

# Wagnerian Singing and the Limits of Vocal Pedagogy

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Wagner singing is [a] special kind of way of singing. Their voices were adapted in a special way to this Wagnerian singing.<sup>1</sup>

—Nicolai Gedda, tenor

Even with exemplary discipline, every singer faces a vocal crisis at some point in her career. Most of us have several. I needed to take a few weeks off and realign my voice after my debut as Eva in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* at Bayreuth.<sup>2</sup>

—Renée Fleming, Soprano

I begin with the words of two of opera's most musically and technically reliable singers, both of whom highlight the problem of singing Wagner. In spite (or perhaps because of) their masterful vocalism, they decided that singing Wagner once was enough. Nicolai Gedda (1925–2017), one of the most versatile and recorded tenors of the twentieth century, sang the title role in Wagner's *Lohengrin* for only one—highly acclaimed—performance. After that January 1966 performance at the Stockholm Opera, he declined offers to sing Wagner, preferring instead to perform lighter and more lyric roles for the remainder of his substantial career. That decision may have ensured his astonishing vocal longevity; Gedda performed into his late seventies. Renée Fleming (b. 1959) took time off from performing to re-tool her singing with her voice teacher after performing Wagner's Eva at the 1996 Bayreuth Festival. Fleming experienced what she thought of as a vocal crisis after those Bayreuth performances, despite a thorough preparation grounded in a keen awareness “that there were no ‘Wagnerian’ singers when this music was composed” (Fleming 2004, 148). Fleming concluded that singing Eva “was not right. The part is too low for me. Projecting all those German words in the middle of my voice over a thick orchestra was difficult. I'm not saying no to other Wagner, but I won't do that role again” (Tommasini 1997). In fact, Fleming never again performed that repertory, preferring instead to concentrate on full lyric soprano roles, in operas by Mozart, Strauss, Handel, and Massenet, among others.

Gedda and Fleming's “one and done” experiences with Wagner speak to several of the issues that Wagnerian singing poses to modern vocal

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pedagogy: expectations of extreme vocal volume and penetrating power; clearly articulated and projected German diction at a mid-range vocal tessitura; lengthy and repeated tests of vocal stamina; the consequences of sustained, heavy singing on vocal health; and the problem of vocal categorization — determining whether certain individual voices can or should sing Wagner. Can a singer adapt her voice to overcome these challenges or even change her fundamental voice type? And, if so, how can a vocal pedagogue facilitate this?

In addressing these questions, this essay explores how singing became “Wagnerian” after Wagner’s death in 1883. In investigating how operatic vocalism adapted to these challenges, I both demonstrate that the “work” of the operatic singer involves much more than having “a voice,” and I open up a new space for considering Wagnerian singing, a topic that Karen Henson suggests has been “extraordinarily neglected” in scholarly literature (2015, 211). More generally, I also build on recent scholarship that has begun to explore the voice in all its material realities and pedagogy as a crucial site of the construction of sonic ideals. As Martha Feldman has theorized, “voice is at its most characteristic when it sounds” and is a “material phenomenon” (2015, 658-659). In the teaching of Western classical singing, as Nina Sun Eidsheim has observed, vocal pedagogy is mandated to naturalize certain sounds, and therefore to encourage a method of singing in which “vocal labor [is] required to maintain a piece’s identity and status” (2015, 133). For the purposes of this essay, the vocal labor in question is of a herculean nature—to perform one of Wagner’s heroic roles, and to sound “Wagnerian,” that is, to sound like a *Held*. The singer’s sound and the effort exerted must overcome the adversity of the musical task (with great volume, highly articulated diction, vocal stamina, and penetrating power), thus matching the heroic ideology explicit in Wagner’s works. For as Barry Millington mused, the “Wagnerian” label always carries with it the weight of the composer’s heroic aesthetic (and political) ideology.<sup>3</sup>

### Schools of Singing Wagner

A truism of singing Wagner, succinctly articulated by Jens Malte Fischer, is that the composer’s vocal writing demands large voices, which “without question are necessary” (1992, 525). What it means to have a “large” voice is of course up for debate, but what the adjective implies is a certain ideal sonority for singing Wagner, an ideal that is suggestive of Eidsheim’s notion of a “figure of sound,” a specific construct that refers to a naturalized listening practice and the aural perception of the listener in that mode.<sup>4</sup> The Wagnerian sound is loud and penetrating, perhaps overwhelmingly so. This sound rings impressively in the opera house, but in a smaller space the

sound can overwhelm. I recall sitting in on one of my father's voice lessons with a Wagnerian tenor, Louis Roney, and experiencing that compulsion to flee, the room being too small to diffuse the intensity of the vocalism.

The shockingly sonorous, outsized quality of Wagnerian singing belongs to what has become an international school of singing, in which singers focus on cultivating a thoroughly penetrating, idealized sound. This sonority-based school stands in opposition to the Bayreuth school, an approach based on the ideals espoused by Cosima Wagner when she held sway as director of the Bayreuth Festival (1886-1906), begun after a period of mourning her husband's death in 1883. Cosima founded this school in 1892 with the choral conductor Julius Kniese (1848-1905) and jointly they prioritized clarity of text declamation over what Ernest Newman and Fischer have claimed was Richard Wagner's original intention: a German *bel canto* school of singing. Cosima feared *bel canto* singing and rejected it as a "term of abuse" (Newman 1976, 453 and Fischer 1992, 529-530). Unlike his wife, Wagner apparently felt more positive, or at least ambivalent, about the Italian *bel canto* school of singing, the school today regarded as the healthiest vocal method for singers. Although he thought little of singers who blithely brought their Italian *bel canto* style to German operatic singing, Wagner admired the melodic writing of Bellini in particular, and idealized the vocal beauty of Josef Tichatschek, the *bel canto*-trained tenor who created the title roles in Wagner's *Rienzi* and *Tannhäuser* (Fischer 1992, 527-529).<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, together, Cosima and Kniese taught and coached singers at Bayreuth to focus on speech over song, what later became known as *Sprechgesang* ("speech-song"). In attempting to satisfy the desire for clarity of diction, many singers developed a penchant for spitting consonants so intensely (*Konsonanten-Spuckerei*) that they were condemned for barking instead of singing their vocal lines. The "Bayreuth Bark" as it became known, was a symptom of vocal deterioration, a voice pushed to its limits in an effort to satisfy Cosima's conviction that text be more spoken than sung (Spotts 1994, 99). Cosima presumably took this directive from her husband's preference that some operatic moments be more declaimed than sung, a preference drawn from the theatrical performances of his soprano muse, Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, who created Wagner's Senta and Venus, and who helped shape Wagner's idea of *Sprechgesang* when she occasionally abandoned singing tone for dramatic effect (Fischer 1992, 527).<sup>6</sup> David Breckbill has argued for a more complicated history of singing Wagner in Cosima's reign as Bayreuth director, stating that the recorded evidence yields a greater variety of approaches to singing style, while also displaying generally "ugly vocalism" (1992, 363).<sup>7</sup> Still, whether following

the Bayreuth or the international school of singing at the turn of the century, all Wagnerian singers sought loudness. And in doing so, they turned to vocal pedagogues who could help them learn techniques involving not ideas of resonance or phonation, but the disciplining of the breathing body.

### Breathing for singing

Many of the revolutions in operatic singing over the course of the nineteenth century resulted from demands for increasing loudness on the operatic stage, a concern observed by many including Hector Berlioz, who saw that singers impressed audiences more often when they sang more loudly and by sheer sonority rather than by sweet, soft tones or embellishments and agility (1994, 69–70). Scholarship in the past ten years has begun to explore the nineteenth-century shift toward a vocal technique that emphasized a lower laryngeal position, what Manuel Garcia II called *voix sombrée* and the Italians call *voce di petto*.<sup>8</sup> This laryngeal position allowed singers to carry the power of the chest voice or speech-like sound higher and louder. Breathing techniques have been less explored, yet they may have had an even greater effect on singers' volume and stamina than the change in laryngeal position.

There is indeed something special about the way opera singers breathe, leading singers today to liken operatic vocalism to Olympic athleticism. Such an analogy is worth consideration, especially in light of examples such as Novak Djokovic, who, before becoming the top-ranked tennis player in the world, worked with an opera singer to improve his breathing. To the audience, an opera singer's breath can appear inscrutable, mysterious, even magical. But breath management in operatic singing is also magical to the performers themselves; singers often feel that breath supersedes phonation, a feeling that soprano Renée Fleming has explained: "When I'm singing comfortably, I can actually imagine that my torso and my breath are doing all the work, while my throat is completely relaxed" (2004, 41).

In order to demystify the magic of operatic breathing, a simple truth might help: blowing more air, harder and/or faster, yields more volume. In other words, the greater the air pressure, the louder the sound. Until the mid-nineteenth-century's demand for ever-increasing volume, singers' breathing techniques may have had goals of *canto spianato* phrasing, or sustained long phrases, or silent inhalation, and a flexible torso, but the techniques then were viewed less as muscular or athletic and more as a technique for vocal finesse than today. And, although one might think that there is a kind of generally accepted, specific breathing technique today for operatic singing, a short viewing of a masterclass given by mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato will confirm that the mystery of breathing for singing

is still quite persistent.<sup>9</sup> In working with a young tenor, DiDonato paraphrases vocal pedagogue and breathing expert Deborah Birnbaum, promoting the image of four tent poles connecting the singer's lower torso to the ground and "corkscrewing" into the ground with a kind of burrowing force, a breath anchor so to speak. These types of metaphorical explanations for singing techniques seem to echo a problem of the sound-based pedagogical approach explored by Eidsheim, whose primary example is the idea of "smelling the rose" on inhalation (2015, 137–138). Admittedly, these metaphors often seem too vague to be useful, and Eidsheim's list of examples points to their absurdity. But an insider-reading of them can help to explain their utility. By inhaling as if one is smelling a rose, a singer lifts the soft palate, a physical adjustment that benefits the classical singer in a number of ways, not least of which is beautifying the tone, by increasing the resonance space inside the mouth in a manner analogous to sound expanding in a cathedral. DiDonato's exhortation to imagine tentpoles instructs the singer to keep a sense of pressure lower in the torso, maintaining the feeling of torso expansion around the entire waist section. The idea of "corkscrewing" the tent poles is an effort to encourage buoyant breath energy that is constantly moving or spinning (perhaps even implying vocal vibrato), rather than a posture that is tense or rigidly held.

There seem to be at least two important aspects of breathing technique for us to unpack then: how the breath is taken (inhalation), and how it is used over the course of a vocal phrase (breath management). Historically, as James Stark has remarked, disagreement among singers and voice teachers has centered on issues of where inhalation should manifest in the torso: whether clavicular (high chest), intercostal (rib), diaphragmatic (abdominal), and/or dorsal (back) (1999, 91–92). Of course, when the lungs expand upon inhalation, so do all of these regions. But singers and pedagogues have long sought to isolate certain expansion areas in order to maximize air capacity, vocal strength, and stamina. In so doing, they have also disagreed over how to manage this high intensity over a long period of time, though there is some consensus that a singer should resist the natural urge to collapse the torso as the body expels air. This resistance can manifest as a sense of using attached muscles to keep the ribcage expanded, a sense crucial to strengthening and increasing air pressure and flow over the course of a phrase. The reader can feel this sensation of expansion by leaning forward in a seated position or by watching the stomach while lying on one's back—taking a breath in this posture will result in the torso expanding, pushing outward. In a way, there is a certain naturalness to this inhalation—this diaphragmatic breath. Yet how a singer manages this breath is much less natural. While vocalizing, the singer attempts to keep

that feeling of fullness, of ribcage/belly expansion, and maintain it to the very end of the vocal phrase before ending the sound and breathing again. And it is precisely this mysterious system of breath management that late nineteenth-century singers and pedagogues sought to enhance and codify.

### Breathing belts

Perhaps most striking is the later nineteenth-century idea of developing musculature to enhance breathing technique, to be able to sing louder and longer without fatigue setting in. Interestingly, the quest for greater stamina and volume led to several cases of profound vocal transformation. Such cases—sometimes aided by emerging technologies—suggest that one might not only *have* a voice, but be able to change it, adapt its technique, and create it anew.

Jean de Reszke (1850–1925) did precisely that when he transitioned from baritone to tenor under the tutelage of Giovanni Sbriglia (1829–1916), an Italian tenor and pedagogue influenced by Garcia, who settled in Paris in 1875. Jean de Reszke, part of a family of successful opera singers, began studying with Sbriglia in 1882.<sup>10</sup> After his studies, Reszke sang a great variety of roles, and was dubbed a true *tenore robusto*, capable of great dramatic singing, and he became well known for his heroic, Wagnerian roles, including Lohengrin, Walther, Siegfried, and Tristan. Sbriglia transformed Reszke's voice. While some might say he pushed Reszke's voice upwards, others would say Sbriglia helped Reszke find his true or natural voice.<sup>11</sup> Regardless, Sbriglia accomplished this by means of muscular training, by tailoring his vocal pedagogy to the athletic potential of the human torso.

Sbriglia seems to have been an eminently practical teacher who put few of his theories into writing. He was a singer with limited piano and musicianship skills, but his pedagogy yielded impressive results. He insisted on two things: that singers avoid hollow, heady, disconnected high singing in favor of always singing “in the chest”; and that singers hold their chests as high as possible, bringing the chin downward. In teaching his students, he often advocated the use of hand weights and regular exercises to strengthen the torso. His emphasis on a firm, strong, high chest position brought the point of breath support to the bottom of the sternum bone, Sbriglia's *point d'appui*. He was so insistent on the strength and consistency of this chest support that many of his students wore abdominal belts to aid in supporting the chest (Aldrich 1917, 122–123).<sup>12</sup> Sbriglia used the belt in his teaching to help singers achieve a sense of what we today might call a system of breath management that allows for optimum vocal phonation and stamina. The idea was that a singer could use extrinsic intercostal muscles to brace against the belt, thereby steadying the breath support and

sustaining high air pressure intensity for longer periods of time. The belt gives the singer a concrete sense of something material to push against, to heighten a sense of what the Italians have called *la lotta vocale*, the vocal contest between the natural tendency for the body and ribcage to collapse as air is expelled and the resistance mustered by the singer in opposition to this urge to collapse, using extrinsic muscles to maintain the torso's expansion.

Interestingly, when interviewed about how her singing had changed after losing over one hundred pounds after gastric bypass surgery, Wagnerian soprano Deborah Voigt observed that before the procedure, her extra weight had made breath support easy—her body automatically offered resistance, layers of fat against which she could lean for support. After the surgery, Voigt had to work harder to achieve a sense of support.<sup>13</sup> She now employs fitted corsets in many of her costumes, perhaps in order to have something like a Sbriglia belt against which to push. One might argue therefore that Sbriglia's belt served as a kind of technological substitute for added body weight and strength. Taken a step further in light of Annie Holt's exploration of the blurred lines between costume and body, the belt thus becomes more than part of a costume; it serves a bracing function, becoming part of the singer's musculature and an extension of the voice.<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of whether this insight helps us understand the sinister "fat lady" operatic stereotype, Sbriglia's techniques emboldened singers to new heights—higher, louder pitches, control over dynamic gradations, longer phrases, and extensive vocal stamina. With his "Sbriglia Belt," the tenor-pedagogue was able to extend the abilities of many singers, including bass Pol Plançon, coloratura Sibyl Sanderson, and especially Lilian Nordica, who he helped transform from a lyric to a dramatic soprano. And indeed, many remarkable singers from the past century have worn belts and custom-made corsets to assist with their breathing, including Lauritz Melchior (another pushed-up baritone, in a corset of his own design, Figures 1 and 2), Kirsten Flagstad, Plácido Domingo, Franco Corelli, and even Cecilia Bartoli, who has commissioned superstar designer Vivienne Westwood to construct her specially made corsets for concert performances.



**Figure 1.** Dresser strapping a corset on Heldentenor Lauritz Melchior, 1944. Photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt, Getty Images.

With this idea of athletic vocal heft, one might wonder about the dangers of such dramatic, high intensity singing—something Jean de Reszke also pondered, especially because his busy operatic schedule from the 1880s to the early 1900s included lighter French roles, such as Faust and Roméo, in addition to the more heroic, dramatic ones. Reszke admitted that he needed time to recover his *mezza-voce* after singing heavier Wagnerian



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roles (Klein 1925, 407). This perhaps implies that Wagner's vocal writing fatigues voices and makes light, high, soft singing more difficult, and that Wagnerian singing demands much more from the body as a whole than other operatic singing.



**Figure 2.** Melchior in his dressing room at the Metropolitan Opera, 1944. Photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt, Getty Images.

### Wagnerian singing

Such a notion has also been reiterated by Wagnerian soprano *par excellence*, Birgit Nilsson, who advocated for very strong breath support and thought that the body's involvement in singing depended very much on the composer: "Another thing is what composer you're singing and how much you need from body sound. Say you sing Wagner, you need *much* more body sound, to feel much more open. To sing Strauss...a little between Verdi and Wagner, a bit in the middle. Verdi...a slender sound. Wagner needs the most of the body. That is a solid sound you cannot use for Verdi"

(Hines 1982, 199). Nilsson seems to imply that singing Wagner demands a thicker sound beam than other composers and that the body must be more intensely involved in singing Wagner than with Verdi or Strauss. Nilsson could also be implying that Wagner requires more breath support, more strength, and, with more bodily engagement, a loud, sustained sound that stays consistently full for long stretches of singing.

Some of the qualities of Wagner's writing for the voice might help us understand Nilsson's comment on the need for "more body sound." Many of the leading roles are indeed quite lengthy, requiring extreme vocal stamina over the course of the opera. In addition, within many of these roles there are lengthy monologues (fifteen to twenty-five minutes long) that in themselves test vocal endurance. Examples include Brünnhilde's Immolation from *Götterdämmerung*, Lohengrin's Narration and Farewell, Wotan's Farewell in *Die Walküre*, and Siegfried's Forging Scene in *Siegfried*. And, outside of Bayreuth—which, with its uniquely resonant acoustic design, (utilizing only one seating section with all wooden seating and floors, and a partially covered orchestra pit) allows singers to carry over the orchestra more easily — singing over a Wagnerian orchestra for an entire evening requires a consistent, ringing tone, certainly no small feat. But, even a minute of Wagnerian singing can be imposingly difficult, demanding a vocal surety and fire that does indeed involve this idea of the full body's sound. To illustrate, I will examine the third and last section of Walther's Preislied in order to explore what might be required at this small-scale-level (Example 1).

This section of the Prize Song lies at a very high tessitura, mostly in the D-G range, a tessitura that ranges from the middle of a tenor's *passaggio* to just above it. The *passaggio* is a treacherous range for any singer, because it encompasses the middle to middle high range in which singers transition across what pedagogues sometimes call two breaks in the voice, unstable regions where phonation must be carefully coordinated in order to unify vocal registers and negotiate the pitches so that the high range remains accessible. The late nineteenth-century technique to accomplish this was a darkening of the sound, by lowering the larynx. (This is the technique supposedly pioneered by Gilbert-Louis Duprez.). Many pedagogical treatises of the second half of the nineteenth century emphasized the importance of a low larynx for vocal stamina, registral unity, and as the gateway to louder, sturdier high notes.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, for some voice teachers, breathing technique was essential to maintaining that low position, as I will discuss in a moment. For now, it must suffice to say that in this section of the Prize Song, the *passaggio* singing in almost every phrase is consistently treacherous. Additionally,

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*mf con passione*  
(sehr feurig)

*cresc.* *dim.*

Huld-reich ster Tag, dem\_ ich aus Dich-tern Traum er- wacht! Das ich er träumt', das Pa-ra-

6 *f*

dies, in himm-lich neu\_ ver-klär-ter Pracht\_ hell vor mir

10 *p* *espress.*

lag, da-hin lach-end nun der Quell den\_ Pfad\_ mir\_

13 *cresc.* *dolce* *con anima*

wies;\_ die, dort ge-bo-ren, mein Herz er-ko-ren, der Er-de lieb-lich-stes

19 *cresc.* *f* *mf*

Bild, als Mu-se mir ge-weiht, so hei-lig ernst als mild, ward

23 *cresc. sempre*

kühn von mir ge-freit, am lich-ten Tag der Son-nen, durch

27 *f* *cresc.* *f poco ritenuto*

San-ges Sieg ge-won-nen Par-nass\_ und Pa-ra-dies!

**Example 1.** Third strophe of Walthe's Prize Song from Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg* (1868).

the text setting further complicates the tenor's task. Take, for example, the consonants set on high pitches: "hell" on a high A; "Herz," on a high G; chromatic inflections while singing the words "geboren" and "erkoren;" and then the "Sonnen" and "gewonnen" ascending up to high Gs, right before the climactic leap to high A on "Parnass." 'L's, 'm's, 'n's, and 'r's are troublesome consonants for singers because pronouncing them brings the soft palate down, creating a sensation of a ceiling effect on pitch and resonance. Singers must consciously re-arc or re-lift the palate after each instance of these consonants or risk going flat and worse, find themselves unable to ascend up to the higher pitches. On top of all of this, the entire section is sung without any moment of relaxation or recovery for the tenor. That is, there is nowhere to rest. Each breath must be taken with the next phrase in mind. And indeed, it is the mix of short, medium, and long phrases, combined with the tessitura and lack of rest that makes breathing technique the key to accomplishing this important moment in the opera. It is worth invoking a performance of the piece to see the work of the body in singing this difficult Wagnerian moment. Take a look at Ben Heppner's 1999 or 2006 performance of the *Preislied*.<sup>16</sup> Watch the tenor's torso, as he varies his breathing according to the phrases, sometimes taking extra breaths to ensure his stamina, and clipping note values in order to steal micro-seconds of extra recovery time. Each breath is quite an event, certainly the primary "work" for this singer. Note also the way he shores up his body and sound before singing "die dort geboren..." His preparation for these phrases reveals the importance of vocal pacing, and helps us see the precision of the technique involved. Impressively, even with all of the evident vocal labor involved, Heppner is able to perform with extreme musicality, so much so that the suavity of the phrasing almost disguises the vocal-technical effort.

### Breath Damming

What makes Heppner's breathing all the more interesting for the purposes of this essay is that his inhalations are strong, quick, and almost inaudible, even while they clearly are large, athletic breaths. Heppner's breathing technique involves storing a large quantity of air for phonation at a high volume and intensity, without allowing any weakening of air pressure over the course of each phrase. Singers need this kind of breath support in order to execute Wagnerian phrases reliably, performance after performance. One of the techniques that emerged early in the twentieth century to accomplish this was an aggressive method of "breath damming" called "Stauprinzip" by its creator, George Armin(1871-1963). Armin was an

early twentieth-century voice teacher and a central figure in German vocal pedagogy. His 1909 treatise, *Das Stauprinzip*, is often mentioned in opposition to Paul Brunns's *Minimalluft* theory, which argued for using the least amount of air possible for phonation. Armin, who in a sense argued for a maximalist approach to air pressure, studied voice with baritone August Iffert and later with the heldentenor Laurits Christian Tørsleff. Curiously, after completing his vocal studies, Armin focused on teaching rather than performing.<sup>17</sup>

Armin's controversial approach to teaching voice polarized the pedagogical community. In his work with singers, he strove to erase what he perceived as inherent binaries in the human voice.<sup>18</sup> In general, his approach sought to undo his students' assumptions about singing and rebuild their voices using *Stauprinzip* as the foundational vocal technique, a technique in which stored breath is dammed against the vocal folds. Through the use of this approach, the voice could be unified and could achieve its full sonic potential in terms of power and beauty. Singers would focus on an exaggeratedly expanded torso, muscularly held in position, with a particular emphasis on the upper rib cage. They would then use the tongue or a beginning consonant to dam the breath against firmly closed vocal folds. The vocal folds were key to the process since they served as a counterbalance to and a kind of cap on the dammed air. In other words, the dammed air was created through extreme muscular tension and expansion of the chest. Armin developed his theory by building on the work of past German vocal pedagogues such as Friedrich Schmitt (1812–1884), who also recommended maximal expansion of the chest and filling of the lungs.

*Stauprinzip* relies on a military-like posture in which the almost-rigid lower body girds itself as a bottom dam against the air-filled lungs. Armin argued that without *Stauprinzip*, freedom in the laryngeal function was impossible. He observed that beginning students would only detect support in the upper rib cage. As the student progressed, a sense of support developed lower in the body, with the student having a sensation of muscular engagement in the lower back and a lowering and flattening of the diaphragm. The *Stauprinzip* technique builds a kind of vocal athletic strength via the increasing use of high sub-glottal pressure, and it pushes the voice to achieve louder sounds, longer phrases, and a darker tone. A scientific study of a tenor who demonstrated different breathing techniques found that *Stauprinzip* did yield more intense, louder tones, especially in the higher range, but noted that the resulting sound might be considered "heavy," "labored," and less buoyant than techniques that relied on lower subglottal pressure (Schutte, Stark, and Miller 2003, 499).

A contemporary use of *Stauprinzip*, combined with a depressed tongue

(a tongue flattened to aid in keeping the subglottal pressure below the vocal cords) is likely found in tenor Jonas Kaufmann's technique. Kaufmann began his career experimenting with different vocal techniques and found himself most enthusiastic about the possibilities presented by one of his early voice teachers, Josef Metternich, a German operatic baritone whose vocal pedagogy embraced *Stauprinzip*. Although Kaufmann later claimed that his body was not ready at the time for Metternich's technical instruction, he did later re-direct his operatic trajectory, moving from lyric to dramatic tenor repertoire.<sup>19</sup> A video recording of him singing Siegmund's "Winterstürme" from Wagner's *Die Walküre* demonstrates incredibly long phrasing, especially at the end of the aria, when he sings in only one breath the last two soaring phrases that are usually performed in two. The intense subglottal pressure Kaufmann exhibits allows for this athletic phrasing display also to be accomplished at a consistently high volume.

Armin's breathing technique defined a new German school of singing and became a necessity for some Wagnerian singers to ensure the breath control and high volume expected in the opera house. His extension of a muscular, antagonistic breathing technique was the culmination of decades of efforts by German pedagogues to cultivate a national style of singing based on power, heroic ring, and clarity of diction. However, the aggressive nature of the *Stauprinzip* has also been criticized for its potentially damaging effects on singers' voices, a fear that now applies more broadly to all Wagnerian singing.

### Wagnerian Failure

One of the commonplace fears among singers and Wagnerian audiences is the vocal decline of singers who have pushed their voices too far, who have sung too heavily, pushed and shouted too loudly, exceeding the bounds of their natural voices. When singers' vibratos slow and widen to a vocal wobble or their thrusts into the higher range show such strain that they crack or seem stuck beneath a sonic ceiling with flat intonation, critics and other singers are quick to blame two things: Wagner's difficult vocal writing and the struggling singer for performing beyond his means. When voices fail, we react strongly, as Emily Wilbourne has observed, explaining the humanness of vocal failure and the stakes of staging it in performance, and as Carolyn Abbate has described, lowering her head in despair when witnessing Ben Heppner crack several times in performance.<sup>20</sup> The vocal stamina challenges of Wagner's vocal writing for certain leading roles seems indubitably difficult for the singer, so much so that there are customary cuts in some cases, such as portions of the Love Duet in *Tristan*. The role of Tristan in particular is a case in point; it is known as one of the most

strenuous tests of vocal endurance for singers, not least because the role's first performer, tenor Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1836-1865), died at age 29 after just four performances of the opera. His death was quickly mythologized as a symbol of the dangers of singing Wagner.

Even with cuts and various *puntature*—singers' adjustments to vocal lines to make them easier to sing—Wagnerians are notorious for canceling performances because of vocal indisposition. One recent example was the highly anticipated *Tristan und Isolde* of the Met's 2007–2008 season with Voigt and Heppner as the headline stars, who instead of performing together six times, did so only once, with four(!) different tenors taking on the Tristan role in the process. In musical circles, then, the singers themselves are often blamed for vocal failures and cancelations. The eminent twentieth-century pedagogue and tenor, Richard Miller, who has written some of the most important and erudite books on classical singing, also exemplifies the typical warning to singers who don't truly have a Wagnerian voice but try to cultivate one, stating that they are headed straight for "vocal incineration" (Miller 2000, 5). Thus, the possibility of greater volume promised by the pioneering breathing techniques examined here simultaneously exposed singers to potential vocal liabilities.

### Heroic Singing

Media theorist and literary scholar, Friedrich Kittler claimed that breathing is one thing that Wagner experts often miss when examining phenomena in text and score. Although his realm of inquiry is perhaps more allegorical than mine here, his challenge for us to consider the "facts of physiology" is certainly pertinent, and my essay is inspired in particular by Kittler's assertion that "(t)o awaken in Wagner always means to sing. The materiality of musico-dramatic data-streams is based upon the intensity of life in the diaphragm, lung, throat, and mouth. That is why singing is the last and most important metamorphosis of breathing" (Kittler 1994, 219). If operatic singing has always seemed somewhat mysterious, special, and specialized, then the historical trajectory I have outlined here has only intensified its difference from other types of singing. In demystifying the breathing of operatic singing, I have suggested that the radical revolutions of nineteenth-century operatic vocalism inform our approach to Wagnerian performance today. Indeed, to sing Wagner after Wagner, singers had to do something drastic to enhance their voices, to add more body to the sound, to push their voices louder, longer, and harder. The Sbriglia Belt and Armin's Stauprinzip are two of the most important and striking vocal innovations to have made these enhancements a reality. Those techniques focused on breath's potential to change voices and augment a singer's vocal

abilities.

We might therefore see these breathing breakthroughs as examples of singers instrumentalizing their bodies. As the status of the singer transitioned from creator to interpreter over the course of the nineteenth century, composers—Wagner especially—instrumentalized singers: singing remained idiomatically vocal, but in service to the composer’s “voice,” the singer became both another “instrument” in the operatic sound world, and a body and a voice-*type*, rather than an idiosyncratic, individual voice. Wagnerian singing and late nineteenth-century breathing techniques ultimately committed the singer to a full-throttle vocalism across operatic repertoire, and signaled, to many, the beginning of heroic singing and, perhaps, the end of *bel canto*.

And while there is some truth that the vocal demands of Wagner’s heavier works endangered earlier styles of singing, including *bel canto*, the demands also pointed to greater potentials in the human voice—that singers can adapt their voices to new repertoires with new technique, transforming from lyric to dramatic, from *mezzo* to soprano, and from baritone to tenor. The mainstreaming of late nineteenth-century breathing techniques added a sense of athletic training in increasing the “labor” of the singer in developing the voice. Instead of wondering whether or not they even “had a voice” with operatic potential, late nineteenth- and twentieth-century singers gained a variety of vocal-technical tools with which they could reliably transform their voices. In order to sound heroic, singers had to be heroic, taking considerable risks to re-create and adapt their voices in new ways.

#### Notes

An early version of this essay was presented at the 2017 National Meeting of the American Musicological Society in Rochester, NY where it benefited from the comments and questions of several musicologists in the audience.

1. See Gedda, Disc 11, Track 11.
2. See Fleming (2004, 144).
3. This is a theme that runs through Millington’s 2012 tome on Wagner, *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth*. For more on conceptions of the heroic in Wagner’s works, see Williams 2004. More generally, many scholars have demonstrated that Richard Wagner’s nationalist ideology permeates his works and cemented the construction of a specifically German musical lineage and an idealized artistic totality and universality. Recent seminal scholarship that has deepened our understanding of Wagnerian aesthetics and politics includes Trippett 2013, Berger 2016, Fry 2017, and Kreuzer 2018. Important explorations of Wagner’s anti-semitism in particular include Weiner 1997 and Grey 2008.
4. For more on the concept of a “figure of sound,” see Chapter 4 of Eidsheim, *Sensing Sound*.
5. In fact, Wagner and his primary vocal coach, Julius Hey (1832–1909), attempted to found a German *bel canto* school on more than one occasion, proposing it to his patron Ludwig II



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(Spencer and Millington 1987, 667–669). This school would have focused on a more energized approach to consonants and speech accents so characteristic of the German language and so suitable for dramatic performance. But Wagner thought that the school should not sacrifice Italian bel canto (Fischer 1992, 527). In my larger project on Wagnerian singing, I am exploring in greater depth what Wagner's bel canto ideal might actually sound like, but for now it is worth observing how we seem to have deviated rather profoundly from his original intentions.

6. See also Rutherford 2000.

7. See also Breckbill 2009.

8. See for example, Henson 2015, Davies 2014, Bloch 2007, and Potter and Sorrell 2014.

9. See Joyce DiDonato, Masterclass with the National Opera Studio, Royal Opera House, London, 2013 (with Nicolas Darmanin, tenor): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CYDjmUrXXN4>, 10:36–13:20

10. For more on Reszke and his career, see Chapter 4 of Henson 2015.

11. Henson, for example, calls Reszke a “pushed-up baritone” while the music critic and voice pedagogue Herman Klein labeled him a “true tenor” citing that composer Jules Massenot also deemed him a genuine tenor. See Henson, 2015, 142–43 and Klein, 1925, 406.

12. See Aldrich 1917. Aldrich studied with Sbriglia, and was his assistant and accompanist too. He later taught as well.

13. See Deborah Voigt's interview with Ed Pilkington in *The Guardian* (15 February 2015): <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/feb/17/deborah-voigt-soprano-book-call-me-debbie-addiction>

14. Holt 2018 employs thing theory in investigating Voigt's “Little Black Dress” incident and opens up a new space for thinking about the relationship between onstage objects and subjects.

15. Baritone and pedagogue, Julius Stockhausen (1826–1906) emphasized and popularized the importance of maintaining a low laryngeal position, especially for singing more loudly, a priority he associates as being essential for singers in the late nineteenth century. See Stockhausen 1884.

16. The Gala concert in honor of Joseph Volpe's retirement from the Metropolitan Opera is not available for purchase, but a clip of Heppner's performance can be found here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1oR3btluSY&list=PL-0Qm7yk-4UPcBF3t0jRSL2bGaLEc\\_Sqa&index=9&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1oR3btluSY&list=PL-0Qm7yk-4UPcBF3t0jRSL2bGaLEc_Sqa&index=9&t=0s) (2:50–end). The 1999 performance with the Berlin Philharmonic, James Levine conducting, is available on Amazon Prime or here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQoPa9uagoU> (3:27–end).

17. Armin first taught theatre and recitation in Leipzig before moving to Berlin in 1904 to continue his teaching. In 1925 he founded a vocal pedagogy association, the Gesellschaft für Stimmkultur (Society for Voice Culture). He later served as a publisher for *Der Stimmwort*, a journal dedicated to vocal pedagogy and he moved to Denmark in the 1940s.

18. Some examples of these “dualisms” include: Armin's view of onsets (glottal vs. breathy), vowels (bright vs. dark), and registers (head vs. chest).

19. Kaufmann's switch from lyric to dramatic repertoire was aided by the teaching of another baritone pedagogue, Michael Rhodes. For more on Kaufmann's career trajectory, see Thomas Voigt 2017.

20. See Wilbourne, 2015 and Abbate 2004. Recorded audiences also demonstrate strong

reactions: see the many “epic fail” videos on YouTube, one of which, “Vocal Disasters,” presents operatic vocal failures in succession (ironically beginning with one of Gedda’s rare vocal stumbles): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fuHn\\_h4VJw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fuHn_h4VJw)

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