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ENACTING KNOWING: BUDDHIST VIJÑĀNA IN THE MUSIC AND DRAMA OF WAGNER'S PARSIFAL

YALAN MA

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PhD candidate,
University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, Graz (Austria)[1]
yalan.ma1104@gmail.com

Abstract
This study argues that the fermatas on rests in the Prelude of Wagner's Parsifal enact, in the medium of music, a cognitive operation structurally homologous with the Buddhist concept of vijñāna—"distinct knowledge"—knowledge that arises not from continuity but from separation. Five fermatas on rests punctuate the Prelude, breaking the sonic continuum into clearly delineated blocks and transforming pre-reflective absorption into reflective distance. Drawing on Eugène Burnouf's Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme indien (1844), a source Wagner studied from 1855, the analysis demonstrates that the prefix vi- (apart, multiple, diverse) encodes in the term's very etymology the logic that the fermatas perform musically: the breaking of unity as knowing itself. This structural operation is then traced across two further registers of the work—the grammatical shift from first to third person in Parsifal's monologue after Kundry's kiss, and the suspended silence at the beginning of Act III—showing that the same cognitive logic governs the musical, linguistic, and dramatic fabric of the work. The study concludes by reinterpreting the governing formula, "durch Mitleid wissend" ("knowing through compassion"): Wagner reconfigures compassion not as a moral virtue but as the sensory mechanism through which distinct knowledge is produced. What Parsifal makes audible and legible is not Buddhist doctrine transplanted into a Christian legend, but a form of knowing enacted through the structural procedures of the music drama itself.

Keywords
Richard Wagner, Parsifal, Buddhism, vijñāna, temporality, suspension

[1] Leonhardstraße 15, 8010 Graz, Austria

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