

Wagner's Childhood and Adolescence—1813-1833 Eleven Episodes

If "...the Child is father of the Man," as William Wordsworth opined in his 1802 poem "My Heart Leaps Up" (and, by loose analogy, is the mother of the artist), then some attention is warranted on Wagner's growth towards the man and artist, since in each role he is acknowledged as one of the most important figures in the western cultural canon. What does Wagner's first 20 years or so of life tell us about his later views on ART, society, politics, economics, and the importance of big houses and good clothes?

I will be talking about Wagner's life in Leipzig and Dresden to identify those family and historical factors that shaped his world view and then his artworks, and to try to answer some questions. I am not a psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychoanalyst, so I will not be interpreting Wagner's inner states. I will, though, show instances of Wagner's presentation of his inner states that suggest particular inclinations and desires.

My background is in literary criticism, so I pay very close attention to the words, images, metaphors, stories of a writer—and Wagner is a skilful writer, but he is also given to exaggeration, fantasising, and the excusing of his more questionable behaviour. All quotations from Wagner's autobiography are taken from *Mein Leben*, translated by Andrew Gray and edited by Mary Whittall, published by Cambridge University Press in 1983—cited below as [ML p].

At the end of this talk I will present some tentative conclusions about Wagner's political trajectory from Leipzig to Bayreuth, and especially the role of student groups—*Burschenschaften*—in shaping his ethical values and moral principles. On the way through, I will highlight Wagner's predisposition to turn almost every episode of his life into a Gothic Romance, with intense erotic content, which then predisposes him to react very strongly to the student group called Saxonia.

The period I will cover is from 1813 to early 1833 that is, from Wagner's birth until after his abortive university year of 1831 and to his first paid professional job in early 1833.

I will use a technical sociological term to describe Wagner during this period of his life – "precocious brat." I think the historical data, and his own descriptions of his childhood, support such a characterisation, and that it can be partly explained by several factors some of which I cover.

EPISODE 1

Napoleon's Welcome and Farewell to Wagner

In 1807, Saxony joined Napoleon against Prussia and other German states and stayed an ally until the end of the wars in 1813. In the German resistance in Prussia to the French invasion, some of the members of *Burschenschaften* formed a kind of student guerilla militia.

Wagner was born into Napoleonic Saxony before the final defeat of Napoleon at the Battle of Leipzig or the Battle of the Nations, which was fought from 16 to 19 October 1813—less than five months after his birth. The field of battle was just outside the city walls.

The period 1813 to 1833 also marks the transition from the defeat of Napoleon to the 1830 uprisings in many German states, another upheaval driven by events in France that had effects on all aspects of Saxon life. The collaboration between Saxony and the French forces had positive effects:

- Napoleon promoted the Elector to a King; there was an increase in trade with other parts of the French occupied territories (but not sufficient to compensate for the loss of trade with Great Britain); some political and social reforms, including improved access by women to divorce:

and negative effects:

- large parts of the Saxon population rose against the French forces (and continued to be problematic for the Saxon government until the 1830 uprising); the French demands for payments for its "protection" from Prussia and its allies; severe dismemberment of the kingdom after the 1815 settlement of the Congress of Vienna (about half its territory ceded); reparations demanded by the victors. Both the protection payments and the reparations left Saxony with huge debts and an escalating problem of borrowing to pay the debts and borrowing again to pay the interest on the borrowings plus the continuing imposts.

The agitation of “a large proportion of the population,” including the *Burschenschaften*, was suppressed during the so-called Restoration period until it erupted again in 1830.

But first, a Cook’s tour of Leipzig around the time of Wagner’s birth.

EPISODE 2

Birthplace



House of the Red & White Lions. The Brühl
(“Flickr-no known copyright restrictions”)

The Red and White Lions – 2 flights up, in the Brühl, the Jewish Quarter. Brühl = “swampy lowlands”—because there was a waterway behind the street; it is still evident as a little stream through part of Wagnerplatz.

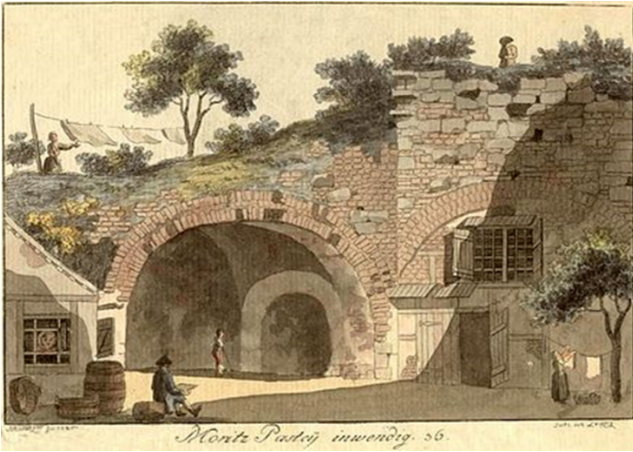
Leipzig Marketplace



Schwarz, Carl Benjamin 1804 coloured copper engraving (Gemeinfrei)



Das Rannstädter Tor während der Abbrucharbeiten
(during demolition work) 1822 / F. M. (Public domain)



Moritzbastei near the Gewandhaus 1785 (public domain) – and 2005 (photo Frank Vincentz)



The Brühl in 1905 during the fur fair, the houses decorated with bears and other skins (public domain)



The Brühl, Shopping Centre, and Wagner-Platz (photo 2005: Frank Vincentz)

Wagner's early life seems to have been a series of haphazard moves from residence to residence as the family's fortune changed according to the employment of various members. Some 17 temporary or longer stay residences between 1813 and 1830.

- 1813** The *Brühl*; brief stays in Stötteritz (just outside Leipzig) and Teplitz (a spa town then in Bohemia), then back to the *Brühl*—all during the final months of the Battle of Nations;
- 1816** to Dresden because Geyer appointed to court theatre;
- 1820** to Pastor Wetzel's at school at Possendorf (near Weimar);
- 1821** a lofty old house at the corner of the *Jüdenhof* and *Frauengassen* in Leipzig;
- 1821** back to Dresden (illness of Geyer);
- 1822** to two houses and a private school in Eisleben (west of Halle, before and after death of Geyer); one of the houses belonged to Geyer's brother;
- 1825** Leipzig for short stay with Uncle Adolph;
- 1825** Dresden enrolled in *Kreuzschule*;
- 1826** rest of Dresden family leave for Prague, Wagner ends up in an attic;
- 1826** week trip to Prague with mother;

1827 quick walking trip to and from Prague; another walking trip to Leipzig; Christmas **1827** to Winter-Garden, the "Pichhof" outside the Halle Gate of Leipzig to join mother, Otilie, Cäecilie, and Luise, when he then entered *Nikolaischule*;

1829 short stay with sister Klara in Magdeburg;

1830 back to Leipzig in another of Johanna's apartments.

Followed by, in the years from 1834 to 1842, some 18 years chasing employment in Würzburg, Königsberg, Magdeburg, Riga, London, Paris, before returning to Dresden and what seemed to be a permanent position as Kapellmeister, and respectable home. From the time he fled from Dresden when the May 1849 uprising collapsed until he settled in Bayreuth, 1874, into *Wahnfried*—there are too many places to track! We can understand why he so desperately wanted a place to call home from which he would never have to depart again.

EPISODE 3

The Family

The Mother — Johanna Rosine Wagner (1774–1848)



Portrait of Johanna 1813 by Ludwig Geyer (public domain)

- Born in Weißenfels to a baker & his wife.
- Lived in the Brühl before marriage.
- Portrait painted in 1813 by Ludwig Geyer of Johanna at about the age of 43 years.
- Married Friedrich in 1798; he took her to the "White and Red Lions" in the Brühl.
- Begged Wagner not to go onto the stage like some of his sisters. Johanna would have endorsed Noel Coward's advice to Mrs Worthington: "Don't put your daughter on the stage!"

Johanna was really like King Canute in trying to stem the tide of theatricality flowing into the young Richard's life from the very beginning. After all, if the two fathers were dedicated thespians, what hope would there be to prevent Richard being swept away.

The Fathers

No. 1: Carl Friedrich Wagner (1770–1813) – No portrait.

- Legal official at town-court.
- He had a grasp of French that made him useful to the French forces garrisoned in Leipzig.
- Friedrich loved the theatre, and regularly appeared in amateur performances.

No. 2: Ludwig Heinrich Christian Geyer (1779–1821)



Ludwig Heinrich Christian Geyer
Self-portrait © Mary Evans Picture Library

- Trained as a lawyer and painter.
- In 1805, he took up a position in a Leipzig theatre.
- He also wrote smaller stage plays, mostly satirical comedies.
- In 1816, he took a position in the Dresden Court Theatre and he, Johanna and the younger children moved to Dresden.

The Siblings and Stepsister

Five of Wagner's siblings were between five and fourteen years older than him. The siblings were:

Albert Wagner (1799–1874), **singer, actor, and stage director**; 1828 married Elise Gollmann (possibly a theatre person – no information);

†Carl Gustave Wagner 1801-1802;

Rosalie Wagner (1803–1837), **actress**; 1836, married Gotthard Oswald Marbach 1810–1890 – academic;

Carl **Julius** Wagner (1804–1862), goldsmith, (no information about later career or marital status); taught Wagner in Eisleben for a few months;

Luise Wagner (1805–1872), **actress**; 1828 married Friedrich Brockhaus - 1806–1877 – owner of publishing / printing company;

Klara Wagner (1807–1875), **opera singer**; 1829 married Heinrich Wolfram (1800–1874) – initially an opera singer, later merchant;

†Maria Theresia Wagner (1809–1814) only survived Wagner by a year;

Otilie Wagner (1811–1883), **not a performer**; 1836 married Hermann Brockhaus—1806–1877, Friedrich's brother – academic;

Cäcilie Geyer (1815-1893), **not a performer**; 1840 married Eduard Ludwig Friedrich Avenarius—1809-1885 – partner in Brockhaus publishing & distribution company.

Precocious Brat / "Spoilt Child"

So that you don't think that I'm being over-critical of Wagner's behaviour as a child and adolescent, let me call on the words of Wagner's biographer Ferdinand Praeger who knew him from about the age of 50 and claims to recount Wagner's reminiscences. Praeger sums up his childhood:

From the first Geyer displayed the tenderest affection towards the **small and delicately fragile baby**.

Through-out his life Wagner was a spoilt child, and the spoiling dates from his infancy. Both step-father and mother took every means of petting him.

His mother particularly idolized him, and seems, so Wagner told me, to have often built castles in the air as to his future. They were drawn towards the boy, first, because of his sickly, frail constitution; and secondly, owing to **his bright powers of observation**, which made his childish remarks peculiarly winning.

As the boy grew up he remained delicate. He was affected with an irritating form of erysipelas, which constantly troubled him up to the time of his death [Praeger, Ferdinand. 1892 *Wagner as I Knew Him*. New York: Longmans, Green, and Co. 6, hereafter [Praeger p]].

Erysipelas is also referred to as "St. Anthony's Fire" due to its intense fiery rash and probably results from a streptococcal infection.

Uncle Gottlob Heinrich Adolph Wagner - 1774-1835.

Mike Day was kind enough to publish my article on Wagner's Uncle Adolph in the *Wagner Quarterly* No 147 December 2017. I claimed that Adolph was a much under-rated influence on Wagner's intellectual and artistic development. He held a special place in Wagner's life-long regard, but also in laying some of the foundations of Wagner's world view.



Christian Ludwig Friedhelm (1781-1810)
portrait of Adolph 1795 (public domain)

Adolph was a translator, editor, speculative philosopher, mystical theosophist, theatre commentator, poet, and biographer, but he was also a playwright, building on the family tradition of dramatic composition, and had trod the boards in his earlier life, but later came to try to dissuade his nieces from becoming actors.

As a widely read, relatively open-minded thinker and writer, Adolph's life and achievements gave Wagner one of the few models of intellectual endeavour, artistic achievement, and solid anchors in his highly erratic early life and intellectual development. Like their mother, he advised his nieces not to become stage performers.

Overview of the Family

The family was neither well off nor struggling. The children were educated to some level, some of the sisters worked and augmented the household budget as their employment allowed, and Johanna appears to have been a very capable *Hausmutter*. The family together fostered a cohort of children who made much of their lives in traditional and not so traditional ways.

The sisters, married respectable, prosperous men of substance in business and academia. It seems that the sisters believed Wagner had special talent, even though much of his youthful behaviour seemed to them designed to harm his chances of realising that talent. Wagner and Albert and his sisters maintained a close relationship through many letters and occasional meetings during Richard and Minna's semi-nomadic lives.

The Brothers-in-Law

It is through his sisters' solicitude and mediation that some of their husbands were persuaded to assist the talented young artist, and his wife, to survive in Paris. The assistance seems to have been given relatively altruistically, with few if any strings attached; it is unlikely that Wagner repaid any of these intra-family transfers. Collectively, the sisters and their husbands represented a high *bürgerlich* world to which Wagner aspired, but which he only achieved securely in *Wahnfried*.

EPISODE 4

Schools – Peripatetic Education - Curricula

This is what seems to have constituted a fairly common curriculum for *Gymnasia* in Saxony during the time and shortly after Wagner attended *Nikolaischule*—for the six upper classes:

Latin with logic, religion and history; "special class systems" [*Klassensysteme*], for mathematics, Greek, French, Hebrew, singing, writing (in the lower grades).

The additional list of topics studied across the school gives us a clear idea of the range of subjects in the curriculum Wagner would have been expected to study:

It included now Greek lectures in [classes] I and II on Thucydides, Demosthenes, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Homer, the difficult Latin writings of Cicero, Livy, Quintilianus and Horace. In addition, new or advanced extension classes were added the German for all, the French of V, mathematics, natural history (Physik—physics) and history in all classes, geography in VI to III, in addition II mythology and history of old literature [**alte Literaturgeschichte**] (alternately), in I also ancient history [Antiquitäten], 'doctrines of the soul and logic ['Seelen- und Denk-lehre']. The lectures in classes VI to III were given entirely in German, in II and I in classical languages, partly in Latin, and partly in French, in these subjects.... [Kaemmel, Otto. 1900 "Die Oberbehörden" in *Veröffentlichungen Zur Geschichte des Gelehrten Schulwesens im Albertinischen Sachsen 170-71*].

It is evident that these kinds of curricula were not designed to encourage independent, critical thinking, or exploration outside the set works. Wagner seems to have decided early that it was more important for his development as an artist to follow his own ideas, whether or not they were well informed by evidence or fact.

The Peripatetic School Years

Kreuzschule – 1822-1827



Kreuzschule Dresden—Copper Engraving Cabinet, Dresden State Art Collection c. 1870

At the beginning of his ninth year, 1822, in Dresden, Wagner attended the *Kreuzschule* (*Cross Gymnasium*) where "...I was supposed to get a formal education..." "...to the point of being ready for the university" [ML 16]: The family was in Dresden because Ludwig Geyer was employed there, until his death in 1822. In 1826, the family left for Prague because Rosalie was engaged by the court theatre. Wagner was left alone in the care of a family, but he quickly moved into a "garret" where he wrote "verses and also began there a stupendous tragic play," and neglected his schoolwork [ML 21].

Nikolaischule – 1827-1830

In 1827, because he was starving in the garret, and the teachers at the *Kreuzschule* were fed up with his behaviour, he decided to walk to Leipzig and seek refuge with his mother, Otilie, and Cäcilie. Of the two *Gymnasia* in Leipzig, he chose the one dedicated to St Nicholas, the medieval Catholic patron saint of merchants and wholesalers—perhaps an ironic patron saint for an aspiring artist!



Old Nikolaischule complex 1875 (public domain)

Schools - Nikolaischule - Demotion

Wagner was demoted by the administration of *Nikolaischule* from the third form he had attained at the *Kreuzschule* to second form, which "...embittered me so much, that thenceforward I lost all liking for philological [common term for academic] study. I became lazy and slovenly, and my grand tragedy [*Leubald und Adelaïde*] was the only thing left me to care about..." [*Autobiographical Sketch* in Wagner, Richard. 1895/1993 *The Artwork of the Future and other Works*. Translated William Ashton Ellis. University of Nebraska Press 5].

In late 1829, Wagner's family was informed by *Nikolaischule* that he had not attended classes for six months, apparently because he had dedicated himself to becoming a musician as well as the poet he was already to a degree. He attended school only, he says, as "...purely a sacrifice for the sake of my family. I paid not the slightest attention to whatever was going on in the classes but rather busied myself with reading whatever attracted me at the moment" [ML 35].

Thomasschule zu Leipzig - 1830-1831

By Easter 1830, just before Wagner's 17th birthday, the *Nikolaischule* had determined that there was no point continuing the charade of his schooling and that he should leave because "...he was too deeply in disgrace with the masters ever to hope to be promoted from there to university" [ML 38].



Historical Thomaskirchhof before 1900 with Thomasschule (public domain)

EPISODE 5

Wagner at University

Wagner could not complain about lack of support from his family. For some six months, Wagner received private tuition to assist him to complete schooling at *Thomasschule* and to matriculate. The tuition, of course, had to be paid for by the family.



The classicist building in Geutebrück: Heinrich Otto Knäbig, Augustusplatz in Leipzig around 1845, coloured lithograph - University of Leipzig Archives.

Wagner chose not to matriculate, that is have a second attempt at the *Abiturexamen*, but to enter as a 'Studiosus Musicae', "Student of Music," which he did just before Easter 1831.

Attending as a "Studiosus Musicae," meant it seems that he was not expected to study texts, write essays—just attend some lectures. The Americans call this arrangement "auditing" a course: sitting in.

He definitely had an ambivalent attitude to learning in such a rigorously disciplined environment while he was capable, he believed of conducting his own education. The perils of being an autodidact are well-known and include problems with logical argument.

What was the true reason he wanted to enter the University, if not to study?

Wagner and the Colours

To be stuck in my home town of Leipzig all these weeks [of tuition] without having the rights to wear the coveted club colors seemed to me an unendurable torment. Straight from the interview with the rector, I ran as if shot from a gun to the fencing club, to present myself for admission to the Saxon club, flashing my registration card. **I attained my object: I could wear the colors of Saxonia, which were highly fashionable owing to the many congenial members in the club's ranks** [ML 44].

We will return to the "congenial members" of the club shortly.

EPISODE 6

Extra-Curricular Activities or Escapades—1822-1827

Many of the activities in which Wagner tells us he engaged in as a child and adolescent are typical of young healthy boys; others seem less typical. He says he spent much time playing games, dancing, climbing trees etc. He records many incidents in *Mein Leben* of turning somersaults, trying tightrope walking, climbing roofs and on tables.

Wagner records many incidents from his childhood in his autobiography that show him behaving like a precocious brat, in addition to his failure to treat schooling seriously, despite the pain and financial inconvenience it caused his family.

In late 1830, at the age of 17 years, Wagner recalls his most embarrassing episode of gambling:

My gambling grew to almost manic intensity out of despair at my bad luck; insensible to everything that had previously attracted me in student life, senselessly indifferent to the judgment of my former companions, I disappeared entirely from their horizon and lost myself in the smaller gambling dens of Leipzig with the scum of the student body. [...] I was of the opinion that profits could only be achieved by upping the size of my stakes and to this end determined to make use of **a not inconsiderable sum in cash that was in my safe-keeping, to wit my mother's pension**, which I had collected for her [ML 50].

The pension had been awarded to Johanna on the death of Geyer in recognition of his role as court theatre actor and painter of court nobles' portraits. This egregious action by Wagner seems to be a portent of his general carefree attitude to other people's money. It also paints a picture of someone at the mercy of selfish impulses and lack of foresight and a sense of reality and responsibility.

...The growing elation I felt during this whole process was utterly sacred. With the turn in my luck I clearly sensed God or His angels as if standing beside me and whispering words of warning and consolation [ML 50].

Wagner turns the episode into a moralistic, redemptive tract, dragging God into the story to give his venality a veneer of respectability for Cosima and King Ludwig. Given Wagner's continued, though erratic, gambling, his assertion that he "was gambling for the last time" is disingenuous. I could have easily included many stories he tells about himself and what we might call his anti-social behaviour.

EPISODE 7

A Little Thespian turns into a Dramatist then a Composer

Wagner was born into a household that had already developed into a theatrical world of its own. Richard had four siblings who took up careers on the stage as singers or actors.

My imagination was now dominated by acquaintance with the theater, with which I was brought into contact not only as a juvenile spectator from the concealed loge with its entrance from the stage, and by visits to the wardrobe with its fantastic costumes and all the **paraphernalia of illusion**, but also by taking part in performances myself [ML 5].

Apart from the exposure to performances of a wide range of plays and operas, in varying levels of competence, during this period, Wagner had the opportunity for the illusion of the theatre to be dispelled by the reality of backstage preparations for those performances and of the life of the theatrical performer, but his language suggests he preferred to be wrapped in the illusion.

Theatrical Heritage

We will return to one of the most important aspects of matters theatrical for the young Wagner—erotic relationships.

Theatres in the Vicinity of the Brühl

The Old Theater - the first new stone theater building in Leipzig on the Rannischen Bastei (1784), that is, on today's Richard-Wagner-Platz.



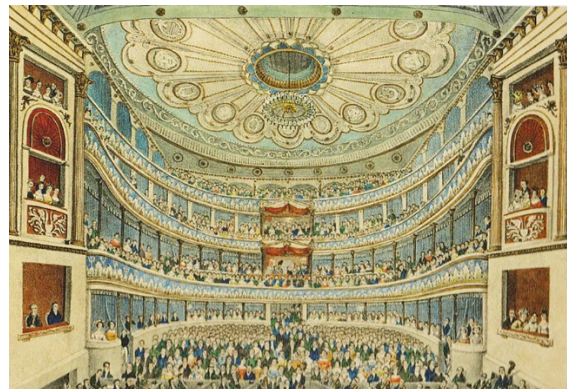
The Rannstädter Bastei in Leipzig with the Comedy House, coloured etching - 1784 Carl Benjamin Schwarz (public domain)



The Old Theater in Leipzig, coloured photograph from 1906 (public domain)

Rebuilt as *Das Alte Theater* & opened in 1817. The theatre where Wagner saw the premieres of Heinrich Marschner's *Der Vampyr* and *Der Templer und die Jüdin* in 1828-29.

The Auditorium of the Altes Theater



The hall of the Old Theater in Leipzig c 1850. Lithographer Thiele (public domain)

Wagner's Theatrical Appearances

Between the ages of about 6 and 9 years, Wagner appeared in at least 5 plays. Most of them were light entertainment and most accompanied with music, including one that included an aria specially composed by Carl Maria von Weber, a family friend.

One reminiscence is amusing: "I recall figuring in a tableau vivant as an angel, entirely sewn up in tights and with wings on my back, in a graceful, though laboriously learned, pose" [ML 5].

While this theatrical experience did not lead to a career as an actor, for which his mother was probably grateful, it did give him a stage-eye view of audiences and their reactions to a wide variety of stage works and the role of music in heightening their responses.

First Drama - Leubald und Adelaïde – c. 1828

At about the age of 15 years, he wrote a five-act drama *Leubald und Adelaïde*, which he admitted failed after he ran out of characters, because the hero Leubald killed all the males, and had to return some characters to the stage as ghosts so he could end the action. But the experience of writing the play prompted him to believe that it should have music. The first hints of his later technique of leitmotifs:

I now wanted to write incidental music for *Leubald and Adelaïde*, like Beethoven's for *Egmont*; the various categories of ghosts belonging to my spirit world would first **receive their distinctive coloring from the corresponding musical accompaniment** [ML 31].

Drama and his First Musical Principle

He tells us about his discovery of his first musical principle that remained foremost for his career:

"I knew what no one else could understand, namely that **my work could only be judged rightly when provided with the music** I had now decided to write for it and which I intended to start composing immediately" [ML 27].

There is a degree of chutzpah in this assertion, given that his musical training was virtually non-existent. It is, though, the middle-aged Wagner remembering his childhood.

EPISODE 8

Musical Training

As with his formal schooling, Wagner's education in music was also haphazard. We need to take into account Wagner's exposure to music as a child with a family of performers. For example, he tells us in *Mein Leben* that, for a family concert in 1821, just before he began at *Kreuzschule*, his "sister Rosalie played the piano; Klara began to sing..." [ML 12]. It is likely then that Wagner, with his musical talent, was early able to pick up the basics of score reading and to match the keys on the piano to notes on a score.

"Formal" Musical Training – 4 Teachers

1825 – Johanna engages a piano teacher Herr Humann – "most rudimentary knowledge of fingering..." [ML 29]

Early 1829 – "To learn about composition quickly enough to do this I resorted to a book of Logier's entitled *Thorough-Bass*, which was recommended to me in a lending library as a suitable textbook from which the art of composition could be easily mastered" [ML 31].

Summer of 1829, Wagner describes his next attempt to learn the formal aspects of composition. "I had **secretly** been taking some lessons in harmony from a capable musician of the Leipzig orchestra, Gottlieb Müller.... [...] His teaching & exercises soon filled me with disgust owing to what I considered their dryness. **For me music was demoniacal, a mystically exalted enormity: everything concerned with rules seemed only to distort it**" [ML 31-32].

In early 1831, he was taken on as a student by the organist and director of music at the Thomaskirche, Theodore Weinlig, from whom he learned to write "exercises in four-part harmony... [and]...the most difficult contrapuntal exercises" but perhaps more significantly, "the satisfaction I now found in clarity and fluidity" [ML 55].

He expanded his knowledge of technique through transcriptions of many composers' works. The most famous is his transcription for piano of Beethoven's 9th Symphony, completed around Easter 1831.

His secret engagement with Logier's textbook and Müller's lessons incurred considerable expenses that had to be paid by the family when the debts could not be hidden any longer.

So, what was he composing during these years of music lessons and supposed study for his *Abiturexamen*?

Musical *Lehrjahre*

1829— Sonata in D minor, Sonata in F minor (both lost) and a string quartet in D major (lost).

1830— Aria for soprano and orchestra and a second aria (both lost), piano transcription of Beethoven's 9th symphony, four overtures, including the Drumbeat (*Paukenschlag*) Overture in B flat, WWV 10, performed on Christmas night at the Leipzig Theater (lost), the D Minor Overture, the *Politische* Overture (lost), an overture to Schiller's *Die Braut von Messina*, and an overture in C major (lost).

1830-31—Study fugue "Dein ist das Reich" ("Thine is the kingdom"), double fugue.

1831-32—(under the tutelage of Theodor Weinlich). Seven *Lieder* based on Goethe's *Faust*, a piano sonata in B flat, WWV 21, *Fantasie* in F# minor, WWV 22, two *Polonaises*, WWV 23, WWV 24, **Grosse Sonate in A, WWV 26.**

1831—an overture in E-flat major; a Concert Overture No. 1 in D minor, Sonata in B-flat major, for four hands (lost), Sonata in B-flat major (lost), overture and incidental music (the overture survives) to Ernst Benjamin Salomo Raupach's 1831 *König Enzo. Manfred, Fürst von Tarent* (part of the 1837–38 *Die Hohenstaufen*, a cycle of 15 dramatic pieces based on Friedrich von Raumer's *Geschichte der Hohenstaufen* (published 1837–38), which might have given Wagner the idea of a multi-part work. Raupach's 1834 *Der Nibelungenhort* (*The Nibelungen Hoard*) might also have played a part in Wagner's thinking in the early 1840s of a work based on the Nibelungen legend, a piano reduction of Haydn's Symphony No. 103 in E-flat major (lost).

1832— Scene and Aria for soprano and orchestra, *Entreeactes tragiques* No. 1 in D major, No. 2 in C minor, WWV 25, **Symphony in C, WWV 29**, performed at Leipzig Gewandhaus, Grand Sonata in A major, Concert Overture No. 2 in C major, *Glockentöne* (*Abendglocken*) (*Tones of Bells / Evening Bells*).

EPISODE 9

Love, Sex, and Eroticism

Part of Wagner's pleasure in theatrical experiences, he tells us, was overtly sensual, definitely erotic, and even sexual. He tells us that these feelings developed early through his immersion in the ambiguous world of theatre:

What attracted me so strongly to the theater, in which I include...the dressing-rooms, was not so much the addiction [*die Sucht*] to entertainment and diversion, but rather a tantalising pleasure in finding myself in company that represented such a contrast to ordinary life by its **purely fantastic and almost nightmarishly attractive quality**. ...all this would serve as a lever to swing me up out of a monotonous reality of everyday habit into **that sublime demoniacal realm** [[ML 13].

In itself, this description of his attraction to the alternative world of make-believe is not unusual; many people attracted to the arts in general and the theatre in particular would recognise the basic appeal of escaping the "monotonous reality of everyday habit." But few professional performers would experience Wagner's claimed elevation into a "sublime demoniacal realm" in their theatrical activities.

For the purposes of this presentation, I'm taking a broad view of the erotic, not limiting it to sexuality or sexual activity, but to desire in general and to the notion that the conditions in which we become aware of ourselves as sensuous, sensual, and then sexual creatures play a large part in directing our desires towards particular kinds of satisfaction. Objects and people can figure in the person's emerging relationships with the world and its occupants. *Tristan und Isolde* is one of the greatest transformations of what could have been the simply sexual into the existentially erotic, along with Molly Bloom's soliloquy in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

The blurring between the mundane and the theatrical world must have been quite intense for Wagner, growing up in a household in which almost all his siblings are engaged in theatrical activities of all kinds and which he sought to imitate in his childish way:

Everything connected with the theater was **mysterious, an attraction amounting to intoxication**, and while I tried with playmates to imitate performances of *Freischütz*, and devoted myself with great zeal to the production of costumes and masks through grotesque painting, **it was the more delicate costumes of my sisters, on which I often observed my family working, that exerted a more subtly arousing effect on my fantasy; the very touch of these objects could provoke me up to a yearning, violent heartbeat** [ML 13-14].

It is evident that the affective content of these experiences, together with the witnessing of powerful melodramas in the theatres in which he and his sisters performed, and the tradition of fathers acting or writing for the theatre, combined to play significant roles in his formation. The erotic content of these backstage and off-stage experiences can be read as informing the strong erotic charge, even erotic over-determination, with which Wagner invests his artworks, culminating in *Tristan und Isolde*.

Wagner's relationship to clothes, or costumes, has two evidently contradictory, though perhaps complementary, aspects: the erotic and the moral. I've sketched his erotic relationship to female clothing and its particular focus on theatre costumes to the extent that a theatrical and/or musical experience is hardly distinguishable from an erotic encounter.

EPISODE 10

Clothes, the *Burschenschafter* and Emerging Political Awareness—1830-1839

Since the 1970s, it has become common to "read" clothes as a way of understanding the wearer. As with linguistic language, sartorial language can be ambiguous, so care needs to be taken in "reading" someone's clothes and/or hairstyles.

Most of you would have seen paintings and photos of Wagner at various times in his life and perhaps noted his clothes and the beret he wore constantly. He always seems to be dressed very well, but we can infer from the financial circumstances of his childhood and youth that not much money was available for him to dress as well as he would have liked and certainly not in the *haute couture* Biedermeier style.

Now, I want to explore what kind of ethical and moral meanings might be "entailored," so to speak, into his clothing. To do this, I need to show you Wagner's reaction to the clothes of the traditional *Burschenschafter*—the Leipzig University students he saw around the city and who captured his imagination so strongly that they and their clothes and their behaviour shaped his own ideas about The Artist of the future and the Fellowship of Artists in the late 1840s.

Clothes and the *Burschenschafter*—two views of Wagner.



Wagner portrait 1840-42
Ernest Benedikt Kietz (public domain)



Painting by Franz von Lenbach from 1872 National Archives of the Richard Wagner Foundation / Richard Wagner Memorial, Bayreuth

Clothes and the *Burschenschafter*—old-German costumes, with black velvet berets

He recalls what he remembers of the earlier, traditional dress code of the Leipzig University students:

When I had first seen college students [that is, university students] as a boy of eight [that is, in 1822], I had been vividly struck by **their old-German costumes, with black velvet berets, long hair, and shirt collars flopping outward round bare necks** [ML 20].



Karl Sand from Heydemann, Hof 1985 (public domain)

Karl Sand - a German university student and member of a liberal *Burschenschaft* and killer of the conservative dramatist August von Kotzebue in Mannheim in 1819 on the mistaken belief that he was a Russian spy.



Schiller by Wagner's friend August Friedrich Pecht. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections.

Ludwig Geyer, Adolph Wagner and Friedrich von Schiller—Wagner's description of the "old-German costumes" of the first group recalls Geyer's self-portrait and Uncle Adolph's portrait, so he is perhaps conflating his affection for his stepfather, his Uncle, and a literary hero, with his desire to belong to a distinctive group (see earlier portraits of Geyer and Adolph). Adolph had met Schiller in 1799 on his trip to study at Jena University. Wagner had a lifelong admiration for the three men.

Biedermeier Fashion – 1815-1849

Just to remind ourselves how the fashionable wealthy dressed during Wagner's childhood and youth.



Biedermeier Fashion – 1815-1849

The members of the student associations to which he refers belonged to a new form of the ancient university student association called *Burschenschaft* (society for students from the university's city and hinterland). There was another form of association called *Landsmannschaft* (students from outside the state of the university). The group that Wagner desired to join was called, predictably, *Saxonia*.

In Leipzig, there were several student groups, and each could be in serious and aggressive contention with any or all the others in the form of brawling or more ritualised duelling, called *Mensur*. Ironically, after an 1815 reorganisation of the *Burschenschaften* into a "national" organisation with a formal constitution, they also changed their costume from the old traditional form into a new one that, Wagner says, "reflected even exaggeratedly the prevailing fashions: but they were clearly

distinguishable from all other classes by a certain gaudiness." Yet, he says he wanted to enter University just to wear a costume in yellow.

So, who are these *Burschenschafter* and why did they so impress Wagner – it was not just their clothes, but the creatures who wore them.

Hero-Worship - Gebhardt & Degelow & Schröter (around 1831)

I have no idea whether or not these three *Burschenschafter* were typical, but Wagner singles them out for special attention. I'd like you to notice the disjunction between appearances and behaviours.

I was particularly dazzled by a certain fellow named Gebhardt, a person of incomparable good looks and strength; his slim, heroic figure towered head and shoulders above his companions. [...] His redoubtable strength, combined with the rather gentle temperament, **lent him a majestic dignity, placing him beyond comparison with other mortals.** He had come to Leipzig...together with a certain Degelow: strong and agile, but by no means of such gigantic proportions as Gebhardt, Degelow was interesting above all for his vivacity and unusually lively physiognomy.

[Degelow] had led a wild and dissipated life, in which drink, gambling, wild love affairs, and a constant readiness for duelling constituted the changing canon. [...] In Degelow this wildness and passion produced a **curious diabolical charm through the malicious humour he often turned against himself, whereas he treated others with a certain chivalrous decorum.**

Schröter as an early 19th century cool Dude!

Whereas these men, decidedly and in full awareness, belonged to a world doomed to destruction and acted as they did from the belief that their inevitable ruin was imminent, I met one man from their group named Schröter, who especially attracted me by his friendly demeanour, his winning Hanover accent, and his refined wit.

He did not belong to the real desperados but rather **maintained a certain calm distance**, while remaining welcome and popular among them. I got to know Schröter quite well, despite his being considerably older: through him I was introduced to the books and poems of Heinrich Heine; From him **I acquired a certain frivolous elegance of diction, and I was inclined to be guided by Schröter in hope of improving my outward bearing.** [...] As long as these roughnecks were sober, at any rate, they would look with good-natured complacency on a **young and diminutive person like me...** [ML 44, 45].

Given the space devoted to the *Burschenschaften* episodes and the excitement with which Wagner recounts them, we can count the episodes as at least as important in his formation as his formal schooling and perhaps equally as important as his attendances at the Leipzig theatres. The *Burschenschaften* episodes, and the larger cultural, political, and social world from which they emerge, and the way in which Wagner responded to them, should be taken into account in any investigation of his intellectual, ethical, moral, and aesthetic development. Apart from the personal influences, there are influences on Wagner's choice of heroic characters from the German Romances for his artworks.

It is possible to read this as an extract from a Gothic novel, full of erotic (not necessarily sexual) charge, and with more than a hint of a bad end for these men who "belonged to a world doomed to destruction and acted as they did from the belief that their inevitable ruin was imminent" —almost a hint of the gods in The Ring Cycle?

Ironically, because Wagner lasted only a few months at most at university, he never qualified to be a full member of the Saxonia group. Nevertheless, he engaged with the students long enough for their behaviour and values to make a strong impression on him.

Objects of the Burschenschafter

I am leading now to the significance of these student groups for the development of Wagner's own ethical values and moral principles. In all ethical values and moral principles, there is a degree of ambiguity if not outright inconsistency, depending on who establishes them and for what ends.

One of the "objects" of the national and nationalist organisation, as constituted in 1815, was:

...pledging their membership to the ideals of equality, unity and freedom as well as to a Christian-German physical and intellectual education for the service to the Fatherland [Weber, RGS. 1986 *The German Student Corps in the Third Reich*. London: Palgrave Macmillan 177 footnote 5, hereafter Weber p No].

Objects of the Burschenschafter

The less admirable side of the *Burschenschaften* was its exclusivity, including its increasing anti-Jewish and generally xenophobic attitudes, as the 1821 Amendments to the original 1815 constitution of the national *Burschenschaften* asserted that...

...Burschenschaft education was Christian and German and **that foreigners and Jews, since they were not part of the Fatherland, should be excluded from membership** because their presence would disrupt the education and awareness of the Fatherland within the Burschenschaft [Weber 16].

Given that this amendment was operational when Wagner was seeking to join the student body at Leipzig University, it is not difficult to see that there is a likely connection between the prejudices of the *Burschenschaften* and Wagner's xenophobic inclinations, especially directed against the French and Jewish people.

Clothes and the Burschenschafter – Value Signifiers

The earlier *Burschenschaft* costume, and the behaviour associated with it in Wagner's view, therefore, signalled a cluster of moral values—simplicity, modesty, "roughness" or "earthiness," egalitarianism, and clarity of values. Each of those moral values, though, can be ambiguous and highly relative, depending on who adopts them and for what ends. We can, though, add another moral value to this list that is central to Wagner's artworks—*Ehre* or Honour:

An early Burschenschaft statute illustrated the importance of the attribute by claiming that they

'must give honour a higher priority than life'. Thus dying for honour—whether in a duelling hall or on a battlefield—was the duty of German men. Honour brought respect, a good reputation and, for some, the right to nationhood. In short, conceptions of honour were critical both to the individual and collective identity of German students [Breuer, Karin. 2008 "Competing Masculinities: Fraternities, Gender and Nationality in the German Confederation, 1815–30" in *Gender & History*, V20 N2 278].

Much of the behaviour of the *Burschenschaften* that Wagner witnessed as a young man is reflected in his artworks. For instance, duelling to avenge a perceived offence, or to prove one's Honour, features in all his artworks—the song contests of *Tannhäuser* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* can be read as musical duels. I leave it to you to rummage through your memories of the operas for the many, many instances of duels for the restoration of honour.

Before returning to this celebration of Honour in the statutes of the *Burschenschaften*, I want to show you the students in action in I will now bring the Leipzig *Burschenschaften* into a historical moment that was of great importance to the adolescent Wagner, and for his later politics. Whether Wagner is aware of the inconsistency in the *Burschenschafter's* behaviour is not clear: I suspect he is not. But first, the context for the 1830 uprising in Leipzig.

EPISODE 11

1830 Uprising – August-September in Leipzig – Cause.

The 26–29 July 1830 revolution in Paris was directed against Charles X's repressive Ordinances that abolished freedom of the press, reduced the electorate significantly, and dissolved the lower house. Charles abdicated in August 1830. His replacement Louis Philippe I then issued the Charter of 1830 establishing a liberal constitutional monarchy. However, the radical element of the working class continued to agitate for more sweeping reforms. Louis Philippe's actions created a wave of enthusiasm and hope among political progressives in German states, including an enthusiastic 17-year-old Wagner, about to enter the University of Leipzig. The Paris uprising provoked a similar range of hopes and fears among German people.

1830 Uprising – Wagner's Reaction – *Die niederen Volksklassen, Das Arbeiterproletariat or Der Pöbel*

In *Mein Leben*, Wagner gives us a firsthand account of the volatility of the political and social relations in the city, especially between the *Burschenschafter*, the city *Burgher* class, and the workers and unemployed. Previously, the students, with Wagner in tow, had ransacked some of Leipzig's brothels, particularly those "managed" by a notoriously corrupt town councillor.

The dangerous example set by the students, however, incited the lower classes [*die niederen Volksklassen – the baser class of people*], especially the workers [*das Arbeiterproletariat*], to indulge in similar depredations against factory owners and the like: now things got more serious: property

was threatened, and **a struggle of poor against rich stood grinning at our doors**. It was the students who were now summoned to help against the proletariat, for Leipzig was without armed militia and its police utterly disorganized. [.....]

The student became the guardian angel of Leipzig...these same young men who had yielded to a frenzy of destruction two days before now assembled in the university quadrangle. The...national clubs and student associations were now...being summoned. The young men, armed with their extraordinary equipment [duelling swords, perhaps] and drawn up in a naive medieval order of battle, to take their posts throughout the city... [ML 41-42].

If 1830 marks Wagner's political awakening, as he claimed, to what kind of political consciousness did he awake? Which side of the political struggle did he choose and for what reasons?

Wagner says nothing about the justified grievances of the workers and unemployed people in the city and from the countryside.

CONCLUSION

I said at the start that I was interested in understanding the trajectory that could take Wagner from humble beginnings in the Leipzig to the very conservative politics of his Munich and Bayreuth years. From a philosophical perspective, politics is a subset of ethics and morality—politics as applied ethics based on a moral code.

If one is uncertain of one's social position in society, then there can be a crisis of identity that can only be resolved by settling on a principle or value that one believes stands above and outside the narrow characteristics of social position, and endows one with an intrinsic worth for which social position is irrelevant and even a hindrance to the pursuit of one's vocation.

If there are any ethical values or moral principles that persist through Wagner's life and artworks, they are *Ehre* or Honour, and its companion *Wert* or Worth or Value—one cannot have one without the other. Honour and Worth are not among the prime Christian values or principles, but they are characteristic of ancient Greek culture and of the High Middle Ages, which produced the Romances on which Wagner drew for most of his artworks.

Honour in *Tristan und Isolde*

Akt 1

ISOLDE

This bashful hero forgets /the correct address demanded by honour /and well-bred attention / to his mistress, / lest her gaze fall upon him, /the hero without peer.

ISOLDE

When he [Morold] fell / my honour fell too.

TRISTAN (bewildered)

What was my dream / of Tristan's honour? Utter loyalty!

Akt 2

KÖNIG MARKE

Whither has loyalty fled /now that Tristan has betrayed me? What price now honour / and honesty, now that the champion of all honour, Tristan, has lost it?

Honour in *Life and Art*

In *Mein Leben*, there is only one group—the *Burschenschaften*—which offered him not just a way of behaving and a moral code to justify it, but also a model of wonderfully exciting, swaggering, non-conforming, sexually promiscuous, yet supposedly morally principled, behaviour. The student associations' ostensible history, going back into the German High Middle Ages, helped Wagner connect the *Burschenschaften* with the literature he will discover in Paris in the 1830s-40s—The German Romances. Wagner's delirious descriptions of those three young men also turn them into incarnations of ancient Greek heroes fated to die tragically but memorably.

It is hard to overestimate the power of this very arresting, existentially immediate, and aesthetically attractive group of young men over Wagner. The amount of space he devotes in his memoir, and the rhapsodic language he uses in recounting the episodes, attest to the importance of these influences.

If we surveyed Wagner's artworks from the 1827 *Leubald und Adelaïde* (which, he tells us, was a bloodthirsty revenge tragedy—or farce perhaps) onwards, then Honour and Worth feature strongly. In the *Dutchman*, Senta's and Eric's Honour and Worth are called into question. Lohengrin's Honour and Worth are slighted by Elsa's doubt and question. I could go on!

I suggest that, as a spoilt child, used to having his own way, coming to believe himself specially gifted, even a genius, resenting any imposition of external authority, with no strongly inculcated religious value system, Wagner came to believe that Honour and Worth are confirmed by such things as special clothes, a kind of outsider, rebel status, and a contempt for "authority." His self-image is bound up with *Burschenschafter* values and behaviour, partly principled, but also largely self-indulgent and capricious.

Choosing his narratives from High German Romances enabled Wagner to bring together his fascination with Honour and Worth as key ethical and moral principles, his erotic delight in rich clothing, and his erotic arousal by music to super-charge the erotic experience of the audiences for his artworks in the particular characteristics of the theatre environment, especially later in the specially constructed *Festspielhaus* that emphasises darkness and focus on the stage.