisian friends, as Cosima Wagner’s diaries give a different account of Wagner’s thoughts on the war. In Cosima’s diaries, we see that Wagner is incredibly in favour of Prussian prosperity at this time, even though he had not been so in the recent past. These quotes appear in Moulin-Eckart’s seminal biographical study on Cosima Wagner, along with Geoffrey Skelton’s translation of her diaries.

A note on this source before we examine the quotes themselves: It is necessary to note the unreliability of the diary in question, as it is quite possible that many of the quotes attributed to Richard Wagner were not his at all, or were edited and embellished by Cosima, or were, in fact, her own opinions mapped onto Wagner’s voice. As has been established in earlier chapters, Wagner’s attitude towards the German artistic establishment, and to the idea of a unified nation, was volatile to the point of outright opposition depending on his mood. On the outbreak of war, Cosima’s diary entries display an aggressive, unfiltered take on the situation, and particularly the behaviour of the French: ‘The more one hears of the French behaviour, the more angry one becomes; a tissue of lies, ignorance, insolence, and conceit. Offering a reason for the outbreak of war, Gramont and Ollivier cite the memorandum which Bismarck is said to have circulated to all foreign courts. There never was such a note — just the telegram which was published in the newspapers, and so it is all pure lies.’¹⁸ It is quite possible, therefore, that her views embellish the statements of Richard in her diaries. For example, in August of 1870, Wagner received a letter from Anton Pusinelli, who writes:

¹⁷ R. Wagner to C. And J. Mendés, “Letter on 12 August 1870,” quoted in *Josserand*, p. 310.

¹⁸ Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries, Volume I: 1867–1877*, Geoffrey Skelton (trans.) (New York, 1976), p. 246.

‘We see with our eyes a new, powerful empire arising, Barbarasossa has awakened, the ravens fly about screaming. Germany is united.... I believe that I do not err when I attribute a great share of this great deed to you. You have lighted the game in noble hearts through your entirely patriotic German-national-tendency— a flame which now stands burning powerfully in the Germany heaven. Praise be to you for it. Like the young king, you have inspired thousands of hearts for the national cause. Thou noble sower, gaze now upon thy harvest.’¹⁹

Wagner’s reply to this stirring patriotic compliment was incredibly muted.

‘I confess that, were I to see Moltke and the German army before me, I should recognise nothing at all which would make me hopeful. And I need only to think, for example of a Dresden performance of one of my works, and immediately all courage sinks within me. And—how deeply and closely it all hangs together! That has just come to my realisation and for that reason I am so sad when I gaze upon the world.’²⁰

It is interesting indeed to see such an apathetic comment appear in Wagner’s writings, given that around the same time, according to Cosima, he developed vocal and enthusiastic support for German political affairs. In Cosima’s writings, Richard believed that the French were necessarily the “incarnation of Renaissance corruption” When the war broke out, Wagner seemed to build on his pro-Prussian stance by deciding that war would be good for the German spirit. Cosima writes that, when war was announced, Richard spoke of how he was “beginning to hope,” and ‘war is sublime, it reveals the insignificance of the individual,” and “war is holy and great.’ Adding a decidedly militant element to what was previously a supposed peace-loving people, he believed that war might perhaps ‘again show what there is in the Germans.’²¹ Going even further to conclude that ‘War is something

¹⁹ A. Pusinelli to R. Wagner, “Letter on 31 August 1870,” quoted in *Josserand*, p. 315

²⁰ R. Wagner to A. Pusinelli, “Letter on 9 November 1870,” *Ibid*, p. 316.

²¹ Moulin-Eckart, *Cosima Wagner Vol. I*, (New York, 1930), p. 408.

noble, it shows the unimportance of the individual; war is so to speak, a dance performed with the most dreadful of powers, like a Beethoven finale in which he unleashes all the demons in a magnificent dance.²² These private thoughts on the benefits of war are indeed striking considering his public commitment to peaceful cultural expansion rather than conquest, writing in 1864 and quoted in Newman, Wagner believes that the German ‘covets nothing from without; but he wants to be left at liberty within. He does not conquer, but he does not allow himself to be attacked.’²³ The French indeed declared war, allowing for Wagner’s assertions about defence, but as seen in the previous chapter, it was Bismarck, whom Wagner now so admired, who engineered the war by provoking France to conflict. Indeed, Wagner had certainly changed his tune with regards to Bismarck: where previously a letter concerning the outbreak of war in 1866 had referred to ‘Bismarck as similarly poor copies of the un- German character,’ and as ‘an ambitious junker [who] betrays his imbecile of a King [Wilhelm I of Prussia] in the most brazen manner,’²⁴ the impending conflict seemed to radically change his tune.²⁵ Wagner clearly did not like Bismarck and referred to him as “a thoroughly underman creature,” but he advised a friend to ‘follow Bismarck and Prussia, I can see no alternative.’²⁶ Mercenary as ever, he was now fully in support of the Prussian prime minister. Cosima relates that Wagner once told some guests ‘we are more and more delighted with Bismarck, whose revelation show more and more how plainly and honestly he has acted’ and ‘how noble and proud is the minister’s attitude! How uplifting it must be for Bavaria, Saxony, and Wirttemberg to fight as the German army’ and finally ‘He [Bismarck] is a true German: that is why the French hate him so much.’²⁷

²² Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries, Volume I: 1867–1877*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 246.

²³ *Newman*, III, p. 480.

²⁴ Steven ozment. *Flesh and spirit*. Describes Junker and its meaning as being associated with decadent court life and idle richness. P 249

²⁵ Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), p. 593.

²⁶ *Sheehan*, p. 909.

²⁷ *Moulin-Eckart*, p. 408-411.

During the Franco-Prussian War as the German army began racking up victories against the French forces, Wagner seemed to expand on the anti-French sentiment of *Die Meistersinger* as Prussia was sure to emerge victorious (it is unknown if he was in contact with his French friends, to whom he had previously appeared so nonpartisan). He writes, ‘The longing of all good men that the German nature may now at last begin to bloom forms a basis for our victory over this much-dreaded France’²⁸ After learning that the German forces were singing the patriotic tune *Wacht am Rhein*, he was worried what the French might think to hear the melody.²⁹

What was it, then, that provoked a change of heart in Wagner? It could have been an organic reaction to the growing sense of nationalist faith in the German cause of unity, of course. However, as ever with Wagner, pragmatism must be central to any analysis of his deeds. It is more likely that Wagner had switched targets from Ludwig II to Bismarck as the authority figure who would help him establish his utopian aesthetic state of the future. Cosima recalls Wagner quoting the historian Gregorovius on the subject of Prussia:

‘Where would Europe be without the power of Prussia, this despised hole-and-corner place of which nobody expected anything, but where preparations for this have been going on ever since the fall of the hohenstaufen.’³⁰

Naturally, Wagner’s publications of the period strayed further into a tone of assertive anti-French sentiment. Even in his ‘Beethoven,’ which was written in honour of the one-hundredth anniversary of the famed composer’s birth. After praising Beethoven as a perfect example of the German artist supporting the spirit of the nation, he emphasises how this was only possible because of the inherent ability of the German people to reach such heights. Beethoven had redeemed ‘the spirit of mankind from deep disgrace.’ The German could

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 412.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 412.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 425.

find that redemption from within, but the Frenchman could not, and found it necessary to look outwards to find the revival they need: “when troubled by the outer form of matters in his state or art, he fancies he must dash it into atoms,” to try and find the new manner of artistic expression.³¹ Wagner is looking to the French Revolution as evidence of this assertion, despite his documented support of the French Revolution, and his role as an active firebrand revolutionary during his Dresden years. Regardless of this irregularity, Beethoven is to Wagner the arch example of the German spirit, of the kind of artistic rebirth found by venturing into the German self. It is for this reason that Beethoven is worth remembering, for ‘beside the victories in this wondrous 1870 no loftier trophy can be set than the memory of our great Beethoven...’

‘...so let us celebrate the great path-breaker in the wilderness of a paradise debased! But let us celebrate him worthily, and no less worthily than the victories of German valour: for the benefactor of a world may claim still higher rank than the world conqueror.’³²

It is most interesting that Wagner should include a reference to the Prussian victories of the Franco- Prussian war so soon after the premiere of his *Meistersinger* which, as we have discussed, inhabited an apolitical space, for the most part, instead of focusing on the dream of the aesthetic state of the future. Still more interesting is in the unequivocal support he shows for Prussian military victories, when almost in the same breath holds the ‘world benefactor’ in apparent higher esteem than the ‘world conqueror.’ Similarly, as has just been discussed, Wagner’s private utterances — according to Cosima — are in full support of the German conquest! This is not the first time Wagner’s hypocrisy on the matter has appeared, as seen in this study, yet his political voice grew ever stronger, and ever more supportive of warfare as the conflict progressed. Cosima writes of Wagner’s increasing commitment to a violent conflict ‘R. says he hopes Paris will be burned down — the burning of Paris would

³¹ Wagner, “Beethoven,” in *Prose works V*, p. 84-85

³² *Ibid*, p. 136.

be a symbol of the world's liberation at last from the pressure of all that is bad. R. would like to write to Bismarck, requesting him to shoot all of Paris down. Discussion of the situation, R. believes the German reports implicitly.³³

During the Prussian siege of Paris in 1870, on the precipice of victory, Wagner composed a poem for the troops camping outside the city. Here, again, he appears to throw off his once firm commitment to the belief in the inherent peacefulness of the German character and sways his support behind engaging in further battles and victories. Wagner writes that the soldier in the field should not be diverted from conquest by diplomatic voices from home, and instead fight on. Where before Wagner has no political interest in the establishment of the German Empire, here he sees its inevitability as a fine thing indeed. Entitled *An das Deutsche Heer vor Paris* (To the German Army before Paris), he celebrates German military conquest and the new Reich:

The ruler calls:
the weapons of a whole great race attend him,
the braggart brawls
of threat'ning arrogance o'er there to end him.
its muscles strain,
with might and main
it falls upon the hect'ring foeman:
our Germany alone breeds men not women.³⁴

Cosima had sent the poem to the German headquarters, that it might fall directly into Bismarck's hands. It was a success, and Bismarck thanked Wagner in a letter concluding 'You, too, have overcome the resistance of the Parisians after a long struggle, with your works, in which I have always had the keenest interest, although at times inclining towards

³³ Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries, Volume I: 1867–1877*, trans. Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p. 259

³⁴ Wagner, "To the German Army before Paris," *Prose Works V*, p. 2.

the opposition party; it is my belief and my hope that many more victories will be granted them, at home and abroad. 21 Feb 1871.³⁵

From what might be considered a standard display of Wagnerian chauvinism in his ‘Beethoven,’ Wagner’s following publication truly plumbs the depths of outright offence. Written during the siege of Paris, ‘A Capitulation’ quite brazenly celebrates the plight of the ever more hungry Parisians suffering under the conditions of military encirclement. Times of war are well known to draw gruesome dehumanising propaganda from the belligerents at the expense of the enemy, but this piece by Wagner is particularly jarring given that it was published more than three years after the siege itself when there were arguably no stakes in fuelling anti-French sentiment. Victor Hugo is ridiculed, popping up from the sewer at one point, in a smirking jab at *Les Misérables*, declaring ‘I am here, not through the Prussian ranks, but underneath them.’³⁶ The play is dotted with sarcastic images of the “holy guillotine,” and claims that only those in the cisterns can anything to eat, a particularly cruel jab considering Paris was in the middle of a terrible shortage of food at the time.³⁷ The National Guard chants ‘Republic! Republic! Republic-blic-blic’ in mocking, almost can-can rhythms.³⁸ The production paints a picture of Paris as a city gripped by the absence of moral upstanding, where atheists and revolutionaries rant on incessantly. To Wagner, rats are central to the chaos of Paris, and he when someone points out ‘The city is starving’ the chorus dutifully responds, ‘Rats with sauces, sauces with rats! Here, pass them, or hunger will dine off our hats!’³⁹ Finally, the rats magically transform into the ballerinas of the French Ballet, further reinforcing Wagner’s apparent disgust with French culture as a whole.⁴⁰ The infamous departure of interior minister Léon Gambetta from Paris in a balloon

³⁵ Curt von Westerhagen, *Wagner: A Biography Vol 2*, (New York, 1981), p. 434.

³⁶ Wagner, “A Capitulation,” *Prose Works V*, p. 9.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 9.

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 10.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 30.

is similarly mocked.⁴¹ Although the work is demonstrably padded with an unrestrained attack on Parisian culture, as we have seen, it is arguably Victor Hugo's concluding monologue that stands out most significantly. Here, Hugo welcomes the Prussian forces into Paris for it is the Parisian culture that has forced the traditional real-world capitulation of Germany, according to Wagner. Wagner, quite pointedly, originally entitled this work, *Nicht kapitulirt!* (Never Capitulate!).⁴² 'Never Capitulate' was, therefore, Wagner's warning to the German people. Where previous writings had admonished the Germans for allowing French cultural sensibilities to seep into Germany, this play builds on the idea and implores that Germans do not give in to this alien culture. It is in Victor Hugo's concluding lines where Wagner presses home his dire warning, 'Then come quick and get yourselves *frisés, parfumés, civilisés!* The great nation will lend you its tone, and its terms are so foolishly easy! Send your soldiers away, while the diplomats stay!'⁴³

Described by Herman Klein in 1916 as 'a miserable concoction, certainly, for a great man to have penned: one of those unhappy errors of judgment and breaches of good taste which Wagner would fain have had France forget, and for which he made all sorts of excuses.'⁴⁴ The biographer Ernst Newman, to whom this study owes much in the way of vital context, writes that the piece is a 'tasteless, witless farce, the loutish teutonic humours of which are ungraded by a single touch of literary finesse.'⁴⁵ While it is presented as satire, the level of mockery to which the French are subjected throughout 'A Capitulation' meant that anti-Wagner feelings were strong enough in France in the wake of its publication to keep performances of the composer's works to a minimum for years after. What is striking about this piece, especially the date it is eventually published, is that it seems to be a kind of

⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 20.

⁴² John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 175.

⁴³ *Wagner*, "A Capitulation," p. 33.

⁴⁴ Herman Klein, "German Music in France: Saint-Saëns and Richard Wagner." *The Musical Times*, Vol. 57, No. 883 (Sep. 1, 1916), pp. 400-402

⁴⁵ *Newman*, IV, p. 277.

spiteful nationalistic work reminiscent of the reactionary earlier publications of Wagner. This study has previously dealt with Wagner's habit of lashing out, in the form of public articles and essays, against those to whom he felt had wronged him in some way. 'A Capitulation' certainly fits the profile, but without any particular reason for its venomous tone. Of course, the time of writing, as we have mentioned, is a reason for the piece in the first place, but waiting more than three years to publish it — well after the defeat of the French and the declaration of the empire — seems bombastic, triumphalist, and cruel in the extreme.

When the Prussian forces finally completed their conquest of France, The German Empire, or *Kaiserreich*, was formally, and triumphantly, declared in the hall of mirrors at the Versailles Palace on 18 January 1871.⁴⁶ Seeking to capitalise on this apparent pinnacle of German nationalistic destiny, Wagner decided to compose a new piece, the *Kaiserlied*, in celebration of the new empire. He completed the work in March of the same year, after experiencing a 'great enthusiasm for things German.'⁴⁷ A diary entry of Wagner's on 16 March 1871 records the lyrics. As the title would suggest, the *Kaiserlied* was explicitly in support of the new Kaiser, as the opening lines boom:

“Heil, Heil dem Kaiser!
König Wilhelm!
Aller Deutschen Hort und Freiheitswehr!
Höchste der Kronen,
wieziert Dein Haupt sie hehr!”

[Hail, Hail to the Emperor!
King Wilhelm!
Shield and bulwark of all Germans' freedom!
Loftiest of crowns,

⁴⁶ Stephen J Lee, *Imperial Germany 1871-1918*, (London, 1999), p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Moulin-Eckart*, II, p. 472.

how augustly it adorns your brow!]⁴⁸

Wagner hoped this highly patriotic piece would become a new national anthem.⁴⁹ The decisions made by Wagner following the premiering of the highly nationalistic *Die Meistersinger* were in the interest of securing his position as the central artistic vehicle of the new empire. However, as popular as his works had become at this point, he still had no official support. Letters of congratulation from Bismarck were one thing, but an official endorsement and patronage from the new empire would secure this position, allowing him to realise his vision of an artistic utopia with himself at the centre. An event that defines whether Wagner's wholesale, mercenary nationalistic rhetoric of the last few years had paid off or not, a meeting with Bismarck was arranged in May 1871.⁵⁰ Wagner hoped to float the idea of the Bayreuth music festival and gain financial support from the new regime. Speaking of Bismarck to Cosima, Wagner states 'I judge him aright, for such a powerful mind must see the importance of the theatre at once.'⁵¹ Following the critical encounter, Cosima records Wagner's impressions of the meeting:

'Richard returned in a highly contented frame of mind,' she writes. "A great and simple nature had revealed itself to him. When Richard assured him of his veneration, he said: 'The only thing that can be counted to me as a merit is that from time to time I have secured a signature. All I have done is to discover the hole in the crown through which the smoke can pass.' Richard was quite enchanted with the genuine amiability of his nature. There was no trace of reticence about him, but an easy address, the most cordial communicativeness, inspiring entire confidence and sympathy.' But, said Wagner, 'we can only look on at each other's work, each accomplishing something in his own sphere. I should not presume to win

⁴⁸ Richard Wagner, *The Diary of Richard Wagner, 1865-1882: The Brown Book*, Joachim Bergfeld (ed.) (Cambridge, 1980), p. 189.

⁴⁹ David C. Large, "Wagner's Bayreuth Disciples" in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics* (New York, 1984), p. 75.

⁵⁰ *Borchmeyer*, p. 286

⁵¹ *Moulin-Eckart*, II, p. 425.

him over to the support of my cause or to present him with any petition. But none the less this meeting remains of the greatest value to me.”⁵²

Although it would seem that Wagner did not propose or expect the official support he desired, he still comes away from the meeting optimistically. However, as mentioned before, Cosima may embellish the truth of the matter to better frame the disappointment of Bismarck’s disinterest. This is especially possible considering Bismarck’s own scant recollection of the event:

‘He hadn’t brought a petition with him (money for Bayreuth). They sat us down together on a sofa, and he probably thought a duet would develop between the two of us, but that’s not what happened. The master of musical sounds probably felt that he wasn’t earning enough praise from me, and, having failed to blossom, he went away disappointed.’⁵³

It is unclear as to whether the meeting with Bismarck gave Wagner pause for thought about his role in the new empire. Clearly, Bismarck is less than enthused by the idealistic composer, even if Cosima records Wagner as being optimistic. Of course, this may simply have been an example of garden variety denial. Despite this rather fruitless encounter, Wagner remained apparently optimistic about the potential centrality of his art to the new empire. During a triumphal parade of the returning troops, Wagner said to Cosima, ‘I believe that the empire will flourish as never before . . . and if *The Ring of the Nibelungs* coincides with the victories of Germany, this will be no mere coincidence.’⁵⁴ It is most interesting to see the heightening of Wagner’s nationalistic enthusiasm for the fledgling empire, hoping it would be the catalyst for his artistic utopia. Indeed, in the above example, he seemingly harnesses its very fate to the success of his *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 484.

⁵³ *Borchmeyer*, p. 286.

⁵⁴ *Moulin-Eckart*, II, p. 492.

Unfortunately for Wagner, the empire pressed on without him, giving no real attention to his ideas at all. In fact, the culture of the new empire was, according to Kitchen, more conservative and critical of Wagner's style than anything else.⁵⁵ Referring broadly to Wagner's entire *oeuvre*, Tenbrock succinctly defines the impact Wagner had on the world around him. In Wagner's own lifetime 'It can hardly be denied that Wagnerian music and writing struck such an answering chord in his contemporaries because it offers his godless and materialistic age new gods and new myths.' However, 'In clothing the great problems of life in the language of mythology, he failed to shake and transform men.'⁵⁶ However, near the end of the century, only five years after Wagner's death, a review of a performance of *Die Meistersinger* praised Wagner as the creator of the ideal German art, which he accomplished through 'German spirit, German music, by the German man in Germany,' going on to conclude that Wagner's precious Bayreuth is the symbol for the 'realisation of national ideals.'⁵⁷ In 1888, as in 1871, the artistic utopia of which Wagner had dreamt throughout his life did not exist. Yet if he had seen this review, in which his Bayreuth is simply recognised as a symbol of German national ideals, perhaps that would have been enough.

The broadly positive reception of *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, and the subsequent popular enthusiasm for Wagner's work, did not act as the primary catalyst for what would become the composer's most avaricious nationalistic period. Anxious about how the show would be performed, he did not respond well to its warm reception at home or abroad. In this final period before the unification, Wagner's nationalism was as volatile as it had ever been, until a victory over the French was overwhelmingly likely, and the declaration of the empire was as good as guaranteed. From there, his commitment to the national spirit strays into the political, contradicting previous declarations about how the political structure needed to be pulled down to its roots before his Germanic utopia of the future could be established.

⁵⁵ Martin Kitche, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Germany*, (Cambridge, 1996), p. 220.

⁵⁶ Robert-Hermann Tenbrock, *A History of Germany*, (Michigan, 1968), p. 231.

⁵⁷ Musikalisches Wochenblatt, 20 September 1888.

Wagner fell in with Bismarck, the military, the Kaiser, and the new order, and was still denied the official endorsement and patronage that he so craved. Wagner had hoped he would profit directly from his nationalistic investment in the new empire; the German spirit made manifest. His years of theorising and shifting idealism did not pay off for him, and the new regime did not hold him in the high esteem for which he had so wished. So it was, therefore, that the remainder of Wagner's life came to be defined by a heightened sense of reactionary bitterness that, as we have already seen, was readily present throughout his life. He committed himself to his Bayreuth music festival, which was first announced in 1871.⁵⁸ It would seem that the Germany of Wagner's visions was simply intangible. A lifetime of contradiction and exploration had given him, as we have seen, a bizarre love/hate relationship with his homeland and its inhabitants. He would sing the praises of the German people in the same breath as damning them, and in 1872 bluntly confided to Cosima "the Germans are a bad lot."⁵⁹ This final chapter has displayed how positively opportunistic Wagner could be, even at the expense of his own ideology. Despite attempting to play the game of loyal patriot to the best of his abilities, composing poetry, music, plays, and nationalistic publications, it was simply not what interested the new regime. Wagner turned inward, and to his Bayreuth, yet never completely abandoning his efforts with the imperial crown, as in a 1873 letter to Bismarck, appealing once more for support, to which he received no reply.⁶⁰ In a bitter letter to Ludwig II in 1876, Wagner reveals how truly disconnected he feels to this 'New Germany,' to which he had previously pledged such support. When Wilhelm I summoned Wagner to his box after the performance, he told the composer that he considered the festival a national event. Wagner writes, "his words struck me as somewhat ironical: what has the "nation" to do with my work and its realisation?"⁶¹ Later, in 1877, Cosima writes in her journal something that assures us of Wagner's finality in how he connects his art to his nation: 'I am writing *Parsifal* only for my wife — if I had

⁵⁸ *Westerhagen*, II, p. 436.

⁵⁹ *Moulin-Eckart*, II, p. 546.

⁶⁰ R. Wagner to O. v. Bismarck "Letter on 24 June 1873," in in Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (eds.), *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988), p. 818-19.

⁶¹ R. Wagner to King Ludwig II of Bavaria, "Letter on 13 August 1876," in *Selected Letters*, p. 857.

to depend of the German spirit, I should have nothing more to say.’⁶² In Newman we find this observation boiled down to its core reality. Writing to Ludwig again, Wagner concludes ‘This new Germany disgusts me.’⁶³ Bayreuth became his life and passion project for the rest of the 1870s until his death in 1883.

⁶² Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, p. 998.

⁶³ *Newman*, IV, p. 598.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to create a clear trajectory of nationalism in the life of Richard Wagner, peaking ideologically with the premiere of *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*, and the unification of the German Empire in 1871. Initially, we expected this to be a straightforward task, utilising the most pointedly nationalistic language present in the sources to identify events and experiences where the composer's ideology incrementally grew. However, what is abundantly clear at the end of this study is that Wagner's developing ideology was neither straightforward nor consistent across his life, and was instead meandering, convicted, mercenary, and flippant during his artistic and philosophical journey. Based on the findings of this research, the volatile nature of Wagner's nationalism can be explained by two factors, ideological exploration and personal experience.

The two most important elements that came to define German nationalism during its evolution are as follows: the establishment of what is German by contrast to what is extrinsically German, and the identification of the German national spirit, the *Volk*. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, these basic tenants of nationalism were codified by the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire, the occupation by French Forces, the War of Liberation, and the eventual liberal discourse surrounding a unified Germany. The landscape of nationalistic belief in Germany following the War of Liberation was a complex, contradictory, and nationalists didn't have a common goal. Many wanted unification, and others were content to define the German character within the broader picture of European cooperation.

It was into this landscape of nationalistic discourse that Wagner stepped, and the second chapter outlines a biographical trajectory of the composer's nationalistic thoughts from his early life to the writing of *Die Meistersinger von Nuremberg*. We have shown that his early exploration of literature and music account for his core ideology, which essentially posits

that Germans and German artistic are part of a greater aesthetic whole in Europe. However, when he unsuccessfully attempted to make a name for himself in Paris, these views began to shift toward a much more vitriolic assessment of other nations, mainly France and Italy. Publicly, in his articles and essays, Wagner begins to qualify Germans as being of an inherently superior quality than other European cultures, not just in music, but in morality and goodness too. But this ideology which supported German greatness split during the period of his exile, displaying an anger towards the established political and artistic establishment in Germany. While the German themselves might be a supreme being, the structures they had created and supported since the fall of the Holy Roman Empire were not, and needed to be done away with completely. Again, these conclusions appear time and again when Wagner did not get his way back in Germany, so his nationalism concerning either the greatness of Germany, or the insignificance of the 'other' —meaning other countries — is very much conditional on the success afforded to him at home and abroad. Ultimately his conclusions from this era, from early life to his repatriation to Germany, manifest themselves in his music drama, *Die Meistersinger*, drawing on importance of history as precedent for national identity, distrust of foreign influences, and the necessary prioritising of art as the vital organ of the state.

The opera is conceived of early on as an experiment for Wagner in drawing from historical figures and locations for use in his work. Nuremberg is demonstrably an important cultural landmark for Germany, acting as a hub of culture and commerce throughout the history of the Holy Roman Empire, and so Wagner uses it as a central device in his work, showing the viewer an idyllic historical setting on which by the time it is being finished he has a wealth of life experience behind him. These life experiences, both positive and negative, impact the message of the opera significantly. Written during a time of significant conflict in Europe, and alongside a push towards German unity, the opera capitalises on anti-French sentiment and establishes German art as the primary unifying force of the German people. As Hans Sachs warns that the Holy Roman Empire might one day not exist anymore, the viewer is keenly aware that such events historically did transpire. Sach's offering is holy German art, which can essentially withstand the trials of history. The opera is his manifesto for the

aesthetic state of the future, a message that he hoped would be pointedly present during the parallel lead up to the declaration of the empire in 1871.

Although *Die Meistersinger* was a ground-breaking popular success, with several critics recognising its importance as an all-encompassing work of German art, it did not secure a position for Wagner in the pragmatic, function Bismarckian German Empire. During the Franco-Prussian War, alongside the build up to an imperial Germany, Wagner attempted to capitalise on pro-German and anti-French rhetoric both publicly and privately, hoping that Otto von Bismarck would see the value in having a highly patriotic artist on side for the new regime. Wagner did not find his artistic utopia in the German Empire, and after several attempts to warm up to the new Kaiser, he abandoned the Germany of his lifetime as a lost cause, instead focusing on the curation and funding of the Bayreuth Music Festival. He considered the Germany of his lifetime to be squarely incompatible with his art, art which he, and many others, believed represented the very heart of what it meant to be German. He was not tangibly rewarded for his offerings, and therefore dismissed the new regime.

Wagner's concept of nationalism is therefore conditional, it is defined by his intentions at any given time in his life. We can conclude that Wagner's nationalism was a highly variable ideology informed not only by exploratory study, but perhaps more significantly by a human desire for ambition. Status, success, and financial security seem to have been more important to Richard Wagner than a simple convicted love of country. When Wagner feels slighted or wronged by forces at home or abroad, the transgressions invariably find their way into his nationalistic feeling. When he desires status or financial return, both ambitions are present in his works too. By the time of *Meistersinger*, he channels the last twenty years into his art. His concepts of history are present, along with assumptions of the German capacity for meaningful art, but so too is garden variety chauvinism at the expense of others. All of this is underscored by the political situation in Germany at the time, and the opera is essentially an application form for the incoming regime, with Wagner hoping to hold a place of honour. The popular reception of the opera was incredibly positive, yet ultimately it did not go far enough for him, and he was not afforded the position of some kind of poet-

laureate in the new empire, despite his best efforts and carefully catered political views. The rest of his life was committed to the Bayreuth music festival, and any nationalism he expressed was simply more stargazing about the potential for a future artistic state.

Eventually, as is well known, Wagner's music would be co-opted by Adolf Hitler and the Nazis during their fascist regime in Germany, held up as the most German art. Ideologically speaking, Wagner would not have considered a regime that uses art to support politics as his ideal state. However, given his ambition and willingness to shift positions in the name of personal success, perhaps Richard Wagner would have liked it just fine.

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