

# 'The Mirage of Eternity': Adorno's Critique of Wagnerian Temporality

*Sophie Boyd-Hurrell*

---

Gurnemanz: *Zum Raum wird hier die Zeit* [Time changes here to space]

Richard Wagner, *Parsifal*

The modernity of Wagner's operatic output, his wholesale re-imagination of bourgeois opera, his desire to break with tradition in the pursuit of a radically new approach to art, is now so accepted that it hardly requires justification. Wagner's modernity is now so beyond question that music criticism has moved on to detail his post-modernity,<sup>1</sup> and we are surely soon (if it hasn't been discerned already) to discover his post-post-modernity. This focus on Wagner's modern-day contemporaneity, on the almost-prophetic quality of his many musical and dramatic innovations, tends to obscure the essentially dual character of his works, which, for all their technical innovation, evoke both an idealistic impulse towards liberation *and* a fatalistic submission to authority. For philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, Wagner's modernity is located precisely within this dual character of his works, which express something of the radical undecidability, if not Janus-face, of the legacy of the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> Gesturing towards

---

<sup>1</sup> John Deathridge, 'Wagner and the Post-modern', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4.2 (July 1992): 143–61.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant's response to the question 'What is Enlightenment?' famously began: 'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity ... *Sapere Aude!* [Dare to know (Horace)]. Have courage to use your own mind! Thus is the motto of Enlightenment.' For Kant, the Enlightenment and rational thinking promised liberation from authority (and authoritarian social structures). Immanuel Kant, *Answering the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'*, trans. David Ferrer, accessed May 26 2015, <<https://archive.org/details/AnswerTheQuestionWhatIsEnlightenment>>. Adorno and Horkheimer challenge the positivism of Kant's account, arguing that the Enlightenment (through rational thought and action) produced the systemic violence of the twentieth century. 'Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity. Enlightenment's programs was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.' Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 1997), 1.

reason's promise of self-determination whilst simultaneously tending towards phantasmagoria (in which the object appears as its own origin), Adorno articulates a view of Wagner's works as the operatic embodiment of the most fundamental paradoxes of aesthetic modernity. This article illuminates this dual character of Wagner's works through the frame of temporality, arguing that both the figure of time in Wagner's narratives, and the manifestation of musical time in his works, exert a regressive force. Through the prism of time, I show how the centrifugal pull between progress and reaction, freedom and submission, past and future, which mark the experience of modernity, finds expression in Wagner's works.

I begin with Adorno's criticism of Wagnerian temporality drawn from his monograph *In Search of Wagner* (*Versuch über Wagner*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1952). The affirmation of Becoming [*Werden*] over Being [*Sein*] that pervades Adorno's entire work is best linked to his music criticism through the frame of temporality. Wagnerian temporality, which Adorno argues suggests Being outside history, provides a particularly clear illustration of the political consequences of our understanding of time. In an effort to show the continued relevance of Adorno's criticism, I then turn to the work of contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, whose more recent writing on art and literature in his book *The Man without Content* (*L'uomo senza contenuto*, Milan: Rizzoli, 1970) resonate with Adorno's awareness of the dependence of progressive politics upon a certain experience of time and temporality.<sup>3</sup>

### **In Search of Wagner**

Adorno's short monograph *In Search of Wagner* stands poised between critique and rescue. Detailing the radicalism of Wagner's oeuvre (his many musical and dramatic innovations), *In Search of Wagner* also considers Wagner's anti-Semitism and the reactionary force of his artworks, which lent them so readily to fascist appropriation. Although written during 1937 and early 1938 while Adorno was in exile in London and New York, *In Search of Wagner* was not published until shortly after his return to Germany in 1952. John Deathridge has noted that the English translation of the book's German title (*Versuch über Wagner*) might be cause for some confusion, reminding us that 'the word *Versuch* [lit. 'attempt' or 'try'] refers to the book's method and not to its author's modesty.'<sup>4</sup> Deathridge suggests that '*Essay on Wagner*' might be a more apt title in English.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, Deathridge also affirms the important influence of Adorno's book on the post-war performance and reception of Wagner's works, noting that *In Search of Wagner* 'probably did more than any other publication to clear the Wagnerian air in Germany after the Second World War.'<sup>6</sup>

*In Search of Wagner* considers both the man and the music, exploring how the musical characteristics of Wagner's operas (his approach to time, his use of motif, the place of

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that Adorno's affirmation of (historical) Becoming over (metaphysical) Being was forged against the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. It would be interesting to consider the ways in which Agamben (a student of Heidegger) departs from, or concurs with, the thinking of his teacher from the perspective of aesthetic temporality. This is, of course, beyond the scope of this article. As I am arguing here, Adorno's and Agamben's understandings of temporality, which are both deeply indebted to the thinking of Walter Benjamin, exhibit a profound resonance.

<sup>4</sup> John Deathridge, 'Review of Theodor Adorno's *In Search of Wagner*', trans. Rodney Livingstone, *Nineteenth-Century Music* 7.1 (Summer 1983): 81.

<sup>5</sup> Deathridge, 'Review of Theodor Adorno's *In Search of Wagner*', 81.

<sup>6</sup> Deathridge, 'Review of Theodor Adorno's *In Search of Wagner*', 84.

dissonance, orchestration and so on) connect with the social character of Wagner himself (his anti-Semitism, his repression of pleasure and sexuality, his nihilism). Fundamental to Adorno's approach is his understanding that social and historical conditions are sedimented within all art, and so political and social formations are expressed through music, even when the composer is not consciously attempting this. Importantly, Adorno does not take Wagner's personality or politics to be a matter of private eccentricity. For Adorno, personality is always taken to be a site for the manifestation of social tendencies. Wagner's politics, his authoritarianism and his nihilism, are not excised from Adorno's music analysis, but rather understood as more general social tendencies that find particular expression within his work. Adorno's approach offers some compelling explanations as to *why* Wagner's work was so readily appropriated by the Third Reich, whilst also identifying the sites of genuine radicalism and musical innovation within the composer's opus. Whilst Adorno's views on Wagner softened somewhat in later essays,<sup>7</sup> the essential elements of his critique are all contained within *In Search of Wagner*.

### History and Stasis

If Wagner does not dominate time like Beethoven, neither does he fulfil it like Schubert. He revokes it. The eternity of Wagnerian music, like that of the poem of the Ring, is one which proclaims that nothing has happened; it is a state of immutability that refutes all history by confronting it with the silence of nature ... the amorphous primal condition.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of historical time, and the profound political consequences of our relationship with the past, are themes that permeate Adorno's entire opus. For Adorno, great music embodies an historical process, in which (historically determined) problems of form are 'worked out' through an engagement with the (historically determined) musical materials available at the time. By Adorno's measure, great music engenders a properly historical relationship to the past (a consciousness of our own 'sedimentation' within contingent social and historical forces), creating a musically coded experience of rootedness within a historical process. In affirming the contingency and historical specificity of human social relations, successful works of art promise the possibility of new modes of experience and thus new modes of social organization. Music (indeed, any art) that treats the present as pure Being, an origin in itself, necessarily engenders a mystification of history, perpetuating the illusion of the necessity and inevitability of any given social conditions. The importance of historical consciousness (which can find expression through different social practices including politics and art) lies in the confirmation of contingency that a materialist approach to history confers on all human social relations.

Adorno takes the creation of musical time (and indeed the manifestation of all musical materials) to be engaged in either the illumination or obfuscation of historical social processes. With musical forms no longer accepted as self-evident, modern composers are charged with creating forms specific to the particular demands of the musical materials they wish to work with. Whilst Wagner's rejection of traditional musical structures (which had provided a ready-made source of dynamism and friction, as composers sought contrast within a pre-ordained

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Theodor Adorno, 'Wagner's Relevance for Today', *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 584–602.

<sup>8</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), 30.

musical structure) certainly allowed the composer an unprecedented freedom, Adorno finds the composer unable to fulfill this freedom, as a lack of temporal differentiation within his works leads to an encounter with the social world as pure nature. For Adorno, Wagner's works amount to 'a phantasmagoric reflection of a phantasmagoric world,'<sup>9</sup> in which the absence of historical time forecloses human agency altogether. The fundamental charge of Adorno's critique is that Wagner's works perpetuate the illusion that what is is inevitable.

Adorno identifies Wagner's construction of temporal stasis as central to the questionable politics of his works, and Adorno describes Wagner's revocation of time on a number of levels. Through the notion of **beating time** (which Adorno understands as fundamental to both Wagner's music and his position as conductor), Adorno argues that Wagner subjects his musical materials to arbitrary and abstract control, reifying time instead of deriving immanent order from the musical materials themselves.<sup>10</sup> Adorno notes Wagner's preference for regular and **unchanging time-signatures**, suggesting that time operates in his music as an 'abstract framework,' an emptiness to be 'filled in,'<sup>11</sup> rather than emerging immanently from the organization of the musical material. Adorno writes that, 'The whole of *Lohengrin*, with the exception of a tiny part, is written in regular time, as if the evenness of the beat allowed entire scenes to be grasped at a glance.'<sup>12</sup> This apparent apprehension of the whole in a single moment, the apparent simultaneous experience of the whole, is what Adorno calls the **spatialisation of time**. This spatialisation of temporality denies the unfolding experience of the whole through its parts, which, in Adornian terms, is an expression of the dialectic of universal and particular. The polarisation of universal-particular, which is expressed in art through the tension between the whole and its parts, is a central feature of a self-reflexive modernity. The spatialisation of time presents the whole and its parts in an illusory state of reconciliation (rather than revealing the actual tension between whole and part, universal and particular). Similarly, Adorno hears in the stasis of Wagner's **harmonic progressions** the production of a 'mirage of eternity'<sup>13</sup>: 'The absence of any real harmonic progression becomes the phantasmagorical emblem for time standing still... The standing-still of time and the complete occultation of nature by means of phantasmagoria are thus brought together in the memory of a pristine age.'<sup>14</sup> History stands negated in favour of eternal nature. Adorno hears **repetition and reiteration** (rather than development) as part of a process of evading musical and historical time: 'Every repetition of gestures evades the necessity to create musical time; they [themes] merely order themselves, as it were, in time and detach themselves from the temporal continuum that they seemingly constituted.'<sup>15</sup> This continual reiteration of musical gestures and motives denigrates the mimetic impulse into

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Decatur Smith, 'Awakening Dead Time: Adorno on Husserl, Benjamin, and the Temporality of Music', *Contemporary Music Review* 5–6 (2012): 406.

<sup>10</sup> 'Wagner's use of the beat to control time is abstract; it is no more than the idea of time as something articulated by the beat and then projected onto larger periods ... the measure to which he subjects time does not derive from the musical content, but from the reified order of time itself.' Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 76.

<sup>14</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 76.

<sup>15</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 27.

mere imitation,<sup>16</sup> with his leitmotifs (and characters) ultimately assuming the narcissistic stance of admiring themselves in the mirror.<sup>17</sup>

Though temporality is the key theme of this article, it is worth noting that *In Search of Wagner* traces the ways in which other musical elements contribute to an overarching sense of stasis. Wagner's use of leitmotif produces 'frozen' gestures and 'miniature pictures,' that reflect but fail to critique the rationalisation of labour under industrial capitalism. The promise of 'unending melody,' of 'unfolding in a genuinely free and unconstrained manner,' is thwarted by Wagner's stringing together of 'small-scale models in substitution for true development.'<sup>18</sup> Max Paddison has noted the paradox between the apparently unending development of Wagner's leitmotifs and Adorno's characterisation of these procedures as 'frozen' or static: 'Adorno argues ... that the device of the leitmotif is, of its very nature resistant to development, in spite of the overall impression given by Wagner's music, which is that of perpetual development.'<sup>19</sup> Adorno writes: 'Beneath the thin veil of continuous progress Wagner has fragmented the composition into allegorical leitmotifs juxtaposed like discrete objects.'<sup>20</sup> For Adorno, even over the course of the *Ring* there is only the *appearance* of development: Wagner's leitmotifs remain juxtaposed symbols whose developmental possibilities are never fully explored. Thus, for Adorno, the full developmental potential of Wagner's musical materials remains unfulfilled.

Though at times achieving 'hitherto unprecedented melodic flexibility,'<sup>21</sup> Adorno is also dissatisfied with Wagner's reliance on conventional voicing of the melody in the top voices,<sup>22</sup> and his frustrated attempts at polyphony.<sup>23</sup> Wagner's use of colour and orchestration, which Adorno conceded was 'properly speaking, his [Wagner's] own discovery,'<sup>24</sup> is described as 'essentially intimate ... magical and familiar at the same time.'<sup>25</sup> For Adorno, though, even Wagner's truly revolutionary approach to orchestration is compromised by the concealment of its own origins, the production of 'thing-like' sounds (like that of the organ), in which 'the final sound gives no clue as to how it was created.'<sup>26</sup> This theme of obscured origins, of sounds emerging from unidentifiable combinations of instruments, of melody emerging and then submerging into the texture, of dissonance emerging out of and then folding back into consonance, permeates Adorno's critique.

Adorno's critique recognises the fundamental and constitutive ambivalence at the core of Wagner's work (the aspect that I have referred to as its dual character): 'progress and reaction in Wagner's music cannot be separated out like sheep and goats.'<sup>27</sup> The internal

<sup>16</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 246.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 37. Max Paddison translates the passage as 'Beneath the thin shell of continuous movement [*Verlauf*] Wagner has fragmented the composition into allegorical leitmotifs strung together like discreet objects.' See Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music*, 246.

<sup>21</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 60.

<sup>25</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 61.

<sup>26</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 37.

inconsistencies, the failures within Wagner's work are, for Adorno, simultaneously the paths of greatest possibility: 'his impotence in the face of the technical contradictions and the social conflicts underlying them, in short all the qualities that prompted his contemporaries to speak of "decadence" – is also the path of artistic progress.'<sup>28</sup> It is this indeterminacy, this inseparability of progress and reaction within Wagner's works that forms, for Adorno, the precise location of their modernity. Wagner's music is, often in spite of itself, full of both conformism *and* radical possibility, and it is this duality that marks Wagner's project as seminal for the entire trajectory of modern music. Whilst Wagner's use of dissonance and instrumentation (in Adorno's terms, 'sonority' and 'colour') are understood to contain the germs of radicalism that would find full expression in the New Music of the twentieth century, Adorno explicitly positions Wagner's temporality and refusal of development at a dialectically opposed extreme, as the germ of the musical regression to come—the Hollywood score and the hit song. Despite Wagner's incomplete fulfillment of the radical potential that many of his innovations promise, Adorno shows how nearly all of his compositional processes contain at least the kernel of something radically new. This combination of progressive *and* regressive possibility is central to what makes Wagner such an influential figure in Adorno's eyes, as he heralds the full spectrum of music to come; from the alienation of the avant-garde to the conformism of mass culture. Wagner's betrayal (if I may put it so dramatically) is his conflation of the two poles of progress and reaction, which in Adorno's eyes should properly have been held in (dialectical) tension. Instead, in reconciliation with the tradition and authority that Wagner sought to usurp, his works present regression as progress; similarly, domination appears as freedom, and subjugation as resistance. And it is from this aestheticisation of powerlessness, achieved largely through temporal stasis, that Adorno charges Wagner with nihilism and capitulation to blind Fate.

Wagner's overarching pursuit of stasis over development comes down in favour of myth (the myth of eternal return) over history, and for Adorno this hinders the radicalism and progressive possibilities of Wagner's project. The suspended temporality of Wagner's works lends the eternally same the air of the eternally new, and thus the static is presented *as* the dynamic.<sup>29</sup> The state of *atemporal* and *ahistorical* (metaphysical) Being takes the place of (historical) Becoming, and the living, changing, historical processes of society appear as their opposite: absolute cessation, death.

### **Zones of Indistinction**

Central to our understanding of what constitutes modernity is the notion of a crisis in received meanings. The loss of unchallenged 'natural' representation, expressed in art as the severing of the traditional unity of form and content (in traditional works, a work's meaning and its mode of transmission cannot be separated) has brought about a specific relationship to temporality in which the passing of time is experienced as a process of decay. As Walter Benjamin, whose profound influence upon Adorno is well known, has suggested: to be modern is to be alienated from a past that recedes at an accelerating pace; the past is always running away

---

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 51.

from us.<sup>30</sup> According to Benjamin, our propulsion through time toward radically new forms of life and knowledge leaves the modern subject in a state of traumatic shock, torn between the demands of the New whilst consumed by an impossible desire for the restoration of an originary, un-alienated condition. It is an undoubted enigma, that from the midst of decay, from the impossibility of an authentic relation to the past, bourgeois individualism emerges; from the conditioning experience of time as disintegration, as the empty search for lost origins, comes the modern self-making subject. This search for irretrievable origins marks the modern experience of time as an inescapable process of decay: the passing of time is encountered as perpetual disintegration and loss.<sup>31</sup> Unlike Wagner's sense of eternal return and circularity, the unflinching modern subject must face their own sense of alienation in time in order to enter into an authentic relationship with the past. Importantly for Adorno (as for Benjamin), this state of unreconcilability of *un*timeliness is properly experienced as tension, if not crisis. For Adorno, Wagner's presentation of this state of crisis as one of reconciliation is a failure of courage, as he had the technical command over his materials to express these poles as properly antithetical, yet recoiled and presented them as indistinguishable. As Adorno notes, Wagner's presentation of opposing states such as love and hate, life and death, pleasure and suffering, resistance and submission, justice and law, renders them indistinguishable. The rendering of opposing forces as indeterminate confirms Wagner's works as undoubtedly modern, but for Adorno also confirms them as deeply reactionary.

Wagner's music-dramas, through a host of narrative, musical and dramatic techniques, stage a conflation of concepts that should properly exist in a state of antagonistic tension, if not outright opposition. The appearance of pleasure as death, justice as law, resistance as submission, stasis as dynamism, reduces the rightful space of tension and antagonism between these conceptual couples to one of reconciliation, ultimately affirming the hopelessness and futility of human action in the face of Fate. This failure to hold conflicting concepts in tension in some regard marks Wagner's work as profoundly modern; however, this conceptual indistinction, which rests on the reconciliation of concepts rightly in tension, is, for Adorno, also precisely the grounds upon which fascism, and the fascist appropriation of Wagner's work, depends.

### **Interruption**

Following Benjamin, both Adorno and Giorgio Agamben argue that 'progressive' works of art generate an interruption. For Adorno, this interruption occurs through formal innovation (through the production of new forms, sounds and so on), but unless this innovation produces an untimely effect of throwing the observer outside their own time, of forcing a break in their experience of time as continuous, then the progressive possibility of such formal innovation remains unrealised. For both Adorno and Agamben, the experience of the work of art is precisely the experience of being embedded within a historical process: a sense of becoming over time, in which neither becoming nor temporality are taken to necessarily pursue linear, progressive trajectories. For Adorno,

---

<sup>30</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Concept of History,' *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 255.

<sup>31</sup> Samuel Weber, 'The Ring as *Trauerspiel*: Reading Wagner with Benjamin and Derrida,' in Samuel Weber and Walter Benjamin, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008), 286.

the concept of the ‘shudder’ (which names the mimetic response to a work of art bounded by a certain experience of time, presence and memory),<sup>32</sup> and for Agamben the concept ‘rhythm,’<sup>33</sup> name this oscillation between our authentic experience of time (in which we experience belonging *in* the world) and its abstract counterpart, ‘the unstoppable flow of linear time.’<sup>34</sup> When a work of art breaks through the continuum of linear time, the subject experiences themselves as a properly historical being, for whom ‘at every instant his past and future are at stake.’<sup>35</sup> Agamben describes rhythm as a state of being held ‘arrested before something, but this being arrested is also a being-outside, an *ek-stasis* in a more original dimension.’<sup>36</sup> Though Adorno might take issue with the apparent essentialism of Agamben’s account (his positioning of an oscillating rhythm as a pre-social and authentic temporality), he would surely agree with Agamben’s assertion that a certain experience of time is essential to the emergence of a properly historical consciousness. In order to resist conceiving of history as the irresistible march of fate, we must resist the experience of time as ‘the one-dimensional flight of instants.’<sup>37</sup> Benjamin’s dictum puts this point succinctly, noting the pertinence of the experience of time to all political life: ‘The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogenous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself.’<sup>38</sup> The popular conception of time as what Agamben calls ‘pure flow,’ which he describes as ‘the incessant sequence of instants along an infinite line,’<sup>39</sup> allows for an unproblematic and uncritical relationship with the past, and indeed the future. Wagner’s circular, eternal temporality, thundering heroically down the road to nowhere, presents time precisely as this ‘infinite line,’ as ‘the one-dimensional region of an infinite numerical succession.’<sup>40</sup>

Agamben’s concept of rhythm as rupture complements the critique of stasis that is the hallmark of Adorno’s Wagner analysis, confirming the ongoing importance of time and temporality to progressive philosophical and political engagement. The non-correspondence between aesthetic manifestations of time (for Adorno, this is explained through music, for Agamben, through poetry) and empirical time is experienced as interruption; we are thrown out of time and our consciousness might thus be (fleetingly) liberated from the patterns and structures of conceptual thought. This interruption, shudder, ‘*ek-stasis*,’ is an experience of being-outside, a state of alterity (not incorporation). For Adorno, Wagner’s temporality fails

<sup>32</sup> See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), 367.

<sup>33</sup> Agamben quotes Hölderlin as the source of this term: ‘Everything is rhythm, the entire destiny of man is one heavenly rhythm, just as every work of art is one rhythm, and everything swings from the poetizing lips of the god’. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 94.

<sup>34</sup> Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 101.

<sup>35</sup> Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 101.

<sup>36</sup> Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 99. ‘Ek-stasis’ from Greek (via Latin), for ‘standing outside oneself.’ ‘Ecstasy,’ *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. The term has been taken up by Heidegger and other existential philosophers to refer to that which stands outside of itself.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Concept of History’, 261.

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 99.

<sup>40</sup> Agamben, *Man Without Content*, 99.

to achieve this suspension of time, and as such is bound to reinforce (rather than interrupt) empirical time. Benjamin's 'homogenous, empty time,' Adorno's 'empirical time,' and Agamben's 'one-dimensional flight of instants,' are all articulations of time experienced *ahistorically*, as if the past stands unaltered by the events that follow. For each of these thinkers, the vulnerability of the past and the importance of our relationship to the past, are central elements of progressive politics and truly radical works of art.

### Conclusion

From our twenty-first-century standpoint it is worth considering whether the elongation and temporal stasis Adorno considered so reactionary in Wagner's works might indeed be capable of interrupting the continuum of linear time. We might also question the idealism of both 'shudder' and 'rhythm,' which promise to propel us outside an apparently all-enveloping social system. Adorno identifies the intoxicating temporal stasis of Wagner's works as a site of their aesthetic truth; by drawing us into a state of complicity with our own subjugation, Wagner's operas make available to thought our own vulnerability to power. This experience presents two contrasting paths of interpretation of profound political consequence: on the one hand, uncritical submission (and this is undoubtedly the posture that made Wagner and authoritarianism such ready bedfellows). Or, as Adorno's critique promises, the critical reflection upon our own self-abdication in the face of the great Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* might lead us towards a self-consciousness of our own ambiguity and vulnerability toward power, which we, as moderns, all share.