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1

RHEINGOLD

Green and golden highlights were dancing on the surface of the water before them as the two men slowly walked towards the stone-rimmed basin of the fountain. “Have you ever seen the Rhinemaidens play, my dear Heckel?”, said one of them, an older gentleman with a peculiar fringe of a beard framing his prominent features. "You know, I saw them often, walking on the bank of the river, while I lived in Biebrich. Once, your father was with me – so I even had a witness”, he added, with a twinkle in his eye.

For a moment, a melancholy smile appeared on Wilhelm Heckel’s face. Thinking of his father, he still felt a great deal of sadness – hard to believe that it had been two-and-a-half years now since the elder Heckel had passed away, leaving him in charge of the workshop, the business, his family’s future. His father had done well, had made some extraordinary achievements, and perhaps most importantly, had passed on his knowledge and ideas, so they could be further developed. Wilhelm had been just 21 years old when he inherited his father’s business, but in the time since, he had accomplished much, and he knew that his father would have approved of his work.

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Richard Wagner (ca. 1875)

"Your father, he would be very proud of you, for what you did with the bassoon. Truly, a marvellous improvement, young man."

That was high praise, coming from his distinguished host, the famous composer, and Wilhelm had to make an effort to not let the feeling of admiration and awe stand in the way of keeping the conversation going.

"Well, Maestro, as I've explained, I just made a few more tweaks. My father and Almenräder, they are to be credited for reinventing the bassoon."

"That they are, Herr Heckel, there can't be any doubt about it. And yet, it is you who perfected the design, and what's more, who finally produced a usable contrabassoon."

"I'm glad you find it useful, Herr Wagner." Now, Wilhelm was beaming. The problems encountered in designing the new contrabassoon had appeared insurmountable at times, but in the end, it had come together very well. Still, he had

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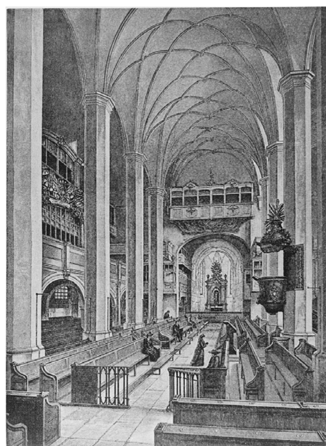
been quite nervous about the demonstration to Richard Wagner, knowing fully well how much depended on the maestro's assessment of the instrument.

"It's quite remarkable how proper slurs can now be played even in the lowest register, and the sound is truly outstanding. As I wrote to you, having such an instrument would open many new possibilities, and now that you've managed to provide it, everyone will soon know what wonderful colour it adds to the orchestra. You know, I've decided to use it in *Parsifal*."

Wilhelm Heckel's heart missed a beat. This would make his name and guarantee the lasting success of the family business. His father would have been very proud, indeed.

In the Spring of 1813, when Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany, no one would have predicted his rise to fame. He was the ninth child of a police clerk, Carl Friedrich Wilhelm Wagner, and the daughter of a baker, Johanna Rosine Wagner, who at the time lived at a modest inn, *Zum roten und weißen Löwen*. In hindsight, it seems fitting that young Richard was baptised in the St. Thomas Church, where Johann Sebastian Bach had worked as music director during the last 27 years of his life, and where in 1727 the première of Bach's *Matthäus-Passion* had taken place.



St. Thomas Church in Leipzig

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Not long thereafter, a tragedy occurred that turned out to be decisive for Wagner's later career: in November 1813, when Richard was barely 6 months old, his father, Carl, died of typhoid fever. Wagner's mother, Johanna Rosine, now turned to Carl's friend, Ludwig Geyer, whom she married in August 1814. Geyer was a full-blooded artist – a painter, playwright and actor, whose passion for the theatre left a mark on young Richard.

At the age of 13, clear signs of Wagner's talents and ambition began to emerge. Since he had heard Carl Maria von Weber's romantic opera *Der Freischütz* at the age of nine, Richard had developed a fascination with music. Now, shortly before his family moved from Dresden, where they had lived since 1814, to Prague, he began writing a play, a drama strongly influenced by the works of Shakespeare and Goethe. *Leubald*, an extensive work of five acts, was finished in 1828. That same year, Richard began taking lessons in composition, quite likely driven by the desire to set *Leubald* to music. Meanwhile, in 1821, Richard's stepfather had died, and in the years that followed, his sister Rosalie had become a celebrated actress.

In 1829, Richard Wagner, now 16 years old, had an experience that would firmly set him on his path towards becoming one of the most influential composers in music history.

Fidelio, Ludwig van Beethoven's only opera, could not by any account be considered a success when it was first performed 1805 in Vienna. It took Beethoven two major revisions to arrive at a final version that was well-received at its première in 1814, and the maestro himself was quite candid about how much frustration and disappointment the work had caused him. *"This opera will win me a martyr's crown,"* he wrote in a

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Wilhelmine Schöder-Devrient
in Carl-Maria von Weber's opera
Euryanthe

letter to Georg Friedrich Treitschke, who revised the libretto for the final version.

The ultimate international success of *Fidelio* came when soprano Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient, widely considered one of the greatest singers of 19th-century Germany, took the lead role of Eleonore. And so it was in April 1829 when young Richard Wagner first experienced *Fidelio*, with Schröder-Devrient leading the cast, that his passion for music truly awoke.

Thirty-five years later, Wagner would write of this experience in his autobiography: *"When I look back upon my life,*

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I cannot find a single event that compares to this in terms of the impression it made on me." Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient became his ideal for a fusion of drama and music in opera, and he claimed that *"the profoundly human and ecstatic performance of this incomparable artist"* kindled in him *"an almost demonic fire"*. From that moment, Wagner's energy was focussed on becoming a composer.

Intriguingly, *Fidelio* was one of the first operas to make prominent use of the contrabassoon, the lowest double reed instrument in the classical orchestra.

While Wagner developed his skills as a composer, Carl Almenräder was working on a project of a different nature: the modernisation of the bassoon. Composers in the Baroque era had already used the instrument prominently, not only as an integral part of the orchestra, but also in smaller ensembles. Like its ancestor, the dulcian, the bassoon was often used to carry or reinforce bass lines; however, noted composers of the time, including Georg Philipp Telemann and Antonio Vivaldi recognised its potential as a solo instrument that could be used for virtuoso performances. Vivaldi alone wrote 39 solo concertos (2 of which remained incomplete) that contributed greatly to the prominence of the bassoon.

The 19th century saw great improvements in the design of all wind instruments, aimed at improving their tone, their expressiveness and their technical versatility. By 1850, Theobald Böhm's newly designed flute had inspired Guillaume Triebert and his sons to modernise the oboe, and Hyacinthe Klosé to do the same for the clarinet. Around the same time,

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the design of brass instruments also saw substantial improvements, as different types of valves were invented and perfected, leading to more versatile trumpets, French horns, tubas and even trombones.

Carl Almenräder had begun working towards improving the bassoon in 1817, when he joined the orchestra of the theatre in Mainz as a bassoonist. In 1819, he moved to Cologne, further down the river Rhine, to make flutes and clarinets in his brother's workshop. Three years later, in 1822, Almenräder moved again, up the Rhine to Biebrich, where he played in the court orchestra of the Dukes of Nassau. At the same time, he became a consultant to Schott, a music publishing company that also produced musical instruments. This appointment gave Almenräder the opportunity to build and experiment with his designs for a thoroughly modernised bassoon.

Carl Almenräder was not alone in this pursuit; he worked quite closely with Gottfried Weber, a prominent music theorist and composer, and with other bassoon makers at Schott, notably Johann Adam Heckel. Born 1812 in the Vogtland, a small region at the border of Saxony and neighbouring Bohemia widely known as a centre for musical instrument manufacturing, Heckel was 25 years younger than Almenräder. Prompted by an uncle, he had moved to Mainz in 1829 and started to make bassoons for Schott. There, he met Carl Almenräder, who quickly recognised his talent. Two years later, in 1831, the two established their own workshop in Biebrich and started producing woodwind instruments – notably, Almenräder's improved bassoons.

Although elsewhere, efforts where also underway to design an improved bassoon, the instruments built by Almenräder

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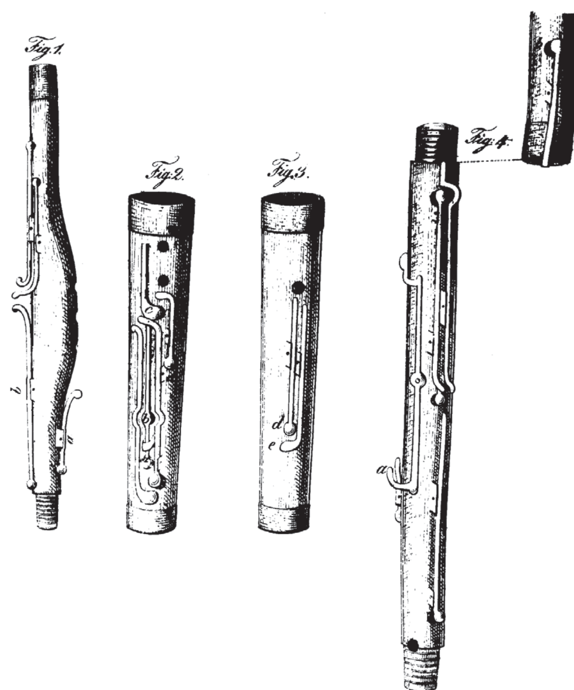

Carl Almenräder's improved bassoon

and Heckel's new company proved to be the most successful. Compared to earlier bassoons, they could be played with relative ease and good intonation in all keys; they also had a much extended range, exceeding three and a half octaves. However, these improvements had come at the price of an overall tone quality slightly inferior to that of earlier, simpler bassoons – a seemingly necessary compromise that left neither Heckel nor Almenräder fully satisfied.

In 1838, Carl Almenräder sold his part of the business to Johann Adam Heckel; in 1843, shortly before his death, he published a comprehensive teaching manual for the improved bassoon that was now produced, in increasingly large

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numbers, by Heckel's company. Highly successful business trips to St. Petersburg, London and Paris, during which Heckel demonstrated the instruments he was manufacturing to influential figures of the international music scene, further increased the demand for what was quickly becoming known as the 'Heckel bassoon'.

Richard Wagners rise to fame began in the autumn of 1842, with the première of his opera *Rienzi* in Dresden, with Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient in one of the lead roles. Despite its length of over three hours (without a series of cuts that later became widely adopted, *Rienzi* is four hours long), which was atypical for the time, the performance was a great success, with the audience as well as with the critics.

This paved the way to the première of *Der fliegende Holländer (The Flying Dutchman)*, less than three months later, also in Dresden, and once again with Schröder-Devrient in a lead role. One month later, on 2 February 1843, Richard Wagner, now 29 years old, was appointed conductor at the Royal Court Theatre in Dresden, one of Germany's leading opera houses. After years of financial struggles and difficulties to gain recognition in the musical world of mid-19th century Europe, Wagner had finally established himself in a secure and highly influential position.

Der fliegende Holländer was the fourth opera completed by Wagner; while he would later regard the preceding three, including *Rienzi*, as immature and overly conventional, of the *Holländer* he wrote: *"From here begins my career as a poet, and my farewell to the mere concoctor of opera-texts."*

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Der fliegende Holländer, Act I:
Farewell, To-day thou shalt
my daughter see
by Ferdinand Leeke (ca.1900)

In the five years that followed, Wagner completed another two major operas, *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, which not only cemented his reputation as one of the foremost composers of his time, but also clearly reflected the further development of his abilities and style. However, not unlike the operatic worlds he created, Wagner's own life seemed destined to be filled with passion and drama.

In February 1848, a revolution fuelled by economic hardship ended the reign of King Louis Philippe I in France and led

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to the establishment the *Deuxième République Française*. This triggered an unparalleled series of revolutionary uprisings across Europe, affecting over 50 countries. At that time, Germany was a confederation of 39 sovereign states that had been created in 1815 to replace the Holy Roman Empire, which had been dissolved during the Napoleonic Wars, in 1806. Fuelled by discontent with the economic conditions of workers and dissatisfaction with the autocratic political structures, revolutionaries throughout the German states now demanded freedom of the press, freedom of assembly as well as the transformation of the confederation into a unified German nation state with a liberal constitution.

Richard Wagner, who had an active interest in politics, shared some of these ideas, and was thus caught up in the May Uprising in Dresden. Despite the fact that he only played a minor role, in 1849, a warrant was issued for his arrest, which forced him to flee with a forged passport, and to seek refuge, first in Paris and then with a friend in Zurich. There, exiled and without employment, dependent on modest support by benefactors, Wagner began to elaborate and publish his ideas on the unified artwork of the future: the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In his treatise *Oper und Drama (Opera and Drama)*, Wagner lays the theoretical foundations for merging opera and theatre into a new art form in which music and poetry perfectly complement each other. He explores the mechanisms by which music can be best used to support theatrical action and intent, based on the psychological impact of music on the listener. Concluding that *"what is not worth being sung is also undeserving of being written by the poet,"* Wagner aims for nothing less than revolutionising the way operas are written, perceived and performed.

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auditorium was realised as a wooden construction, without the balconies typically found in opera houses throughout Europe. The most radical departure from existing practice was found in the construction of the orchestra pit, which Wagner had covered, so the musicians and the conductor would be completely hidden from the audience. More importantly, this construction, which Wagner termed *"mystischer Abgrund"* ("mystical abyss"), led to a unique blending of the sound produced by the individual instruments; it also projected the music played by the orchestra onto the stage, where the singers would add their voices to the overall fabric of sound.

In August 1872, Wagner completed the orchestral sketches for the last of the *Ring* operas, *Die Götterdämmerung*. It would take another four years to complete the score and the theatre where the first performance of the *Ring* cycle was to be given, over the course of four days, in August 1876. Financing the construction of the theatre had been challenging, and fund-raising efforts by Wagner had very limited success. In the end, King Ludwig II, who had also financed Wagner's new residence in Bayreuth, saved the project through a loan of 400 000 marks – the equivalent of 143 kilogrammes of gold.

When he received the invitation to Bayreuth, Wilhelm Heckel immediately realised the opportunity this would present. Richard Wagner's phenomenal success and captivating, if controversial personality practically guaranteed that any opinion he would voice would be amplified greatly, in Germany and far beyond. Heckel was deeply grateful to Wilhelm Jahn for arranging the visit to Wagner; as musical director of the royal

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Haus Wahnfried, Bayreuth (before 1913)

opera house in Wiesbaden, practically next door to the Heckel workshop, his star was rising fast. It was like climbing a ladder, thought Heckel: with skill and a modicum of good fortune, an endorsement by someone famous would be followed by one from someone more famous.

Of course, the meeting would be on Wagner's terms, and on Wagner's turf. This was a man, Heckel had reminded himself, who was not only immensely talented, but who had also secured the admiration and support by the King of Bavaria. The new theatre on the hill, the stately house with the beautiful garden – all this spoke of Wagner's success. And yet, what was far more impressive was the man himself. Such intensity and passion, such force of vision!

Wilhelm Heckel had felt exceedingly nervous upon entering Wagner's villa. *"Hier, wo mein Wähnen Frieden fand – Wahnfried – sei dieses Haus von mir genannt."* read the

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engraving in large, gilded letters above the door and windows of the front side of the stately house: *"Here, where my desires have found peace, Wahnfried shall be the name I give to this, my house."* Coming from anyone but Richard Wagner, this would sound rather insane, and even adorning Wagner's villa, the inscription had apparently caused some amusement among the local townfolk, according to Jahn. 'Wahnfried' … what a name for a house!

Wagner had received him most gracefully, speaking kindly and respectfully of his father, Johann Adam, and of the time he had lived in Biebrich, Heckel's home town. Yet, Wilhelm knew that the maestro had invited him not out of nostalgia, but because he valued the quality of the instruments made by the Heckel workshop, his father's business, and now his own. And Wagner understood the importance of the improvements he had made to the bassoon.

Still, it was not until after the demonstration of his contrabassoon, which had taken place in the grand salon on the ground floor of the house, and the stroll in the park that followed, that Wilhelm felt the tension fall from his shoulders, just to be quickly replaced by a familiar feeling of exhilaration. He knew the demonstration had gone well before Wagner praised his work, but he had not expected Wagner to commit right then to scoring for the instrument.

They had just rounded the fountain and started to head back to the house, when Wagner paused and lightly touched his arm.

"You know," he said, "now that the problem of the contrabassoon has been solved, there's another task to which you should apply your talent."

"You are too kind, Herr Wagner," replied Wilhelm Heckel,

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NOTES

▶ **Richard Wagner.** While the scene at the beginning of the chapter and its later continuation are freely imagined, they are consistent with the description of the meeting between Wagner and Heckel in Bayreuth, in October 1879, given in Michael Finkelman's 2004 article on the heckelphone. Heckel had travelled to Bayreuth to demonstrate his newly designed contrabassoon, and he later recalled that during the same visit, Wagner suggested the construction of a new double reed inststrument that combined the character of the oboe with the mellow, but powerful sound of the alphorn; this would eventually be realised in the form of the heckelphone. It is also known that Wagner, while he lived in Biebrich, had become well acquainted with Johann Adam Heckel. Furthermore, Wagner's positive assessment of Heckel's contrabassoon and announcement during Heckel's 1879 visit to use it in his own works is well documented in an article by Wilhelm Altenburg from 1899.

There is a darker side to the persona of Richard Wagner that is mostly absent from his portrayal in this chapter, but will play a role later, in Chapter 6. Wagner was known to hold strong antisemitic views; these are particularly clearly expressed in an essay entitled *Das Judenthum in der Musik (Jewishness in Music)* which he published in 1850 under the pseudonym K. Freigedank. Wagner's antisemitic sentiments are further documented in his wife Cosima's diaries and in a letter he wrote to King Ludwig II of Bavaria in 1881. Ludwig, a great admirer of Wagner and his music, did not share these sentiments and is even known to have pushed back against them on occasion. Long after Wagner's death, his outspoken antisemitism, along with his music, was harnessed by the Nazi regime.

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▶ **Wilhelm Heckel.** Many interesting details about the life and work of Wilhelm Heckel, his father and his descendants are found in the book by his great-granddaughter, Edith Reiter.

An early account of the contributions of Wilhelm Heckel and his father, Johann Adam Heckel, to the development of the modern bassoon, and to innovations in manufacturing the instrument can be found in Wilhelm Altenburg's article from 1899. The portrayal of the conception and development of the heckelphone given in this chapter mostly follows the account from Michael Finkelman's 2004 article, which also inspired the description of Heckel's meeting with Wagner in October 1879.

Significant contributions to the improvements of the contra-bassoon were made by Friedrich Stritter, who had been working for and with Johann Adam and Wilhelm Heckel since 1872. This led to a serious dispute in 1877, after Stritter had applied for a patent of the improved instrument without consultation with, nor mentioning of, Wilhelm Heckel. The conflict was settled in September 1877 by means of a contract that secured Stritter additional responsibilities in Heckel's workshop as well as a share of the profits derived from the sales of the improved contrabassoons, as detailed in Edith Reiter's book.

The scene at Heckel's workshop described at the end of the chapter is freely imagined, but consistent with what it is known about the design of the first heckelphone in 1904. In particular, Wilhelm Heckel always emphasised that his sons had been involved in the development of the new instrument.

▶ **Johann Sebastian Bach.** Nowadays one of the most widely recognised and performed composers of the Baroque era, during his lifetime, Johann Sebastian Bach was mostly known as a virtuoso organist and cembalist with an exceptional skill for improvisation. Shortly after he had died in 1750, Bach's name appeared seventh on a list of Germany's ten most famous composers — well behind that of Händel and Telemann, but also those of four other composers whose works