Variations on a Theme: An Introduction to Leitmotif
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While symphony attendance and classical music sales seem to be on the decline, the legacy of classical music is alive and thriving in modern music. The average music consumer may be unaware of this legacy, but current composers and musicians continue to learn from the musical giants of the past. Richard Wagner is possibly one of the most influential composers to modern musicians; his use of leitmotif represented a shift in symphonic composition which continues to be used in modern music.

Leitmotif in Wagner
Richard Wagner’s best-known compositions were operas. His operas covered a variety of genres, from medieval love stories to Germanic myths. Grout and Palisca assert in A History of Western Music that for Wagner, the main “function of music was to serve the ends of dramatic expression” (622). Thus, Wagner’s music was meant to enhance the stories he told. While a motif is a repeated theme, a leitmotif (leading motif) is used to refer to characters, objects, emotions, or ideas (625). Richard Wagner Web Site states that a leitmotif is a musical motif which consists of a series of melodic-harmonic notes, often played or sung as the element is introduced into the story (Evensen). As the narrative progresses, these notes can be played, either at different tempos or keys, to refer back the element. In this way, leitmotif can indicate a change in characterization, relationships between characters or ideas, foreshadow events, or convey a thematic thread woven throughout the entire work.

Wagner’s use of leitmotif was incredibly complex. In his masterpiece Der Ring des Nibelung, a four-opera cycle that chronicles the decline of gods in the age of myths and the rise of humanity, Wagner uses incredibly nuanced motifs to signal the theme of love versus the lust for power. Each character has at least one motif (though many of them have multiple motifs), and as the characters become tempted toward love or power, their motifs entwine with the motifs of the corresponding side. Figure one compares two motifs, those of Alberich’s Ring and the fortress Walhall. As The Richard Wagner Web Site explains, both the fortress and the ring were created when love was forsaken in the pursuit of power, which the music illustrates by using similar rhythms and intervals (Evensen). Critics have identified many motifs in Der Ring des Nibelung:

- Wotan’s Spear
- Loge (Loki), who has the most motifs (Evenson)
- Rhinegold
- Sieglinde

Figure 1: The two motifs, when compared, have similar notation. (Source: Richard Wagner Web Site. Copyright 2008 by Kristian Evensen.)
The Rhinedaughters

Scholars are still debating how many motifs are actually in the opera cycle.

Wagner’s intricate use of leitmotif influenced his contemporaries, especially those who composed dramatic works. Grout and Palisca explain that his use of motif minimized divisions within the acts of a performance, something that later composers imitated (628). Scene and act changes could now be signaled with musical motifs rather than a pause in the music. Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss particularly admired Wagner’s work, the latter becoming well-known for composing symphonic poems laden with motifs (639). Sergei Prokofiev’s *Peter and The Wolf* uses leitmotif to represent each character in the story. Wagner’s influence on symphonic composition continues to this day.

**Modern Examples**

It is hardly surprising that Wagner’s leitmotif legacy would find a place in dramatic music of the 20th and 21st century, particularly in film scores. Perhaps the most recognized use of motif is in the *Star Wars* trilogy. John Williams drew inspiration from Richard Wagner when composing the *Star Wars* soundtracks. His use of “The Imperial March” is closely associated with Darth Vader. While commanding the Imperial fleet in *The Empire Strikes Back*, “The Imperial March” is loud and driving. The motif is played by the brass section, which conveys military strength and power. A version of the motif is revisited as Darth Vader dies; the motif is played at a slower tempo with alternating flutes and violins, ending with the gentle plucking of a harp. In this use, the motif conveys weakness and fading life. John Williams’ use of motif complements the journey of this character.

A more nuanced use of motif can be found in Howard Shore’s score for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. In “The Ring and I” episode of *Radiolab* Shore admits to composing over 50 motifs for the three films (Abumrad). The Gondor motif is a great example of how Shore varies and utilizes leitmotif. When Boromir is first introduced in *Fellowship of the Ring* (the first film in the trilogy), traces of the Gondor motif can be heard under his dialogue. The theme itself is not heard in full until *Return of the King* (the third film). The Gondor motif is also used as the melody for an elegiac song. As Pippin sings (see figure 2), the scene cuts between Denethor eating and Faramir leading troops in a suicidal attempt to recapture the lost city Osgiliath. Pippin’s shaky delivery of the Gondor motif in song illustrates that this once great kingdom is now poisoned and dying. This is a very subtle use of motif in a very powerful and heart wrenching scene.

**Figure 2:** Pippin reluctantly entertains the mad steward of Gondor. (Source: The One Ring website. Copyright 2003 by New Line Cinema.)
Leitmotif has also been used in modern rock, typically by folk or progressive rock bands, though not as extensively as in film scores. One recent example is The Hazards of Love by The Decemberists. This concept album (an album in which each song is written around a specific theme) relates the story of William, a shape-shifting youth who lives with his adopted mother The Forest Queen, and Margaret, a human woman who becomes his lover. In the pursuit of their relationship, William and Margaret incur the wrath of The Forest Queen. The Queen’s theme is first introduced to the story as the two lovers spend an evening together. As they consider their plight, The Queen watches from the shadows, her motif plucked cautiously on a banjo. Later, when she finally confronts her son, her power and dark magic are conveyed as the motif is repeated as a distorted, hard rock riff. The Hazards of Love is a good example of how leitmotif can be used in rock.

Conclusion
Richard Wagner brought a new approach to dramatic music in his operas. His development of leitmotif opened new ways of using music in storytelling. Wagner’s leitmotif legacy is heard to this day in many types of music that accompany dramatic narratives, from movies to television, video games to rock operas. While it is not necessary to understand the use of leitmotif, nor is it necessary to recognize its use in storytelling, identifying the motifs in music can give a listener greater insight into the narrative. Leitmotif can give audible cues to future plot points, show the audience a journey of a character, or draw thematic links between situations. Recognizing leitmotif can give a listener a greater appreciation of a story and connect a listener with a work of art on a deeper level.

Works Cited
