



# The Reception of Wagner's Operas Since the May Fourth Movement

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**Abstract.** The so-called music Reception Theory, to be precise, refers to the relationship and development between musical works and recipients. Due to the non-semantic nature of music, different recipients will have very different understandings of the same work. Audience reception is subjective. Moreover, due to the influence of factors such as changes in time and space, changes in thought trends, and differences in the knowledge structure and aesthetic taste of the aesthetic subject, the aesthetic experience of the same object will inevitably be different. Wagner is a representative composer who experienced the decline and climax of European Romanticism. Wagner has won numerous praises in Western countries, but in the past 100 years in China, Wagner's music reception has been very tortuous.

After the May Fourth Movement (May 4, 1919), Chinese people gradually realised that China's future independence and influence depended upon adaptation to the trend of the times. It needed to be fundamentally changed by creating new ideas, culture, morals, ethics, and a related social and political system. After that, China's openness to new ideas and culture led the Chinese to explore western culture more. This essay will explore and analyse the different status of Wagner after the May Fourth Movement and explain to a certain extent why Wagner's operas didn't spread well in China. Hand, the operas require large venues and skilled performers (Wagner's operas are very long and require performers to have high singing skills); on the other hand, the changes in the Chinese political system have a certain impact on Wagner's spread.

**Keywords:** reception theory · Richard Wagner · opera

## 1 Introduction

'Art creates a rich treasure, which is always updated but connected. We are looking for people in it. Because we have discovered that every sound in the past has stirred up an echo today,' Paul Henry Lang said in his book. The use of 'person' in this sentence contains at least two meanings. First, the composer, the producer of musical works, bears the most critical responsibilities and functions in the musical activity; second, the audience, the receiver of the musical work, is the key to completing the musical training. Then, the composer and the listener, who are also indispensable participants in

the formation of music activities, have received much attention in traditional Western music research.

Traditionally, Western music research has focused more on the composer. This approach presupposes that the composer's social background, emotional life, and personal experience can only be understood through in-depth exploration. Poetry expresses ambition; music expresses emotion (Classical Chinese from the ancients). The production of musical works originates from the composer's creation and is the materialized form of the composer's thoughts and emotions. Therefore, musicologists have traditionally thought that the study of music works must be carried out around the level of composers. This kind of research thinking, focusing on 'composer-works,' has become a recognized research method and has formed a relatively deep-seated academic tradition. I have found that educational, literary theory focusing on 'composer-works' has been fruitful. However, there are not many articles in China that study Western music from the perspective of the recipient. Generally speaking, music acceptance refers to people's time and awareness of musical works. This includes two factors. Firstly, the performance of musical works and related publications; secondly, the subject's interpretation, evaluation and attitude to the musical works and their influence. Generally speaking, the term history includes two aspects: human experience and creation; the other is human thinking and understanding of their past. These two aspects correspond to the two accepted meanings mentioned above. The former--performance and publication can be called historical ontology (including music creation); the latter--evaluation, interpretation and attitude--can be called historical knowledge. Based on this, it can be said that musical works' dissemination, understanding and influence are examined from the acceptance perspective. It can not only supplement the historical deficiencies that come from focusing on 'composer-works' but also increase the comprehensiveness of music history writing.

## 2 Current Status of Chinese Research on Music Reception

Research on music acceptance began to attract academic attention in the 1980s. According to the author's current collection and sorting, more than 30 related papers have been found. The research in this area in Chinese musicology can be divided into three aspects: the first is research from the perspective of music aesthetics. For example, Luo Yifeng's *On Audience Structure* in 1986, for example, explores both the three levels of music itself and the aesthetics of music.<sup>1</sup> Another approach is to explore the structural model of music listeners; in 1995, Sun Jiabin analyzed the psychological process of music understanding and the results of restricting understanding in 'On the Understanding of Music,'<sup>2</sup> whilst in 2004, Ma Zhifei in the 'Principles of Reception Aesthetics and Several Issues in Music Aesthetics' emphasize don't one-sidedly emphasize the role of the audience and ignore the text.<sup>3</sup> In 2006, Xing Weikai discussed the enlightenment of hermeneutics

<sup>1</sup> Luo Yifeng, *On Audience Structure* (Beijing: Musicology in China, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> Sun Jiabin, "On the Understanding of Music," *Journal of Jilin Arts University Journal of Xinjiang Arts University* 32–38. No.2 (1995).

<sup>3</sup> Ma Zhifei, "Principles of Reception Aesthetics and Several Issues in Music Aesthetics," *Journal of Xinjiang Arts University* (2004).

and reception aesthetics on the understanding of music in ‘Attention to the Listener---Modern Hermeneutics and Receptive Aesthetics’ Enlightenment on Music Aesthetics.’ and pointed out the importance of receptive perspective on the study of music history.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, Zou Yan’s ‘A Few Enlightenment from Reception Aesthetics to Musicology Research’ believed that the recipient of music should become the focus of the research of musicology<sup>5</sup> and in 2016, Guo Yan discussed the three stages of the receiving subject’s acceptance of musical works in ‘On the Subjective Cognition in Music Reception and the Differences Between China and the West.’<sup>6</sup>

Second, Chinese musicologists like to conduct research from the perspective of combining Western music history and aesthetics. Chen Xinkun’s ‘From Submission to Acceptance: On the Relationship between European Music and the Receiver Before the 20th Century’ from 2002;<sup>7</sup> Gao Fuxiao’s ‘A Latitude of Aesthetics-Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience Involving the History of Western Music’ from 2005<sup>8</sup> and Li Xiaonuo’s Western Music Genre from the Perspective of Aesthetic Psychology from 2007 provide examples of this.<sup>9</sup>

Third, Chinese musicologists like to study from the case of composers or works. For example, in 2007, Zhao Zhongming’s ‘The Historicity of Texts and the Textuality of History-A Review of Beethoven’s Biography Research in the Chinese Context’ discussed the study of Beethoven’s biography in China for more than a century, which showed Chinese music to a certain extent academic development context.<sup>10</sup> In 2007, Yan Baoyu’s ‘A Preliminary Study of Beethoven’s Reception History in China’ introduced in detail the acceptance process of Beethoven and his works in China, including in performance, learning and research [1]. In 2013, Zhang Lexin, in ‘Beethoven in China—A Case Study of the Acceptance of Western Classical Music,’ dug deeply into the different understandings and interpretations of Beethoven in different periods in China in the 20th century, showing the flow of reception of Beethoven’s music from the Chinese perspective.<sup>11</sup> Change process. The above literary theory provides a basis and reference for the author to understand music acceptance and the writing of this essay. Most of the

<sup>4</sup> Xing Weikai, “Attention to the Listener---Modern Hermeneutics and Receptive Aesthetics’ Enlightenment on Music Aesthetics,” *Journal of Nanjing University of the Arts: Music and Performance* (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Zou Yan, “A Few Enlightenment from Reception Aesthetics to Musicology Research,” *Chinese music* (2012).

<sup>6</sup> Guo Yan, ““On the Subjective Cognition in Music Reception and the Differences Between China and the West,” *Shanghai Conservatory of Music* (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Chen Xinkun, “From Submission to Acceptance: On the Relationship between European Music and the Receiver Before the 20th Century,” *Journal of Central Conservatory of Music* (2002).

<sup>8</sup> Gao Fuxiao, “A Latitude of Aesthetics-Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience Involving the History of Western Music,” *Journal of Guangxi University of Arts* 102–104. No.2 (2005).

<sup>9</sup> Li Xiaonuo, *Western Music Genre from the Perspective of Aesthetic Psychology* (Shanghai: Shanghai Music Publishing House, 2007.).

<sup>10</sup> Zhao Zhongming, “The Historicity of Texts and the Textuality of History-A Review of Beethoven’s Biography Research in the Chinese Context,” *Journal of Central Conservatory of Music* (2007).

<sup>11</sup> Zhang Lexin, *Beethoven in China: A case study of the acceptance of western classical music*. (Beijing: Central Music Publishing House, 2013).

articles discussed how musicology in China developed, and I also referred to the logic of other authors who have written about Beethoven's history of acceptance in China.

According to the data compiled by myself, the Polish musicologist Zofia Lissa, who has been involved in music acceptance in foreign musicology research, believes that.

Our musical empiricism is therefore always decisive for the type of reception, the whole complex of our longstanding musical experiences, which are different at different times and in different countries. Differences in the cultural tradition, in the type of folklore (especially in the village environment) are factors that determine the different types of musical reception. The reception is - as we shall explain in the following - determined by several factors, it is multidimensional, depending on the influence of its determinants. The reception of music can therefore be described as a complex of certain givens of musical reception that are characteristic of the musical consciousness of a social group.<sup>12</sup>

This passage shows that the new meaning of music acceptance is based on the diversity of personal understanding. Although there are differences between individuals, there are a large number of personal music experiences that often share certain characteristics, and they come from similar acceptance attitudes and acceptance methods. In addition, she has conducted research on Chopin's acceptance problem, by studying the music heard 'with a different ear' in a specific period and a specific society, and the reasons for the 'popularity' and 'cold out' of certain forms of music, putting forward insights on the influence of society on the reception of works.<sup>13</sup> German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus's *Foundations of Music History* published in 1983 also put forward some insights on the issue of music acceptance:

The distinction between datum and fact, easy as it is to demonstrate with documents, seems to fail when applied to the main object of music history-works. 'And what', asks Droysen, 'are we supposed to do with work of critical method in a history of literature, or of art, where the desired objective facts lie ready to hand? ... The concept of a work, seemingly the most stable element of music history, dissolves into a source, an authentic text, a composer's intention and an historian's notion as to the musical significance of the acoustical substrate sketched out by the text or realised according to the guidelines laid down within it ... But from the perspective of music history, the structure of reception history is complicated: as a narrative history, its internal aggregation depends on a continuity borrowed from the history of thought or the history of society. But this continuity has nothing to do with music facts [5].

Dahlhaus's analysis, to a certain extent, cuts through certain shortcomings of reception theory, which is worthy of careful consideration by music reception researchers.

<sup>12</sup> Zofia Lissa, *Zur Theorie der musikalischen Rezeption*. (Archiv für Musikwissenschaft, 1974), 31, 157–169. Translation into English by Google Translation, checked by Áine Sheil.

<sup>13</sup> Zofia Lissa. *The Musical Reception of Chopin's Works*, (Studies in Chopin: Warsaw, 1972).

### 3 Methodology

This essay mainly takes the reception theory in the history of literature as the logical starting point. The research direction and focus of reception theory is to focus on the connection between musical works and recipients, so as to explore the effect, interpretation and influence of works in the process of continuous reception, and then enrich and expand the meaning of works.

The concept of 'Rezeptionsästhetik' first appeared in the book *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation* written by Hans Robert Jauss in Konstanz, Germany in 1967. In the book, Jauss proposed the core concept of 'Horizon of expectation' in literary reception theory. The Jauss acceptance theory is mainly derived from Hans-Georg Gadamer's. 'Horizen Fusion' theory is derived from Martin Heidegger's 'Vorurteil' theory. Both the horizon of expectation and the foresight theory are derived from Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's existential philosophy. Husserl once said: Every giving in the world is given in the context of Horizont, and Horizont contains a broader Horizen. In the end, everything in the world has its own Horizen, and it is precisely because of Horizen that it is considered the world.<sup>14</sup> The horizon, and only because of this, is it conscious of the world. Horizon is Horizont in German. The object we want to understand itself has the horizon of the world', and the world or environment it is in is a Horizon.<sup>15</sup> Heidegger sees that Husserl's concept of horizon is still only epistemological, so Heidegger turns horizon into the horizon of existence. Heidegger believes that any explanation depends on the understander's previous understanding: 'The interpretation of something as a certain thing, in essence, works through prior possession, prior vision, and prior grasp. It is not an unconditional grasp of what is given first.' Heidegger believes that understanding is actually a kind of planning activity. When facing the object of understanding, the receiver first throws out his pre-planned understanding, and then finds its corresponding reference in the text to understand the meaning of the text.<sup>16</sup> Gadamer was inspired by Heidegger's previous understanding and saw that Husserl's vision does not include history. This is a big limitation. To get rid of the narrowness of vision, one needs to extend and return to the real, the horizon of the past. This put forward requirements for the rationality of 'foresight,' and Gadamer criticized the Enlightenment (The Enlightenment ignored the importance of history) and found a reasonable basis for the foresight. The past horizons and the current horizons are fused together to form a fusion of horizons, which act together in the process of understanding. Gadamer called Vorurteil the state of hermeneutics, and he also regarded the state of hermeneutics as Horizont. From this point of view, he considered Vorurteil to be equal to the vision formed by history. Jauss' horizon of expectation theory also comes from Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's existentialism, and its more direct influence comes from Gadamer's Vorurteil theory and vision fusion. His concept of 'view' is inherited from phenomenology and existentialism.

<sup>14</sup> Zhang Xiongyi, ed., *Husserl: The Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Shanghai: Shanghai Century Publishing Group, 2005), 315.

<sup>15</sup> Edmund Husserl. *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: an introduction to phenomenological philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 315.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger. *Being and time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 176.

Karl Heinrich Marx believed that: 'The essence of man is not an abstract inherent in a single person. In terms of its reality, it is the sum of all social relations.'<sup>17</sup> Recipients, people, are never independent, but live in specific social relationships and are deeply influenced by social culture. Moreover, society is all-encompassing, and different recipient groups have different temporal and spatial positions, social environments, and cultural education, which will inevitably cause differences in aesthetic tastes between groups. Based on this, facing the same aesthetic object, different receiving groups will have different attitudes and evaluations, and these receiving responses are based on their own tastes, expectations and knowledge. When carefully appreciating a piece of music, the physiological and emotional feelings that the recipient feels all carry a certain 'Vorurteil.' Heidegger believes: 'The reason why we interpret something as something is based on previous visions and concepts. This explanation is by no means an understanding of things that appear before us without any prior factors.'<sup>18</sup> The so-called 'Vorurteil' means that the recipient's aesthetic experience and understanding process are related to the 'existing cultural literacy' and 'prescient life experience.' Without 'Vorurteil' our aesthetic and understanding of artistic works will be difficult to achieve.

Gadamer believes that the 'Vorurteil' that constitutes the aesthetic experience and understanding process will cause the recipient to have a preconceived 'Vorurteil' in the aesthetic process. He pointed out that 'The historicity of our existence produces foresight, which is the original directness that actually constitutes all our experience capabilities. Vorurteil is our tendency to open up to the world.'<sup>19</sup> On this basis, Gadamer puts forward the theory of "fusion of vision". He wrote: 'Understanding activities are personally related and a fusion of vision and historical vision.'<sup>20</sup> Personal vision is related to 'Vorurteil' but it is not eternal, it will change with the recipient's appreciation angle. The historical vision is related to the 'time distance,' and the recipient's interpretation of the text has different understandings as the history changes. What is the relationship between traditional understanding and current understanding? In the face of literary and artistic works, 'Understanding should not be conceived as a certain subjective act. Understanding is to put the individual within the tradition, in which the past and the present continue to blend with each other.'<sup>21</sup> That is, the artistic characteristics of the work of art will change with the recipient's vision (Here I mainly discuss interpretive communities rather than individual reception).

The theory of reception, a research method that emphasizes the status of the recipient in the study of literature and art, and explores the relationship between the recipient and the text, provides a new object for the study of theories of literature and art, and broadens the horizon of the study of their history of literature and art. Under the exploration of

<sup>17</sup> Gilbert Faccarello, Christian Gehrke, "Handbook on the History of Economic Analysis volume I" *Economic* (2016). Accessed Jul 29, 2016. <https://www.elgaronline.com/view/edcoll/9781849801102/9781849801102.00040.xml>.

<sup>18</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982),321.

<sup>19</sup> Hans-Georg, Gadamer. *Truth and Method*. (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. Edn; trans. Joel Weisheimer and Donald Marshall; London: Continuum, 2004),347–372.

<sup>20</sup> Hans-Georg, Gadamer. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*.

<sup>21</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*,321.

Jauss and others, reception theory gradually developed into an aesthetic school in the 1970s and 1980s, and has had a profound influence on other art forms.

#### 4 Current Status of China's Research on Wagner

Since Wagner is a musician (composer) and writer (playwright), subsequent Wagner studies are also divided into two parts: music studies and literary studies. The earliest research on Wagner in China can be traced back to the musicologist and writer Fu Yanchang in 1923 in the editor-in-chief of the 'Music World' monthly magazine which produced 'Wagner in the world' (July 1923 No. 5),<sup>22</sup> and two articles for 'An Overview of Wagner's Musical Drama' (No. 7, August 1923).<sup>23</sup>

Examining Wagner's drama from a literary perspective is Wang Guangqi's monograph *Western Music and Drama* (1925).<sup>24</sup> The book is divided into three parts, each of which has a discussion of Wagner (translated as 'Wagner' at the time). One fifth of the first edition of 'A Short History of Western Opera Evolution' is devoted to Wagner and his works; the second edition of 'Modern Western Opera Writers and Their Works' introduces 61 writers and their works, including Wagner and his sons. In particular, the section 'Model Script' in the second edition of 'Analysis of Modern Western Scripts' is devoted to Wagner's play *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (at the time translated as 'The Famous Singer'), which is regarded as the highest artistic achievement of Wagnerian of drama.

After that, many scholars introduced Wagner to China. For example, Feng Zikai's long article 'The Musical Constructor Wagner and His Famous Songs' was published in *General* magazine in 1929,<sup>25</sup> but mostly introduced Wagner from a musical perspective. It is worth mentioning that Zheng Zeduo's *Syllabus of Literature* published in 1927 was the first work to include Wagner in the history of literature, although only one paragraph was used in the fifth section of Chapter 36 'German Literature in the Nineteenth Century'.<sup>26</sup>

Later, Liu Dajie's *Introduction to German Literature* was published in 1938 and included Wagner in the fifth chapter 'The Rise of Romanticism' which discussed Wagner and his plays: Fifth Festival 'The Opera Writer Wagner Comes.' Liu Dajie believes that Wagner's plays are deeply influenced by Buddhist thoughts [6]. At the same time, Liu Dajie inherited Wang Guangqi's views and considers *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as its pinnacle. Although Wagner was introduced to China as early as the 1920s, his opera was loved by the Nazis and China did not accept Nazi ideas. Because China had been in the instability of war for a long time, China needed rapid development, so Wagner's acceptance in China has been stagnant for a long time. The earliest complete translation of Wagner's play in China only appeared in 1964, thanks to the translation of *Der fliegende Holländer* by Hu Qiding. To welcome this belated beginning is the silence of the following decades, and the translation of Wagner's plays was at a standstill. 'Wagner'

<sup>22</sup> Fu Yanchang, "Wagner in the world," *Music World* no.5(1923).

<sup>23</sup> Fu Yanchang, "An Overview of Wagner's Musical Dram," *Music World* no.7(1923).

<sup>24</sup> Wang Guangqi, *Western Music and Drama* (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1925).

<sup>25</sup> Feng Zikai, "The Musical Constructor Wagner and His Famous Songs," *General* (1929).

<sup>26</sup> Zheng Zeduo, *Syllabus of Literature* (Jilin: Times Literature and Art Publishing House, 1927).

entered the first edition of Encyclopedia of China·Foreign Literature Volume in 1982 (and the second edition of Encyclopedia of China·Music and Dance in 1998). It can be said that the real prelude to the study of Wagner in China was the publication of *The Complete Works of Wagner's Dramas* edited and translated by senior high school students Fu and Zhang Li in 1997<sup>27</sup> and broke the silence that had persisted for many years. Later, translations such as *Der fliegende Holländer* (2001) translated by Yao Lijing and Zhou Shihong, and *Der Ring des Nibelungen* translated by Lulu came out. The literary study of Wagner's opera depends on the translation of its drama script. Translation is one of the factors that has led to more attention on Wagner. Therefore, the large-scale literary study of Wagner's operas in China should start from the publication of *The Complete Works of Wagner's Dramas* in 1997. Following the 1999 first performance of Wagner's opera *Der fliegende Holländer* in China, to the Chinese premiere of *Parsifal* on the 200th anniversary of Wagner's birth in 2013. With the aid of dissemination of opera performances, Wagner has received more and more attention from scholars.

## 5 Conclusion

The acceptance of Wagner and his works in China has a history of 100 years since 1919. In the past 100 years, Chinese society has undergone earth-shaking changes, and Chinese people's aesthetic concepts have also undergone profound changes. As a German composer, Wagner's works undoubtedly bear the attributes of Western culture. As a figure of foreign culture, the dissemination and acceptance of Wagner and his works in China has always been directly and closely related to the Chinese people's attitude towards Western culture. One of the tasks of this article is to explore the dissemination and acceptance of Wagner and his works in China. I have compiled a summary of Wagner's acceptance in each historical period in terms of performance, literary theory, and publications. From the perspectives of social conditions and aesthetics, as well as music education and musicology, I analyzed the reasons for the changes in China's acceptance of Wagner in different historical periods. Based on the above materials and analysis, a basic understanding is drawn that the acceptance of Wagner and his music in New China has been tortuous, but China is now accepting Wagner more and more.

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<sup>27</sup> Gao Zhongfu et al., *The Complete Works of Wagner's Dramas* (Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Art Publishing Company, 1997).



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