

Dossiê Wagner e o Teatro

Theatrical Declamation and Wagner's Works – A Research Overview

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Abstract

Exactly 100 years after Rudolf Kirsten's *Streifzüge durch die musikalische Deklamation in Richard Wagners Parsifal*,¹ I pursued the hypothesis, that Wagner's music has been shaped by theatrical declamation.² This gap indicates that the deep connection between his works – which includes not only the music but also the performance on stage – has been forgotten in the meantime. Instead, music scholars during the 20th century have claimed that Wagner's musical declamation is 'naturalist'. But as early recordings from around 1900 illustrate, the vocal delivery of actors, the declamation of dramatic texts was on the contrary everything else than natural.

Given the fact that the styles of speech and even spoken everyday language itself change over time, my hypothesis was to verify the extent of the impact of contemporary theatrical declamation in Wagner's works. In this essay, I will first give an overview about the musicological research about this topic that focuses on my own writings, especially my doctoral dissertation. In a second part, a report about performance research projects follows that have been launched ever since its publication.

Keywords: Richard Wagner, Theatrical Declamation, Gestures.

1 Rudolf Kirsten: *Streifzüge durch die musikalische Deklamation in Richard Wagners Parsifal*, Annaberg 1907; other monographs from the 19th century that dealt with the impact of declamation on Wagner's music are Louis Köhler: *Die Melodie der Sprache in ihrer Anwendung besonders auf das Lied und die Oper. Mit Berührung verwandter Kunstfragen dargelegt*, Leipzig 1853 and Wilhelm Kienzl: *Die musikalische Deklamation dargestellt an der Hand der Entwicklungsgeschichte des deutschen Gesanges* (PhDiss.), Leipzig 1880.

2 Martin Knust: *Sprachvertonung und Gestik in den Werken Richard Wagners. Einflüsse zeitgenössischer Rezitations- und Deklamationspraxis*. Berlin: Frank & Timme 2007; second impression 2018.

Resumo

Exatamente 100 anos depois do livro Streifzüge durch die musikalische Deklamation in Richard Wagner Parsifal, de Rudolf Kirsten, eu segui a hipótese de que a música de Wagner foi moldada pela declamação teatral. Essa lacuna indica que a profunda conexão entre suas obras - que inclui não apenas a música, mas também a performance no palco - foi esquecida nesse meio tempo. Em vez disso, os estudiosos de música do século XX afirmaram que a declamação musical de Wagner é “naturalista”. Mas, como ilustram as primeiras gravações feitas por volta de 1900, a voz dos atores, a declamação de textos dramáticos era, ao contrário, tudo menos natural.

Considerando o fato de que os estilos de fala e até mesmo a própria linguagem cotidiana falada mudam com o tempo, minha hipótese era verificar a extensão do impacto da declamação teatral contemporânea nas obras de Wagner. Neste ensaio, primeiro apresentarei uma visão geral da pesquisa musicológica sobre esse tópico, que se concentra em meus próprios escritos, especialmente em minha tese de doutorado. Em uma segunda parte, apresento um relatório sobre os projetos de pesquisa de desempenho que foram lançados desde sua publicação.

Palavras-chave: Richard Wagner, Declamação Teatral, Gestos.

1. Musical declamation and gesture in Wagner's works

In my dissertation, I traced the influences of theatrical declamation on Wagner from different angles. First, I gave a summary of his theoretical writings which are quite comprehensive for a composer. They fill ten volumes in the 1907 edition. What surprised me when reading them, is how little Wagner wrote about music. Instead, it is the theater and – a term that has to be defined more in detail – the “drama” which his essays and books center around. In his letters which contain many theoretical reflections as well, there is additional material and I coined the Aristotelian term ‘artwork in actu’ as opposed to the ‘artwork in potentia’ for describing Wagner’s concept of ‘drama’. In short, it means the performed dramatic artwork in the very moment of its performance, the dramatic act in the moment of the perception through a human mind. Wagner’s point was that a score should not be mistaken for a piece of music or a printed dramatic play not as a ‘drama’. This theoretical point of departure explains, why it is the performance of a dramatic piece, the declamation, that he returns to in his texts, for instance, in *Oper und Drama*. At the same time, the concept of ‘drama’ implies a description of his own creative process.

What makes this process challenging to describe is the fact that declamation, speech and everyday language is changing continuously. The first recordings of German declamation from around 1900 show the different aesthetics of speech. In the beginning of my dissertation and in some essays,³ I gathered its characteristics and tried to outline the standards of German declamation in the beginning if

3 E.g. “... eine tüchtige Stimme und ergreifendes Spiel’ – Die ersten Bayreuther Sänger“, in: *wagnerspectrum* vol. III (2007), no. 2 Udo Bermbach, Dieter Borchmeyer, Hermann Danuser, Sven Friedrich, Ulrike Kienzle, Hans R. Vaget (eds.), Würzburg, 115–137; “Richard Wagner und Karl von Holtei. Eine Rekonstruktion ihrer gemeinsamen Rigaer Zeit von 1837 bis 1839“, in: Kristel Pappel, Toomas Siitan and Anu Sõõru (eds.): *Musikleben des 19. Jahrhunderts im nördlichen Europa. Strukturen und Prozesse / 19th-Century Musical Life in Northern Europe. Structures and Processes*, (= Studien und Materialien zur Musikwissenschaft vol. LX), Hildesheim/Zurich/New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2010, 111–134; “Wagners Kompositionsprozess – Eine Detailbetrachtung“, in: *Richard Wagner. Persönlichkeit, Werk und Wirkung* (= Leipziger Beiträge zur Wagner-Forschung. Sonderband), Helmut Loos (ed.), Beucha/Markkleeberg: Sax-Verlag, 2013, 137–142.

the 19th century. Compared to 20th- and 21st-century standards it was noisy, ponderous, very expressive, and full of dynamic and tempo contrasts. What stands perhaps most out is the use of onomatopoeia; it informed the visual part of the declamation, the gestures, as well. For instance, a 19th-century actor who declaimed the word 'high' would lower his hands and his or her voice pitch and perhaps even its volume for signifying its meaning in a quite redundant manner.

In the first main chapter of my dissertation, the role of the theater for Wagner's biography is outlined. There are various connections. He was born into a family of actors and singers, grew up in the theater, literally, and spend the first half of his life with actors and singers, both as a professional and privately. What is crucial for understanding the German theatrical landscape of this era is the fact, that the same persons did perform as actors and dramatic singers, that means, that there was no difference between these two professions; only very few professional opera singers were based in Germany, and it was common to switch between these professions during a stage career as Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient and Johanna Wagner did.

Wagner's song ideal was thus shaped during the time of his childhood and adolescence and in this particular environment of versatile actors/singers. Probably also his own declamation and recitation style – Wagner loved to read dramas aloud regularly – bore traces of the style of Saxonian actors/singers who were active during from 1810s through the 1830s.

How strong the impact on his own writing was, is shown in an extensive music analysis of all of his works.⁴ In it, I could prove that various parameters of spoken artistic language can be found in Wagner's vocal melodies. For instance, the pitch structures, rhythmic and periodic irregularity, contrasts between long and short syllables, onomatopoeic means and extensive gestures in them match very closely with the descriptions of theatrical declamation in the various contemporary sources. During the time of Wagner's childhood and his career as a kapellmeister many volumes about the declamation and recitation of the German language were published. Among them was a monograph of his Dresden colleague Ferdinand Heine.⁵ He grew up in a time when the spoken word in Germany got a lot of attention from pedagogues and scholars and his personal style of writing for the solo voices, which is focused on the delivery of the words, various traces of this aesthetics can be found.

In this analytical chapter, not only the scores but also the sketches of Wagner are analyzed. Additionally, I compiled other sources and documents that witness about his composition process. This synopsis of different source types gave a clear image of his creative process. As is known, Wagner was his own librettist. However, a Wagnerian libretto has not to be understood as a book with texts

4 Knust 2007/2018, chapter 4.

5 Ferdinand Heine: *Grundzüge eines Unterrichtsplanes in der Kunst des mündlichen Vortrags*, Dresden 1859.

to be sung but, according to his theoretical concept, as fixated theatrical improvisations that have to materialize and result in a 'drama'. Wagner did declaim and sing his nascent works regularly which led me to suggest that his compositional process has to be understood as a chain of performative actions rather than a chain of different steps – writing of the text, writing of the music – and that the prosaic nature of his music has its root in the sound of the spoken word. For instance, a allegedly purely instrumental theme like the “Ride of the Valkyries” has its origin in the spoken word. The verses of the Valkyries “Nach Süden wir ziehen, Siege zu zeugen” etc. in his unfinished opera *Siegfrieds Tod* would have been sung on this melody. I have chosen an ensemble of 18 different methods of analyzing Wagner’s vocal lines in his dramatic oeuvre, that is, in all his works for the stage from *Die Hochzeit* through *Parsifal*, both finished and unfinished. This is a list of his entire output:

1. *Die Hochzeit* (fragment) WWV 31 (1832/33)
2. *Die Feen* WWV 32 (1833/34)
3. *Das Liebesverbot oder Die Novize von Palermo* WWV 38 (1834 – 36)
4. *Rienzi, der Letzte der Tribunen* WWV 49 (1838 – 40)
5. *Der fliegende Holländer* WWV 63 (1840/41)
6. *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* WWV 70, state 1 and 2 (1843 – 45)
7. *Lohengrin* WWV 75 (1845 – 48)
8. *Siegfried's Tod* (fragment) (1848 – 50)
9. *Das Rheingold* WWV 86 A (1852 – 54)
10. *Die Walküre* WWV 86 B (1852 – 56)
11. *Siegfried* WWV 86 C (1850 – 1869)
12. *Tristan und Isolde* WWV 90 (1857 – 59)
13. *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg* WWV 70, state 3 and 4 (1860/61; 1867; 1869; 1875)
14. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* WWV 96 (1845 – 67)
15. *Götterdämmerung* WWV 86 D (1848 – 74)
16. *Parsifal* WWV 111 (1857; 1877 – 82)

The development of *sprechgesang* did not happen before *Der fliegende Holländer*, despite some traces of declamatory rules in previous works. In it, the monologue of the Holländer is the first and only piece of proper *sprechgesang*. As Wagner wrote in *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde*, he created it from “the expressive speech”, that is from theatrical declamation.⁶ Also in the next work, *Tannhäuser*, there is only one part that can be addressed as *sprechgesang*, the so-called Rome narration in act 3. After it, Wagner changed his technique of outlining a

6 Knust 2007/2018, 40; more details in Martin Knust “Declaiming Wagner: Between Genesis and Historical Performance Practice”, in *Wagner in Context*, David Trippett (ed.), Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2024, 258–266 (forthcoming).

work. He started writing complete drafts of *Lohengrin*, starting from the beginning, and did thus deviate from the standard opera composition technique; before he had, like other composers, written central pieces or ‘numbers’ first and then added the remaining parts in between later. Now, in *Lohengrin*, he wrote the music from the beginning to the end, like declaiming a text, and kept this technique for the rest of his life. It did cause him some labor with *Lohengrin* as the sketches show. The second innovation was the consequent application of the *sprechgesang* technique to all vocal parts. He did not do it in a uniform manner, however, but the parts which exhibit the strongest impact of *sprechgesang* – and hence the most declamatory-like shape of their melodic lines – are the villains and intriguers like Telramund and Ortrud. The heroic characters in his works which are most often high dramatic voices – tenors and sopranos – do appear to be more designed to be sung emphatically. This tendency kept Wagner too during the creation of all the other works of his oeuvre, with the significant exception of Wotan. It seems that this *sprechgesang* technique, which in a way ‘de-operized’ the vocal parts, was his choice for writing his tetralogy when he began it. In any event, *Das Rheingold* is virtually only consisting of *sprechgesang* as are the largest parts of the first two acts of *Die Walküre*. At the end of act 3 of *Die Walküre*, Wagner modified his outlining strategy once more. Before, the first layers in his first drafts were the vocal lines, that is their pitches and rhythmic structures. He added most often not more than a bass note in the second system. After this, he sometimes inserted some smaller figurations and finally he added the text to be sung. At the end of *Walküre*, the so-called Wotan’s farewell marks a shift.⁷ The sketches show that Wagner outlined the accompaniment first, in the first draft, and adjusted the vocal part later, when writing the full score. From now on he used two basic techniques for proceeding with a draft: outlining the vocal parts or outlining the orchestral part first. Again, the first acts of *Siegfried* are more or less only *sprechgesang*. After drafting them, Wagner interrupted his monumental *Ring* project and wrote *Tristan und Isolde*, a work in which he paired *sprechgesang* – especially in the first and third act – with quasi-instrumental and often motivic vocal melodies in the second act. *Die Meistersinger*, despite being a work that has the correct musical declamation as a main theme – cf. Hans Sachs’s and Beckmesser’s dialogue in act 2 –, moves even further away from the *sprechgesang* of the *Ring* parts that were finished at this time. Instead, Wagner’s only mature work that is a comedy explores other techniques like polyphony and diatonic melodies. Equipped with this increase of his competence as a composer of complex and dense thematic structures, Wagner finished the *Ring*. Its last four acts – act three of *Siegfried* and the entire *Götterdämmerung* – were composed in a theme- or leitmotif-centered style. As the *Meistersinger* sketches show, Wagner now proceeded

7 Knust 2007/2018, chapter IV (online), 124.

when writing a draft through adding thematic material to either the vocal lines or the accompaniment, a procedure that Jörg Linnenbrügger identified as a modular principle.⁸ This was the strategy that Wagner employed for the final acts of the *Ring* as well and it explains why his music became so dense or even heavy loaded with themes and leitmotifs which did not leave much space for *sprechgesang* to emerge. Nonetheless, even here certain declamatory rules, for instance the imitation of prosody and pitch contours of spoken language, are still valid for shaping the solo vocal melodies. Wagner's last work, *Parsifal*, appears to be a synthesis of his achievements as a composer. In it, the *sprechgesang* is partly reinstated, most clearly in the part of Kundry in act 1 or the part of Amfortas. The methods of this analysis (in English) as well as the complete analysis results (in German) are freely accessible online.⁹

Not only for the production but also for the reproduction – the rehearsing and performing – of his works, the declamation was Wagner's point of departure. In a separate chapter,¹⁰ I have depicted his activities as a stage director. Wagner staged all his mature works at least once. Again, like in his theoretical texts, the interpretation of music in the strict sense got relatively little attention. Instead, Wagner focused on his singer's and rehearsed with them the delivery of the text and the physical actions thoroughly. For his singers, purely musical advices are virtually absent from all documents about his rehearsing practice which looked like this: First, Wagner instructed his singers to read the text aloud or downright to declaim it before studying the music.¹¹ Then, when all singers, musicians, stage assistants and technical personal gathered for the first time, he would read the entire libretto aloud himself for all of them. Third, his work focused on the soloists, and he rehearsed individually and on stage with them. However, he gave very little, if any advice about the musical interpretation; purely musical terms are virtually absent from his instructions. Instead, he instructed them about the psychological processes they had to embody or gave them declamatory analogies for their vocal delivery of the music. At times, as Julius Hey witnessed, he let them even declaim their text during the rehearsal for giving them explanations for his choice of musical measures.¹² In sum, the work with the singers was the main part for him when he staged one of his works and his instructions were more those that could be expected in a spoken piece than in an opera.

8 He dubbed it "Bausteinverfahren" (Jörg Linnenbrügger: *Richard Wagners Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. Studien und Materialien zur Entstehungsgeschichte des ersten Aufzugs* (1861–1866). *Band 1: Studien* (PhDiss.), Göttingen 2001), 234–36.

9 "Musical and Theatrical Declamation in Richard Wagner's Works and a Toolbox for Vocal Analysis", in: *Danish Musicology Online* vol. VII (2016), 81–105

10 Knust 2007/2018, chapter III.

11 Letter to Hans Betz August 8 1868 (quoted in Knust 2007/2018, 291).

12 *Richard Wagner als Vortragsmeister 1864–1876. Erinnerungen von Julius Hey*, ed. Hans Hey, Leipzig 1911, 130 (quoted in *ibid.* 292–293).

If one compares all states of a Wagnerian artwork, from the first prose draft to the production on stage, it seems as if Wagner's first scenic vision became realized more or less without major modifications. His idea for a performance which he checked time and again through reading and singing his parts, became elaborated in this process and the music he composed was only one among several means for determining the actions and expression of his actors/singers. In short, Wagner's artistic concept is a direct predecessor of the film.¹³ The singers on stage were supposed to perform the actions he had envisioned during the creation process. It appears that he tried to realize what I called 'Living movies' in analogy to the *Tableaux vivants*.¹⁴ His magnificent orchestra had in this context the function of a stage director who gives the singers psychological hints and even the exact rhythm and pace for their physical actions and gestures on stage as do the vocal lines which evoke the sound of spoken theatrical language. However, due to the aesthetic changes that declamation and dramatic singing underwent during his lifetime, this visionary concept of a fixed stage performance tradition never became reality.

2. Reconstructions and re-enactments of Wagner's *sprechgesang* in the 21st century: A report

During the past years, I have developed some of my observations further and spread them in the music research community. My hypothesis, that a large part of Wagner's works can be understood as the monumentally enlarged version – both acoustically and visually – of Saxonian singers/actors from the first third of the 19th century, has been discussed and entered even education and performance practice. In the second part of this text some projects will be described which my research results have informed without my personal interference or participation. My insight in these projects is that of a consultant, in the best case, and not comprehensive or that of an insider. For that reason, I have to pre-apologize for all potential misconceptions in their description and ask the reader of this text to contact the initiators of these projects directly in case they want to know more about them.

The first project was initiated at the Hochschule der Künste in Berne, Switzerland. About ten years ago, some results of my research were implemented into the instruction of students in singing. Mainly, it was about the idea to inform singers historically through different source types about the declamation practice in the 19th century and its particularities. Among others, the first recordings of actors

13 Martin Knust: "'hier hört man klopfen' – Wagners Werke als Vorläufer des Filmsoundtracks" in *wagnerspectrum* vol. 18 no. 1 'Schwerpunkt: Wagner im Film', Friederike Wißmann, Dieter Borchmeyer and Sven Friedrich (eds.), Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann 2022, 13–28.

14 Knust 2007/2018, 428.

who declaimed texts like Alexander Moissi or Ludwig Wüllner became a source of inspiration. Besides that, written sources from the early 19th century like declamation textbooks served as a point of departure and a guide for interpretation. Several special research projects which were initiated by prof Kai Köpp completed the image. He is a specialist for the historical informed interpretation of violin and string instruments in the 19th century and has conducted extensive research about the Dresden performance material of the world premiere of *Der fliegende Holländer* in 1843. During presentations and consultations, we accumulated our research results about this performance and made it accessible for both musicologists and music educators. Generally, the Hochschule der Künste in Berne has as perhaps the first major institution dedicated its research and education of musicians to and specialized in the historical informed performance practice of the 19th century.

A still ongoing project started right before the outbreak of the pandemic and is therefore delayed. It is very ambitious because its aim is nothing less than the re-enactment of Wagner's complete *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in concerts according to the research results of a larger group of scholars who took, among others, my dissertation as a point of departure. This project *Wagner Lesarten* is a cooperation of the Forschungsinstitut für Musiktheater (FIMT) in Thurnau, the orchestras Concerto Köln and Dresdner Festspielorchester, the conductor Kent Nagano, the Kuratorium KölnMusik e.V., and the Kulturstiftung des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen. In November 18 and 20 2021, the first public performance of Wagner's Rheingold according to these principles took place in the Philharmonie Köln and the Concertgebouw Amsterdam respectively. Kent Nagano conducted Concerto Köln, an orchestra that has specialized on music on historical instruments that was written before the 19th century. The latter performance is still accessible on the Netherland's public service radio broadcaster NTR.¹⁵ In August 2023, a reprise of this concert was given, this time with the participation of the Dresdner Festspielorchester. The public resonance focused on the use of reconstructed and historical instruments – among others, the tubas were original instruments from the late 19th century – but not so much on the singing. In what follows, some details of the production and the its rehearsals will be described, however with the caveat that I did only witness the finished product – the concerto in Köln and its preceding presentation of the singing of the Rheintöchter – and can only be regarded as a secondary source for this extraordinary event. In my dissertation, I employed many research results from German Sprechwissenschaft, an academic discipline that apparently does not exist elsewhere and for which I can not give an English translation. Since the 1930s, Sprechwissenschaftler at the university of Halle conducted research about the sound and expressive means of declamation of the pre-recording era. Especially the work of Irmgard Weithase, who collected and summarized vast amounts of

15 <https://www.nporadio4.nl/uitzendingen/ntr-zaterdagmatinee/d54951ad-8845-4d64-b87f-4a2821002988/2021-11-20-ntr-zaterdagmatinee-kent-nagano-en-de-authentieke-wagner>

empirical material,¹⁶ was very valuable for my own project. The *Wagner Lesarten* project did the same. Initially, the actress the libretto of Wagner's *Rheingold* was declaimed by a performer after having been instructed in the historical practices of 19th-century actors who had never heard the music of this piece. This event exhibited expressively the declamatory substance that became Wagner's material for composition. The singers of the *Rheingold* were instructed by the Sprechwissenschaftler Ulrich Hoffmann and developed the interpretation of their parts according to a four-step model which derives from Wagner's rehearsal practice as documented by Julius Hey. In a first step, the actors had to declaim their texts. In a second, they had to do it with the accompaniment of the piano and to adjust their delivery to the rhythm of it. In a third step, they had to sing emphatically, like in conventional opera. In a fourth they had to combine the latter creatively with their declamatory delivery. The aim was to shift permanently between these different layers and to use the sound of speech for expressive and onomatopoetic means. For instance, the syllable of Woglinde's "Nur wer der Minne Macht entsagt" was spoken, for onomatopoetic reasons; the German word "sagen" means "to speak", and even though the word "entsagen" has a different meaning as such semantically – it means "to abstain from" – this was a typical way for the direct or perhaps even naïve auditive exposition of the word's content in the 19th century theater. Another element turned out to be challenging for the singers: Not only the aesthetics and measures of 19th-century speech but also its very physiological essence, its phonetics was different from today. For instance, in the 19th century the consonant "r" was always produced with the tip of the tongue, like in Italian, not guttural in the rear of the mouth like in French. Moreover, the "r" was emphatically rolled not only in the beginning and in the middle of a word but also at the end of it. In a phrase like Floßhildes "Der Vater sagt' es, und uns befahl er" there are three of these final "r" to be pronounced which required a fundamental re-adjustment of modern singing conventions.

As a whole, the sound of the performance was very different from common standards. For instance, the lack of a strong vibrato in the singer's delivery and the historical string instruments which were played not vibrato as well changed the entire overtone structure compared to a conventional interpretation with strings of steel and full, powerful voice tone. Moreover, the reference tone was significantly lower than 440 hertz, namely 416 hertz. And the tempo was fast, something that Wagner had hinted at to his singers on some occasions as being useful for the delivery. The entire performance took no more than 2 hours and 14 minutes and was thus about half-an-hour shorter than other performances. This – the lower reference tone as well as the quick tempo – made it easier for the singers to employ

16 E.g. in Irmgard Weithase: *Geschichte der deutschen Vortragskunst im 19. Jahrhundert – Anschauungen über das Wesen der Sprechkunst vom Ausgang der deutschen Klassik bis zur Jahrhundertwende*, Weimar 1940 and in *Zur Geschichte der gesprochenen deutschen Sprache*, 2 vol.s, Tübingen 1961.

the speech tone rather than the rather heavy and inflexible chest voice sound. The result was a fascinating plentifulness of details and a permanent shifting in color, articulation and dynamics. Of course, this is not already a fixed style or a finished concept that could become the model for other performances. Rather, this first attempt showed the potential and limitations of this way of performing that in the ears of some Wagnerians may sound non-homogenous and fractured. But, as a matter of fact, this is the way the voices of German actors/singers sounded 200 years ago. The perhaps least surprising but artistically most satisfying result of this performance was the perfect clarity of the diction. The less thicker orchestra and the expressive text delivery of the singers made the use of a texting machine superfluous. Even if the question whether the re-enactment of the 19th-century's 'flaws' of singing in Germany is closer to Wagner's ideal than the more plain and professional delivery of singers in the 20th century remains to be open, one goal or perhaps even the main goal of Wagner's aesthetics and artistic practice was achieved: to make the text intelligible in its sung form. The other three parts of the *Ring* will follow in the next years.

The most recent project that combined research presentations about Wagner and the declamation practice of his time with practical vocal performance was a workshop that took place in Christ's College in Cambridge, UK, on November 29 2023. After a scientific symposium in the morning, the afternoon was dedicated to experimental rehearsals of the second scene of the second act of *Die Walküre* with the opera singer Paul Carey Jones as Wotan and prof David Trippett on the piano. As a warming up they performed Wagner's only melodrama, Gretchen's "Ach neige, du Schmerzenreiche" from the *Sieben Kompositionen zu Goethes Faust* WWV 15 that the 19-years old Wagner composed. After that they tried different artistic approaches from this genre in the interpretation of Wotan's part. The goal was to test means of the melodrama without making the result overtly melodramatic in the double sense. Together both performers reflected about the outcome of these attempts.

So far, all of these projects have only concerned the auditive part of the actors'/singers' delivery, not the visual. That means, the impact of the often extreme and extremely expressive gestures from 19th-century practices have not been tried at all in practice. Such a project would require quite fundamental basic research about the nature of these gestures. Surely, it would be a fascinating project but given the immense mass of written and iconographic material this basic research demands substantial resources. I have outlined some of the challenges and given overviews about the types of relevant documents.¹⁷

17 Martin Knust: "Die Bühnengestik im 19. Jahrhundert – Quellen und Ansätze einer szenisch-musikalischen Rekonstruktion", in: *Musiktheorie. Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft*, vol. XXVI (2011), no. 4, special volume "Hörbare Gebärden – Musik und Körperausdruck", Arne Stollberg, Wilhelm Seidel, Matthias Schmidt (eds.), 325–344; "The Stage Gesture of the Wagner Era", in: *Mettere in scena Wagner. Opera e regia tra ottocento e contemporaneità* (= Studi e saggi 25), Marco Targa and Marco Brighenti (eds.), Libreria musicale italiana: Lucca 2019, 37–48.

The idea of understanding Wagner's works to some extent as musicalized declamation has been established in music research. If it will gain traction in performance practice, time will tell.