# Introduction

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## Concept of the Companion; Or, How to Use This Volume

This book is intended for a broad range of readers: for those entirely new to Richard Wagner's monumental *Der Ring des Nibelungen*; for those who know it well; for those who have heard (possibly seen) a little or all of it and who would like to explore it further; and for all shades of difference in between. The Introduction attempts to provide as thorough an overview to the work and its creator as possible within the space allowed. Much of this is quite brief and necessarily superficial, but it nevertheless should serve to orient the reader. Especially for newcomers, therefore, we highly recommend that you read the whole Introduction first.

The chapters that follow go into greater detail about their given topics. For those chapters, the Introduction serves to set out the background knowledge assumed by the authors or to address aspects not covered. Of course, not every aspect of the *Ring* and its history is addressed by the chapters, and, in some of those cases, the Introduction is there to provide some coverage and guide the reader to further sources. The editors have highlighted connections between the individual chapters by pointing to other sections of the book where a certain idea, made in passing in one place, is elaborated more fully or, perhaps, considered from a different angle. Therefore, each chapter provides an entry point into the book.

The *Ring* opens vistas into a multitude of different historical, social, cultural, political, and philosophical domains, and so it will not be solely the student of music or even theater history who might find this book of interest. Wagner's *Ring* continues to draw and inspire devotees from all walks of life, and the editors hope that this volume will likewise have something to say to a diverse readership, young and old, novices and aficionados, amateurs and professionals, students and scholars from a broad range of fields, listeners, readers, performers, and spectators alike.

Whilst it is, of course, always advantageous when dealing with Wagner to have some familiarity with German, no knowledge of the



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language is assumed for the purposes of this volume. Although the titles of his compositions are generally provided in German, the titles of his prose works will be presented first in both the German and English versions, followed thereafter by just the English. Quotes will always be in English, but the original is offered either parenthetically – or in the footnotes for longer ones – either where the German presents a translation challenge or where Wagner's choice of vocabulary or semantic structure is particularly noteworthy, revealing, or crucial to understanding.

The structure of this Introduction is a little unusual. We had initially intended to write each section together, one of us writing first, the other making changes, additions, and so on, in the hope that it might emerge in, if not quite one voice, then in two that were closely allied. In a sense, it still does; we certainly continue to think of ourselves as allies. However, during editing of contributors' chapters and conversations about this volume and more generally about the *Ring*, we decided that, rather than try to conceal our differences, here was the place to bring them into the open. No two people, let alone a volume of contributors and its readers, will think the same way about Wagner or about the *Ring*. Wagner himself thought very differently about it at different times in his life, even according to his daily mood. His correspondence and a multitude of other sources, discussed throughout the Introduction and *Companion* alike, make that abundantly clear.

With that in mind, we have discussed and edited each other's sections in something akin to the "normal" way, whilst at the same time allowing the other the opportunity to state his own views. To this end of friendly difference, we also decided against using any one translation of the *Ring* poem; we have rather let contributors choose their own (in many cases, very much their own, made expressly for this purpose). We wish to underline that there is nothing wrong with disagreement, that it is inherent in both work and reception. Nothing written here should be taken as the last word on the *Ring*; at best, we hope, it may have some worth as a first.

## Why Wagner? (Nicholas Vazsonyi)

There is a lot of misinformation in circulation about Wagner, some of it originating with Wagner himself. As if his publicly expressed anti-Semitism were not problematic enough, he, his music, and the aesthetic of his dramas were incorporated into the world of the Third Reich to such an extent that, as a result, many have come to assume, falsely, that he was a contemporary of Hitler, functioning as a sort of court composer who

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wrote the theme music to accompany the Blitzkrieg and to be played from loudspeakers at Auschwitz.

Actually, Richard Wagner was born in 1813, in Leipzig, a few months before the famous "Battle of the Nations" on the outskirts of that same city, where Napoleon, after his disastrous retreat from Russia, was finally routed at the hands of the European allies and sent off to exile in Elba to serve out the rest of his days, or so it was hoped. Wagner died almost exactly seventy years later, in 1883, in Venice. Hitler would not be born until 1889. Wagner's world was a different one from that of Hitler and the first half of the twentieth century, framed as it was by two world wars and a global economic collapse in between. The nineteenth century was, instead, an age fueled by enormous possibilities and hopes, as the feudalism that had marked the social and political order in Europe for almost a millennium was clearly drawing its last breaths, extinguished quite literally by the guillotine and eroded by other less violent though no less unstoppable tectonic shifts. The Church, too, and the religious ways of faith-based thinking it propagated were being forced to yield to the irrefutable and tangible conclusions of the sciences and the technologies they produced. The development of industrial production and improvements in modes of travel and communication altered society and living conditions more fundamentally and on a broader scale than even today's dizzying advances in technology can begin to match. For better and for worse.

This was the world into which Richard Wagner was born, a world that affected him profoundly and that he in turn would profoundly affect. The reason to devote a *Companion* volume in a series more typically reserved for authors and works of literature is that Wagner was far more than a composer, or even a dramatist. The fact that he wrote the texts to his own stage works and that these texts are themselves substantial works of literature is only one aspect of the reason. From the start, Wagner was interested in and drawn to the most weighty issues of human psychology and the drama of life. He read voraciously and quite eclectically, from the classics of Antiquity to the latest works of German philosophy, and pretty much everything in between. The only thing he probably spent more time doing than reading was talking and writing. The surviving correspondence will eventually fill thirty-five volumes of the complete edition, and according to accounts of his friends and acquaintances, Wagner simply dominated the room at any gathering where he was present. He also was part of a generation of composers who felt compelled to write for the public, publishing in journals that were growing in circulation and influence across the Continent. But, whereas his contemporaries such as Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Hector Berlioz generally limited their publications to musical issues, Wagner went much further, writing about

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aesthetics, politics, history, culture, and sociological issues. Even in his own day, when standards of what constituted scholarship or informed opinion were less rigorous than they have become, his essays were often the stuff of conjecture and loosely tied together facts and ideas that, even then, were considered fanciful by many. But they need to be taken seriously by us, because they provide some insight into his ways of thinking and, more significantly still, his dramatic works. This is a fraught topic and one that continues to spark heated debate within Wagner scholarship and beyond: what exactly is the relationship between his published essays on a variety of topics and the artworks he created around the same time? It is a debate that cannot ever be resolved satisfactorily, nor even could Wagner himself answer the question conclusively, were he alive today, because the creator cannot be fully aware of the creative process, just as we as individuals can never be fully aware of our motivations, our intentions, and ourselves.

Wagner began to write essays prodigiously during his first and longest stay in Paris: 1839–42. He had gone there to seek success, fame, and fortune in the lively and lucrative opera scene but found mainly failure, misery, and poverty.[1] In order to make ends meet, he started writing essays on music and reviews of the music scene, alongside a few novellas, mostly published in the leading *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* as well as back in Germany. It turns out that he was very good at writing and was encouraged to continue. During the 1840s, he also composed *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*, also becoming the Royal Saxon Kapellmeister in Dresden in 1843, a well-paid position that he could conceivably have held for the remainder of his professional life. Had he died at this point, he would be remembered today as one of the greatest opera composers of the nineteenth century and a notable orchestral conductor. To cite just one example, the French avant-garde poet, Charles Baudelaire, heard the Prelude to *Lohengrin* in 1860 and was immediately swept off his feet, writing a breathtakingly moving fan letter to Wagner immediately after.[2] For Baudelaire, Wagner's music was a revelation about the essence of existence which inspired his own poetic work. The generation of French modernists who came after Baudelaire were some of Wagner's greatest admirers of the nineteenth century. To say that Wagner was the Godfather of the French and eventually the

[1] Ulrich Drüner has argued against Wagner's claim of poverty. Of course, if one spends more than one earns, one will always be short of money. Either way, Wagner's autobiographical narrative continues to mold how he is perceived by posterity. See Ulrich Drüner, *Richard Wagner: Die Inszenierung eines Lebens* (Munich: Blessing, 2016), chapter 7.

[2] See Charles Baudelaire's letter to Wagner on February 17, 1860, in Charles Baudelaire, *Baudelaire as a Literary Critic*, trans. L. B. and F. E. Hyslop (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1964).

European fin-de-siècle movements would not be an overstatement.[3] But he had another thirty-three years to go.

In 1849, he found himself at perhaps the most significant juncture and junction of his life. We will never know precisely what he did during the May 1849 uprising in Dresden, a relatively late echo of the 1848 revolutions that swept Europe. Whatever it was, he felt compelled to flee for his life as the revolt was crushed, and a good thing too, because a warrant was issued for his arrest and, if captured, he would most certainly have faced the death penalty. He remained an exile from German lands and did not receive a full pardon until 1862, wandering Europe like the Flying Dutchman himself. His main residence during this period was Zurich, with stays in Paris and Venice, at Swiss spas, and with friends here and there in between. Wagner's existential crisis of 1849 was accompanied by a creative one. What to do after *Lohengrin*? The solution he found was quite literally to write his way out of the impasse. What followed is loosely referred to as the "Zurich essays," and you will see references to them throughout this volume, because they form the cultural, historical, aesthetic, and theoretical basis for the *Ring* as it was initially conceived.

The main writings that form the "Zurich essays" are, in chronological order, *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (*Art and Revolution*, 1849), *Die Revolution* (*Revolution*, 1849), *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*Artwork of the Future*, 1849), *Kunst und Klima* (*Art and Climate*, 1850), and *Das Judentum in der Musik* (*Jewishness in Music*, 1850), capped off by the book-length *Oper und Drama* (*Opera and Drama*, 1851). The seeming anomaly in this list is *Jewishness in Music* which we will return to below. These essays and the book form a progression in Wagner's thinking that, whilst fundamentally about the aesthetics of his future undertakings, are fueled and inspired by his quite particular understanding of the cultural history of what I will call the West, combined with his equally distinctive interpretation of the sociological and political stakes of his own time. Instead of chiseling away at his writings and honing his thoughts, his approach was to write, write, and then publish when he had arrived at a caesura. Reading Wagner is thus both thrilling and frustrating. Thrilling, because we experience the organic and dialectical development of his thoughts as if in real time. One misses a lot if one just reads the last in the series of works because it is much harder to understand how he arrives at his conclusions. On the other hand, if one reads it all, one must wade through many half-baked, murkily formulated, and abandoned ideas that a good editorial process would have eliminated or refined. It has also meant that

[3] See Mark Berry, "Music and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*," in *The Fin-de-Siècle World*, ed. Michael Saler (Routledge: London and New York, 2015), 625–40.

commentators and scholars have wasted time puzzling over matters that Wagner himself might have excised upon reflection.

These essays are grounded in Wagner's iconoclastic understanding of the sociological role played by drama in ancient Greece. In this, Wagner is part of a German interest in ancient Greece that starts with the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann whose *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* ("Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture") of 1755 launched the movement which would culminate in the Weimar Classicism of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich Schiller at the end of the eighteenth century.[4] Wagner was inspired by the idea that the performance of dramas in Athens was part of a religious festival, where the public, freed from their daily labors and cares, attended for free. The idea of "religious festival" was central for the remainder of his life, reflected in the label he gave the *Ring* – Bühnenfestspiel (stage festival play) – and the building in which the work was to be performed: the Festspielhaus (Festival Theater) in Bayreuth.[5] More on the "religious" dimension below. Furthermore, Greek drama was not merely a text to be spoken but a work integrating music and dance (i.e. movement), as well as words. Wagner refers to this as a "Gesamtkunstwerk" (total work of art) that ceased to exist once the Athenian state disappeared. Although he never referred to his own subsequent stage works by that label, the term stuck and came to be used by others to describe the Wagnerian project, an aesthetic goal to (re)unify the distinct arts that has continued to capture the imagination of creators ever since.[6]

The eighteenth century provided Wagner with another, equally important, impetus in the work of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), a maverick and highly creative thinker whose project became the basis of

[4] For more on this issue, see the seminal work by E. M. Butler: *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012), originally published in 1935.

[5] See Wagner's essays: "Epilogischer Bericht über die Umstände und Schicksale, welche die Ausführung des Bühnenfestspieles *Der Ring des Nibelungen* bis zur Veröffentlichung der Dichtung desselben begleiteten." *SSD*, 6:257–72, and "Vorwort zur Herausgabe der Dichtung des Bühnenfestspieles *Der Ring des Nibelungen*." *SSD*, 6:272–81, as well as Roger Allen's chapter in this volume.

[6] There is a vast literature on the subject, hence no separate chapter devoted to the concept in this volume. For orientation, the reader might consult: Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (Routledge: New York, 2007); Anke Finger and Danielle Follett, eds. *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork: On Borders and Fragments* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2011); David Roberts, *The Total Work of Art in European Modernism* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 2011); Margaret Menninger and Anthony Steinhoff, eds. *Gesamtkunstwerk: Foundations, Articulations, and Inspirations* (Berghahn: New York, 2016); not to mention the sections on "*Gesamtkunstwerk*" in *CWE* and the *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, trans. ed. John Deathridge (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992).

what later was called Ethnography and, more recently, Culture Studies. Herder was interested in questions of language, origins, and identity. How can one find out a people's original and, presumably, "authentic" culture in an age when dominant cultures and a way of thinking that had aspirations of universality – the Enlightenment – were effacing local particularism? The answer, he argued, was to go into the field, make contact with peasants and villagers (i.e. those as yet untouched by the Enlightenment), and recuperate the stories, tales, and songs they had been handing down orally for centuries from one generation to another. In these tales were to be found the "spirit of the people" (*Volksgeist*). Although Herder was unable to complete his mammoth undertaking, the fairy tale collections of the Grimm brothers and the Lieder assembled and published by Clemens Brentano and Achim von Arnim in the Romantic period of the first decades of the nineteenth century, not to mention Béla Bartók traversing the Hungarian countryside with a gramophone recorder a hundred years later, would have been inconceivable without Herder's grand idea. Herder's work was a prime ingredient in the development of what we can call cultural nationalism, a movement that accompanied the political or state nationalism that came into being with the French Revolution and the liberal bourgeois movements of the nineteenth century. At this point, it is important to point out that "nationalism" in the nineteenth century, especially leading up to the revolutions of 1848, was something quite different from what nationalism became in the latter part of that century and into the twentieth. In the first half of the nineteenth century, nationalists were on the "left" of the political spectrum, supporting a "progressive" agenda that demanded political rights for the people and standing against the feudal institutions of the Middle Ages, a project that was at least as important as defining what was particular about one national identity when set against an "other." Richard Wagner's interest in the question of an authentic German identity, a question which, among many others, infuses his work, comes out of this particular tradition and must also be understood within this context. By the end of the First World War, the vestiges of medieval feudalism were all but gone, and the nation state had become the political order by default, leaving little more than the cultural and racist aspects of nationalism to define what by then had become a movement of the political right.

But Wagner also got an important impulse from both the ancient Greeks and Herder together: the centrality of myth. Whilst we observe a revival of myth, broadly understood, in both the Classical and Romantic movements of Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the former fueled by Winkelmann, the latter by Herder, Wagner, I would argue, stands alone in his adoption and fusion of myth from both

ancient Greek and Germanic sources.[7] In Wagner's hands, the potential and significance of myth are raised exponentially as if to the level of myth itself: a myth of the myth. Wagner was the first German speaker to use the word "Mythos" (from ancient Greek) as opposed to the commonly used Latin-based "Mythus." By doing so, he meant to send a signal that, in his hands, myth was to be something different, extraordinary. He explained: "the incomparable quality of myth is that it is always true, and its content in concentrated form is forever inexhaustible."[8] Myth addresses situations and emotions that are essentially human and thus emotionally and psychologically universal. So, as "Germanic" as Wagner's works may appear, his turn to the world of myth is actually quite the opposite. The *Ring* is not about Germans; it is about the human condition.

As if this were not enough, Wagner's project was not merely a fusion of strands from the eighteenth century and earlier. Perhaps more importantly still, he was a keen observer of his own age and an artist who seemed to have grasped the long-term consequences of what we can simply call modernity. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Wagner's closest friends and most incisive critics, put it succinctly, as always: "Wagner sums up modernity; it's no use, one must first be a Wagnerian."[9] What exactly Nietzsche meant by this cannot be explored here, but one of Wagner's most significant responses to modernity was in the area of religion. He understood the crisis of faith and the erosion of Church authority that modernity had precipitated, but he also understood humanity's deep need and longing for transcendence. In his late essay *Religion and Art* (1880), he wrote: "One might say that where religion becomes artificial, it is reserved for art to save the essence of religion by recognizing the figurative value of the mythic symbols which the former would have us believe in their literal sense, and revealing their deep and hidden truth through an ideal presentation."[10] In other words, art, for Wagner, would assume the role of religion in modernity. Hence the significance of the ancient Greek idea of dramas being performed at "religious festivals."

Wagner's stage works offer even more, however. Beyond the "merely" transcendental substitution for religious experience, they explore the mysteries of human existence and psychology that the research- and reason-based cultures of Western scientism continue to have difficulty grasping.

[7] See Stewart Spencer, "The Romantic Operas and the Turn to Myth," *CCtW*, 71, "Wagner himself does not seem to have drawn any fundamental distinction between legend and myth, but came to see both as outpourings of the popular spirit." One could add folktales as well.

[8] "Das Unvergleichliche des Mythos ist, daß er jederzeit wahr, und sein Inhalt, bei dichtester Gedrängtheit, für alle Zeiten unerschöpflich ist" (*SSD*, 4:64).

[9] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Vintage: New York, 1967), 156.

[10] *SSD*, 10:211; *PW*, 6:213.

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Wagner also exposes the dynamics of social structures and offers a critique of modern modalities that quite remarkably continue to have relevance today. The influences on his thinking came from a heady mix of contemporary thinkers, from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to Ludwig Feuerbach and Arthur Schopenhauer as well as French socialists Charles Fourier, Henri de Saint-Simon, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who also influenced Karl Marx, only five years Wagner's junior. The Zurich essays contain a critique of property and money, and use the term "communism," though not with the same rigor that we find in Marx. Nevertheless, the consequences of industrialization and the rise of the money economy constitute a significant element in the *Ring*.

The political dimension of Wagner's thinking brings us to the last issue in this section. If the emphasis of the Zurich essays was on the aesthetic stakes of Wagner's worldview, his later essays, starting around 1865 with a series of pieces initially designed to convey Wagner's understanding of Germany and politics to the new king, Ludwig II, become increasingly ideological. Ludwig ascended the Bavarian throne in 1864 at the age of eighteen. He was, already then, enthralled by Wagner's operas, especially *Lohengrin*. One of his first acts was to demand to meet the composer. From their initial encounter until Wagner's death, the composer enjoyed the financial support of the king, who was also instrumental in making the construction of Wagner's Festival Theater in Bayreuth and thus the world premiere of the *Ring* cycle possible. For a time, Wagner became Ludwig's trusted advisor, invited by the monarch to explain his views on matters of politics and the state. This launched the last phase of Wagner's prose output, which increased in quantity after the founding of the *Bayreuther Blätter*, an in-house journal of the Bayreuth Festival, established by Wagner in 1878 and edited by Hans von Wolzogen until his death in 1938, when the journal itself was disbanded. With a few notable exceptions, the majority of these writings centered on Wagner's critique of modernity and its corrosive effects on society and the human condition. Essays promoting vegetarianism, against vivisection, and against mass media, among other topics, followed, all aimed at advocating a "regeneration" of humanity. Although there is much in Wagner's original thinking that corresponds to what we would consider a radical socialist agenda, the context in which they were written and the group of people who formed around Wagner in these last years – referred to as the Bayreuth Circle – were staunch nationalists and radical conservatives who functioned as the connective ideological sinew between Wagner, who died in 1883, and the Nazis, who began to stir in earnest after 1918. These last, often anti-Semitic, and misogynistic essays, the product of a world-weary and resentful person filled with spite and hatred – ironically reminiscent of Alberich in the *Ring* – are what haunt the Wagner legacy today. This legacy is all the harder to defend as the rantings of an old

and dying man given the publication in 1850 of *Jewishness in Music*, no less the ravings of resentment and hatred. In combination, we can see that Wagner was driven lifelong by pervasive and enduring sentiments which, given the direction of subsequent history for which he cannot be held responsible, are nevertheless horrible and terrifying.

So, why Wagner? Clearly there is something to an artist who can simultaneously have been important for French modernism and the Third Reich, not to mention close to two centuries of devoted listeners and leading minds who have responded to the challenge of understanding and interpreting his work. J. P. E. Harper-Scott, in Chapter 4 of this volume, refers to the "magnetic effect" Wagner has had on radical artists and thinkers over the last one hundred and fifty years. Indeed. Wagner is an enormously complex phenomenon, and I note that, in the preceding, I have barely even touched on his music. The next section will hopefully make up for this lacuna.

## Why the *Ring*? (Mark Berry)

Even within Wagner's œuvre, there is something not only particular but extreme about the *Ring*. If *Tristan und Isolde* outdoes it for particularity and extremity of musical language – perhaps because it is but a single drama and thus less all-encompassing – then the *Ring*, like life, like world history, like religion and philosophy themselves, emerges victorious on most other fronts. Art as any revolutionary socialist such as Wagner would tell you, is not a competition; yet that is not to say that there are no judgments, quantitative *and* qualitative, to be made.

The scale of the tetralogy – strictly, three dramas with a "preliminary evening" (*Vorabend*), *Das Rheingold* – is one thing. It consciously echoes the *Oresteia* of Æschylus and the tragedies of Sophocles as much as, perhaps more than, any previous musical drama. Indeed, until the end of his life, Wagner would continue to read – often aloud, to his second wife Cosima or to a small, invited audience – such dramatic works. The evening after one such reading, Cosima records him saying of Æschylus's *Agamemnon*: "I declare that to be the most perfect thing in every way, religious, philosophic, poetic, artistic. One can put Shakespeare's histories beside it, but he had no Athenian state, no Areopagus as a final resort."[11] Such a remark already points us to the truth that size, whilst not irrelevant, was far from sufficient. (The same might be said the other way round for the music of Anton Webern: his aphoristic brevity is a characteristic it

[11] *CT*, June 24, 1880.

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would be absurd to ignore, yet it is one of many.) Fourteen or fifteen hours of musical drama, not least of such intensity as Wagner's, lay claim to a monumentality that two or three cannot – and would not. Yet there is certainly something, increasingly so, of the sacred drama of Johann Sebastian Bach's Passion settings – also intimately concerned with redemption – to Wagner's conception of art and its purpose.

It is not simply a matter of words and notes written or of hours spent seated or standing in the theater. In 1977, writing on Wagner's sketches for the *Ring*, John Deathridge reported a German colleague telling him that there were "big" as well as "great" composers; Wagner was both. The *Ring*, Deathridge continued, was "at least in terms of length, the biggest work in the history of Western music."[12] No longer. If "bigness" were all that counted, *Licht*, the neo-Wagnerian myth of the seven days of creation on which Karlheinz Stockhausen embarked that same year, would by now have outstripped the *Ring*. Nor is singularity to be located solely in seriousness of purpose either, although that too plays a role. Another work owing much to Wagner's example, Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*, might threaten to make *Götterdämmerung* seem light music, were only gravity at stake.

Wagner, as keen a pupil of Shakespeare as one can find, unquestionably lays claim to a more wide-ranging sense of humor and musico-dramatic comedy – *Siegfried* is in many respects the fairy-tale scherzo of the *Ring* – than either Messiaen or Stockhausen. The ambiguous close of the *Ring* – what *does* it mean? – stands as suggestive of a divine comedy as of conventional tragic catharsis. The time taken to tell the origins, history, and downfall of a civilization is not unreasonable; indeed, one might argue it is its concision and its ability to imply what has gone on between dramas, acts, scenes, and encounters that are most breathtaking. Shakespeare is an acknowledged master of that, inviting us to ask, speculate upon, perhaps even answer questions that lie beyond literal reading of the "text." Wagner learned much from his example.

Another such master, often explicitly following Wagner, was Giacomo Puccini. In *La bohème*, as Wagnerian a work as Puccini wrote, albeit on a far smaller scale, we seem to have experienced far more with the characters than we could on a literal level of seeing and hearing. Imagination, interpretation, and extension are not only permitted; they are inescapable. Return to the cosmic scale of the *Ring*; its lines, dramatic and musical – rarely can or should one separate the two – extend in all manner of directions. That holds for chronological narrative, leitmotivic conjunction,

[12] John Deathridge, "Wagner's Sketches for the *Ring*: Some Recent Studies," in *The Musical Times*, 118 (1977), 383.

long-term harmonic journey, verbal and/or musical revelation in one of the *Ring*'s epic narrations, and our own intellectual and emotional interpretative stance, be that at home with scores and records or in the theater, challenged by a stage director's new vision.[13]

For when Wagner wrote the "music dramas" of the *Ring* – he had been edging towards this in his earlier operas – he invested the orchestra with a more explicitly dramatic role than had previously been the case. Musical drama, insofar as one can dissociate it from the rest, is found at least as much in the orchestra as in vocal lines. A large, modern orchestra, unleashed at climaxes to overwhelming effect, yet often treated with chamber-music economy, is the *Ring*'s counterpart to the Chorus of ancient drama. It does more than provide harmonic support and motion, atmosphere and mood. It comments upon the action we see on stage: sometimes underlining it, sometimes contradicting it, sometimes reminding us of its origins in earlier scenes, at others even hinting at what is to come.

At a basic level, music will often be able to connect with past and future less pedantically than words. For instance, in Act I of *Die Walküre*, Sieglinde tells us in words that an "old man clad in grey" had appeared at her forcible wedding to Hunding. She cannot tell us who, for she does not know; she does not know that he is her father, and never will. Perhaps only Wotan could tell us – and he is not there. A flashback or even digression might be more readily accomplished in a novel than a play. Here, Wagner's orchestral "Chorus" does the work, both conceptually and emotionally. Wotan's music and that of his fortress, Valhalla, identify that old man to us, filling in a crucial part of the backstory and paving the way for further developments. Yet the music is not quite the same; it has been changed by the passing of time, by events that have passed, some of which we know, some of which we do not; it is also changed by its new context. Harper-Scott's chapter takes this very motif and its transformations – a technique Wagner formulated in tandem with Liszt in his symphonic poems and elsewhere – as an example of how Wagner generates musical form and structure (on which, also see the section in this Introduction below).[14]

[13] On leitmotif, see Christian Thorau's chapter in the first instance.

[14] The relationship between Liszt and Wagner as composers is complex, far more so than most realize. Scholars have barely begun to scrape the surface of their mutual influence – often, alas, falling into the partisan trap of playing off one, morally, aesthetically, or both, against the other. (A similar state has pertained in much writing on Wagner and Nietzsche.) In a rare instance of undue critical charity, Wagner actually went so far as to exaggerate Liszt's historical influence upon the theoretical conception of music drama ("Über Franz Liszt's Symphonische Dichtungen. (Brief an M.W.)," in *SSD*, 5:192–4); the chronology does not fit. However, on the compositional level, transformation technique included, "influence" and affinity run deep, as both composers cheerfully – at least more often than not – acknowledged.

As the *Ring* progresses, motifs or themes, harmonies, even orchestral timbres become in this complex web of association both laden down and yet also so dramatically enriched as almost to be liberated.[15] The Prelude to the first act of *Götterdämmerung* is thus on one level a portrait of world-weariness, preparing for the end; it is also the most thrilling yet, in well-nigh unfathomable possibilities of associative meaning. As Pierre Boulez, one of the *Ring*'s foremost conductors, noted, in a remark that also bore testimony to Wagner's compositional legacy for composers such as Boulez (see below), Wagner "refused to sacrifice expressiveness to polyphony." Or vice versa, we might add. Instead, Wagner "endowed each part in the polyphonic web with such expressive power that there is almost a conflict of interest: everything sings and sings 'unendingly'." For it was, Boulez continued, at work on the *Ring* at Bayreuth, "the wealth and density" of Wagner's music, "and its large-scale continuity, that most puzzled his contemporaries, more especially in the world of opera where listeners were not remarkable for their acuteness."[16] In Wagner's own words of *Das Rheingold*, "there is scarcely a bar in the orchestra which does not develop out of preceding motifs."[17] It was certainly a world apart from Giacomo Meyerbeer at the Paris Opéra, though even Meyerbeer's techniques and technologies found their way into Wagner's heady synthesis.

Characters, ideas, music, words, production, even audience – in a word, drama – develop in time, shaping one another. We may even think of Wagner stealing from the future of the novel, for his leitmotivic technique would be avidly developed in literary form by modernist authors such as James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Mann. Mann thus hymned Wagner's technique in his appreciation of Siegfried's Funeral March from *Götterdämmerung*:

> an overwhelming celebration of memory and mind. The longing questions of the boy about his mother; the hero motif of his clan, begot[ten] by an unfree god to godlessly free deed; the love motif of the brother-sister parents . . . the sword mightily leaping from the scabbard; the great fanfare formula of his own nature, announced of yore, first from . . . [Brünnhilde]; the sound of the horn, prolonged in mighty rhythms; the beautiful music of his love to the once-awakened; the old lament of the Rhine daughters over the stolen gold and the gloomy tone-painting of Alberic[h]'s curse: all these splendid, reminiscent phrases, weighted with fate and feeling, should pass by amid earth-shakings and thunderings, with the body borne high on its bier.[18]

[15] "Theme" and "motif" are largely interchangeable in Wagner's usage and understanding. See Klaus Kropfinger, *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner's Reception of Beethoven*, trans. Peter Palmer (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991), 91.

[16] Pierre Boulez, "Richard Wagner: The Man and his Works," in *Orientations*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Martin Cooper (Faber: London and Boston, 1986), 227.

[17] Letter to Röckel of January 25/26, 1854, *SL*, 310.

[18] Thomas Mann, "Richard Wagner and the 'Ring,'" in *Essays of Three Decades*, trans. Helen Lowe-Porter (Knopf: New York, 1976), 353–71, here 367.

Past and present come together to explain and to expand our conception of one another.

Wagner's orchestral music, of which the vocal line is sometimes a strand and to which on other occasions it stands opposed, furthers and adapts the thematic development techniques of Ludwig van Beethoven. It is never, however, to be understood merely "in itself," as what Wagner from 1846 onwards termed "absolute music." Such was the way of the past or indeed of reactionary contemporary composers (to Wagner, if not to us) such as Johannes Brahms. Musical drama gains its meaning in relation to the words and indeed staging, verbal drama in relation to music and gesture, and so on. Crucially, "drama" should never be reduced to plot; it is incommensurately more than the sum of its parts. The term *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) is overused in writing on Wagner (*mea culpa!*); in fact, he barely used it. It is more significant as part of his general inheritance from German Romantic artists and theorists alike. Many, like Wagner, were both.

The point is not so much agglomeration of multiple art forms as dramatic necessity to every component of the whole, which should not, indeed cannot, be understood properly in isolation. Perhaps the Greek *mousikē* comes closer, or at least compels us to consider what we mean by *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Wagner certainly seems to have thought so. In a letter to Schumann's successor as editor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, the musicologist Franz Brendel, Wagner lauded the Greeks for having "invented the term 'music,'" for having meant by that: "not only the *poetic* and musical arts, but every artistic declaration of the inner man, insofar as he expressively communicated his feelings and ideas in the ultimate, most convincing sensory form, through the organ of resonant speech."[19] Wagner's literary texts, "poems" as he called them, were published in their own right: he even gave readings of them as such, prior to musical composition. They were nevertheless always written with music in mind: independent for a whilst, yet far from self-sufficient.

So much has Wagner's example changed our understanding and practices, that it can now prove quite difficult to recall how different such ideas, let alone practices, were from even their most strenuously considered and executed predecessors. Consequently, Wagner found that he needed not only to develop new poetic and compositional techniques but also new methods of staging and performance. Following a reading Wagner gave of the *Siegfrieds Tod* (The Death of Siegfried) poem (later *Götterdämmerung*) to a group of Zurich friends in 1851, Wilhelm Fischer, formerly stage-manager and chorus-master at Dresden, expressed bewilderment as to how

[19] Letter of January 25(?), 1852, *SB*, 4:263.

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so complex a poem could be set to music. Wagner explained the unprecedented importance of the orchestra, as successor to the Greek Chorus, and insisted on the necessity of treating "the word" more seriously than had been done in previous "opera."[20] This was no zero-sum game but a dialectical relationship: greater importance accorded to one art form necessitated greater importance for the others too. It was not clear at the time that anyone had understood, nor that anyone, even Wagner, really could – at least until the *Ring* came into actual existence over the coming quarter of a century. In his chapter on theory and practice, Arnold Whittall outlines and analyzes that most fraught yet fascinating of relationships.

Wagner's new technique of leitmotivic writing was a crucial new element in his musical toolbox – and an important way in to understand this explicitly *musical* drama. There are no clear lines, no years zero, to be drawn in history: (almost) everything has roots and consequences, as the *Ring* itself shows us – musically *and* dramatically. "Motifs of reminiscence" appear in earlier dramas, many of them unquestionably known to Wagner: from the oratorios of George Frideric Handel, through eighteenth-century operas by Christoph Willibald von Gluck, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and, often less known to us, French composers such as André Grétry (his 1783 *Richard Cœur-de-lion* a celebrated example) and Étienne Méhul, to the German Romantic operas of Carl Maria von Weber, Heinrich Marschner, and Wagner himself (*Die Feen* to *Lohengrin*). We may even find the practice – perhaps with the anachronistic (dis)advantage of hindsight, perhaps not – in the earliest years of the genre, in the operas of Claudio Monteverdi and in his dramatic madrigals too. Musical figures that recall a character, a situation, or an idea in a new context had always proved crucial tools of dramatic specificity and of large-scale structure – and of having those two apparently competing demands cohere. What, then, is novel and especially meaningful in the technique Wagner employs here?

The musicologist Carl Dahlhaus makes as emphatic a claim as might be imagined for the novelty of Wagner's method in *Das Rheingold* and thereafter. Wagner achieved "the binding together of a music drama through a dense web of motivic connections from within." That differed "so tremendously from the older method of citing reminiscence motifs at dramatically decisive moments (their æsthetic effect was doubtless significant, but their structural function was negligible) as to mark a caesura in the history of music itself." Dahlhaus underestimates their structural, especially transitional function, at least in certain cases, yet he makes the

[20] Gustav Adolph Kietz, *Richard Wagner in den Jahren 1842–1849 und 1873–1875: Erinnerungen von Gustave Adolph Kietz*, ed. Marie Kietz (Reissner: Dresden, 1905), 69–70.

interesting further claim that the "transition from Romantic opera to music drama" was part of a dialectical, historical process in which "the decline in importance of the symphony as a genre represented the obverse of an inexorable expansion of the symphonic style in other genres."[21]

It is a Germanocentric view, open to all manner of exceptions and reservations; and yet, it is far from without foundation. Mozart had been the great exception to a general preceding division between operatic and symphonic composers. (Joseph Haydn wrote operas, yet he remains justly more celebrated for his works in other genres. Beethoven composed, with considerable difficulty, just the one: *Leonore*/*Fidelio*.) Yet, although Mozart had employed symphonic techniques within his operas – as well as employing operatic techniques in his orchestral and instrumental music – their construction owes little to symphonic method. At the root of this new method lay Wagner's – not just his – conviction that, in the symphonies of Beethoven from at least the "Eroica" (Third) onwards, there were to be found "involuntary attempts to construct a language."[22] Music, far from being undervalued on account of alleged meaninglessness – "Sonata, what do you want of me?" a celebrated eighteenth-century reproach – became hallowed as more meaningful and more powerfully meaningful than mere words. In his Ninth Symphony, introducing in its "Ode to Joy" vocal soloists and chorus, Beethoven had, for Wagner at least, shown the way towards a unity of words and music. In that unity, both would incite one another to musical drama of greater intellectual and emotional depth than ever before, recapturing with thoroughly modern means the example of Greek tragedy. According to Wagner's summary:

> To be an artwork as music, the new form of dramatic music must possess the unity of the symphonic movement; this it attains by spreading itself over the whole drama, in the most intimate cohesion therewith . . . This unity centres upon a web of basic themes, which contrast, complete, re-shape, divorce, and intertwine with one another as in a symphonic movement; yet here, the requirements of the dramatic action dictate the laws of separation and combination.[23]

The extraordinary thing remains that, special pleading and exceptions aside, Wagner's art in the *Ring* often lived up to his theorizing. Indeed, it surpassed that, finding fault in practical and theoretical terms alike. Like many intellectuals of his time in thrall to the philosophy and legacy

[21] Carl Dahlhaus, "Wagner's Place in the History of Music," trans. Alfred Clayton, in *Wagner Handbook*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, Eng. trans. ed. John Deathridge (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1992), 106, 109. See also Harper-Scott's discussion in this volume.

[22] Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama*, ed. Klaus Kropfinger (Reclam: Stuttgart, 1994), 75–6.

[23] "Über die Anwendung der Musik auf das Drama," in *SSD*, 10:241.

of G.W.F. Hegel, Wagner felt a need to understand what he was doing in historicist terms extending beyond his mere artistic inclination. If there were no prizes for guessing whose art would seize this historical moment, in a so-called "artwork of the future," no more than Hegel was Wagner merely writing with duplicitous, delusory egoism. He genuinely could not write something because he wanted to; in crude terms, he needed to respond to and to embody historical necessity. He also usually needed to establish that necessity in theory first. Very much Schiller's modern "sentimental" artist, as opposed to the ancient "naïve" version, Wagner was supremely conscious of himself as an artist, of his historical position, of what it required of him and us, and of what it did not. He could not provide mere entertainment for the rich, as he accused the operas of Paris of doing. He looked to a new world in which new art, new politics, new lives would be formed, explored, fully lived, and ultimately come to die. Such, in the *Ring*, is a lesson the god Wotan must come to learn – and teach us.

Perhaps to an extent unprecedented in the history of Western music, Wagner found himself outlining a philosophy of history and attempting to put it into practice, thereby providing himself – and us – with an immanent critique of that philosophy. That history is musical – placing art in general and music in particular at the heart, rather than on the traditional fringes – yet goes far beyond that. It asks social and political questions such as, "What is the nature of power, be it economic, social, religious, even erotic?" and "What might it be to live in a world in which such urgings of power are contested, even defeated?" It is constructed as much through musical means as words. It seems also to possess direction: a goal or *telos*. Yet, although we might hazard guesses at the nature of that goal – love, revolution, harmonic resolution – we can never be certain, far less so than in middle-period Beethoven's blazing victories of light over darkness. At best, we come to understanding through trying to make sense of what has happened. Utopian predictions are the business of neither historian nor artist, still less of those who would be both. Such predictions will, at best, be frustrated – for instance, Siegfried turns out not to be the revolutionary many had hoped for – and will most likely frustrate. Wagner rightly shares with his contemporary Marx a reluctance to write "recipes . . . for the cook-shops of the future."[24] Anthony Arblaster's chapter on the *Ring*'s politics might be your next port of call in discovering more of that history's particular content.

[24] Karl Marx, "Capital, a Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production," in *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, ed. various (Dietz: Berlin, 1972–), part 2, 9:22.

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## Compositional Process (Mark Berry)

There is, however, another history to be considered in the meantime: that of Wagner's actual labor in writing the *Ring*. It is concerned not so much with intellectual foundations and interpretations, although it may well tell us something about them too. With the *Ring*, it is often a matter of juggling, of keeping as many balls in the air as we can.

The idea of a *Nibelung* opera had been in the air for a few years. In 1844, the Young Hegelian aesthetician, Friedrich Theodor Vischer called, in a celebrated article soon much quoted and paraphrased, for a "great, heroic opera" to arise from the *Nibelungenlied*.[25] Two years later, Franz Brendel had declared, in unmistakably Hegelian, "world-historical" terms, that the composer of such an opera would become "the man of the age."[26] Having completed his final "Romantic opera," *Lohengrin*, in which myth and history had not so much coexisted as come into dramatic conflict, Wagner marshaled his forces and sources to press a claim as opera's Napoleon, to go beyond a mere Nibelung opera of medieval chivalry to encompass the mythological foundations not only of that world but of his too. The first step was *The Nibelung-Myth: As Sketch for a Drama*, dated October 4, 1848, penned as revolution continued to rage over much of Europe – although not yet in Saxony.[27] By the time Wagner had completed this sketch four days later, another revolt had broken out in Vienna. He observed world events as he wrote, and vice versa; both influenced his understanding of each other. Much of what he noted here was intended as background: "the story so far." It would be narrated in typical epic fashion, not represented on stage. As time went on, however, much encroached into the projected drama itself, necessitating a grander canvas than a single opera could contain.

It was still unclear where, if anywhere, this might lead. Other dramatic themes were considered and explored at the same time, including Jesus of Nazareth and Frederick Barbarossa – all with potential for combination of myth and history, some imagined more as spoken than musical dramas. From those and the bizarre essay *The Wibelungs: World History from Saga*, in which Wagner similarly attempted to penetrate to the mythological roots of the Nibelung "history," themes made their way into *Siegfrieds Tod*.[28] He drafted a scenario, wrote his poem, and actually began work in 1850 on some musical composition: starting at the beginning, then as now

[25] Friedrich Theodor Vischer, "Vorschlag zu einer Oper," in *Kritische Gänge*, 2 vols (Bausinger: Tübingen, 1844), 2:410. See also the "Sources" section immediately following.

[26] Reinhold Brinkmann, "Mythos-Geschichte-Natur: Zeitkonstellationen im 'Ring,'" in *Richard Wagner – Von der Oper zum Musikdrama*, ed. Stefan Kunze (Francke: Berne, 1978), 65–6.

[27] "Der Nibelungen-Mythus: Als Entwurf zu einem Drama," *SSD*, 2:156–66.

[28] "Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Sage," *SSD*, 2:115–55.

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the Norns' Scene. The music he wrote survives yet did not make its way into the *Ring* proper. Indeed, it looks and sounds so different that it is difficult to conceive of it ever having done so.[29] By this time, Wagner had fled Dresden following involvement in the 1849 uprising against the Saxon monarchy (his employer).[30] He had settled in Zurich, alongside many political exiles from Saxony and elsewhere. Wagner now realized that, in order to say what needed to be said, a second opera, or rather prequel, would be required: *Der junge Siegfried* ("The Young Siegfried," later plain *Siegfried*). That poem, intended as a comedy – we can still in part consider *Siegfried* as such – he sketched and wrote during just three weeks in June 1851.

You may have guessed what happened next. Two further prequels were required: *Die Walküre* ("The Valkyrie," that is Brünnhilde), then *Das Rheingold* ("The Rhinegold," initially conceived of as *Der Raub: Vorpsiel*, "The Theft: Prelude," then *Der Raub des Rheingoldes*, "The Theft of the Rhinegold"). Scenarios were sketched and poems drafted. This time, they were written together. The cosmos Wagner created had not so much spiraled out of control but demanded a scale fitting to both aspiration and eventual achievement. So complex an interaction between contemporary social, religious, and political concerns, history, mythology, and literature (*Nibelungenlied* material increasingly edged out by its fractious sisters), let alone the music yet to be composed, would probably have had anything much smaller collapse under the weight of its competing demands and opportunities. Even now, much would still be related through narration, remaining true to the ancient traditions of epic verse, Germanic and Greek, from which Wagner had derived great inspiration. The four poems were completed by late 1852, although some changes were made thereafter. The most significant would be to *Siegfrieds Tod*, which he had been amending in the meantime.

Those crucial amendments would be to the final scene.[31] They reflected not only Wagner's political and philosophical development but also increasing immersion in the world he had created and the way it, reflexively, transformed his understanding of both the world of the *Ring* and that in which he actually lived. Siegfried's position as the hero had gradually been overlain, yet never entirely supplanted, by Wotan and

[29] It may be heard in an arrangement for piano and voices by Werner Breig, alongside music from some of Wagner's Zurich contemporaries, his Dresden assistant and fellow revolutionary August Röckel included, on a Musikszene Schweiz CD, "Richard Wagner in Schweizer Exil," CD-6156.

[30] For a brief account of the uprising and Wagner's involvement, see Mark Berry, "Dresden Uprising (May 1849)," in *CWE*, 106–7.

[31] Several versions of the text are reprinted and translated, with commentary, in *Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung": A Companion*, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (Thames and Hudson: London, 1993), 348–51, 360–3.

Brünnhilde; the tragedy had become as much metaphysical as political. Writing from political exile to August Röckel, Wagner pointed to the Wanderer, that is Wotan (or "Wodan" as he was still calling him): "observe him closely! he resembles *us* to a tee; he is the sum total of present-day intelligence, whereas Siegfried is the man of the future whom we desire and long for but who cannot be made by us, since he must create himself on the basis of *our own annihilation*."[32] No wonder, we might say, that Siegfried had become a problematical character. If Wodan/Wotan resembles "us," then Siegfried, who had once been very much "our" – revolutionaries' – present or at least imminent incarnation, is now a figure longed for yet more or less inconceivable to us, still rooted in medieval myth.

The final scene of November 1848, sometimes called the "Bakunin ending" after Wagner's revolutionary anarchist friend, has Brünnhilde read the Ring's runes, thereby hearing and understanding the primeval wisdom of the Norns. She therefore returns the Ring to the Rhine, delivering the enslaved Nibelungs from Alberich's bonds: not entirely unlike an agent of the proletarian revolution Marx and Engels had just outlined in the *Communist Manifesto*, published earlier that year. Brünnhilde calls upon Wotan to rejoice in Siegfried as the "freest of heroes," now ready to join the god in Valhalla. A balance between old and new, between traditional and revolutionary authority, is struck, as might befit a revolutionary socialist who was yet still a liveried servant of the king of Saxony. That may seem cynical or at least a pragmatic compromise, but the idea of a "republican monarchy" was not unusual; it had a distinguished history in Western political thought.[33] Wagner had written an article for a Dresden newspaper earlier that year in which he outlined thoughts in that very vein: away with aristocracy, philistinism, and ultimately capital, yet under the aegis of an enlightened Wettin monarchy.[34] Wagner's enemies at court wasted little time in using it against him with the king.

Less than a month later, however, such power-sharing had been replaced with Brünnhilde proclaiming blessed redemption in death to Wodan. The god had, in guilt and fear, created the hero, "whom, alas, you begat," yet his guilt had been redeemed in Siegfried's death, which had also spared him "anxious struggle" to maintain waning power. Siegfried will still be greeted by Wodan's "brotherly gods"; their position, however, seems notably less secure. We should be wary of treating this reductively as

[32] Letter to Röckel of January 25/26, 1854, *SL*, 310.

[33] Udo Bermbach, "Die Destruktion der Institutionen: zum politischen Gehalt des 'Ring,'" in *In den Trümmern der eignen Welt: Richard Wagners "Der Ring des Nibelungen,"* ed. Udo Bermbach (Reimer: Berlin and Hamburg, 1989), 117–18; Berry, *Treacherous Bonds* (Ashgate: Aldershot and Burlington, VT, 2006), 140–3, 221.

[34] "Wie verhalten sich republickanische Bestrebungen dem Königthume gegenüber?" in *SSD*, 12:220–9.

political or indeed any other form of allegory, although, as Deathridge, drawing on Walter Benjamin, has pointed out, Wagner's drama here stands closer to the specificity of allegory than the multivalence of symbolism: stronger at least than many conservative or Romantic disciples have allowed.[35] It would, though, be perverse simply to ignore correspondence between Wagner's increasingly extreme socialism and increasing prominence of the idea of the twilight of the gods, *Götterdammerung*, as *Siegfrieds Tod* was renamed in 1856.

The so-called "Feuerbach ending," after the radical Left Hegelian philosopher whose work so inspired Wagner during his revolutionary years, had been penned by 1852. It retains revolutionary optimism and has Brünnhilde express it still more explicitly. She rejects not only private property but the custom and contract that had been its protectors. Moreover, she foretells, in anger rather than sorrow or sympathy, the immolation of Valhalla – which shortly comes to pass. Brünnhilde foresees an anarchistic "world without rulers," ruled over instead by "love alone": love being for Feuerbach the foundational principle of any healthy life and religion, and by extension political and social order. Some writers, for instance Carl Dahlhaus and Thomas Mann, have seen this message, Wagner's subsequent revisions notwithstanding, as the truest conclusion to the *Ring*.[36] That seems decidedly strange. One may or may not agree with the sentiment apparently expressed, but Wagner unquestionably came to think otherwise.

In another letter to Röckel from two years later, Wagner voiced unease towards what he had previously considered to be the meaning of the *Ring*:

> Brünnhilde addresses those around her, . . . [turning] their attention away from the reprehensibility of ownership to the love which alone brings happiness; and yet I had (unfortunately!) never really sorted out in my own mind what I meant by this "love" which, in the course of the myth we saw appearing as utterly devastating. What blinded me in the case of this one particular passage was the interference of my conceptual meaning. . . . it required a complete revolution in my rational outlook, such as was finally brought about by Schopenhauer.[37]

And so, we come to his penultimate attempt to conclude, in what we have come to know as his "Schopenhauer ending," written that year, 1856. Here Brünnhilde's closing message has become, in keeping with Wagner's own postrevolutionary preoccupations, more metaphysical, even, in the light of

[35] John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2008), 81–5.

[36] Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1979), 140–1; Mann, "Richard Wagner and the 'Ring,'" in *Essays of Three Decades*, 371.

[37] Letter to Röckel of August 23, 1856, *SL*, 358; *SB*, 8:153.

his increasing interest in Asian religious thought, Buddhistic. She rejects Valhalla's fortress and the homes of desire and illusion (*Wunschheim* and *Wahnheim*) and closes the gates of "eternal becoming." Thus redeemed from the punishing schedule of reincarnation, her eyes opened by the grievous *suffering* induced by erotic love, she sees "the world end."

Wagner rejected that particular conclusion too, leaving the wordless orchestra the final say, to our eternal frustration and fascination. In explicit preference for a musical and scenic rather than verbal culmination, he suggests that its consummation is left to us as interpreters. Insofar as one single message is at work, it may be that there can be no single message. Life is complicated – as Wagner had learned. We make our own way among the motifs, memories, musical and dramatic realizations, to ask ourselves as well as the work fundamental questions about our social and individual existence.

More will be said about that challenge both in subsequent sections of this Introduction and in many of the chapters ahead, not least that by Barbara Eichner. We, however, having briefly peered forward to Wagner's compositional work of 1874, when he would finally complete *Götterdämmerung*, must return to the narrative of a couple of decades earlier. If we have followed Wagner, as he admitted having done in trying to explain the meaning of his drama to Röckel – "I have certainly allowed my pen to run away with me" – we have followed other writers too, arguably anyone who has dared dip interpretative toes into the waters of Wagner's Rhine.[38] That is probably simply, or not so simply, a matter of what thinking about the *Ring* must be. Trying to keep to any one single line, even chronological, seems doomed to failure.

Back, however, to the 1850s. Although Wagner had written a few musical sketches in the meantime, notably some work on the Prelude to Act I of *Siegfried* in 1851, the main thrust of his musical composition was forward – in the opposite direction to that of the poem.[39] It began on November 1, 1853 with the music of *Das Rheingold*. That proceeded quickly, the composition draft completed two and a half months later, the full score in late May 1854. Wagner began work on the music of *Die Walküre* a month later; it was complete within two years, in March 1856. The first two acts of *Siegfried* followed suit between September of that year and August 1857, although he would not orchestrate the second until 1864.

[38] Letter to Röckel of January 25/26, 1854, *SL*, 310.

[39] On Wagner's early work on musical material for *Der junge Siegfried* and on much else besides, see Robert Bailey, "The Method of Composition," in *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York, 1979), 269–338, esp. 287–92.

The greater part of his musical energies until the very end of the 1860s was then devoted to composition of *Tristan* and *Die Meistersinger*. These were turbulent biographical years too: Saxon amnesty and consequent return to German soil were followed by Bavarian court intrigue that sent him packing once again into Swiss exile, this time at Tribschen on the banks of Lake Lucerne. In 1869, the same year that Ludwig II, to the composer's displeasure, had *Das Rheingold* premiered in Munich – *Die Walküre* followed in 1870 – Wagner returned to *Siegfried* to compose its third act and began work almost straight away on *Götterdämmerung*. The full score of the *Ring* as a whole was completed on November 21, 1874.

By now, Wagner had settled in Bayreuth and had both his Villa Wahnfried and the new Festival Theater (Festspielhaus) built. One might argue that not only was the *Ring* not complete until the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876, when it was first performed as a whole, and *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* were both performed for the first time, but that it constantly requires completion every time it is performed. Be that as it may, Wagner's work *as composer*, if not as director, was now done. "The eternal work" was "now complete," as Wotan hymns Valhalla at his first appearance. Roger Allen's chapter on Bayreuth not only takes up the story at this point but takes it back to its roots: some touched upon here, many outlined afresh.[40] So thereafter, in their different ways, do all of the chapters and not just those engaged specifically with the *Ring* as performance. The extent to which any musical work is contained in its score will always be contested. Two things, however, are certain: first, that Wagner's work *as composer*, if not as impresario, conductor, director, commentator, and all manner of other things, was now done; second, that every attempt we make to grapple with his poem and music, let alone with the "work" that has grown around them, will always involve acts of interpretation.

Let us leave, then, the conclusion of *this* completion to Cosima, here very much a character in her own domestic drama with Wagner.[41]

> Thrice sacred, memorable day! Toward the hour of noon R. calls to me upstairs, asking me to bring him the newspapers; since he had yesterday complained how worn out he felt and had also assured me that he would not finish before Sunday [this was Saturday], I thought that tiredness had prevented his working any longer, but I was too shy to ask him . . . Offended, he shows me that it is finished and then says bitterly to me that, when a letter arrives from my father [Liszt], all thought for him is entirely swept away . . . I have been robbed of my greatest joy . . . Thus I celebrate it in suffering, bless the fair and wonderful work with my tears, and thank the malicious God who ordained that I must first atone in

[40] See also the section here on performance (history).

[41] On Wagner's relationship to his heroes, see, e.g., Peter Wapnewski, *Der traurige Gott: Richard Wagner in seinen Helden* (Beck: Munich, 1978).

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> suffering for its completion . . . How could I express my gratitude other than through the destruction of all urges towards a personal existence? Greetings, eventful day, greetings, day of fulfilment! If a genius completes his flight at so lofty a level, what is left for a poor woman to do? To suffer in love and rapture.[42]

That she would certainly continue to do, as wife, as widow, and as keeper of the Bayreuth flame. So too, perhaps, do many of us.

## Sources (Nicholas Vazsonyi)

The previous section traced the compositional process from gestation, through sketches, and from the genesis of the text to the composing of the music: all in all, an almost thirty-year undertaking from the first germ of an idea in 1848 to the world premiere in 1876 of the entire work at the Festival Theater in Bayreuth. In addition, the earlier section "Why Wagner?" set out the kaleidoscopic interests Wagner had, as well as the multiple and diverse sets of influences on his intellectual and creative development. Thus, it is very important for any discussion of "sources" to keep both of these in mind. The distinctive Germanic names of the characters, the major events portrayed and narrated, and the specific locations, like the Rhine, all have their identifiable sources, which are important to know, but this should not obscure the fact that, over a period of several decades, the quantity and the range of sources – meaning triggers, revelations, experiences, ideas, material – for Wagner's work are virtually impossible to reconstruct entirely. We are fortunate that Wagner was as communicative as he was, with his friends, with the public, with posterity. During his lifetime, he published his own collected writings in ten volumes, expanded to sixteen after his death. The complete edition of his well over 10,000 letters is still underway with twenty-five volumes published and a total of thirty-five plus supplementary volumes planned. He even rewrote his autobiography every ten years or so, not to mention Cosima, who started keeping a diary in 1869 until the day of Wagner's death in 1883, mostly dedicated to chronicling Wagner's life, thoughts, and utterances. But with all this, some of the creative process remains concealed and mysterious, even for the creator.

The original source for Wagner's *Ring* was the *Nibelungenlied* ("Lay of the Nibelungs"), a heroic epic in verse (German: *Heldenepos*) written in Middle High German around 1200AD whose author is unknown. By the end of the Middle Ages, the work had been lost, only to be rediscovered in 1755. With the onset of the Romantic Movement in the early nineteenth century and the interest in the medieval period, not to mention Germanic

[42] *CT*, November 21, 1874; Eng. trans., *CD*, 1:805–6.

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myth, the *Nibelungenlied* became a standard text read as a sort of "national epic" throughout the growing school system. By the 1840s, the idea of writing a German national opera based on the *Nibelungenlied* was widespread, and several composers, including Robert Schumann, Franz Liszt, and Felix Mendelssohn toyed with the idea. Wagner first read the work no later than 1844 whilst he was living in Dresden.

The massive *Nibelungenlied* is written in two books, the first of which contains many characters and situations found in *Götterdämmerung*, the last part of Wagner's *Ring*. These include Hagen, Gunther, Gutrune, Siegfried, and Brünnhilde. The central event of the first book is the death of Siegfried, and this ended up being the original kernel of Wagner's opera, the prose draft of which he wrote in 1848. Not unlike *Götterdämmerung*, the *Nibelungenlied* is set in a medieval court, where Christianity and an earlier heathen culture live in uneasy company, reconciled by the complex notions of chivalry, designed to regulate the unrestrained violence required by hand-to-hand combat with the necessities of civilized behavior at court. Whilst this tension lies at the heart of the *Nibelungenlied*, it was ultimately not what interested Wagner, as his project grew with the need to explain all the strands leading to Siegfried's death and to present the cosmic significance of that death.

It was in part the process of trying to figure out how to do so that preoccupied him in the "Zurich essays" of 1849–51. As we have already discussed, Wagner turned to myth: that realm of the eternal present that we can never know because, however quickly our brain processes the world around us, what we experience is already the past. To explain the world of *Götterdämmerung* and how it fit into the larger scheme of things, Wagner used much older Germanic sources found in Norse and Icelandic mythology. These are the sources for the world that populates the first three parts of the *Ring*: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre* and much of *Siegfried*. It also explains why *Götterdämmerung* is structurally and stylistically different from the other sections, and rightly so, though this seems to have caused much consternation for critics since the beginning.[43]

Wagner's Germanic sources comprise the *Thidriks Saga of Bern*, the *Poetic Edda*, the *Prose Edda*, and the *Volsunga Saga*. These are indispensable because they include not only the stories of the hero Sigurd (Siegfried), on which the later German sources are partly based, but also the mythology of the Scandinavian gods. The title *Edda* is used to designate two different works from the thirteenth century in Old Norse literature.[44]

[43] For an excellent discussion of Wagner's Nordic sources, see Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's* Ring (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1979); and Elizabeth Magee, *Wagner and the Nibelungs* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1991).

[44] See *CWE* entries for "Edda," Nordic Mythology," "Saga of the Volsungs," and "Ring des Nibelungen: Ein Bühnenfestspiel" section 1.

The *Prose Edda* is a handbook of poetics written in the vernacular sometime during the 1220s by the Icelandic chieftain Snorri Sturluson. The *Poetic Edda* is a collection of vernacular mythological and heroic poetry thought to have been written down in about 1270 by an unknown scribe. Together these two works constitute the main literary sources for our knowledge of pre-Christian Norse mythology and heroic legend. The *Prose Edda* presents a systematic and comprehensive account of Norse mythology from the creation of the world to its ultimate destruction, including the story of the building of the gods' fortification against the giants by a giant master builder, largely as portrayed in *Das Rheingold*.

The *Poetic Edda* begins with a prophetic poem forecasting the Nordic Doomsday *ragnarök* ("the doom of the gods") and concludes with a dialogue between Thor and a dwarf. Most of the poems, told in a mixture of narrative and dialogue, focus on tales of the gods Odin, Thor, Frey and Loki. The poems follow the story of the Volsungs, Gjukungs, and Budlungs and relate the central episode of Sigurd's slaying of the great dragon Fafnir, which wins him lasting fame and a fabulous treasure, and his subsequent involvement with and betrayal of Brynhild, which bring about his downfall and death.

*The Saga of the Volsungs* is an anonymously written thirteenth-century prose manuscript from Iceland that was perhaps the main source of Wagner's plot for the *Ring*; he is known to have used an 1815 translation by Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen, *Volsunga Saga oder Sigurd der Fafnirtödter und die Niflungen*. The plot follows five generations of the Volsung family, beginning with King Volsung's grandfather, who is descended from the god Odin, and ending with his grandson Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer, whose heroic adventures constitute the subject matter for the saga's longest episode. It contains the story of the origin of the great treasure and the cursed ring, Sigurd's slaying of the great dragon Fafnir and acquisition of the treasure and ring, and his encounter with Brynhild whom he awakens from her magic sleep on a mountain, vows to marry, and then betrays because a magic potion has caused him to forget her. This betrayal leads to his death.[45]

Even if the raw material for the *Ring* dramas comes from Germanic mythology, however, the searing depth psychology, the poignant interpersonal relationships, the inescapabilty of fate, and the noble stature of the main characters has Greek tragedy written all over it.[46] Wagner was the first person in modern times to create a mythic universe that served as

[45] For a more detailed discussion of the Nordic sources with particular reference to depictions of nature, see Thomas Grey's chapter in this volume.

[46] See Jason Geary's chapter on Wagner's ancient Greek sources.

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a vessel into which was poured an amalgam of the multiple ingredients comprising the cultural memory of the West. Many have followed, the most recent example of which would be the *Game of Thrones*, based on the series of epic fantasy novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin.[47]

## Structure and Form (Mark Berry)

How to structure an opera, let alone a series of four operas? The Romantic claim would be that its structure should emerge "organically" from its content. There should be no conflict, to cite an influential distinction beloved of one of Wagner's heirs, Arnold Schoenberg, between style and idea. That is all very well as an aesthetic; it has much to be said for it in many respects. Do we want to see and hear the joins, the tricky corners, whether in a piece of writing or a musical drama? Sometimes yes, although even then such a modernist claim for functionality tends to be predicated on rebellion against the organic: we shall bring the structure to the foreground because our predecessors, intent on Romantic mystification, did not. Whatever one's thoughts on that, though, it does not follow that structure is unimportant, either to the composer or to the listener. Music and drama, likewise musical drama, are experienced in time. That is perhaps the distinction we may draw between structure and form: the latter being dynamic experience of the work in actual time, something with which any per-*form*-ance worth its salt will concern itself Conductor and stage director alike will play their part in that, most likely in a mixture of collaboration and conflict. So too will an active member of the audience, *form*-ing his or her own *Ring* within bounds set by the work and the broadly conceived communal performance.

At the broadest level, this is a work in four parts, to be experienced on four different days.[48] Those three "days" and "preliminary evening" are further subdivided. *Das Rheingold* is split into four scenes, in three different locations (the fourth returning to the scene of the second), played without a break. In

[47] See the essay by music critic Alex Ross, "Wagner, Incest, and *Game of Thrones*" in *New Yorker* August 29, 2017.

[48] There have occasionally been attempts to perform the whole *Ring* over a single day with multiple casts, etc. Their legacy has perhaps been more akin to having participated in a marathon – several marathons? – than artistic. Wagner knew what he was doing spreading performances over several days; it is common now to spread them over a week, with nights off between *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* and between *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*. Such is the practice at Bayreuth, although those longing for more Wagner will often find a *Lohengrin*, a *Tristan*, or a *Parsifal* to occupy them during days of relative freedom from the Ring's curse. At the other end of the spectrum, BBC Television, when broadcasting the Boulez-Chéreau "Centenary" *Ring* in 1985, opted to present the work an act at a time: perhaps more in line with viewing habits. In the case of recordings, audio or visual, choice and responsibility lie with the listener/viewer.

one of the lengthiest unbroken, "through-composed," stretches of music written in the Western or any tradition, transitional interludes further musical and indeed conceptual action even when the curtain is down. *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* are divided into three acts, each separated "in real time" by an interval; each act is further subdivided into scenes, which may or may not take place in different locations – just as in many other operas or plays. *Götterdämmerung*, the final and longest of the four parts, is constructed – perhaps it is better to think of it that way rather than "divided" – similarly, yet with an additional Prologue of two scenes prior to the first act proper.

All opera until the *Ring*, even when acts were "through-composed" as in Wagner's preceding "Romantic operas," had involved further subdivision into arias, recitatives, choruses, and so on. Even in *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, those divisions pertain – although one may have to look or listen a little harder to find them. There are traces, moreover, of such "numbers" even in the *Ring*.[49] A difference holds, however, in that that is not really how the musical drama is constructed. The finale to the second act of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* is a celebrated instance of building trio from duet, quartet from trio, and so on (more or less), leading up to a vocal-septet finale to the finale, as it were. That takes place within a twenty-plus-minute musical structure that has much in common with those of Classical sonata forms (which in turn, especially in Mozart's case, owed much to operatic forms) save for its considerably greater length. There is no musical break; drama is cumulative; the coda, if we will, is climactic. Nevertheless, constituent sections of this finale structure continue not only to be readily identifiable but to play an important form-giving role both within the finale and within the act itself. They are formative staging posts, far from mere remnants; they reflect and give life to the construction of Lorenzo da Ponte's libretto.

Such remains the case, if to a lesser extent, in *Lohengrin* – notwithstanding strong tendencies towards not only elision but elimination of such boundaries. Wagner tells in his autobiography of having given readings of the poem to the work, prior, as was his custom, to composition of the music. Schumann, he recalls, "liked it, yet couldn't figure out the musical form I had in mind for it, as he couldn't find any passages suitable for traditional musical numbers. I then had some fun reading him different parts of my poem just as if they were in aria and cavatina form, so that in the end he smilingly conceded the point."[50] Whether the distinction to be

[49] On some continuities between Wagner's writing in *Lohengrin* and the *Ring*, see Arnold Whittall, "Wagner's Great Transition? From *Lohengrin* to *Das Rheingold*," *Music Analysis* 2/3 (1983), 269–80.

[50] Richard Wagner, *My Life*, trans. Andrew Gray, ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), 326.

drawn with *Das Rheingold* and the rest of the *Ring* is qualitative or quantitative is debatable; most likely, it depends what we are looking or listening for. The distinction, however, remains stark. If remnants of "traditional musical numbers" reassert themselves – particularly once, in the later parts of the *Ring*, Wagner has gained distance from what he has been trying to overcome – it is within a novel structure, purged of many of the old points of reference and meaning.

This begins, as he did, with the *Ring* poems (see also the section above on compositional process). Epic form seemed to Wagner, not unreasonably, unsuited to conventional, earlier nineteenth-century verse or musical construction. After all, Schubert – whose songs' relationship to Wagnerian music drama musicology has barely begun to consider – does not tend to write in the same way when setting a Goethe ballad (say, *Erlkönig*) as when setting the same poet's strophic, almost folk-like *Heidenröslein*; nor, of course, does Goethe. The principle is similar, on a larger scale: at least for one such as Wagner writing in the wake of a Romantic idealism that suggests or rather insists that material, be it verbal, musical, or indeed scenic, should create its own rules and forms. The alternative would be stale classicism. It might yet have its moments, for instance in Mendelssohn or even, later, in Brahms. When the latter in 1862, on what seems to have been their first meeting, played Wagner his *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, Wagner admitted that Brahms had shown that something could still be done with "the old forms."[51] It could never, however, be music truly to speak of and to its time. Wagner was in that sense a modernist; were art to be worthy of the name, it would speak with means appropriate to its age.[52] Such was not the least influence of Hegel and his school on Wagner's theory and practice.

Meanwhile, Wagner had largely put the *Ring* to one side.[53] Having completed *Tristan und Isolde*, he had begun work on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. He told Liszt in 1857 that he had

> led my young Siegfried into the beautiful forest solitude; there I have left him beneath a linden tree . . . he is better there than anywhere else. – If I am ever to take up this work again, it must either be made easier for me, or else I myself must in the meantime make it possible to *bestow* this work on the world in the fullest sense of the word.[54]

It perhaps goes without saying that the latter option prevailed, although the increased intensity of his musical writing, harmonic and contrapuntal,

[51] Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms*, 4 vols (Wiener: Berlin, 1904–14), 2:117.
[52] See Mark Berry, *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from "Parsifal" to Nono* (Boydell: Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 2014), *passim*.
[53] See above, on compositional process. [54] Letter to Liszt of June 28, 1857, *SL*, 370.

perhaps rendered "easier" that "fullest sense" of "bestowal" too. When he returned to the *Ring* in earnest, in 1869, to compose the third act of *Siegfried*, followed by *Götterdämmerung*, his musical style, interest, and capabilities had been greatly enriched by the experience of those two intermediate operas. Siegfried under the linden tree, the boy without fear with only a Woodbird for company, was followed by Wotan's great confrontation with Erda (the earth goddess but also personification of Fate) – and then the sole, enigmatic encounter between the *Ring*'s original and latter-day heroes. As if offering a snapshot of the *Ring* as a whole, revolutionary comedy led to metaphysical abnegation, in turn followed by difficult yet productive encounter between both. Wagner may have sworn (ambivalent) ideological allegiance to Schopenhauer; his dialectical method and its formal implications had become more Hegelian than ever.

What did that entail musically?[55] That must, essentially, be a musical question, for the poem remained as it always had been. (Or must it? Had the poem not been transformed by the presence of music? Such are questions we must always ask ourselves, as we despair of and/or rejoice in the impossibility of a final answer.) The Prelude to the third act of *Siegfried* speaks both conceptually and emotionally, the one intensifying the other – as had always been Wagner's practice. Motifs not only succeed one another, not only combine and transform; they perform a role that is musically and dramatically generative. A crucible of meaning, musical and extramusical, which may never quite be pinned down so precisely as we might like with respect to meaning, here reaches a point of violent, necessary overflow – analogous, perhaps, to a point in the political sphere of revolution or indeed counterrevolution. This music does not appear anywhere else; it is or seems necessitated by what has gone before. What happens hereafter, moreover, seems all the more strongly a necessary outcome, the cumulative sense not dissimilar to that in a Beethoven symphony, if by the same token never quite to be identified with it. We even – and perhaps this is the greatest difference in degree with Beethoven, who seems always to look forward – back-interpret: standing where we do now, we also experience the past and further interpretation of that past as necessary too. We become historians or at least mythologists. For if it had been other, would we not now stand in a different place? This may or may not require a leap of faith, may or may not be an illusion, even a conjurer's trick; it is, however, no less, in a strong performance and with attentive listening, our experience on that account. If that much-derided Romantic

[55] Just for now, let us leave on one side extramusical "meaning": on which see not only the next section here, but much of the rest of this book.

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aesthetic concept "organicism" means anything, perhaps in performance it means something like that.

Such "necessity" is not entirely new, any more than the writing of *Das Rheingold* had been. It is now, likewise, a far stronger impulse, though, such that one tends to feel, as in *Tristan*, that the drama is orchestral as much as anything else. When the Prelude, seemingly the Wanderer's moment of reflection and resolution, is over and he confronts Erda, the words do not quite, as in *Tristan*, come across as mere verbalization of inner musical action ("deeds of music made visible," according to a celebrated formulation of Wagner's).[56] The *Ring* remains a drama in which characters, concepts, and perhaps above all actions remain crucial; the example of *Die Meistersinger* endures – as, of course, do many of Wagner's original intentions for the *Ring*. The balance has nonetheless shifted; musical writing has gained complexity in harmonic and contrapuntal terms; the burden of past deeds has increased. This, one feels, was just the right time for Wagner to have returned to the *Ring*, to have essayed its greatest turning point (in Aristotle's language of tragedy, its ultimate *peripeteia*). "How to arrest a turning wheel" as Wotan seeks in vain to learn from Erda? He cannot; drama, however, lies in the attempt and its vanity.

When working towards the *Ring* in his Zurich reform essays, Wagner had written of poetic-musical periods. Both Harper-Scott and Whittall in their respective chapters tell us much about Wagner's success in the transformation of this excellent sounding yet ultimately limiting musico-dramatic idea, in which musical material, its melody, its harmonies, and ultimately its form and structure would respond to the particular requirements of particular words.[57] What could be more Romantic, more of a standing rebuke to the generic status of form as (alleged) formula? The difference between Wagner's theory and practice – not a fault, but an artistic necessity – is Whittall's concern. He points to the problems of generating meaningful dramatic form and of reducing music to a mere mirror image of words. Such has been a perennial problem in opera history; the greatest composers have always found solutions. Wagner's requires attention not only for itself but, as we shall see, for its legacy too. (It also reminds us that staging, should it present us with nothing different from what we hear in words and music, will be of little value too.)

Proceeding hand in hand with the increasing importance of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music to Wagner – it is almost beside the point to ask which comes first – a more decisive, fundamental role for

[56] Wagner, "Über die Benennung, 'Musikdrama,'" in *SSD*, 9:306.

[57] See also Thomas S. Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995), in particular chapter 4.

music and musical forms emerges. The structure of Wagner's poem remains in one sense as it is; much of *Siegfried* is a series of dialogue exchanges between different characters: just as much in its third act (the Wanderer and Erda, the Wanderer and Siegfried, and finally Siegfried and Brünnhilde) as it had been in its first (Mime and Siegfried, and above all the central riddles between the Wanderer and Mime).[58] That epic form, however, is perhaps in itself transformed by the advent of the style and method Harper-Scott presents to us as "symphonic"; after all, we do not tend to read the poem in isolation any more than we tend to play the score without the vocal parts. At the very least, our experience is transformed in this final act of *Siegfried* and perhaps still more so in *Götterdämmerung*, bringing Wagner and the *Ring* closer both to some, at least, of the symphonic means of his hero Beethoven and to the work of many of his modernist operatic successors – which would, one can say with little exaggeration, be inconceivable without his example. At the same time, we should continue to remind ourselves that what Wagner was doing – and indeed what he said he was doing, in his 1879 essay, "On the Application of Music to Drama" – had little in common with contemporary symphonists such as Anton Bruckner, even when their musical language came close to his, let alone to Brahms and his alternatively Beethovenian tradition.[59]

Where, then, to proceed in analysis of Wagner's forms? Here, at best, the openings to a few paths may be pointed out. Harper-Scott and Whittall will be of greater help in showing the way. Something will also be said on the matter later in this Introduction in the sections on meaning; for, however hard we try to separate different focuses of our attention in the *Ring*, others will always invade our consciousness, just as they did with Wagner when he was writing it. Should we focus upon particular cases, on particular details? Should we, as Pierre Boulez once suggested with regard to Arnold Schoenberg's work (his emphatically post-Wagnerian opera, *Moses und Aron*, in particular), proceed, like a French cheesemaker, who would "take a small sample, analyze it for quality and on that basis draw conclusions about the quality of the cheese as a whole"?[60] We might, also or alternatively, follow Wagner's own suggestion, picked up here in chapters by Christian Thorau and Thomas Grey, of tracing the development of an entire corpus of interrelated musical and thus dramatic themes from the

[58] For an admirably clear and succinct introduction to *Siegfried*'s musical structure, see Adrian Daub and Patrick McCreless, "*Siegfried*," in *CWE*, 540–1.

[59] "Über die Anwendung der Musik auf das Drama," in *SSD*, 10:176–93.

[60] Pierre Boulez, "Boulez on Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*: An Interview with Wolfgang Schaufler," trans. Stewart Spencer, CD booklet note to Deutsche Grammophon CD 449 174-2, 13–15, here 15.

individuation of "a few malleable Nature motifs."[61] Schoenberg would surely have approved, offering compositional advice as he did, drawing upon a lifetime's study of Wagner as composer and analyst: "Common content is provided by using motive-forms from the same basic motive."[62]

Or should we look to grander architectonic structures? Heinrich Schenker's antipathy towards Wagner's music notwithstanding, might we follow a method somewhat in his line?[63] Might we perhaps even seek to rehabilitate some of the concerns of the much-criticized work of Alfred Lorenz, which relies heavily upon a systematized version of Wagner's poetic-musical period?[64] That, as you might expect, pays more attention to structure than form; Wagner becomes marmoreal, yet is not the *Ring* a monument as well as an experience, or has it not at least often been understood as such? Reception is unavoidably a part of any artwork – as the most interesting *Ring* productions and performances now tend to acknowledge explicitly. More broadly, though, why choose? We are likely to come closer to understanding of structure and form, of "meaning" too, if we pay attention to the world(s) between "background" and "foreground."

In any case, musical analysis certainly need not, arguably should not, preclude engagement with Wagner's words, with his "drama," whatever we mean by that. Harper-Scott, in a revealing article on *Götterdämmerung*, shows just how closely literary and philosophical investigations are entwined with musical analysis, and vice versa.[65] There are in the *Ring* threads aplenty, both as dramatic subject, woven by the Norns, and as related formal metaphor, as explored by musicologists such as Patrick McCreless and Michael Spitzer.[66] The world of the *Ring*, at least until it comes to an end, is our oyster. Experience, interpretation, analysis, performance, and so much else often combine: Wagner is neither a composer nor a dramatist for the either/or.

[61] "Bericht an den Deutschen Wagner-Verein über die Umstände und Schicksale, welche die Ausführung des Bühnenfestspieles 'Der Ring des Nibelungen' begleiteten," in *SSD*, 6:266.

[62] Arnold Schoenberg, *Fundamentals of Musical Composition*, ed. Gerald Strang and Leonard Stein (Faber: London, 1967), 16.

[63] Warren Darcy, "A Wagnerian *Ursatz*; or, was Wagner a Background Composer after all?" *Intégral*, 4 (1990), 1–35; Darcy, *Wagner's "Das Rheingold,"* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1993); Patrick McCreless, *Wagner's "Siegfried": Its Drama, History, and Music* (UMI Research Press: Ann Arbor, MI, 1982).

[64] Alfred Lorenz, *Der Musikalische Aufbau des Bühnenfestspieles "Der Ring des Nibelungen"* (Hesse: Berlin, 1924); Stephen McClatchie, *Analyzing Wagner's Operas: Alfred Lorenz and German Nationalist Ideology* (University of Rochester Press: Rochester, NY, 1998).

[65] J. P. E. Harper-Scott. "Medieval Romance and Musical Narrative in Wagner's 'Ring,'" *19th-Century Music* 32/3 (2009), 211–34.

[66] Patrick McCreless, "Schenker and the Norns," in *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner*, ed. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), 276–97; Michael Spitzer, *Metaphor and Musical Thought* (Chicago University Press: Chicago, 2004), 315–19.

## Meaning (Nicholas Vazsonyi)

What does it all mean? We can pose this question about the *Ring* and about life itself. As Roger Scruton succinctly puts it, Wagner "recognized that modern people, having lost their faith in the divine order, need another route to meaning than that once offered by religion." The *Ring* is in many ways a "search for meaning in a world where meaning exists only if we ourselves provide it."[67]

The urge to find meaning in, indeed *the* meaning of, Wagner's *Ring* has proved impossible to resist since the work was first performed in 1876. The use of myth of course demands and has always demanded interpretation. Beyond this, the fact that Wagner wrote and rewrote the ending of the final scene several times, as discussed in the earlier section on compositional process, has only served to encourage and befuddle those bent on formulating comprehensive readings of this mammoth work.[68] There is certainly value in the more responsible attempts to glean the ultimate meaning of the *Ring*, but one should beware that readings are usually compelled to ignore certain aspects of a work in order to make the interpretation viable. It does not so much invalidate the reading as it reveals yet again the astonishing complexity and multilayeredness of this drama. Perhaps an overall more productive approach would be to look not for *the* meaning but rather to look for meaning or even for what is meaningful in certain scenes or storylines.

By the time Wagner had reached the composition of *Die Walküre*, his already formidable skill in spinning vocal lines that were the ideal complement to the text being delivered had been perfectly honed. Add to that the immense and simultaneously subtle musical arsenal he brought to bear in the orchestra, which, in the case of the *Ring* and its enormous span, can be conveying something totally distinct from the text, and you have the ingredients for rich and often contradictory meaning. It is ultimately in the orchestra that meaning resides, because before the first word is spoken and after the last word is sung, we have only a world of sound. This is all the more so, since the first words "Weia! Waga! Woge, du Welle!" also have no "meaning" and are themselves closer to music than to discernible language in that they convey a feeling rather than a meaning. This is why is it imperative, as you work your way through the *Ring*, that you read the text together with the music always. Reading the text alone or listening to the music without knowing what is being said is essentially a pointless

[67] Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung"*(London: Allen Lane, 2016), 8, 200. This connects well with Wagner's own essay "Religion and Art" (1880) discussed in the "Why Wagner?" section of this Introduction.

[68] See also comments by Thomas Grey and Barbara Eichner in this volume.

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exercise and will, quite often, leave you wondering what all the fuss is about.

In the next section, we will present a brief overview of approaches to interpretation and introduce some of the most famous and enduring ones. Although it would be foolish to argue that the *Ring* is "about" any one thing in particular, and without wishing to sound trite, it is certainly valid to claim that the work consistently deals with issues of power and love. Indeed, the seventeen-hour drama is almost like a set of variations on these two topics, both separately and as they interact with one another. Power and love are timeless elements of human existence, but both have very specific contours in the nineteenth century, and these have changed little into our own time and thus may simply be inherent to modernity.

The first scene of *Das Rheingold* loses no time in presenting this very conflict between power and love. Several of the chapters in this volume inevitably touch on the moment when Alberich foreswears love in order to win the Rhinegold and the power of the Ring. But it is very important to understand what Wagner means by "love," a concept which many commentators get wrong and a word which is often used rather randomly and sloppily. When discussing Wagner in general, and the *Ring* in particular, it is vital to distinguish between sex, eroticism, desire, friendship, affection, infatuation, and love.[69] These are all very different things, and Wagner is extremely careful and specific in his verbal and musical depiction of these different phenomena, which commentators have an unfortunate habit of simply labeling "love" in some generic fashion. This is maybe because as a culture we do not spend nearly enough time thinking about what all these words mean and how the emotions and interpersonal relationships attached to them are quite distinct from each other.

For Wagner, "love" is not generic at all. It is supreme and uncompromising. It might, upon reflection, also not be that desirable a condition. When Alberich foreswears love, it is this that he is giving up. Not sex. And especially not desire. The reason he must forego love in order to acquire the power of the Ring is that love and power are incompatible. Here, Wagner is close to Karl Marx, who had argued a few years before Wagner began on the *Ring*, that power in the modern age was regulated by money and that what were commonly perceived as relationships based on love were actually not so, because they existed under the aegis of relationships dependent on money. Marx's classic example was the nuclear or bourgeois family. According to popular lore, the family is the original unit held together by sentiments of love. But Marx argued that the family

[69] Roger Scruton has given some of this more thought than most. See his discussion of friendship versus (erotic) love in *Death-Devoted Heart: Sex and the Sacred in Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde"* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004), esp. 152–8.

was actually an economic unit of power structured by money. By the same token, Marx argued, wealth was also a primary factor in attractiveness. An aesthetically, physically "ugly" person suddenly becomes attractive if it turns out that they are rich. This is Alberich. Commentators wonder how he ends up impregnating a woman who bears him Hagen after he has foresworn love. But he never foreswore sex. Whilst sexual desire and fulfillment can certainly be a component of love, love is not at all required to engage in sexual activity.

For Wagner, "love" is something very specific. He dedicated an entire work to that topic, *Tristan und Isolde*. Love, again, is all-encompassing and uncompromising. It is not beholden to anything or anyone other than the two people involved in the relationship. This is why it is incompatible with money and power, both of which tend to determine the dynamics of a relationship. Love is also not subject to social convention and quotidian notions of morality. This is where Wagner is radical in terms of his own times and, possibly, even our own still today. It is also why he chooses seemingly bizarre and outrageously impossible pairings to demonstrate what he means by love. The twins Siegmund and Sieglinde would be the archetypal example. Theirs is a bond that is both instant and irresistible; they both know it is impossible by conventional standards, in the first place because Sieglinde is married and, later, all the more when they discover that they are also twins. But theirs is a bond that simply must be embraced (no pun intended). The consequence is that they must flee, not only Sieglinde's home but their social environment entirely. They become "outlaws" quite literally, because that is the only space in which their love can exist. Their relationship is such that it strikes the second mortal blow in the realm of the gods, a world already destabilized by the illegal acquisition and then immediate loss of the Ring, as played out in *Rheingold*, and now one where fundamental principles of human conduct and morality prove unresolvable. There is no compromise possible between Fricka's insistence on preserving the laws of marriage and Wotan's desire for coupling free of social expectations and regulations. But love, as Wagner understands it, is also incompatible with the institution of marriage. Whilst it is possible that two people decide to wed as a result of their love for one another, as soon as the vows are made and the contract sealed, love in the Wagnerian sense becomes impossible. Marriage is an institution regulated and safeguarded by Church and State, and a married couple is legally bound until death.[70] Love, for Wagner, is only possible as a free union of two free people. It is a union, furthermore, that is renewed afresh each day. This is why love is

[70] Wagner addresses this very point in his 1848–9 sketch for the opera "Jesus of Nazareth," *SSD*, 11:273–324, see specifically 288–9.

incompatible with marriage. Love is both supremely generous and selfless, and simultaneously demanding and possessive. This is how it differs fundamentally from "affection" or even "infatuation," which is only giving and should expect nothing in return. So, when you read commentaries or, even more, as you work your way through the *Ring*, ask yourself always what kind of "love" Wagner is depicting and why.

By comparison, power is far simpler and more straightforward. Not that Wagner is simplistic. Indeed, I would argue that he, together with someone like Shakespeare, is one of the greatest philosophers and keenest observers of power. As opposed to "love," power in Wagner's world is never absolute and is always compromised, indeed compromised from the very start. For understandable reasons, most of us want power. Only, if we would study Wagner more carefully, it would be the last thing anyone wants. So, if there is an overall meaning offered by Wagner's *Ring*, it is a lesson in power and love: the two forces that make and break civilizations and individuals alike.

## Approaches to Interpretation (Mark Berry)

Wagner was not the least of his own interpreters. As he worked on the *Ring*, he came to believe that he understood it better than he had to begin with. (Many of us, wisely or otherwise, have had and continue to have similar experiences.) There was always an industry around him. As a self-aware modern artist, he played an important role in promoting that industry too.[71] A significant part of it has always been interpretative; indeed, any serious engagement with the *Ring*, of whatever kind, is almost by definition interpretative. Whilst Wagner was at work on the score of *Das Rheingold*, Liszt observed to his uncle that there was already a substantial "'Wagner literature' – I have contributed to it myself."[72]

Here is not the place to offer a cursory list of that literature, even insofar as it relates specifically to the *Ring*. Barbara Eichner offers a judicious, necessarily selective, chronological and thematic survey. Interpretative approaches are discussed in each of the other chapters too; we might say that each in itself offers such an approach of its own. One obvious way of interpreting the *Ring* is to perform it and/or to attend (or otherwise watch and listen to) a performance. Barry Millington's chapter offers a complementary survey, again both chronological and thematic, of the

[71] See Nicholas Vazsonyi, *Richard Wagner: Self-Promotion and the Making of a Brand* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2010).

[72] Letter to Eduard Liszt, March 29, 1854, in *Franz Liszt: Selected Letters*, trans. and ed. Adrian Williams (Clarendon: Oxford, 1998), 355.

*Ring*'s history on stage and of the ideas behind and flowing from its production history. Rather than offering inadequate summaries of chapters that deserve to be read properly, let us consider a few opposing or contrasted thematic approaches to understanding the *Ring*, asking also how some of those approaches might fit together – on occasion, at least, in the context of staging and performance. The *Ring*'s antagonism between power and "love," however interpreted, is discussed in the previous section. It therefore seems a good starting-point from which to take one, almost arbitrary, whistle-stop tour of different interpretative responses to the *Ring*.

One of the most celebrated – rightly celebrated – early books on the subject was George Bernard Shaw's 1898 *Perfect Wagnerite*. Three quarters of a century before Joachim Herz and Patrice Chéreau did so on stage, Shaw presented a *Ring* very much of the nineteenth century's social, economic, and political realm: close to his own "plays of ideas." He certainly had Wagner's warrant from politics and broader worldview, even though Shaw could not possibly have known entries in Cosima's (then unpublished) diaries, such as Wagner likening London's industrial capitalism to Nibelheim: "This is Alberich's dream come true – Nibelheim, world dominion, activity, work, everywhere the oppressive feeling of steam and fog."[73] Alberich as "sworn plutocrat," wielding an "invisible whip of starvation" over his oppressed mass of workers, would never have been seen as such on stage, given a preference for mythological nonspecificity.[74] Shaw, however, delineated an important aspect not only of who Alberich was, but of where he had (in Wagner's worldview) come from. Nevertheless, in an interpretation of enduring insights, Shaw reduced too much to mere allegory or, more seriously, disregards that which does not fit. There is little appreciation of the possibilities of "love" as a positive and/or multivalent force – or even as a valid dramatic subject. Shaw's Fabian reformist socialism, quite different from Wagner's angry revolutionary variety, saw in *Götterdämmerung* a catastrophe in another sense from Greek tragedy: Wagner's highly regrettable capitulation to "the Love panacea."[75] Rather than asking why his allegory collapsed here, Shaw blamed Wagner for not having followed what he really ought, in Shaw's view, to have done. Moreover, Shaw evinced little appreciation of the *Ring* as a *musical* drama. But then, it seems, any interpretation, even (one of) Wagner's, will fall short, such are the drama's riches.

[73] *CT*, May 25, 1877; Eng. trans., *CD*, 1:965.
[74] George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Niblung's Ring*, 4th edn (Constable: London, 1923), 10.
[75] Ibid., 83.

Perhaps the most successful attempts to grasp Wagner's meaning(s) will seek, if not to replicate, then at least to understand and to communicate the self-critical method, consciously or otherwise, at work in the *Ring*. Theodor W. Adorno, writing as he was in a broadly Hegelian–Marxist tradition, understood that contradiction existed, although he was less able to find it fruitfully generative in Wagner in his 1938 book than later on, in a late, fascinating essay on Wagner's relevance for today (the 1960s).[76] Taking leave from Nietzsche, one of Wagner's earliest and still most powerful foes, Adorno's hostile yet ultimately – despite itself – admiring book had no more time for "love" than Shaw. At the same time, Adorno was able to adopt an acutely political, even historical standpoint, showing that situation of Wagner in the revolutionary upheavals of 1848–9 and his subsequent disillusionment could illuminate his work in general and the *Ring* in particular. A composer and musicologist as well as philosopher and critical thinker, Adorno brought – like all of us – his own particular skills, preconceptions, and prejudices to the *Ring*. He also wrote as a refugee from Nazism, trying to explain how what was apparently the most civilized society the world had known had lapsed into barbarism, suggesting that such barbarism had always been present, not least in its culture. For, as Adorno's Frankfurt School colleague Walter Benjamin owned, "there is certainly no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."[77] Such may broadly be considered the starting point of modern critical theoretical treatments of Wagner (and of much else). Moreover, Adorno took seriously indeed the need to engage critically with Wagner's music, just as he did the biographical research of writers such as Ernest Newman, whom he often cited admiringly.[78]

An attempt to consider the *Ring* systematically from the standpoint both of sources and musical leitmotivic construction was undertaken, or rather begun, by Deryck Cooke.[79] Lack of completion is one problem. More serious is the naïve idea Cooke entertained of music as language. (Not only is it not how Wagner considered music or musical drama, but, in its dictionary-like approach to keys, intervals, and themes, it simply does

[76] Theodor W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1981); "Wagner's Relevance for Today," trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2002), 584–602. See also Mark Berry, "Adorno's *Essay on Wagner*: Rescuing an Inverted Panegyric," *Opera Quarterly*, 30/2–3 (2014), 205–27.

[77] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *German 20th Century Philosophy: The Frankfurt School*, ed. Wolfgang Schirmacher (Continuum: New York, 2000), 74.

[78] Ernest Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner*, 4 vols (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1976). See also Paul Watt, *Ernest Newman: A Critical Biography* (Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2017).

[79] Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's "Ring"* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1979).

not work.)[80] Nevertheless, for the germs of an interpretation that places the contest between love and power right at the heart of the *Ring*, founded above all in Wagner's mythological sources, Cooke remains required reading. Cooke had little time for Robert Donington's Jungian interpretation; indeed, he more or less dismissed it out of hand.[81] Donington remains provocative, however, for a critical interpretation of "love" as a negative force within a psychoanalytical framework that receives some historical justification from Wagner's own turn towards the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Wotan, most of us would agree, is more than a man in a midlife crisis; that he is chief of the gods means something quite important. Thinking of him in Donington's terms nevertheless helps remind us that Wotan, whilst a god, is also a man, with the desires and problems that entails – and indeed, arguably, a middle-aged man with the problems and desires *that* entails.

Sadly, neither Cooke nor Donington ever escaped, nor tried to, the either/or that has bedeviled much *Ring* criticism. That "my" *Ring* is not "yours" does not necessarily render either meaningless, although one or both may well be. Wagner had several *Ring*s of his own too. Cooke's dogmatic assertion that "the question is not 'What meaning can *we* find in *The Ring*?', but 'What did *Wagner* really *mean* by *The Ring*?'" may initially sound persuasive, yet on inspection falls apart – even from a textual standpoint. So too does his chapter's nonironic title: "Objectivity in Interpretation."[82] Moreover, neither writer took Wagner's politics – or seemingly anyone else's – seriously: perhaps understandable during a post-Second World War period in which associations with the Third Reich, however dubious, appeared to many advocates and apologists as something to be suppressed, consciously or otherwise. If Wagner were *that* suspect, some asked, should his works be performed at all? Indeed, the German Democratic Republic long viewed the Saxon composer's *Götterdämmerung* with Shavian suspicion; Herz's Leipzig cycle came late in the day – and even then with considerable controversy. (What, however, would a *Ring* be without controversy?) The USSR in its later years was more hostile than suspicious: Leonid Brezhnev's regime perhaps came a little close for comfort to *Götterdämmerung* decay.

However, in earlier days, Lenin's Cultural Commissar, Anatol Lunacharsky, had welcomed Wagner's works and writings as the work of

[80] Cooke had laid out the idea more fully – interval *x* "means" emotion *y*, throughout the history of Western music, etc. – in his briefly celebrated *The Language of Music* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1959). See also the discussion in Thomas Grey's chapter.

[81] Robert Donington, *Wagner's "Ring" and Its Symbols: The Music and the Myth* (Faber and Faber: London, 1974); Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, 31–2.

[82] Ibid., 14.

a fellow revolutionary socialist.[83] As so-called "socialist states" turned away from socialism, so, it seemed, did they turn away from Wagner. Indeed, the return of the *Ring* to East Germany, under Herz's aegis, came perhaps not entirely coincidentally at a time of ideological reexamination, that of Erich Honecker's liberalization of the ruling Socialist Unity Party.[84] "Herz later observed," we read in Elaine Kelly's excellent history of East German ideologies of nineteenth-century music, "the end therefore not an end, but instead: tabula rasa, open for a new beginning heralded by the violins – so that the new world might be better than the old. The principle of hope." He opted, then, as one might expect, for the Wagner of Feuerbachian love-communism – just as Dahlhaus would a few years later on the other side of the Berlin Wall: "his [Wagner's] first conception was also his last."[85]

For old Nazis, path and reasoning were obvious: downplay revolution and politics more broadly in favor of metaphysical resignation. (Others did so for different reasons; that is another matter.) Curt von Westernhagen, quite happy earlier in his career to indulge in more political Wagnerism, would ludicrously protest, late in life, that "directors who deem themselves progressive when they transform the *Ring* back into a drama with a 'message' have no idea how regressive this approach is in relation to the genesis of the work itself." Westernhagen claimed, in defiance of evidence internal and external, that Wagner had had no deep acquaintance with, let alone understanding of, radical political ideas. Even had he done so, that would matter little for his dramas, somehow hermetically sealed from such unwholesome influence.[86] Few Wagner scholars and critics have seen their work age so poorly. A review by Deathridge finished him off once and for all with judgments, meticulously backed up with evidence, such as "Westernhagen seems preoccupied with invisible evidence" and "more serious still is Westernhagen's handling of evidence which really does exist."[87] Westernhagen's "positive biography" – his publisher's bizarre yet telling term – retains some value yet as a display of National Socialism by other means after Hitler's fall; as scholarship, it is worse than worthless.[88] The Chéreau staging implicitly attacked in Westernhagen's

[83] See Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner and Russia* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995).

[84] Elaine Kelly, *Composing the Canon in the German Democratic Republic: Narratives of Nineteenth-Century Music* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2014), 85–8. See also Eckhart Kröplin, "Aufhaltsame Ankunft und ahnungsvoller Abschied: Der *Ring* in der DDR," *wagnerspectrum*, 2 (2006), 63–100.

[85] Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 141. See also Dahlhaus (and Mann) on the Feuerbach ending, as discussed in the "Composition" section of this Introduction.

[86] Curt von Westernhagen, "Wagner as a Writer," trans. Cedric Williams, in *Wagner Companion*, ed. Burbidge and Sutton, 344–64, here 349.

[87] John Deathridge, "Reviews," in *19th-Century Music*, 5 (Summer 1981), 81–9, here 85.

[88] Curt von Westernhagen, *Wagner*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1978).

and other reactionary criticism is now well-nigh universally acclaimed as a landmark not only in staging but in interpretation. Goodness knows what Westernhagen would have made of what came thereafter.

Wagner's grandsons, Wieland and Wolfgang, had, in not unrelated fashion, inaugurated their so-called "New Bayreuth" in 1951 with an appeal to refrain from political discussion. Quoting their father Siegfried's 1924 request that the German national anthem not be sung at the conclusion of *Die Meistersinger*: "Hier gilt's der Kunst!", the latter-day Fasolt and Fafner's note to audiences read: "In the interests of trouble-free progression of the Festival, we kindly request that you refrain from political debate and discussion on the Festival Hill. 'Art is what matters here!'"[89] Wagner's art remained political – as well as musical. Such discussion could not be suppressed for long, however sound the brothers' initial reasoning might have been. Wolfgang, to his credit, would bring a host of avowedly political directors to work at Bayreuth, beginning with Chéreau and that celebrated "Centenary *Ring*," received with anger, even death threats, from those of a more conservative disposition. Soon, it may almost have seemed, other aspects of Wagner's work were in danger of being forgotten. Less so, however, in critical writing, in which alternative strands *and* attempts at synthesis have always endured.

Whilst it would be misleading to describe Michael Tanner's work, some of the richest, most probing discussion of Wagner in English or any other language, as "conservative," it has taken its leave more from literary and philosophical than political concerns, often pointedly so. Nietzsche, D. H. Lawrence, and Thomas Mann are more likely to appear than Proudhon and Marx, although Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are certainly called upon, in his placing of Wagner within a broadly modernist tradition – both modernism and tradition here are apparent – of "moral vitalism."[90] Roger Scruton's book on the *Ring* and other writings on Wagner have a certain affinity to such an approach – both Scruton and Tanner are philosophers – although Scruton is certainly not uninterested in politics or in history, which Tanner often distrusts, at least as a tool of art criticism. Scruton retains, however, a creditable concern not to reduce, in Tanner's evocative phrase to "domesticate," Wagner; not merely to allegorize the *Ring*; and positively, to honor it within a "great tradition" different

[89] "Im Interesse einer reibungslosen Durchführung der Festspiele bitten wir, von Gesprächen und Debatten politischer Art auf dem Festspielhügel freundlichst absehen zu wollen. 'Hier gilt's der Kunst!'"

[90] See, e.g., Michael Tanner, "The Total Work of Art," in *Wagner Companion*, ed. Burbidge and Sutton, 140–224; *Wagner* (London, 1996).

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from yet related to Tanner's extended framework of Leavisite literary criticism.[91] It is no coincidence, however, that both writers stand uncommonly hostile among contemporary Wagner scholars to *Regietheater* or "director's theater."[92] Wagner's proclaimed desire for mythological nonspecificity – a desire for at least one of our multiple, contradictory Wagners – rings true here. So too, still, does that titanic *Ring* contest between love and power: for Scruton a question as much religious as anything else (for me too, for reasons often, if not always, similar).

Many other writers, German and otherwise, have thought differently concerning politics on- and offstage: doubtless to advantage and disadvantage. Udo Bermbach, for instance, has approached Wagner's work as a political scientist not unconcerned with the particularities of nineteenth-century history yet liable perhaps to downplay them in favor of a "great tradition" of his own, that of Western political theory.[93] Bermbach's either/or comes down squarely on the side of Wagner as revolutionary socialist – perhaps because he is less inclined to address the musical side of Wagner's dramas. If one thinks Wagner's political (and other) ideas were laid down in his poems, which were then merely "set" to music, one may well argue that Schopenhauer – and resignation more broadly – have little role to play. Love, then, is very much a positive, revolutionary force for Bermbach. Dieter Borchmeyer takes a more even-handed, subtler approach, not least since he comes to Wagner as a scholar of German literature. There is room not only for Feuerbach *and* Schopenhauer here, but also for Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, and a host of other writers whose legacy for Wagner is incalculable but with whom some Anglophone writers may be less familiar at first hand.[94] Is "romantic love" to be identified with "love for the Romantic movement"? Borchmeyer's work comes closer than most to helping us appreciate the importance of this question in the *Ring*.

One writer who certainly cannot be accused of minimizing love, not least given his book title, is Barry Emslie. Alas, whilst making many fascinating points on that subject, *Richard Wagner and the Centrality of*

[91] Scruton, *Ring of Truth*; Tanner, *Wagner*, chapter 4; F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (Chatto & Windus: London, 1948).

[92] On which, see Barry Millington's chapter and, in more theoretical yet strongly Wagnerian terms, Mark Berry, "'Es klang so alt und war doch so neu!': Modernist Operatic Culture through the Prism of Staging *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Musical Modernism*, ed. Björn Heile and Charles Wilson (Routledge: London and New York, 2018), 454–74.

[93] Udo Bermbach, *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks: Richard Wagners politisch-ästhetische Utopie*, zweite, überarbeitete und erweiterte Auflage, 2nd edn (Metzler: Stuttgart, 2004).

[94] Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2003); *Die Götter tanzen Cancan: Richard Wagners Liebesrevolten* (Manutius: Heidelberg, 1992).

*Love* loses credibility through a handling of evidence almost as cavalier as Westernhagen's.[95] Like many determined at all costs to "uncover" anti-Semitism as the *Ring*'s motivating force, Emslie identifies a cover-up; his opponents are apologists, literalists, loyalists, acolytes, and so on – and so on. If far from "Wagner and UFOs" – the realm of Joachim Köhler's disgraceful *Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and his Disciple*, which has Wagner (d. 1883) shoulder *sole responsibility* for the Second World War and the Holocaust – there is something of the conspiracy theorist here.[96] Emslie never asks, moreover, why we should not grant higher priority to the *Ring* and Wagner's other dramas, the places he truly worked out his thinking, than to titbits of reported, sometimes distorted, speech. A throwaway remark may well shed light on the dramas; that is not, however, to be taken for granted. In order to maintain such a strange equality between utterances, Emslie must condemn the *Ring* as "a mess," which rather makes one wonder why he bothered.[97] There are better ways to escape, even to explore, the either/or. One would certainly be to look to an interpretation that understands Wagner as a composer, which would return us, as so often, to Dahlhaus.[98]

Another, perhaps related, would be to construct your own path through the *Ring* and its interpretative literature – and stagings. There are enough threads to pick up, as others snap under the weight of the *Ring*'s – and, as for the Norns, the Ring's – history. Interrogate writers', directors', performers' standpoints: ask where they may be coming from, as well as where they have arrived. That need not entail nihilistic skepticism – though that, as Nietzsche would certainly have warned us, may prove one consequence of Wagnerian modernity. On the other hand, it may be indicative of the *Ring* still having much to reveal to us, more than its creator, let alone any of its subsequent interpreters, may ever have dreamed. Perhaps the closest I can come to a truth here is to reiterate, in the tradition of my own critical background, that not only does contradiction exist but that often the greatest truths in a prerevolutionary world will be divined in and through the contradictions of the *Ring* and its interpretations.

[95] Barry Emslie, *Richard Wagner and the Centrality of Love* (Boydell: Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 2010).

[96] Joachim Köhler, *Wagner's Hitler: The Prophet and His Disciple*, trans. Ronald Taylor (Polity: Cambridge, 1997).

[97] Emslie, *Wagner and the Centrality of Love*, 55.

[98] See Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* and other writings cited in this Introduction and elsewhere. For a different path, for which there is alas no room to discuss here, turn to chapters 5 and 6 of Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 1991).

## Performance (History) (Nicholas Vazsonyi)

From the start, the idea of performance was hard-wired into the conception of the *Ring*. Although this is of course true for any musical or dramatic work, the stakes for Wagner – as is almost always the case – were higher. If Wagner, together with his contemporary and imagined nemesis Felix Mendelssohn, inaugurated what can be considered the modern school of conducting, it is even more the case that Wagner was, in many respects, the first opera stage director (*Regisseur*) worthy of the name. The work where this came to the fore was with the world premiere of *The Ring of the Nibelung*.

For Wagner, the very concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, discussed earlier in this Introduction, involved performance. As Carl Dahlhaus stated explicitly: "Drama is not reproduced but actually comes into existence through the process of staging, which Wagner understood as *realization*."[99] This is an idea Wagner inherited from the late eighteenth-century playwright and dramatist Friedrich Schiller, for whom the most effective aesthetic medium for the transmission of ideas to a public in need of moral, ethical, and political persuasion was the drama performed on the stage. Under Schiller, and especially in the wake of the failed French Revolution, the theater was the institution that could undertake the reeducation and moral redemption of humanity, and the creative artist became nothing less than the designated guide. For Schiller, the work of art becomes a tool to achieve the "aesthetic state" through peaceful revolution, where all the ruptures and tensions of modernity would be resolved.[100] This is the political-utopian dream that also lies at the heart of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as Wagner conceived it, a half century later. Wagner recuperates the idea of theater with reference also to an idealized vision of ancient Greek culture and, by integrating music, opened up the theatrical stage to the possibilities of transcendent experience. It was again Schiller, who drew the crucial comparison between performed drama on stage and religion, which has the greatest hold on our civil and moral conduct, an influence exerted with equal force by the stage. For Schiller, religion and the stage both bypass the intellect and operate instead on a visceral level: "Religion generally acts more upon the sensual side of

[99] "Durch die Inszenierung, die Wagner als *Verwirklichung* begriff, wird das Drama nicht reproduziert, sondern überhaupt erst hervorgebracht," Carl Dahlhaus, *Wagners Konzeption des musikalischen Dramas* (München: dtv, 1990), 27. See also Bermbach, *Der Wahn des Gesamtkunstwerks*, especially 210. See also Christiane Heibach, "Avant-Garde Theater as Total Artwork? Media-Theoretical Reflections on the Historical Development of Performing Art Forms," in *The Aesthetics of the Total Artwork: On Borders and Fragments*, trans. Peter Winslow and Anke Finger, ed. Follett and Finger (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 2011), 209–26, here 224.

[100] See Joseph Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1989) and Philip J. Kain, *Schiller, Hegel, and Marx: State Society and the Aesthetic Ideal of Ancient Greece* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1982).

people – indeed, it probably has this infallible effect only through the sensuous . . . and how does the stage achieve its effect?"[101] This is exactly what Wagner also meant, with his famous formulation "die Gefühlswerdung des Verstandes" (the transformation of the intellect into feeling).[102] When Schiller is talking about religion, he means religion-as-church-performance, rather than the peaceful contemplation of the Bible at home. Religion tries to address all aspects of life, "but," as Schiller adds, "the stage extends its sphere of influence further still. Even in those regions where religion and law deem it beneath their dignity to accompany human sentiment, the theater is still at work for our upbringing."[103] For Schiller, the stage is nothing less than an institution that promotes what he would later term the aesthetic education of mankind, "The stage is, more than any other public institution, a school of practical wisdom, a guide to our daily lives, an infallible key to the most secret accesses of the human soul."[104] Its moral dimension also has a political function in that it binds together people of a distinct culture and aids them in finding a unity of taste, conduct, and cultural identification that makes them different from people of another culture. This was already the case in ancient Greece, as understood by the Germans of the eighteenth century.

Given Wagner's intent to create a drama that would be different in every way from "opera" as it was conceived and performed in the nineteenth century, the question of where and how his new form – which posterity has labeled *Gesamtkunstwerk* – was to be performed was integral to the undertaking. Roger Allen's chapter in this volume traces the development of the idea, as revealed in Wagner's correspondence starting already in 1851 through to its realization at the Bayreuth Festival Theater in 1876. There were many stages along the way, including possible sites at the Rhine, Weimar, Zurich, and even Munich. The ultimate choice of Bayreuth had many reasons, and Wagner penned several essays in the early 1870s to explain to his public why Bayreuth.[105] Not only did Wagner take over the

[101] "Religion wirkt im Ganzen mehr auf den sinnlichen Theil des Volks – sie wirkt vielleicht durch das Sinnliche allein so unfehlbar . . . und wodurch wirkt die Bühne?" *Schillers Werke*, Nationalausgabe (hereafter NA) Bd. 20/1, ed. Norbert Oellers, *et al.* (Böhlaus Nachfolger: Weimar, 2001), 87–100.

[102] Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, *PW*, 2:208 (translation modified).

[103] "Aber der Wirkungskreis der Bühne dehnt sich noch weiter aus. Auch da, wo Religion und Geseze es unter ihrer Würde achten, Menschenempfindungen zu begleiten, ist sie für unsere Bildung noch geschäftig" (NA 20/1:94). Schiller reinforces this point again and again. See also: "So gewiß sichtbare Darstellung mächtiger wirkt, als todter Buchstabe und kalte Erzählung, so gewiß wirkt die Schaubühne tiefer und dauernder als Moral und Gesetze" (93), and "Tausend Laster, die jene [Religion N.V.] ungestraft duldet, straft sie [Bühne N.V.]; tausend Tugenden, wovon jene schweigt, werden von der Bühne empfohlen. Hier begleitet sie die Weisheit und die Religion" (93).

[104] "Die Schaubühne ist mehr als jede andere öffentliche Anstalt des Staats eine Schule der praktischen Weisheit, ein Wegweiser durch das bürgerliche Leben, ein unfehlbarer Schlüssel zu den geheimsten Zugängen der menschlichen Seele" (NA 20/1: 95).

[105] See for instance, Wagner's essays: "Schlußbericht über die Umstände und Schicksale, welche die Ausführung des Bühnenfestspieles der *Ring des Nibelungen* bis zur Gründung von Wagner-

city physically, he took possession of it as an idea. He wrote into "Bayreuth" a collection of mutually reinforcing narratives, so that Bayreuth has become synonymous with the entirety of Wagner's project – both an ideologically laden sign and a company town.[106] As if it had had no previous history, Wagner filled it with meaning, which began with bald acts of rhetorical erasure: "Bayreuth is still untarnished, genuinely virgin ground for art."[107] Again and again, he and his allies called Bayreuth "neutral ground" for the "entire German public."[108] Wagner even referred to the town as "a kind of Washington-for-the-Arts."[109] Bayreuth, like Washington DC, was to have no previous history, no contentious past, to haunt it. Wagner's "thoroughly self-sufficient new creation" would be performed "at a location which would only become meaningful via this creation."[110]

The campaign to infuse Bayreuth with meaning began well before the first performance of the *Ring*. Wagner capitalized on its location in the geographic center of the newly unified Germany, describing Bayreuth as "Deutschlands Mitte" (Germany's center). This had the effect of turning Bayreuth into nothing less than a synecdoche of Germany itself. Given its geographic centrality and political-economic remoteness, it was at once at the heart and out of the way, the proverbial German "nook" (*Winkel*).[111] As opposed to urban life – characteristic of the French, the English – Wagner explains, historically decentralized Germany is all about the *Winkel*. The metropolis is un-German, and German ones are the "worst copy" (*schlechtester Kopie*).[112] Just as Bayreuth represents Germany, the "provisional" theater Wagner would build there reminds us of the German state which has also always been provisional.[113]

Not unlike Disneyland, Bayreuth itself is a performance.[114] Wagner was obsessed with the construction and retention of a perfected illusion: the sunken orchestra pit, the invisible orchestra and conductor, the series of proscenium arches, the use of smoke and steam, the totally darkened

Vereinen begleiteten," *SSD*, 9:311–22, and "Das Bühnenfestspielhaus zu Bayreuth. Nebst einem Berichte über die Grundsteinlegung desselben," *SSD*, 9:322–44.

[106] See Nicholas Vazsonyi, "Bayreuth: Capital and Anti-Capital," *Other Capitals of the Nineteenth Century: An Alternative Mapping of Literary and Cultural Space*, ed. Richard Hibbitt (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 205–22.

[107] "Bayreuth aber ist noch unentweihter echt jungfräulicher Boden für die Kunst," Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner an Emil Heckel, Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Bühnenfestspiele in Bayreuth*, ed. Karl Heckel (Breitkopf & Härtel: Leipzig, 1912), 28.

[108] Letter to Emil Heckel, September 23, 1873; "daß ich an einem neutralen Orte eine Unternehmung für das ganze deutsche Publikum, nicht für das Publikum einer Hauptstadt in das Auge gefaßt habe" (*Richard Wagner: Bayreuther Briefe* [Breitkopf & Härtel: Leipzig, 1912], 137).

[109] "*eine Art Kunst-Washington*," Letter to Friedrich Feustel, June 14, 1877.

[110] "an einem Ort, der erst durch diese Schöpfung zur Bedeutung kommen sollte" (Ibid.).

[111] *SSD*, 9:332. [112] *SSD*, 10:22. [113] *SSD*, 9:329.

[114] See also Matthew Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

theater (though this was not originally intended), all of which contribute to the totality of the experience and must properly be considered part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.[115] Beyond this, even, the entire evening is choreographed, from the audience's walk up the hill towards the Festival Theater, to the timing of the performance itself starting at 4pm, to the hour-long intermissions allowing time to eat a meal, reflect, and recover, to the brass ensemble that plays on the outside balcony of the theater to indicate the end of the intermission for ticketholders and spectators alike. So the audience becomes part of this performance, part of the pageantry of the occasion, watching and being watched from all sides.

Just as Wagner had a hand in choreographing – one might also say manipulating – his audience's behavior on the day of the performances, if not for the entire week of the festival, he was meticulous about the musical and stage preparations for the world premiere. We still have the record, written by Wagner's assistant Heinrich Porges who was asked specifically by the composer to take "intimate" notes during the rehearsals of the *Ring* in order "to create a fixed tradition" of its performance.[116] Porges' account, in addition to recording Wagner's interactions with the singers and the orchestra, also effectively functions as a repository of Wagner's ideas on how the cycle should be ideally staged and performed, which Wagner hoped would establish a paradigm for future interpreters of the cycle to follow. It is a vivid portrayal of Wagner's breathtaking ability to become his characters, immerse himself in the drama, and inspire the same in his performers.

In the days before sound recording, the *Ring* faced a significant challenge in becoming widely known and experienced, however incompletely, precisely because performance constitutes such a major challenge. Had it not been for the enterprising Angelo Neumann, the history of *Ring* performance would look very different. Neumann attended the first Bayreuth Festival and immediately worked towards "transplanting" the *Ring* to Leipzig.[117] Despite cumbersome negotiations, Neumann succeeded in staging the first complete *Ring* cycle outside Bayreuth. The success of this

[115] See Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century* Opera (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2019).

[116] Letter to Heinrich Porges, 6 November 1872: "ich [hatte] Ihnen für mein Unternehmen ein für die Zukunft allerwichtigstes Amt bestimmt. Ich wollte Sie nämlich dazu berufen, daß Sie allen meinen Proben . . . genau folgten, um alle meine, noch so intimen Bemerkungen in Betreff der Auffassung und Ausführung unseres Werkes, aufzunehmen und aufzuzeichnen, somit eine fixirte Tradition hierfür zu redigiren" (Richard Wagner, *Richard Wagner an seine Künstler*, ed. Erich Kloss, 3rd edn [Breitkopf & Härtel: Leipzig, 1912], 31). These rehearsal notes have been published as Heinrich Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the Ring: An Eye-Witness Account of the First Bayreuth Festival*, trans. Robert L. Jacobs (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1983), German orig: *Die Bühnenproben zu den Bayreuther Festspielen des Jahres 1876*.

[117] Angelo Neumann, *Erinnergungen an Wagner*, 3rd edn (Staackmann: Leipzig, 1907), 22.

production of 1878 in Munich, which closely imitated the Bayreuth model, earned him Wagner's trust, as did his willingness to accommodate as much as possible the composer's wishes regarding cast and staging. In May 1881, Neumann brought the *Ring* to Berlin's Victoria-Theater, with Wagner attending two of four sold-out cycles; a year later he took it to London. In 1882, Neumann formed a touring "Richard Wagner Theater" with conductor Anton Seidl, an orchestra of between sixty and seventy, two casts, chorus, technical staff, and the original Bayreuth décor that Wagner was willing to sell.[118] Between September 1882 and June 1883, the company performed twenty-nine *Ring* cycles in twenty-five cities across Germany, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, and Austro-Hungary, as well as individual operas and promotional concerts. This unprecedented tour demonstrated widely that the *Ring* was economically and technically viable, and also showed how it was to be staged.[119] Promoting "Muster-Aufführungen" (model performances), it became Bayreuth's "ambulant" counterpart.

It is also important in this context to mention Cosima Wagner. Barry Millington's chapter in this volume discusses some of the key productions of the *Ring* through to our own time, and he has some critical words to say about Cosima's role in creating a fixed and inflexible tradition of Wagner performance and staging that required many decades and possibly a world war to overcome. But it is also important to point out that, without her, there might not be a Bayreuth Festival today. It was no small accomplishment, least of all for a woman in the late nineteenth century, to revive the festival after Wagner's death in 1883 and make it a regular event. Whilst it was of course Richard who started it all in 1876, it was Cosima who made a reality of what has become the longest-running tradition on the German stage. More than that even, following Wagner's own involvement with the staging of the *Ring*, unprecedented for an opera composer, the *Ring* has proved a litmus test for major innovations in operatic and theatrical staging. It might not even be too bold to claim that the history of operatic production styles and philosophies is synonymous with the history of *Ring* productions.

## Impact (Mark Berry)

Wagner's influence, impact, incitement, and so forth – in asking how those apparently similar things differ, we learn more than a little – can scarcely

[118] All of this recounted in Neumann, *Erinnergungen an Wagner*.
[119] See Wagner's letter to Neumann, October 16, 1881 in Neumann, *Erinnergungen an Wagner*, 198.

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be exaggerated. Writing, thinking, reading, watching, listening, performing as we do in the twenty-first century is in itself testament to that. There is not a single chapter, nor a single paragraph, in this book that does not deal with these questions in some way. Nevertheless, some do more than others – and with particular focus. Stefan Arvidsson, placing the *Ring* within a broader context of modern mythology, considers pathways to, also from, the *Ring*; David Trippett does likewise for literary history. It seems that the *Ring*, like the Ring from which it takes its name and much of its action, is an immovable although far from immutable object.

After the Holocaust, we likewise cannot, even if we should wish to, ignore the "specters of Nazism" that not only have come to haunt Wagner posthumously but which have perhaps changed him and the *Ring* forever too. Tash Siddiqui considers some of these ghosts, their progenitors, and their progeny: not to indict, but to understand. Roger Allen's treatment of the "Bayreuth Circle" provides one of the crucial links. Will there now always be something of Hitler in his *Downfall* bunker now to the Valhalla-Wotan of *Götterdämmerung*, grimly awaiting the inevitable end? Adrian Daub's richly suggestive, probing yet playful treatment of the *Ring* in popular culture may speak for itself; there is little point attempting to repeat here what he will say so much better. From Charles Baudelaire to J. R. R Tolkien, from August Strindberg to Lars von Trier, from James Joyce to Joseph Goebbels, mutual influences – posthumous as they may be – abound and resound. There are so many further avenues that could be explored here yet cannot. Nietzsche, like so many of the critics and indeed cheerleaders considered in this book, for instance in the chapters by Eichner and Trippett, deserves at least a chapter to himself.[120]

What of the English utopian social reformer, essayist, and what we should now call sexologist, Havelock Ellis, and his 1890 paean to a "New Spirit," to be found in

> Diderot's mighty enthusiasm, in Heine's passionate cries, in Ibsen's gigantic faith in the future . . . in the music dramas of Wagner, in Zola's pathetic belief in a formula, in Morris's worship of an ideal past, in the aspiration of every Socialist who looks for a return to those barbarous times when every man was equally fed and clothed and housed?[121]

Ellis's legacy to psychoanalysis is far from negligible, if hardly comparable to that of Wagner. There is, after all, sex – there are also sexology and psychoanalytical tropes – aplenty in the *Ring*. Ellis, Jung, and Freud are but

[120] One version of that potential chapter may be read in another *Cambridge Companion*: Mark Berry, "Nietzsche and Wagner," *The New Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Tom Stern (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2019), 97–120.

[121] Henry Havelock Ellis, *The New Spirit* (Bell: London, 1890), 228.

the arbitrary first three in a line that could continue indefinitely yet cannot. What remains to be said here will concentrate instead on music and musical drama "after Wagner," to borrow from the title of a previous book of mine – which considered in the *Ring*'s wake not only *Parsifal* but *Lohengrin*, as well as composers ranging from the conservative (politically and, increasingly, aesthetically) Richard Strauss to the Italian Marxist revolutionary, Luigi Nono.[122]

In *Parsifal*, his final drama, Wagner was indeed confronted with having to take up the challenge he himself had offered the rest of the world: what to write after the "artwork of the future," after the downfall of the gods – especially when, as with the *Ring* itself, that had not necessarily taken place in reality. There is a greater turning inward, an intensification of the Schopenhauerian concerns of Wagner's later work on the *Ring*, although never entirely at the expense of older Hegelian thinking.[123] It was written with Bayreuth in mind; indeed, perhaps solely with Bayreuth in mind. Such certainly was the claim advanced by his heirs, who sought to restrict it to Wagner's Festival Theater, Cosima going so far as to pursue the quixotic cause of a lex *Parsifal*, a special law that would extend copyright for *Parsifal* alone, helping restrict its performances, at least on the eastern side of the Atlantic, to Bayreuth's Green Hill.[124] Help from Strauss, who spent more than a week lobbying the Reichstag on her behalf, and international petition signatories such as Puccini was enlisted. At any rate, the desire to speak to an entire world seemed, at least in part, to have been replaced with a sermon to a (Lutheran) gathered congregation; this was a *Bühnenweihfestspiel* (stage festival consecration play), not a *Bühnenfestspiel*. The fin-de-siècle idea of a temple of art, instantiated in Josef Olbrich's Vienna Secession Building, had many roots, yet none stronger than Bayreuth's. As with the revolutions of 1848–9 in which Wagner had fought, as indeed with any revolution, political or aesthetic, there was, to quote A. J. P. Taylor, an element of a "turning point" whose "fateful essence" was that Germany and indeed Europe, even the world, had "failed to turn."[125] The opera houses of the world had failed to unite to throw off their Italianate and Parisian, still less social and commercial, chains. Aestheticism instead might show the way, as much a reaction to as an extension of the *Ring*, at least in its early stages, yet nevertheless very

[122] Mark Berry, *After Wagner: Histories of Modernist Music Drama from "Parsifal" to Nono* (Boydell: Woodbridge and Rochester, NY, 2014).

[123] Mark Berry, "Is It Here That Time Becomes Space? Hegel, Schopenhauer, History, and Grace in *Parsifal*," *The Wagner Journal*, 3/3 (2009), 29–59.

[124] New York's Metropolitan Opera had already broken the embargo, giving the American premiere in 1903.

[125] A. J. P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of German History since 1815* (Methuen: London, 1961), 68.

much taking its cue from the "Master" – as increasingly he had become known to his disciples – in his later years.

Strauss and Claude Debussy were among the composers most heavily indebted to Wagner to think in this way. Debussy owed a more obvious debt to *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, yet listen to his music, above all his opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and much else besides, and you will hear harmonies, melodies, timbres, musical processes at work quite unimaginable without the *Ring*.[126] *Siegfried*'s Neidhöhle undoubtedly informs the dark forest of Debussy's Allemonde; its "Forest Murmurs," as Siegfried commences his liberation from that world, left their mark on *Prélude à l'aprés-midi d'un faune* (as strong a candidate as any to be accounted the first work of "modern music"). The composer who caricatured Wagner's leitmotifs as "calling cards" knew they were far more than that; his music certainly did. Moreover, the "symphonic development" Debussy thought contrary to that of character development and which he often, yet not entirely, avoided in *Pelléas*, was born anew and with similar eccentricity in the tone-poem *La Mer*.[127]

The Bavarian Strauss was lauded in Munich as the truest heir to the composer of four works premiered there, *Rheingold* and *Walküre* included. To those four, he helped add a fifth, rehearsing *Die Feen* for its posthumous premiere in 1888. Munich took its Wagner seriously and still does; many of the great performances and productions have taken place in this rival to Bayreuth (itself too situated in modern Bavaria). A darker side to both has long been apparent too, the "Bayreuth Circle" mirrored, for instance, in that notorious 1933 protest by the "Richard Wagner City Munich" against "Mr Thomas Mann" and a lecture on Wagner he had given at the university a few days earlier, in the light of the "national restoration of Germany … [having] taken on definite form."[128] The very forces of reaction and progress Mann divined in Wagner, which Adorno would claim were impossible to separate "as sheep from goats," seemed to have been reinvented, in this next Richard – as they would be, perhaps, in all Wagner's successors.[129]

[126] See Berry, "Music and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*," 628–9; Robin Holloway, *Debussy and Wagner* (Eulenberg: London, 1979).

[127] Claude Debussy, "Critique des critiques: *Pelléas et Mélisande*," *Le Figaro*, May 16, 1902, in *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, ed. Francois Lesure, rev. edn (Gallimard: Paris, 1987), 277.

[128] *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* of April 16/17, reprinted and translated in Sven Friedrich, "Ambivalenz der Leidenschaft – Thomas Mann und Richard Wagner. Zum 125. Geburtstag Thomas Manns," in *Programmhefte der Bayreuther Festspiele* (Bayreuth, 2000), 142, 150. Hans Knappertsbusch, a justly famed Wagner interpreter, albeit not to Hitler's liking, and thus soon to be sidelined in Munich, was instrumental in and may even have drafted the "protest." See also Hans Rudolf Vaget, *"Wehvolles Erbe": Richard Wagner in Deutschland. Hitler, Knappertsbusch, Mann* (Fischer: Frankfurt, 2017), 258.

[129] Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner*, 44.

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Such indeed may prove to have been Wagner's most widespread musical legacy: whether for those who embraced him, rejected him, or fell somewhere in between. Few, very few, could proceed in blissful oblivion. Responses always seemed to entail a measure of both. In taking Wagner's chromaticism, as much as that of *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* as that of *Tristan*, to its limits and beyond, Schoenberg had ushered in a brave new world of so-called atonality. However, even he had had felt compelled to resort to Brahms and his school to construct order out of the chaos that ensued. It was more complicated than that, of course; Schoenberg's "developing variation" actually owed a good deal, far more than has generally been acknowledged, to the more generative aspects of Wagner's "musical prose" as developed in the *Ring*. That said, dodecaphony, whatever the personal Wagnerian inclinations of many of its practitioners, stood in some respects as a reaction to Wagner. One of the most prominent leaders of the postwar avant-garde, Boulez would find in his study and conducting of Wagner and another of Wagner's more immediate heirs, Gustav Mahler, considerable inspiration to rebuild larger forms more freely.[130] That likewise stood to some degree in reaction, or at least dialectical response, to his and other composers' earlier, brief period of so-called "total serialism." Moreover, the idea of the musical "signal," crucial to many of Boulez's works, owed not a little to Wagner's conception of the leitmotif, above all as it appeared in the *Ring*.

Likewise, Harrison Birtwistle's decisive turn to Wagner in the early 1980s embraced elements of leitmotif, the idea of continuous line, even source material. Part of the attraction of *Gawain*'s subject matter was proximity to *Götterdämmerung* and *Parsifal*.[131] The *Ring* in particular has offered Birtwistle, who had always been fascinated by viewing and portraying musical events from several standpoints, a fine example of drama that need not necessarily be experienced in a single direction. One did not need to have been a fully fledged (or any variety of) serialist in the first place – by the late twentieth century, the term often begged more questions than it answered – to feel a need to "return" to Wagner. He was by now, quite simply, "there": like Bach, Beethoven, or indeed Schoenberg.

Perhaps the most obvious, if slightly superficial, legacy lies in the through-composed nature of so many twentieth-century operatic acts: more deeply, related yet not reducible to that, in the *unendliche Melodie* (endless melody) so greatly admired by composers from Strauss and

[130] On Wagner and Boulez, see Mark Berry, "'Blow the Opera Houses into the Air!' Wagner, Boulez, and Modernist Canons," in *Oxford Handbook to the Operatic Canon*, ed. Cormac Newark and William Weber (Oxford University Press: Oxford, in press).

[131] David Beard, *Harrison Birtwistle's Operas and Music Theatre* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012), 199–201.

Debussy, indeed from Schumann and Liszt, to Birtwistle and beyond. The term has often been misunderstood; it has little to do, even in *Tristan*, with the long phrases of Italian *bel canto* opera, but rather refers to the need for each and every note to be expressive, significant within the whole. Therein surely lies one of Wagner's most important legacies to Schoenberg, his pupils Alban Berg and (especially) Webern, and beyond, to Boulez, Stockhausen, *et al*. It is as much a way of understanding some of the greatest music of the past – usually yet not necessarily Austro-German – and of placing works, here the *Ring*, within that lineage, as it is of offering prescriptions for the music of the future (a term Wagner endowed with often unacknowledged irony).[132]

For, as Dahlhaus points out, when Wagner coined the term, he did so with respect to Beethoven, divining in the "Eroica" Symphony the unfolding and development of a single coherent melody – perhaps not so very different from what Schoenberg, defying interpreters ever since to make final sense of his term, called the Idea of a musical work. "According to Wagner," Dahlhaus continues, "music is 'melodic' when every note is eloquent and expressive; and in contrast to a 'narrow melody,' in which the melodic element is continually interrupted in order to make room for vacuous formulae ... avoidance of cadences is not the nature of the principle, but one of its consequences."[133] In Strauss's *Salome* as much as Berg's *Wozzeck*, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* as much as Luigi Dallapiccola's *Il prigioniero*, Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten* as much as Nono's *Prometeo*, *unendliche Melodie*, even when broken, had become the new norm.

Closed forms within – as, for instance, in Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, and Ferruccio Busoni's *Doktor Faust* (especially, controversially, in its completion by Busoni's pupil, Philipp Jarnach) – gained much of their meaning, even their validity, through interaction with that longer musical line, implicit or explicit. Number opera was not dead; rather, it found resurrection in explicit reaction to Wagner. In Kurt Weill – setting, notably, the avowedly anti-Wagnerian dramatist, Bertolt Brecht – and in Igor Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, a self-conscious "return" to an "eighteenth century" that was very much of the twentieth, the artificiality of individual songs or arias was embraced, often with anti-Wagnerian polemical edge. Reaction is, however, often the deepest, sincerest debt of all.

[132] Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1989), 120.
[133] Ibid., 121.

Stockhausen's *Licht* cycle, mentioned above, remains perhaps the most overt homage to, even attempt to outdo, the *Ring*. Both Wagner and Stockhausen have often found themselves accused of megalomania; both have attracted discipleship to an uncommon degree of subservience. Stockhausen, moreover, on his death in 2007, would receive the following words of tribute in *The Observer*: "This was the man who realised that Wagner was rock'n'roll and that rock'n'roll is Wagner – if only people would realise; the composer who arranged to have his oeuvre stashed away on microfiche in a nuclear shelter, so that it would be the only art to survive an atomic holocaust. Another reason to thank God there wasn't one."[134] Arguably the two most important and certainly the two most controversial German composers of their respective ages shared a concern with world history both as posterity and catastrophe: something comical, even absurd, yet not entirely without meaning. As Beethoven's symphonies were to the nineteenth century, so were Wagner's dramas to the twentieth. Beethoven did not cease to be influential, far from it; yet even he tended to be mediated through Wagner, both as composer and conductor. (Wilhelm Furtwängler's Beethoven recordings are inconceivable without Wagner's "tradition" behind them; likewise, insofar as we can ever know about them, Mahler's performances, "retouchings" of the score and all.) Even late twentieth-century neoclassical reaction to "heroic" Beethoven, whether as Stravinskian composition or "authenticke" performance, stood more concerned with opposing Wagner and his legacy than with Beethoven as such.[135] To return to the distinction quoted earlier in this Introduction from Deathridge, the *Ring* may not be quite so "big" as *Licht*; it nevertheless still seems "greater."[136]

## Final Thoughts (Nicholas Vazsonyi and Mark Berry)

It required the better part of a lifetime for Richard Wagner to conceive and compose *The Ring of the Nibelung* and to bring it to its first complete performance. And it requires a lifetime at the very least to get to know this work. If you are a first-time explorer, take a deep breath, be patient, and give yourself time. You will be rewarded. And until you know the text more or less by heart, don't just listen to the music. Whenever you can, try to see it performed. Even bad productions and performances will contribute to your understanding of the work.

[134] Ed Vulliamy, "Karlheinz Stockhausen," *The Observer*, December 9, 2007, 2018, http://bit.ly/33dYuAq (accessed March 12, 2020).

[135] See Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1995).

[136] See the discussion in the "Why the *Ring*?" section above and the reference given in Note 12.