

AN ATTEMPT AT A NEW ANALYSIS AND RECONSTRUCTION OF RICHARD WAGNER'S *FLYING DUTCHMAN* (1843)

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Abstract

To progress in the field of lyrical art, one must draw strength from origin. As water flows inevitably from source to sea. The legend of “The Flying Dutchman” (*Der Fliegende Holländer*) came to Wagner’s mind during the violent storm that broke as he left Riga for France. At the genesis of this opera, stands the sovereign power of nature, carrying within it the secret destiny of man. As an enigma. The main theme of the cursed captain would be today differently understood. Because romanticism, limitless love and supreme sacrifice, redemption, are gone over. But face from the sea in fury, man’s heart stays with fundamental interrogation about meaning of life and existence. One could read this raging ocean as the mirror of a tormented, wandering, unstable conscience. That’s why “The Flying Dutchman” is ever contemporary. We propose to extract (to save) from these upset waters the true *Leitmotif*, unperishable, that leads to the dawn of Future. Our method lies in total freedom of interpretation and complete reconstruction of this Wagner’s masterpiece.

Keywords: *contemporaneity, interpretation, signification form, total art.*

Thematic: purpose and method

This essay of analysis and new reconstruction of the “Flying Dutchman” by Richard Wagner, is a personal, original vision, aiming to highlight the essential and the non-perishable through time (fashions, aesthetics, theories and interpretations).

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The method consists in seizing the crucial point where the whole composition is revealed and towards which its smallest details converge. That is to say the key to opening the work, to the secret of its meaning, even to its technical composition. In this opera, “The Flying Dutchman”, the key is given from the *Overture* – which itself sums up all the dramatic action, embodied by the *Leitmotifs*¹ (essentially, the *Leitmotiv* of the captain, of the ghost ship, of Senta).

Problematic: hypothesis

This idea (this hypothesis) of a global design revolving around a central point, makes it possible to go beyond structural analysis to reach the primary, generative and creative thought of the work. The one that sets the work in motion and constantly nourishes its content, because it is its source of inspiration. Returning to this source and rediscovering its original flow, one can measure the primary force and power of the idea, intact, without ever weakening it in its subsequent interpretation or transposition. So, in its past (in 1843) as in its future, today. Hypothetically, this method makes it possible to dominate the text and to reconstruct it, in its entirety, but not necessarily in its first logical temporal succession and according to its initial aesthetics and technique. Freely redesigned, upsetting its compositional structure, one can recreate the work by bringing its meaning to the top. Whatever the new form given: abstract, symbolic, metaphorical, modern, futuristic. Moreover, like Wagnerian conceptions, to make it a total art. However, the subject must lend itself to an indivisible osmosis of image and sound. As is the case here, because it is about the sea and the legend of the sea. The setting here is dreamy. You have to be able to enter the author’s brain at the moment of fertilization of the idea. To capture that first spark, the most important, which is the main idea put into art.

Application. The ultimate meaning of the work and its composition

Our hypothesis is that at a precise moment in the composition, all of its content and its ultimate meaning are revealed. (Ex. No 1: the captain’s call, Senta’s response. The osmosis of two beings. The anticipated victory of Senta and her *Leitmotif*). From this moment, it seems obvious that the *Leitmotifs* of the captain and Senta have common links, from the beginning. They are of the same nature and inevitably had to be called and tied together. On the other hand, Senta’s final victory is realized in death, which she accepts to join and be united, definitively, to the captain. By her love, her abnegation, she broke the curse that weighed on the captain and freed his soul from its sufferings. The legend’s prediction has come true. The composition thus

¹ *Leitmotiv*.

revealed reads with certainty and, without a doubt, it was whole in the main idea preceding its composition. The common elements of the *Leitmotif* of the captain and the *Leitmotif* of Senta are then perfectly perceptible. (Ex. No 2 presentation of the two main *Leitmotivs* (the captain and Senta), Ex. No 2/a/b/c, and Ex. No 3: the common elements of the captain's and Senta's *Leitmotiv*). Presentation and demonstration of links.

Research results. Originality and becoming

We claim that this semantic *Form*, where the master thought, the ultimate meaning of the work, dominates, is absolutely present in the composer's brain even before he begins to write. And that it is necessary to grasp it before analyzing or interpreting. Because a succession of logical elements will never form a Whole. It is necessary to find the Form to analyze the structure well. And it is this form that allows us to go further, into the future, and to recreate the work in a modern, current, futuristic way. By putting at the top, or in the center, the essential.

Conclusion: consequences on the semantic analysis of the work. *hidden spiritual Form*

To grasp, today, universal **signification**, we must operate an **abstraction**. Considering only the Idea of the sea and of the curse. Because the real action is played out in the consciousness, rather in the subconsciousness, of the Captain. Above dramatic action (progressing in acts and scenes), above the abyss of the sea, the *Leitmotif* of the captain damned and of his ghost vessel, sounds as a desperate call, tormented, to which, like an echo, responds the calm *Leitmotif*, full of self-sacrificing of Senta. The tonal relationship is obvious and classic. Minor tonality (D minor) for the Captain, facing major tonality (F major) for Senta. But the two *Leitmotivs* come from each other, they are from the same nature, compatible. They possess common musical motifs and cells which bond them above the fury of the sea. This secret conception (*hidden spiritual Form*) precedes musical composition. The real signification is outside the framework and the structure of the drama and beyond its romantic connotation. (Ex. No 1: *Der Fliegende Holländer*. *Leitmotive* of damned Captain's ghost vessel and of Senta, in response).

Signification

The limitlessness of the sea reflects the Captain's troubled conscience. The separation between Life and Death. Faith and Doubt. His revolt before Nature, his will to dominate it, his challenge before God, are provoked by hidden fear and brutal pride. The seven years of wandering on the madly turbulent sea have a symbolic meaning. Like the stopover at the port, each seven years, that gives him the chance to

finding true love that breaks the damnation. All of this symbolize the temporal space of thought and repentance, accorded to Captain for defeat his own revolt. The Sea is an impenetrable, dangerous and dark abyss, which limits the living from the dead. Against which the Captain must struggle by braving the furious, enemy and contrary winds. In fact, he is fighting against his own conscience. In contrast, Senta does not defy the sea and she throws herself into it, with faith, at the end of opera. She believes in love and salvation.

Impact on interpretation

Sea as a dark boundary between Life and Death. Life = own will, pleasure, physical and carnal power. Death = nothingness of non-life. Senta's *Leitmotif* brings a subtle nuance, a new quivering and unknown vibration. The secret threshold between earthly life and eternal existence. The passage. The light in the immoral chasm that sees the eye of salvation. The true meaning of struggles and destinies. The sign of belonging between the *Leitmotif* of the Captain and that of Senta is in the *fluidity* of the instrumental color (English Horn and Horn-symbol of Captain), a mysterious new life, that of Water. (Ex. No 2/a/b: *Der Fliegende Holländer*, the subtle nuance into Senta's *Leitmotif*). The image, the notion, of the sea, can be stylized by a black bar that separates life from death, a zone of danger, requiring a constant struggle to stay above the abyss, on the violently agitated waves by storms. In the instrumental voice of Senta's *Leitmotif* slips the supernatural presence of the water, imbued with soul, understanding, hope and forgiveness. It is this new element that penetrates the *Leitmotif* of damnation and will cause its overturning, the face to the sky, by a victorious motif in major tonality. The dark and unfathomable abyss of the sea becomes consciousness illuminated by faith. Then it finds its bottom, the limit of torments and doubts.

Technical and analytical foundation

Two *Leitmotivs*, of the Captain and of Senta, are musically linked (intertwined) from the start. One comes from other and they have common musical fragments and cells. But the *Leitmotif* of Senta, by its depth, surpasses that of the Captain, it dominates and overcomes the fury of the raging sea. The force of abnegation and intelligence penetrates the secret of the capricious and ungovernable sea and opens to the Captain damned the vision of a higher order. The key to listening and understanding, of the real dramatic strength, is found in Senta's *Leitmotif*. The logic of harmonic structure is very clear: Captain's *Leitmotif* in D minor face Senta's *Leitmotif* in F major. At the end, Senta's victorious *Leitmotif* in D major (minor tonality of Captain became major). Senta overturns the damnation, its face towards the sky. The stronger the despair and fury of the sea, the stronger Senta's inner conviction. The

key to balance and meaning lies in this powerful challenge. Combat of two elements which make only one.

(Ex. No 3: common musical motifs and cells between the Captain's *Leitmotif* and Senta's one. Osmosis).

Stylization, Abstraction, Total Art

There are no pathological features in this legend and this opera. If so, the cursed captain would not be saved. Senta's power of love and self-sacrifice wouldn't be victorious. It is therefore a miracle of the redemption. The captain does not fall into the impenetrable, dark and satanic, abyss of the sea, but rises, freed, to the sky. Union of two soulmates above distress. This is why Senta's song (*Leitmotif*) triumphs, so powerful and so pure, at the end of the overture (in the major tonality of the Captain's *Leitmotif* = D Major). We therefore propose as visual abstraction, scenic stylization and ultimate signification, the black bar of the raging ocean where the spark of pure love falls, illuminating the universe created by God. The human soul piercing all riddles and dominating all fear, by grace to be guided and carried by its first, divine nature. All of Nature is the mirror of the soul, which the only true choice, and only rudder, is true Love.

Consequences in research and analysis

The first step is the definition of the main theme, because its authenticity gives to drama its accurate contrast color. More sincere is the love of Senta, deeper is the abyss of the Sea. More evident is the light of her last triumphal *Leitmotif*, in D major: the major tonality of Captain's *Leitmotif*. The sincerity of the Captain's desperation is essential to the challenge and struggle between two antagonistic forces. Because on the one side, lie would not lead to ultimate deliverance. And on the other, this kind of love requires an absolute commitment of souls, and a complete abnegation. Perhaps it is today an outmoded romantic vision? Which was, in the Past, truth and ideal. However, we can conclude that matter is nothing, and spirit everything. By seeking the presence, the color, the vibration of the spirit, one could suddenly pierce the mysteries of the world and solve enigma of this opera: pure love and faith into limitless power of human love, face the Nature (ocean) in demon hand.

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Appendices

Musical examples

- Ex. No 1. *Der Fliegende Holländer*. *Leitmotif* of damned Captain's ghost vessel and of Senta, in response).
- Ex. No 2 and 2/a/b/c. *Der Fliegende Holländer*, the subtle nuance into Senta's *Leitmotif*.
- Ex. No 3. *Der Fliegende Holländer* common musical motifs and cells between the Captain's *Leitmotif* and Senta's one. Osmosis.

Ex. nr 1 3/4 : Der Fliegende Holländer, The subtle nuance into Senta's Leitmotif (English Horn and Horn = common musical elements between Captain's Leitmotif and Senta's Leitmotif). Fluidity of Water into Senta's Leitmotif. Harmonic modulation in D minor. Response of Senta to Captain. Sensitive reaction from the Captain.

Example No 1.

Allegro
cresc. f.rio

ff

Hr.

(Damned Captain's ghost vessel leitmotif)

d. minor (Captain's leitmotif) molto marcata (d. minor)

musical figure

common motif with Senta leitmotif

Andante (Engl. Horn) (solo)

Senta's leitmotif in F. Major

musical figure = common musical element (Captain and Senta leitmotif)

(F. Major)

Ex. n° 2

Der fliegende Holländer.

Captain's leitmotif and Senta's leitmotif. (d. minor / F. Major)

Example No 2.

vc & cb. Captain's leitmotif (fragment allusion) pizz. *Silence*

Flauti Andante

Clas.

Coro. inglese Senta's leitmotif (F Major)

Coro. in F.

Coro. in A.

Fag. & F. Dur

dominant seventh chord dominant F Major

ritard.

Ex. n° 2/a : Der Fliegende Holländer
 Senta's leitmotif, English Horn, oboe, flute (in echo)

Example No 2a.

a tempo

Fl. *a tempo* Fl.

ob. 1 *Sinfonia Leitmotiv* (F. Dur)

Cl.

C. ingl.

F. Corn (F)

T. Corn (A)

T. Corn

Fl. *a tempo*

Ex. n^o 2/B. : Der Fliegende Holländer (dominante-
 F dur)
 Sinfonia Leitmotiv : (English Horn), oboi and flauti
 (in echo).

Example No 2b.

Ex. nr 2/d.
 Der Fliegende
 Holländer.
 Captain's reaction.

like a torpedo, slides trombones, fragment of Captain's Leitmotif
 Animato a poco then crescendo.
 Return of the Captain's Leitmotif in force.

Example No 2c.

