

# 11 Critical Responses

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If Richard Wagner is one of the most written-about men in history, this is due in no small part to the extraordinary amount of debate and controversy inspired by *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Friend and foe agree that the tetralogy occupies a unique position in the development of art and that its influence is (or should be) felt in all areas of society, culture, and politics. It is these claims to the *Ring's* wider significance that form the backbone of this chapter. Its scope does not allow for a fully fledged reception study of Wagner criticism, nor will any of the many artistic responses – from Henri Fantin-Latour's drawings to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* – be considered. Nor is this a history of *Ring* research, although some seminal works by professional music critics and musicologists will feature in the second half of this chapter. Rather, it will chart some milestones of the debates surrounding Wagner's *Ring*, including well-known contributions by Nietzsche, Shaw, and Adorno but also by less well-known writers, and place them into their wider historical and social context.

A quick glance at the wealth of literature shows that it falls basically into two camps: writings that insert Wagner's *Ring* into an ideological system of the author's choice, and writings that develop an interpretation of the wider world from the *Ring* outward. The sheer size and heterogeneity of the *Ring* makes it difficult to integrate it seamlessly into any complex argument; thus its "meaning" frequently was reduced to a manageable selection of intellectual or artistic concepts, or discussions highlighted only those features that went well with the *Weltanschauung* in question. On the other hand, the *Ring* was and is a particularly fruitful playing field for debate, with its focus on law and governance, freedom and servitude, loyalty and disobedience, greedy egotism and selfless love. From the start, most commentators were aware that the *Ring* owed its initial inspiration to the composer's involvement in the 1848–9 Revolutions. Wagner himself raised the stakes with writings such as *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*Artwork of the Future*, 1849) and *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde* (*A Communication to My Friends*, 1851), which promised a complete shake-up of all things artistic and political through his latest operatic

venture. He could not have foreseen, however, the wide range of interpretations that the completed *Ring* would inspire.

### From the Publication of the Libretto to Bayreuth

Public responses to the *Ring* started considerably before its first complete performance in Bayreuth in 1876, at a time when only the music of *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, and half of *Siegfried* had been completed. Heinrich Porges, coeditor of the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (NZfM) and later the chronicler of the 1876 rehearsals in Bayreuth, was among the first to promise a full-scale interpretation of the *Ring* based on the libretto published in 1863. Although his series of articles did not venture further than *Rheingold*, it introduced several themes that remained staples of the discourse for decades to come: the claim that the *Ring* attempted to “recreate the totality of the hustle and bustle of the world in a unified artwork”;<sup>1</sup> its relevance particularly for the Germans by reviving their “ancient history”; its combination of Greek clarity with Germanic infiniteness;<sup>2</sup> its perfect embodiment of nature in the figure of Siegfried, the “ur-image of the human being”;<sup>3</sup> the expressivity and realism of its music and its developmental-symphonic character reminiscent of Beethoven.<sup>4</sup> Much of Porges’ introduction, however, is a plot summary, and this focus continues in the critical responses to the first cyclic performances in Bayreuth in 1876. Apparently, the mythological storyline, which departed significantly from the well-known *Nibelungenlied*, needed substantial explanation. By contrast, few writers saw the *Ring*’s potential significance beyond immediate artistic or musical concerns. The Protestant Church in Germany strongly voiced its discomfort with the all-encompassing pretensions of the artwork of the future, the preachings of the “new musical Messiah” and the *Schwärmerei* (swooning enthusiasm) among his followers.<sup>5</sup> A journalist for the *Neue Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* also rejected the claim that the music dramas or their Bayreuth realization constituted a national treasure, an idea that already

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Porges, “Richard Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen* I,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 58/23 (June 5, 1863), 191–2. All translations are by the author, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>3</sup> Heinrich Porges, “Richard Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen* III,” *NZfM*, 58/25 (June 19, 1863), 211–13, here 212.

<sup>4</sup> Heinrich Porges, “Richard Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen* IV,” *NZfM*, 58/26 (June 26, 1863), 223–5, here 224.

<sup>5</sup> [H. Messner], “Das Bühnen-Festspiel in Bayreuth,” *Neue Evangelische Kirchenzeitung* 36 (September 2, 1876), reprinted in S. Großmann-Vendrey, *Bayreuth in der deutschen Presse. Beiträge zur Rezeptionsgeschichte Richard Wagners und seiner Festspiele* (Bosse: Regensburg, 1977), vol. 1, *Die Grundsteinlegung und die ersten Festspiele (1872–1876)*, 77–81.

had become standard among Wagnerians. However, even those who emphasized Bayreuth's significance for a new national – German – art usually stopped short of drawing explicit political parallels. One exception is an anonymous article in the *Deutsche Presse* of Vienna, which traces the inspiration for the festival to the upsurge of national confidence in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, claiming that the German people themselves had now become the patron of art.<sup>6</sup> The author's stance must be seen against his Austrian background: After the hopes for a Greater German Empire had been laid to rest for the present, many Austro-Germans upheld all the more forcefully the inseparable bond of Germany and Austria in the sphere of arts and ideas.

Friedrich Nietzsche likewise saw the Franco-Prussian War as a decisive step towards the realization of the Bayreuth project. He published "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth" as the fourth of his *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen* (Untimely Meditations) in 1876 and sent the essay to Wagner in July 1876 as "a kind of Bayreuth festival sermon."<sup>7</sup> In many ways, it serves as an echo chamber of Wagner's own writings about the destiny of the music drama, namely to bring about profound change in all areas of society. In line with the title of the essay collection, Nietzsche stresses that the Wagner phenomenon is not yet "timely" (*zeitgemäß*); the realization of the Bayreuth Festival anticipates a future world which truly needs art and derives authentic satisfaction from it.<sup>8</sup> Among the present generation, Wagner's works will steel the tragic spirit for future fights against the traditional order of power and law, customs and contracts.<sup>9</sup> Exasperatedly, he exclaims in the final section, "And now ask yourselves, you generations of human beings living today! Was this written *for you*? Do you have the courage to point your hand at the stars of this entire firmament of beauty and goodness and say: it is *our* life that Wagner placed under these stars?"<sup>10</sup>

It is ironic that the writer of the impassioned "festival sermon" had to leave Bayreuth during the rehearsals, as he could not bear the heat or the admiring crowds. Twelve years later, he had shaken himself free from his Wagner infatuation and attacked him in *Der Fall Wagner* (The Case of Wagner, 1888) and *Nietzsche contra Wagner* (1889). In his acerbic parody of "redemption," he declares that the composer – in the guise of the "typical revolutionary" Siegfried – sought his own redemption in the *Ring* through the destruction of the old gods and the emancipation of

<sup>6</sup> Anonymous, "Die Bedeutung des Baireuther Festspiels," *Deutsche Zeitung (Wien)*, no. 1660–1661 (August 16–17, 1876), reprinted in Großmann-Vendrey, *Bayreuth in der deutschen Presse*, 83–4.

<sup>7</sup> Letter draft to Richard Wagner, July 1876, Friederich Nietzsche, *Briefwechsel, Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, part II vol. 5, *Briefe von Nietzsche: 1875–1879* (de Gruyter: Berlin, 1980), 173.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. R. T. Gray (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 1995), 328. On the Bayreuth Festival, see also Roger Allen's chapter in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 277–8. <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

woman.<sup>11</sup> Wagner floundered on the reef of Schopenhauerian philosophy, turning the *Ring* from a socialist utopia into a dramatization of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, and Wagner into the artist of decadence. While “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth” stressed the noncontemporaneity of his works, *Der Fall Wagner* declared the opposite: Wagner’s oeuvre encapsulates everything that is wrong with modern art and society; it is artificial, brutal, mock-innocent, lying; a pick-me-up for enfeebled youths and a dangerous stimulant for hysterical women.

### Degeneration and Regeneration

Nietzsche’s voice was by no means alone in a swelling chorus decrying contemporary culture. “Conservative revolutionaries” like Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, or Arthur Moeller van den Bruck vociferously attacked liberalism, capitalism, materialism, parliamentarianism, and urban lifestyles and “propounded all manner of reforms, ruthless and idealistic, nationalistic and utopian,”<sup>12</sup> holding out the promise of a redemption or rebirth in the *völkisch* spirit. The success of these “politics of cultural despair,” using Fritz Stern’s memorable term, built on a long-standing tradition of German idealistic yearning, an emphasis on culture and the cultivation of *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness), and a deeply-ingrained habit to regard culture as equal with religion, which brought a prophesying and proselytizing tone into the debate.<sup>13</sup> The place of art in society was important in these writings, not least because Wagner himself had made far-reaching claims about the redemptive mission of his music dramas and joined the antimodern discourse in his late “regeneration writings.” However, opinions were divided whether he was the illness of or the cure for modern life. While Paul de Lagarde, for example, was courted by Bayreuth after Wagner’s death, the bestselling writer of *Deutsche Schriften* (German Writings, 1878) was “bored to extinction” by a performance of *Siegfried* and told Wagnerians so with great relish.<sup>14</sup> Leo Tolstoy was similarly traumatized by attending the same opera in Moscow. In his essay *What Is Art?* (1897) he pillories plot and performance in excruciating detail and reiterates, by then, well-worn criticisms of the music. Since his essay deals with the question of art’s role in society, his main concern is the impact of Wagner’s works on an already degenerate urban audience. They will

<sup>11</sup> Friederich Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner. Ein Musikanten-Problem*, in *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, part 6 vol. 3 (de Gruyter: Berlin, 1969), ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari 14–15.

<sup>12</sup> Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1974), xi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiv–xxv. <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

affect the spectator by hypnotizing him, as a man who listens for several hours to the ravings of a madman uttered with great oratorical skill will also become hypnotized . . . This can be achieved in a still quicker way by drinking wine or smoking opium . . . Try sitting in the dark for four days in the company of not quite normal people, subjecting your brain to the strongest influence of sound calculated to excite the brain by strongly affecting the nerves of hearing, and you are certain to arrive at an abnormal state and come to admire the absurdity.<sup>15</sup>

Julius Langbehn, another cultural pessimist, took particular offense at the “erotic madness” in *Tristan und Isolde*, which he characterized as non-German, and saw a similarly exaggerated “sensual character” in the Nordic mythology, in contrast to the “silent passion” of the ur-German *Nibelungenlied*.<sup>16</sup> Even Wagner’s anti-Semitism was no recommendation to Langbehn, one of the figureheads of this movement, since Wagner had applied Meyerbeer’s technique to national stories and thus “out-meyerbeered Meyerbeer.”

The medicalization of Wagner’s operas reached its high point in Max Nordau’s widely read pathology of *fin de siècle* cultural *Entartung* (Degeneration, 1892).<sup>17</sup> Building on the work of Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso, who had linked genius and mental disorder, Nordau offered a complementary study of arts and letters,<sup>18</sup> encompassing phenomena as diverse as the Pre-Raphaelites, Symbolism, and the “cult of Richard Wagner” under the heading “mysticism.” He sees Wagner as the victim of two pathological urges: an anarchist bitterness, which manifests itself mainly in the writings (not in the *Ring*), and an exuberant sexual drive: “All his life, Wagner has been an amorist [*Erotiker*] (in the pathological sense of the word) and his imagination entirely circles on woman.”<sup>19</sup> The *Ring* provides a rich hunting ground for corroborating evidence. After citing Hanslick’s verdict of the “animal sensuality” in *Rheingold* and the repugnant lustful groaning in *Siegfried*, Nordau offers a close reading of the stage directions in *Die Walküre* and concludes that *Siegfried*, *Götterdämmerung*, and *Tristan und Isolde* faithfully replay the main content of *Die Walküre*: “It is the ever same dramatic embodiment of the same obsessive idea, the terror of love.”<sup>20</sup> At the same time, Wagner’s bodily urges struggle with the self-denying ideals of Schopenhauerian philosophy, necessitating the death of the sinful character. This eroticism was not even original since Nordau brands Wagner “the last fungus on the

<sup>15</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art*, trans. R. Pevear and L. Volokhonsky (Penguin: London, 1995), 111.

<sup>16</sup> Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher. Von einem Deutschen* (C. L. Hirschfeld: Leipzig, 1890), 269.

<sup>17</sup> Laurence Dreyfus covers Max Nordau’s views at some length in *Wagner and the Erotic Impulse* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2010), 161ff.

<sup>18</sup> Max Nordau, *Entartung*, 2nd edn (Carl Duncker: Berlin, 1893), 1:vi–vii. <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

ding-heap of romanticism.”<sup>21</sup> He sees Wagner’s intermingling of the arts not as a step towards the future but as an atavistic regression towards an earlier, less developed stage. Nordau’s criticism of the music, however, remains conventional; he rejects the “endless melody” as a string of recitatives, and the use of leitmotifs as a violation of the nonrepresentational nature of music. From these criticisms, Nordau moves back to the intellectual and cultural climate which made degenerate art possible: The eager reception of Wagner’s works can only be explained with the rise of hysteria in Germany since the 1870s. Especially those already affected – notably women – were an easy prey for the voluptuous eroticism, dazzling imagery, and hypnotic quality of the music. Furthermore, Wagner’s success relies on pandering to contemporary obsessions of the Germans, such as anti-Semitism, chauvinism, and vegetarianism. Nordau thus classifies these regeneration movements, which were endorsed by many of the “conservative revolutionaries,” as dangerous aberrations that found their artistic complement in Wagner.

It may seem ironic that Wagner’s attempts to revive folklore and national mythology could be interpreted as a sign of decay and degeneration, for instance in Oswald Spengler’s *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Decline of the West, 1918–22), which outlines a historiographical panorama of rising and falling cultures, with Western civilization the latest to enter a downward trajectory. Spengler draws parallels between Wagner and Baudelaire, who both appeal to the “cosmopolitan man of the brain, not the rural or generally natural man,”<sup>22</sup> aligns their art with contemporary concepts such as Darwinism and Socialism and declares: “Everything Nietzsche has said about Wagner equally applies to Manet. Seemingly a return to the elemental . . . , their art in fact yields to the barbarism of the big cities . . . . An artificial art is unable to develop organically; it marks the end.”<sup>23</sup> Although Spengler lacks the moral panic that characterizes much of *fin de siècle* cultural criticism, he clearly sees Wagner’s art as the writing on the wall.

The opposite camp considered Wagner one of its figureheads in the fight for regeneration and national renewal but was likewise steeped in conservative cultural pessimism, possibly with even more pronounced racist and supremacist overtones. The journal *Bayreuther Blätter*, founded by Wagner’s acolyte Hans von Wolzogen in 1878 to give Wagner’s late writings a forum and to act as the “official” Bayreuth mouthpiece, sought,

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>22</sup> Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft: Berlin, n.d.) [unabridged translation of the edition: (C.H. Beck, Munich, 1923)], 48.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 377.



in particular, to integrate the dramas into a *völkisch* worldview.<sup>24</sup> At first the *Bayreuther Blätter* focused on *Parsifal* and published only literary-historical explorations of the *Ring* mythology, with the exception of an early contribution by Nietzsche's physician Otto Eiser, who suggested that the Nordic-Germanic *Ring* mythology was injected with a contemporary spirit and thus evolved towards the basic idea of Christianity.<sup>25</sup> The most comprehensive exegesis of the *Ring* appeared in several installments between 1907 and 1915: The Austrian independent scholar Felix Gross interpreted the tetralogy as a pagan cosmology in preparation for the Christian world in *Parsifal*, where gods and humans progress through ever-renewing cycles of innocence, fall-from-grace, curse, and revenge.<sup>26</sup> *Rheingold* in particular is seen through the racist lens as a fight between Aryan and non-Aryan races, which the former are doomed to lose precisely because of their exalted ideals. Gross was not the only one to employ the modish term "Aryan," which so conveniently conflated mythology and up-to-date science. In 1911 the esteemed Viennese Indologist Leopold von Schroeder published a treatise where he explains Wagnerian drama as the final destination of several thousand years of Aryan culture, from Indian cult and Greek theater onwards.<sup>27</sup> Schroeder reads the Siegfried story as a modern variant of an archaic solar myth, a theory that by 1911 had a venerable ancestry, not least in Wagner's own treatise *Die Wibelungen*. In contrast to many others dabbling in Aryan ideas, however, Schroeder had a solid academic background in Indian literature and Baltic folklore, and while the introduction in particular celebrates Wagner's creation of the German music drama as rebirth of ur-Aryan myths, his arguments steer clear of the derogatory racism so common in the early twentieth century.

Whether these writers saw in the *Ring* drama the crowning achievement of German – or even human – culture or just the most deplorable aberration of modern civilization, they usually agreed that their praise or criticism was not political but metapolitical. The *Ring's* potential for critiquing contemporary political and social conditions was suppressed

<sup>24</sup> About the ideological stance of the Bayreuth Circle and the journal, see Winifred Schüler, *Der Bayreuther Kreis von seiner Entstehung bis zum Ausgang der Wilhelminischen Ära: Wagnerkult und Kulturreform im Geiste völkischer Weltanschauung* (Aschendorff: Münster, 1971); Annette Hein, "Es ist viel Hitler in Wagner": *Rassismus und antisemitische Deutschtumsideologie in den "Bayreuther Blättern" (1878–1938)* (M. Niemeyer: Tübingen, 1996); and Stephen McClatchie, "Bayreuther Blätter," in *CWE*, 43–5.

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of the *Ring* interpretations in the *Bayreuther Blätter*, see Udo Bermbach, "Richard Wagner als Prophet des Weltkrieges.' Zur *Ring*-Interpretation in den *Bayreuther Blättern* 1878–1938," in *Richard Wagners "Ring des Nibelungen." Musikalische Dramaturgie – Kulturelle Kontextualität – Primär-Rezeption* (Karl Dieter Wagner: Schneverdingen, 2004), ed. Klaus Hortchansky 49–84, here 55.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> Leopold von Schroeder, *Die Vollendung des arischen Mysteriums in Bayreuth* (J. E. Lehmann: Munich, 1911), 7.

through a strict separation of the lowly realm of pragmatic, materialistic politics and an idealistic sphere of timeless, transcendent values and artistic endeavor.<sup>28</sup> Even Wagner's son-in-law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who exerted a decisive influence on twentieth-century politics, kept Wagner out of his ideological texts. The composer is not even mentioned in the seminal *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Foundations of the Nineteenth Century, 1899), while *Das Drama Richard Wagners* (1892) proposes a purely interiorized reading of the music dramas including the *Ring*, which he characterizes as the "tragedy of Wotan."<sup>29</sup>

This apolitical posturing of intellectual opinion leaders, which dogged German intellectual life well into the twentieth century, found its best-known expression in Thomas Mann's *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Reflections of a Non-Political Man, 1918), where he argues that his rejection of democracy and cosmopolitanism – all alien to the German spirit – does not constitute a political but a metapolitical statement.<sup>30</sup> His early experiences of Wagner's music played an important role in the self-fashioning of the German bourgeois thinker par excellence, including a story of how alienated – and German – he felt while listening to an open-air performance of Siegfried's Funeral March in Rome, surrounded by a crowd of unruly Italians. The lecture "Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners" (Richard Wagner's Suffering and Greatness), which he gave at an event of the Munich Goethe Society on February 10, 1933, responded to the changed political climate with careful analysis and guarded observations. Mann's main concerns are Wagner's character and personality as an artist, and at first he contains Wagner's political activism within the nineteenth-century bourgeois mindset: "I won't insist that he was a revolutionary of 1848, a middle-class fighter and thus a political citizen; because he was it in his particular way, as an artist and in the interest of his revolutionary art, for which he expected non-material advantages, improved reception conditions from an overturning of the existing order."<sup>31</sup> However, when Mann moves on to nationalism and Wagner's Germanness, it becomes apparent that his insistence on the unpolitical nature of the composer – whose nationalism was either alien to official state politics in the 1840s, or merely pragmatic in Bismarck's new

<sup>28</sup> Bermbach, "Richard Wagner als Prophet des Weltkrieges," 58–9.

<sup>29</sup> Houston Stewart Chamberlain, *Das Drama Richard Wagners: Eine Anregung*, 6th ed (Breitkopf & Härtel: Leipzig, 1921), 111 and 100. See also R. Allen, "All here is music': Houston Stewart Chamberlain and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*," *wagnerspectrum* 1 (2006): 155–77.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Fischer: Berlin, 1920), 32. For Mann's relationship to Wagner in general, see Hans Rudolf Veget, *Im Schatten Wagners: Thomas Mann über Richard Wagner: Texte und Zeugnisse 1895–1955* (Fischer: Frankfurt am Main, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Mann, "Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners," in *Reden und Aufsätze* vol. 9 of *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden* (Fischer: Frankfurt am Main, 1960), 363–426, here 410.



Empire – is a warning against the simplistic appropriation of the artist by the National Socialist regime. In Mann’s view, Wagner’s Germanness is “modern, fragmented and deconstructed, decorative, analytic, intellectual,” at the same time offering “the most sensational self-expression and self-criticism of the German character” – in short, cosmopolitan.<sup>32</sup> The effect of the lecture was immediate: Forty-eight mainly Munich-based artists and intellectuals (most of whom had not heard the lecture or read the article in *Die Neue Rundschau*) accused Mann in an open letter of character assassination, which the writer took as a signal not to return from a holiday in Switzerland.

While “Leiden und Größe Richard Wagners” has little to say specifically about the *Ring*, in 1937 Mann returned to the tetralogy in a public lecture delivered on occasion of a performance in Zurich. Here the meta-political reading of Wagner’s music dramas reasserts itself. In the first half, Mann outlines in some detail Wagner’s revolutionary involvement and even calls him a “Kultur-Bolshevist,” who wrote the *Ring* “essentially as an attack on the bourgeois civilization and culture that had reigned supreme since the Renaissance – [with] its blend of primitivism and futurity . . . aimed at a non-existent world of classless populism.”<sup>33</sup> His initial comparison of the *Ring* with the second part of Goethe’s *Faust*, however, signals that Wagner’s work was no mere political parable but true art and therefore “concerned solely with the primeval poetry of the psyche, with the simplest of beginnings, the pre-conventional and the pre-social: and these things alone seem to him to be fit material for art.”<sup>34</sup> While non-German artists, such as Dickens, Thackeray, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Balzac, or Zola focused their efforts at monumentality on the social novel, “the form that this greatness took in Germany, knows nothing of the social dimension and desires to know nothing of it: for society is not musical, or indeed accessible to art at all.”<sup>35</sup> Contemporary events notwithstanding, Mann placidly concludes that the “German spirit is essentially uninterested in the social and the political”<sup>36</sup> and that the *Ring*’s ending projects “the same message that speaks to us in the words at the end of Germany’s other universal poem of life [i.e. *Faust II*] . . . The Eternal-Feminine / Draws us ever on.”<sup>37</sup> Wagner’s art is divorced from the political realities of the day not because it is “just art” but because it is “true art.”

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 422–3. See also Hans Rudolf Vaegt, “Wehvolles Erbe” *Richard Wagner in Deutschland: Hitler, Knappertsbusch, Mann* (Fischer: Frankfurt am Main, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Mann, “Richard Wagner and Der Ring des Nibelungen,” November 1937,” in *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. A. Blunden, with an introduction by Erich Heller (Faber and Faber: London, Boston, 1985), 171–93, here 178.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 192. <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 193. <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

### Political Readings

Due to the dominance of these *fin de siècle* “idealists,” political readings of the *Ring* were rare in German-speaking Wagner literature. An interesting exception is Moritz Wirth’s treatise *Bismarck, Wagner, Rodbertus, drei deutsche Meister* (Three German Masters, 1883). He sets out rather conventionally by celebrating Bismarck and Wagner as the creators of the German Empire and German music drama respectively. However, their legacy is still awaiting completion in the sphere of social reform, as envisaged by the economist Karl Rodbertus. Rodbertus was interested in the welfare of the working classes, and, while stopping short of communist demands like the nationalization of property and capital, he advocated state intervention to guarantee minimum wages and thus a more equal access to property, culture, and education.<sup>38</sup> The influence of this idea can be seen in Wirth’s appraisal of the *Ring*, where he asks: “Alberich’s cursed ring, which travels from hand to hand, what should it signify but the reign of capitalism, which is just as detrimental for us inhabitants of the real world, as the ring is for the gods and heroes of the drama?”<sup>39</sup> In Wirth’s view, Wagner did not follow these ideas to their logical conclusion, as he portrays greed for money and lust for power as individual shortcomings, which can be healed with compassion and self-denial as expounded in *Parsifal*. Wirth, in contrast, maintains that social and economic ills need a social solution, as outlined in the economic theories of Rodbertus: The improvement of the material conditions would automatically lead to an improvement in morality and common happiness.<sup>40</sup> Thus the most fitting model for the German people is not a Buddhist outcast along the lines of *Die Sieger* but a dynamic character such as Wieland the Smith.

The tension between “idealistic,” apolitical readings of Wagner’s music dramas on the one hand and more concrete political applications on the other, is played out in several European countries around the turn of the century. Discussions about Wagner’s relevance for contemporary society were further complicated by the necessity to integrate his German nationalism – and that of his followers – into home-grown narratives of national renewal and regeneration. In the wake of the Franco-Prussian War, “French Wagnerians stayed away from political issues of all kinds, except for some abstract social observations, since any such discussion led them into dangerous territory.”<sup>41</sup> Symbolist and aestheticizing

<sup>38</sup> Eckhart Reidegeld, *Staatliche Sozialpolitik in Deutschland: historische Entwicklung und theoretische Analyse von den Ursprüngen bis 1918* (Westdeutscher Verlag: Opladen, 1996), 76–8.

<sup>39</sup> Moritz Wirth, *Bismarck, Wagner, Rodbertus, drei deutsche Meister. Betrachtungen über ihr Wirken und die Zukunft ihrer Werke* (Oswald Mutze: Leipzig, 1883), 154.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 393ff.

<sup>41</sup> Gerald D. Turbow, “Wagnerism in France,” in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, ed. David C. Large and William Weber (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1984), 134–66, here 157.

approaches prevailed among professional writers and artists. Towards the end of the century, however, Wagner and his works were “ideological weapons in the cultural battles between Left and Right that followed the Dreyfus Affair” of 1894, where both factions attempted to redefine French identity from a traditional pro-Republican or a more recent national-conservative vantage point.<sup>42</sup> Representatives of the latter, for example the composer and music educator Vincent d’Indy, believed that “Wagner’s stress on the nation, on the instincts over reason, and on the power and directive force of myth,” especially in the *Ring* and *Parsifal*, complemented the ideals of the *Ligue de la Patrie Française* which worked towards a conservative regeneration of French culture.<sup>43</sup> Republican commentators, by contrast, emphasized the egalitarian and universal values in Wagner’s works, but turned away from the *Ring*, which had been co-opted by the nationalist mysticism of the right-wing leagues, and towards *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* as the perfect expression of “communal solidarity of an artisan culture.”<sup>44</sup>

There were similar trends in Russia and the early Soviet Union. Wagner reception shifted from rejection of his works in the name of artistic realism – as expressed by Vladimir Stasov and Tolstoy – to their passionate embrace by the next generation of symbolist artists who strove for inner regeneration with strongly religious overtones, only to be superseded in turn by a more extrovert and populist approach in the wake of the Revolution of 1905 and again after 1917.<sup>45</sup> Wagner’s revolutionary credentials and his criticism of bourgeois society and capitalism were duly stressed, and poets such as Alexander Blok and Andrei Bely integrated the apocalyptic imagery of *Götterdämmerung* into their interpretations of the Russian present and future. Like many contemporary artists, they were attracted by the idea of a “theater-temple,” which would serve as a rallying point for national culture in the same way that Bayreuth – at least when viewed from abroad – had become the cultural center of Germany. In the early years of Soviet rule, the Wagnerian concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was used to create new types of multimedia, participatory theatrical spectacles, until the onset of Stalinism once more rejected Wagner as politically suspect and morally dangerous.

George Bernard Shaw’s *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898) offers the most comprehensive political exegesis of the *Ring* cycle.<sup>46</sup> Shaw regards the

<sup>42</sup> See Jane F. Fulcher, “Wagner in the Cultural Politics of the French Right and Left before World War I,” in *Von Wagner zum Wagnérisme. Musik, Literatur, Kunst, Politik*, ed. Annegret Fauser and Manuela Schwartz (Leipziger Universitätsverlag: Leipzig, 1999), 137–54.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 142. <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>45</sup> Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, “Wagner and Wagnerian Ideas in Russia,” in *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, ed. David C. Large, William Weber, 198–245.

<sup>46</sup> For the wider context of English intellectual and artistic Wagnerism, see Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: Rutherford, 1979).

tetralogy as an “essay in political philosophy,” with Wagner’s “picture of Niblung-home under the reign of Alberic [as] a poetic vision of unregulated industrial capitalism.”<sup>47</sup> Shaw was neither the first nor the last to highlight the critical potential of the *Ring*, but, rather than inserting the music dramas into a larger argument, as most other commentators did, he developed his allegorical reading out of a desire to explain the meaning of the artwork to the wider public. He does so by hijacking the format of the plot synopsis, the indispensable companion of the opera-going public, making it attractive through his witty style – a rarity in any writings by or on Wagner – and irreverent observations. *Das Rheingold* thus becomes a parable for the destructive force of the “Plutonic power” of the gold which subjugates and exploits the dwarves, i.e. the working classes toiling in an underground mine that “might just as well be a match-factory with . . . a large dividend, and plenty of clergymen shareholders.”<sup>48</sup> The gold likewise corrupts the gods, the higher beings and lawgivers, who in turn harness the power of the lie (personified in Loge) to deceive the giants, i.e. the manual laborers, who expect them to uphold contracts and social order. Since the gods have failed to “establish a reign of noble thought, of righteousness, order, and justice” and disgraced themselves through their lust for power and gold,<sup>49</sup> Wotan realizes that they will be superseded by a yet higher form of existence, the hero. This hero appears in the guise of anarchist Siegfried “Bakoonin” (i.e. Bakunin), who disregards the lure of the gold and recklessly sweeps aside the old order. For Shaw, Siegfried was the “type of the healthy man raised to perfect confidence in his own impulses by an intense and joyous vitality which is above fear, sickness of conscience, malice, and the makeshifts and moral crutches of law and order.”<sup>50</sup> The goal of the *Ring* allegory is thus not a benign vision of liberation for the toiling working classes but the advent of the new (super)man (i.e. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*). Nevertheless, he had second thoughts about the efficacy of Siegfried-style anarchism.<sup>51</sup> Only a few pages later, he classifies it as an ineffective panacea, since in modern industrialized society anarchism would “always reduce itself speedily to absurdity.”<sup>52</sup>

Shaw’s uneasiness about Siegfried as the answer to the *Ring*’s dilemmas are due not only to his misgivings about anarchism but also to his rejection

<sup>47</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Niblung’s Ring* (Dover: New York, 1967), xviii and xvii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–3. <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>51</sup> Guido Heldt, “Die Propaganda der Tat – George Bernard Shaws The Perfect Wagnerite und der Anarchismus,” in *Richard Wagners “Ring des Nibelungen,” Musikalische Dramaturgie – Kulturelle Kontextualität – Primär-Rezeption*, 103–23.

<sup>52</sup> Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, 69.

of the concluding part of the tetralogy, translated *Night Falls on the Gods*. With Siegfried's awakening of "Brynhild," the political-philosophical allegory breaks down and disintegrates into conventional opera. If in *Die Walküre* she was "the truth-divining instinct in religion, cast into an enchanted slumber and surrounded by the fires of hell lest she should overthrow a Church corrupted by its alliance with government," she has now become a thoroughly theatrical character, "a majestically savage woman, in whom jealousy and revenge are intensified to heroic proportions."<sup>53</sup> Siegfried has likewise transformed from natural vitality personified to a "man of the world."<sup>54</sup> In this context, Shaw argues, the vestiges of the allegorical plot, such as the Norns' scene, Waltraute's narrative, and Alberich's nocturnal colloquy with Hagen, make no sense anymore. Even the intimate link between music and meaning is severed when Brünnhilde finishes her final monologue with a musical theme that has no discernible narrative significance and "might easily be the pet climax of a popular sentimental ballad."<sup>55</sup> Shaw's disappointment at the operatic betrayal of the political allegory is palpable. While at first he did not investigate it further, he added some thoughts on Wagner's motives to a 1907 German translation, which subsequently were incorporated into the third English edition. The political developments between 1853 and 1876, Shaw argues, demonstrated that Siegfried had to be a failure, since the Alberichs, Wotans, and Loges were so effortlessly victorious in contemporary society.<sup>56</sup> Real capitalism just does not work in the way that Wagner's characters deal with the Rhinegold, and Alberich the successful financier cannot be superseded by an anarchist hero: By the 1870s, even Wagner had given up on him.<sup>57</sup> Shaw overlooks, however, that Wagner had to have Siegfried die if he did not want to abandon the original saga; nevertheless, he correctly diagnoses the difficulties in interpreting the *Ring* after Wagner himself had shifted the emphasis from Siegfried to Wotan and from liberation to renunciation. Then as now, this in-built fault line is exasperating for anybody who attempts a unified allegorical, philosophical, or political reading of the *Ring*, but it is also one of the features that continue to attract divergent and contradictory interpretations.

### **Form Follows Function: Alfred Lorenz and Theodor W. Adorno**

If thus far the music has played a subordinate role, this faithfully mirrors the early stages of the engagement with the *Ring*. Those commentators who

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 77. <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 84. <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 89. <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 87–91.

were at all willing to consider the musical language often stopped at the most prominent aspect, the leitmotif, highlighting how it added meaning and articulation to the situations and concepts expressed in the poetry. By the turn of the century, this limited approach became problematic, not least because the emerging academic discipline of *Musikwissenschaft* increasingly demanded technical tools to describe its subject matter in a “scientific” way. Guido Adler, chair of music at Vienna University, poured scorn on the “exegetes who stopped, in childish contentment, at finding this or that motive in such and such a place, and labelling individual motifs. . . . What really matters, the relationship of thematic work to poetic content, the orchestral to the vocal parts, to the scenes, sub-scenes and . . . acts could not be covered by these attempts.”<sup>58</sup> One of the first coherent, all-encompassing explanations of Wagner’s musical form was written by an accidental musicologist, Alfred Lorenz, who submitted his dissertation on the *Ring* at Frankfurt University in 1922, having been dismissed as music director at Coburg and Gotha three years earlier.<sup>59</sup> The study was published in 1924 as *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner* (Richard Wagner’s Mystery of Form), by which time Lorenz had taken up a lectureship at Munich University. Lorenz rejects the charge of formlessness, the attempts to salvage remnants of traditional “numbers,” and the division of recitatives and arias in the *Ring*. Instead he proposes that each act is divided into ten to twenty “periods” – a term inspired by Wagner’s own *dichterisch-musikalische Periode* (poetic-musical periods).<sup>60</sup> These periods are internally unified through tonality, melodic punctuation (cadences), the use of identical or related motivic-thematic material, and less tangible elements like orchestral timbre or dynamics. The distribution and repetition of the themes determines the overall shape or form of each period; Lorenz suggests nine different types such as simple repetition, strophic form, arch forms, rondo and refrain forms, and bar form.<sup>61</sup> These orderly periods, Lorenz is at pains to point out, are not simplistic labels or concessions to tradition but subconscious reflections of Wagner’s “dark creative urge, becoming the representation of a distinctive Will that could not be otherwise, the exterior visualisation of unlimited logical thought processes.”<sup>62</sup> Lorenz’s notion of Wagnerian form is thus grounded in a particular understanding of creativity which also informed his view of

<sup>58</sup> Guido Adler, *Richard Wagner-Vorlesungen* (Breitkopf & Härtel: Leipzig, 1904), 183–4.

<sup>59</sup> For Lorenz’s life and an in-depth discussion of his ideological and musicological views, see Stephen McClatchie, *Analyzing Wagner’s Operas. Alfred Lorenz and German Nationalist Ideology* (University of Rochester Press: Rochester, 1998).

<sup>60</sup> Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, 2nd edn (reprint Hans Schneider: Tutzing, 1966), vol. 1, Der musikalische Aufbau des Bühnenfestspiels “Der Ring des Nibelungen,” 294.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 295. <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



music historiography. While organicist theories were by no means unique in the 1920s – Heinrich Schenker’s approach to musical form is based on a similar understanding of art<sup>63</sup> – Lorenz took them further by putting his ideas to the service of the emerging National Socialist movement. He was the only professor of Munich University who joined the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) before 1933; he took a leading role in several Nazi organizations, and frequently invoked Wagner as Hitler’s spiritual precursor.<sup>64</sup> While his cultural conservatism – a movement that gained momentum in the Weimar Republic and for many transformed effortlessly into National Socialism – is beyond doubt, it is, however, perhaps too simplistic to label his analytical method “an embodiment of National Socialist ideology.”<sup>65</sup>

Although Wagner’s life and works were certainly put to use by the Third Reich, it is noteworthy that the *Bayreuther Blätter*, which had contributed significantly to the formulation and dissemination of Nazi cultural and racial agendas, did not publish any extensive *Ring* critiques in the 1920s and 1930s, whether musical or ideological. While they rejected any left-wing readings such as Shaw’s, it seems that the *Ring* had mainly lost its usefulness for scoring points in contemporary debates.<sup>66</sup> Thus it might have been the general complacency with Wagner’s popularity with the regime, rather than any coherent National Socialist appropriation of the *Ring*, that spurred Theodor W. Adorno into writing *Versuch über Wagner* (Essay on Wagner) in 1937–8 (revised and published as a book in 1952). While remaining an inspiring and provocative read, its lasting legacy has been to suggest how Wagner’s anti-Semitism permeates his creative imagination: “The gold-grabbing, invisible, anonymous, exploitative Alberich, the shoulder-shrugging, loquacious Mime, overflowing with self-praise and spite, the impotent intellectual critic Hanslick-Beckmesser – all the rejects of Wagner’s works are caricatures of Jews.”<sup>67</sup> If this thought was not exactly new – readers of Wagner’s late essay “Erkenne dich selbst” (1881) found the equalization of Alberich and Jewish finance fairly transparent<sup>68</sup> – it certainly became more prominent in late twentieth-century American scholarship (e.g., Paul Lawrence Rose

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 200. I disagree with McClatchie’s argument that Schenker’s analytical technique can be divested of “its aesthetic and philosophical underpinnings,” something not possible for Lorenz. For a more complex view on Schenker’s indebtedness to contemporary ideological agendas see Nicholas Cook, *The Schenker Project: Culture, Race, and Music Theory in Fin-de-siècle Vienna* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> McClatchie, *Analyzing Wagner’s Operas*, 9–22. <sup>65</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>66</sup> Bermbach, “Richard Wagner als Prophet des Weltkrieges,” 80.

<sup>67</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, foreword by Slavoj Žižek, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Verso: London, 2005), 12–13.

<sup>68</sup> For example, Paulus Cassel, *Der Judengott und Richard Wagner. Eine Antwort an die Bayreuther Blätter* (J. A. Wohlgemuth: Berlin, 1881), 35–7.

and Marc Weiner),<sup>69</sup> who found Wagner's creative output to be saturated with anti-Semitic coding. Adorno, however, aims at a higher target altogether. Wagner's personality and his creative persona are intimately intertwined with the crisis of bourgeois society where even a rebellious gesture is – in one of Adorno's dialectic reversals that oscillate like the magic fire music he so abhors – a sign of acquiescence with the powers of state and capital. Wagner “is an early example of the changing function of the bourgeois category of the individual. In his hopeless struggle with the power of society, the individual seeks to avert his own destruction by identifying with that power and then rationalizing the change of direction as authentic individual fulfilment.”<sup>70</sup>

In contrast to many Wagner critics, Adorno does not stop at a damning dissection of Wagner's character or his writings. A considerable part of his essay is devoted to a discussion of Wagner's musical techniques, because he claims – half a century before the New Musicology – that “the key to any artistic content lies in its technique.”<sup>71</sup> For example, the use of a *parlando* style in *opera buffa* has potential for “bourgeois opposition” against the powers of the ancient regime whereas, in Wagner's later works, recitative “deserts irony for pathos.” In the hands of Wagner the reactionary revolutionary, language is forced to “wrest a new form of magic from the disenchantment: bourgeois language should sound as if Being itself were being made to speak.”<sup>72</sup> Likewise Wagner's reluctance – or inability – to create themes rather than motives and his rejection of conventional forms are explained as consequences of his ideological ambiguities. While Adorno draws on examples from the *Ring* throughout the essay, its final chapters, especially chapter 9 “God and Beggar,” are given over to a dissection of the tetralogy. He focuses on the encounter between Wotan, the representative of the old order, and Siegfried, seemingly the rebel and harbinger of a new time, in act three of *Siegfried*. However, Adorno subverts the familiar reading by arguing that the victor necessarily succumbs to the power of the Ring, because “betrayal is implicit in the rebellion.”<sup>73</sup> “The conflict between rebellion and society is decided in advance in favor of society, because the latter recruits the opposition for the bourgeoisie, a process which Wagner then presents as entirely natural or even transcendental in his operas.”<sup>74</sup>

It is hardly surprising, then, that Adorno reads the finale of *Götterdämmerung* as a cinematic happy ending that thinly disguises its commodity character with the perfect, ultimate phantasmagoria.<sup>75</sup> At the

<sup>69</sup> Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (Faber: London, 1992); Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1995).

<sup>70</sup> Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 7. <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 114. <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 48. <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 127. <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 138–9.

end of the essay, there is hardly any aspect of Wagner's artistry left that could – or should – be experienced with anything approaching pleasure. Adorno allows Wagner some self-reflective clear-sightedness that in itself is part of everything that is wrong with late-bourgeois society: “Wagner is not only the willing prophet and diligent lackey of imperialism and late-bourgeois terrorism. He also possesses the neurotic's ability to contemplate his own decadence and transcend it in an image that can withstand that all-consuming gaze.”<sup>76</sup> Although Adorno resorts here to a visual metaphor, it is clear that Wagner's music is the true culprit. There is a vague hope that in some instances, such as the dark passages of the third act of *Tristan*, music, “the most magical of all the arts, learns how to break the spell it casts over the characters. . . . It is the rebellion – futile though it may be – of the music against the iron laws that rule it, and only in its total determination by those laws can it regain the power of self-determination.”<sup>77</sup> Adorno's dialectic somersault catapults him into the company of desperate Wagnerians who want to salvage at least the beloved music from the rubble of the catastrophe of the twentieth century. But even then, the myth and the music of the *Ring* seem beyond redemption.<sup>78</sup>

#### **Postwar Professionalization: The *Ring* in Academia and on the Stage**

Since Adorno's *Versuch über Wagner* was published in 1952 (the English translation in 1980), its reception precedes the first wave of attempts to reclaim Wagner's works for the political “left,” notably in the writings of the too-little known Hans Mayer as well as some of Adorno's later essays.<sup>79</sup> However, the debate about the meaning and interpretation of the *Ring* increasingly migrated from the public arena, where writers like Nietzsche and Shaw attracted huge followings, into academic circles. The postwar decades saw several comprehensive *Ring* interpretations, beginning with Robert Donington's *Wagner's “Ring” and Its Symbols* (1963). His Jungian approach to the *Ring* develops a wealth of archetypal images which, he argues, are spontaneously understood by the listener, because the myths as retold by Wagner offer “a distillation of human experience.”<sup>80</sup> If

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 141. <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 144–5.

<sup>78</sup> For a less pessimistic assessment of Adorno's Wagner critique, which places *Versuch über Wagner* in the German intellectual tradition of making a “case” for or against this formidable figure who is always in need of “rescuing” (*Rettung*), see Mark Berry, “Adorno's *Essay on Wagner*: Rescuing an Inverted Panegyric,” *Opera Quarterly* 30/2–3 (2014), 205–27; <https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbu020> (accessed December 20, 2017).

<sup>79</sup> See Nicholas Vazsonyi, “Reading Right from Left: Hans Mayer and Postwar Wagner Reception,” *Opera Quarterly* 30/2–3 (2014), 228–45; doi: 10.1093/oq/kbu024 (accessed July 16, 2015).

<sup>80</sup> Robert Donington, *Wagner's “Ring” and Its Symbols: The Music and the Myth*, 3rd edn (Faber and Faber: London, 1974), 32.

listeners want to unravel these symbols, they need to pay attention to music and poetry, since both “work together in expressing that ‘deep and hidden’ truth of whose underlying presence Wagner was himself aware.”<sup>81</sup> Donington approaches the music through the leitmotifs since a “musical motive is a symbolic image . . . combinable into compound images by symphonic development and contrapuntal association.”<sup>82</sup> In his exploration of *Die Walküre* act three, for example, “Brynhilde” is explained as Wotan’s “anima,” the “representative of his inner femininity,” as are the somewhat hysterical Valkyries, hinting at schizoid tendencies in Wotan who is – after his quarrel with Fricka and Brynhilde’s disobedience – “estranged from his inner femininity.” Such a “psychotic disposition” can ultimately be traced back to the *Ring*’s creator, Wagner, who nonetheless brought his “healing instinct” to working out “his deepest problems through his work.”<sup>83</sup> Whether or not today’s readers find Donington’s Jungian explanations convincing, his book formalizes the indebtedness of modern psychology to Wagner’s mythical cosmos which many *fin de siècle* artists, not least Thomas Mann in his novels, had instinctively grasped.

Donington’s approach was sharply criticized by the British musicologist Deryck Cooke, who argued that any attempt to discover what Wagner meant by the *Ring* had to fulfill four conditions: it had to absorb each of Wagner’s own intentions; it had to respect the “overt meaning of each element in the drama”; it had to maintain the “degree of emphasis placed by Wagner on each element”; and it should even leave the work “to speak for itself in the theatre” without putting “ideas into the reader’s head” that do not relate to the theatrical experience.<sup>84</sup> More than any other writer before him, Cooke places the music at the center of his analysis, since it carries the ultimate meaning.<sup>85</sup> Based on the optimistic assumption that music functions like a language and that the *Ring* displays thematic and symphonic unity, his actual musical investigation is a mixture of motivic and harmonic analysis, working in close tandem with a deep reading of the text and its literary sources. Unfortunately, Cooke’s premature death allowed him to complete only the textual reading of *Rheingold* and *Walküre*; the volume containing the musical analysis remained unwritten. However, even had he completed the monumental task, it is questionable whether his book would have remained the last word in *Ring* interpretations. His belief that “the puzzle of the *Ring*” – i.e. Wagner’s intended meaning – can be solved through “objectivity in interpretation” and “comprehensiveness in musico-dramatic analysis” (thus the headings of the introduction) might have been swept away by the rise of

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–4. <sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 164–5.

<sup>84</sup> Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End. A Study of Wagner’s “Ring”* (Oxford University Press: London, 1979), 14–15.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 37 and 65.

poststructuralism, which seriously undermined the belief in a definitive meaning of artworks that awaits uncovering. Nevertheless, his close readings of the *Ring* text remain inspiring in their attention to detail and mythological background, balancing psychological insight with commonsense observations.

One – perhaps unintentional – result of Donington’s and Cooke’s studies was to shift the focus of twentieth-century *Ring* interpretations from the Wotan–Siegfried dualism to Brünnhilde. Cooke astutely observes that Brünnhilde, by defying her father, reveals herself as the free hero Wotan longs for, something that “the ruler of the old European man-dominated civilization” is too blind to see.<sup>86</sup> The altered emphasis made possible Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s study *Wagner Androgyne* (1990), where he takes an idea from Wagner’s famous *Ring* letter to August Röckel to its logical conclusion: “Not even Siegfried alone (man alone) is the complete ‘human being’: he is merely the half, only with *Brünnhilde* does he become the redeemer . . . for it is love which is really ‘the eternal feminine’ itself.”<sup>87</sup> Nattiez then argues that androgyny plays a central role. First, because “the myth around which the *Ring* revolves may be read as a metaphorical reenactment of Wagner’s conception of the history of music; and second, that throughout his life, Wagner’s theory of the relationship between poetry and music is reflected, in his music dramas, in the relations between man and woman.”<sup>88</sup> More precisely, it is the relationship between Siegfried and Brünnhilde that springs from the same well as Wagner’s theoretical speculations, laid down in the Zurich writings. Thus, Nattiez achieves a structural equivalence between Wagner’s prose writings and his creative imagination, an idea that was further developed, with greater attention to the actual music, in Thomas S. Grey’s *Wagner’s Musical Prose* (1995).<sup>89</sup> Feminist Wagnerians in turn reacted against this positive reading of Wagner’s sexual politics. For example, Eva Rieger stresses that redemption is by no means a defiant, liberating, or empowering act for the female characters but a task that they fulfill as a service to the still-dominant and domineering male heroes – the composer himself not excepted.<sup>90</sup> Like the majority of current Wagner scholars, Rieger uses the music dramas – and the *Ring* in particular – to construct a comprehensive panorama of nineteenth-century attitudes and ideas. A further example of this approach is Mark Berry’s

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 332–3. Cooke kindly omits to say that Wagner likewise was blind to the possibility of Brünnhilde, rather than Siegfried, being the true free hero.

<sup>87</sup> Letter to Röckel of January 25/26, 1854, *SL*, 307.

<sup>88</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne. A Study in Interpretation*, trans. Stewart Spencer (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1993), xv.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas S. Grey, *Richard Wagner’s Musical Prose: Texts and Contexts* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>90</sup> Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner’s Women*, trans. Chris Walton (The Boydell Press: Woodbridge, 2011), 164.

*Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire* (2006), which restores the balance between two approaches to the *Ring* that are traditionally seen as mutually exclusive: the revolutionary, Feuerbachian and the resigned, Schopenhauerian reading.<sup>91</sup> Berry argues that, in the completed work, there is no simple either-or, although chapters on property, capital, and production, law, and religion show a certain preference for a revolutionary Wagner – a not unwelcome antidote to a century of Schopenhauerian renunciatory pessimism.

Since the 1950s, however, the theatrical stage has become the main arena for philosophical, symbolic, or ideological readings of the *Ring*. Thus, it is increasingly directors – or stage directors working in tandem with Wagner scholars, such as Wieland Wagner with classicist Wolfgang Schadewaldt – who offer novel interpretations of the *Ring*. While stage designers Adolphe Appia and Emil Preterorius were the first to abandon conventional, representational stagings, it was Wieland Wagner's "New Bayreuth" of the 1950s that forcefully demonstrated that stage design, costumes, and *Personenregie* had an important role to play in highlighting hitherto unsuspected perspectives on the tetralogy.<sup>92</sup> Wieland's Hellenistic aesthetics emphasized a metapolitical classicism, so ingrained in the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, at the expense of contemporary commentary or an accounting with the recent past.<sup>93</sup> Many Wagner lovers were (and still are) unsettled by the question of whether these new performative approaches uncovered genuine facets of Wagner's creative vision, or whether directors have been projecting their personal agendas onto the works. There is no doubt that stagings responded to the political climate in the divided Germany. In the early decades of the German Democratic Republic, i.e. East Germany, uneasiness about the perceived bleak nihilism of *Götterdämmerung* prevented complete stagings of the tetralogy until Joachim Herz's Leipzig *Ring* of 1973–6, which was the first to embrace Shaw's socialist ideas while trying not to be appropriated wholesale by state ideology.<sup>94</sup> Landmark productions in West Germany, by contrast, confronted the Nazi past, notably in the Brechtian staging by East-German director Ruth Berghaus at Frankfurt in the 1980s.<sup>95</sup> The 1976 centenary Bayreuth *Ring* directed by Patrice Chéreau was thus only one of several productions that historicized Wagner's nineteenth-century worldview, while pointing out the *Ring's* relevance for contemporary audiences.

<sup>91</sup> Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's "Ring"* (Ashgate: Aldershot and Burlington, VT, 2006).

<sup>92</sup> For an overview of stagings especially in Germany see Patrick Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2006). See also Barry Millington's chapter in this volume.

<sup>93</sup> See also John Deathridge, "Wagner's Greeks, and Wieland's Too," in *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2008), 102–9.

<sup>94</sup> Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 331–2. <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 364, 370–5.



More recent productions have, meanwhile, given up on offering unified readings of the *Ring*, whether of Wagner's alleged intentions or the director's worldview. In line with postmodern sensibilities, the mere suggestion of making sense of the *Ring* has come under scrutiny, and thus it was in a sense an opportunity when director Herbert Wernicke died after premiering his highly self-referential *Rheingold* and *Walküre* in Munich in 2002, leaving others to complete the cycle. The Stuttgart State Opera (2002–3) confronted the issue of multiple meanings head-on by inviting several artists – Joachim Schlömer, Christoph Nel, Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito, and Peter Konwitschny – to direct one opera each, with widely differing approaches. Whether this strategy is a reflection of a postmodern loss of artistic confidence or a welcome response to the multiple layers of meaning floating always already in and through the *Ring* depends very much on the predisposition of the individual listener.

All these postwar interpretations, whether written or staged, take Wagner's works as their starting point, which they then analyze with reference to broader historical or philosophical discourses. The opposite approach – to insert the *Ring* into a fully developed worldview – has practically come to an end. Philosophers like Alain Badiou or Slavoj Žižek, who repeatedly – and not just in music-related writings – refer to Wagner, have become the exception rather than the norm. Interestingly both were invited by the German weekly *Die Zeit* to comment, along with singers, directors, and writers, on the Wagner bicentenary in 2013, thus asserting their role as public intellectuals, and both focused their reflections on the *Ring*. Badiou stresses the tragic dimension and Brechtian alienation at the end of *Götterdämmerung* in particular, thus defending the tetralogy (which he first encountered in postwar Bayreuth in 1952) against the charge of protofascism.<sup>96</sup> Žižek hears in the same scene somewhat more conservatively Brünnhilde's transformation from erotic love to political agape, making her the leader of the new, nonpatriarchal collective.<sup>97</sup> However, general debates about the (post)modern condition hardly ever use Nibelheim or Valhalla as their vanishing point. John Deathridge's interpretation of one of *Rheingold*'s most enigmatic characters is certainly worth considering: “The cold fire of calculating reason represented by Loge has indeed won out in a management-obsessed world demonized by objectification (the obsession with news, for instance) and by what Wagner and his socialist *confrères* in the 1840s would have almost certainly regarded as the fatal isolation of Internet mania and mobile

<sup>96</sup> Alain Badiou, “Desaster als Triumph,” *Die Zeit* January 3, 2013; [www.zeit.de/2013/02/Richard-Wagner-Alain-Badiou](http://www.zeit.de/2013/02/Richard-Wagner-Alain-Badiou) (accessed December 20, 2017).

<sup>97</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Was weiß Brünnhilde,” *Die Zeit* May 16, 2013; [www.zeit.de/2013/21/richard-wagner-oper-liebe](http://www.zeit.de/2013/21/richard-wagner-oper-liebe) (accessed February 18, 2020).

phone conversations on windy pavements.”<sup>98</sup> A stage director could certainly show Loge swiping through images on his tablet or conjuring up a *Matrix*-style 3D-projection of his search for “Weibes Wonne und Wert,” for sure a relevant updating of Wagner’s critique of contemporary values and behaviors. However, it is highly unlikely that advocates or critics of the digital economy would consider the *Ring* as the obvious starting point for their judgment of the world we live in today, quite in contrast to thinkers like Nietzsche, Shaw, or even Adorno, who keenly felt that the world had to learn from Wagner’s (good or bad) example. While there is certainly still demand for new interpretations of the *Ring* cosmos, the Wagnerian world-interpretations so much in evidence between 1880 and 1930 definitely seem to have become a thing of the past, a renewed appetite for world-size mythological dramas like *Game of Thrones* notwithstanding.

<sup>98</sup> Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, 49.