



The Quest for the Gesamtkunstwerk and Richard Wagner

Hilda Meldrum Brown

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The *Gesamtkunstwerk* ('total work of art'), once a key concept in Wagner studies, has become problematic. This book sheds light on this conundrum by first tracing the development of the concept in the 19th century through selected examples, some of which include combinations of different art forms. It then focuses on the culmination of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in Wagner's theories and in the practice of his late music dramas, of which *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is the most complete representation. Finally, the book contrasts the view of the *Ring* as a fusion of dramatic text and music with the 20th century trend towards Deconstruction in Wagnerian productions and the importance of *Régie*. Against this trend a case is made here for a fresh critical approach and a reconsideration of the nature and basis for the fundamental unity which has hitherto been widely perceived in Wagner's *Ring*. Approaches through Leitmotiv alone are no longer acceptable. However, in conjunction with another principle, Moment, which Wagner insisted on combining with Motive, these can be ingeniously 'staged' and steered to dramatic ends by means of musical dynamics and expressive devices such as accumulation. Analysis of the two Erda scenes demonstrates how this complex combination of resources acts as a powerful means of fusion of the musical and dramatic elements in the *Ring* and confirms its status as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

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