Composing Identity: Richard Wagner’s Legacy in Divided Germany

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Introduction

“The connection between Wagner and things German is inescapable and hardly needs rehearsing.”
--- Nicholas Vazsonyi

"I am the most German of men, I am the German spirit."
---Richard Wagner

Richard Wagner holds a unique place in the German collective consciousness. He is perhaps the most iconic composer in German history, certainly the most famous in the operatic tradition. His thoughts on both music and politics forever reshaped what it meant to be German. After his death, his legacy has been a source of both pride and controversy. Even today, the question of what Wagner means for the German nation is hardly settled. Wagner was an innovative thinker, a prolific composer, an original German nationalist, an anti-Semite, and a favorite composer of Adolf Hitler. This extensive and contradictory set of attributes makes his legacy profoundly complicated. One thing, though, is undeniable: Wagner was, and remains, essentially deutsch.

This thesis grapples with Wagner’s legacy in Germany. It begins by describing his impact on German national identity while he lived, from 1813 to 1883. After he died, Germans continued to define and redefine his legacy. In particular, the Nazi regime, by employing his music and thought to promote their own vision of German culture, had a large impact on how Germans viewed Wagner. However, the most fascinating time period for Wagner’s legacy, and the focus of this thesis, is the early Cold War years. After the Nazi period and the Second World War, Germany was divided into two states: the Western-capitalist Federal Republic of Germany

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(FRG) and the Eastern-socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), both founded in 1949. Both countries, which believed themselves “German” at heart, had to negotiate conceptions of national identity within their own societies. Yet again, a crucial question was what to do with Wagner. Would they repudiate the composer, whose works were marred by the destructive cultural policies of the Nazis? Or would they embrace his work, hoping to salvage Wagner’s deeply appealing nationalism to build loyalty among their populations and lay claim to being the one true German state? As if this question were not complex enough, both Germanies endured almost four years of military occupation, from 1945 to 1949. During this time, decisions about the arts were left up to external occupying powers with their own agendas. Despite all of these complications, both German states stayed relatively true to Wagner, hoping to rehabilitate his image and deploy his life and music as a justification for their own rule. This consistent return to Wagner demonstrates both his power as a national symbol and the importance of national symbols to all of the German states since Unification in 1871.

In order to understand why Germans and their leaders have turned consistently to Wagner, it is important to grapple with both nationalism and the crucial role that culture plays in constituting national pride. Hitler used Wagner to push his conception of a united German fueled by national pride. His goal was to gather widespread support for his regime. After his fall, the two German nations, emerging from a devastating war and perpetually in conflict with one another, again needed to gather the fate of their publics. They needed support both internally, from their own populations, as well as externally from the international community. A strong claim to Germany’s historical cultural material—in this case its music—was an important component of this legitimation strategy. The two sides regularly fought for the right to appropriate and control German culture. Although these struggles had no “winners” or “losers,”
they were still extremely important. Both states took them seriously. One example—the “Bach Year” in 1950—helps illustrate this competition, and provides a framework of comparative analysis that this thesis builds on while examining cultural policy in divided Germany.

The “Bach Year” (1950)

Toby Thacker, in *Music After Hitler*, writes one of the few comparative analyses of FRG and GDR music policies. Although most of the book deals with denazification in the four occupation zones immediately after World War Two, he touches on the competition for cultural control that played out once the two states gained independence in 1949.

July 28, 1950 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of Johann Sebastian Bach’s death. The FRG and GDR governments both scrambled, almost simultaneously, to set up celebrations. Thacker argues that this event “provides us today with a lens through which to view many interlinked aspects of the two new states created in 1949, as both tried to define what it meant to be German after the catastrophe of the ‘Third Reich’.3

What is most striking is how explicitly the two states defined their Bach festivals in relation to one another. They attempted to one-up each other, vying for better performers, more rigorous programs, and more distinguished attendees. The GDR held its event in Leipzig, where Bach spent the bulk of his professional career. It claimed that its possession of Leipzig was proof that Bach’s true “homeland” was in the GDR. The FRG, which held its festival in Göttingen, argued that Bach’s political beliefs could never have aligned with the socialist, repressive GDR. Hence, it believed, only West Germany had a legitimate claim to the composer’s legacy.4 As this competition played out, both states “were intensely conscious that the eyes of the world were

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upon them.”5 They were performing, so to speak, for both their citizens and for the world. This was a struggle over art, but the Bach Year was also fiercely political. The FRG and GDR were fighting to “define the relationship between new governmental structures and the arts, and to rewrite German cultural history” in their favor.6

The Bach Year was not unique. This model of dueling cultural displays would be an “established [pattern]” throughout the 1950s as the two Germanies tried to best one another in a battle over Germany’s historic culture.7 Thacker concludes that this episode was extremely significant: “the Bach year made it plain that music would play a unique role in relations between the two new German states.” Both states were “reinforced in [their] determination to use music as a weapon in the struggle for German unity.”8 This competition for music continued throughout the 1950s and beyond.

**Wagner and Germany**

Taking its cue from Thacker’s comparative analysis of the Bach Year, this thesis argues that the FRG and GDR fought to establish exclusive claims over Wagner’s legacy. It also demonstrates that this fight was a continuation of German nationalist politics that stretch back to the nineteenth century. The two Germanies used the composer’s music to stoke nationalism and a unique “German” sense of collective identity among their people. This collective identity drew strongly from the past. A widespread conception of Wagner as the ideal German composer has been a consistent theme since the composer’s life. The two German states, building on Wagner’s

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past national significance, continued to use his works as proof that they were legitimate inheritors of Germany’s past.

In order to prove the extent of this continuity and the importance of Wagner to German identity, the following chapters approach Wagner’s legacy from multiple angles. Chapter One goes back to Wagner’s life and examines his music, demonstrating why the composer had, and still has, so much heft as a national figure. This examination demonstrates that, even while he was still producing, Wagner was already challenging and shaping ideas of what it meant to be German. Chapter Two develops a theoretical framework to discuss collective identity, culture, and nationalism. This helps explain why the struggle over culture, and particularly music, has been so important throughout German history, and was particularly critical for the two new German states. These two chapters rely primarily on a wealth of scholarly work that deals with Wagner, his music, and theories of national identity and collective consciousness.

Chapter Three explores both the Nazi appropriation of Wagner, which fundamentally changed his reception in Germany, and the ways that the occupying powers—the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union—dealt with Wagner while they controlled Germany. These interactions were complex, multifaceted, and set the stage for how the two German states would eventually grapple with Wagner’s legacy. This chapter relies on studies of Nazi culture and denazification, including Thacker’s, which have painted a clear picture of how the occupying powers dealt with cultural and musical issues. It also draws on primary sources from the occupation period to draw out the priorities and policies of the occupying powers in the cultural realm.

Chapter Four investigates the GDR’s policies of music control and their relation to Wagner’s opera. Although both states had an active interest in promoting particular music and
building narratives around that music, the GDR was more interventionist in its approach, adopting explicit censorship laws and controlling the cultural narrative through its extensive state-run publishing apparatus. Drawing on new primary sources from a deep archive of East German periodicals, this chapter examines how the GDR attempted to deploy Wagner for their own purposes. The state hoped to reframe Wagner as a socialist icon. The evidence shows that they were only moderately successful in doing so.

Chapter Five pivots to the FRG and examines the Bayreuth Festival, perhaps the most iconic cultural event in Germany, and a favorite of Hitler himself. By reading the extensive academic work on Bayreuth and examining the production decisions made there in the 1950s, the chapter shows how the FRG also hoped to re-appropriate Wagner in order to fit its liberal-democratic ideology. The GDR, in characteristic fashion and harkening back to the Bach Year, responded with its own Wagner festival at Dessau. Chapter Five concludes by comparing the two festivals. This provides a fascinating microcosm with which to examine cultural competition and the struggle for nationalism writ large.

This thesis adds to ongoing debates in multiple historical fields. It touches on Wagner’s legacy, culture in divided Germany, and the nexus between culture and nationalism more broadly. It contributes to a developing field in German historiography. This field examines music as a critical element of collective consciousness, very much a causal factor in determining the contours of German politics and society.9 Specifically, this thesis makes two unique contributions, one to histories of German music, the other to histories of culture and nationalism more generally. First, although the focus of this study (and the bulk of its primary source use) is cultural policies in the Cold War, the account stretches back to Wagner’s life and includes both

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the Nazi period and denazification. This paints a broad picture of Wagner’s importance as a nationalist symbol throughout German history. This picture is unique; no similar account of his changing reception in this time has been written.

Second, this thesis contributes to studies of culture and nationalism. Examining musical culture from 1945 through the 1950s allows the historian to assess a unique situation: two nations, working with the same cultural material, varnished by the Nazis, had to decide how to negotiate their relationships with nationalism. The story of how they dealt with this situation has much to reveal about the nature of nationalism, music, and coming to terms with the past. This is the first comparative study of music between the two Germanies that uses Wagner as its explicit point of comparison. Given Wagner’s paramount importance to German history, that alone makes the story worth telling.
I. Richard Wagner

*It has often weighed upon my mind, to gain a clear idea of what is really to be understood by the expression “deutsch.”*

--- Richard Wagner

What does it mean to be German? What is German music? These are questions that Wagner struggled with and attempted to answer throughout his life. By utilizing both prose and opera to tackle these concerns, Wagner (1813-1883) actively produced particular concepts of German identity, which would resonate far beyond his lifetime. His immense impact was partially due to the fact that he worked at an extremely formative time for the idea of “Germanness.” His career coincided with the rise of Bismarck, the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71, German Unification in 1871, and the beginning of the Wilhelmine Empire. Wagner, especially in his composing, aimed to produce the score for German unity by writing opera that he saw as “national,” befitting both the new German nation and its people, whom he viewed as sharing a distinct cultural lineage. Wagner was also caught up in larger crosscurrents that flowed through German society in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. In this tumultuous time, he was hardly the only person negotiating the meaning of “German” in the context of a new, unified state, but he may have had a greater impact than any other.

This chapter examines Wagner’s life and surroundings in three distinct ways. First, it delves into Wagner’s biography and the development of his thoughts about German music and German politics. Second, it looks at his music in more depth, concentrating on the philosophy

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underlying his opera. Using Der Ring des Nibelungen—perhaps Wagner’s most iconic work—as a case study, the next section argues that Wagner’s music was very much a nationalizing project, an explicit attempt by the composer to create German music and a broader sense of German cultural unity. Finally, this chapter examines some of the factors that contributed to Wagner’s visibility and made his attempts to define German opera, as well as German identity more broadly, successful. These “amplifying factors” included the rise of printed music, music journalism, and the emergence of musicology as an academic discipline in Germany. Of course, Wagner lived and worked with other crucial figures in the history of German nationalism, and they all played a role in defining Wagner as a proto-typical German musician. The most important of these people, in fact, may have been his wife Cosima, who vigorously promoted Wagner’s music after his death. Because of his conscious efforts and a range of external factors, Wagner’s opera came to be defined as quintessentially “German.” This was the cultural material and set of collective memories over which the two German states would struggle less than one hundred years after the composer’s death in 1883.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify one issue of this study’s source material. This chapter refers to Wagner’s own writing, and it cites Wagner scholars who study Wagner’s prose writing. As Jessica McShan writes: “When [Wagner] wasn't composing, he was writing, and vice versa.” As a result, historians now have access to an extensive collection of the composer’s letters, diaries, and prose. Wagner had no fear of sharing his opinions on music, politics, and society. He did so often, and he often changed his mind. Scholars have debated at length whether his writing qualifies as true philosophy, history, or musicology. There is a strong argument to be

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made that Wagner was indeed a serious intellectual, despite the often-contradictory and erratic nature of his writing. Ultimately, for historians, Wagner’s writings provide valuable insights that shed light upon his thoughts and his operas. For example, it is difficult to remove the Ring cycle, one of Wagner’s most famous operatic works (which is studied at length in this chapter) from Wagner’s letters about his desire to create a national opera. Examining his writing in conjunction with his life and work can provide a more complete picture of how Wagner contributed to German nationalism.

**Wagner’s Life: Birth and Revolution**

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Saxony, in May 1813. Coincidentally, he was born in the same year as Giuseppe Verdi, his most prominent contemporary whose operas formed the artistic backdrop to Italian Unification. Before Wagner turned ten, both his father and stepfather had died, but not before his stepfather introduced him to a musical education, which his step uncle continued to oversee. Wagner was trained as a piano player, but already at age eleven expressed an immense interest in opera. Martin Geck, studying Wagner’s diaries, notes that the composer’s writing about his own youth is filled with memories of the opera. Young Wagner also was obsessed with the theater. It provided him stability in a childhood wracked by death and instability. In 1827, Ludwig von Beethoven died. In 1828, Wagner first heard a

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14 Young, 220.
16 McShan, “Short Bio, Long Life.”
Beethoven performance and was moved to attempt his first composition.\textsuperscript{19} He was fifteen. Three years later Wagner, who had been schooled in Dresden, returned to Leipzig to study music at the Universität Leipzig. Under the tutelage of C.T. Weinlig, Wagner wrote his first symphony, which was produced in Leipzig in 1832.\textsuperscript{20} His stock rose in the area, and in the following year Wagner moved to Würzburg, Bavaria, where he became chorus master at a major city theater. While in Franconia he produced two operas in one year: \textit{Die Feen}, which was never staged, and \textit{Das Liebesverbot}, which was performed in 1836.\textsuperscript{21} By that time, Wagner and his first wife, Minna Planer, were nearly bankrupt. In 1839 they fled to Paris to avoid their furious creditors. Living in Paris was crucial to Wagner’s development as a musician. He befriended Giacomo Meyerbeer, the preeminent opera writer in Paris at the time. Later in his life, Wagner would describe Meyerbeer’s opera as “empty,” emblematic of the cosmopolitan, melodic, and lighthearted style of music that was sweeping France in the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{22}

In 1842, Wagner returned to Germany, taking up residence in Dresden. He was appointed as one of the \textit{Kapellmeister} (music directors) of the Saxon court, giving him a prominent place in the thriving principality’s music scene.\textsuperscript{23} While in Dresden, Wagner composed a number of his most famous works. He wrote \textit{Der fliegende Holländer} (“The Flying Dutchman”), which he had conceived of in France but only found the time and resources to finish in Saxony. He completed, and almost immediately staged, \textit{Tannhäuser} in 1845.\textsuperscript{24} He began working on his next opera, \textit{Lohengrin}, which he finished before leaving the city. While it was in progress, Wagner became

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\begin{itemize}
  \item McShan, “Short Bio, Long Life.”
  \item \textit{Ibid.}
  \item Berry, 668-9. Also see Young, 222.
  \item “Wagner.”
  \item \textit{Ibid.}
\end{itemize}
increasingly involved with various left-wing radical groups and befriended a handful of revolutionary thinkers. These included socialists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, social anarchists like Michael Bakunin, and a number of far-left German nationalists. Wagner scholars emphasize the importance of Wagner’s time in Dresden. These revolutionaries introduced the composer to political thought and activism, as well as ideas about how to unite, structure, and organize German society. Wagner, after his Dresden years, was infatuated by the heroism of the revolutionary, the quintessential Romantic act of rebelling against the powerful. He thought that opera could play an important role in disseminating revolutionary ideology. The idea of “[rejecting] the worldly for the sake of an inner substance,” in this case rejecting political comfort for revolutionary change, is a theme that appears in Wagner’s operas. It is a theme, Susan Bernstein argues, that explains how Wagner conceived of his greatest hero, Siegfried, the fearless protagonist of the Ring cycle.

Wagner’s time with the Saxon socialists and anarchists came to an abrupt end in the May Uprising in Dresden. The May Uprising was the last gasp of the Revolutions of 1848 that had rocked Central and Western Europe (the Dresden Uprising itself took place in 1849). The Uprising began on May 3rd, with calls for King Frederick Augustus II to implement a new, democratic constitution. Clashes between the Saxon military and protestors escalated. King Augustus II called in Prussian reinforcements, triggering open armed conflict. By May 9th, the

25 Ibid.
27 Young, 220.
30 Ibid.
fighting was largely over. The surviving revolutionaries who had not fled were cornered in Dresden’s iconic Frauenkirche church and arrested. With his friends imprisoned, and many sentenced to death, Wagner fled the German states.

**Wagner’s Life: Exile and Musical Ideas**

Richard Wagner spent more than a decade in exile, including time in Zurich, Venice, and Paris. There is no doubt that by this point he considered the German-speaking states, especially Saxony, to be his home.\(^\text{31}\) His time abroad was, by his own account, painful.\(^\text{32}\) It was also one of his most productive: he conceived of the *Ring* cycle in Zurich and wrote it throughout his time in exile.\(^\text{33}\) In the late 1850s, Wagner left Zurich for Venice. Around 1859, when *Siegfried*, the third *Ring* opera was close to completion, Wagner abandoned the project and began work on *Tristan und Isolde*.\(^\text{34}\) His initial idea was to write a standard tragedy of love and loss, but as he wrote he found himself unable to contain his ideas within the two-act tragic template of his Italian peers.\(^\text{35}\) He turned *Tristan und Isolde* into a love story of “superhuman proportions.”\(^\text{36}\) He then turned to writing *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, which was perhaps his most directly nationalist opera,\(^\text{37}\) before finally completing the *Ring* cycle more than a decade later.

Besides yielding three of his most famous works—*Tristan, Meistersinger, and the Ring*—Wagner’s time in exile was highly significant in other ways. Wagner developed his most important, lasting thoughts about the purpose and structure of opera. Simultaneously, he

\(^{31}\) “Wagner.”
\(^{32}\) Geck, 147-50.
\(^{33}\) “Wagner.”
\(^{34}\) Geck, 239.
solidified his opinions on the character of German national identity. By the time Wagner returned to Germany, these two questions—opera and Germanness—were tightly bound in his mind.\textsuperscript{38} In sum, between 1849 and 1862, removed from German soil, he established his vision of “German opera.” This vision sent shockwaves into the German collective consciousness for decades to come. There are two main components of this vision.

The first unique element of Wagner’s opera is his construction of “total art,” what he called \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk}. Wagner, especially after observing the favorite operas of the Italians and the French, strongly believed that art had been “broken down into its constituent parts.”\textsuperscript{39} Because singing was isolated from reading text, acting from playing instruments, composing from conducting—and all were isolated from actually performing—art had become atomized. Nineteenth century consumers could choose to hear a song; they could choose to hear a poem, or to watch a play. Yet no artist since the great Athenian dramatists had been able to merge all of these elements into one.\textsuperscript{40} As Berry, quoting Wagner, so succinctly puts it: “for Wagner, as the \textit{polis} had disintegrated, so had ‘the great \textit{Gesamtkunstwerk} of tragedy’.”\textsuperscript{41} This was not just a problem of art. In his view, society itself had become removed from collective passion and struggle, driven to radical individualism.\textsuperscript{42} Two main factors were to blame for peoples’ alienation from one another. Christianity shifted everyone’s focus to preparing oneself for the afterlife, at the expense of building communities here on earth.\textsuperscript{43} Capitalism, with its logic of accumulation and zero-sum wealth was also responsible for dividing friends and family. This

\textsuperscript{39} Berry, 671.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ibid.} 667.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.} 670.
\textsuperscript{42} Young, 233.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.} 222.
was especially destructive for music, as composing to produce beauty fell out of favor. Instead, Wagner believed that his contemporaries composed for nothing more than commercial success.⁴⁴ It is not hard to see the traces of Wagner’s time with the Dresden socialists in this line of argument.⁴⁵ His tendency to attribute the decline of art with the rise of capitalism was also a central trope in Wagner’s anti-Semitism. Nicholas Vazsonyi writes that Wagner’s critiques of music were “peppered (…) with openly anti-Semitic references to banking.”⁴⁶ The logic behind this was straightforward: Wagner believed that Jews were running the financial system, and that the individuated, Darwinian logic of the financial system was ruining music, replacing Gesamtkunstwerk with mere music or mere theater, consumed for no purpose besides personal pleasure.⁴⁷

The solution to this alienation from true art was a revival of Gesamtkunstwerk. Wagner wrote that Gesamtkunstwerk “collected all the arts, in particular words and music, together into a single artwork.”⁴⁸ Today many call his work opera, but Wagner viewed it as something greater than what Verdi or Meyerbeer were writing. Following Wagner’s own writings about opera, many critics still choose to call his pieces “music dramas.” Wagner used the term in order to emphasize the co-constitutive, equal nature of the music and the text. Using Gesamtkunstwerk, Wagner sought to blur the lines between dramas and operas, between music and text. He also wanted to collapse the walls between actors, audiences, composers, and conductors. His productions would be gigantic in scope, long, complex, and, importantly, very loud.⁴⁹ The goal

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⁴⁴ Berry, 679.
⁴⁷ Geck, 14.
⁴⁸ Young, quoting Richard Wagner, 224.
⁴⁹ Berry. 673.
was to create a “unity of the arts.” A performance could only be called *Gesamtkunstwerk* if it activated the audience’s senses in their totality, immersing them fully in the emotion of the work. According to Wagner, only this type of art is meaningful.

*Gesamtkunstwerk* is a complex, multifaceted concept. Wagner never wrote a blueprint or set of criteria to define total art. Yet we can illuminate the ideology of *Gesamtkunstwerk* by examining the *leitmotiv*, perhaps Wagner’s most important operatic innovation. It is no coincidence that the set of operas he wrote while in exile—*Tristan*, *Meistersinger*, and the *Ring*—are also the three that most heavily employ *leitmotiv* in their construction. The idea behind the *leitmotiv* is not particularly complex. Martin Geck calls it a form of “traditional music rhetoric,” where the aim is to “[ascribe] specific musical idioms to specific human emotions.”

Notes, chords, and phrases could be used to represent specific feelings, characters, or developments in the story. While Wagner was not the first composer to tie concepts to lines of music in opera, he was unrivaled, and remains unrivaled, in his ability to create a complex, evolving range of expressions within a single work. In his operas, especially *Tristan* and the *Ring*, Wagner introduces characters and concepts as distinct musical *leitmotive*. In the former opera, one of Wagner’s themes, a single chord that represents Tristan, is considered one of the most memorable components of any opera in history. Raymond Furness calls the “Tristan Chord,” a “haunting half-dominant seventh chord” representing the male protagonist, “the epitome of longing.” In the *Ring*, everything from the protagonist Siegfried to the god Wotan to the idea of love is given a few bars of music that stay with them throughout the performance. As

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50 Ibid. 670.
51 Geck, 231.
52 Ibid. 249.
53 Berry, 671.
54 Geck, 249.
55 Furness, 114.
the characters and concepts interact and change each other, their musical themes merge, divide, and alter one another. In a fifteen-hour performance like the Ring cycle, which includes four separate operas, thirty-four scenes, and thirty-six roles, it is easy to see and hear how complex leitmotive can become. Yet Wagner meticulously carries each theme from beginning to end, never opting to abandon the complex musical developments of his ideas. The result is a fusion of text in music. Both evoke emotion; they co-constitute the subject matter of the opera. This, in Wagner’s mind, was the power and revolutionary challenge of Gesamtkunstwerk.

Gesamtkunstwerk was a major innovation, but one must wonder why Wagner’s new type of opera constituted an inflection point for German music. How is total art German? First and foremost, Wagner made it so. It is important to remember that, while in exile, Wagner considered himself a German nationalist, and he was determined to develop a style of music befitting of his cherished Vaterland. As Susan Bernstein argues: “Wagner's aesthetic [was] aimed at making real the invisible phantasm of the German spirit.” Of course, Germany was not yet united while Wagner was abroad, but ideas of German unity were already widespread even while Wagner lived in Dresden. As William Osborne argues, Wagner both saw himself and was perceived by others as an “artist-prophet,” a uniting figure that could define and solidify the cultural underpinnings of the soon-to-be-joined German states. Later on, I will discuss why Wagner and his works were considered quintessentially German, even during his lifetime. Yet

57 Calico, 4.
58 Bernstein, 92.
we cannot overlook that Wagner actively tried to promote German unity through his own writing and composing.  

Following from this, Wagner’s music also became known as German music because Wagner explicitly defined it in relation to the music of other nation states. This is perhaps the foundational move of nationalism: demarcate boundaries between the collective self and the collective other, between the home and the abroad. When both sides of the dichotomy are assigned fixed values, it becomes easy to distinguish, say, German opera from French opera. This is exactly what Wagner did while abroad. Specifically, his return to Paris in 1859, the final stage of his exile, shored up his opinions on the distinct characteristics of French and German art music. His largest project in Paris was translating Tannhäuser into French and performing it for the Parisians. This failed miserably; the city’s art critics and elites hated Tannhäuser to the point of leaving productions in the middle of the opera and starting full-on riots at its conclusion. They rejected as drab and boring Wagner’s entire idea of music drama. Wagner, ever committed to his music and everything it represented, took this poor reception as a personal insult. He doubled down, especially in his prose writing. His aim was to justify Gesamtkunstwerk. He began to define total art primarily in opposition to the so-called “cosmopolitan” music that was popular among the Parisians. Cosmopolitan music, with its easy-listening style and emphasis on musical simplicity over textual complexity, was the polar

60 Young, 218. Foster, 148.
61 Bernstein, 82.
62 Ibid. 76.
63 Furness, 119.
64 Paillard, 407.
65 Ibid. 406.
66 Bernstein, 72.
67 Vazsonyi, 202.
opposite of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner specifically attacked Meyerbeer, his former friend, as the prototypical composer who made music only to please the masses. Meyerbeer’s work had little external content; its biggest virtue was how easily it could be consumed. Is it a surprise, given his vitriol for Paris and its music, that Wagner would later support wholeheartedly the Prussian invasion of France in 1870? Cosima Wagner, who had witnessed Richard’s embarrassment in Paris, would eventually claim that the Prussian bombardment of the French capital was a form of revenge for how the Parisians had mocked *Tannhäuser*. Yet this was still some time off. In 1862, tired of France, and with the Saxon bounty on his head finally lifted, Wagner returned to the German states.

**Wagner’s Life: Return to Germany**

Wagner lived in Biebrich, Prussia for two years, working on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, his only comedy. *Meistersinger*, perhaps Wagner’s most controversial and overtly nationalist work, will be discussed at length later in this thesis. The opera would present the biggest challenge to the East and West German people as they renegotiated their relationships to Wagner after the Second World War. In 1864, shortly before finishing *Meistersinger* and finally completing the *Ring* cycle, Wagner was invited to Munich by the new Bavarian monarch, King Ludwig II. Ludwig, who rose to the Bavarian throne at age 18 and was the last Bavarian king before Bismarck’s unification, was obsessed with Wagner’s work. Ludwig personally adored Wagner. The relationship between the two is legendary, a mainstay of German history and

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68 Young, 222.
69 Berry, 668-9.
70 Paillard, 405.
71 Furness, 119.
myth. Wagner had Ludwig’s ear on issues ranging from opera to military operations. For example, Ludwig in the 1860s had to decide whether to commit troops to the Prussian campaigns against Austria-Hungary and France. The success of these campaigns would almost certainly ensure Prussian dominance of Germany. This would likely mean the end of Bavarian independence and its integration into a Prussian empire. Wagner lobbied Ludwig intensely to support Bismarck, effectively surrendering Bavarian sovereignty to the Prussian Chancellor. While this lobbying was not the sole factor that drove Ludwig to acquiesce, it was certainly impactful. Given that Wagner was a musician, not an advisor or politician, this was an impressive feat, and demonstrates just how deep Ludwig’s affinity for Wagner ran.

It is little surprise, then, that Ludwig financed a substantial share of Wagner’s last great project: the theater at Bayreuth, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus. As I will explain later, Bayreuth quickly became a German national icon, just as central to Wagner’s essential Germanness as his music. In order to truly perform his bombastic, loud, and complex operas, Wagner envisioned a large theater with adequate acoustics. The Festspielhaus was the actualization of this vision. It was a theater tailored to Wagner’s needs. It was large enough for his elaborate sets. The acoustics were groundbreaking for the time, allowing his performers to sing for hours on end without exhausting too much energy. He positioned the orchestra partially beneath the stage, and had curved walls built to coax even higher volumes from his ensembles. The theater was simultaneously “enormous” and “Spartan,” efficient and grand, but not overly ornamented in the French Baroque style that Wagner so despised. In 1876, the Ring cycle was performed for the first time in its entirety at Bayreuth. A continuous performance was what Wagner had intended

72 “Wagner.”
73 Paillard, 398-400.
for the cycle all along. It was perhaps the zenith of Wagner’s entire career, the culmination of his work in Germany and abroad. Even today, seeing the Ring at Bayreuth is considered the essential experience for Wagner’s fans. After the Ring, he wrote and finished one final work: Parsifal. With Bayreuth built, the oeuvre complete, and his homeland politically united, Wagner died, in 1883, at the height of his fame and influence.75

Wagner’s Music: Der Ring des Nibelungen as National Opera

Wagner spent most of his life attempting to write “German” opera. To explore the contours of his effort, this section employs Der Ring des Nibelungen ("The Ring of the Nibelung") as a case study to determine how Wagner’s music came to be defined as a national symbol for Germany. I argue that the Ring cycle is a nationalist opera. Indeed, Steven Cerf calls the Ring “a gigantic mirror of the German society,” in that Wagner’s aim in composing it was to simultaneously capture and define emerging notions of what it meant to be German.76 Three particular elements give rise to the opera cycle’s nationalistic character. First, it is perhaps the clearest illustration of Wagner’s idea of Gesamtkunstwerk. I have already shown why the birth of Gesamtkunstwerk is closely linked to the emergence of a German style of music. Second, Wagner wrote the Ring as a national myth for Germany. Mythology, representing permanent, transcendent stories rather than contingent, situated histories, is a potent medium for cultivating the imaginary of a united nation. Third, the opera’s heroic narrative of overcoming, epitomized by Siegfried, resonated powerfully with the German people who, during and after Wagner’s life, were negotiating their nascent community. The Ring, like Wagner’s other operas, intensified

75 “Wagner.”
76 Cerf, 133.
feelings of a shared German identity. This explains why the composer and his works became crucial cultural symbols in the maintenance of German nationalism.

If one accepts Wagner’s thesis that total art is the most pure art, then the *Ring* cycle may be the most artistic art ever produced. Wagner, while abroad in 1851, reflected on the value of opera. He wrote that opera should “[capture] the essence of the phenomenon and thereby [reveal] it in simple, pictorial outline.” At its core, this was his mission with *Gesamtkunstwerk*: to unite the different facets of art in order to produce a more complete whole, one that more accurately represents emotional and physical phenomena. Some may find the word “simple” ironic when discussing the *Ring*. The opera as a whole takes fifteen hours, generally spaced out over four nights, to perform. It took Wagner twenty-six years to write. It is no model of efficiency. The plot is so complex that one is hard-pressed to find a concise summary anywhere. The story generally revolves around a magic ring, which entices gods, demigods, and mortals with its extreme power. Wagner uses the struggle over the ring to touch on multiple concepts that are central to human existence. For example, greed runs throughout the plot. The dwarf (*Nibelung*) Alberich, who seems to represent the prototypical (Jewish) capitalist, fights the noble Siegfried for control of the magic ring. Religion plays a role, as a cast of gods—led by Wotan, the god of light, air, and wind—get involved in the fight and choose their sides in seemingly-unending waves of intrigue and betrayal. Love, of course, is present as well. The main love story is between Siegfried and the demigoddess Valkyrie Brünnhilde. Like Tristan and Isolde in Wagner’s other masterpiece of total art, Brünnhilde commits suicide at the end of the cycle, finding closure only in the act of dying on Siegfried’s funeral pyre. As explained previously, all

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78 Cerf, 133.
of these themes—greed, religion, love, lust, betrayal, and death—were presented both as stories and musical themes. The idea was for audiences to become completely immersed in the story, not just its linear plotline, but also its emotions and the evolution of the characters. The Ring is epic in almost any sense of the word. Its scale and scope are unmatched.

Further, Gesamtkunstwerk went beyond the harmony of text and music. The all-encompassing experience of total art required, in Wagner’s view, an equally monumental set. Early productions of the Ring, including the first shows in Munich and Bayreuth, required revolving stages with two or more distinct sections in order to quickly complete scene transitions. The gods had to be represented above all else. Some directors took this literally, building platforms onto their sets so as to elevate the gods above the fray. Other directors had to think of more creative ways to portray Wagner’s immortals, including Wotan, Freia (the goddess of love), and Donner (the god of thunder).

The Ring cycle can be considered the epitome of Gesamtkunstwerk, and hence a powerfully German opera. Yet Wagner went further: he wanted to write a true national drama. His choice of source material was absolutely crucial in achieving this goal. The cycle is based on a combination of the Nibelungenlied, a pre-Christian, southern Germanic epic, and medieval Norse mythology. The combination of these two sources is especially meaningful. While the Nibelungenlied was more obviously German, in that it was written in the High German language, it lacked a heroic narrative fitting of a nascent yet emerging empire. Norse mythology, in which Wagner actually found the hero Siegfried, provided the heroism befitting a true national opera. The combination of northern and southern mythology was also crucial in fostering a sense of

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid. 138.
pan-German unity, as it quite literally drew traditions from both Germany’s far north—its North Sea coast—and its southern regions—the former seat of the Holy Roman Empire. Roberta Frank, analyzing the development of German nationalism by Wagner and the famous German Romantic mythologist Jacob Grimm, captures this nationalizing move well:

In the Romantic period, as later and earlier, the study of Germanic antiquity had political import... For a political entity called Germany to become a reality, an ideal of 'Germanness,' of a glorious common national past, had to be created. But from what? Not from the courtly epics and bridal quest romances of the Holy Roman Empire. The German-speaking lands lacked a heroic age. So Grimm borrowed that of Scandinavia, laying claim to the Viking-age North as Germania germanicissima, or 'Ultra-German Germany.' Wagner's pan-Germanism in Der Ring des Nibelungen was part of this German takeover of the North, his words, music, and costumes calling up a subterranean politics of allusion and quotation.82

Wagner used a potent pan-Germanic myth to write a national opera. The question remains: why mythology at all? Given Wagner’s willingness to write extremely long operas, he could have just as easily written a history of the Germanic people. Yet he was infatuated with mythology, and especially the medieval legends of the Germanic tribes.83 Julian Young, reading Wagner’s commentary on the Ring scattered throughout decades of letters and journal entries, determines that Wagner had highly developed thoughts on the importance of myth in creating national identity. “The ethos of a people,” Wagner believed, could be “articulated in the form of myth.”84

Mark Berry, also studying Wagner’s writings on music, comes to a similar conclusion:

Myth, Wagner believes, provides greater scope for expressing the essence of history than history itself. Connections between characters, objects, and ideas become less problematical. Wotan, the spear, and the history of contract, or Loge, fire, and self-

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82 Ibid.
84 Young, 225.
consciousness, can readily refer to one another, whereas this would run the risk of appearing contrived in straightforwardly historical narrative.\textsuperscript{85}

Indeed, historians and theorists of nationalism agree that myths are significant tools in negotiating collective identities.\textsuperscript{86} Histories are contingent, variable across time and space; myths also change in different social contexts, but their core messages are absolute and create continuity between past and future. As Maike Oergel writes, “creations of national myth unite the universal and the particular by presenting ideas and concepts of universal human significance in a national guise.”\textsuperscript{87} By turning specific stories into ahistorical legends, myths create timeless narratives with timeless themes, which can be the basis for collective knowledge and a sense of togetherness.\textsuperscript{88} Myths, for Wagner, “collected the whole community together and so created and preserved it as community.”\textsuperscript{89} Germans, for most of their history, lacked a truly unified state that could form a physical, cartographical basis for a national identity. This made mythology even more crucial for fostering a broad sense of Germanness. Storytelling and music, brought together by Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, could be the vehicle that united Germans around a single mythical heritage.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{85} Berry. 675.
\textsuperscript{86} Stefan Berger. 2009. "On the Role of Myths and History in the Construction of National Identity in Modern Europe." European History Quarterly 39 (3): 494. Specifically, Berger writes, in nineteenth century Europe “myths were often perceived by nation-builders as being far more powerful in mobilizing people than history (…) to make sense of the world, to provide a master key to explain the present and predict the future, to integrate diverse social and political groups, to legitimate political regimes.”
\textsuperscript{88} Young, 224.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
Myths are important nationalizing projects because they provide ahistorical, permanent cultural material. They also generate significant origin stories. Stefan Berger, one of the preeminent scholars of nineteenth century German nationalism, writes that the pan-German Romantics were obsessed with a search for origin myths, ancient stories that emphasize the pure, original character of the German people. These origin stories, they hoped, could “emphasise the longevity of the [German] nation” by linking its current state to medieval times.\footnote{Stefan Berger. 2007. "The Power of National Pasts: Writing National History in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Europe." In Writing the Nation: A Global Perspective, edited by Stefan Berger. New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 31.} By linking nineteenth century Germany to its northern progenitors, represented by the gods and heroes of Norse mythology, the Ring promoted a particular version of authentic and pure Germanness.\footnote{Gordana Uzelac. 2010. "National Ceremonies: The Pursuit of Authenticity." Ethnic and Racial Studies 33 (10): 1718-1736.} Wagner certainly took liberties in this equation. Ethnographically, the Norse people were not the true predecessors of the Germans of the Wilhemine Empire. Wagner, by couching Norse mythology in the German Nibelungenlied, was able to fulfill his vision anyway.\footnote{Frank.} In the Ring, Wagner brought northern and southern mythology together. He fused them into a tribute to German heritage that had a distinctly northern character.\footnote{Ibid.} This tribute would change the way that the German people viewed themselves and their community. By creating common cultural material, Wagner aimed to unite the people of the various Germanic states into one Volk. This was not just Wagner’s goal; it was his obsession.\footnote{Young, 225.} In writing the Ring as a national opera, he succeeded in creating a myth that united Germans for the foreseeable future.\footnote{See, Cerf’s thesis from the beginning of this section, at p. 133.}
One other element of the *Ring* cycle cemented its status as a nationalist opera: its heroic narrative. Siegfried, the hero that Wagner ripped from Norse mythology, the element that gave the *Ring* its distinctly northern character, became a symbol for the struggle of the German people. This was exactly as Wagner intended. Siegfried, the mortal son of the god Wotan, struggles throughout the play. He must deal with his impossible love for Brünnhilde, his conflict against the greedy dwarf Alberich, and the constant fighting among the all-powerful gods. As he is a mortal, he starts at an inherent disadvantage. Similarly, in Wagner’s mind, the German states were fractured and facing old empires such as France, Britain, and Austria; they too were at an inherent disadvantage. Yet Siegfried proves himself powerful, able to thwart the best-laid plans of both gods and demigods to kill him and steal the ring that he possesses by the end of the cycle. Siegfried is eventually killed in a plot involving both Alberich and the gods, but the chaos created is so great that the world is destroyed along with Siegfried. The banks of the Rhine overflow, Brünnhilde commits suicide, and the curtains close on the last act of *Götterdämmerung* (“Twilight of the Gods”) with the gods’ palace in flames. The underdog, mortal hero dies, but only after tearing down the existing powers and rending the world into chaos. The salience of the ending, in hindsight, is striking.

It is difficult to overstate just how much resonance this linkage between Siegfried and Germany had among the German people. Consistent with Wagner’s focus on the ethnic characteristics of the Germanic people, and with the prominence of pseudo-scientific theories of race in Europe, Siegfried is “obsessed with his identity, his race, and the purity of his

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97 Oergel, 172-5.
98 Bernstein, 73.
99 Berry, 675-6.
bloodline.” Perhaps more importantly, Siegfried was seen as the perfect national hero for the emerging German Empire. The Ring was first staged in its entirety in 1876, five years after the end of the Franco-Prussian War and the creation of the Second Reich in the occupied halls of Versailles. With nationalist fervor reaching new heights, Wagner’s epic operas had “larger than life power” in the new Empire. The Ring, both its epic plot and its grand scale, was perceived as commensurable with Germany’s seemingly endless and rapid growth as an economic and military superpower. At the height of the Empire’s rise, the imagery of the Ring was constantly invoked to bolster perceptions of German power. The German military’s battle plans during the First World War were given names such as “Operation Valkyrie.” As the Germans dug in to fight the Great War, the “Hunding Line,” named for one of Wagner’s gods, was a particularly important area. It should come as little surprise that Hitler, writing Mein Kampf from his prison cell in the 1920s, explicitly compared the German military in World War One to Siegfried. With Siegfried, Wagner gave the Germans a hero when they needed one most. This hero’s legacy would last in the German imaginary for a long time to come.

**Amplification: How Wagner Became the Face of German Culture**

Wagner actively attempted to build cultural material for the new German Empire. He was a nationalist, and his legacy and work inspired nationalist feelings in the generations of Germans that followed him. However, he could not cement his status as the standard-bearer of a common German culture alone. This section analyzes the various “amplifying” factors that turned Wagner into a symbol, linked to the very concept of what it means to be German.

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100 Foster, 150.
101 Cerf, 138.
102 Ibid. 140.
103 Ibid.
The most obvious amplifying factor for Wagner’s work was its timing. As I have already explained, Wagner was working as the Prussians were busy creating the geographical mass to be known as Germany. Wagner actively supported political unification. Paillard goes as far as to call him a “fanatical agitator for German unity.”\textsuperscript{104} He was instrumental in convincing King Ludwig II to join German the Prussian coalition against Austria and France. In Wagner’s mind, political unification was incredibly important. His own conception of German identity was based on geographical and linguistic distinctions between the descendants of the Germanic tribes and their neighbors.\textsuperscript{105} Clear divisions, in this case physical borders, between the Germans and the French/Romans were absolutely central to Wagner’s idea of the German people as distinct and superior.\textsuperscript{106} The fact that Wagner’s own nationalism combined so seamlessly with the political events of his day certainly made him a natural cultural figurehead for the new German state. As both the World War One generals and Hitler demonstrate, Wagner’s influence on political elites in Germany was profound.

Wagner also lived during a turning point for German culture. The idea of a “German” culture was more widespread and influential than ever. People were consuming cultural artifacts like never before, and musicians were beneficiaries of this trend. Susan Bernstein claims that the nineteenth century was characterized by “an enormous escalation of printed matter that had begun in the preceding centuries.”\textsuperscript{107} This was certainly true of printed music. As the cost of musical instruments decreased, the number of musical ensembles rose, and overall incomes in Germany rose, the demand for printed music climbed as well. The German states saw an explosion of musical performances and amateur music playing, alongside increases in book and

\textsuperscript{104} Paillard, 407.  
\textsuperscript{105} Bernstein, 81.  
\textsuperscript{106} Oergel, 295.  
\textsuperscript{107} Bernstein, 68-9.
periodical printing and theater productions.\textsuperscript{108} All of this allowed people to see, read, and hear artists such as Wagner. This widespread access is crucial in the dissemination of collective cultural material. Benedict Anderson, perhaps the foremost authority on theories of nationalism, acknowledges that large-scale printing is absolutely critical in constructing widespread imaginaries of national unity.\textsuperscript{109} Music especially gained prominence during this time. Pamela Potter argues that Germany cemented its status as the “[leader] of the musical world” in the nineteenth century, a distinction already perhaps bestowed upon it by the legacies of Bach and Beethoven. She cites the development of a mature music-publishing industry, the rise of academic musicology and music teaching, and the rapid growth of amateur engagement with music as key factors in music’s influence during Wagner’s time.\textsuperscript{110} As music became more popular, people became better acquainted with composers, and were able to draw connections between their work, their life stories, and their ideologies. In this way, composers became leaders in generating public opinion and identities in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{111}

Music was not the only cultural force with currency among the German public. Literature, too, was rapidly expanding in the German states. Alongside Wagner’s national opera, German Romanticists such as Goethe and the Brothers Grimm were creating a German style of writing that would similarly define unified Germany. In fact, the Brothers Grimm often drew material from Norse mythology in their tales, just as Wagner did in the \textit{Ring} cycle.\textsuperscript{112} Academia, too, played a crucial role in the nationalizing wave that swept the German states. As German

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Berger} Berger, “On the Role of Myths and History,” 494.
\bibitem{Osborne} Osborne, 71-2.
\bibitem{Frank} Frank.
\end{thebibliography}
culture solidified, academics began writing histories of German art. This may seem innocuous, but Hinrich Seeba argues that this move fundamentally reframed how people thought about German culture.\footnote{Seeba, 191.} Histories of German art reinforced the view that there were continuities—a core element of Germanness—that linked the artistic products of Saxony, Prussia, Bavaria, and the other states. A history of German art, of course, requires a coherent German art to study. This historiographical shift in German universities was particularly important because of the importance many Germans ascribed to their scholarship. Their tendency to study “German” art reinforced the idea of “German” art as a distinct category. Wagner’s work was bound up in this, and Seeba demonstrates how works such as Die Meistersinger were evaluated academically, as works of German culture, almost as soon as they were performed.\footnote{Ibid.} This academic framing contributed to the perception of Wagner as a national artist.

Finally, we return again to Wagner’s prose. His writing was another amplifying tool that increased his visibility and bound him to nationalist ideas. In his study of the nineteenth century “Wagner Industry” Nicholas Vazsonyi argues: “Wagner marketed his person and his works more consistently, creatively, purposefully, and with greater long-range impact than any other artist of his century.”\footnote{Vazsonyi, 197.} Vazsonyi illustrates this point by examining Wagner’s writing in a wide range of print media: newspapers, magazines, periodicals, concert programs, leaflets, and books. Wagner wrote in all of these.\footnote{Ibid. 198.} Vazsonyi devotes particular attention to a novella that the composer completed in 1840. Originally published in French, Wagner ensured that “A Pilgrimage to Beethoven” was translated into German in 1841. The novella is clearly an act of self-promotion. Wagner’s protagonist, whose name is simply “R…,” is a musician. R… begins the story with an
idea for a new opera, based on Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (recall that Wagner first decided to write opera after hearing Beethoven). R… is a starving artist, underappreciated by mainstream society, with a grand vision for “an opera aesthetics of the future.” R… is also, predictably, German. R… overcomes his struggles, completing a transformative new opera as he espouses his opinions on the legacy of Beethoven. “A Pilgrimage to Beethoven” is an interesting case. It is self-evidently a case of Wagner writing about himself in order to promote his own artistic priorities. Yet there is more at work here. Wagner, from his early career, took great pains to link himself to Beethoven. In 1846, when Wagner was just beginning his career in Dresden, he conducted Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Dresden. Vazsonyi writes: “neither the choice of Beethoven’s last symphony nor the enormous success of the event was accidental.” Wagner knew that tying his work to the legacy of Beethoven would be enormously beneficial. It was Beethoven, after all, who his contemporaries were examining as the basis for a new, pan-Germanic musical style. Bach, too, was becoming popular as people sought out historical roots for German music. By positioning himself as an heir to Beethoven, Wagner hoped to create a “divide succession of German composers,” a group of artists who could define the scope and trajectory of German culture. Joining this succession would be immensely profitable to Wagner. Given Beethoven’s popularity, any association with the late composer was a fantastic marketing tool (Vazsonyi calls this association “literally priceless”). Yet an association with Beethoven would do more than that. It would give Wagner the cultural capital, the claim to legitimacy, necessary to spread his view of what German culture should be. In crafting his claim to be the standard-bearer of German music, Wagner was extremely precise, and by all accounts

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117 Ibid. 200.
118 Ibid. 195.
119 Ibid. 206.
120 Ibid. 201.
he prevailed. A cult of personality developed around Wagner during his own lifetime. His ideas and operas gained a status almost on par with the idea of German music itself.\textsuperscript{121}

**Conclusion: Wagner and German Identity**

Richard Wagner spent much of his life thinking about questions of German identity. He had a profound impact on its development. Through his life experiences as a leftist revolutionary, a German in exile, and a supporter of the Wilhelmine Empire, he negotiated his own Germanness and created a legacy that would influence conceptions of German identity for the indefinite future. His music was often explicitly aimed at building a national operatic style. This style is characterized by *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the uniting of the arts, and by its mythological and heroic themes. Perhaps most importantly, Wagner’s opera is uniquely German because he defined it in opposition to other national styles. As Bismarck unified Germany politically, Wagner unified it musically. He did not do this alone. A range of amplifying factors and historical currents propelled Wagner to the forefront of a new German cultural nationalism. Wagner’s view of what is German, and his own status a preeminent historical German person, are still being negotiated today, especially in light of his appropriation by the Nazis. Yet what is undeniable is that Wagner is closely intertwined with ideas of Germanness. It is little wonder, then, that Nazi Germany, followed by the FRG and GDR, all had strong interests in creating relationships to Wagner as they asserted and refined their identities as German states.

\textsuperscript{121} *Ibid.* 211.
II. Music and Identity

“Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life.”
--- Oscar Wilde

This thesis explores questions of nationalism, state building, and political fragmentation. Music may seem out of place in a discussion of nationalism. Such discussions often center on questions of borders, nations, and armies. This chapter challenges the artificial division between culture and politics. The core argument is that music helps constitute German culture and German nationalism. Obviously, art is not the sole determinant of collective identity. Rather, a defined, common set of cultural mores creates linkages between people. It unites them under the sociopolitical umbrella of the nation state. A strong common culture is instrumental in facilitating the rise of nationalism. Given the power of nationalism as a mobilizing force, it follows that the governments in East and West Germany had strong interests in struggling over culture as they competed for legitimation. The argument proceeds in two steps. The first section defines “culture” and explains how art culture, specifically music, is an important driver of nationalism. This is particularly true in Germany. The second section explores the definition of nationalism. It discusses nationalism’s paramount importance as a means of political mobilization. This helps to explain why controlling and channeling nationalism was so important for the two German states in the 1950s. The goal is to close the circle opened in Chapter One. Wagner is/was a critical figure in German culture. This chapter explains why German culture, and hence Wagner, were so important during the Cold War.

Culture and Music: The Contours of Collective Identity in Germany

Stefan Berger, writing about German culture, aims to find a broad definition of culture that captures both its continuities and changes. He arrives at a definition that is adopted here. Culture is “the production of meaning by individual actors in on-going, heterogeneous and contested processes of representation, discursive construction and appropriation.”¹²³ This is certainly a broad definition. At first glance it may appear vague to the point of uselessness. Yet Berger touches on almost all critical aspects of culture. First, culture produces meaning. Through generating narratives—histories, myths, stories, tales, or otherwise—culture constantly generates a shared set of values and beliefs.¹²⁴ These shared beliefs not only inform how people interpret the past, they guide how people live their lives every day.¹²⁵ Second, individual actors produce culture. This is somewhat incomplete, as groups of actors can also influence culture, but Berger sets a minimum threshold: at least a person can change culture and its attendant systems of meaning. Richard Wagner’s work proves this to be the case. Third, the production of culture is “on-going, heterogeneous and contested.” A culture may have similar aspects throughout time. Some stories may persist, or some myths may be widespread for very long stretches, but no culture is ever fully ossified. Change is inevitable as new people push new meanings into their societies. Fourth, the production of culture is achieved through “representation, discursive construction and appropriation.” Cultures are tied to material reality, but the connection is not one-to-one. Rather, the individuals and groups that produce culture take reality and frame/appropriate it in ways that alter how it is perceived.

One thing that Berger’s definition is not explicit about is the communal nature of culture. Elsewhere, discussing the idea of “collective memory,” Berger handles this quite deftly. When people partake in collective memory, he writes, they “[internalize] a memory which is presented to them through a mixture of public and private narratives as a collective memory with the assumption that individuals should partake in it.”\(^{126}\) Using the earlier definition of culture, it is safe to say that culture includes collective memories: memories are one aspect of defining a worldview through representing material reality. Yet the way that Berger describes collective memory applies very much to how culture binds people together. Just as they do with memories, people internalize culture, which they absorb through narratives. Those narratives carry an assumption: people assume that they should believe and share them. An example may help illustrate how important collectivity is in producing culture. Consider two narratives. First, a four-year-old child tells an adult that the sky is blue because a giant mass of blue birds is flying across it all times, giving it their color. This is indeed a narrative: it is a story that interprets material reality. If the adult were to accept this view, it would structure her beliefs about the sky, about the nature of the planet, and so on. Yet this has nothing to do with culture. It is not collective because almost nobody believes it in, and there is no expectation that I partake in believing this narrative. Now, imagine a scenario where an ancient book—which the adult’s parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, onward have all read—that claims the sky is blue because a supernatural being willed it to be so. This is not just culture. It is one of the core tenants of organized religion, perhaps the most widespread culture in human history. When beliefs are collective, and when people expect that collectivity, narrative morphs into culture.

\(^{126}\) Berger, “On the Role of Myths and History,” 492.
To simplify somewhat, there are two primary facets of culture: the narratives and the group/collective that believes them. In the instance of Germany, the group is a nation state, which is what makes culture national. Culture, when shared between members of a nation state, becomes a tool of nationalism. This will be discussed later. For now, we are concerned with the former aspect of culture: the media through which it is constructed. Cultural narratives can be constituted in many ways. People interact with reality through multiple forms of expression. Music is one such form, and it is particularly salient in the German case. There is something of an old stereotype: Germans are the people of music.\textsuperscript{127} There is some truth to this cliché. As European art music grew in various enclaves—Baroque court music in France, comedic musicals in England, and opera in Italy—the German states sat at the physical crossroads of its development. As artists traveled from place to place, they were likely, at some point, to set foot in Germany, and the German territories were able to absorb and synthesize a wide range of music cultures.\textsuperscript{128} Indeed, part of what made German music so appealing in Wagner’s day was its appeal to universality.\textsuperscript{129} Academic musicologists could plausibly describe German music, because of its history, as the sum total of European music.\textsuperscript{130} It was simultaneously national and without boundaries, rising above other nations’ art in its purity and complexity. The German states were physically endowed to assume the role of the European capital of music, not just by their central location, but also by the high concentration of concert halls, opera houses,

\textsuperscript{128} Potter, 625.
\textsuperscript{129} Young, 226.
\textsuperscript{130} Berry, 668.
conservatories, and other places of music within.\textsuperscript{131} Potter describes music as adopting, as early as the 1700s, a “privileged position in German culture.”\textsuperscript{132}

It is little wonder that the critic and philosopher Friedrich Theodor Vischer, himself working in Wagner’s time, called music the “national art” of the Germans.\textsuperscript{133} Indeed, the “practice” of music reached its heyday in Germany right before Wagner’s time. This was around 1800, when the memory of Bach was fresh and Beethoven was still composing. The turn of the century saw an explosion of new orchestras, scores, and performance spaces in the German-speaking world.\textsuperscript{134} Music as the art of the Germans was a formulation built to last. Many believe it still holds today. Applegate, perhaps the foremost authority on this issue, describes music as “essentially German,” a “guarantor” of German identity even in times when political unity has been lacking.\textsuperscript{135} A number of other studies have confirmed music’s unique place as a point of commonality for Germans. When surveyed, ethnic Germans tend to identify with the country’s musical greats.\textsuperscript{136} Debates rage on in the public and academia about what qualities make music “German.”\textsuperscript{137} Their only point of agreement is that such a category, “German music,” does exist.\textsuperscript{138} Children in German schools are often taught the grand tradition of music in Germany,
socializing them to share in this common culture.\textsuperscript{139} Music education, in fact, was a practice that truly took flight in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{140}

Music is certainly a major shared artifact between Germans. Because of their historical experience with music, it is seen as a common bond. It is, in many ways, one of the most important parts of explaining the culture that we call “German.” Starting in the nineteenth century, music helped spread a sense of collectivity throughout the German states.\textsuperscript{141} The rise of Wagner and his national operas demonstrates just how effective music was as a means of uniting Germans, overcoming political and geographic fragmentation of the German states. It was, and is, a powerful tool indeed for shaping a sense of nationhood and collective identity. Applegate, summarizing this argument, calls music “a significant, sometimes powerful form of social and political action, as well as a constitutive activity in the making of the modern self.” In Germany, writing and performing music are acts of “nation-making” and are therefore “politically significant.”\textsuperscript{142}

**Nationalism: National Cultures, Regimes of Legitimacy**

If music is the medium of this particular Central European culture, what defines the group of people that share it, the all-important collectivity? They are German. This may seem obvious, but it is a crucial point. Situating collective identity within the boundaries of a nation state is the core logic of nationalism. This section examines how culture drives nationalism,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{140} Seeba, 191.
  \item \textsuperscript{141} Applegate, "What is German Music?” 24.
  \item \textsuperscript{142} Celia Applegate. 2012. "Introduction: Music among the Historians." *German History* 30 (3): 329-349.
\end{itemize}
particularly in Germany. It then briefly outlines the importance of nationalism as a legitimating technique for the state.

First, we must establish a working definition of “nationalism.” It is only natural here to turn to Benedict Anderson. His *Imagined Communities* continues to be one of the most thorough and widely read explorations of the concept. Anderson does not define “nationalism” as such, but he defines the idea of the “nation” and then argues that nationalism is the ideology that people adopt when they identify themselves as members of nations. Anderson’s defines the nation:

> It is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.  

Nationalism is the ideology that binds people to that imagined community of the nation. It is what makes people believe that they do share a “communion” with their fellow nationals. Anderson touches on this when he argues: “the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” Nationalism is that sense of linkage, that sense of comradeship. This is not an exceedingly precise definition, but nationalism is inherently a malleable concept, just as the idea of the nation state is a relatively recent one. We should feel comfortable with a basic idea of what constitutes nationalism: when there is widespread loyalty to an imagined community, and that community is a nation state, we may say that nationalism exists.

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143 Anderson, 5-6.
If nationalism is a widespread sense of solidarity within an imagined nation, what convinces citizens of the nation to have that sense of solidarity? Culture can play that role. As has been explained, culture fastens people together through a shared sense of identity. It can convince citizens of their ties to other nationals by creating a shared vocabulary and mutual modes of framing reality.\textsuperscript{147} Anderson acknowledges this: nationalism relies on common, influential material that members of a nation identify with.\textsuperscript{148} In Germany, that material has often been music. Music, and especially art music such as orchestral music and operas, is a natural forum for governments to disseminate their vision of a national consciousness. The reason is straightforward: funding operas and symphonies is a complex task that requires vast resources, of the kind generally only available to elites or governments. This fact allows a small group of elites, usually those with ties to governments, to have an outsized role in programming decisions.\textsuperscript{149} This was certainly the case in East and West Germany, and it was the case in Wagner’s day: only Ludwig II’s support gave Wagner a theater to stage his music dramas consistently and in the manner he preferred.

Further, music was more important in creating a sense of German identity than in other European countries, as the German nation never truly existed before 1871. Any sense of Germanness before political unification was premised almost entirely on cultural, rather than geographic or political, affinities.\textsuperscript{150} Perhaps as early as Bach’s life (the early seventeenth century), music bound Germans together through a feeling that they shared something, something intangible, perhaps, but something meaningful. When the time came for political unification, this pre-existing commonality provided the groundwork, some of the “profound

\textsuperscript{147} Berger, “Social History vs Cultural History,” 146.
\textsuperscript{148} Anderson, 109.
\textsuperscript{149} Osborne, 72.
emotional legitimacy,” that building nationalism requires.\textsuperscript{151} As Germany became whole, the Germanic musical tradition provided a backdrop that made the new nation seem real, natural, and legitimate.

This brings us to the final key element of nationalism. Cultural commonality draws people together into an imagined community. This does not fully explain why nationalism is so powerful. Nationalism serves also serves a legitimizing function, generating public faith in the nation state. The idea of nation state is crucial here. Nationalism does not just make the nation stronger; it makes the state—the government, the bureaucracy, the elected or non-elected officials—stronger as well.\textsuperscript{152} Anderson calls nationalism “the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time.”\textsuperscript{153} Legitimacy holds states together and ensures that their rule is seen as natural and acceptable.\textsuperscript{154} It does not merely compel passive acceptance of the nation state. Nationalism can often generate fierce pride in the state, a proactive willingness to make sacrifices for it.\textsuperscript{155} Norbert Elias, constructing his own theory of nationalism, notes that nationalist feelings tend to be characterized by a feeling of superiority: one state’s attributes are preferable to another’s.\textsuperscript{156} This is why nationalism has both “integrating” and “disintegrating” tendencies: it brings people of a nation closer together by amplifying their differences vis-à-vis other nations.\textsuperscript{157} Wagner’s penchant for comparing German music to French music comes to mind here. His mission to cleanse German art from the corruption of the capitalist classes also

\begin{footnotes}
\item[151] Anderson, 4.
\item[152] \textit{Ibid.} 99.
\item[153] \textit{Ibid.} 3.
\item[154] \textit{Ibid.} 7.
\item[155] Elias, 163.
\item[156] \textit{Ibid.} 167.
\item[157] \textit{Ibid.} 160.
\end{footnotes}
played into an exclusive vision of Germanness, with its attendant anti-Semitic connotations.\textsuperscript{158} Creating sets of dichotomies of insiders and outsiders—Germans compared to the French, or the Jews, or otherwise—proved an extremely powerful method for Wagner and others to inspire German nationalism.\textsuperscript{159} This notion of an exclusive, bordered culture brought Germans together and generated loyalty to their new state.

**Conclusion: Looking Forward**

In the Nazi era and in the 1950s, German leaders again invoked nationalism as a means of nation building. This time, though, the context varied considerably. In the nineteenth century, Anderson writes, states invoked nationalist rhetoric and culture in order to resist challenges from within, whether political revolutions or ethnic separatists.\textsuperscript{160} For the Nazi regime, German culture served a similar purpose: to cement the Party’s control over its people. When the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic were founded in 1949, the primary challenges to their legitimacy came from without. The mere existence of two German states undermined the legitimacy of both. The FRG and the GDR each claimed exclusive dominion over the mantle of “Germany” and demanded reunification on their own terms. The struggle for each state was to foster a sense of nationalism among its people. One way to do this was to build cultural continuities back through time, to position the new states as heirs to the German cultural legacy. Wagner, with his prominent position in this legacy, became a key question that both states had to grapple with. His music because a key prize that both states fought to win. Before

\textsuperscript{160} Anderson, 3.
they could fight for it, however, they had to come to terms with how Hitler appropriated Wagner’s music right before them.
III. Nazi Culture and the Allied Response

“There is no starting-over with national identity.”
--- Celia Applegate

The Nazi regime’s appropriation of Wagner may have done more to change future perceptions of the composer than any other event in history. Nazi cultural policies heavily stressed Wagner as a symbol of the Nazi’s hyper-nationalist, xenophobic, and racist ideology. The aftereffects of these policies significantly complicated the picture for Germans after 1945. In the aftermath of Hitler’s reign, both the FRG and GDR had to determine how best to reconcile the Nazi era with Germany’s long artistic legacy. While Wagner’s anti-Semitism and xenophobia were obvious during his life, the Nazi regime inextricably tied the composer, in the eyes of many, to the machinations of a genocidal dictator. In the wake of World War Two, the occupying powers, and their successor governments in the FRG and GDR, did not have a clean slate of cultural artifacts to work with. They had to engage in a balancing act: accepting, even promoting, Wagner’s nationalist music while treading carefully around his problematic reputation.

This chapter reviews the Nazi appropriation of Wagner, and the reaction of the occupying powers to that appropriation after World War Two. The aim is not to provide a comprehensive account of Nazi music policy, which could be its own book, but rather to summarize this policy briefly. In the process, this chapter “sets the stage,” providing context that will help frame an understanding of how Germans in the 1950s viewed and altered Wagner’s legacy. Furthermore, denazification under allied control is this thesis’ first comparative case study. The differences between how the Western, especially American, occupiers and their Soviet counterparts treated Wagner’s legacy were profound, and shaped the ways that the FRG and GDR would confront

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161 Applegate, “Saving Music.”
Wagner’s music in the 1950s. Finally, this chapter serves as another example of how culture drives nationalism. The Nazi regime is perhaps one of history’s preeminent examples of how governments can rally cultural symbols to fuel a narrative of national pride.\(^{162}\) Their success in stoking nationalism made it that much more difficult for the two new German states to appeal to the same emotions.

**Wagner and the Nazis**

After Wagner’s death, his status as a nationalist icon was confirmed again and again. This was due, in no small part, to the efforts of his second wife, Cosima. Cosima took over the Bayreuth Festival, directing operations at her late husband’s theater from 1883 to 1907, during the height of the Wilhelmine Empire’s power. As artistic director, she established the full “Bayreuth Canon,” the ten Wagner operas performed at Bayreuth. They include the entire *Ring* cycle, *Parsifal, Tristan und Isolde, Meistersinger, Tannhäuser, Lohneigrin*, and *Der Fliegende Holländer*.\(^ {163}\) What is noteworthy about this lineup is that it excludes all of Wagner’s early operas. Anything that he wrote before his friendship with the Dresden revolutionaries is excluded. These operas were written before Wagner fully embraced the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. They are not characteristic of the German/total art style that he spent so many years honing. Their exclusion, given Cosima’s own fierce nationalism and devotion to Richard’s work as German art, is not surprising.

Cosima Wagner was not only an important theater director. She was the stewardess of her late husband’s legacy. She published his letters and his diaries whenever it could improve his

\(^{162}\) Osborne, 72.

image. She worked to bring notable Germans to the Festival. Bertita Paillard nicely summarizes Cosima’s obsessive dedication to Richard’s legacy:

That the Bayreuth enterprise did not collapse and that the Wagner affair did not ebb away was the work of Cosima. Consumed by mad ambition, this brainy woman dreamed of a Wagnerian imperialism that would beat a path for the Reich throughout the world. No longer was it to be German political policy that would aid Wagner, but it was Bayreuth that would be the support of Berlin, the most formidable instrument of propaganda for Germanism. She made use of everything. With superhuman force and remarkable talent, Cosima drew up her working plans to the last detail, just as she had already done for the building of the theater: a world-embracing organization of art, finance, and publicity. In matters of business, the lady of Bayreuth had more energy, tenacity, and even commercial sense than Wagner.\(^{164}\)

Cosima continued publication of the *Bayreuth Blätter*, which had began circulating while Richard still lived. Cerf describes the *Blätter* as a “hyper nationalistic” journal of musicology with a wide readership and a particular focus on Wagner’s opera. It was, furthermore, “a repository for pan-German and anti-Semitic writings.”\(^{165}\) Bayreuth around the turn of the twentieth century may have represented the zenith of imperial German pride. In public lectures, the *Blätter*, and even in small talk in between performances, visitors and regulars discussed the future of Germany and the meaning of German music. They also bantered about some more esoteric subjects, including pseudo-scientific theories of race that were becoming increasingly popular throughout Europe.\(^{166}\) It was at this time that the idea of German music as a consistent, continuous, and universal chain—a series of the world’s finest compositions from Bach to Wagner and Brahms—emerged.\(^{167}\)

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\(^{164}\) Paillard, 408.
\(^{165}\) Cerf, 140.
\(^{167}\) Applegate, “Saving Music.”
The Nazi regime built on this conception of German music developed during the Wilhelmine Empire. As part of their overall strategy of social control, the Nazi government carefully curated culture. Their aim was not to tie music to the regime. Rather, they defined acceptable music as “German” music.\textsuperscript{168} The goal was nationalism, not loyalty to the Nazi Party (although they certainly hoped that the two feelings were linked).\textsuperscript{169} Building on theories of racial superiority and German supremacy, the Nazi culture bureaucrats, at Hitler’s direction, censored “degenerate” music that was too French, too Jewish, or too avant garde. The goal was to create a soundscape within Germany that was completely aligned with German nationalism and Nazi ideology.\textsuperscript{170}

Wagner’s music was at the forefront of their efforts. This was, in fact, an area where Hitler intervened directly. Hitler deeply admired Wagner. He embraced Wagner’s pan-German imagery. In Mein Kampf, he explicitly invokes the Ring cycle as a metaphor for the struggle of the Second Reich.\textsuperscript{171} He developed an intimate personal friendship with Winifred Wagner, Richard’s daughter-in-law, who ran the Bayreuth Festival from 1930 to 1945. Winifred herself was an ardent supporter of Hitler, and speculation that the two had a romantic relationship persists to this day. Regardless, the two were certainly friends. Their friendship was a large reason why the Nazi Party readily endorsed Wagner’s opera as national music.\textsuperscript{172} Hitler regularly attended the annual Bayreuth Festival, and he lavished additional funding and support on the

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{171} Cerf, 140.
\textsuperscript{172} Potter, “What is ‘Nazi Music?’”
Festspielhaus and its surrounding apparatus.\textsuperscript{173} This in itself increased the visibility of Wagner’s work, but the Party went further. To place the German people in constant interaction with Wagner and his opera, the Party staged gigantic and constant performances, which were often free to attend. They funded Wagner lectures, discussions, and more periodicals. When the Party found that there were not enough accomplished lyricists remaining in Germany to perform the whole Wagner oeuvre, they aggressively recruited foreign singers, even from the French. A center for Wagner studies was installed at Bayreuth. A small army of historians was sent there to dig through Wagner’s letters, to look again at his compositions, to mine the raw material for as much nationalist material as they could find.\textsuperscript{174} The result of this effort was that Wagner, along with Beethoven and Richard Strauss, moved to the forefront of German culture under the Nazis. His legacy, due to the efforts of Cosima, Winifred, and Hitler, became tied to German nationalism in its most extreme and racially charged form. His music also became bound forever to the Nazi period. Perhaps the most telling example of this connection was when Wilhelm Furtwängler, the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted works from Die Meistersinger during the Nuremberg Rallies.\textsuperscript{175} Such an image could not quickly disappear from the collective German consciousness.

\textsuperscript{174} Paillard, 401.
**Occupation and Denazification (1945-1949)**

Nazi control of Germany ended with the country in ruins. Major cities from Hamburg to Dresden were devastated by allied bombing campaigns and occupied by Soviet or Western ground forces. The town of Bayreuth was subject to brutal assaults from the air. Wagner’s *Festspielhaus*, though, survived. The German people were thrust into a new era politically, culturally, and psychologically. It began as an era of control: the Allies divided the country, and Berlin as its microcosm, into four zones of occupation. As external factors deepened the rivalry between East and West, Germany became ground zero, so to speak, of the rapidly emerging Cold War.

In 1945, German culture stood at a strange crossroads. Even the utter destruction of Germany could not suppress the vibrancy of the country’s music culture. Abby Anderton, studying Berlin in the summer of 1945, writes that musical life there continued “seemingly without pause,” despite a shortage of instruments, sheet music, opera costumes, and performance spaces. Applegate writes that music making, even in the immediate aftermath of invasion, continued, especially at a smaller scale. In a time characterized by death, destruction, and constant shortages, culture was seen as a familiar place of refuge, an escape from the harsh realities of life under occupation.

Despite the continued vibrancy of music in Germany, there was hardly any Wagner to be heard in 1945. In many cases, people simply did not want to see opera so closely linked to the

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177 Anderton, 3.
178 Applegate, “Saving Music.”
179 Anderton, 32-3.
The occupiers, through, played a crucial role. The Soviets, Americans, British, and French controlled the funding and production of music. Their varied policies during the German occupation—which ran from 1945 to 1949—provide the first comparative study of how Germany, now divided, negotiated Wagner’s legacy after the Nazis. All four occupying powers quickly implemented denazification policies, attempting to remove both former Nazis and former Nazi ideas from post-war German life. These efforts had inherent limits. The Soviet occupiers were far more concerned with installing socialism in their zone, even if it meant allowing some traces of German nationalism. Even the Americans, who wanted most to eliminate Wagner from the post-war cultural canon, could not stop all performances, including some at Bayreuth.

The rest of this chapter examines the occupation’s cultural aspects in more depth. The goal is to compare musical life in the two territories: that which would eventually become the FRG, and that which would eventually become the GDR. Cultural policies during occupation set the stage for how the two new German governments, and their people, would perceive Wagner’s work in the 1950s. Before diving in to the specifics, it is important to note that two paradoxical demands confronted the occupiers in their four years of running cultural policy. First, all four of the occupying powers had an interest in de-nationalizing German music as part of their campaign to de-Nazify Germany. Initially, the four powers even cooperated on issues of art and music, opting to share information and form cross-boundary groups of opinion leaders to discuss the future of German art. This cooperation generally fell under the purview of the Allied Control

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181 Thacker, 17.
Council, which facilitated writers’ councils, concerts, and discussions. Even as friction between the powers increased, all were acutely aware of what the others were doing in the cultural arena. The German press and public, still very much invested in their music, made sure of this. The second driving force behind cultural policy pulled in the other direction. Just as the two German states would later have to balance nationalism with the legacy of the Nazis, so too did the occupying powers have to allow some degree of German culture to exist in order to rally support for their respective causes. This was especially true of the Soviets, who aimed to impose a socialist regime on their zone. After 1947, when the Allied Control Council fell apart and cooperation on cultural issues all but disappeared, a sort of cultural competition emerged between the Soviets and the Western powers. The goal: achieve the “cultural high ground” that would position the Western zone above the Eastern one, or vice versa. As Toby Thacker writes: “as the world divided into two ideological blocks, music was part of this wider intellectual and ideological schism.” The example of the “Bach year” from the Introduction provides a good illustration of just how fierce the competition got. Both sides perceived their mission as highly important. In practice, this jockeying for the comparative advantage in culture often meant that denazification was given short shrift in favor of creating a robust and popular musical culture in the occupied zones. In many instances, this meant a return of Wagner despite his historical baggage.

\[183\] Thacker, 99.
\[184\] Ibid. 105.
\[185\] Ibid.
\[186\] Ibid. 30.
\[187\] Ibid. 3.
Occupation and Denazification: The Western Zones

“It is the view of the American Government that the German people throughout Germany, under proper safeguards, should now be given the primary responsibility for the running of their own affairs.”¹⁸⁸ These are the words of James F. Byrnes, United States Secretary of State. He delivered them in Stuttgart, in 1946, as part of a speech detailing new economic cooperation between the American and British zones of occupation. He goes on: “it never was the intention of the American Government to deny to the German people the right to manage their own internal affairs.”¹⁸⁹ Yet one wonders how the American occupying forces reconciled this stated hands-off approach with another major statement of intent: “the principal purposes of the military occupation (...) are to demilitarize and de-Nazify Germany.”¹⁹⁰ In practice, cultural denazification was a very hands-on process; the American and British occupiers in particular attempted to determine and micromanage acceptable forms of art, literature, and music. They often faced practical barriers, and in their competition with the Soviet regime they had to make concessions, but the overall approach of the Western powers was very much focused on de-nationalizing, and hence de-Nazifying, German culture.

The American approach was particularly intense. The Americans occupied Bavaria (including Bayreuth), Hessen, parts of Baden-Württemberg, the port cities of Bremen and Bremerhaven, and their section of Berlin. Within this substantial territory, the Americans

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.
¹⁹⁰ Ibid.
“perceived their role as cultural re-educators.” Hermann Hesse, the legendary writer who had fled Germany in 1919, wrote to a German friend in 1946 that the Americans had asked him to return so he could “help to reeducate the people.” He declined, blasting the Americans as nothing more than “culture-manufacturers.” If Hesse’s words were extreme, his depiction was mostly accurate. Orders to overhaul German culture came directly from the top. Joint Chiefs of Staff Directive 1067 (JCS 1067, also known as the Morgenthau Plan) laid out the fundamental American goals for occupation. One stands out in this context. The document calls for “a coordinated system of control over German education and an affirmative program of reorientation (…) designed completely to eliminate Nazi and militaristic doctrines and to encourage the development of democratic ideas.” The scope of this order is potentially endless. While JCS 1067 contains specific provisions for managing the economy, agriculture, and trade, there is almost no mention of culture. The closest thing to a provision on cultural control is one sentence on “Archives and Art,” which tells the occupiers: “you will make all reasonable efforts to preserve historical archives, museums, libraries and works of art.”

Given the open-ended nature of this mandate, the American occupying forces had wide latitude to implement cultural denazification. The overarching goal to “encourage the development of democratic ideas” contributed to the vague guidelines. To promote democracy, the occupying forces attempted to use music as a medium to express liberal, rational and

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191 Anderton, 3.
193 Ibid.
195 Ibid.
humanistic ideas, rather than emotional, nationalist ones.\textsuperscript{196} To achieve this control over music, they combined censorship with aggressive central planning.\textsuperscript{197} Within the Office of Military Government, United States (OMGUS), the occupiers established the Information Control Division (the ICD). The ICD was a major implementing arm of the goals outlined by JCS 1067 and by Byrnes in Stuttgart. Its stated goal was to “control all forms of mass media presented to the conquered civilian population in order to promote a democratic political ideology.”\textsuperscript{198} The ICD, needing a way to quickly gain control over the German cultural scene, found help in the documents and records of the Reichskulturkammer, the Nazi cultural agency. Heinz Roemheld, who served as an early director of the Film, Theater, and Music arm of the ICD, went so far as to claim that the Reichskulturkammer served as the “basis” for the ICD’s activities.\textsuperscript{199} While the ICD was establishing itself and gathering intelligence, the American authorities allowed musical performances to continue (how could they contain them?), but they limited programs to a set of artists that seemed sufficiently cosmopolitan and Western: Beethoven, Mozart, and Bach were favorites.\textsuperscript{200} Meanwhile, the ICD’s capabilities grew rapidly. By the bureau’s first birthday, it had gathered intelligence on over ten thousand Germans who were involved in media and the arts, aiming to weed out Nazi Party members and prevent them from influencing post-war culture.\textsuperscript{201} The American musical mandates became ever more complex. The ICD adopted a policy calling for more chamber music instead of symphonic music and opera; they viewed this as a way to make music consumption more private, to shift away from the highly public nature of

\textsuperscript{196} Anderton, 17.  
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid. 16.  
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid. 19.  
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{200} Thacker, 75.  
\textsuperscript{201} Anderton, 43.  

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music under the Nazis. The ICD began prohibiting particular pieces from being played on particular days, lest they allow performances with nationalist or fascist undertones. For example, the censors took aim at *Siegfried Idyll*, the symphonic poem that Wagner wrote to celebrate the birth of his son, Siegfried. They banned performances of the piece on Hitler’s birthday and *Heldengedenktag* (Heroes Commemoration Day). They banned performances of Beethoven’s Third Symphony (*Eroica*), which was broadcast nationwide both on Hitler’s birthdays as Chancellor and immediately following his suicide. With these specific mandates, the ICD showed its commitment to re-educate the Germans, refusing to let nationalism into culture even in subtle ways. They also, over time, changed their guidance on what music should be performed, pinpointing specific messages they hoped to promote through music. Works banned by the Nazis came back in force. Orchestras again performed Tchaikovsky and Mahler, at the expense of Strauss and Wagner. In particular, the ICD pushed to rehabilitate Mendelssohn, whose music the Nazis had banned because of his Jewish heritage. The ICD so aggressively promoted Mendelssohn that, by the late 1940s, many orchestras in the American zone would open their performances with a Mendelssohn overture by default. This spoke to the ICD’s success in controlling music. German conductors wanted so badly to appease the bureau that they played programs full of Mendelssohn without any prodding from the Americans. The ICD’s efforts were not the sole driver of music control. There was some self-censorship. Herbert von Karajan, who conducted the Berlin Philharmonic for most of the 1950s, refused to play

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204 Thacker, 75.
206 Anderton, 29.
works by Richard Strauss for years after the collapse of Nazism. Many simply found these works unpalatable after years of Nazi censorship. Others were simply bored of playing the same pieces that they played under Hitler, and welcomed the opportunity to play Mendelssohn, Tchaikovsky, and Mahler again.

While the ICD was effective, there were limits to music control in the American zone. In particular, the American effort to condemn musicians who had been Nazi Party members was poorly executed. Former Party members, especially the prominent ones, were allowed to “glide through” the denazification proceedings with almost no impact on their careers. Many famous conductors and performers, including Herbert von Karajan, were Nazi Party members. Many claimed to be “above politics” during the Nazi period. Others argued that they were tricked into supporting Hitler with false promises, meanwhile knowing nothing about his atrocities or racism. The Americans were unwilling to follow through on cases against such important figures, and the German public generally accepted their excuses. The Americans also had difficulty exercising complete control over music for both practical and ideological reasons. Practically, the peoples’ insatiable demand for music could not be fully satisfied by the carefully curated, pre-approved programs handed down by the ICD. There was a “chronic shortage” of sheet music in Germany. This was an especially acute problem for musical scores that were banned by the Nazis; many of these were burned and not easily replaced. Enforcement of music control policy was difficult because there were not enough resources or personnel assigned to the ICD. At its height, the Division employed thirty-five full-time cultural officers and 150 German

\[208\] Potter, “Dismantling a Dystopia,” 626.
\[209\] Ibid.
\[210\] Thacker, 93.
partners in Berlin, hardly enough to patrol the city’s robust music scene.\(^\text{211}\) Widespread pushback against music control from German musicians and leading voices in German culture also undermined enforcement.\(^\text{212}\) Ideologically, the American goal of democratizing Germany made total censorship of music impossible. No matter how distasteful the occupiers found nationalist culture, they valued democratization more, and they viewed democracy as fundamentally inconsistent with intense, coercive censorship. The occupiers, ultimately, wanted to facilitate a “free market” of music, consistent with their liberal democratic values.\(^\text{213}\) Full-on censorship was a “dangerous temptation,” but one that the occupiers ultimately refused.\(^\text{214}\) They were willing to let Germans stage Wagner or play Strauss, but within limits. These limits revealed the impossibility of complete denazification. Ultimately, even banned works were performed in the American zone with little consequence. Wagner operas continued. By the end of 1946, Berliners could again hear the overtures from *Tannhäuser* and *Der Fliegende Holländer*, or see scenes from *Götterdämmerung* at the Philharmonic. As Abby Anderton argues, the occupiers most likely allowed this for “pragmatic rather than dogmatic reasons.”\(^\text{215}\) The level of transformation that the ICD desired—a “clean break” from the remnants of Nazi culture—was simply not possible.\(^\text{216}\)

In the British and French zones, experiences were largely the same. Both of the European occupiers made strong but incomplete efforts to replace the Nazi’s favored music. Unlike the Americans, the British and French were more insistent on replacing German nationalist art with

\(^{211}\) Anderton, 23.
\(^{213}\) Anderton, 21.
\(^{215}\) Anderton, 47.
\(^{216}\) Berghahn.
their own traditions. This likely made music control even more difficult, as they were asking Germans to accept entirely new national styles in place of their own. In 1945, the French wartime government immediately began holding concerts full of French music, played by French artists, in cities such as Karlsruhe and Stuttgart. They integrated some German music as well, but limited it severely. French soldiers often made up a significant portion of the audience. \(^{217}\) The French occupiers were meticulous in documenting these concerts. They carefully measured attendance, the ratio of French to German attendees, and the nature of German reactions to the French music played. \(^{218}\) Given the lackluster reaction to these concerts, they did not last as sustainable alternatives to German national music.

The British took two slightly different tacks, with similar results. First, they focused more explicitly on opera than the Americans or French. There was an active effort in the British zone to replace Wagner with British comedies and madrigals, the works of Purcell, Elgar, and others. \(^{219}\) Second, the British invested heavily in radio broadcasting, attempting to transform German music tastes not through live performance but recorded programming. Hamburg, the largest city under British occupation, was a good example. The British military gave the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) exclusive control over a Hamburg radio station. Each show began with a recording of *God Save the King*, and hosts would sign on by saying: “this is Hamburg, a station of the Allied Military Government.” \(^{220}\) The musical programming consisted of modern British music. Jazz and electronic music were especially prominent. Like the Americans, the British emphasized previously banned music. Mendelssohn was a mainstay on British radio, as were more esoteric genres like klezmer. They sunk significant resources into

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\(^{217}\) Thacker, 80-1.  
\(^{218}\) *Ibid.* 83.  
\(^{219}\) *Ibid.* 89.  
\(^{220}\) *Ibid.* 90
radio. The BBC outfit in Hamburg hired a German conductor and hundreds of musicians to create an in-house orchestra.\textsuperscript{221} Despite these efforts, the same problems persisted: total music control was unattainable.

By the time West Germany gained formal political (and cultural) independence in 1949, it was already prepared for a world where nationalist music could be played relatively freely. Wagner concerts were a fact of life again almost as soon as the dust had settled from the war. As later chapters will discuss, the West German idea of \textit{Stunde null} (“Zero Hour”) would provide the ultimate justification for fully rehabilitating Wagner in the FRG. Wagner could become part of the FRG’s claim to inherit Germany’s cultural history.

**Occupation and Denazification: The Eastern Zone**

Cultural policy in the Soviet zone differed substantially from its Western counterparts. This was true for two, somewhat contradictory reasons. First, the Soviets were far more committed to actively curating music. Censorship was more intense, and the Soviet military brought with it an apparatus capable of wide-ranging intelligence operations and suppression of banned material.\textsuperscript{222} Like the Western powers, the Soviets had a “commitment to getting rid of Nazi, militarist, and pan-German music” within their new territory.\textsuperscript{223} In some cases, the Soviet army and its allies in the nascent East German bureaucracy debated censorship of Wagner operas.\textsuperscript{224} Moreover, the Soviets perceived music to be a more important battleground for social control than the Western occupiers. Perhaps because of their existing experience with a centrally

\textsuperscript{221} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{222} \textit{Ibid.} 131.
\textsuperscript{223} \textit{Ibid.} 39.
\textsuperscript{224} Glaser, 231.
planned culture, the Soviets devoted substantial time and resources to actively shaping the musical world in East Germany.\textsuperscript{225}

Theoretically, these factors should have made suppression of nationalist music in East Germany far more effective than in the West. Yet the Soviets, despite their commitment to denazification, had different aims for the occupation. In 1948, the \textit{Kulturbund zur demokratischen Erneuerung Deutschlands} (“Cultural League for the Democratic Renewal of Germany”), the cultural arm of the Soviet military administration, published a mission statement for cultural policy in Germany. It outlined two goals:

1. Destruction of Nazi ideology in all areas of life and knowledge. Battle against the spiritual perpetrators of Nazi crimes and war crimes. Battle against all reactionary, militaristic ideas. Purging and keeping public life free from their influence.
2. Creation of a national unity front of German intellectual workers. Creation of an unbreakable unity between the intelligentsia and the people. With confidence in the viability of our people and its power to change: a rebirth of the German spirit under the banner of a militant democratic Weltanschauung.\textsuperscript{226}

The first and second goals are in tension with one another. The first calls for battle against “reactionary militaristic ideas;” this describes denazification, in line with the Western view of the practice. The second, however, calls for a new “militant democratic Weltanschauung (worldview),” as well as a renewal of “national unity” in East Germany. The Soviets here expressed their desire to promote a strong, even militarist, commitment to socialist culture. A key component of national unity was also garnering popular support for the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the communist party that would eventually run the East German State. Like all of the states in the Warsaw Pact, East Germany was to be governed by its own communist party. The

\textsuperscript{225} Thacker, 25.

Soviets believed that the SED, even though it would not have to win a fair election, still needed legitimacy.

Practically, this orientation to music in East Germany had three consequences. First, the Soviets were often willing to let the nascent SED take charge of music policy. Soviet documents from the occupation show that the military administration put relatively little thought into music control, preferring to let SED musicians and censors take the lead. Second, the SED, spurred on by Soviet initiative, was committed to reframing the German music tradition in a way that made it consistent with socialism. Consistent with Soviet practice, East German bureaucrats quickly adopted the position that the arts were a key part of fostering a socialist ethos among their people. They believed that “all artistic activity was political,” making state intervention both natural and necessary. However, given the state’s lack of experience with Leninism, creating a socialist culture required a reappraisal of German art. One key element of this effort was to create a “new sociology of music” for East Germany. To accomplish this, the SED and Soviet occupiers appointed a committee of musicologists, historians, and musicians led by the composer Ernst Hermann Meyer. The committee’s mandate was to write a definitive Marxist account of Germany’s music history, and to attempt to define the future of German music under a new regime. The committee came to two conclusions. First, the point of socialist music was to be accessible to the public, easily understandable rather than abstract. Art existed in service to the proletariat. Anything that was beyond the tastes of the people was superfluous and, worse, bourgeois.

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227 Thacker, 230.
228 Ibid. 3.
229 Ibid. 131.
230 Ibid.
231 Ibid. 147.
exemplified this ideology when he argued that the “essential deficiency” in the arts “is the complete lack of a genuine connection to the life of our people.” Second, music must be aggressively promoted and curated by the state. Centralization of music would make it more accessible: the state would cover the costs of orchestras and operas. It would also weed out bourgeois performances. In terms of dealing with Germany’s musical past, Meyer’s analysis tied musicians to their social ideas and background. This was to be the primary determinant of their suitability for performance. This gave the SED latitude with Wagner, who had outspoken revolutionary convictions during his life. They could claim, and often did, that Wagner’s Dresden days were the inspiration for his work, discounting his stated commitment to German supremacy. The Meyer report ended up driving East German musical policy for the foreseeable future. The SED displayed such a commitment to implementing it that the Soviets often found no reason to enter the cultural arena at all.

The third implication of Soviet occupation policy was that it gave the SED wide latitude on the question of German nationalist music. Sometimes this music did not fit neatly into the Meyer parameters for socialist art. The SED was often willing to overlook this issue. The Party’s primary interest in the late 1940s and early 1950s was to garner legitimacy among its people. With no free elections to point to and a political system imposed on it by a foreign occupier, the SED turned to nationalism. Elaine Kelly, in her study on SED musical policy, argues that the party “relied heavily on the exploitation of national pride to validate the state. The SED was keen

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233 Thacker, 116-7.
234 Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”
235 Thacker, 231.
not to portray the GDR as a brand new entity but to align it instead with the Germanic cultural heritage and to demonstrate its position as the true heir to the riches of Germany’s past.” The Bach year, described in the Introduction, is evidence of this strategy. The Wagner Festival at Dessau, the GDR’s answer to the Bayreuth Festspiel, shows how committed the socialist government was to wielding nationalism. Chapter Five will focus on the competition over Wagner festivals. The next chapter outlines the government’s successes and difficulties in laying claim to Wagner’s legacy, while simultaneously attempting to frame the composer as a socialist at heart. There were many complications in the SED’s music policy, not the least of which was the difficulty of reframing peoples’ opinions on art. Yet one conclusion is exceptionally clear: the East was unwilling to surrender Wagner’s legacy to the West. This was evident early in the Soviet occupation, when the SED took the lead on musical policy. The 1950s, in many ways, was a continuation of these efforts.

237 Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”
IV. Reconceptualizing Wagner in the GDR

“Wagner ist keineswegs überwunden worden.”
(“Wagner has not been overcome.”)
---Heino Lüdicke238

The East German state and its backers in the Soviet Union had an interest in repressing and then redeploying Wagner’s music in the 1950s. As the GDR tried to claim itself as the heir to Germany’s cultural past, it had to walk a fine line between repudiating Wagner’s association with fascism while also maintaining his reputation as a “German” artist who the state could champion.239 As discussed previously, the East Germans, even under Soviet occupation, were far more willing early on to stage Wagner’s operas than the West Germans. Indeed, Professor Peter Kupfer, who documented every Wagner performance in the GDR, found that Tannhäuser was staged 19 times in Chemnitz as early as February 1946.240 In 1947, Wagner operas could be seen in Rostock, Görlitz, Leipzig, and even at the Deutsche Staatsoper, the national opera company of the GDR, located in the heart of Berlin.241 The Soviet occupiers’ rather half-hearted denazification of opera did not stamp out Wagner’s influence.242 Nationalist music was a deep well of cultural material for the SED to draw upon.243 They did so readily and often.

The German Democratic Republic became an independent country in 1949. The SED, which had dismantled its opposition during the Soviet occupation, quickly gained a political monopoly over the new state. The one-party state wasted no time in promoting itself as the one

241 Ibid.
242 Thacker, 68.
243 Thacker, 30.
legitimate “Germany,” sowing nationalism among its people through a diverse array of channels.\textsuperscript{244} This nationalist project, especially as it related to culture, was an attempt to create continuity between Germany’s old national pride and the new East German state.\textsuperscript{245} Music was central to the SED’s approach.\textsuperscript{246} Applegate and Porter claim that the GDR’s musical policy was not a true break from the past. Rather, the state’s goals for music “harbored unmistakable similarities to the unifying national agendas of nineteenth-century proponents of a ‘national opera,’” by emphasizing “[opera’s] function as a vehicle for the eventual cultural unification” of Germany.\textsuperscript{247} The idea was to bolster “the links between music and Germanness,” to make the music that people heard, and the opera that people saw, invoke feelings of pride and loyalty to the new state.\textsuperscript{248} This was consistent with the Party’s overarching goals, articulated in a resolution of the SED’s Central Committee in 1951. The resolution calls for “reestablishment of German unity on a democratic basis.” A “democratic basis,” in this context, means socialist rule. Cultural policy, according to the document, is important for turning people “into true democrats” who can facilitate that reunification.\textsuperscript{249} Wagner’s work could accomplish this. It could invoke a sense of pride in Germany’s past. SED bureaucrats believed that if they deployed Wagner’s operas correctly as part of a broader portfolio of nationalist and socialist music, they could turn Wagner’s music into a symbol of, and justification for, the new communist state.\textsuperscript{250}

\textsuperscript{244} Applegate. "Introduction: Music among the Historians."
\textsuperscript{245} Kelly, Imagining Richard Wagner.”
\textsuperscript{246} Thacker, 4.
\textsuperscript{247} Applegate and Potter, “Introduction,” 29.
\textsuperscript{248} Ibid. 31.
\textsuperscript{250} David Tompkins. "Orchestrating Identity: Concerts for the Masses and the Shaping of East German Society." German History 30, no. 3. 2012, 412-428.
In order to evaluate how SED musical policy was implemented, we need to examine how people interacted with Wagner’s operas “on the ground.” Most scholarship has focused on SED officials’ intent in deploying Wagner. These studies tend to examine, almost exclusively, the meetings, writings, and dictates of the various SED cultural ministries, especially the German Agency for Concerts and Guest Performances (Deutsche Konzert- und Gastspieldirektion, or DKV). Yet they do not detail how the GDR interacted with its citizens directly. There is little discussion of how exactly the GDR promoted and framed Wagner for its people in the 1950s. Was the nationalizing mission a success? More importantly from the state’s perspective, was it able to establish Wagner’s music as supporting socialist rule and the SED? This chapter investigates whether Wagner was deployed effectively as a cultural tool for creating national unity in the GDR. The results were mixed, at best. People saw Wagner operas, they wrote about Wagner, and they certainly had opinions of Wagner. Wagner was again portrayed as a national icon. In this sense, the GDR may have been successful in utilizing nationalism to garner legitimacy. However, the state’s efforts were in many ways also half-hearted. The SED did not completely micromanage performances and the writing about those performances to keep them in line with official ideology. They rarely pushed the line that Wagner’s opera was socialist at heart. Even in newspapers and periodicals that were heavily censored (some were even run by the by state), the Party’s interpretation of his work did not always come across clearly. This seems to confirm David Tompkins’ conclusions about musical policy in the GDR. Although the

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252 Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”
state had ambitious goals for culture—it hoped to use art as a means of gathering legitimacy—evidence tends to show that the state’s ability to influence public interpretations of cultural material was limited.\[^{254}\]

There are two primary ways that people can experience an opera, including its music, plot, production, and, of course, its composer. They can either view the opera, or they can read about it. People can also form opinions through discussion, internal deliberation, or preconceived notions. Since those latter metrics are nearly impossible to measure or evaluate in a meaningful way, this chapter uses performances and writings to gauge just how deeply the GDR’s redeployment of Wagner penetrated into East German daily life.

Seeing a Wagner opera is certainly the most direct way to develop opinions about his music and its meaning. The DKV knew this. “Concerts,” for the agency, “were considered crucial in motivating citizens and forming a national and socialist identity, and therefore cultural officials worked hard to assert control over them.”\[^{255}\] The DKV directly put on or otherwise supervised over 20,000 concerts, with 6.35 million spectators, in 1952. In 1953, those numbers increased to 35,000 concerts and 12 million viewers.\[^{256}\] The state clearly exercised discretion over when and where the East German people could view Wagner operas. How much access to Wagner did they allow? Kupfer’s data is useful here. One would expect to see a limited number of performances at first, as denazification policies gave way to an increased emphasis on nationalism, and as the DKV was building up its capacity to promote its cultural vision. Furthermore, one would expect the earlier years of the SED’s rule to focus heavily on national music. In the early 1950s, the Party was still developing its relationship to the people, and its

\[^{254}\] Tompkins.
\[^{255}\] Ibid.
\[^{256}\] Ibid.
position vis-à-vis the Federal Republic. In this more tumultuous time, it would have been logical for the regime to put more resources and energy into developing a range of nationalist justifications for its rule and its claim to “Germanness.” Indeed, Kupfer’s data bears this out. Appendix I shows the total number of Wagner performances, by opera season, throughout the GDR in the 1950s. The number of performances ramps up quickly, peaks right around the middle of the decade, and then begins to settle around 100-200 performances per year. The DKV was clearly successful, then, in disseminating nationalist material as the situation changed. As the new state attempted to establish its cultural bona fides, this specific apparatus played an important role.

Was this push to get people to see Wagner accessible throughout the country? One shortcoming of the newspapers evaluated later in this chapter is that they tend to focus their reporting on Berlin. Reading these publications, one gets the sense Berlin was the epicenter of life for a Wagner fan in East Germany. This was not the case, however. Wagner’s operas were staged in at least twenty-four different cities in the GDR. Appendix II shows the geographical distribution of Wagner performances from 1949 to 1960, displaying only the towns and cities that had at least fifty performances. Cities (Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, and Weimar, for example) had the most performances, but that is because those performances reached the most people. In Appendix III, which includes every town with even a handful of Wagner performances, one gets a sense of how thorough the DKV was. People from Altenburg to Stralsund were able to see Wagner operas in this formative period. In this sense, then, the regime’s cultural policy was quite successful with respect to Wagner. East Germans were again exposed to Wagner’s

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257 For the raw data, see Kupfer, 2012.
controversial work. SED rule did not wash away nationalist music. Those who wanted to see Wagner or took pride in his work could see that the socialist regime had ties to Germany’s artistic past.

Yet the data only reveals so much. It reveals only the raw number of performances. Kupfer does not have access to attendance data or detailed descriptions of what occurred at most of these performances. Cultural writing can help bridge the gap, and provides a tool for evaluating just how the people perceived Wagner under their new government. Much of this cultural discussion took place in the major newspapers and magazines of the GDR. These publications were another medium through which the East German public experienced culture, and they allow a more in-depth qualitative analysis. Using the archives of three East German newspapers—Neue Zeit, Berliner Zeitung, and Neues Deutschland—I examine how people reacted to the Party’s rehabilitation of Wagner. Their writers wrote often about culture. Many took an explicit interest in music. In many editions, long editorials about particular artists or reviews of marquee concerts would run side-by-side with important political news. In one notable case, a long column about Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner’s 1950 visit to Dresden was directly adjacent to an article titled “The Soviet Union today and tomorrow.”260 This piece, with its sweeping headline, featured a photo of Stalin casting a ballot in Moscow, and declares the Communist Party’s victory in the Soviet elections, receiving 99.98% of the vote. This was critical news, and it was news that the SED government certainly wanted to share with its people. An article about the Wagner grandsons was deemed worthy of similar attention.

The quote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates perhaps the best-case result for the Party’s musical planners. Heino Lüdicke, an opera critic, who wrote often in Neue Zeit,

triumphantly declared Wagner’s return to the German music scene in 1958.\textsuperscript{261} After almost a
decade of widely accessible Wagner operas, this was not a surprising conclusion. Yet Lüdicke
enthusiastically advocated for Wagner as the paramount and unparalleled German composer. He
argued that Wagner had exerted a profound influence on music even after his death, continuing
to Lüdicke’s own day.\textsuperscript{262} Wagner’s Romantic ideology, his concept of total art
\textit{(Gesamtkunstwerk)}, and his structuring of opera with musical ideas that span the work
\textit{(Leitmotiven)} all outlived the composer himself and continued to influence German, and
international, opera. Lüdicke’s conclusion was unapologetically triumphalist. Despite the best
efforts of the Nazis to compromise the composer’s legacy, “the old catchphrase, ‘no more
Wagner,’ often proclaimed (…) has not come to pass.”\textsuperscript{263}

Indeed, Wagner’s legacy lived on in the GDR. The sheer number of articles that mention
or discuss Wagner across these three papers is overwhelming. Between 1949 and 1959, the name
“Richard Wagner” appears 705 times across the three papers.\textsuperscript{264} This does not include passing
references, which simply use the composer’s iconic last name. Yet did others share Lüdicke’s
enthusiasm? Few authors used the same bombastic rhetoric. Some did, however, discuss Wagner
with reference to nationalist tropes. Some declared his work to be uniquely or quintessentially
German. Others argued that his work is superior to his competitors and contemporaries. An
article from \textit{Neues Deutschland} critiqued the \textit{Komische Oper Berlin}’s March, 1950 performance

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Lüdicke, “Der Meister von Bayreuth.”
\item “Unmittelbar oder mittelbar geht vieles, was sich im Reich der Töne nach Wagners Tod
began, auf ihn zurück.”
\item “Das modische Schlagwort “Nieder mit Wagner", oftmals proklamiert, (…) hat sich nicht
bewahrheitet.”
\item Search conducted in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin DDR-Presse archive. Online:
http://zefys.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/ddr-presse/suchergebnisse/
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
of *The Barber of Seville* by Rossini.\(^{265}\) Although the opera was “blissful” and “amusing” (“köstlich,” “unterhaltsam”)—and the author was quick to note that these characteristics make *Barber* uniquely “Italian”—it lacked any subtle revolutionary qualities (“revolutionärer Hintergründigkeit”), any moral fortitude. Citing Wagner’s own writings, the author took a shot at the light-hearted fare of *Barber*. Although not going as far as Wagner, who likened Rossini to a parasite,\(^{266}\) the author did wish that the *Komische Oper’s* director, Walter Felsenstein, would have staged more “revolutionary productions” (“revolutionäre Inszenierung”), imparting educational experiences onto the masses.

Right around this time, the *Deutsche Staatsoper* was undergoing a period of transformation, performing in a new state and with a grand new theater in the works. Karl Schönewolf, “one of the best-known music critics of East Germany,”\(^{267}\) penned an editorial in *Neues Deutschland*, where he weighed in on what the *Staatssop*er should be performing.\(^{268}\) He was evidently quite unhappy with their early selections. He called the repertoire “effeminate” (“weichlich”), “insubstantial” (“gehaltlos”) and “kitschy” (“verkitscht”). Schönewolf was particularly concerned with the recent performance of Debussy’s *Pelleas and Melisande*. He drew a direct contrast between this opera and *Tristan and Isolde*, which he praised for its “aggressive pathos,” which, in his mind, was typical of German operas.\(^{269}\) Capping his criticism

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\(^{266}\) *Ibid.* The author quoted Wagner, but did not echo the composer’s sentiments: “Richard Wagner traf den soziologischen Tatbestand genau, wenn er schrieb, Mozart habe ‘einer hoffnungsvoll strebenden Zeit’ angehört, Rossini dagegen nur einer ‘Parasitenumgebung’.”


\(^{269}\) “Das agressive Pathos des deutschen Musikdramatikers.”
of the Opera’s program, Schönewolf complained that the first Wagner opera that the 
*Staatsoper* was considering was *Parsifal*. For Schönewolf, *Parsifal* was the furthest-removed opera from 
Wagner’s *oeuvre*. It was not representative of the aggressive and manly (as opposed to 
effeminate) pathos that characterized his other work. Indeed, when *Parsifal* first opened, the 
*Staatsoper* was careful to emphasize to the East German press that its decision to stage the opera 
did not reflect any ideological commitment (“weltanschauliches Bekenntnis”) to Wagner.270 
Rather, *Parsifal* was important to the company because of its historical meaning and place in the 
development of German opera. This was not a neutral position; it very much constituted an 
attempt to place GDR opera in the historical continuity of German opera. Schönewolf’s article 
relies on an even more nationalist conception of Wagner as the prototypical nationalist icon. To 
tie the critique together, he concludes on an even stronger note. He implores the *Staatsoper* to 
stage works that “speak to the present, speak the voice of the people.”271 Appealing to the 
collective *Volk* so soon after the fall of Hitler is making a profound statement. Schönewolf is 
appealing to an unmistakability and deeply nationalist conception of German opera in his 
defense of Wagner.

These critics stand out. The vast majority of writing on Wagner in the 1950s was far 
more subdued in its nationalism. Given the state’s control of the press, this shows that the GDR 
sought a somewhat moderate approach. Much of it did not invoke nationalist imagery or 
vocabulary at all. Many of the articles in these publications displayed a “softer” nationalism with 
regard to Wagner, a pride in his work that was measured, sometimes to the point where it barely 
came through in the text. Yet pride in Wagner was certainly palpable. Even in short, descriptive 
pieces, a rehabilitation of Wagner’s image was evident. One example is a paragraph-long blurb

270 “Der weltflüchtige Parsifal Oster-Premiere in der Deutschen Staatsoper.” *Neues Deutschland.* 
271 “Spricht die Gegenwart, spricht die Stimme eines Volkes.”
about the first East German performance of *Parsifal* since World War II.\textsuperscript{272} This was the same performance, staged by the *Staatsoper*, which Karl Schönewolf harshly criticized. The writing was very much descriptive, but two sections stand out. First, the headline was “Wagner in new light” (“Wagner im neuen Licht”), implying a new beginning for the nationalist composer, who was being transformed by the state into a socialist icon. Second, the author described the production as a “new” performance, rather than simply the first performance since the war. Both of these short phrases suggested that a page has turned, and Wagner has returned to the social/political/cultural mainstream in East Germany.

Many similar clues dot these writings. In another article about the *Staatsoper’s* performance of *Pelleas and Melisande*, a *Neue Zeit* journalist interviewed Ernst Legal, the opera’s director.\textsuperscript{273} Legal, trying to refute criticism, compared Debussy’s work to a natural cultural referent: Wagner. He argued that *Pelleas and Melisande* was one of the more important and compelling works of opera produced after Wagner’s death.\textsuperscript{274} These comparisons to Wagner demonstrate that his work was seen as a yardstick with which to measure other operas. Wagner was the gold standard. He was still the epitome of what German composers and opera directors should strive for. It should come as little surprise, then, that the *Staatsoper* chose *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as the inaugural performance for its new theater.\textsuperscript{275} The opera company progressively embraced Wagner’s full *oeuvre* throughout the 1950s, but this particular

\textsuperscript{272}“Wagner im neuen Licht.” *Neue Zeit*. Jahrgang 6, Ausgabe 83, Seite 2. 7. April 1950.
\textsuperscript{274} *Pelleas and Melisande* “ist eines der bedeutendsten und persönlichsten Werke des musikalischen Theaters nach Richard Wagner.”
development nevertheless bore a special significance. Built directly on the main boulevard of Unter den Linden in Berlin, *Neues Deutschland* describes the new facility as “one of the most beautiful opera houses in the world.” Chapter Six will show why the specific choice of *Meistersinger* was meaningful: the opera is perhaps Wagner’s most overtly nationalist composition. Yet the choice of any Wagner piece at all is telling. The main East German opera company was putting the composer front-and-center in one of its most important events of the decade.

The article about Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner’s visit to Dresden also displays hints of nationalist pride. The writer seems to have been touting East Germany’s cultural importance, and centering Wagner’s legacy in East rather than West Germany. Wieland and Wolfgang’s trip was part of a cultural tour of the GDR. They were traveling, supposedly, with a group called “Friends of the Artists for German Unity” (*Freundeskreis der Künstler für Deutschlands Einheit*). Their goal, according to the author, was to “educate themselves” about the artistic history of Dresden. Surely, for a nation seeking ties to Wagner, a cultural visit from his own grandsons was a substantial victory. The fact that the newspapers did not cover this event more demonstrates how conflicted Wagner was as a figure. The press oscillates between an embrace of his importance and a measured reluctance to write too much about him.

There were many similar articles. When a new theater was built in Magdeburg, *Neue Zeit* proclaimed it a tribute to Wagner’s legacy, since the composer had worked in that city. The newspaper described a “large tradition” of Wagner in Magdeburg, although in actuality the

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276 “‘Tristan und Isolde’ in der Deutschen Staatsoper.” *Neues Deutschland.*
277 “Eines der schönsten Opernhäuser der Welt.”
278 “Wagners Enkel besuchen Dresden. *Neues Deutschland.*
279 “Sich über die künstlerische Entwicklung der Stadt zu unterrichten.”
280 “Hier wirkte einst Richard Wagner.” *Neue Zeit.*
composer’s time there lasted only about a year. The same paper published a glowing review of
Die Walküre, which was performed in Berlin in 1951, after a long absence from the city’s opera
scene.281 The critic raved about the performance, and, invoking Wagner again as a gold standard,
proclaimed: “real Wagnerian splendor shone from the orchestra”!282 “Real Wagnerian splendor”
was very much an appeal to an idealized past: spectacular and certainly very German. The author
was not peddling nationalist propaganda, of course, but traces of that ideology are visible; the
author painted Wagner painted as an ideal-type, a national composer with a long, storied, and
continuing tradition.

Other East German writers display flashes of their respect for Wagner in even less
straightforward ways. Of particular note are two articles by Harry Steen, an East German writer
and occasional Neue Zeit contributor. Written five years apart, in 1950 and 1955, his two essays
both showed a similar relationship to Wagner: one of guarded but discernible reverence. His first
piece, “The famous guest” (“Der berühmte Gast”), was a somewhat bizarre story about Wagner
visiting the mayor of a small German town.283 Besides its premise, which is inherently flattering
to the late composer, the short story praised Wagner in other subtle ways. For example, Steen
describes Tannhäuser as “the opera of which the entire world now speaks.”284 Throughout the
prose, Steen refers to Wagner simply as “the master” (“der Meister”). At other times he is “the
big spirit in German music.”285 The town mayor’s meeting with Wagner’s ghost ends with the
entire town demanding a performance of Tannhäuser. The mayor complies and the people,
having heard the Master’s work, are satisfied. Steen was suggesting something quite interesting

23. Februar 1951.
282 “Echt wagnerischen Glanz strahlte das Orchester.”
284 “[Da]von (…) jetzt alle Welt spreche.”
285 “Der groß Geist der deutschen Musik.”
in this article: that the East German people had a demand for Wagner’s national operas, and that they may not have been getting enough from the SED censors.

In his latter article, “Heart of the German spirit,” Steen similarly glorified Wagner. This essay was closer to historical fiction than the fantasy of his first piece. Steen wrote about the history of the castle at Wartburg in Thuringia, an extremely important landmark in German history. Martin Luther hid there while avoiding arrest from the Catholic German princes. Steen recounts and fictionalizes Leo Tolstoy’s visit to the castle, which actually did occur in 1857. Steen wrote that all Tolstoy had heard about German culture as he entered Thuringia were references to the “new, intense, controversial opera Tannhäuser.” Clearly Steen did not know that Wagner was Tolstoy’s frame of reference for Germany, but his decision to focus on Wagner here reflected a very important judgment about what constituted the core of German culture at this time. Side-by-side with Wagner, Steen told the stories of other German heroes with connections to the castle, such as Luther and Goethe. Steen praised Luther explicitly for facilitating unity and the creation of a single German identity: Luther circulated his standard German translation of the Bible, which helped break down regional dialects and increase communication across the various German principalities. Finally, while comparing Tolstoy’s trip to Germany with his visits to France and the Netherlands, Steen noted that Germany is unique, because only in Germany could Tolstoy experience “pure humanness, in word and in deed.”

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287 “Die neue, heftige, umstrittene Oper ‘Tannhäuser’.”
288 These figures also have substantial meaning in German cultural history. Both have strong ties to conceptions of German nationalism. See, for example: Brent O. Peterson. 2009. "Between National Fantasies and Regional Realities: The Paradox of Identity in Nineteenth-Century German Literature (Review)." Monatshefte 101 (1): 120-122.
289 “Reinem Menschtum (…) im Wort und in der Tat.”
The entire essay was an ode to Romantic, united German culture. Wagner stood proudly at its center.

Many authors in the East German cultural press allowed traces, if not outright endorsements, of Wagnerian nationalism, to come through in their commentary. Yet it would be a mistake to overstate this effect. The overwhelming majority of articles on Wagner either mention him in passing, review Wagner shows with little more than technical detail, or write plainly and simply about his biography. This was not necessarily a rebuke to the DKV’s mission to claim Wagner as a socialist hero. Around the middle of the decade, as Wagner operas were being shown most frequently (Appendix I), the majority of newspaper writings about Wagner were concert listings. This can be seen as a success for the regime: newspapers were advertising Wagner operas, increasing the chance that the people would attend. The overall paucity of discourse about Wagner with an explicit socialist frame, however, should generate some skepticism about the extent of the DKV’s success. In some rare cases, in fact, East German newspapers were explicitly reluctant to endorse Wagner. For example, one Neue Zeit editorial in 1951 defiantly proclaimed a new “master of dramatic song”: Giuseppe Verdi. Verdi and Wagner were famously adversaries, rivals in the production of Romantic opera, who had few kind words to say about each other. It is somewhat striking, then, to see a newspaper that also published Steen’s essays lavish such praise on the Italian composer. This inconsistency itself also demonstrates just how rarely the GDR’s vision for Wagner-as-socialist hero truly caught on. Perhaps most meaningfully, the editorialist in this article described Verdi as both the greatest master (“der größte Meister) of opera, and as a man of the people (“ein Kind des Volkes”), an extremely meaningful compliment in the lexicon of socialist ideology, one that could have been

reserved for the German Wagner. Wagner’s grip on the East German nationalist imaginary was
hardly total. It may not even have been strong.

Thus far, the analysis of East German writing about Wagner has yielded mixed
conclusions. The SED, through its musical arm, the DKV, was able to propagate an image of
Wagner as a cultural icon. In many cases, and despite the ever-present specter of the Nazi past,
East German periodicals again began to speak of Wagner in both overtly and covertly nationalist
terms. However, this was certainly not the overwhelming norm. Another substantial limit
hampered the SED’s efforts. The regime was not easily able to associate Wagner with socialism
in these publications. When promoting Wagner as a national hero, the DKV had a broad
reservoir of cultural memory to draw upon.291 In order to fully own Wagner’s legacy, and to
wrest it from their Western neighbor (home to both Bayreuth and the Wagner grandchildren),
however, the Party needed to fuse socialism into the myth of Wagner.292 Besides the occasional
reference to Wagner’s relationship with the Volk, few traces of this linkage can be found in the
East German press. This suggests further limitations on the regime’s deployment of Wagner.
Only three articles showed strong traces of the Wagner-socialism connection. First was Karl
Schönewolf’s essay, which has already been analyzed at length.293 Schönewolf was far more
concerned with reviving a strongly nationalist vision of German opera, but his concern for the
Volk also demonstrated socialist affinities. Second, Hans Borgelt, an East German film director,
wrote about Wagner’s time in Dresden. Borgelt concludes that Wagner’s revolutionary period

291 Celia Applegate. "What is German Music? Reflections on the Role of Art in the Creation of
292 Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”
293 Schönewolf, “Klingendes Museum oder Volksoper?”
“was a matter of the heart” (“war die Revolution Herzenssache”).\textsuperscript{294} This may have been an attempt to bolster Wagner’s socialist bona fides. Third, and perhaps most interestingly, one article explicitly outlined, in great detail, the ideological foundation for the SED’s resuscitation of Wagner.\textsuperscript{295} Discussing the \textit{Staatsoper}’s first performance of \textit{Parsifal}, the author writes that the performance is not anything like the propagandized productions of Hitler’s time. Rather, Wagner was a “bold revolutionary” (kühner Revolutionär”). The Dresden years are invoked again, proving that they were crucial to the SED’s effort to reframe Wagner’s politics. This performance of \textit{Parsifal}, in the author’s view, was meant to bring Wagner back to his revolutionary roots. The article directly and unapologetically promoted socialism, the music of the people, and Wagner’s revolutionary character. It ended, in fact, with praise for the Soviet Union. The author believed that Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk and Russia’s musical tradition are aligned on the most profound issues of nature.\textsuperscript{296} The author called for more connections between the Soviet and East German musical cultures. These pieces are surprising for their blunt approach to Wagner and socialism. Given the regime’s heavy hand in controlling the press, it is surprising how rarely such articles appeared.

This chapter has examined how the public viewed Wagner’s legacy in the GDR. The GDR government, through its music bureaucracy, the DKV, was determined to portray Wagner in a new light, to rehabilitate his image as a national hero. Simultaneously, the regime hoped to make its peoples’ view of Wagner consistent with its governing ideology: socialism. The regime wanted to draw this connection in order to position itself as the rightful heir to German culture,

\textsuperscript{296} “Die inneren Beziehungen zwischen dem musikdramatischen Gesamtkunstwerk Richard Wagners und dem russischen Geistesleben sind viel tieferer Natur, als es allemein bekannt ist.”
to strengthen its claim to reunification on its own terms, and especially to combat the Federal Republic’s efforts to secure the same cultural material. For the East German government, the results of this effort were decidedly mixed. It may have accomplished the first goal: fostering nationalism. The SED aggressively promoted Wagner concerts and writing about the composer. Much of this writing sought to revive Wagner’s image as a legitimate, respectable German composer. However, the SED was less thorough in tying its socialist project to Wagner’s operas. The state’s music bureaucrats did not lay a strong claim to Wagner’s legacy in socialist terms. They did not use the press, which was ostensibly under their control, to push for the vision of Wagner-as-socialist that could have thoroughly cemented their claim to Wagner’s legacy.
V. “Zero Hour” at Bayreuth: Rehabilitating Wagner in the Federal Republic of Germany

“There is only a present, only a here and now.”
--- Wieland Wagner297

Hier gilt’s der Kunst. (Here is for art)
--- Bayreuth Festival Program, 1951298

The geographic focal point of Richard Wagner’s legacy lies in Bayreuth, a mid-sized town in Upper Franconia, Bavaria. It was here that Wagner, with King Ludwig II’s backing, designed his ideal theater for staging music dramas: the Festspielhaus. Wagner lived out most of his final years at Bayreuth. He is buried there. Bayreuth is very much intertwined with Wagner, and Wagner with Bayreuth, in the eyes of academics and observers alike.299 Starting in 1876, the town became home to the annual Bayreuth Festival, a world famous celebration of Wagner and his work. The tradition continued uninterrupted through the Wilhelmine Empire and the Weimar Republic. Under National Socialism, the Festival was more important than ever. Adolf Hitler, a fanatical Wagner fan, and close friend of Winifred Wagner, was a frequent attendee. In 1945, as the Americans occupied Bavaria and implemented their vision of cultural denazification, the Festival was banned. Makeshift assemblages of orchestras and singers still occasionally performed Wagner at the Festspielhaus during the occupation, often as a way to entertain the American GIs garrisoned at nearby military bases.300 Yet it was only in 1951—two years after the Federal Republic of Germany became a formal, independent state—that the Bayreuth Festival began again. Scholars often refer to the historic 1951 performance and the subsequent

297 Quoted in Furness, 187.
299 Applegate, “Saving Music.”
300 Thacker, 17.
Festivals as “New Bayreuth.” In many ways, it represented a fundamental break from the past. The town had become, by Hitler’s time, a paramount symbol of German nationalism. This association is explained at length in Chapter Three. The New Bayreuth Festivals, which experimented with radical new production styles and often explicitly aimed to depoliticize Wagner’s work, were a new direction for Wagner’s work. On the other hand, one could view New Bayreuth as a profound continuity with previous Festivals. The FRG’s new government, aiming to rally public and international support against its Eastern rival, had little incentive to change Bayreuth’s status as a place of German power and pride.

This chapter analyzes the first several years of New Bayreuth’s existence. Given the importance of Bayreuth in German collective memory, the Festival represented a key arena in which the FRG crafted its relationship to Wagner’s legacy. Reviving the Festival was a crucial legitimizing tactic of the West German regime. It was, in many ways, an explicit attempt to connect the Federal Republic to the cultural material of Imperial Germany. Yet staging the Festival again also required a balancing act, similar to the GDR’s efforts to rehabilitate Wagner. Bayreuth’s new directors—Wagner’s grandsons Wieland and Wolfgang—seriously changed the style of opera productions at the Festspielhaus. By doing so, they were able to distance their productions from some of the more nefarious connotations of Wagner’s music. The chapter proceeds as follows. The first two sections trace both sides of the balance that the FRG had to traverse. The first examines the importance of Bayreuth for German national consciousness in order to define its status as a nationalist symbol. The second section looks at how the FRG reacted to its Nazi past. It examines the concept of Stunde null, or “zero hour,” the view that the new state represented a mostly-clean break from the past, as well as a blank slate for German

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politics and culture. This view was important in shaping cultural policy in the FRG, and it was the lynchpin of the argument for why Wagner could be revived after Nazism. The third section demonstrates how these two crosscurrents intersected at Bayreuth. It examines the Festivals in the 1950s to show how the FRG hoped to embrace Wagner’s music while avoiding the way that the Nazis used it. By examining accounts of the performances, it becomes clear that this redeployment was largely successful, insofar as West Germany was able to claim a new, but still fundamentally German, Bayreuth Festival within its borders. Consistent with the oft-demonstrated pattern of cultural competition between the two Germanies, the GDR did not allow the FRG unfettered access to the Festival. The final section of this chapter explores the East German Richard-Wagner-Festwoche (Wagner festival week) at Dessau. The Festwoche began in 1953, and represented a direct response to New Bayreuth. This instance of dueling festivals demonstrates the intense competition for cultural legitimacy between the two states. It confirms the broader thesis that both governments were concerned with fostering nationalism as a means of solidifying their power.

Bayreuth as a Space of Memory

Previous chapters have shown that Richard Wagner’s operas are crucial materials in the construction of a German nationalist culture. The spaces in which they are performed are just as important. Generally, political scientists, cultural anthropologists, and others have studied at length the importance of spaces and rituals in processes of identity formation. Populations

302 Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”
often designate as national landmarks specific places with historical significance. Rituals play this role as well. These acts create feelings of community among populations across geographic space, facilitating the rise of national consciousness. Bayreuth has double the power as a symbol: it is both a place and a ritual—it is home to Wagner’s Festival. Further, Bayreuth holds a truly unique place among symbolic spaces: its ties to German nationalism have always been particularly profound.\textsuperscript{305} As the cultural historian Frederic Spotts succinctly puts it: “Wagner without Bayreuth would have been like a country without a capital, a religion without a Church.”\textsuperscript{306}

Wagner’s legacy is closely intertwined with Bayreuth for several reasons. First, the Bayreuth Festival, almost since its inception, has been a national and international phenomenon with strong public and private support. For opera devotees, a trip to the Bayreuth Festival is often described as a “pilgrimage.” This speaks to the place’s power as a site of cultural production; the Festspielhaus is considered a preeminent venue to watch and hear opera.\textsuperscript{307} Its status is global in nature; people from across the world want to attend the Festival. The American author Mark Twain, on a visit to Bayreuth in 1891, wrote extensively about opera enthusiasts’ fierce devotion to the town. His essay, full of humor and sarcasm, nevertheless demonstrates just how important the Festival was early in its life, and in the eyes of an American visitor. Describing the immense popularity of the Festival, Twain cautions his readers:

If you are living in New York or San Francisco or Chicago or anywhere else in America, and you conclude, by the middle of May, that you would like to attend the Bayreuth opera two months and a half later, you must use the cable and get about it immediately or you

\textsuperscript{305} Gregor, 835.
will get no seats, and you must cable for lodgings, too. Then if you are lucky you will get seats in the last row and lodgings in the fringe of the town. If you stop to write you will get nothing.  

Even today, this is no understatement. Demand for tickets to the Bayreuth Festival has been overwhelming throughout its existence. It was, and largely remains, very much a haute-bourgeois event. As early as Twain’s time, the world’s preeminent luminaries and celebrities vied for a seat at Bayreuth. During his visit, the guests included not only “people (...) from all corners of America,” but also a variety of Europe’s aristocracy: “imperial princesses,” “princes,” “czars,” “and their sort.” For over a century, the Festival has been simultaneously a social event and an almost-religious experience for Wagner fans. Twain, observing his fellow opera-goers in 1891, writes that many seemed to be experiencing “a sort of divine ecstasy.” These same people view Wagner as a “deity, his stage a temple, the works of his brain and hands consecrated things, and the partaking of them with eye and ear a sacred solemnity.” As the Festival evoked intense passion among its attendees, and even among the hopeful listeners who were not even afforded an opportunity to attend, Bayreuth quickly became a proud symbol of German culture unlike any other.

Second, Bayreuth has special qualities as a performance space. The unique features of the Festspielhaus help magnify the content of Wagner’s operas: the epic set designs, the lengthy, bombastic overtures, and the massive scale of his mythological dramas. Since the Festspielhaus was built specifically to stage his productions, Bayreuth is the essential site where both his visual and aural aesthetics can be performed at their full degree. These aesthetics themselves are a

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critical part of how Wagner’s operas create a sense of Germanness. As explained in Chapter One, the grand mythological imagery of Wagner’s operas creates the idea of German identity as natural and timeless. Bayreuth stretches Wagner’s aesthetics to their limit; it fulfills their purpose to the greatest possible degree. The thrill of attending an opera at Bayreuth, or even watching a recording, can foster the sense of national pride that Wagner hoped to instill in his viewers.

Finally, Bayreuth is a national symbol because of the value of tradition. Regardless of the exact evolution of German perceptions of Bayreuth, its importance has been so oft repeated that it has become almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. The sheer amount of writing, rhetoric, and controversy surrounding Bayreuth and the Festival have turned it into a symbol of German nationalism—with all attendant connotations—regardless of Wagner’s or anyone else’s intent. It was only natural, then, that the Federal Republic, with Bayreuth squarely within its borders, would struggle with what to do with the site that held so much potential, but also so many liabilities from the Nazi years.

Stunde Null: West German Reaction to the Nazi Past

In order to understand how the FRG approached the Bayreuth issue, it is important to examine how the country dealt with the Nazi past more generally. This is, of course, a complex issue. There is no single answer to how West Germans came to terms with the past (to the extent that this process is even complete, another open question). Yet the idea of Stunde null, popular as it was in the West, helps explain how the FRG could both bring back the Bayreuth Festival, while also rejecting Hitler’s deep connection with the place and the event.

313 Uzelac.
314 See Berry, 675, for the best summary of this.
315 Berger, “Social History vs Cultural History,” 149.
West Germany, as soon as the Third Reich fell, faced a crisis of guilt. A large number of Germans, who were to become citizens of the FRG, either gave or carried out orders for massive human rights violations. Others were complicit, uninformed, or willfully ignorant of the atrocities their government was carrying out for years. After 1945, many Wehrmacht soldiers and other operatives returned to Germany. Many were conscripted, but they nevertheless fought for the losing side, for a genocidal government committed to European domination. At the end of the war, eight million Germans were listed as Nazi Party members. Their degree of involvement in the Party, of course, varied considerably. Except for Hitler, his military lieutenants, and high-level Party officials, there was no consensus on exactly who was culpable for the horrors of Nazi Germany. Nor was there consensus on how lower-ranked Nazis, even if guilty, should be held accountable. In the face of this dilemma, different ideologies began to take hold about how Germany, as a society, should move forward. There was no conceivable way to precisely assign blame without either overreaching or letting large swaths of people off the hook. Further, there were no easy answers about how to mend Germany’s collective consciousness. People wondered how one could be German in 1945, given the crimes committed in the name of Germany only a few years before. In East Germany, which featured a repressive government with a consistent, mandated policy of anti-fascism, society as a whole could avoid these questions of responsibility. In West Germany, with its plural political system, there was no easy way out.

*Stunde null* means “zero hour.” It was not an official doctrine of reconciling with the past. Rather, scholars looking back at the immediate post-war era use it to describe the way that West Germans rehabilitated their culture, politics, and ways of life. The idea of *Stunde null* is that 1949—the establishment of the FRG—marked a new beginning, a tabula rasa (blank slate),

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or a “zero hour” for West Germany and its citizens.\textsuperscript{317} While \textit{Stunde null} is used to describe the period beginning in 1949, there were signs of its ascendancy as a popular idea during the occupation. In the American Zone, the occupational authorities conducted detailed opinion surveys of the German population. These surveys shed light on how “ordinary” Germans chose to come to terms with the past.\textsuperscript{318} In a series of questionnaires administered during the Nuremberg Trials in 1945-1946, many respondents reported that they were unaware of their former government’s worst evils. In 1946, 57% of people said that they had first learned about the infamous concentration camps from the Trials.\textsuperscript{319} This shows people either actively denying their responsibility for genocide, or people who were truly kept in the dark. Either interpretation would make a \textit{tabula rasa} approach to the past attractive. In December 1946, 83% of 3,005 Germans asked said they “believed that both sides in World War II committed many crimes against humanity and peace.” In the same survey, 63% said “the German people were at least partly to blame for acts of the Hitler regime,” but only 28% “felt that the Germans were to blame for the outbreak of World War II.”\textsuperscript{320} In surveys carried out from 1945 to 1947, between 42% and 55% of respondents described National Socialism as “a good idea badly carried out.” In August 1947, 52% described it as “basically a good idea.”\textsuperscript{321} These results all show just how complicated collective responsibility was to assess. Many Germans did not agree with the notion that Germany was an agitator under Hitler. A good number of Germans also refused to accept the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{317}] Potter, 626.
\item[\textsuperscript{318}] I use “ordinary” with quotes here for two reasons. First, random sampling may not capture a representative cross-section of the population. Second, while discussing culpability for the Nazis’ crimes against humanity, there is no consensus on who should be considered “ordinary,” and hence complicit, versus “responsible,” and hence guilty.
\item[\textsuperscript{320}] \textit{Ibid}. 149.
\item[\textsuperscript{321}] \textit{Ibid}. 171-2. There is no sample size information available for these surveys.
\end{itemize}
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notion that their political project was flawed. Rather, they believed that National Socialism was sound, but poorly executed by their leaders.

Following from this, there was a tendency to place the bulk of the blame for Nazi crimes on the Party and military leadership. The parallel to this inclination was to sideline personal responsibility in favor of blaming a small number of prominent officials. This view of accountability was one of the building blocks for *Stunde null*, insofar as the FRG could claim a new beginning once the old leaders were effectively cleansed. One American military report, analyzing the opinion polling projects, summarizes this quite well:

> There is a tendency to hold individuals, especially Hitler, responsible for the regime’s atrocities. Strong contradictions are evident here. A review of the attitudes (cross-checking) shows that 84% of those who can still be regarded as National Socialists distance themselves from the person of Hitler.\(^{322}\)

Even self-identified former Nazis viewed themselves as innocent of the crimes of their regime. They chose instead to displace blame onto other individuals, or just Hitler alone. Given the prominence of such views in West German society, the concept of a clean break gained quick traction when the West German state came into existence.

This was especially true in music. As West Germans built the cultural character of their state, they had to decide what to do about culture under the Nazis: could art from the Nazi period ever be reused? A number of scholars have demonstrated that *Stunde null* was a particularly salient concept among the FRG’s cultural elite. Many opinion leaders and tastemakers, those with the wealth and influence to decide which shows would be performed or which songs would be played on the radio, believed in the possibility of a clean break. Pamela Potter describes a

“seamless transition” from the Nazi era to the FRG in German music. There were significant changes in concert programs as avant garde and other banned music was allowed back into Germany. There was not much of a corresponding effort to dispense with the music favored by the Nazis. According to Stefan Berger, West German cultural elites had a tendency to reference National Socialist “as the exception to an otherwise untainted national tradition” of Germanic music. The nationalist music so beloved by the Nazis, in this view, was not inherently problematic. Instead, it was merely deployed malevolently, for political purposes, and hence could be reclaimed. The same was true of the conductors, composers, and performers who created and performed music during the Nazi era. Many people in the FRG believed that these artists were not loyal to Hitler, but rather were tricked or forced into doing his work. Just like Hitler’s music, his artists could thus be salvaged at the zero hour. They could be cleansed of past associations and could start over in the new Germany.

**New Bayreuth**

The national importance of Bayreuth and the ideological tenants of Stunde null came together at the 1951 Bayreuth Festival. This was, indeed, a goal of the Federal Republic’s government. Reviving the Bayreuth Festival was an attempt to rehabilitate German nationalist music in an acceptable way. It is important to note that, although West German culture was not planned from the top as it was in the GDR, the government still played an active role in promoting a national culture. It was the government, after all, which made the decision to reopen the Festival after its six-year hiatus. The government openly backed the 1950 Bach Year,

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323 Potter, 626.
324 Thacker, 79.
326 Potter, 627.
providing funding and programmatic direction to the Göttingen celebration.\textsuperscript{327} Toby Thacker argues that government cultural initiatives had a major impact in shaping musical life in the FRG. A range of governmental actors took an active role in music: the individual town, city, and state governments all had cultural agencies. The federal Bundestag and Bundesrat each had committees on art and culture, and the executive branch, the Chancellery, regularly gave out money for favored musical projects, including the Bayreuth Festival.\textsuperscript{328} Thacker thus concludes: “in practice, there was an almost total political and societal consensus on music,” both created and sustained, in large part, by government intervention.\textsuperscript{329}

New Bayreuth, as a government-backed project, was a part of this consensus on music. Its stylistic innovations in performance represented a departure from Hitler’s association with Nazism, as well as continuity with his past status as national icon. They built on the cultural milieu of Stunde null in order to revive Wagner as a symbol of German unity. They attempted to claim Wagner’s legacy as the property, so to speak, of the FRG, as opposed to the GDR. Investigating these stylistic choices is crucial to understanding Bayreuth’s revived role as a national symbol in the FRG. As the performance style of music changes, so too does the way that people perceive the music, its composer, and its meaning.\textsuperscript{330} Examining performances, then, has much to tell us about how the FRG promoted Wagner.\textsuperscript{331}

In 1951, Richard Wagner’s grandsons, Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, took over the directorship of the Bayreuth Festival. Their goal in reopening the Festival was to honor their grandfather’s operas while cleansing them of associations with National Socialism. Given the

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\textsuperscript{327} Thacker, 148.
\textsuperscript{328} Thacker, 128.
\textsuperscript{329} \textit{Ibid.} 170.
\textsuperscript{330} \textit{Ibid.} 4.
\textsuperscript{331} Applegate, “Music Among the Historians.”
intimate ties between Nazism, including Hitler himself, and the Bayreuth Festival, this was a difficult task indeed.\textsuperscript{332} They went about creating New Bayreuth in several ways.

First, they made sure to clearly designate New Bayreuth as a break from the past. Consistent with the prominence of \textit{Stunde null} thinking, cultural critics throughout West Germany demanded a “new beginning for opera.”\textsuperscript{333} The Wagner brothers were happy to oblige them. They promised, in the lead-up to the Festival, a “cultural overhaul,” for which New Bayreuth would be the vanguard.\textsuperscript{334} They believed that the 1951 Festival would mark “a symbolic moment of new beginning, one performed on the tabula rasa of postwar West German cultural life.”\textsuperscript{335} As has been demonstrated, this message of a new beginning had broad-based appeal in the Federal Republic. It proved extremely popular among opera enthusiasts. Months before the Festival opened that summer, a wide range of people from Germany and abroad were clamoring for tickets. They included artists, opera critics, politicians of all stripes, workers, aristocrats, and even a number of known, prominent former Nazis.\textsuperscript{336} Following these people were members of the German and international media, as well as foreign dignitaries and diplomats.\textsuperscript{337} Wieland and Wolfgang were extremely careful when instructing their visitors about what to expect at their Festival. On the first page of the 1951 programs, each attendee found a note from the Wagner brothers: “In the interest of the smooth functioning of the Festival, we request that people refrain from discussions and debates of a political tilt. Here is for art. Signed,

\textsuperscript{333} “Neuanfang auf dem Musiktheater.” Glaser, 233.
\textsuperscript{334} “ein kultureller Neuanfang.” \textit{Ibid}. 9.
\textsuperscript{335} Gregor, 837.
\textsuperscript{336} Glaser, 233.
\textsuperscript{337} Gregor, 835.
the festival administrators.”338 This was an attempt at explicitly depoliticizing Bayreuth, the exact opposite tack that Hitler took with his attendance at the Festival.339 The idea was to re-center the Festival around the music, and shed the fascist associations that attached to Wagner during the Nazi era.

In the performances themselves, the Wagner brothers also broke substantially with past iterations of the Festival. Throughout the 1950s, they tested radically different staging techniques in order to frame Wagner’s opera as explicitly anti-fascist. Their experimental productions broke Hitler’s ties to Wagner, injecting avant garde aesthetics, which Hitler famously despised, into the operas. These productions focused on stripping the operas down to their bare minimum. The scores stayed the same, but Wieland and Wolfgang, along with a host of guest directors, tore out the ornate set and costume designs that Richard himself was so fond of.340 The directors worked with complex theories of lighting. Instead of changing sets, they altered stage lighting to provoke symbolic and emotional effects, substituting for the physical substitution of scenes.341 These techniques drew heavily from modernist art, itself a reaction to fascist grandiosity and realism.342 In many cases, the directors made extremely substantial and often controversial changes. Before some operas at New Bayreuth, the audience would file into the Festspielhaus to find an open curtain and a fully revealed stage. The show began not with a raising of the curtain, but with a

339 Ibid.
341 Ibid. 24.
light show during the overture, an extension of the Wagner brothers’ interest in light and shadow. As the 1950s went on, they became increasingly comfortable with minimalism. They made some changes that angered Wagner purists to no end. In some productions of the Ring cycle, for example, the Nibelungen (dwarves) were stripped of their hammers, and the giants of their clubs. The dwarf Hunding’s hut, a crucial location in the Ring plot, was missing on at least one occasion. Stage elements were “reduced to the barest essentials or replaced entirely,” and actors continued to wear simpler costumes, while gesturing less frequently to each other and the audience. All of these changes were substantial breaks from the past. Whereas the Nazis preferred a maximalist version of Wagner featuring costume and scenery at an epic scale, which evoked the great proportions of German myths, the directors at New Bayreuth embraced minimalism as a way of returning to the music. They also viewed minimalism as a way to return to Wagner’s original intent for his operas: not Baroque, exaggerated affairs, but rather deeply contemplative and emotional ones. This was all deeply consistent with Stunde null ideology. The new staging techniques were supposed to represent a new beginning, a new way to reconcile Wagner as a national musical icon with his tarnished reputation after National Socialism.

Two other phenomena, which began in 1951 at New Bayreuth, demonstrate its close linkages to both Stunde null thinking and the drive to rehabilitate Wagner’s reputation. First, despite previous efforts at denazification, prominent Nazis were present at Bayreuth and played prominent roles in the Festival. In 1951, Wilhelm Furtwängler conducted the orchestra at Bayreuth. Furtwängler was, and remains, mired in controversy over his extensive conducting career, which was built largely under the Nazis. Neil Gregor argues that “overwhelming

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343 Ibid. 145.
344 Ibid. 144-5.
345 Gregor, 838.
evidence” and “a vast body of scholarship” has proven that the conductor was “increasingly given to the nationalist and racist politics” of National Socialism.\(^{346}\) At the very least, even if not an active Nazi supporter, Furtwängler was “incontrovertibly” an anti-Semite, who was “prone to using the biological–racial language of the Third Reich.”\(^{347}\) Despite his actual and perceived ties to Hitler’s regime, he was invited to conduct at the first post-Nazi Bayreuth Festival. He was not the only one. Herbert von Karajan, a Nazi Party member, also conducted at Bayreuth in the early 1950s. The willingness to pardon these composers, and to let them refocus their talents on conducting Wagner’s music, is consistent with the \textit{Stunde null} ideology that drove many of the other production decisions at Bayreuth.\(^{348}\)

Second, the 1951 Festival opened in an important new way. Instead of diving right into the overture for \textit{Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg}, Furtwängler and the orchestra began instead with Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. The choice of the Ninth Symphony is revealing: it shows the two, sometimes contradictory, missions of the Festival directors: to spark again a sense of German pride at Bayreuth, and to avoid the hyper-nationalist excesses of Hitler and his followers. To speak to the latter part of that first, the Ninth Symphony is seen by many as a song of hope, universalism, and liberalism. Although the same symphony had yet to be performed in front of the ruins of the Berlin Wall in 1989, its connotations in the 1950s were, to many observers, similar. Ideas of universal humanism, fraternity, and progressivism were a part of the narrative surrounding Beethoven’s ultimate symphony.\(^{349}\) Shortly after this performance at Bayreuth, in fact, the European Economic Community, the precursor to the European Union, chose the \textit{chorale} from the Ninth as its anthem. On the other hand, the Ninth Symphony can also

\(^{346}\) \textit{Ibid}. 857.
\(^{347}\) \textit{Ibid}. 858.
\(^{348}\) \textit{Ibid}. 838.
\(^{349}\) \textit{Ibid}. 836.
be seen as a representation of German nationalism in music. As discussed in Chapter One, Beethoven has long been considered one of the crucial symbols of German national music. Wagner himself fought hard to link himself to the Germans’ memory of Beethoven. By calling for Beethoven’s most famous symphony to introduce Wagner’s operas, Wieland and Wolfgang retold the narrative of continuity between great German composers.\textsuperscript{350} Gregor, studying the musicological scholarship of the 1950s, argues that “conservative, nationalist traditions of Beethoven reception” had become the norm around the time the Festival reopened.\textsuperscript{351} He concludes that the decision to perform Beethoven, with Furtwängler at the helm, “betrayed clear echoes of the Wilhelmine residues which scholars have detected in the political culture of the 1950s.”\textsuperscript{352} This was, in many ways, a deeply nationalist performance.\textsuperscript{353} It was a kind of return-to-power for the famed succession of Germanic musicians, of which Beethoven and Wagner were both a part.

The FRG, with the help of Bayreuth directors Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner, were able to bring Richard Wagner back as a musical icon in West Germany. They were able to rejuvenate his monumental Festival, a critical part of his legacy as a nationalist musician. Utilizing the popular ideology behind \textit{Stunde null}, Wieland and Wolfgang produced Wagner operas that supposedly represented a clean break from the Nazi past. In this way, the FRG laid their claim to Wagner’s music, bolstering their social/historical claim to a German identity at the heart of their new state.

\textsuperscript{350} Ibid. 837.
\textsuperscript{351} Ibid. 855.
\textsuperscript{352} Ibid. 876.
The GDR Responds: The Dessau Festival

In 1953, two years after Bayreuth reopened, another Wagner Festival premiered in Dessau. Dessau, a mid-sized city in the heart of East Germany, was an odd choice of location for a Wagner Festival. Wagner had only been there once, near the end of his life. Although some opera houses in the city had been known for exemplary renditions of his work, there was not much, historically, that bound Wagner to Dessau. Cosima Wagner visited the city often, and she even conducted operas herself while there. Yet even she had to admit, when asked: "after Bayreuth, Dessau is where [Richard] Wagner's art is best cultivated, both stylistically and true to detail." The clause “after Bayreuth” is critical. Bayreuth was Wagner’s dream, his greatest creation. It still stands as the most prominent symbol of his life and work. Dessau, due mostly to Cosima’s efforts, became another, certainly lesser, place to see Wagner performed.

This did not deter the GDR’s musical planners. Noting the success and international acclaim surrounding New Bayreuth, they moved quickly to respond. The Dessau Festival represented the East’s refusal to cede exclusive control over important Wagner events to the West. The parallels to the Bach Year are shocking: both sides created Wagner Festivals in order to legitimate their claims to Wagner’s inheritance. The idea is almost elementary in its simplicity: because the West had a festival, the East had to have one as well. Elaine Kelly, in her essay "Imagining Richard Wagner: The Janus Head of a Divided Nation," examines a wide range of GDR government documents concerning the Dessau Festival. She substantiates this view of Bayreuth and Dessau in competition, concluding that Dessau was the GDR’s attempt to

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“[respond] to the challenge posed by Bayreuth with an Eastern alternative.”355 This Eastern alternative, with the goal of being a widely accepted alternative to Bayreuth, replicated many facets of the original Festival, while rejecting others. By examining the similarities and differences between the two, this section illuminates the ways in which the two German states struggled for cultural authority.

The two Festivals were unmistakably similar. Dessau replicated many aspects of Bayreuth. Many of these aspects were seen as important to staging a legitimate celebration of Wagner, so the GDR’s planners were willing to copy them almost exactly. Even the timing of the events was similar: Bayreuth was being held every August; the GDR decided to hold its Festival earlier each summer, in May. Both tried to hire well-known guest conductors to lead the performances. The theory was that retaining more accomplished conductors created a greater air of importance surrounding the events.356 The East German press focused on these guest conductors in almost every press release they issued before each Dessau Festival. They were always sure to note that the guest artists were “well-known.” The phrase “Bekannte Künstler” (“well-known artists” appears often in these articles, and is usually followed by an extensive list of each conductor’s accomplishments.357 This embellishment, while standard fare for event promotion anywhere, should be read in the context of Dessau’s competition with Bayreuth. The press, mostly controlled by the government, wanted East German readers to know that Dessau was a serious festival, featuring important and accomplished musicians, just like Bayreuth.

355 Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”
356 Ibid.
The programs were often similar at Bayreuth and Dessau. Both tried to play Wagner’s most famous works early and often. The *Ring* cycle premiered in the first year of both Festivals. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Wagner’s deeply and explicitly nationalist opera, was played often at both. Of course, this could have been merely coincidental: Wagner’s *oeuvre* only has so many operas. Yet another programmatic choice made at Dessau reveals the extent to which the GDR wanted to both model and compete with Bayreuth. The East German newspapers devote almost no ink to describing this, but in 1955, at the third Dessau Festival, one article notes that the proceedings “formally opened with Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony” (“Die III. Richard-Wagner-Festwochen des Landestheaters Dessau wurden mit Beethovens 9. Sinfonie feierlich eröffnet”). The 1956 Festival again opened with a performance of the Ninth. This suggests that using Beethoven to begin the Festival became a tradition in Dessau, just as it had in Bayreuth. Considering the ideological significance of the Ninth, and of Beethoven’s ties to Wagner, it was sensible for the Dessau directors to copy this practice from Bayreuth.

Another important similarity was the broad scope and purpose of the Festivals. Since Wagner’s lifetime, Bayreuth has been home to more than just a festival. Various journals and magazines devoted to music and culture, such as the ultra-nationalist *Bayreuth Blätter*, have been produced out of Bayreuth. The town also has an archive devoted entirely to Wagner’s life and work. In addition to its festival, then, the town is important because it is a focal point of Wagner study and research for academics. It is, year-round, the single best place to go in order to experience Wagner’s legacy. Dessau, without a comparable archive, could not hope to match Bayreuth’s status as an all-purpose headquarters for Wagner enthusiasts. The GDR did try,

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358 Littlejohn, “The Wagners.”
359 “Wagner-Festwochen in Dessau.” *Neue Zeit*.
however, to challenge Bayreuth in publishing. The fourth Dessau Festival, in 1956, saw the introduction of a new journal ("Festschrift"), published by the Dessau Theater (Landestheater-Dessau), which ran the city’s Festival. In describing the new periodical, the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* touted it as a “richly-illustrated publication with valuable essays on musical studies” ("eine reich-illustrierte Festschrift mit wertvollen musikwissenschaftlichen Abhandlungen").\(^{361}\) The *Festschrift* publishers’ stated goal was to research Wagner’s musical “legacy,” or “inheritance” ("Hinterlassenschaft").\(^{362}\) The Dessau planners aimed not only to put on an event rivaling Bayreuth’s. They also wanted an active voice in how Wagner’s memory was defined, something that Bayreuth already had, which gave the FRG an advantage in the fight over Wagner’s legacy.

While the GDR went to great lengths to build a comparable Festival to Bayreuth, its bureaucrats were also careful to distinguish their event from the West’s. They wanted to use Dessau as a tool in their mission to re-conceptualize Wagner for the GDR. As described in Chapter Four, they were dedicated to creating an image of Wagner as a socialist icon, a hero of the people. The productions at Dessau were crucial components of this effort. Indeed, according to Kelly, Dessau was seen by the GDR leadership as a “forum to mold a Wagner for the East.”\(^{363}\) The Dessau Festival first distinguished itself from Bayreuth simply by lasting longer and featuring more performances. The 1958 Festival, for example, featured three more full operas than Bayreuth did that year. That iteration showed twelve performances of ten different works in a mere two weeks.\(^{364}\) Describing the 1956 Festival, *Neues Deutschland* notes that the directors

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\(^{362}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{363}\) Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”

staged both *Parsifal* and *Meistersinger* twice.\(^{365}\) This was rare at Bayreuth, which generally featured one performance of each opera. The reason Dessau featured more operas was to portray itself as the more democratic event. More performances meant more opportunities for GDR citizens to see Wagner’s work.\(^{366}\) This practice was consistent with how the GDR tried to frame Wagner: as a revolutionary man of the people, a radical egalitarian who was a socialist before socialism’s time. In their internal communications, GDR planners continuously stressed how important it was that ticket prices for Dessau be affordable. In public, these same planners, often through the press, blasted Bayreuth for being elitist: it was framed as too expensive, too bourgeois, too international, and not German enough.\(^{367}\) There was certainly some truth to these accusations. They supported the GDR’s claim that Dessau was a “people’s theater.” Bayreuth, in contrast, was referred to in the East as a “court theater.”\(^{368}\)

The Dessau productions, significantly, did not adopt the *avant garde* staging techniques that were so popular at New Bayreuth. In fact, the Festival’s promoters often touted this as strength of Dessau, and a drawback of Bayreuth. This argument was consistent with broader socialist thinking on culture. Socialist art critics rejected *avant garde* and abstract aesthetics as too lofty and removed from the daily realities of working life. In their minds, performances such as Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner’s operas were neither useful to the majority of viewers, nor particularly meaningful to them.\(^{369}\) Thus, writers in the East often denounced the Bayreuth performances as “[manifestations] of the imperialist-capitalist Western spirit,” and untrue to the

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\(^{365}\) “Richard-Wagner-Festwochen in Dessau eröffnet.” *Neues Deutschland.*

\(^{366}\) Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”

\(^{367}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{368}\) *Ibid.*

\(^{369}\) See, for example, Heymann. “Kosmopolitismus und Formalismus.”
original spirit of Wagner’s work.\textsuperscript{370} This opinion was not universal. Some East German commentators actually quite admired the new “relevant” (“gültig”) productions.\textsuperscript{371} Yet the Dessau directors, determined to turn their Festival into a masthead for a new interpretation of Wagner, rejected the Western style wholeheartedly. The Dessau performances were more true to Wagner’s original designs, featuring naturalistic set designs and elaborate costumes.\textsuperscript{372} This was perhaps the greatest difference between the two Festivals, which were otherwise extremely similar.

Clearly, the Dessau/Bayreuth dynamic fit within a broader framework in FRG-GDR interactions. It was a clear instance, like the Bach Year, of competition for cultural inheritance. The GDR’s Culture Minister Johannes R. Becher demonstrated this clearly when he said, prior to the second Dessau Festival:

\begin{quote}
Nothing lies closer to the hearts of our creative artists than championing the unity of German culture and contributing in this way to the preservation of peace and the reunification of our fatherland. I am positive that this sentiment will come alive in all participants during the second Richard Wagner Festwoche in Dessau.\textsuperscript{373}
\end{quote}

Becher here explicitly ties the Dessau Festival to ideas of German reunification. This required the GDR to have a legitimate claim to being the inheritor of the German state. Music, as a crucial part of Germany’s inheritance, was a battleground to wrest that claim away from the FRG. The fact that the GDR found it necessary to start a parallel Festival also demonstrates why Bayreuth is so important in Germany’s collective consciousness. It shows why the FRG went through great lengths to fund the Bayreuth Festival and revive its prestige in 1951. When the two states were just establishing themselves, they needed badly to draw on nationalist sentiment for

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{370} Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”
\textsuperscript{372} Kelly, “Imagining Richard Wagner.”
\textsuperscript{373} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
support. At Bayreuth and Dessau, they found ways to tie themselves to Wagner, and thus to Germany’s rich national past.
Conclusion

“It is characteristic of the Germans that the question ‘what is German?’ never dies out among them.”

--- Friedrich Nietzsche

Even before Germany became a nation, thinkers, political leaders, and common people were considering the question of what it means to be “German.” The answer is multifaceted and fluid. Any number of factors can influence a person’s identity. Even more come into play when discussing collective identity, which is the cornerstone of a shared sense of nationality. The processes may be complicated, but the results are extremely significant. Nationalism can unite people behind a state. It can drive people to support the state, accept the state, and even fight for the state. In German history, widespread acceptance of the idea of German collectivity has been a major factor influencing everything from Unification to the Nazi atrocities to the Cold War divisions. An understanding of the processes that create and sustain collective identities is invaluable if historians hope to understand how Germany has come to where it is. It can provide insights into where the nation is going.

Recently, scholars of German history have begun to treat music as a powerful cultural artifact that plays a significant part in constructing German identity. Building on those studies, this thesis has examined Richard Wagner’s role in building German national consciousness. It has focused on the composer’s life, his music, and his legacy. Since the nineteenth century, a fundamental continuity has emerged. German governments—from the Wilhelmine Empire, to the Nazis, to the two German states in the Cold War—have invoked Wagner’s name and music as a way to strengthen their own positions. They have done this in order to establish their credentials as legitimate representatives of the German people, their populace. By claiming a

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linkage between the state and Wagner’s music, life, or ideas, all of these governments have attempted to frame themselves as the inheritors of Wagner’s cultural endowment. Chapter One explained that this was Wagner’s explicit aim: he wanted to write national operas and was interested in constructing a German style of music. In the music itself, as evidenced by the Ring cycle, he was able to create cultural material that would be considered timelessly deutsch. Because he lived and worked prior to and during Unification, at a pivotal time for collective identity formation in the German states, he had a lasting impact on the definition of both German art and nationalism.

Wagner’s conception of an essential German character continued to resonate long after his death. All artists, leaders, and ordinary Germans after him had to struggle with the meaning of Germanness that he had outlined. As Chapter Two argued, the importance of nationalism in constructing political solidarities and bolstering state power made these struggles enormously important. Bismarck used Wagner’s ideas as a justification for national unity, bringing together various states into a German Empire. Only a few decades later, Hitler would use those same ideas as the basis for his vision of Germanness. The sense of national pride that he fostered helped to fuel racism, xenophobia, and even genocide. The trend continued: states evoked Wagner to help them define the contours of German collective consciousness. Control of culture mattered greatly.

After the Second World War, this dynamic continued apace. Although the occupational powers made some efforts to extricate Germany from Wagner’s grasp, their efforts at denazification were often incomplete or thrown by the wayside. This left the two German states, their newfound independence secure, with a choice to make about Wagner: would they repudiate
the composer, rejecting his Nazi ties and starting anew with culture? Or would they attempt to use Wagner’s legacy much in the same way that the previous German states did?

This comparative question formed the bulk of this paper. Chapters Four and Five concluded that both the FRG and the GDR chose the latter option, continuing to claim Wagner as their own musical inheritance. Both states had different methods for rehabilitating Wagner’s image and de-linking him from the baggage of the Nazi past. The GDR, through its top-down control of music and the press, tried to paint Wagner as a socialist revolutionary, a hero fitting for East Germany and its Soviet backers. Their efforts were mixed at best, but their intentions were clear: bring Wagner back as a German hero with a unique socialist identity. In the FRG, the process was different. Using the idea of *Stunde null* to call for a fresh start, the West German state and cultural elite revived Wagner performances, discounting the Nazi years as little more than a momentary, erroneous turn. At Bayreuth, a key site for Germans’ conceptions of Wagner, they changed the style of his operas to modernize them and strip them of Nazi associations. Both states chose to continue to promote Wagner as an essentially German figure. Both used his music to unite their people behind a certain idea of Germanness. This point is the first major contribution of the thesis. Broadly studying Wagner’s influence on nationalism throughout time makes clear his immense impact on German collective consciousness.

Perhaps even more interestingly, the two German states in the 1950s actively fought each other for the most legitimate claim to Wagner’s legacy. The controversy over the Bayreuth and Dessau Festivals, which followed from the precedent set by the Bach Year, illustrates this point. The comparative study is the second major contribution made by this thesis. Within a somewhat “controlled” environment—two states formed in the same year with claims to the same cultural material—this thesis sketches the processes by which states contend for culture and music. Given
the broader effects of nationalism on state formation, this inquiry is valuable. Given the unique importance of music in German nationalism, it is even more so.

There is, of course, room for further research here. Chapters Four and Five focus only on the FRG and GDR’s early years. Extending the analysis into the 1960s and beyond would no doubt uncover fascinating twists in the evolution of Wagner’s legacy in divided Germany. An analysis of Wagner’s legacy after German Reunification in 1990 would be similarly valuable. This thesis can provide a useful jumping-off point for historical research on broad topics such as the importance of German music or the evolution of Wagner’s legacy. It can also be valuable as a starting point for further exploring narrower topics, such as competing cultural policies during the Cold War.
Bibliography

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Appendices

Appendix I: Wagner performances in GDR by theater season
Appendix II: Number of Wagner performances, by town, 1949-1960 (only towns with 50+ performances)
Appendix III: Number of Wagner performances, by town, 1949-1960