

Meaning in the Motives: an Analysis of the *Leitmotifs* of Wagner's Ring

Among the many great developments in opera fostered by Richard Wagner, none is more challenging than the *leitmotif*. These small, distinctive snatches of music, often no more than one or two measures long, are the bricks with which Wagner built his operas, including the massive sixteen-hour cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. By establishing and subsequently layering these motives, Wagner devised a way for the listener to recall certain characters or plot points. Furthermore, Wagner directly commented on the action in the opera through the use of his *leitmotifs*. One method of commentary was to show characters' hidden intentions and thoughts by juxtaposing two or three motives at the same time in both the vocal lines and in the orchestra.

But what do the *leitmotifs* actually contain? How are they constructed? How are they able to convey so much powerful emotion in so very few notes? In this paper, I will examine some of the key *leitmotifs* from Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in order to more deeply understand Wagner's intent, and how Wagner is able to be so effective in their communication.

In performing my analysis, I turned to one of the great Wagnerian scholars—Deryck Cooke. In addition to his landmark analyses of *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* in *I Saw the World End*, Cooke is also the author of an influential book on musical analysis called *The Language of Music*. In this book, Cooke argues that tonal music is literally a language of the emotions; the emotions conveyed being those of the composer. In my paper, I will closely examine Cooke's theory, detail its tenets, history, and criticisms, and apply it to Wagner's *leitmotifs*.

Born in Leicester, England on September 14, 1919, Deryck Cooke studied music at Cambridge, and became involved in producing music presentations on the fledgling BBC, eventually becoming an editor of such presentations. He was also an active freelance writer on music, and a respected scholar on German music of the late 19th Century. He specialized in the compositions of Richard Wagner, Anton Bruckner, Frederick Delius, and Gustav Mahler. In 1960 Cooke made a “performing version” of Mahler’s Tenth Symphony, which won considerable praise, and is now the standard version for the work. Though he was the author of many articles, and several books, one of the most influential writings is his book *The Language of Music*.

In *The Language of Music*, Cooke begins by saying that music can be closely related to three other art forms—architecture, painting, and literature. Of these three, he feels the analogy of music to literature is similar in that both make use of an aural language to express emotion. Because of this analogy, he explores further the similarities between music and language in form and content, eventually coming to the conclusion that music is indeed a language. He writes, “In any case, it is undeniable that composers have consciously or unconsciously used music as a language, from at least 1400 (A.D.) onward—a language never formulated in a dictionary, because by its very nature it is incapable of such treatment.”¹

He goes on to define the vocabulary of the language thusly, “Beginning with the basic material—notes of definite pitch—we must agree with Hindemith that musical works are built out of the *tensions* between such notes. These tensions can be set up in three dimensions—*pitch*, *time*, and *volume*; and the setting up of such tensions, and the

¹ Deryck Cooke. *The Language of Music* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1959). pp. 13-14.

coloring of them by the *characterizing agents* of *tone-color* and *texture*, constitute the whole apparatus of musical expression.”² Of these three dimensions, Cooke spends the great majority of the book on pitch. He goes on to describe the emotional connotations of the various intervals of the major and minor scales. For example, he describes a major third as a “concord, natural third: joy,” and a minor sixth as a “semitonal tension down to the dominant, in a minor context: active anguish in context of flux.”³ These descriptions build to one of the major ideas of the book—what Cooke calls his “Basic Terms of Musical Vocabulary.” These terms are a set of seventeen basic pitch patterns to which Cooke ascribes distinct emotional meanings.⁴ It is with these terms and descriptions of intervals that I will analyze Wagner’s *leitmotifs*.

Cooke is by no means the first to attach non-musical meanings to musical ideas. As far back as the Middle Ages, music theorists were giving “characteristics” to the various modes (scales) in which the Gregorian chants were composed, based on the characteristics given them by Plato and other Greek philosophers. In the musical Baroque period, musical form was linked closely to the art of rhetoric, as outlined in treatises that discussed “The Doctrine of Affections.” It was thought that in good rhetorical speaking, the object was to affect the listener with his argument. The statement would have “figures of speech” which would make it more affective. In the same way, a musical statement would have musical figures, or motives, which would make the musical statement more affective to an audience. These motives would be very similar to Cooke’s “terms,” though Cooke has adapted the concept to a specifically major-minor vocabulary used in

² Ibid. p. 34.

³ Ibid. p. 90.

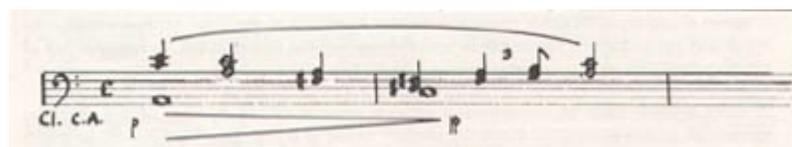
⁴ See Appendix A for a complete chart of all the scalar patterns and their meanings as ascribed by Cooke.

the period of Romantic music (roughly 1825-1914) which was subsequently perfected by Wagner and Mahler.

Finally, it is interesting to note that during Wagner's lifetime there were a set of key characteristics given to all the major and minor keys put together by Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart (1739-1791) in his book *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst*. These key characteristics were well known to the majority of composers of the day.⁵ Undoubtedly, Wagner was included in that group. It is difficult to say whether Wagner used ideas from Schubart or his own. However, a good case can be made that Wagner was influenced by Schubart's ideas.

With the foundation in Cooke's ideas regarding musical expression in hand, we can turn to the *leitmotifs* of Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. The first motive I would like to explore is the one associated with the Ring itself.⁶

Example 1 – The Ring motive



In Example 1 we find the definitive version of the Ring motive. It takes place in the key of E minor, and essentially outlines a vii^o7 chord, which is made up entirely of intervals of a minor third. For this I would use both Cooke's terms #3 and #6 to analyze this passage⁷, because the middle voice is outlining a minor scale first going down and then back up. When we look at Cooke's meanings we can't help but agree with the

⁵ Rita Steblin. *A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, MI, UMI Research Press, 1983). pp. 74.

⁶ All musical examples are taken from the following source:

John Weinstock, <http://www.utexas.edu/courses/wagner/home.html> (Accessed: [12/4/02]).

⁷ See Appendix A for more details.

confidence.” Certainly, when Alberich sings the curse it is both loud and confident. One could even describe the curse as defiant.

Next, let us turn to the Spear motive. I also feel that this motive not only represents the Spear, but also Wotan himself, as he is the only major character that does not have a motive specifically named after him.

Example 3 – The Spear

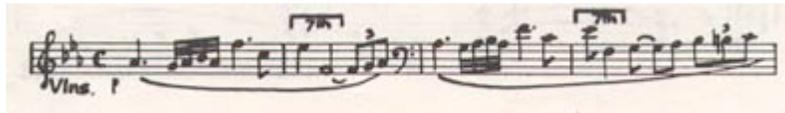


Just as the Curse motive, the Spear motive is one that carries multiple intentions overlapping with one another at the end. The key of the motive is both C major and A minor. The two keys coexist easily together because they both have the same key signature, and are relative keys. As you look at Example 3, the Spear motive is in the accompaniment line, not the voice part. It is essentially a descending C major scale for the first half of the motive. The terms that apply are #14 and #5. We must account for the loud dynamic of the motive. According to Cooke, Wagner is expressing Wotan’s great confidence in himself—an attribute that he first possesses in abundance. However, as the motive progresses down the scale, our ears hear a shift to the A minor scale, which would imply term #6. In other words, Wotan along with his sense of confidence has an

“acceptance of, or yielding to grief; discouragement and depression; passive suffering; despair connected with death; passive falling away from the joy in life.” Cooke gives us a description of Wotan as the Wanderer in the third opera *Siegfried*. We see in Wotan’s own motive the foreshadowings of his own demise.

The next motive we will look at is that of Brünnhilde.

Example 4 – Brünnhilde

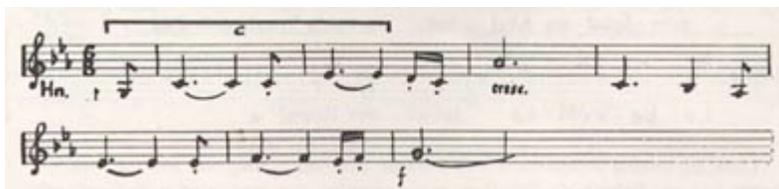


In this example in E flat major, the motive occurs twice, with the repetition of the motive an octave down in measures 3 and 4. Upon further examination, we see that the thirty-second notes in the second half of the second beat in the first measure, along with the eighth note on the last half of the fourth beat of that same measure, both can be considered ornamentation of the key melody. The melody itself is at its core only three notes—A flat, F and E flat. When we look to Cooke, we see that term #12 best applies because just as in the term, we have a leap up of a major sixth, and a return down of a major second. Cooke’s definition is again quite accurate in describing the character:

“innocence and purity (of angels and children); affirmation of maximum joy.” What is Brünnhilde but simultaneously an angel (of Death as a Valkyrie) and a child (of Wotan)? And what does she bring Siegfried but maximum joy?

Finally, let us take a look at the hero of the cycle, Siegfried.

Example 5 – Siegfried



This example is in C minor, and is yet again a motive that contains dual meanings—one at the beginning and one at the end. The beginning outlines a C minor chord with one exception. The standout feature in the first half of the motive is the A flat in m. 3. The addition of the lowered sixth scale degree charges the passage with emotion. This is not lost on Cooke, whose term #13 best goes along with the pattern in the motive by including the minor sixth scale degree. Cooke describes the term as “a powerful assertion of unhappiness.” This certainly is a foreshadowing of the end of *Götterdämmerung*, and harkens back to Wagner’s original idea for the material for the Ring Cycle—an opera called *Siegfrieds Tod* or The Death of Siegfried.

The second half of the motive shows Siegfried’s most important characteristic. The motive rises from scale degree five, to the tonic, and finally up to the minor third above. Cooke’s term #4 fits this pattern exactly, and the description fits Siegfried’s character like a glove: “pure tragedy; strong feeling of courage; acknowledges tragedy and springs onward.” I cannot think of a better description of Siegfried as the tragic hero.

After having analyzed five of the *leitmotifs* from *Der Ring des Niblungen*, what can we say about their construction? I think it is clear that the motives which Wagner created for his masterwork, the building blocks of his monumental achievement, are

themselves crafted from smaller bits of music that contain inherent connotations. These connotations may only apply to music of the nineteenth century, but they are imbedded in the Western understanding of music. Further, Wagner uses those connotations to reflect the objects or characters the *leitmotif* is supposed to represent. Deryck Cooke's theories prove to be invaluable in analyzing this type of music. Though Cooke's ideas have fallen out of favor from mainstream music theory, it is undeniable that there is something to them, if only applicable to a certain period of Western music. Hopefully, with this new knowledge, scholars may continue to unravel the secrets of Wagner's profound genius.

Appendix A: Deryck Cooke's Basic Terms of Musical Vocabulary⁹

#	Scale Degrees	Pitches in C Major or C Minor	Emotional Content
1	1-(2)-3-(4)-5 Major	C-(D)-E-(F)-G	Outgoing, active assertive emotion of joy; more experience of exuberance, triumph, aspiration
2	5-1-(2)-3 Major	G-C-(D)-E	Equally expressive as #1 of an outgoing emotion of joy; partial synonym of #1; aims at M3 (E) which makes it more expressive of joy
3	1-(2)-3-(4)-5 Minor	C-(D)-E flat-(F)-G	Outgoing feeling of pain, assertion of sorrow, complaint, protest against misfortune
4	5-1-(2)-3 Minor	G-C-(D)-E flat	Pure tragedy; strong feeling of courage; acknowledges tragedy and springs onward anyway.
5	5-(4)-3-(2)-1 Major	G-(F)-E-(D)-C	Experiencing joy passively; accepting, welcoming blessings, relief, consolation, reassurance, a feeling of homecoming; if loud, a sense of confidence
6	5-(4)-3-(2)-1 Minor	G-(F)-E flat-(D)-C	Incoming painful emotion in a context of finality; acceptance of grief; discouragement and depression; passive suffering; despair connected with death, passive falling away from the joy of life
7	5-3-(2)-1 Minor	G-E flat-(D)-C	Passionate outburst of painful emotion, does not protest further, falls back into acceptance; neither complete protest or complete acceptance; restless sorrow
8	1-(2)-3-(2)-1 Minor	C-(D)-E flat-(D)-C	A look on the darker side of things in terms of immobility, neither rising up to protest, nor falling back to accept; brooding; obsession with gloomy feelings; trapped fear; sense of inescapable doom
9	(5)-6-5 Major	(G)-A-G	Three possibilities: a). simple assertion of joy b). if unaccompanied "joyous vibration" c). anacrusis to 5 th : joyous vibration with longing
10	(5)-6-5 Minor	(G)-A flat-G	Burst of anguish (most commonly used of all terms)
11	1-2-3-2 Minor	C-D-E flat-D	Gloomy; sense of brooding grief swelling to anguish and dying again
12	1-(2)-(3)-(4)-5-6-5 Major	C-(D)-(E)-(F)-G-A-G	Innocence and purity (of angels and children); affirmation of maximum joy (savages, children, animals, birds, saints, etc.)
13	1-(2)-(3)-(4)-5-6-5 Minor	C-(D)-(E flat)-(F)-G-A flat-G	Powerful assertion of fundamental unhappiness
14	8-7-6-5 Major	C-B-A-G	Incoming emotion of joy, welcoming or accepting comfort, consolation or fulfillment—if loud then a sense of confidence
15	8-7-6-5 Minor	C-B flat-A flat-G	Incoming painful emotion; acceptance, or yielding to death; passive suffering; despair connected with death—but an opening continuing feeling
16	Chromatic Scale (down)	C-B-B flat-A-A flat-G-G flat-F-E-E flat-D-D flat-C	Weary despair and increased pain (a chromatic expansion of #15 and #6)
17	1-2-3-3- 5	C-D-E-E- G	Passionate love

⁹ Condensed from Deryck Cooke's *The Language of Music*, Chapter 3 "Some Basic Terms of Musical Vocabulary". pp. 113-167

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