Chapter 21: Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi: Class of 1813

I. Introduction
    A. Two of the most important and influential operatic composers of the nineteenth century were Richard Wagner and Giuseppe Verdi.
        1. Richard Wagner sought a radical reform of opera that would combine different art forms into the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total artwork.
        2. Giuseppe Verdi was the dominant figure in Italian opera.
II. Art and revolution: Wagner's early career
    A. Wagner's musical career had a slower start than most of the others we have studied.
        1. His third opera, *Rienzi* (1838–40), was the most successful of the early works.
        2. Soon after the premiere, Wagner was offered a prestigious job as Royal Court Kapellmeister, which enabled him to supervise production of his next opera: *Der fliegende Holländer* (1843).
        3. Two more grand Romantic operas followed: *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*.
        4. *Dutchman* dealt with a phantom sea captain, but *Tannhäuser* was based on a historical person from the Middle Ages (see Chapter 2).
            a) In the "Rome monologue" in the final act, Wagner introduces what he later calls *unendliche Melodie*, a seamless stream in which every note is thematic and meaningful.
    B. A union of the arts
        1. Wagner was the first composer to write his own librettos.
        2. No Wagner opera premiered between 1850 and 1865.
        3. Wagner developed an idea that the ancient Greeks had united the arts, but these had subsequently split into different areas. He saw a reunification of them in *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total or united art work).
    C. From theory into practice: *The Ring of the Nibelung*
        1. The result of the time spent theorizing was the largest musical entity in the Western literate tradition: *The Ring of the Nibelung*.
        2. Wagner ties together the story of the German folk hero Siegfried with the history of the gods (Medieval Icelandic epics known as Eddas).
        3. After beginning with Siegfried's story, Wagner realized he needed to begin the story earlier: a preexisting musical reality that connected everything.
        4. He backed up to the point where Wotan becomes the central figure (in *Die Walküre*). He committed the "original sin" by pulling his spear from the World Ash Tree.
        5. Wagner wrote the "poems" to the operas before composing.
    D. Wagnerian leitmotifs
        1. The preferred genre for these works is "music drama," not "opera."
        2. Wagner created ways to unite the music and ideas over a period of several days.
        3. He did not write the usual "numbers" but let the action continually evolve.

4. He used leitmotifs (which can be very small) to signal more than the words were telling the audience.
5. The motifs can signify many things, including characters, places, objects, emotions, and even abstractions such as "fate."
6. They can appear in the orchestra or vocal parts.
7. Oftentimes leitmotifs sound similar; this is a way to impart the web of interrelations that Wagner presents.

E. Wagner's theories on words, orchestra, and theater
1. Wagner struggled with verse structure for the poetry. He was not satisfied with modern verse structure and decided to invent a speech melody of his own.
2. He based his poetry on the idea of *Stabreim*, an old bardic system of rhyming with letters.
3. The result has not received complete satisfaction for modern critics, but Wagner believed it to be a significant part of the work.
4. The use of the poetry and leitmotifs contributes to the "sea of harmony" that he created, swathing the audience in as many aural arenas as possible.
5. The harmony wanders through a broad spectrum of tonal centers, rarely stopping by avoiding authentic cadences.
6. His works demanded new instruments in the orchestra and extraordinary staying power from the singers.
7. Wagner also wanted a new theater structure for them, which was made possible when King Ludwig II came to the throne in the mid-1870s. The result was Bayreuth.

III. The ultimate experience: *Tristan und Isolde*
A. Thinking that he would never be able to have the *Ring* performed, Wagner took a break while composing *Siegfried* and wrote two other works: *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger*.
1. The story of Tristan comes from the Middle Ages and was rather famous.
2. In this work, Wagner wished to express longing and desire in music. The obvious answer was to create tension and delay resolution.
3. The tension is palpable from the opening prelude, which features the "Tristan" chord.
4. Wagner's real tonal innovation was not the Tristan chord but the failure to resolve the dominant seventh to which it moves.

B. The love duet and "Liebestod" in *Tristan and Isolde*
1. In Act II, after spending the night together, Tristan and Isolde sing a song cursing the sunrise.
2. The third act ends with the famous *Liebestod* in which Isolde is transfigured by an orgiastic death by love.

C. Troubling parallels between Wagner's life and art
1. The moral conventions that Wagner disobeys in *Tristan und Isolde* (and elsewhere) in part reflect what was going on in his own life.

2. Wagner believed a great artist should be allowed to do what he needed to do to inspire his art.
3. Wagner frequently explores the forbidden and suppressed.
4. He was very persuasive at convincing his listeners of his views. Many of these are scary.
5. The end of *Die Meistersinger* illuminates Wagner's aggressive nationalism.

D. Wagner's final opera: *Parsifal*
1. *Parsifal* is based on a Medieval knight who is involved with the search for the Holy Grail.
2. The knight Parsifal has a task to redeem, and the opera is obsessed with community and purity.
3. The special orchestral effects in the work were made possible by Wagner's opera house (Bayreuth) and its sunken/hidden orchestra.
4. It is an emotionally compelling musical experience.

IV. Verdi: upholding the Italian tradition
A. Verdi was the preeminent late nineteenth-century representative of what was the oldest and most distinguished living tradition in European music: Italian opera.
1. Verdi and Wagner were born in the same year.
2. Wagner's influence has made him seem the more important composer according to the way music history has been written, but that does not mean he is better.
3. During his lifetime, Verdi was generally the more famous composer.

B. Early Verdi: the "galley" years
1. Verdi worked as a staff composer in major Italian opera houses from 1839 to 1853.
2. Because he was at the beck and call of others, writing on commission, Verdi likened these years to being in the galley of a Roman ship.
3. Italian opera was mostly standardized, but each had its own style called a *tinta*.
4. Verdi wrote nineteen operas during this time.
5. *Nabucco* (1842) brought him to national prominence, and in 1844–47 he composed eight operas.

C. Stirrings of revolution: the struggle for a unified Italy
1. Verdi became the most performed Italian opera composer in the mid-century, during the *Risorgimento*—the period when Italy struggled for national unity.
2. Opera could inspire the educated classes to action by providing a political conscience.
3. Verdi's style enforced these ideals because it sought to make tangible cruelty, strife, force, and aggression.
4. Cries of "Viva Verdi!" were code for Viva VERDI: "Viva Vittorio Emanuele, Re d'Italia."
5. Verdi's operas included large choral numbers that were to rouse the listener.

6. A new type of singer developed during these years, one with a much larger voice.
   a) The tenor voice in particular changed, becoming the *tenore di forza* with the entire strength of the full voice carried throughout the entire range.
D. Tragicomedy in the Shakespearean manner
   1. Verdi dominated the librettist of *Ernani*, Piave, which was a reversal of the typical relationship.
   2. Verdi sought dramatic realism in his operas.
   3. Verdi's final operas were based on Shakespeare plays: *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

V. A trio of masterpieces
A. *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*
   1. Verdi wrote three masterpieces in three years: *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*.
   2. *Il trovatore* is the most conventional of the three.
   3. Verdi took several risks with *La traviata*.
   4. The novel on which the opera was based, by Dumas the younger, was somewhat autobiographical, and Verdi's life also had parallels with the opera.
   5. Even in this earlier opera, Verdi combines tragedy and mirth.
B. *Rigoletto*: opera as modern drama
   1. Verdi's irony is at its fullest in *Rigoletto*.
   2. Verdi presents different types of drama within the opera.
   3. Verdi is able to use music to take care of some of the weaknesses of Hugo's original play.
   4. Analysis of the action is in the text.

VI. Verdi in retirement
A. After these operas, Verdi turned away from the cantabile/cabaletta pairing into a more realistic flow.
   1. Pathos became a major factor in Italian opera.
   2. He wrote two operas in the French grand opera tradition.
   3. He received a commission from the tsar for *La forza del destino* and wrote *Aida* for the opening of the Suez Canal, performed in Cairo.
   4. After being accused of imitating Wagner, Verdi retired and became a farmer.
   5. He was lured out of retirement to compose operas based on Shakespeare, with the librettist Boito (with whom he revised *Simon Boccanegra*).
B. Verdi's last opera: *Falstaff*
   1. Verdi was led to opera via a tradition of buffa, mixed with seria. He shunned the supernatural. He strove for present action and let humankind be responsible for its own fate.
   2. Differences between the two can easily be drawn from their final operas: *Falstaff* and *Parsifal*.
   3. *Falstaff* ends with a joyous fugue, which seems to give a nod to the "sons of Bach" by showing that he, too, could compose in this manner.