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Abstract

Although current scholarship focuses on Richard Wagner's literary medievalism in his operas, little attention has been given to his musical medievalism. Considering that Wagner based nearly all of his operas on medieval legends, one can assume that he desired to evoke a "medieval" sound in the music of those works. When writing music that sounds ancient in his operas, Wagner is being a musical medievalist. He incorporates historical musical forms and styles as well as musical devices that would sound antique to a nineteenth-century audience to make his music sound old and to enhance the medieval aura of his stage works. This paper explores Richard Wagner's musical medievalism in his operas Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, Parsifal, and in his tetralogy, Der Ring des Nibelungen.
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I. Evoking an Ancient Sound: Introduction

Much study has been devoted to the literary medievalism of Richard Wagner's operas. Indeed, Wagner was an ardent bibliophile of medieval epics and poetry, and the success of his operas was a driving force for German interest in medievalism in the nineteenth century and after. After all, Wagner based all of his operas after Der Fliegende Holländer, with the exception of Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, on medieval legends and epics whose manuscript traditions date mostly from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹ But amidst the scholarship that explores Wagner's medieval sources and his literary medievalism, the subject of Wagner's musical medievalism has for the most part been left untouched. The Wagner Handbook, edited by Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, for instance, offers a lengthy section by Volker Merten entitled "Wagner's Middle Ages," in which Mertens gives an extensive analysis of Wagner's use and interpretation of medieval legends, but rarely discusses his treatment of the music in connection with these legends.² The Wagner Compendium, edited by Barry Millington, also gives a discussion of Wagner's interpretation of medieval sources, but again does not provide an adequate discussion of the music.³

This is due in large part to the commonly held assumption among scholars that Wagner's medievalism is a phony, idealized imagination of a mythical, Utopian past, as opposed to a serious effort at historical reconstruction. Mertens sees Wagner's depiction of the Middle Ages

as artificial—a mere product of nineteenth-century thought and ideology. Annette Kreuziger-Herr contends that due to a lack of knowledge of real medieval music in the nineteenth century, any musical depictions of medieval times were products of the nineteenth-century imagination. Furthermore, scholars like Gayner Jones contend that nineteenth-century composers created medieval musical color based on generic impressions of what would have suggested an archaic time period. These and other scholars are supported in their views by the fact that Wagner did not intend his operas to be mere copies of the medieval texts he studied. He manipulated source material to create his own version of the Middle Ages, and the German public of that time accepted his version, whether or not it was an authentic portrayal of the actual Middle Ages. But this would not explain why there is such little discussion of Wagner’s musical medievalism, for the term medievalism itself forgoes the necessity of an authentic understanding of how the Middle Ages actually were. It is my contention that one can study Wagner’s music from the perspective of Wagner as a medievalist, which would connote Wagner’s personal interpretation of the Middle Ages. He is not seeking an authentic recreation of medieval music. Rather, in terms of his musical medievalism, Wagner’s principal aim is to create an “ancient” sound to accompany the medieval settings of his operas. He does this by incorporating past musical forms and styles into his works, and by using nineteenth-century musical idioms that would suggest archaism. There is thus a dual process of historicism, or the use or revival of historical styles in

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contemporary works, and imagination in Wagner's process of evoking an ancient or medieval sound.

In terms of historicism, Wagner resurrects forms and styles from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque eras to signify music that is ancient. As Heath Lees point out, "it is by no means inconsistent to see/hear a mixture of Medieval and Renaissance techniques with practices from Wagner's music, since Wagner insisted that his Music-Dramas were a return to the musique ancienne that emanated directly from the words; indeed, he often embedded Renaissance counterpoint into his music (especially in a work like Die Meistersinger) and exploited the earliest types of folk-song derived structures such as Medieval Bar form."\(^9\) Although one could contend that Wagner's resurrection of forms and styles from the Middle Ages shows that he is providing an authentic portrayal of medieval music, one must remember that it is not Wagner's aim to present an authentic portrayal of medieval musical culture through his operas. Rather, his goal is to create music that would evoke a sense of the distant and naïve past. Wagner is being a musical medievalist in those moments that he is seeking to portray music that is naïve, which in Friedrich Schiller's sense of the term, from his essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry," would constitute that which is simple, uncorrupted, innocent, and ancient. But in writing from a nineteenth-century perspective, Wagner never seems to escape from the sentimental in his art, which to Schiller would constitute modernity and complexity.\(^10\) Ultimately, Wagner's striving for the naïve within the context of the sentimental becomes the key feature of his musical medievalism, as historical reality and nineteenth-century imagination

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join to form his own musical picture of the Middle Ages. This paper will explore Wagner’s musical medievalism by first looking at the historical context within which he composed, and then examining how Wagner evokes an ancient sound in his operas Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg, and Parsifal. There will then follow a concluding section devoted exclusively to examining musical medievalism in Wagner’s expansive tetralogy Der Ring des Nibelungen. More specifically, this paper will examine Wagner’s use of instruments and voices, Bar form, and antique harmonies in his creation of an ancient sound. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to provide a speculative discussion on possible interpretations of Wagner’s music, rather than to provide a definitive declaration as to what Wagner intended to portray.

II. Evoking an Ancient Sound: The Nineteenth-Century Historical Context in Germany and Wagner’s Musical Sources

To understand Wagner’s musical medievalism, it is important first to define the term medievalism as a source of scholarly discourse. Leslie J. Workman defines medievalism as “the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages.” As indicated in the introduction, medievalism may also be more loosely defined as the later reception or interpretation of the Middle Ages, and in Wagner’s case, the later interpretation of the Middle Ages most aptly describes his brand of medievalism. Simmons points out that Europeans became fascinated with the Middle Ages as soon as they recognized themselves as no longer part of that time period. As early as the fifteenth century, Europeans began to express in their art and literature

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12 Clare A. Simmons, ed., Medievalism and the Quest for the “Real” Middle Ages (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 1.
13 Ibid., 2.
a nostalgic and idealized notion of the Middle Ages as a naïve, simple, and mythical time.\textsuperscript{14} The Romantics of the nineteenth century revisited these ideals, at which time a fascination with the legendary and fabled past of the Middle Ages took hold.\textsuperscript{15} The Romantic movement in Germany was a reaction against the ideals of the Enlightenment, which saw the Middle Ages as a crude and barbaric time, dominated by faith and ungoverned by reason. Enlightenment thinkers distanced themselves from the past through science, whereas Romantics yearned for identification with the past. For the Romantics, the Middle Ages symbolized an ideal time of innocence that they yearned to reconnect with amidst the turmoil of modern society. With this idealization of the past there also emerged a strong nationalist movement following the Wars of Liberation of 1813 to 1815. Many Germans longed for a unified nation, and they looked nostalgically to the power of the Hohenstaufen Empire of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as a model for German greatness to be revived in the present.\textsuperscript{16} The Romantics' yearning for the past spawned a new historical consciousness, accompanied by a revival of historical music, as evidenced by Felix Mendelssohn's revival of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach.\textsuperscript{17}

In addition to Bach, this historical consciousness reached back to Renaissance composers like Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. Writers on early church music idealized a distant "golden age" in music, as represented in the figure of Palestrina.\textsuperscript{18} E.T.A. Hoffmann, in his 1814 essay "Old and New Church Music," describes the true nature of church music having been revealed for the first time by Palestrina, whom he called "the founding father of music...simple, true,

\begin{itemize}
\item[16] Spencer, 165.
\item[18] Ibid., 16.
\end{itemize}
childlike, good, strong, and sturdy.” This interest in Palestrina followed a more general nineteenth-century German aesthetic of “Sehnsucht nach dem Süden,” or the “yearning for the South (Italy).” According to James Garratt: “Although this (aesthetic) had been an element of German culture since the Renaissance, the attraction of Italy for the Romantics was dramatically increased: it provided a weak but tangible link to the naiv culture of the Middle Ages, being viewed as an enduring remnant of the Holy Roman Empire.” Wagner himself furthered the revival of Palestrina’s music by creating a modern adaptation of Palestrina’s motet *Stabat Mater*. Wagner’s arrangement of this work was the most famous adaptation of a Renaissance composition in the nineteenth century, and in it he added stylistic markings to make it conform to nineteenth-century standards of performance and expression. According to Garratt, Wagner’s arrangement can be seen as “a reclamation of the essence of the work through the modification of its form,” with the purpose of expressing the beauty of the ancient work while making it communicable to the modern audience. Wagner said of Palestrina’s motet that “in the details of their execution can be discerned inexperience and the early strivings of an art.” This indicates that the composer saw a certain degree of crudeness in such early works, in need of modern editing to make them more accessible and beautiful. But Wagner nevertheless saw much beauty in the *Stabat Mater*, describing Palestrina’s slow-moving chords as “monoliths that defy the ages.” This adaptation certainly shows Wagner’s interest in historical reconstruction, but his

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20 Garratt, *Palestrina and the German Romantic Imagination*, 49.
22 Ibid., 230.
23 As quoted by Garratt, *Palestrina and the German Romantic Imagination*, 226.
24 Ibid., 223.
desire to shape the music into what he thought it ought to sound like demonstrates clearly his disregard for historical authenticity.

But a strong revival of medieval music in the nineteenth century could not have occurred on the same scale as Renaissance music, with the exception of Gregorian Chant. Most sources of medieval music still lay hidden in monasteries and archives, not to be discovered in full until the early twentieth century. Therefore, imagination played a large role in filling “the empty position within historic reconstruction.” According to Annette Kreutziger-Herr, the artistic interpretation of medieval music, rather than real medieval music itself, defined nineteenth-century conceptions of the music from that era. The music of Wagner’s operas and the Lieder of Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms dealing with medieval lore became “sources” for understanding medieval music. This understanding of medieval music shaped conceptions of secular medieval song, such as the German minstrel Minnesang. Gregorian Chant, however, with its origins in the Middle Ages, gained increasing exposure in the nineteenth century through the Cecilian movement, particularly after 1830 through the works of the monks of the Abbey of Solesmes. So just as with other historical styles, medieval music saw a revival in the nineteenth century based simultaneously on some historical reconstruction and a large degree of imagination.

In terms of Wagner’s medieval musical sources, there is evidence that he came in contact with real medieval Minnesang. According to Larry Bomback, in his article “Wagner’s access to Minnesinger melodies prior to completing Tannhäuser,” Wagner acquired during his

25 Kreutziger-Herr, 82, 85.
26 Ibid., 90.
27 Ibid., 88-90.
composition of *Tannhäuser* a copy of Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen’s four-volume work entitled *Minnesinger*, containing in the fourth volume 100 pages of Minnesinger melodies.  

Figure 1: A page in Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen’s *Minnesinger*, Volume 4.  

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Bomback hypothesizes that although there are no direct quotations of these Minnesinger melodies in *Tannhäuser*, or any of Wagner's other operas, there is stylistic evidence that Wagner was influenced by his study of these melodies. To demonstrate this, the author looks specifically at the "Song Contest" of *Tannhäuser*, in which Wagner portrays medieval secular song through the diegetic performances of actual historical Minnesingers. Bomback notices that in many instances of medieval Minnesang, there occur an abundance of repeated-note figures, which he defines as the repetition of a note at least three times in succession without rests or breaks in between. He is careful to note that although some scholars would refer to this feature as a reciting pitch, he sees the concept of the reciting pitch as firmly rooted in Chant traditions, and therefore distinct from the Minnesinger repertoire. He points out that singers arrive at the reciting pitch in the middle of a chant, whereas in Minnesang, "the repeated note is more often than not heard near the start of the melody or at the beginning of a new line of text." The author claims that in the diegetic songs of the Minnesingers in *Tannhäuser*, one can find Wagner recreating such repeated-note figures, such as in this musical example:

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30 Bomback, 24.
31 Ibid., 27.
32 Ibid., 24-25.
In addition, Bomback observes that in the songs of figures like Wolfram von Eschenbach, Wagner writes music that is extremely diatonic, slow, relatively soft in dynamics, and in a small vocal range, suggesting a simpler musical style from an earlier time period. This article thus provides compelling evidence of Wagner’s exposure to real medieval music, which may help open up scholarly discussion a bit more on the subject of Wagner’s musical medievalism.

To more fully understand Wagner’s influences and sources, however, it is important to look at what Wagner himself said about creating an ancient sound in music. One can observe his own conception of the dual process of historicism and imagination in depicting the musically archaic in a letter he wrote to Carl Emil Doepler on December 17, 1874. Wagner writes:

> For basically what I require is nothing less than a characteristic portrait made up of individual figures and depicting with strikingly vivid detail personal events from a period of culture not only remote from our own experience but having no association with any known experience. You will soon discover that you have to ignore completely the sort of picture which, following the example of Cornelius, Schnorr & others, artists have tried to put forward in portraying the characters of the medieval Lay of the Nibelungs…Passing references to the costumes of the Germanic peoples in Roman authors who came into contact with these nations do not appear to have received the attention they merit. In my opinion, that artist who wishes to take up the subject I offer him and make it his own will

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34 Bomback, 27.
find a unique field open to him in terms not only of intelligent compilation but also his own inventiveness."\(^{35}\)

Wagner also gives his own succinct view on creating an ancient sound in music in his 1851 essay *Opera and Drama*. He asks:

How must an ‘historic’ music sound, to produce an effect in keeping with its name? To be sure, quite otherwise than a not-historic music. Bur wherein lay the difference? Clearly in this: that the ‘historic music’ should differ as much from that we are now accustomed to, as the costume of a former epoch from that of the present day. Would it not be wisest then, just as one had copied faithfully the costumes of the date in question, to take one’s music also from that epoch? Alas! This was not quite so easy, for in those epochs, so piquant in their costume, there was, barbarically enough, no Opera: a general type of operatic speech was therefore not to be borrowed from them. On the other hand, the people of those epochs sang in churches, and these church-hymns have about them, if one springs their chanting suddenly upon us, something strikingly foreign to our modern music. Excellent! Fetch out the Hymns! Religion shall take a turn upon the stage!\(^{36}\)

One can see how Wagner is grappling with his inaccessibility to actual historical music, but one can also see how he equates ancient music with sacred music. This is significant, for as we will see in his operas, Wagner’s evocations of an ancient sound and of a sacred sound are usually synonymous.

One can also get a glimpse of what Wagner considered an adequate portrayal of the Middle Ages in his praise for the 1835 opera *La Juive*, by nineteenth-century French composer Fromental Halévy. Wagner writes about the opera in his 1842 article “Halévy and ‘La Reine de Chypre’,” which appeared in the *Gazette Musicale*:

But what strikes us as above all worthy admiration, is that Halévy has succeeded in stamping on his score the seal of the epoch at which the action passes. To solve this


problem, it was no question of consulting antiquarian documents, to drag out archæologic
grossnesses anent the manners of that day, affording no artistic interest; the question was,
to lend the music the perfume of the epoch, and reproduce the men and women of the
Middle Ages in all their individuality. In that the author of La Juive has perfectly
succeeded. Without doubt one could not point to such and such passage as more
especially denoting this intention of the author's; there he has shewn himself true artist:
but for my part I avow that never have I heard dramatic music which transferred me so
completely to a given reach of history.

Wagner goes on to discuss how Halévy had attained this historical effect:

How did Halévy arrive at this effect? That is a mystery whose key must be sought in his
mode of production. One might rank him in what is called the Historic school, were it
not that the constituent elements of the composer's mode concur with the Romantic; for
as soon as we are carried away from ourselves, from our sensations and impressions of
the hour, from the habitual sphere where our existence passes, and transported to an
unknown region, yet with full retention of all our faculties,—from that moment we are
under the spell of what folk call Romantic poetry.37

It is evident then that Wagner himself did not consider it an important task to create a historically
authentic presentation of the Middle Ages. Rather, as he indicates, it is more important to "lend
the music the perfume of the epoch." He also describes Halévy's archaic effects as not
necessarily placing the composer in the Historic school, suggesting that the aim of the opera as
Wagner sees it is not mere historicism. Rather, Wagner sees in the work a combination of
historicism and that which is "Romantic." The Romantic comprises the nineteenth-century
imagination that fills the gaps in historical reconstruction, and transports the listener to those
ancient and distant lands for which the Romantics yearned.

The 1823 opera *Euryanthe*, by Carl Maria von Weber, may also have influenced
Wagner's musical medievalism. Michael Tusa, in his article "Richard Wagner and Weber's
Euryanthe," points out that Wagner was indeed influenced by *Euryanthe*, to the extent that he

composed some ceremonial music based on themes from the opera. He also argues that Weber's medieval setting and portrayal of supernatural elements and real historical figures in *Euryanthe* served as a model for Wagner's composition of *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*. Tusa looks to a number of different similarities among *Euryanthe* and *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* to show how Weber's work influenced Wagner's. He points out such similarities as the large presence of Minnesingers and the almost identical tonal designs of *Tannhäuser* and *Euryanthe*, the overall orchestral textures and treatment of instruments such as the harp and the horns among all three, and the key associations with certain characters in *Lohengrin* and *Euryanthe*. Beyond these more surface similarities, the author goes into incredible detail. In describing the similarities between *Tannhäuser* and *Euryanthe*, for instance, he writes that

in both works ballet is coupled with a purely coloristic chorus, and what follows is a dramatic exchange in a simple, declamatory style. Both knight-minstrels are then invited to sing a song in praise of love, which in both cases consists of three stanzas. Note, too, that the accompaniments in both songs progress in strophic variation from the naturalistic emulation of a singer's harp or cither to ever more complicated and rhythmically involved accompaniments in the second and third strophes.

Tusa makes a solid case for the similarities among these three works, which is important for establishing Wagner's models and influences in his musical portrayal of the Middle Ages. But to understand more fully such possible influences, a general examination of Wagner's medievalist treatment of instruments and voices will be fruitful.

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38 Michael C. Tusa, "Richard Wagner and Weber's *Euryanthe*," *19th-Century Music* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1986): 207.
39 Ibid., 217.
40 Ibid., 211, 212, 217.
41 Ibid., 212.
III. Evoking an Ancient Sound: Wagner’s Treatment of Instruments and Voices

One could argue that the tone quality alone of certain instruments and vocal ensembles can sound archaic. Daniel Beller-McKenna argues, for instance, that the harp and the horn have “a particular capacity to symbolize memory, the past, and distance.” Indeed, the harp is a rather ancient instrument in its own right: the ancient Greeks looked to the harp as a symbol of divinity, and the notion of the harp as “spiritual mediator” carried through to the nineteenth-century views of philosophers like Ludwig Tieck, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder, and E.T.A. Hoffmann. By the eighteenth century the harp had become associated with medieval minstrels and song, particularly in its association with the mythical bard Ossian. The idea of the mythical medieval bard Ossian with his harp became a popular image in nineteenth-century art and music alike.

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43 Ibid., 56-57.
Nineteenth-century Danish composer Niels Gade exploits the association of the harp with Ossian and ancient music to evoke a medieval and legendary aura in his 1840 *Echoes of Ossian* Overture. As John Daverio points out, the harp provides an archaic bardic quality to the music that transports the listener to an ancient world.⁴⁶

Wagner was certainly aware of the medieval associations of the harp, for he gives the instrument a prominent role in the medieval setting of his opera *Tannhäuser*. The role of the harp is most evident in the Song Contest or "Sängerkrieg" in Act II, Scene 4. For extended

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⁴⁵ Daverio, 249.
⁴⁶ Ibid., 259.
passages of Wolfram von Eschenbach’s opening song, “Blick ich umher in diesem edlen Kreise,” referred to previously as “Wolfram’s Eulogy of Love,” the arpeggiated chords of the harp form the single instrumental texture underneath Wolfram’s singing:

![Figure 4: Tannhäuser, Act II, Scene 4 - Moderato, measures 395-408.]

The same is true for Tannhäuser’s “Auch ich darf mich so glücklich nennen”:

![Figure 5: Tannhäuser, Act II, Scene 4 - Meno Allegro, measures 503-08.]

and Walther von der Vogelweide’s “Den Bronnen, den uns Wolfram nannte”:

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48 Wagner, Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg, 235.
In all three cases, the harp’s chordal accompaniment often comprises the only orchestral sound underneath the vocal lines, save for occasional drones in the low strings or woodwinds. Only in the choral responses to the songs does the whole orchestra come back in its full texture. In portraying historical Minnesingers on stage engaging in a medieval song contest, it appears that Wagner is representing what he thought Minnesang would have sounded like. Indeed, Wagner was relatively accurate in his depiction of a medieval sound based on iconographic and written evidence portraying the harp as a common accompanimental instrument for medieval minstrels. Wagner would in fact have been exposed to the medieval function of the harp through his study of the medieval Tannhäuser poems, in which it is indicated that the “harp often provided instrumental interludes during the performances of epic lays.” And this is exactly how Wagner employs the harp in the Song Contest scene.

To look to Weber’s *Euryanthe* as an influence on Wagner’s portrayal of medieval secular song, one can find a similar diegetic performance of a Minnelied in the *Romanze* of Act I. Here, rather than using an actual harp, Weber evokes the sound of the harp through plucked strings:

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50 Bomback, 20.
Figure 7: Weber, *Euryanthe*, Act I, Scene 1 - “Romanze,” *Andante con moto*, measures 1-8.\(^{51}\)

Just as with Wagner’s use of harp, the plucked strings effectively evoke an image of sparse accompaniment underneath a medieval bard’s melodic line. The same is true for the lute accompaniment of Sixtus Beckmesser’s “serenade” and “Prize Song” in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. According to Carl Dahlhaus, “perfunctory accompaniment, limited to a few chords and figurations on a lute, represent the essence of the musically obsolete, which Wagner equated with meagerness. (The direction of musical progress, he believed, was towards every greater abundance.)”\(^{52}\) Ultimately, Wagner’s depictions of solo song with simple, arpeggiated, chordal accompaniments in instruments like the harp and the lute demonstrate his evocation of a simpler, naïve style of music to represent this ancient world. In the case of the harp, Wagner


demonstrates an imagined idea based in part on historical reality of what medieval music would have actually sounded like.

As Beller-McKenna points out, horns also have the capacity “to symbolize memory, the past, and distance,”\(^53\) and this becomes evident in Wagner’s writing for horns in *Tannhäuser*. According to Blandford, Wagner employs the very same horn combinations that Halévy had employed in *La Juive*.\(^54\) Halévy wrote for two valve-horns and two natural horns in his opera—a combination that Wagner later employs in *Tannhäuser*. Halévy and Wagner were the first to begin writing for this ensemble of horns,\(^55\) and it is likely that Wagner, inspired by Halévy’s portrayal of the Middle Ages, had written for these horns to evoke a medieval or ancient sound in his opera. The same could be said for the use of organ in Act I, Scene 1 of *Die Meistersinger*. In Act I, Scene 1 of *La Juive*, the chorus sings *a cappella* for the first verse of the *Te Deum*, and the organ then accompanies the chorus for the second verse and for the return of the *Te Deum* at the end of Act I. Hugh Macdonald describes this opening as a “thrilling effect which Wagner borrowed almost unchanged in *Die Meistersinger.*”\(^56\) Again, based on Wagner’s fascination with Halévy’s presentation of the Middle Ages, one can assume that Wagner is adopting these effects for his own operas to give his works that same medievalist aura. But as previously indicated, Wagner was not so much concerned with the historical recreation of the Middle Ages in *La Juive* as he was concerned with Halévy’s romantic evocation of the Middle Ages. In this light, Wagner’s use of those instrumental effects would have likely catered more to the nineteenth-

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\(^53\) Beller-McKenna, 49.
\(^54\) W.F.H. Blandford, “Studies on the Horn. II. Wagner and the Horn Parts of Lohengrin (Continued),” *The Musical Times* 63, no. 955 (September 1922): 622.
\(^55\) Ibid., 623.
century imagination of what constituted an ancient sound as opposed to a historical reconstruction of a medieval instrumental sound.

Another evocation of an imagined medieval sound can be heard in the *Prelude* of *Lohengrin*. Here, the effect of high, shimmering strings creates the perfect image of a golden medieval past, and the sound seems to propel the listener into an ancient world of bygone chivalry:

![Figure 8: Lohengrin, Act I, Vorspiel - Langsam, measures 1-6.](image)

Champfleury seems to champion a medievalist aesthetic in this opening when he explains that "the fragment from the *Holy Grail* (*Prelude to Lohengrin*) is among those which struck me the most, by its religious mysticism and the highest quivering of the violins, at the same time, clear and transparent like crystal. The orchestra gradually becomes more animated and arrives at a

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kind of radiant apotheosis, golden like the sun, which transports the listener to unknown worlds.\textsuperscript{58} The "unknown worlds" Champfleury refers to could well be the distant worlds of an ancient, ideal era. Interestingly, Wagner himself seems to express a medievalist aesthetic in this work as a whole when he tells his wife Cosima, on June 6, 1879, that with \textit{Lohengrin} he had "provided a complete picture of the Middle Ages." She replied that the opera is "the only monument that shows the \textit{beauty} of the Middle Ages."\textsuperscript{59} But as with the previous example, it is likely that Wagner is evoking an imagined idea of what sounds archaic with these high shimmering strings, rather than seeking to restore a historical style.

As with Wagner’s treatment of the harp in \textit{Tannhäuser}, one can observe both historicism and imagination in the composer’s use of bells in \textit{Parsifal}. In the Act I \textit{Säulenhalle der Gralsburg}, Wagner introduces listeners to the sound of deep bells in C major, indicating that we are inside the Grail temple:\textsuperscript{60}

![Figure 9: Parsifal, Act I, Säulenhalle der Gralsburg - Langsam und feierlich, measures 88-93.\textsuperscript{61}]


\textsuperscript{59} As quoted by Mertens, 236.

\textsuperscript{60} Ryan Minor, "Wagner’s last chorus: Consecrating space and spectatorship in \textit{Parsifal}," \textit{Cambridge Opera Journal} 17, no. 1 (March 2005): 17.

Wagner uses the bells, along with other instruments such as trumpets, trombones, and tenor drum, to indicate moments of religious ceremony. Such religious ceremonies reveal the strong sacred element that Wagner infuses in his rendition of the medieval Parzifal legend. It also reveals the nineteenth-century medievalist aesthetic of the idealization of medieval Catholicism. Friedrich Schlegel, for instance, viewed Catholicism as naïve Christianity, whereas Protestantism represented to him sentimental Christianity. He associated the naiveté of Catholicism with the naïveté of the Middle Ages, believing that "the idea of the naïve art of the Catholic Middle Ages provides the paradigm of the relation between a secure religious foundation and a superlative artistic production." This is not to suggest that Wagner's Parsifal is meant to idealize medieval Catholicism, but such musical devices as the sound of the church bells nevertheless reflect strong nineteenth-century associations between early Christianity and the Middle Ages. With the bells, Wagner is reproducing a sound that provides historical continuity with the peals of bells heard from churches during medieval times. According to Johan Huizinga:

one sound (in the Middle Ages) always rose above the clamor of busy life and, no matter how much of a tintinnabulation, was never confused with other noises, and, for a moment, lifted everything into an ordered sphere: that of the bells. The bells acted in daily life like concerned good spirits who, with their familiar voices, proclaimed sadness or joy, calm or unrest, assembly or exhortation...People never became indifferent to these sounds, no matter how overused they were.

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63 Garratt, Palestrina and the German Romantic Imagination, 49-50.
The sound of bells also plays powerfully on the imagination, for it evokes what Alain Corbin calls "the sound of another time." In this manner, real and imagined history unite through Wagner's portrayal of the Temple bells in *Parsifal*.

One can also hear Wagner's musical medievalism in those moments where he is evoking an aura of Gregorian Chant. Leaders of the Cecilian Movement, a reactionary movement of church reform in the nineteenth century, revived Gregorian Chant to reinstate the singing of Chant during the Christian liturgy. Romantic composers, who saw vocal music as the ideal portrayal of religiousness and of the sacred, supported the movement. *A cappella* vocal music began to dominate religious scenes in many nineteenth-century operas, while composers such as Franz Liszt and Anton Bruckner began incorporating Chant melodies into their symphonic works. Wagner, too, supported the movement, and one can see how he alludes to Chant in those moments where he employs vocal monophony. One striking example occurs in the "Chor der älteren Pilger" in Act III, Scene 1. The pilgrims returning from Rome sing softly in four-part harmony from a distance off-stage. As the pilgrims progress upon the stage, they crescendo from piano to fortissimo in five bars, and in the bar prior to the fortissimo the four-part harmony dispels to reveal a monophonic line shared by all parts. For the next seventeen bars they sing gloriously in unison, which, apart from the strong presence of the orchestra, evokes an aura of monophonic Gregorian chant:

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65 As quoted by Richard L. Hernandez, "Sacred Sound and Sacred Substance: Church Bells and the Auditory Culture of Russian Villages during the Bolshevik Velikii Perelom," *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 5 (December 2004).
67 Fellerer, 185.
Figure 10: Tannhäuser, Act III, Scene 1 - Andante maestoso, measures 80-97.\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{68} Wagner, Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf der Wartburg, 349-50.
One can observe a similar effect in the monophonic chanting of the knights in *Parsifal.*

In the Act I *Säulenhallo der Gralsburg,* between the C to G and A to E sequences of bell intonations, listeners hear the knights singing in unison as they process into the Temple. They sing for a total of 23 bars in pure vocal monophony, as opposed to the traditional four-part harmony. According to Kinderman:

> the initially unharmonized line, with its suspended rhythm and avoidance of stress on the downbeat, evokes the aura of Gregorian chant – an impression conveyed again toward the framing close of the Communion Theme. Wagner also evokes Gregorian intonations in another prominent thematic idea associated with the Grail: the rising whole step and third heard in the first phrase of the Grail motive, immediately preceding the ‘Dresden Amen.’

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**Figure 11:** *Parsifal,* Act I, *Säulenhallo der Gralsburg* - Langsam und feierlich, measures 94-99.

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70 Wagner, *Parsifal,* 156.
It is evident here that Wagner is intending to conjure up an image of ancient religious ceremony. Such an ancient religious ceremony would certainly have had its historical precedent in the medieval Catholic liturgy, with its centuries-old tradition of monophonic Gregorian chant. Just as with the bells, this moment is connecting the listener to an ancient sound that has its roots in the actual Middle Ages. But as in the "Chor der älteren Pilger" in Tannhäuser, the presence of an accompanying orchestral texture places the musical experience firmly in the nineteenth-century imagination.

IV. Evoking an Ancient Sound: Bar Form

The Bar form is a particularly important form of musical medievalism for Wagner. The Bar form, with its roots in medieval Minnesang, consists of three stanzas that form an AAB structure. The first two stanzas, known as the Stollen (AA), comprise the same or similar music, while the third stanza, known as the Abgesang (B), contains new music. In addition to Minnesang, the form also has its roots in Gregorian chants, in the canso of the troubadours, and in the ballade of the trouvères. Thus, in Wagner's use of the Bar form he is reviving an actual medieval form and communicating it to a nineteenth-century audience. Bar form appears, for instance, in Walter von der Vogelweide's song, "Walther's Eulogy of Love," during the Song Contest scene in Tannhäuser.
Figure 12: Tannhäuser, Act II, Scene 4 - Moderato, measures 1-52.\(^71\)

\(^71\) Wagner, *Tannhäuser and the Tournament of Song at Wartburg*, 155-57.
The music of the two Stollen are similar, whereas the B section Abgesang introduces new musical material. In addition, one can see how the text also demonstrates Bar form. The two Stollen extol the beauties of the fountain, while the Abgesang warns against drinking its waters. Such textual and musical contrast between the Stollen and Abgesang is a key quality of this medieval form. The form also appears in Act II, Scene 1 of *Parsifal*, where Klingsor sings a solo consisting of two Stollen based on the *Knabenmotiv*, a motive associated with Parsifal. These two Stollen also have their own internal bar form structures. The Abgesang consists of an internal ABA’ structure, with both A sections bringing forth the *Parsifal* motive. The Parsifal motive is diatonic, and as we will see, a symbol of medieval naïveté. Wagner is connecting the use of Bar form to the figure of Parsifal, thereby portraying Parsifal as a naïve, innocent, and ancient figure.

The one opera in which Bar form serves a central dramatic role is *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. This opera may seem an odd choice for a discussion of Wagner’s musical medievalism, for unlike the majority of his other operas set in the thirteenth century, he sets this opera in sixteenth century Nürnberg. But Edward Haymes points out that the opera represents “two-storied” medievalism, for the Meistersingers were medievalists themselves. The Meistersingers were craftsmen who composed and performed songs in guilds, and they flourished particularly during the sixteenth century in southern Germany. They saw their musical tradition as deriving from medieval Minnesang, and in their continuation of the Minnesang tradition the Meistersingers employed such forms as the Bar form in their music. If one concurs with the working definition of medievalism as the later reception or interpretation of

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72 Haymes, 512.
73 Dahlhaus, 260.
the Middle Ages, then the musical forms and traditions of the Meistersingers would constitute their own form of medievalism, and Wagner brings this medievalism forth in his opera. Volker Mertens gives his own insight into what constitutes *Die Meistersinger* as a medievalist work. He writes:

What is ‘medieval’ about *Die Meistersinger* is the Romantics’ Janus-faced myth of Nuremberg as a free city in which the arts flourish, but petit-bourgeois narrowness and small-mindedness also abound. The music of the mastersingers stands for both of these attributes: it is ‘German and true,’ in that it preserves the old and authentic art through lean years, but at the same time its narrowness is manifest in the quaint laws and customs which Wagner evokes in such graphic terms.

Mertens goes on to discuss the strong social element that gives the opera its medievalist character:

In the noisy festivities on the banks of the Pegnitz the problematic and threatening aspects of the mastersingers and their art are lost in the utopian vision of an artist who, rejected by the pedantic guild, is acknowledged instead by the ‘folk.’ This typically Romantic utopia required a multidimensional social milieu such as was to be found in the late medieval town with its guilds and town council, its craftsmen and apprentices, and its knights and burghers... The medievalism of the work is not merely a matter of local color, as it had been in *Lohengrin*: rather it is a form in which the social element appears as an integrative factor, an element which, according to Wagner’s understanding, was ‘German and true’ in the Romantic tradition.

Haymes also provides justification for interpreting *Die Meistersinger* as a medievalist work. According to Haymes:

In spite of the change of time and social milieu, we must admit that Wagner treats his Nürnberg of the sixteenth century much as he treats his Brabant of the tenth century or his Wartburg of the thirteenth. We still have romantically colored images of the past time in which morals, character and humanity were on a higher plane. We have spectacular panoplies of knights on the one hand and guild members on the other, both of whom swing large banners and form attractive and refreshingly foreign pictures on the stage. The past is used both in the ‘medieval’ works and in the comedy set in the sixteenth

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74 Mertens, 261.
century as a positive example and an escape from the mundane reality of Wagner’s own time. Thus, whether one sees Die Meistersinger as medievalist in its social context, or medievalist in its evocation of an ancient age of chivalry and moral order, one could certainly argue that this is a medievalist opera despite the absence of a medieval setting.

Examples of Bar form abound in the opera, including Walther von Stolzing’s “Trial Song,” which is in embellished bar form (A-B A’-B’ C). Additionally, in Act III, Walther asks Hans Sachs: “Ein schönes Lied, ein Meisterlied: wie fass’ ich da den Unterschied?” to which Sachs replies in a modified bar form (AABB). Act I also contains detailed instructions given to Walther von Stolzing on the structure of Bar form and the various ways to properly craft a Meistersinger melody, while in Act III Hans Sachs gives further instruction to Walther on the proper composition of a Bar form. Lee even analyzes the three acts of the opera as creating a giant Bar form, with the first two acts comprising the Stollen, and the last act comprising the Abgesang. According to Lee: “Act III of Die Meistersinger, the longest act in Wagner, is the Abgesang, or aftersong, in which the serious elements in the comedy, only hinted at in the two Stollen that preceded it, darken and deepen both text and music.” Wagner derived his knowledge of the singing traditions of the Meistersingers and their use of Bar form from his study of old texts such as the Account of German Mastersong of 1571, written by Adam Puschmann, a pupil of Hans Sachs, and Johann Christoph Wagenseil’s Nuremberg Chronicle,

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75 Haymes, 506.
78 Owen Lee, Wagner and the Wonder of Art: An Introduction to Die Meistersinger (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 171.
from 1697. He also consulted nineteenth-century sources like Jacob Grimm’s *On the Old German Mastersongs* of 1811, which provides details on the traditions and names of historical Meistersingers.79 Wagenseil’s text in particular would have been informative for its inclusion of real Meistersinger melodies, since the presence of the *Lange Ton* represents Wagner’s use of a real Meistersinger melody in his opera.80 Even the feast of St. John the Baptist at the opening of the work has historical musical significance. Lee points out that the first syllables of each line of the old Latin hymn of John the Baptist correspond to the notes of the hexachord syllables ut-re-mi-fa-sol-la-mi-ut, founded by medieval music theorist Guido d’Arezzo. In the church, the citizens of Nürnberg sing a German version of this hymn, showing how the citizens value the preservation of historical traditions.81 These sources and musical elements all contribute to the historicist milieu that Wagner imbues in this opera. Just as the Meistersingers did with Minnesang, Wagner sought to resurrect the musical traditions of a previous era, to form the “two-storied” medievalism that is a defining feature of this opera. But despite the fact that Bar form is an authentic relic of the medieval past, Wagner situates it within a nineteenth-century orchestral frame, just as he does with his treatment of vocal monophony. This alienates his art from legitimate efforts at authentic reconstruction of medieval music. But ultimately, the appearance of Bar form in *Die Meistersinger* and other operas shows Wagner’s interpretation of the musical simplicity of a distant past, and in this sense his use of Bar form is an expression of his musical medievalism.

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79 Lee, 9-10.
80 Ibid., 12.
81 Ibid., 14.
V. Evoking an Ancient Sound: Antique Harmonies

In addition to Wagner’s instrumental and vocal evocations of a distant sound, and to his use of antiquated musical forms, Wagner reveals his musical medievalism most clearly in his use of antique harmonies. The term “antique harmony” is arguably fraught with complications, for one would question if a specific harmony is antique by nature of its historical origins or by nature of its antique associations. I will show, however, that Wagner employs both actual historically antique harmonies as well as harmonies that to the nineteenth-century listener would have suggested an imagined, “ancient” sound. In terms of real historically antique harmonies, Wagner often alludes to the harmonies in Palestrinian polyphony. Since Wagner himself had a good deal of exposure to Palestrina’s music through his own adaptation of the Stabat Mater, one could conjecture that Palestrina’s harmonies may have had an influence on some of his more antique-sounding music. But in terms of what the nineteenth-century listener would have thought sounded antique, one would have to delve into the nineteenth-century musical language. A general look at compositional practices of the nineteenth century will help to clarify this point.

When discussing the nineteenth-century musical language for expressions of the past, or that which is ancient, modal and plagal harmonic progressions come to the fore. Modal progressions refer to root-movement progressions within the scales of the original medieval church modes as opposed to root progressions in the traditional major and minor diatonic scales. The church modes as we know them today have their origins in medieval music theory, with the main modes represented by the Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, and Mixolydian scales, as well as their plagal versions (hypodorian, hypophrygian, etc.). The later inclusion of the Ionian and Aeolian scales would represent the later major and minor diatonic scales. But what is unique about the
Aeolian scale, or natural minor scale, in comparison to a harmonic minor or melodic minor scale, is that there is no subtonic leading tone. Rather, there is a flat-VII whole step relationship to the tonic. This distinction is crucial, for the leading-tone seventh is arguably one of the most distinguishing features of nineteenth-century tonal harmonic construction. After all, it is through the leading tone that one hears the strong resolution to the tonic in a perfect authentic cadence with the third degree of the V7 chord resolving upward to the first degree of the tonic chord.

References in scholarship to the archaic qualities of modal root progressions abound. Jonathan Bellman, in his article “Aus alten Märchen: The Chivalric Style of Schumann and Brahms,” for instance, discusses how Schumann and Brahms use modal root progressions to portray music that sounds ancient and medieval. He describes the minor i to the major flat-VII chord progression as “clearly archaic.” He also explains the function of modal mixture, or the appearance of chords that are not part of the diatonic scale of the music’s home key, in describing that “to the Romantic sensibility it implied modality, and symbolized the music of an uncorrupted past.” He points out, too, that a harmonic progression of I-VI-I, which bypasses completely the traditional tonic-dominant relationship, would have symbolized for Schumann “royalty or nobility.” Indeed, such “archaic harmonic practices are reminiscences of an idealized, noble past.” Balázs Mikusi further explores this important mediant-tonic relationship when he looks at the “paratactic” relationship of the i, VI, and III chords in the opening harmonic progression of Niels Gade’s Echoes of Ossian Overture.

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83 Ibid., 132, 134.
As this is the opening harmonic statement of a piece entitled "Echoes of Ossian," alluding to a mythical figure from ancient times, one can conjecture that Gade is using such a progression to portray music that sounds ancient. Such a progression, however, would not necessarily be alluding to a specific historical harmonic progression, thus anchoring the "ancient" sound in the imagination of the nineteenth-century listener. Mikusi further explores the nineteenth-century conception of ancient-sounding music by identifying Mendelssohn's shifts from the minor key to its relative major in his "Scottish" Symphony as a recognizable code for an antique sound in the nineteenth century: "The peculiar turn of a minor key to its relative major appears in several of Mendelssohn's vocal works, and its association with distant lands and ancient times seems to have been established by around the time of the composer's trip to England (around the mid-nineteenth century)."
Other scholars like Margaret Notley have looked to Brahms's use of plagal harmonies as "the other of authentic harmony and perhaps even of common-practice tonality itself." She defines authentic harmony, or the "authentic system," as "dominant harmony, authentic cadences, and characteristic upward semitone motion between scale degrees 7 and 8." She likewise defines plagal harmony, or the "plagal" system, as "subdominant harmony, plagal cadences, and characteristic downward semitone motion between scale degrees 6 and 5." She argues for a plagal system as distinct and independent from the authentic system, as opposed to the ideas of theorists like Heinrich Schenker who believed that subdominant harmony served "only subordinate functions to the dominant and tonic, such as 'prolonging' one of them or 'preparing' the former." By identifying the plagal system as distinct from the authentic system, she describes the plagal system in the music of Brahms as sounding like the "other" of authentic harmony, and perhaps suggesting a music that precedes authentic harmony. She expounds on such archaic sound associations of the plagal system in arguing that "the semantic significance of certain plagal moments...has to do above all with their ability to suggest something other than, outside of, or prior to tonal music." Essentially, Notley argues that plagal harmonic progressions, at least in the case of Brahms, have the capacity to suggest music of an older time. Arthur Hutchings also dissects what he calls "'archaic modal' harmony" as used by the nationalist composers of the nineteenth century. He describes the process of creating modal harmony as the reversal of *musica ficta* that turned church modes into modern scales, in order that the nationalist composers could avoid what he calls "the fussiness of leading-note

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88 Ibid., 92.
89 Ibid., 130.
modulations. One can thus see how this predilection for modal-root and plagal harmonic progressions was a possible musical script for evocations of that which is ancient in the nineteenth century.

One may observe Wagner’s use of such harmonic progressions as his own expression of musical medievalism. We hear this, for instance, in Act III Scene 2 of Tannhäuser, when a progression of i - VII - VI (d - C - B-flat) occurs to accompany the death of Elisabeth:

![Musical notation image]

Figure 14: Tannhäuser, Act III, Scene 2 - Moderato, 15-20.

Wagner is depicting with Elisabeth’s death her transformation to sainthood, and he is infusing the music with obvious sacred connotations in his treatment of this harmonic progression. As in Wagner’s other depictions of sacredness, there is a strongly archaic quality that accompanies both the harmonic progression and his evocations of medieval Catholicism. With the minor i to major flat-VII progression Wagner is removing the leading tone that would suggest an authentic harmonic progression, and instead he is bringing forth an archaic sound built on root-movement progressions in Aeolian mode. But, interestingly, this moment could be seen as portraying both the nineteenth-century imagination as well as historical reality, for Garratt argues that Wagner’s

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91 Wagner, Tannhäuser and the Tournament of Song at Wartburg, 295.
92 Garratt, Palestrina and the German Romantic Imagination, 232.
use here of "adjacent root progressions," such as the d - C - B-flat progression, could be alluding to the Palestrinian harmonic language. Garratt points to the appearance of several adjacent root progressions in addition to the d - C - B-flat progression, such as at the conclusion of Elisabeth's prayer for the forgiveness of Tannhäuser's sins, and following Elisabeth's Assumption. But Garratt points out that none of these represents an exact quotation of chord progressions from the *Stabat Mater*. He does argue, however, that in these moments "it is the association of Palestrina's language with the Christian sublime that is evoked."93 In any case, the effect of a sacred and ancient moment is clearly transmitted through Wagner's treatment of the minor i to flat-VII harmonic progression.

Carl Dahlhaus offers his own interpretation of Wagner's musical medievalism in *Tannhäuser* when he describes chromatic harmony as an expression of Tannhäuser's suffering. He explains that the chorales of the pilgrims resemble Tannhäuser's song in praise of Venus in that they "stand out of the deliberately archaizing 'old German' context by reason of their un-chorale-like chromaticism, and are a musical gesture of suffering, alluding to Tannhäuser."94 Dahlhaus thus sees those moments of non-chromatic, diatonic harmony as representing an archaic, "old German" sound in this opera. Ultimately, Wagner juxtaposes that which is innocent, pure, and saintly in the figure of Elisabeth with her modal and quasi-Palestrinian harmonies, with chromatic harmony, an indication of Tannhäuser's torment. Elisabeth represents the naïve, and she is therefore located in the moral and golden past of the Middle Ages, while Tannhäuser's suffering is an allegory for the ills of modern-day society. One could thus see the opera *Tannhäuser* as representing both the modern and the ancient worlds with their

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94 Dahlhaus, 31-32.
respective moral value. The opera is simultaneously reaching backward and commenting on the present state of society. Furthermore, the pilgrims move musically from chromatic four-part harmony to diatonic monophony, representing liberation from suffering. Wagner is foreshadowing Tannhäuser’s ultimate freedom from his sin through Elisabeth’s death, and the triumph of the moral virtue of the ancient world over the corruption and decay of the modern world.

One can find the same mixture of imagination and history in the harmonies of *Lohengrin*. Allusions to Palestrina’s harmonic language can be spotted in this work, and as with *Tannhäuser*, Wagner usually connects these allusions with sacred imagery. As Garratt points out, Wagner’s “chains of quasi-modal roots,” indicative of Palestrina’s style, “do play a limited part in Wagner’s construction of a mystical idiom with which to symbolize Lohengrin and the kingdom of the Grail.”

Cecilian Johannes Hatzfeld-Sandebeck believed Palestrina’s style had a strong influence on the opera. According to Hatzfeld-Sandebeck: “*Lohengrin* shows...a character that in its perfection and individuality, in places in its rapturous glowing purity and modesty – despite all chromaticism – would not have been possible had Wagner not just beforehand walked in the garden of Palestrina.” But Garratt does not so much believe that Wagner is seeking to portray old Italian church music as he is seeking to distinguish the “sublime Christianity of Lohengrin from the mundane religious beliefs of the Volk...and the piety of Elsa.”

As in *Tannhäuser*, Wagner revives the Palestrinian style to represent something both sacred and ancient at the same time. Lohengrin, after all, is a legendary figure steeped in the

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95 Dahlhaus, 232.
96 As quoted by Garratt, *Palestrina and the German Romantic Imagination*, 231.
morality and mysticism of the Middle Ages, and like Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, he represents the romantic ideal of innocence, purity, and naïveté.

Beyond expressing Lohengrin's naïveté with Palestrinian style, Wagner incorporates the nineteenth-century musical language for antiquity in his use of tonic-mediant progressions. As previously stated, Daverio connects the nineteenth-century historical sound to phrases in third-related keys, such as A minor and C major. Both keys represent a tonic-mediant relationship to each other, as either key could be the mediant or submediant of the other. Even the mere harmonic progression of i-VI or I-vi can evoke a sense of something archaic and ancient. The very opening of Gade's *Echoes of Ossian* Overture is a perfect example of this. Shimmering strings play a minor i tonic chord followed by a rest, and they repeat the i with a move to the major VI chord and to the major III thereafter (refer to Figure 13). The modal-root progression suggests a harmony existing prior to authentic progressions. Even the initial mediant relationship of i to VI seems to set the tone for the whole piece, for it immediately transports the listener back to a legendary time period, ungoverned by the I to V tonic-dominant relationship. The same is true for the opening “Grail motif” in the Prelude of Lohengrin. The violins and woodwinds firmly establish the key in A major, and the violins then introduce the first harmonic progression to its submediant vi, or F-sharp minor.

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98 Daverio, 258.
As in *Echoes of Ossian*, this tonic to submediant relationship establishes an instant mood of archaism that continues throughout the *Prelude*. The I - VI - I progression further suggests a connection to Schumann’s association of the progression to “nobility,” which in this case would suggest the ideal of the noble and chivalric medieval past. In fact, throughout the opening *Prelude* Wagner reiterates again and again this tonic to submediant relationship, showing its significance for the tone of the opening and of the opera as a whole. The tonic to submediant progression is also apparent in the first statement of the main theme at the beginning of the third scene in Act III. The first two bars outline the E-flat major triad, and then the orchestra moves to the submediant vi C minor in the third bar:

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Interestingly, in this excerpt we see the same paratactic relationship of the tonic to the mediant chords vi and iii as we saw in *Echoes of Ossian*. In addition, in the last five bars of the entire opera, Wagner reiterates the opening A major to F-sharp minor progression, uniting the very beginning of the opera with its ending in a beautiful expression of ring composition. He does, however, interject the subdominant D major before resolving finally to A major:

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This and other plagal cadences would be an example of the plagal harmony that Notley describes as the “other” of authentic harmony and evoking a sense of a sound “prior to tonal music.” Ultimately, both the reiteration of the I-vi motive and the final plagal cadence reinforce the antique sound that Wagner is creating in this opera. But it is important to remember, as Mertens had pointed out when describing medievalism as social milieu in *Die Meistersinger*, that such effects are coloristic portrayals of medievalism not based on real historical fact, but rather embody what the nineteenth century listener would have imagined to be an ancient or medieval sound.

In terms of Wagner’s musical archaism in *Die Meistersinger*, Dahlhaus provides a cogent discussion on how Wagner harmonically makes his music sound old. In fact, Dahlhaus examines the opera as a whole in terms of its archaism. For Dalhaus, “the historical element (in *Die Meistersinger*) is not just a piece of a dead past, but appears in the role of the prehistory of the present day, as if there were a collective memory reaching back into the sixteenth century.” He also points out that the music of the opera “sounds like something quoted from memory: it is near and yet remote.”102 Hans Sachs ponders this quandary himself after hearing Walther’s “Trial Song,” saying, “It sounded so old and yet was so new.”103 Incidentally, Dahlhaus sees this as the defining feature of the music in the opera. But Dahlhaus, rather than discussing this concept merely from an aesthetic or philosophical standpoint, shows exactly how Wagner achieves this effect musically. He argues that the music sounds archaic through Wagner’s treatment of dissonance without chromaticism. According to Dahlhaus:

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102 Dahlhaus, 72.
103 As quoted by Dahlhaus, 73.
The infusion of archaism in modernity, the impression, however vague, of something immemorably old, can be described in technical musical terms. In progressive harmonic writing of the nineteenth century (of which the harmony of *Tristan* is paradigmatic), the increasing complexity of dissonance treatment — which led in the twentieth century to Arnold Schoenberg’s ‘emancipation of dissonance’ from the obligation to resolve — was closely connected with a tendency to chromaticization of chords, to ‘colouring’ individual notes by raising or lowering them a semitone... Yet one of the characteristics of *Die Meistersinger* — and perhaps the most important of them — is that, while the dissonance treatment is prominent, the chromaticism is repressed: that is what creates the impression of the old in the new.

He then describes the opening bars of “Wach’ auf” as typical of this paradigm:

The process of delaying the resolution of seventh chords (on ‘gen’ and ‘Tag’) by inserting intermediate chords is undoubtedly modern, but creates an archaic effect at the same time insofar as, for one thing, there is no chromaticism — the essentially modern element — and, for another, the interpolations give rise to sequences of chords which are unusual in tonal harmony and recall an earlier kind of music, in which the sequence of chords was not regulated by tonal norms.\(^{104}\)

![Figure 18: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Act III, Scene 5 - Langsam und feierlich, “Wach’ auf,” measures 2-6.\(^{105}\)](image)

Thus, in *Die Meistersinger*, Wagner is alluding to music of an earlier time through his avoidance of chromaticism, which for him would have been an expression of modernity. Coincidentally, such harmonic treatment of the music may have had its influence in Weber’s *Euryanthe*. In his opera, Weber represents evil through chromatic harmony, and the morals and virtues of medieval

\(^{104}\) Dahlhaus, 73.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.
chivalry with diatonic harmony. Such musical devices from both Weber's *Euryanthe* and Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* form a musical interpretation for what the Romantics would have seen as the contrast between the corrupt modern world and the idyllic past.

This contrast between diatonicism and chromaticism is also evident in Wagner's *Parsifal*. The musical harmonic language throughout the opera portrays a dichotomy separating the sacred, innocent, and ancient from the complex, anguished, and modern. Wagner represents the sacred and innocent, as portrayed by the Grail and by Parsifal, with diatonicism, whereas he represents the complex and anguished, represented by the characters Amfortas, Klingsor, and Kundry, with chromaticism. The knights of the Grail also portray the simplicity of diatonic harmony and monophonic chant as they march into the Temple in Act I. Beckett points out that “the first stanza of the hymn ‘Nehmet von Brot’ provides a rare example in Parsifal of purely diatonic music (save for one chromatic passing-note).”

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106 Jones, 230.
Figure 19: *Parsifal*, Act I, *Säulenhalle der Gralsburg* - *Noch etwas bewegter*, measures 1-13. ¹⁰⁸

This simple, diatonic music stands in sharp contrast to the complex, chromatic music of Amfortas’s lament.\textsuperscript{109} Beckett also points out that there is an archaic tone embedded within the sacred connotations of the Temple, represented most poignantly in the E minor of “Mittag, die Stund’ ist da.” According to Beckett,

much could be written on how the gentleness of the Good Friday music enshrines a pastoral spirituality totally absent from the Flower Maidens’ seductive idyll...with natural reality, comes once more the sense of space. Distant Monsalvat (Temple) gradually impinges on the blissful forest scene, and the curiously archaic way in which the E minor orientation is introduced at ‘Mittag, die Stund’ ist da’ adds further to the solemnity of the moment.\textsuperscript{110}

Other nineteenth-century notions of an ancient sound occur in addition to the diatonic-chromatic contrast, including the appearances of third-related keys and plagal harmonic progressions. The Parsifal motive, for example, modulates from B-flat major to G minor, representing a major I to minor vi relationship similar to the harmonies in \textit{Lohengrin}. Darcy believes this third relationship “can be viewed transformationally,”\textsuperscript{111} in terms of Parsifal’s personal transformation in the work, and one could also view this relationship as portraying the medieval naïveté of Parsifal’s character. Furthermore, a grand plagal cadence in A-flat major occurs at the end of the opera, which serves as a redemptive gesture similar to the ending of \textit{Lohengrin}. As Kienzle points out, this plagal cadence would have signified sacred music to a nineteenth-century audience,\textsuperscript{112} and as we have seen in the music of Wagner and other composers at that time, the plagal cadence can also suggest music existing prior to tonal music. The sacred and ancient seem to complement each other perfectly in Wagner’s presentation of Parsifal’s world.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 82.
As with the other three operas discussed, elements of Palestrina’s harmonic language may also be found in this work. Garratt, however, believes that the connection to Palestrina in *Parsifal* has been exaggerated, with the exception of a few key scenes. He points to the communion scene of Act I Scene 2, where the boys’ choir sings *a cappella*, for instance. He believes that “its *a cappella* idiom, diatonicism, root progressions and imitative writing reflect the nineteenth-century perceptions of Palestrina’s language” (Figure 20). Another such exception occurs in Wagner’s melismatic passage on “Leben’s” (Figure 21), which Garratt believes serves “to imbue the ritual with the authenticity and conviction associated with Palestrina, accentuating the absence of these qualities from Amfortas’s own performance of his sacramental duties.”^{113}

^{113} Garratt, *Palestrina and the German Romantic Imagination*, 234.
Figure 20: Parsifal, Act I, Säulenhalle der Gralsburg - Noch etwas bewegter, measures 34-46.\textsuperscript{114}

As with Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, the archaic qualities of these musical passages reinforce antique notions of the sacred and religious. The complete conglomeration of chant, Temple

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bells, allusions to Palestrinian polyphony, and plagal harmonies seem to take the listener to the sacred space of a legendary, idealized world.

Wagner makes additional references in Parsifal to historical styles and to church music to demonstrate the simple, sacred, and old, such as when he quotes the “Dresden Amen.” The “Dresden Amen,” which one can hear in the parallel sixths of the Grail motive, would have been a recognizable allusion to Catholic church music during Wagner’s time.¹¹⁶ In addition, Wagner hearkens to baroque church music in his polyphonic writing for the “Faith” motive.¹¹⁷ Other allusions to Baroque music include the expression of lament in the turn figure in Heilandsklage. Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach (1714-88) advocated the use of this figure to heighten emotional expression, particularly in the expression of a lament.¹¹⁸ The Heilandsklage further portrays baroque music with its descending fifths, which to Kienzle represents a curious mixture of the old and the new. According to Kienzle:

> because of its (Heilandsklage) chromatic augmentation with secondary tones, it gains a specifically modern and alienated aural character. The result is a paradoxical combination of the archaic and the modern. Similarly, the motivic structures are archaic in their employment of Baroque topoi of weeping and lament (in the downward motion of thirds in the Wehelaute) as well as in the use of ornamented scale passage of tirata and the leaps of a tritone, which recall the topoi of Baroque opera; yet modern in the polyrhythmic nature of the motivic layers and the expressive force of the instrumental screams.¹¹⁹

Just as in Meistersinger, this mixture of the old and new shows that the work is expressing both that which is ancient and that which is modern. Wagner is expressing himself as a medievalist in writing music that sounds old, but he is also commenting on the modern world at the same time. His music is paradoxically looking backward and looking forward at the same time.

¹¹⁶ Kinderman, 163.
¹¹⁷ Kienzle, 113.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 117.
¹¹⁹ Ibid., 119-120.
VI. Evoking an Ancient Sound: A Ring Epilogue

Nowhere is this paradox of the simultaneous modern and ancient more apparent than in the music Wagner writes for his tetralogy, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, comprising the four operas *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*. I devote an entire section to this discussion, for Wagner’s music as an expression of medievalism in this cycle seems to be a more complex and multi-layered issue. On the surface, however, the same musical devices for an ancient sound that appear in the previously-discussed operas appear as well in the *Ring*. The opening of *Das Rheingold* contains a 136-bar musical development of a single E-flat major chord, suggesting a music existing prior to harmonic progressions. Wagner is portraying the beginning of the world, and naturally, the beginning of music. When Wagner introduces us to the gods, we begin to hear a preponderance of authentic harmony take hold. The I-V-I progression seems in fact to be the tonal norm in this opera, symbolizing the progression of music from its meager beginnings to its authentic tonal language. The progression also symbolizes modern nineteenth-century society, with the decadent and corrupt aristocracy, as represented by the gods, oppressed by the laws and regulations of previous generations and, in the musical sense, by the progress of western harmony. This opera essentially represents the progress of music up through the nineteenth century, and there is nothing “other” about the place of authentic harmony in this work. Wagner emphasizes the V-I root progression most emphatically in the last fifteen bars of the work, when the gods cross the rainbow bridge into Valhalla. Wagner hammers the root movement in the eighth-note/triplet sixteenth-note to dotted quarter motif in the brass for every bar, making it clear, if there were up to that point any confusion, that the gods represent the encrusted traditions of society.
When we embark into *Die Walküre*, however, we hear something new, and yet incredibly old, in the union of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Sieglinde is destined to marry Hunding, who represents, alongside the gods, the rigid laws and foundations of modern society. With the arrival of Siegmund, however, Siegmund and Sieglinde find in each other a true, honest, and pure love. Siegmund expresses this purity with a medieval Bar form in his song, “Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond”:

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The Bar form represents the medieval naïveté of the couple, as their purity hearkens to the purity of an ancient time.

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In addition, the tonal language of the song is for the most part diatonic in comparison with the chromaticism that precedes and follows it. The harmonic language is thus also looking backward to a previous era. But authentic harmony still predominates within the song, placing Siegmund and Sieglinde’s naïveté in modern times. Their naïveté, though, expresses a return to the moral origins of medieval times amidst the chaos of the modern. It is a brief glimpse of the future morality as a return to moral origins that will ultimately be attained through the figure of Siegfried. In the end of Die Walküre, the arrival of Siegfried is foreshadowed in the presence of the “The Heroic in Siegfried” theme amidst the “Magic Fire Music.” The dazzling chromaticism of the “Magic Fire Music” portrays the progress of tonality to its chromatic and complex modern state, and “The Heroic in Siegfried” theme symbolically penetrates the fire, another foreshadowing, with modal-sounding harmonies. The theme proceeds harmonically as follows: I - i - VI - III - ii° - V. The i - VI - III reveals once again the paratactic archaic sound found in Gade’s Echoes of Ossian, and it suggests the archaic origins of Siegfried as a product of the pure and innocent love of Siegmund and Sieglinde.

\[\text{\textcopyright 122 J.K. Holman, Wagner's Ring: A listener's Companion & Concordance (Portland, OR: Amadeus, 1996), 139.}\]
Framed, as it were, by I (E) and V (B) at the beginning and ending of this musical phrase, however, we are reminded that Siegfried’s character is emerging from within the context of authentic harmony, and hence, within the context of modern times. Siegfried’s character is thus a symbol of medieval naïveté and purity for the new era, and in this sense, Wagner’s music can be seen as medievalism for the new millennium.

When we are introduced to Siegfried for the first time in Siegfried, we hear musical archaism that would show Siegfried to be emblematic of medieval naïveté. The archaic sound of the horn stands out in one of Siegfried’s principal themes:

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123 Wagner, Die Walküre, 303.
Furthermore, in the scene where he reforges his sword, Notung, we hear a curious ground bass reminiscent of the Baroque descending minor tetrachord (i - VII - VI - V7):

\[ \begin{align*}
    &\text{i} & \text{VII} & \text{VI} \\
    &\text{V7} & \text{i6} & \text{VII6} & \text{VI6}
\end{align*} \]

\[ \text{Dahlhaus, 126.} \]
Ellen Rosand points out that this harmonic gesture was a prominent expression for lament during the seventeenth century, and Raymond Knapp indicates that such Baroque ostinatos would have been "common currency" in the nineteenth century. I find it unlikely, though, that Wagner is attempting to express a lament in this scene. Rather, the use of the antique ostinato form as well as the whole-step progression from minor i to major flat-VII seems to create a particularly archaic sound in connection to Siegfried's character. Interestingly, the ostinato pattern cadences from V7 to I, suggesting again the authentic harmony of Wagner's modern era. We hear authentic harmony, but it is in the context of a more modal-sounding and archaic music. Siegfried is taking both the old and the new, and he is leading the way to the musical future.

Ultimately, by the end of Götterdämmerung, after the death of Siegfried and the destruction of the Valhalla and the gods, listeners are left with Wagner's last harmonic statement for the future path of music. In the last statement of the "Love" theme, we hear a harmonic progression from D-flat major to B-flat minor, evoking the prominent I to vi progression of

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*Lohengrin.* For two bars thereafter he reiterates a G-flat major to D-flat major plagal progression (IV - I), and then rests on G-flat for a bar before moving to D-flat major for the last three bars of the cycle.

![Figure 27: Götterdämmerung, Act III, Scene 3 - Etwas zurückhaltend, measures 1-7.](image)

Just as he did in *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*, Wagner emphasizes the plagal progression here as a final redemptive gesture and expression of liberation from authentic harmony. And just as in *Die Meistersinger*, Wagner’s medievalism in the Ring is multi-layered. He is advocating a return to musical purity and naïveté as represented by the nineteenth-century image of the Middle Ages, but he is bringing these values to the modern day to pave the path for future generations. He is moving away from the dominance of authentic harmony, and he is opening new musical vistas by evoking an ancient sound that can curiously be heard as something new. And just as with

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Wagner's other operas, the *Ring* shows the same process of historicism and imagination that has informed his portrayal of an ancient sound, and it shows too his striving for the portrayal of the naïve that characterizes his musical medievalism.

VII. Evoking an Ancient Sound: Conclusion

In the sources that discuss Wagner's literary medievalism, a component discussion on Wagner's musical medievalism is usually absent, or at best described as mere "coloristic" impressions of a nineteenth-century ideal. For that matter, nineteenth-century musical medievalism as a whole has received little scholarly attention, much less Wagner's. Jonathan Bellman provides his own rationale for this peculiarity in scholarship. According to Bellman:

Certainly, undue attention to any German glorification of a specifically martial past still provokes discomfort. Moreover, recent reevaluation of the historical realities that underlay these chivalric stories makes the nineteenth century's love of them look painfully naïve. Related to this is our unspoken disbelief that such simpleminded stories might actually have inflamed the imaginations of some of the greatest musical minds in history. Finally, the two-dimensional themes of such stories – innate nobility vs. evil, adoration of the courtly love-object, the ability of a hero to prevail over seemingly impossible odds – seem, in our Critical age, frankly trivial.129

But despite the paucity of scholarly discussion of Wagner's musical medievalism, I have sought to show with this paper that it is indeed an issue worth discussing. Wagner himself discusses the portrayal of the historical in music, and of his admiration for operas like Halévy's *La Juive* in its vivid portrayal of the Middle Ages. We also know that medievalist operas like Weber's *Euryanthe* had a large influence on Wagner's own operas. But part of the problem with discussing medievalism in nineteenth-century music is that the people at that time had little knowledge of real medieval music compared to what is known today. Scholars like Annette Kreutziger-Herr contend that portrayals of medieval music were imagined and not based on real

129 Bellman, 117.
historical fact. She is correct in that the idea of the Middle Ages at the time was an imagined ideal of a Utopian past bathed in golden sunlight, where knights performed chivalrous deeds for fair damsels, and people lived a simpler, purer, and holier existence. They sought to identify with the forgotten Middle Ages to escape from themselves—to escape from the dreariness of industrialized society. Composers such as Wagner fanned the flames of this desire to escape from modern society by basing his operas on medieval epics and legends, and by transporting his listeners to a long-forgotten world. He played on the musical imagination of his time by incorporating sounds and devices that would connote archaism to his listeners. His use of instruments like the harp, horns, and bells certainly could have made his music sound archaic, along with his use of modal-root and plagal progressions. His use of monophonic choral writing and his contrasts between chromatic harmonies and diatonic harmonies also express an older, simpler time versus the complexities of the modern world.

But it would be incorrect to say that artistic portrayals of the Middle Ages during the nineteenth century were not based on any historical fact. As we have observed with Wagner, he simultaneously incorporates historical musical forms and styles with a nineteenth-century musical language for archaic-sounding music into his works to paint a musical picture of the legendary Middle Ages. Larry Bomback has argued in his research that Wagner did observe real medieval Minnesinger melodies prior to composing Tannhäuser, and that one can observe the influence of his exposure to these melodies in the music of the opera. In addition, Wagner resurrected medieval musical forms like Bar form, as well as stylistic elements of medieval Gregorian Chant, to give his works a stamp of historical authenticity. He also incorporated elements of Palestrina's style and Baroque musical forms to lend further an archaic quality to his music. One may argue that his incorporation of such styles should be removed from a discussion
of musical medievalism, because in those cases Wagner is not resurrecting real medieval music. But Wagner was not concerned with portraying the Middle Ages as they actually were. Rather, his art was his interpretation of the Middle Ages. Medievalism, after all, is the later reception or interpretation of the Middle Ages, and it is distinct from Medieval Studies as a discipline. Medieval Studies seeks to understand the Middle Ages as they actually were, whereas medievalism is more concerned with perceptions of the Middle Ages. Wagner, with his operas, is engaging in medievalism, or his own interpretation of the Middle Ages. In those moments where he is seeking to express something ancient, innocent, and naïve, he is being a musical medievalist. Wagner gives characters like Wolfram von Eschenbach in Tannhäuser, Lohengrin, Parsifal, Walther von Stolzing in Die Meistersinger, and Siegfried in the Ring music that suggests uncorrupted simplicity with archaic origins.

Wagner is seeking to express that which is naïve as opposed to that which is sentimental, as those concepts would have been understood from Schiller’s “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry.” For Schiller, the naïve is pure, visceral, and organic, whereas the sentimental is thought-out, contrived, and artificial. One wonders if Wagner, coming from his nineteenth-century perspective, ever attains complete naïveté in his art, or if the art by its very nature is sentimental. Carl Dahlhaus sees Wagner’s art as sentimental by nature. According to Dahlhaus:

Archaizing music is ‘sentimental’ in Schiller’s sense of the word: not instinctive but the product of reflection. No matter what stylistic disguise it assumes, it cannot escape the age on which it turns its back; restored, the language of the past becomes dialect, tingeing the language of the present. Archaizing is a symptom of nostalgia and if it pretends otherwise it degenerates into the self-conscious excesses of the Arts and Crafts movement at its worst.\[130\]

\[130\] Dahlhaus, 74.
But whether the art itself is naïve or sentimental does not matter, for Wagner’s portrayal of the naïve alone forms a distinctive musical language that stands apart from his more complex chromatic musical language. It is in Wagner’s striving for the naïve that he becomes a musical medievalist.

Ultimately, the question of naïve or sentimental, authentic or inauthentic, should not impede scholars from discussing Wagner’s musical medievalism. Wagner is continuing an artistic tradition in his own image, and he is adding a new layer to what had previously existed. As Haymes points out, this is certainly in keeping with the art that came before him. According to Haymes:

The statement made in Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg is that the use of the past must be flexible and creative, not hidebound or slavish. Critics who have damned Wagner’s treatment of the masterpieces of Gottfried von Strassburg and Wolfram von Eschenbach could learn something from this lesson. Wagner treated his sources in the same creative and adaptive manner with which they had treated their own sources. The medieval poets Wagner used would have been little more than translators if they had not fundamentally reshaped the material they used. The same can be said about Wagner. He would have been untrue to his models as well as to himself as an artist if he had simply followed their works slavishly.  

Thus, despite the fact that Wagner’s is not an authentic portrayal of the Middle Ages, there is still much to discuss in terms of how he viewed that era. And considering the fact that the issue of nineteenth-century German medievalism in music has been generally untouched as a whole, there is much yet to discuss with other German composers of that time as well. Ultimately, this paper sought to provide a speculative examination of how Wagner may have expressed musically his fascination with the Middle Ages. For the purposes of my argument I have

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131 Haymes, 512.
declared assertively how Wagner is being a musical medievalist, but my intention has not been to argue exactly what Wagner was thinking as he was composing.

To expand this study, one could compare Wagner’s treatment of musical medievalism with those of his contemporaries. It would be worth studying what kinds of sources other German composers had in their own creation of a medieval sound. There are indeed a number of Lieder set to poetry dealing with medieval lore, and one could examine the musical devices that bring out a “medieval” sound in those Lieder. One could also compare Wagner’s medievalism with musical medievalism in other time periods, such as the twentieth century. To what extent did the increase in knowledge about real medieval music in the twentieth century affect musical portrayals of the Middle Ages? One can still hear imagined ideas of medieval music in film scores such as Nino Rota’s 1968 Romeo and Juliet, despite the wealth of knowledge at that time on what medieval music actually sounded like. The allure of medievalism is in essence removed from the Middle Ages itself, and it is built on the love of an ideal, rather than the love of rediscovering the actual past. Ultimately, in the study of medievalism in music one can see that there is much yet to analyze, discuss, and, as Wagner did himself, to interpret.
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