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WAGNERIAN HEXAMETERS, HOMERIC QUESTIONS: CLASSICAL «OBSESSIONS» ON TEXT, METER AND PERFORMANCE

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WAGNERIAN HEXAMETERS, HOMERIC QUESTIONS: CLASSICAL «OBSESSIONS» ON TEXT, METER AND PERFORMANCE

1. Cosima diaries

In the Cosima Wagner's diaries¹ it is possible to follow a domestic routine in which, between meals and conversations, there are moments of reading and discussion of different texts.² Between these moments, specific topics of poetic appreciation and metric analysis are carried out, as for example on January 17, 1869:

At table we talked a lot again about the drama. Richard explained to me various verse meters, particularly in regard to Schiller, whose *Wallenstein* I am now rereading.³

Cosima Wagner (1837-1930) refers here to the reading of Schiller's trilogy, which is part of the movement, along with Goethe, to propose a renewal of theater in the German language based on models from Classical Antiquity.⁴ In *Wallenstein*, which premiered in 1799 and was written in verses, metric variations are used depending on the situations presented: we have from the «doggerel», an irregular medieval meter in rhymes, close to the iambic pentameter, used for comic scenes, passing through blank verses in debate scenes, and hexametric adaptations for epic scenes.⁵

¹ This paper is part of research *Wagnerianas: integrated methodology of dramaturgy, orchestration and technological mediation based on Richard Wagner's proposals and his reception of the idea of chorus in Ancient Greek Theater*. This project has founded from Brazilian National Bureau of Research (CNPq). This paper was presented at the International Colloque *Les Odyssées de l'hexamètre et autres avatars des mètres grecs: traduction, dérive, performance*, at University of Rouen, 2022. Link: <https://www.homeros.site/spip.php?article95>

² Eric Salzman, «On Reading Cosima Wagner's "Diaries"», *The Musical Quarterly* 3/68 (1982), p. 341: «The diaries cover the period of the resumption of the composition of *the Ring* and the creation of *Parsifal*; they chronicle the move from Switzerland to Bayreuth and the first festivals: the *Ring* of 1876 and the *Parsifal* of 1883».

³ Richard Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, vol. 1, 1869-1877, Martin Gregor – Dellin and Dietrich Mack (eds), Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York/London 1878, p. 40.

⁴ Pedro Franceschini, «Elementos da gênese da trilogia *Wallenstein*: estética e teatro na correspondência entre Goethe e Schiller», *Rapsódia* 13 (2019), p. 71-98; Simon Richter (ed.), *The Literature of Weimar Classicism*, Camden House, Rochester/Suffolk 2005.

⁵ Lesley Sharpe, *Friedrich Schiller. Drama, Thought and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991; Carlos Spoerhase, «A Monster in Its Breadth and Length: Schiller's *Wallenstein*

More specifically still, in the context of the reception of poetic forms in antiquity, on June 16, 1872, Richard Wagner (1813-1873) refers to something like «bad hexameters»:

...In the afternoon I read *Hermann und Dorothea* and felt that the hexameter form does much to impair the impression of a splendid naivete in Goethe's characters. R. agreed with me and said: «One sees by that to what extent everything with us was a seeking and groping; the people who don't understand call it classical, since it uses a Greek form which does not suit it at all, and which gives everything an air of affectation».⁶

Wagner's censorship translates into the lack of correlation between the metric form used and the situations and characters in Goethe's epic poem. This censorship of Goethe and his hexameters will be present in other occurrences registered by Cosima, as on July 4, 1878:

...Also, at my request, he reads *Euphrosyne* [Goethe] to me, first according to the meter, which makes it almost nonsensical, then according to the sense, which we find more moving; but we regret the hexameters and the Hermes, R. even Antigone and Polyxena, though I am less disturbed by them, since here they seem to me like theatrical sisters, being welcomed by Euphrosyne.⁷

This reaction to Goethe's hexameters led Wagner, on August 18, 1881, to almost propose the banning of this compositional strategy:

R. had a better night, and we are cheerful at breakfast; he thinks, among other things, about Goethe's hexameters and observes: «People should write such things only if they are able to». One must be out of one's mind to write hexameters.⁸

In these incidents annotated in Cosima's diaries, a coherence of interconnected acts reverberates. As you can see, such hexameters are considered «bad»:

1. within a practice of recreating old metric standards;
2. from reading the texts aloud;
3. when there is a disconnection between meaning and form;
4. when producing an affective falsification (affectation).

Thus, when the verses are uttered aloud, when they are presented in oral performances, it is perceived that the vocabulary and prosodic restrictions imposed by the distribution and selection of words lead to reception shocks. Such

and the Poetics of Scale», *Modern Philology* 118/1 (2020), p. 87-106; Walter Bennet, *German Verse in Classical Metres*. Mouton and Co., The Hague 1963.

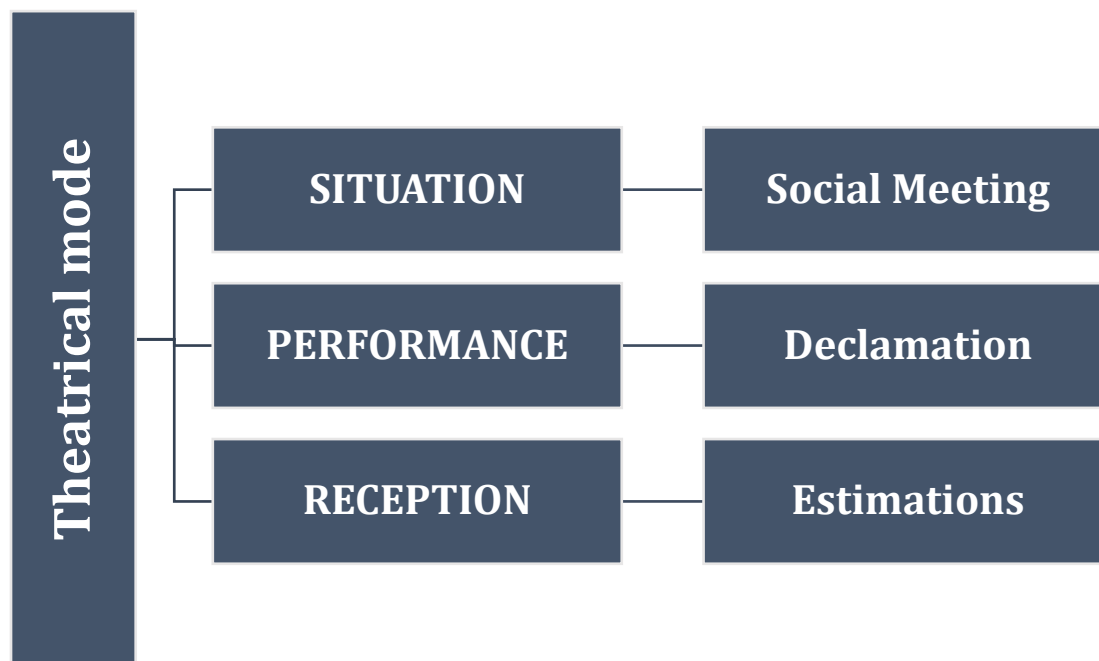
⁶ Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, p. 500.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 107.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 707.

a performative situation in which Wagner, Cosima, and the guests find themselves can be described as follows:

Fig. 1: Theatricality of Wagner's meetings at home



In this way, we have a generalized and recurrent performative situation in the Wagner household: the agents of this domestic social theater engage in asymmetrical interactions of performing and appreciating texts.

2. How to become a poet

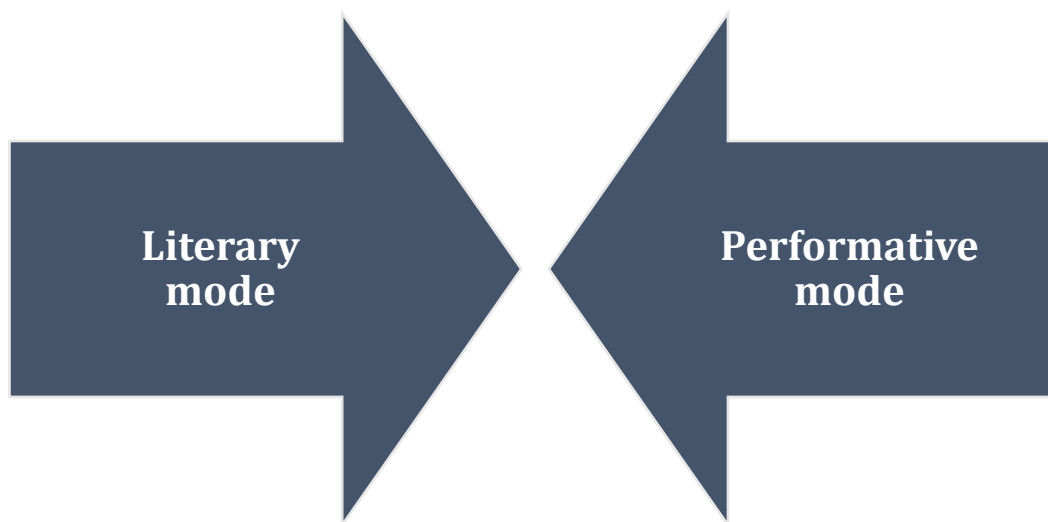
Wagner's comments on hexameters dialogue with a dynamic Germanic tradition of reception of classical poetic forms. In this reception dynamic, between 1720 and 1899, there was a «Change toward ever more rigorous imitation the theorization of meter, in particular the meters of Greek and Latin, and especially hexameter. Hexameter was the meter of epic, particularly Homer and Virgil, and the German attempt to write in hexameter was thus central to the question of whether modern literature could approach the greatness of its ancient predecessors and of what modern German literature should become».⁹

The incorporation of hexameters in the German language, first in metric translations, then in original works of literature and in theater, provides a vast field of expressive and critical experiences and possibilities. Metric standards

⁹ Hannah Eldridge, *Metrical Claims and Poetic Experience: Klopstock, Nietzsche, Grünbein*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2022, p. 27.

related to performative events are redefined in literary scriptural acts. And such literary scriptural acts are reprocessed into performative events. Wagner inherits this tension between literary interpretations of the hexameter and performative reformulations of the same meter, which can be represented as follows:

Fig. 2: Contrastive modes of creative traditions



Wagner's insertion in the study of classical metric patterns is a topic present in the composer's writings. In his *Autobiographische Skizze* [*Autobiographic Sketch*], published in 1842. Wagner says:

Greek, Latin, Mythology, and Ancient History were my principal studies. I wrote verses too. (...) I promptly determined to become a poet; and sketched out tragedies on the model of the Greeks, urged by my acquaintance with Apel's works: *Polyidos*, *Die Ätolier*.¹⁰

Recalling his studies and school-boy life, he indicates that his first creative tendency was to become a literary author, based on his contact with the neoclassical dramas of August Appel (1771-1816), works based on metrical studies of antiquity.¹¹ These memories of Wagner are expanded in the first part of his autobiography, published in 1870:

Nevertheless, by my successes in philological work I managed to attract the attention of a young teacher at the Kreuz Grammar School, a Master of Arts named Sillig, who proved very helpful to me. He often permitted me to visit him

¹⁰ Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 1 (tr. William Ashton Ellis – Kegan Paul), London 1892, p. 4.

¹¹ August Apel wrote *Metrik*, in two volumes, between 1814-1816, a work that generated great debate and opposition, especially by his master Gottfried Hermann (1772-1848). Cf. Daniel Foster, *Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2010, p. 276.

and show him my work, consisting of metric translations and a few original poems, and he always seemed very pleased with my efforts in recitation.¹²

From a reader of metrical imitations of classical texts, Wagner began to produce metrical translations. Among these translations is a Herculean effort for a 15-year-old:

...My disgust at having to lay aside my Homer – from which I had already made written translations of twelve songs.¹³

That is, Wagner elaborated from the Homeric text approximately 6,000 hexametric verses! Between this hard work in 1828 efforts and the judgments handed down more than 40 years later, we have a trajectory of someone exposed to literary metrical practices who then engage in dramatic-musical rhythmic patterns.

In the formative period of his studies, Wagner can be described as follows:

Fig. 3: Initial steps of Wagner's artistic career



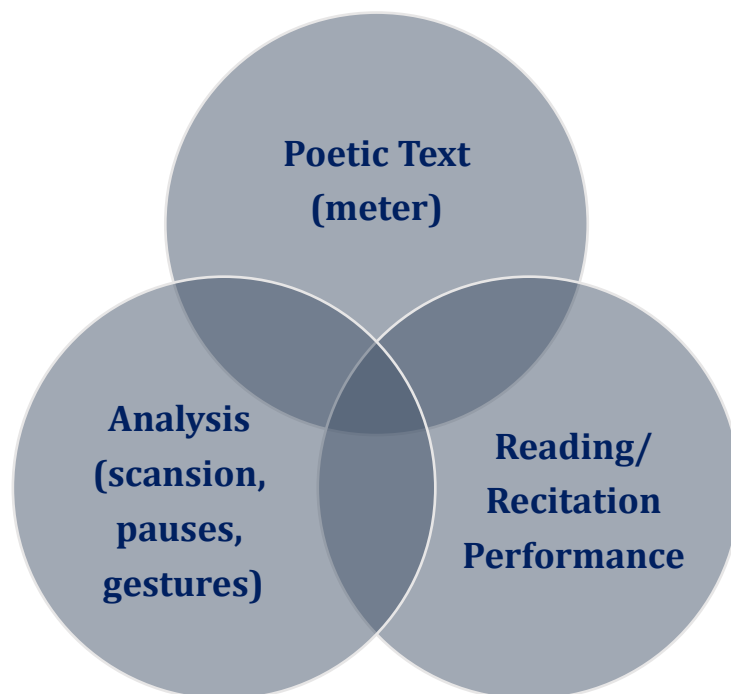
He follows protocols for the elaboration of written texts based on the reception of classical culture, especially with regard to the production of works in metered verse.

Within this perspective, your writing practice is understood from the following correlated tasks:

¹² Richard Wagner, *My Life*, Dodd, Mead and Company, New York 1911, p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 25.

Fig. 4: Intersection of activities at reception of classical texts



This relationship between writing, analysis and performance makes explicit a formative program and a rhetorical style for both the production and reception of texts. Such a rhetorical and declamatory style, which starts from the word selected and distributed in psychoacoustic parameters, will be the horizon for the mediation carried out by Wagner in his career: the poet becomes a musical dramatist.

From the young man with literary ambitions to the adult composer and librettist, there are changes that lead him to propose and carry out a “new drama”, a diverse multisensory synthesis. The complementarity between the theoretical ideas of *Oper und Drama* (1851) and the wide range of dramatic-musical works of the cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1848-1876) attests to the reassessment of poetic and dramatic forms from Antiquity and, consequently, to the use of metric standards into actual performative events.

From this period, among other documents, we have the explicit indications of Richard Wagner regarding this reassessment, published in 1851 in the bibliographical text *Eine Mitteilung an Meine Freunde* (*A communication to my friends*):

I must necessarily pass forward to a gradual but complete upheaval of the traditional operatic form. This opera-form was never, of its very nature, a form embracing the whole Drama, but the rather an arbitrary conglomerate of separate smaller forms of song, whose fortuitous concatenation of Arias, Duos,

Trios, &c., with Choruses and so-called ensemble-pieces, made out the actual edifice of Opera. (...) the Matter of what the Word-Tone poet has to utter: it is, the Purely-human, freed from every shackle of Convention.¹⁴

The new musical drama demands a range of psychoacoustic parameters, no longer restricted to formal schemes and pre-established formulas. The deconstruction of the dramaturgical model of the hegemonic operatic tradition of its time goes through the generalization of its rhythmic heterogeneity: it is necessary to think about the uniqueness of each event in its temporal flow. From this, the act of composing in verses is resumed in its complexity:

Whereas modern opera-composers had merely sought to make the wonted Opera-melody, in its final utter pauperism and stereotyped immutability, just new and piquant by far-fetched artifices, the harmonic suppleness that I gave my melody had its mainspring in the feeling of a quite other need. I had now completely given up Traditional Melody, with its want of any prop, or vindication of its rhythmic structure, in the spoken text; in place of that false rhythmic garb, I gave my melody a harmonic characterization, which, with its determinant effect upon the sense of hearing, made it the answering expression of each emotion pictured in the verse.¹⁵

Thus, instead of verses, rhythmic phrases configured in metrical patterns but devoid of the relations between sound, affectivity, and movement, Richard Wagner proposes a performative rationality that incorporates the rhetorical-declamatory tradition in the polyfunctionality that metrical patterns can produce. To this end, Wagner adopts the alliterative verse.

This was alliterative verse, which, in keeping with true speech inflections, can be adapted to suit the most natural and lively rhythms; which is at all times readily capable of the most infinitely varied expression.¹⁶

As an immediate option to the trivialization of Greek meter into monovalent formulas, the option for the rhythm of medieval Nordic poetry brought the possibility of verses of varied length and greater freedom of choice, combination, and distribution of words by, paradoxically, restricting and indicating the selection of words according to their sound associations. Instead of previously marked positions on the verse to fit certain stress patterns, we have a flow of sounds built from their aural connection.

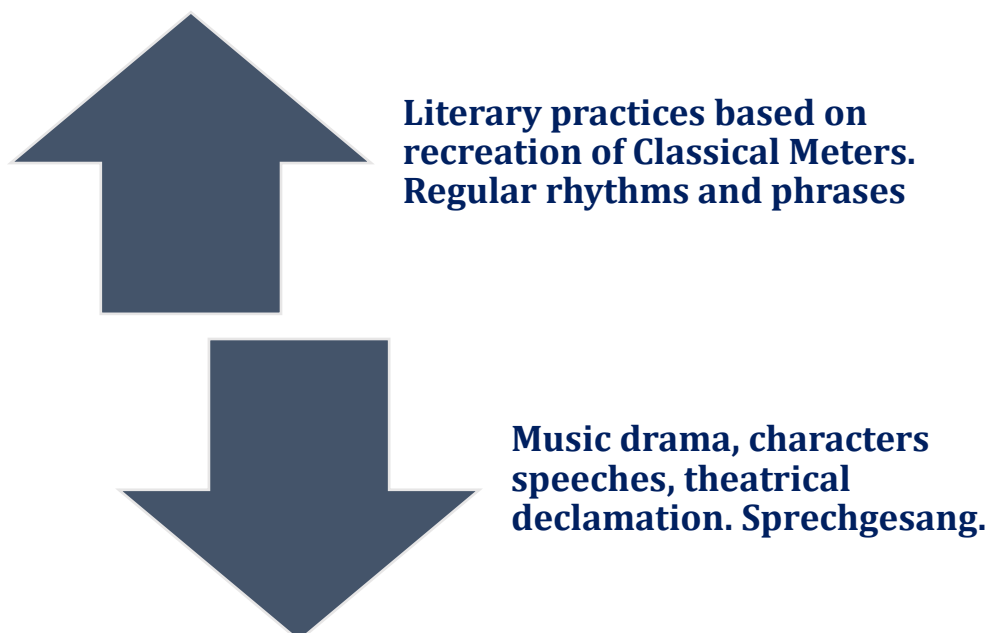
In the context of these theories and practices of the new drama, we have the following opposition:

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 367.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 374.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 378.

Fig. 5: Opposition between literary and music-dramatical practices



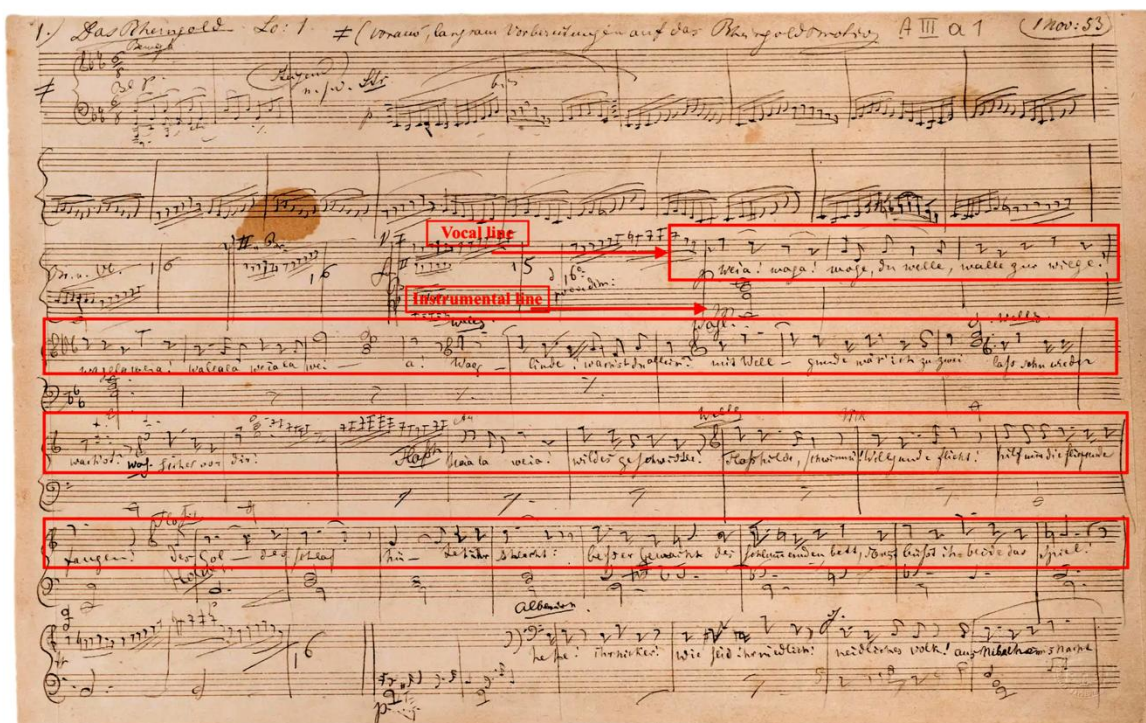
Analyzing Wagner's creative process at that time, one can observe how rhythmic verse and its rhetorical-performative potential become the center of dramatic-musical activity. According to Martin Knust,

...vocal lines were fixed in their definite form in the so-called first drafts – early in the composition process – while the instrumental part of the scores often was not fixed until the second drafts or even later in the composition process. In other words, the first drafts show the vocal lines as they appear in the printed score and thus the musical declamation was clearly his main concern during the first steps of composition. This corroborates the thesis that the recitation had a strong impact on his music because those passages that were especially close to the sound of spoken language were easy for him to sketch in one go despite their considerable diastematic and rhythmic irregularities.¹⁷

This is what it is possible to observe in *Rheingold*'s draft:

¹⁷ Martin Knust, «Musical and Theatrical Declamation in Richard Wagner's Works and a Toolbox for Vocal Music Analysis», *Danish Musicology Online Special Edition* (2016), p. 81-104; Martin Knust, *Sprachvertonung und Gestik in den Werken Richard Wagners: Einflüsse zeitgenössischer Deklamations- und Rezitationspraxis*, Frank & Timme, Berlin 2018; Martin Knust, «Music, Drama, and Sprechgesang. About Richard Wagner's Creative Process», *19th-Century Music* 3/38 (2015), p. 12.

Fig. 6: A composition draft of the prelude and Scene 1 for *Das Rheingold* from 1853.¹⁸



The first sung verses of the work that opens the tetralogy float in their rhythmic diversity through an associative unification through the contrast between similar sounds in different words.

“Weia! Waga! / Weia! Waga!
Woge, du Welle! / Welter, you wave
Walle zur Wiege! / swirl round the cradle!
Wagalaweia! / Wagalaweia!¹⁹

The words sung by the naiad Woglinde are thus set to music, showing the melodic outline of the phrases and their rhythmic flow from phrases of different dimensions:

¹⁸ Wikipedia commons.

¹⁹ Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey 2003, p. 2018.

Fig. 7: Transcription of the first sung verses of *Rheingold*



In the image above, we see how in each bar/phrase, different words with repetition of initial consonant sounds are vocally performed. There are variations in the number of syllables/notes per measure/phrase and in the melodic contour that combines different combinations of ascending and descending movements. In the end, we have a new pattern in the closing of the chant: instead of arpeggios, there are sustained notes and pauses. In the detail of the draft, we see how regularities of measures/phrases of 5-syllable notes are broken by the final measures/phrases.

Thus, the entirety of *Rheingold*'s first vocal performance presents a flow of variations in pitch, and rhythm arranged in an arc between a crescent of sounds and their reduction. Such wavelike and variational dynamics correlate with the proposed images for the scene heading:

With graceful swimming movements at the center of the stage picture, one of the Rhinedaughters circles a reef, its slender pinnacle towering upwards into a denser flood of water and brighter dawning light.²⁰

3. Excursus on Nietzsche and rhythm

It was not just Wagner who was involved in the re-discussion of the Greek meter. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) also proposed a somewhat commented project of critical review of the reception of rhythmic patterns in antiquity.²¹ This project starts as much from the philology as from the ideas and works of Wagner. In a letter to his friend and musician Carl Fuchs (1838-1922), Nietzsche sums up his ideas:

²⁰ Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, John Deathridge (ed.), Penguin Books, London 2020, p. 235.

²¹ Carlotta Santini, « Nietzsche & la rythmique grecque Une approche philologique & anthropologique », *Les Cahiers philosophiques de Strasbourg* 40 (2016), p. 113-142 ; Wai Ling Cheong, «Ancient Greek Rhythms in Tristan and Nietzsche», *Musicologist. International Journal of Music Studie* 2/2 (2018), p. 69-112; Fritz Bornmann, «Nietzsches metrische Studien», *Nietzschen-Studien* 18 (1989), p. 472-489.

Your counting of rhythmical beats is an important find, real gold, out of which you will be able to mint some good coin. It reminded me that while studying ancient metric in 1870 I had been hunting for five and seven beat phrases and had counted through *Die Meistersinger* and *Tristan* -- which told me a few things about Wagner's rhythms. He is so averse to anything mathematical and strictly symmetrical (as is shown on a small scale in his use of triplets -- I mean the excessive use of them) that he prefers to prolong four-beat phrases into five-beat ones, six-beat ones into seven-beat ones (in *Die Meistersinger*, Act 3, there is a waltz; check to see if it is not governed by seven-beat phrases). Among the dangerous after-effects of Wagner, it seems to me that one of the worst is wanting to make things come alive at any price, for in an instant that can become a mannerism, a trick. I have always wanted some competent person simply to describe Wagner's various methods in the context of his art as a whole, to make an historical and plain statement as to how he does it here and how he does it there.²²

From this long quote, we highlight some information:

a. Nietzsche writes the letter at a time of distancing from Wagner. The rhythmic processes described by Nietzsche indicate a negative evaluation: the use of irregular periods or alogia is dangerous both in its effects and in the fact that it becomes an artifice.

b. Nietzsche informs us that his studies of ancient Greek meter in 1870 are in sync with analyzes of dramatic-musical works from Wagner's post-romantic or mature period, such as *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868) and *Tristan und Isolde* (1865).

Thus, we have a clash of divergences and convergences: Richard Wagner, as we have seen, has a humanistic background with an emphasis on producing verses from conventionalized metric standards; Due to his work with actors and music, Wagner seeks a closer approximation of writing through rhythmic patterns to multisensory happenings, which the new musical drama makes possible. Nietzsche, a philologist with some musical ambitions, among other things, seeks new horizons in the reception of classical culture through Wagner's experiences, which he later rejects.

And what would these rhythmic researches be, which at first become better clarified when associated with Wagner's ideas and works?

In a letter to the philologist Erwin Rhode, in 1870, Wagner comments on such research:

I have discovered a new metric («Metrik»); compared with it, the entire recent development of metric («Metrik») from G. Hermann to Westphal or Schmidt is an

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche*, Christopher Middleton (ed.), Hackett Publishing Company, Indiana – Cambridge 1996, p. 162.

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aberration. Laugh and malign me as much as you want – the whole thing is astonishing to me too.²³

From this new metric, in opposition to the dominant philological studies, only annotations remained, which were only published in 1993! According to James Porter:

An intense burst of activity while at Basel followed. There, Nietzsche treated the topic of rhythm in lectures between 1869 and 1874, twice devoting a whole course to it (1869 and 1870/71). And having made a series of unconventional and innovative insights into Greek and Roman rhythm and meter, he filled four notebooks on the subject between 1870 and roughly 1872, with an eye to future publication – a plan that, like so many others, never materialized.²⁴

Here is the list of these notes written between 1870-1873:

«Griechische Rhythmik»;
«Aufzeichnungen zur Rhythmik und Metrik»;
«Zur Theorie der quantifizierenden Rhythmik»;
«Rhythmische Untersuchungen»

Especially in the Griechische Rhythmik notebook, which was drawn up for we have the following analysis of a scene from *Tristan und Isolde*:²⁵

²³ Michon Pascal, «12. Rhythm from Art to Philosophy – Nietzsche (1867-1888) – part 5», *Rhuthmos* 1 (June 2016), <https://rhuthmos.eu/spip.php?article1892> [5.4.2024]

²⁴ James Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of Future*, Stanford University Press, California 2000, p. 128.

²⁵ Image in *Griechische Rhythmik*, KGW II. 3, p. 201. Such an analysis is within a section called *Taktwechsel und taktgleichheit* (*Time change and equality of measures*).

Fig. 8: Nietzsche's analysis of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*

Tristan Act III Scene II

3/4 4/4 3/4 3/4 4/4 3/4 4/4 3/4 4/4 4/4 3/4 4/4 4/4
 4/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4
 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 5/4 5/4 5/4 5/4 5/4 5/4 5/4 4/4 4/4 4/4
 10 3/4 4/4 4/4 3/4 4/4 4/4 3/4 4/4 3/4 4/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4
 4/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 3/4 5/4 5/4 5/4 5/4 4/4 4/4 4/4 4/4
 3/4 3/4 3/4 2/4 2/4 2/4 2/4
 2/2 2/2 2/2 2/2 2/2 2/2 usw.
 also
 15 3 2 2 3 3 3 2 2 2 4 4 2 2 2 2 1 1 1
 3 3 2 2 4 3 1 1 1 1 2 2 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1
 also
 3 2 2 3 3 3 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 1 1 1
 a b c d
 3 3 2 2 4 3 2 2 2 2 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1
 a b c d
 20 also
 a b c d Strophe
 a b c d Antistrophe
 U U - U - - - U - - - U -
 verlängert. . . .
 25 κύκλος περίπλεφ λογικοί

According to Katherine Fry, such distribution of rhythmic values from the score can thus be described:²⁶

Act 3, Scene 2, mm. 1-77 Strophe

Mm.

a.1-10 4-beat period (3+2+2+3)

b. 11-16 2-beat period (3 + 3)

c.17-30 7-beat period (2+2+2+2+2+2+2) d.31-41 7-beat period (2+2+2+2+1+1+1) Antistrophe

Mm.

a.42-51 4-beat period (3+3+2+2)

b. 52-58 2-beat period (4 + 3)

c.59-70 7-beat period (2+2+2+2+2+1+1)

d.71-77 7-beat period (1+1+1+1+1+1+1)

²⁶ Katherine Fry, «Nietzsche, *Tristan und Isolde*, and the Analysis of Wagnerian Rhythm», *The Opera Quarterly* 3-4/29 (2013), p. 262-263.

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What caught Nietzsche's attention was the use of constant metric modulations in the scene where the dying and delirious Tristan contrasts with the vividly playing orchestra, «Sehr lebhaft». Nietzsche transcribed such modulations in groups of phrases with alternations between measures of ternary and quaternary beats. In Wagner's score, we have:

Fig. 9: Score of *Tristan und Isolde* 3.2.

Zweite Szene

The score is for the second scene of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, measures 1210 to 1215. The tempo is marked "Sehr lebhaft". The score includes parts for Flutes (Fl. 1, 2), Oboes (Ob. 1, 2), Clarinets (Klar. (F) (im Orchester), Klar. (B) 1, 2), Bassoons (Baßkl. (B)), Fagots (Fag. 1, 2, 3), Horns (Hr. 1, 2 (F), 3, 4 (E)), Trombones (Pos. 1, 2, 3), Trumpets (Baßtr.), and Strings (Viol. I, II, Br., Vc., Kb.). The score is annotated with dynamic markings (p, f, cresc., decresc.) and articulation marks. Red circles and numbers (3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 4) are drawn over the score, indicating metric modulations between 3/4 and 4/4 time signatures. The circles are drawn around the measures, and the numbers are placed below the staffs, indicating the time signature for each measure.

As Tristan agonizes and surrenders to seeking more life, the furious orchestra explores rhythmic and melodic tensions. In the words of Christopher Corbier, such alternations detected by Nietzsche can thus be understood:

More importantly, such an interpretation brings out a fundamental idea for Nietzsche: Wagnerian rhythmicity is indeed a resurrection of Greek rhythmicity, since the same concepts can be used to account for them. There is, in fact, a perfectly appropriate term for these incessant changes of meter: *alogia*. This is why the rhythmic analysis of this scene from *Tristan* comes at the end of a series of notes devoted to the ancient *alogia*. After noting the frequency of changes of meter in the verses of the Ancients, Nietzsche makes the connection with the «music of the future», which disregards eurhythmicity, regularity and the periodic return of strong beats.²⁷

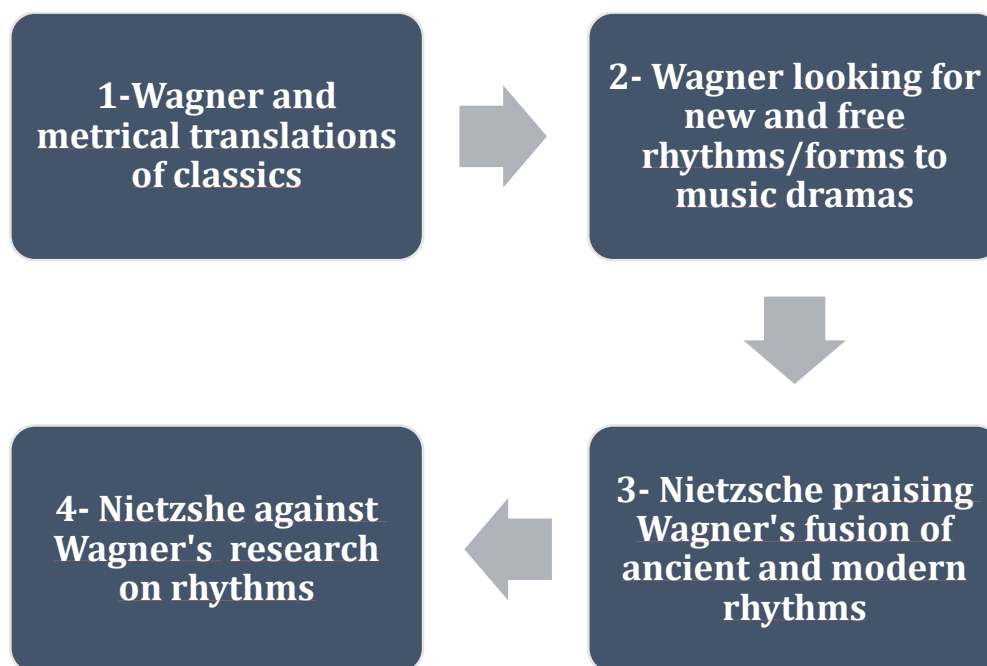
Thus, Wagner's musical dramaturgy, reacting against rhythmic conventions inherited from the literary and operatic tradition, by proposing metrical fluctuations comes close to what Nietzsche would have found in his new meter: instead of regular phrases, of an isochrony, there would be a greater heterogeneity in the composition and transition of these successions of sounds. Wagner's «*alogia*», praised at first, becomes the target of Nietzsche's censure after his disappointment with the presentations of the Ring cycle in 1876:

Richard Wagner wanted another kind of movement – he overthrew the physiological first principle of all music before his time. It was no longer a matter of walking or dancing – we must swim, we must hover.... This perhaps decides the whole matter. «Unending melody» really wants to break all the symmetry of time and strength; it actually scorns these things. Its wealth of invention resides precisely in what to an older ear sounds like rhythmic paradox and abuse. From the imitation or the prevalence of such a taste there would arise a danger for music – so great that we can imagine none greater – the complete degeneration of the feeling for rhythm, «chaos» in the place of rhythm.... The danger reaches its climax when such music cleaves ever more closely to naturalistic play-acting and pantomime, which governed by no laws of form, aim at effect and nothing more.... Expressiveness at all costs and music a servant, a slave to attitudes, this is the end...²⁸

Thus, in the second half of the 19th century, we can detect different reactions to the reception of Greek meters. Between Wagner and Nietzsche moves a complex network of questions:

²⁷ Christophe Corbier, «Alogia et eurythmie chez Nietzsche», *Nietzsche Studien* 1/38 (2009), p. 33.

²⁸ Nietzsche, *Friedrich Nietzsche. I: The case of Wagner. II: Nietzsche contra Wagner. III: Selected aphorisms*, T. N. Foulis, Edinburgh/London 1911, p. 61. This criticism is followed by several authors. In 1913, we read: «...Wagner's weakness undoubtedly lay in the staleness of his rhythmic formulae. (...) Wagner, particularly in *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, allows the rhythmic beat to dwindle almost to extinction, while he floods our ears with luscious harmonies or rich instrumentation: Robert Ralph, «The Rhythmic Weakness of Wagner», *The Musical Times*, 1 April 1913, p. 236.

Fig. 10: Wagner and Nietzsche reactions to Greek meters

4. Conclusion. Wagner and classics: from drama to epic

Back to Cosima's diaries: it is noteworthy how towards the end of his life Wagner emphasizes Homer's exemplary role. In a conversation on May 17, 1879, such exemplarity is expressed as follows:

Then our conversation turns to Homer (after R. has called me Panelopeia), and he says that Homer was really the poet par excellence, the source of all poetic art, the true creator. We recall several things in the *Odyssey*, and then he talks about the *Iliad*, how interrelated it all is, like a drama, and he talks of the difference between the two epics.²⁹

The understanding of Homeric hexametric art as something between narrative and drama has a long tradition, as seen in book 3 of Plato's Republic. In a letter from Liszt, on November 20, 1851, Wagner takes up such Plato as a playwright:

«By the distinctness of representation which is thus made possible, and which at the same time does away with everything of the nature of a lengthy narration, or at least condenses it in a few pregnant moments, I gain sufficient space to intensify the wealth of relations, while in the previous semi-epical mode of

²⁹ Richard Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, vol. 2, Martin Gregor – Dellin and Dietrich Mack (eds), Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York/London 1878-1883, p. 309.

treatment «halb epische Darstellung». I was compelled to cut down and enfeeble all this». ³⁰

By multiplying narrators on stage who perform long metered passages between song and speech, Wagner resumes the functionality of Homer's hexameters, which produced an aural flow in the succession of blocks of verses. The integration of Homeric art in terms of its performability was already stated in a manifesto by Wagner, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (1850):

While those pedants and professors in the prince's castle were labouring at the construction of a literary Homer, pampering their own unproductivity with their marvel at their wisdom, by aid of which they yet could only understand the thing that long had passed from life. Thespis had already slid his car to Athens, had set it up beside the palace walls, dressed out his stage and, stepping from the chorus of the Folk, had trodden its planks; no longer did he shadow forth the deeds of heroes, as in the Epos, but in these heroes' guise enacted them. ³¹

As in the discussions about «bad Hexameters», Wagner, in a moment of affirmation of his renovating aesthetic project, addresses the dissociation between text and performance through purely literary conceptions applied to the works of Antiquity. Through the hybridity between narrative and drama, Wagner invokes the whole world of movements, sounds and rhythms of antiquity, as can be seen in a text written in his maturity, *Über das Dichten und Komponieren* (1879):

We came to the conclusion that all Greek genius was but an artistic re-editing of Homer, whilst in Homer himself we refused to recognize the *artist*. Yet Homer knew the «Aoidos» nay, he himself perhaps was «singer» also? To the sound of heroic songs, the chorus of youths approached the mazes of the «imitative» dance. We know the choral chants to the priestly ceremonies, the dithyrambic choral dances of the Dionysian rites. What there was inspiration of the blind seer, becomes here the intoxication of the open-eyed ecstatic, before whose reeling gaze the actuality of Semblance dissolves to godlike twilight. Was the «musician artist»? I rather think he *made* all Art, and became its earliest lawgiver.

In this sense, Homer and his verses, Homer and his rhythmic art remain for Wagner as a model to be followed and resignified. The musical dramaturgy around the Ring cycle can be understood as a way of facing the classical tradition and Homer's poetry through integration between philological data and aesthetic experiences. ³² In the case of Wagner, there was a need to free himself from the

³⁰ Richard Wagner, *Briefwechsel zwischen Wagner und Liszt. Erster Band* (tr. William Ashton Ellis), Breitkopf, Leipzig 1887, p. 148.

³¹ Wagner, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 1, p. 135.

³² Leif Albertsen, «Plädoyer für die metrische Formung von Richard Wagners *Ring*», *Orbis Litterarum* 41 (1986), p. 296, 297: «Wie manche seiner Zeitgenossen beherrscht Wagner etliche metrische Stilarten [Like some of his contemporaries, Wagner masters a number of metrical styles]

schematisms of a school literary culture in order to understand the possibilities of meters in a performative situation.



ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

ΒΑΓΚΝΕΡΙΚΑ ΕΞΑΜΕΤΡΑ, ΟΜΗΡΙΚΕΣ ΕΡΩΤΗΣΕΙΣ: ΚΛΑΣΙΚΕΣ «ΕΜΜΟΝΕΣ» ΓΙΑ ΤΟ ΚΕΙΜΕΝΟ, ΤΟ ΜΕΤΡΟ ΚΑΙ ΤΗΝ ΕΠΙΤΕΛΕΣΗ

Σε διάφορα στάδια της καριέρας του, ο Ρίχαρντ Βάγκνερ αναζήτησε αισθητικές λύσεις για τα καλλιτεχνικά του έργα μέσω της πρόσληψης ιδεών και λογοτεχνικών μορφών από την αρχαιότητα. Μεταξύ των επιλογών του ήταν και η έρευνα-επεξεργασία της ομηρικής ποίησης, στην προσπάθειά του να βρει λύσεις στα αδιέξοδα που εντόπιζε στη σχέση κειμένου και παράστασης, φαινόμενο που παρατηρείται εν γένει, στη γερμανική λογοτεχνική παράδοση της εποχής του. Στην παρούσα μελέτη παρουσιάζω ορισμένες στιγμές αυτής της «βαγκνερικής» αναζήτησης προκειμένου να γίνουν κατανοητοί οι ρυθμοί του παρελθόντος και η ένταξή τους σε νέες μορφές καλλιτεχνικής έκφρασης.



ABSTRACT

WAGNERIAN HEXAMETERS, HOMERIC QUESTIONS: CLASSICAL «OBSESSIONS» ON TEXT, METER AND PERFORMANCE

At various stages in his career, Richard Wagner sought aesthetic solutions for his artistic projects through the reception of ideas and forms from Antiquity. Among some of his options was reworking Homeric poetry, trying to find solutions to the impasses found in the disjunction between text and performance, as he identified in the German literary tradition. In this paper, I present some moments of this search for an understanding of past rhythms in new forms of expression.

(...) In this metrical pluralism, *Der Hollander* is still a number opera. This is increasingly given up in the following and leads for Tannhäuser and Lohengrin to large, rhyming structures of five-foot iambics and other long verses in which the small adverbs of filler proliferate. Wagner wanted to be a poet in the spirit of his century and did not dare to give up all metrical formation».

Ο ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΕΑΣ

Ο Marcus Mota είναι τακτικός Καθηγητής στο University of Brasília, στο Τμήμα Παραστατικών Τεχνών, όπου ίδρυσε και διευθύνει το Εργαστήριο Δραματουργίας (LADI-UnB) από το 1998. Επίσης, είναι ο εκδότης του περιοδικού *Dramaturgies* και καθηγητής στο μεταπτυχιακό πρόγραμμα Μεταφυσικής και Παραστατικών Τεχνών του UnB. Επιπλέον, είναι συγγραφέας, δραματουργός και συνθέτης.



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