8 The *Ring* as a Political and Philosophical Drama

ANTHONY ARBLASTER

You often hear it said, or suggested, that politics and the arts, including of course music, inhabit totally separate worlds and that attempts to bring the two together are at best misguided, if not positively misleading.

Such a belief, however fervently held, is nevertheless only tenable, if actual history is ignored, or if you cling to the idea that music, or the arts in general, are able to somehow transcend history, stripped of all their context. Of course, the notion of transcendence has some viability. How else could we respond to the 200-year old music of Beethoven, or the 400-year old music of Monteverdi? But just as there are limits to your appreciation and understanding of a Beethoven sonata or symphony if you know nothing of sonata form or symphonic structure, so there are also limits to your understanding if you choose to ignore the historical, political, and cultural context in which they were composed.

The need for contextual understanding applies particularly strongly to opera. Any performance of opera is very much a public event, with potential social or political significance and even consequences. Opera consists of words as well as music, and those words may have a political dimension or may be perceived to have one regardless of what the composer intended. But, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, much opera has been given an explicit and deliberate political dimension. This is true of works by Giuseppe Verdi, Bedřich Smetana, Modest Mussorgsky, and Sergei Prokofiev as well as Kurt Weill, Michael Tippett, and John Adams. The question for us is, Is this also true of Richard Wagner, Verdi's exact contemporary and the other supremely great opera composer of that age?

There is, or should be, no question that Wagner as a person was always a highly politically conscious being. I say *should be*, because this assertion, like almost any statement about Wagner, is still subject to dispute. It is accepted, for example, that Wagner was involved in the revolutionary turmoil that swept across Europe in 1848–9, and particularly in the uprising in Dresden of 1849. It was for this that he was exiled from Germany for eleven years. Yet one author tells us that "the revolutionary acts which led

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to his exile were only marginally political,"[1] while one biographer asserts that "in spite of his activities in the field, politics as such hardly impinged at all on his inner life."[2]

Similarly, it is generally recognized that Wagner was obsessively and virulently anti-Semitic. Yet this same biographer claims, in relation to *Jewishness in Music*, written in 1850, that for Wagner, "though otherwise not hostile to Jews . . . the real object of his attack was Meyerbeer and no one else."[3] And another well-known writer on opera, Peter Conrad, has claimed that "Wagner's remarks (about Jews) were mostly tasteless jokes, and there seems to me to be an abysmal gap between a grumpy jest and a campaign of genocide."[4]

But, leaving aside the defense of the indefensible, the real question is why anyone should seek to downplay Wagner's concerns with politics. Wagner's ambitions as a composer of what he preferred to think of as *music drama* rather than *opera* were bound up with his political hopes. Broadly speaking, he took a low view of mid nineteenth-century opera and in particular of its position and function in contemporary culture. Opera should not be superficial entertainment for the rich and privileged. It should be a far more serious and thoughtful experience, and it should occupy a central position in a more open and popular culture. His ideal for Bayreuth, which was never realized, was that it should be free, and so open to all.[5]

Wagner was a political being, but what was his political position or philosophy? Unlike with, say, Verdi, this is a difficult question to answer with any assurance or even clarity. Wagner was born in Leipzig in 1813, at a time when the city was engulfed in Napoleon's Central European War. When still a teenager and a student there, he felt the impact of the European revolutions and uprisings of 1830–1, and in particular of Polish refugees who fled to the city after their nationalist uprising was put down by Czarist Russia. He composed a "Political Overture" which was lost.[6] He got involved with the Young Germany movement, a campaign of intellectuals for republican and democratic principles, and got valuable support from the writer and journalist, Heinrich Laube. Laube was

[1] Peter Burbidge, "Richard Wagner: Man and Artist," in *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (Faber: London and Boston, 1979), 21.

[2] Curt von Westernhagen, *Wagner: A Biography*, trans, Mary Whittall (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1981), 133.

[3] Curt von Westernhagen, "Wagner," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (Macmillan: London, 1980), 20:111.

[4] Peter Conrad, review of *Wagner, Race and Revolution* by Paul Lawrence Rose, *The Observer*, June 14, 1992. See also Conrad, *Verdi and/or Wagner: Two Men, Two Worlds, Two Centuries* (Thames & Hudson: London, 2011).

[5] See also Roger Allen's chapter in this volume.

[6] See Derek Watson, *Richard Wagner: A Biography* (Dent: London, 1979), 33.

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imprisoned in 1834 for his political activities. *Rienzi*, composed between 1838 and 1840, reflects to a degree Wagner's political outlook at this time.

We have already mentioned his involvement in the unrest of 1848 and the Dresden uprising of May 1849. Contrary to what he suggested in later years, his involvement was far from peripheral. In *Mein Leben,* Wagner's autobiography written at the request of King Ludwig II of Bavaria, this dichotomy is at work, where Wagner places himself "always in the thick of things," but remains careful not to appear "anti-monarchist in the eyes of his new royal patron." The extent of Wagner's revolutionary activities is thus intentionally vague, but it is undeniable that he aligned himself with the revolutionary forces and was in "close contact with several of their leading lights."[7] He took over the editorship of the subversive magazine, *Volksblätter*, from his radical musical colleague, August Röckel, and contributed inflammatory articles himself. He had leaflets printed urging Saxon soldiers to support the uprising, and he may have tried to get hand grenades manufactured. He held political meetings in his own garden. Through Röckel, he met the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who came to Dresden to take part in the uprising, and they found much to discuss and debate.

In the end, Wagner fled Dresden and, with help from Franz Liszt among others, escaped to Switzerland. He stayed away from Germany in self-imposed exile for eleven years in order to evade an active arrest warrant. Bakunin and Röckel were not so lucky. Both were arrested, imprisoned, and sentenced to death, later commuted to life imprisonment.

This, then, was the period of Wagner's involvement in radical politics. But it was also the period in which the plan of the *Ring* began to take shape, and in late 1848 he wrote the first version of the text of a drama he called *Siegfrieds Tod*, which eventually became *Götterdämmerung*. And it was only a year after the Dresden uprising that he published his first major attack on the Jews, *Das Judentum in der Musik*. When Liszt wrote to him about this article, Wagner told him "I harbored a long suppressed resentment against this Jewish business, and this resentment is as necessary to my nature as gall is to the blood."[8] In this essay, he mocked those who argued for the emancipation of the Jews: "in reality it is we who require to fight for emancipation from the Jews. As the world is constituted today, the Jew is more than emancipated, he is the ruler. And he will continue to rule as long as money remains the power to which all our activities are subjugated."[9]

[7] Chris Walton, *Richard Wagner's Zurich: The Muse of Place* (Camden House: Rochester, 2007), 40.
[8] Letter to Liszt of April 18, 1851, *SL*, 221–2.
[9] "Judaism in Music," in *Richard Wagner: Stories and Essays*, ed. Charles Osborne (Open Court: La Salle, IL, 1991), 25.

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There is a conventional pattern whereby young radicals gradually mutate into crusty conservatives or even militant reactionaries, and Wagner does conform to this pattern in some respects. His anti-Semitism, already evident in the 1840s, became more virulent and obsessive in later years and was tied into a broader concern with racial purity, which was reinforced by his friendship with Count Joseph-Arthur de Gobineau and his reading of Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*. His German nationalism assumed a more aggressive form: he was an enthusiastic supporter of Prussia's war against France in 1870–1, which chimed with his longstanding and assiduously nourished hostility to all things French that had its roots in his unhappy and unsuccessful time in Paris in 1839–42. In 1871, he composed the *Kaisermarsch* to celebrate the German victory. But both anti-Semitism and German unification or patriotism had long been features of his political outlook, while even in his years of fame and success he still cherished dreams of a world somehow cleansed of traditional privilege and the "underlying curse of capital."[10]

How far are Wagner's political views and experiences reflected or embodied in his operas, and most particularly in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*? We have already noted Wagner's low opinion of much contemporary opera. In 1845, quite early in his composing career, he wrote to Louis Spohr, "in my own view, almost every aspect of operatic life in present-day Germany suffers from this distasteful striving after superficial success."[11] The logical corollary of this was that Wagner saw it as his mission "to raise up opera to a higher plane & restore it to a level from which we ourselves have debased it by expecting composers to derive their inspiration from trivialities, intrigues & so on."[12] But it was not until he had put the compromises with existing grand opera represented by *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* behind him that he was really free to embark on the vast project that he believed would "raise up opera to a higher plane." This *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a unification of artistic ideals, was a conception Wagner had previously touched upon in two essays of 1849 on the role of art and more specifically, opera, in society. And this grand project was what would eventually become *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

He never had any doubts about the historical and philosophical significance of this project. While he was still drafting its text, he wrote to his musical colleague and friend Theodor Uhlig, "I am again more than ever moved by the comprehensive grandeur and beauty of my subject: my

[10] Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner's* Ring (Routledge: London, 2016), 40.
[11] Letter to Louis Spohr of February 4, 1845, *SL*, 120.
[12] Letter to Karl Gaillard of January 30, 1844, *SL*, 118.

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entire philosophy of life has found its most perfect artistic expression here."[13] Given the scale of the project – four separate music dramas totaling more than fourteen hours of music – and the seriousness of the composer's plans for it, it would be extraordinary if it did *not* express and embody at least some of Wagner's most fundamental and far-reaching perspectives upon life itself and the nature and purpose of human society. Indeed, when he had completed the text of the *Ring* in 1853, he wrote to Liszt in a moment of exultation, "mark well my new poem – it contains the world's beginning and its end!"[14]

I do not think it is fanciful to hear in the vast sustained opening of *Das Rheingold* an evocation of the pure, unsullied waters of the Rhine, but, more than that, an evocation of the beginning of the world, with its simple E♭ arpeggios conveying the harmony of the natural world before it is disturbed by human or quasi-human activity. So too the overwhelming end of *Götterdämmerung* announces the end of one failed epoch in world history together with the prospect, in musical terms at least, of a better future.

The myth, which provides the central narrative of the cycle, is indeed one of global significance. The rule of the gods, led by Wotan, which we see in its delusive splendor at the close of *Das Rheingold,* is doomed because of its own corruption, greed, and brutality. It is destined to be replaced by a world in which free, loving, and heroic human beings hold sway, yet live in harmony with the natural world, which has been vandalized by the gods and other nonhuman inhabitants of *Das Rheingold.* Siegfried and Brünnhilde, stripped of her divinity by Wotan, are the first representatives of this new human order. Thus, to an extent, the *Ring* embodies Wagner's utopian hopes for the human future, as Wagner himself acknowledged: "my Nibelung poem . . . had taken shape at a time when . . . I had constructed a Hellenistically optimistic world for myself which I held to be entirely realizable if only people wished it to exist, while at the same time seeking somewhat ingeniously to get round the problem of why they did not in fact wish it to exist."[15]

But, having said that, we are immediately faced with one of the paradoxes, if not contradictions, in Wagner's plan, for the new order begins in tragedy, and the tragedy is one of betrayal. Siegfried is tricked or drugged into abandoning Brünnhilde in favor of Gutrune, while Brünnhilde takes her revenge by betraying Siegfried to Hagen. It is a bleak start to the new human order, and since Wagner began work on the *Ring* with the text then

[13] Letter to Theodor Uhlig of May 31, 1852, *SL*, 260.
[14] Letter to Liszt of February 11, 1853, *SL*, 281.
[15] Letter to August Röckel of August 23, 1856, *SL*, 357.

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called *Siegfrieds Tod*, it is clear that this sordid tragedy was always at the heart of the whole project.

It was equally clear to Wagner, however, that the old prehuman order of gods, giants and dwarfs had to go, and one reason for this was that he equated that mythical prehuman society with the society he saw around him in nineteenth-century Europe, which he so despised and wished to see replaced. One of the first people to grasp this was George Bernard Shaw. In *The Perfect Wagnerite*, first published in 1898, he wrote, "The Ring . . . is a drama of today, and not of a remote and fabulous antiquity. It could not have been written before the second half of the nineteenth century, because it deals with events which were only then consummating themselves."[16]

Deryck Cooke, in his important but alas incomplete study of the *Ring*, suggested that some people are actually put off the cycle because they find the gods, giants, and dwarfs "frankly ridiculous."[17] But Shaw had anticipated this reaction too. Reviewing what sounds to have been a poor performance of *Das Rheingold* in London in 1892, he observed that "*Das Rheingold* is either a profound allegory or a puerile fairy tale."[18] It is, of course, the former, and Shaw went on to explore and explain it in *The Perfect Wagnerite*.

Das Rheingold

The essence of *Das Rheingold* is a ruthless struggle for power, and for a very particular and topical kind of power – the ability to create wealth and thereby dominate the world. That power is embodied in the Ring Alberich has had made out of the gold which, in the opening scene, he has stolen from the Rhine and the Rhinemaidens. One of the Rhinemaidens, Wellgunde, had foolishly told Alberich about the potential power of the gold; but then her sisters agree that, since the essential condition of obtaining that power is a renunciation of love, there is no danger of the lustful dwarf meeting that requirement. They are wrong. Alberich chooses power and curses love. He seizes the gold and makes off with it. Immediately, the Rhine goes dark.

Whether this is represented in the staging or not, it is important that we, the listeners and spectators, understand the significance of what has happened. The theft of the gold is a crime against Nature, a violation of the

[16] George Bernard Shaw, *Major Critical Essays* (Penguin: London, 1986), 192.

[17] Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's "Ring"* (Oxford University Press: London, 1979), 11.

[18] George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw's Music*, ed. Dan H. Lawrence (Reinhardt: The Bodley Head, 1981), 2:663.

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natural order. As Shaw wrote, the Rhinemaidens value the gold "in an entirely uncommercial way, for its bodily beauty and splendor."[19] But Alberich sees nothing of that. For him it is only a source of wealth and power. He takes the kind of crude utilitarian approach to nature which Dickens satirized in his exactly contemporary novel, *Hard Times* (1854).

This is not the only violation of nature that has taken place in this old-established society. Wotan's spear, we learn eventually from the Norns at the opening of *Götterdämmerung*, was created by tearing a branch from the World Ash Tree – an act that eventually killed the tree and the wisdom of which it was the source. As Mark Berry has noted, "this rape of nature appears to be purely Wagner's invention, with no warrant in his mythological sources."[20]

As will later be seen, the obverse of these spoliations of nature is Siegfried's exceptional rapport with the natural world. It is one striking indication of Wagner's intuitive genius, as well as his intellectual receptiveness, that in the middle of the nineteenth century, with the Industrial Revolution in Europe in full swing, he should have made humanity's relations with the natural world a central theme of his magnum opus.[21]

Alberich's renunciation of love in favor of power epitomizes what is wrong with the god-dominated social order of *Das Rheingold*. For his chief rival, Wotan, has made a similar choice. At the time when he decided to build Valhalla, the grandiose home of the gods, he was short of cash, so he offered the builder-giants his sister-in-law, Freia, instead. Bonds of relationship or affection count for little compared to his desire for glory. Fricka, his wife, rightly denounces him as a "cruel, heartless, unloving man" (*Liebeloser, leidigster Mann*). With the help of Loge, he resolves to pay off the giants with Alberich's store of gold, which will be obtained "by theft," as Loge bluntly puts it. But he and Alberich both understand – as the giants do not – that it is not existing wealth that matters but the power to go on producing it, a power that resides in the Ring. So when Alberich tries to keep the Ring while surrendering the wealth that has already been created by his army of slaves in Nibelheim, Wotan tears it off his finger. Were it not for the warning of Erda, the voice of far-sighted wisdom, he too would have held onto it and allowed the giants to make off with Freia after all. The gods then watch, horrified, as the two giants, Fafner and Fasolt, quarrel over the Ring, with Fafner striking his brother dead.

The world of *Rheingold* is full of violence, deceit, and contempt for morality. Alberich steals the gold from the Rhinemaidens; Wotan steals it from Alberich. Later on in conversation with Mime in the first act of

[19] Shaw, *Major Critical Essays*, 197. [20] Berry, *Treacherous Bonds*, 71.
[21] See also Thomas Grey's chapter in this volume, "The Idea of Nature."

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Siegfried, Wotan describes himself as Licht-Alberich (Light Alberich), as opposed to Alberich, who is Schwarz-Alberich (Black Alberich). In other words, they are two sides of the same coin. At its center, this is the battle for power, the power to create wealth through industrialized production. Shaw was surely right to see that this mythical world is a thinly disguised picture of nineteenth-century European society. The gods represent the traditional aristocracy, occupying the leading roles in society but in danger of being supplanted by the new capitalist owners of productive industry. Nibelheim, the subterranean world where Alberich holds sway over his fellow toiling dwarfs, is the new world of factory-based industry.

This is not Shaw foisting on Wagner an interpretation alien to the composer's intentions. When Wagner visited London in 1877, a year after the first performances of the *Ring*, he and Cosima took a trip down the Thames from Charing Cross to Greenwich. Cosima recorded that it made a "tremendous impression." Wagner said, "this is Alberich's dream come true – Nibelheim, world dominion, activity, work, everywhere the oppressive feeling of steam and fog."[22] But Wagner had composed the music for Nibelheim more than twenty years earlier, and what he had in mind was closer to the Manchester of the 1840s, the city Engels knew and wrote about in *Condition of the Working Class in England* (1844).

As Wotan and Loge make the descent to Nibelheim, we hear the rhythmic pounding of massed anvils – something which, as Berry has said, is "quite unlike anything music has previously experienced – quite unlike anything the preindustrial world could have conceived."[23] Mime tells them that things were different in the past: "Once we were carefree, / worked at our anvils, / forged for our women / trinkets and jewels . . . But now . . . for him alone / we sweat and we slave . . . so by day and night / we serve the greed of our Lord."[24] There may have been a tendency in the early years of industrialization to idealize the nature of work in preindustrial society, but there was no doubt that the rigidity and regimentation of work in the new factories and mines came as a shock, and this is what Mime's lament articulates. Wagner was well aware of this. In 1849, he wrote in *Art and Revolution*, "our modern factories offer us the miserable spectacle of the deepest degradation of man: perpetual soul- and body-destroying toil, without joy or love, often almost without aim."[25]

[22] *CD*, May 25, 1877. [23] Berry, *Treacherous Bonds*, 100.

[24] For this and other quotations from the text of the *Ring* I have used Andrew Porter's translation, edited by Nicholas John, printed in *The Rhinegold/Das Rheingold* (John Calder: London, 1985); *The Valkyrie/Die Walkure* (John Calder: London, 1983); *Siegfried* (John Calder: London, 1984); and *Twilight of the Gods/Götterdämmerung* (John Calder: London, 1985).

[25] Quoted in Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, 22.

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Das Rheingold is full of these kinds of topical touches and references, both musically and verbally. The manner in which Wotan and Loge trick Alberich and so capture him is one example. Alberich, a typical *nouveau riche*, cannot resist showing off his latest gadget, the Tarnhelm, which allows him to change shape at will, and so the more sophisticated representatives of the traditional ruling class are able to catch him out.

Opera, or music drama, consists of words as well as music, and the grand music with which Wagner ends *Rheingold* as the gods enter Valhalla should not impress us too much. As Carl Dahlhaus said, "the radiance of Valhalla is a deception worked by the music."[26] Meanwhile, Loge stands apart from the gods, and comments "they are hastening on to their end, / though they think they are great in their grandeur." The Rhinemaidens, still lamenting the loss of their gold, have, literally, the last words in *Das Rheingold*: "Goodness and truth / dwell but in the waters / false and base / all those who dwell up above!"

Die Walküre

The contrast between *Das Rheingold* and the opening act of *Die Walküre* could hardly be greater and is bound to strike anyone who hears and sees them in close sequence. The public, conflict-ridden world, in which it is groups as much as individuals who compete with each other, is apparently left far behind, and we are in a different but very familiar domestic world, that of an unhappy loveless marriage into which a romantic stranger brings the prospect of love and escape for the bullied wife. It is the sole act in the entire *Ring* where only humans appear, making the strongest possible break with the nonhuman cast of *Rheingold.* So, it is not surprising that *Die Walküre* has always been the most popular of the four *Ring* dramas, and that act one is quite often given separate concert performances. There is also the extraordinary freshness and intimacy of the music. Is there anywhere in music a more eloquent and tender expression of awakening love? The music is quite without the oppressive sultriness of *Tristan und Isolde*. It is youthful ardor, not all-consuming obsession, that is being portrayed.

But this domestic romance has its part to play in Wagner's grand scheme. Against Alberich's renunciation of love and Wotan's heartless indifference to the fate of Freia, Wagner was determined to assert the centrality of love to the human and enlightened society that he wished to

[26] Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, trans. Mary Whittall (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1979), 113.

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see replace the existing order based on greed, privilege, and ruthless pursuit of power.

Unlike some composers, Wagner read extensively and was particularly open to philosophical ideas. Given the ferment of theories and arguments circulating in Germany in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is not surprising to find Wagner, in his letters and in his occasional pamphlets and essays, struggling, not always successfully, to make sense of what he has read and heard, and to reconcile perspectives that might well seem to the outside observer to be incompatible or contradictory.

One writer who made a powerful impact on Wagner was Ludwig Feuerbach, whose *Essence of Christianity* was published in 1841. Feuerbach is probably best known as a transitional figure between Hegel and Marx, but his influence was felt more widely than that, as his impact on Wagner shows. Wagner dedicates his 1849 essay, *The Artwork of the Future,* to him. Two aspects of Feuerbach's thinking seem to have particularly impressed the composer. One was his attempt to preserve the morality of Christianity while discarding the theology – a project which may well have helped to determine the nature and purpose of *Parsifal*, which, although not composed until more than three decades later, was gestating in Wagner's mind once he had read Wolfram von Eschenbach's poem *Parzifal* in 1845. The other aspect was Feuerbach's emphasis on the sensuous and sensual character of human life once it is freed from the rigid and harsh dictates of conventional religion. For Wagner, this places love between a man and a woman at the heart of human existence, because it is in this way that they become complete and fully human. He explained this to Röckel in that extraordinarily revealing letter of January 25–6, 1854: "The full reality of love is possible only between the sexes: only as *man* and *woman* can we *human beings* really love . . . the true human being is both man and woman, and only in the union of man and woman does the true human being exist, and only through love, therefore, do man and woman become human."[27]

This is the thinking that lies behind the romance of Sieglinde and Siegmund. But we can hardly avoid noticing that this love is both adulterous and incestuous. Sieglinde is married to Hunding, and Siegmund is her twin brother. This is neither incidental nor accidental. It is true that an incestuous coupling between a brother and sister is there in Wagner's principal source for *Die Walküre*, the Volsung Saga, but in the saga it is, as George Gillespie puts it, "a matter of convenience."[28] Signy (who

[27] *SL*, 303.

[28] George Gillespie: "New Myths for Old," in *The Valkyrie / Die Walküre*, ed. Nicholas John (John Calder: London, 1983), 30.

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becomes Sieglinde in Wagner's adaptation) needs a heroic son and heir, and disguises herself to have sex with her brother. But in Wagner's version, the discovery by the pair that they are brother and sister does not give them pause. On the contrary, it becomes a further reason to celebrate their emotional and sexual union, as they do in the ecstatic music that brings act one to a close. Wagner was determined to underline his belief that traditional taboos should not be a barrier to that form of love.

There is nothing in Wagner's – or Wotan's – presentation of this episode which implies disapproval. When Fricka, the guardian of conventional moral rules, protests at the breach of holy matrimonial vows, Wotan retorts "Unholy / call I the vows / that bind unloving hearts," and he defends incest in similar terms. "When came it to pass / that brother and sister were lovers?" asks Fricka indignantly. To which Wotan replies "Now it's come to pass! / And learn from this / that a thing may happen although it's not happened before." But still, in the end, Wotan yields to Fricka. Whatever his personal views, he must enforce the rules of the social order he presides over. Siegmund must not be protected against Hunding's revenge. As Fricka correctly perceives, Siegmund is not the free agent who is needed to inaugurate the new social order. He is an agent of Wotan's scheming, and he ends up as its victim, and, as Deryck Cooke said, "surely . . . the most *contemptibly betrayed* of all Wagner's heroes."[29]

Siegmund, however, is not just a victim, he is also an exemplar of the committed, courageous love which Wagner wants to set at the heart of a better society. One of the momentous turning-points in the *Ring* saga occurs when Brünnhilde, in obedience to Wotan's instructions, comes to Siegmund to tell him he must die and join the fallen heroes in Valhalla. When he learns that Sieglinde cannot accompany him, he refuses Brünnhilde's summons. Come what may, he will stay with his sister and wife. Brünnhilde is so impressed and moved by this act of devotion that she decides to defy her father and do whatever she can to help the couple. In so doing, she identifies herself with humans against the gods, and this identification is reinforced when Wotan, by way of punishment for her disobediences, deprives her of divinity in the closing scene of this part of the drama.

Wagner was always careful with the titles of his works, and while to many listeners this second installment of the *Ring* seems in essence to be the tragedy of Siegmund and Sieglinde, it is the transforming impact of this drama upon Brünnhilde – *Die Walküre* – that he wants us to focus on. It is this that makes the story of Siegfried and his union with Brünnhilde possible.

[29] Cooke, *I Saw the World End*, 312.

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But it is part of the complexity of *Die Walküre* that the central figure in the last two acts is neither Brünnhilde nor the Walsung pair, but Wotan, who orders Siegmund's death and expels his daughter from the community of the gods. It is clear that Wagner is profoundly moved by the plight of a god – a figure of authority who has grown weary of power and finds himself circumscribed by the rules he has himself made: "since by my treaties I rule / by those treaties I am enslaved." Twice in this second part of the epic drama he is compelled to abandon and punish two of his (many) offspring to whom he is particularly attached. The destruction of Siegmund marks the defeat of his attempt to set in motion the heroic, independent action which will save the gods from their otherwise impending doom. No wonder that, as he confesses to Brünnhilde in act two, all he longs for is "the end" ("*nur eines will ich noch: das Ende, das Ende!*").

It would be tempting to see in this portrayal of the god's unhappiness and despair evidence of the influence of the famously pessimistic thinker Arthur Schopenhauer, who made such an impact on Wagner once he had been introduced to his writings. But it was not until late in 1854 that the author Georg Herwegh persuaded Wagner to read the philosopher. The text, or libretto, of the *Ring* had been completed nearly two years earlier in December 1852. Nevertheless, Wagner read *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (*The World as Will and Idea)* four times by the summer of 1855, the same time he was composing the music of *Die Walküre*.

Yet it is hard to be sure exactly what it was that Wagner took from Schopenhauer, and how far the philosophy actually changed his outlook. Carl Dahlhaus remarked shrewdly that "His convictions were always inclined to develop out of his works, rather than vice versa,"[30] and it seems likely that Wagner found in Schopenhauer both confirmation and clarification of a streak of existential bleakness that was already part of his *Weltanschaung* and that found expression in Wotan's sense of hopelessness and futility, voiced so powerfully in his act-two scene with Brünnhilde. It also clearly affected the ethos of the narrative of *Tristan und Isolde*, which he composed in the late 1850s.

For all that, Schopenhauer is a paradoxical figure. His name is almost synonymous with pessimism, but it would be quite wrong to think of his outlook as one of listless fatalism. On the contrary: he is an energetic, clear-sighted and cogent campaigner for recognition of the somber truths of existence as he sees them, and an advocate of the virtues we need to endure that existence. As for suicide, he is firm in his belief that everyone has a right to end his or her life, but it is not something which he advocates whatsoever.

[30] Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 101.

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Schopenhauer's grasp of the facts of mortality and the passing of time was bound to strike a chord with Wagner, who was already meditating on these themes, as his letter to Röckel of January 25/26, 1854 makes plain: "we must learn *to die*, and *to die* in the fullest sense of the word; fear of the end is the source of all lovelessness." And these thoughts are directly related to his portrayal of Wotan: "Wotan rises to the tragic heights of *willing* his own destruction. This is all that we need to learn from the history of mankind: *to will what is necessary* and to bring it about ourselves." After his parting with Brünnhilde, Wotan "is in truth no more than a departed spirit." As the Wanderer in *Siegfried*, he is essentially an observer, with no significant power to interfere. Wagner is nonetheless fascinated by him: "observe him closely! He resembles *us* to a tee; he is the sum total of present-day intelligence."[31] But the future, and the last two parts of the *Ring,* belong primarily to Siegfried.

Siegfried

Wagner presents Siegfried as the tragic hero of the *Ring*, but also as the man of the future. He is explicitly and directly contrasted with Wotan, "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.*" The term "annihilation" may reflect the influence of the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Bakunin was in Dresden in 1849 at the time of the uprising, and he and Wagner talked a good deal in the course of their insurrectionary campaign. Bakunin was famous for declaring that "the urge to destruction is a creative urge," and there are indications in Wagner's writings that he shared that response at times. It is plausible to see the destruction of Valhalla at the end of the *Ring* as the dramatic expression of this idea: an annihilation that is the precondition for the emergence of the new and better moral and social order. There certainly seemed to be a great deal of Wagner in Siegfried, and for a time it appeared as though Wagner was beginning to revitalize culture through his music. That astonishingly original and independent thinker Friedrich Nietzsche, befriended by the Wagners as a young man, for a while believed that Wagner, his music, and his conception of heroism, embodied in Siegfried, represented the radical break with nineteenth-century orthodoxy that he himself advocated. Though later disillusioned with Wagner – disliking the influence of Schopenhauer and seeing *Parsifal* as the

[31] *SL*, 306–8.

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composer's abject surrender to established Christianity – while Wagner was writing the *Ring*, Nietzsche saw the composer as the best hope for the future of music.

Having begun the text of the *Ring* with its final part, then called *Siegfrieds Tod,* Wagner was surely well aware that this tragic narrative, in which he is trapped by Hagen into betraying Brünnhilde, and is in turn betrayed by her, does not provide many opportunities for Siegfried to reveal his heroic and uncorrupted character. This was particularly so since its first draft did not include the Prelude showing Siegfried and Brünnhilde celebrating their love together. Hence the need to preface the tragedy with *Der junge Siegfried,* which later became simply *Siegfried.*

This is the story of how the young hero, who knows nothing of fear, first reforges Notung, the sword which Wotan had originally given to Siegmund but smashed with his spear when Siegmund tried to use it to defend himself against Hunding. Siegfried then uses the sword to slay the dragon Fafner, obtain the Ring, and then kill Mime, who was planning to kill him. Guided by the Woodbird, he brushes the Wanderer Wotan aside, and passes through the ring of fire to be united with Brünnhilde.

Siegfried is the most positive, extrovert and straightforward of the four parts of the *Ring*, and Wagner expected it to become the most popular part of it. You can see why. It has less of the complexity and ambivalence that run through the other dramas, and with the first meeting of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, it concludes on a note of relatively unqualified hope and confidence. There is even some humor in it, notably in the exchanges between the Wanderer and Mime in act one.

The problem of *Siegfried* lies with Siegfried himself. Wagner never lost his belief in him. While he was still working on *Götterdämmerung* in 1872, he told Cosima, "Siegfried lives entirely in the present, he is the hero, the finest gift of the will."[32] But this comment unwittingly draws our attention to one of this supposed hero's crucial limitations: He "lives entirely in the present" – so much so that he comes across as almost entirely unreflective, impulsive, and unable to listen to anyone. The encounter with Wotan is particularly disturbing in that respect. Of course, Siegfried cannot allow this stranger – his grandfather, as it happens – to bar his way up the mountain to Brünnhilde. But it is somehow typical of Siegfried that he abuses the Wanderer for his age and threatens him with violence and death if he persists in obstructing him. He finds it hard to listen even to Brünnhilde: "You sing of the past, / but how can I listen, / while I have you beside me, / see and feel only you?" Lack of curiosity seems to be part of living "entirely in the present."

[32] *CD*, March 12, 1872.

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Then there is his treatment of Mime. We know that Mime, like his brother Alberich, is fixated upon recovering the Ring, which lies unused in Fafner's possession. We know also that he plans to get Siegfried to kill Fafner and bring back the Ring. Then Mime will obtain the Ring, by either drugging or killing Siegfried. But not until Fafner is dead, does Siegfried know this. It is possible to argue that Siegfried's contempt and loathing for Mime, so brutally expressed in act one, reflects his intuitive apprehension of the dwarf's evil intentions. But we can't help noticing that much of his abuse of Mime, here and in act two, focuses not on Mime's character but on his appearance and physical characteristics.

At the opening of the drama, Siegfried knows nothing of his parents. He has been brought up and looked after by Mime, but there is not the least sign of gratitude or respect for this on Siegfried's part, and he totally rejects the suggestion that Mime could be his father. "No fish had a toad for a father!" he says – which sounds like an assertion of racial or ethnic superiority.

The suggestion that Mime, like Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*, is an anti-Semitic caricature arouses indignation in some quarters, but it is hard to see why. It is readily acknowledged that many other of the composer's convictions and preoccupations find their way into his work. For example, the outrage in the Grail community at Parsifal's shooting of a swan is naturally linked to Wagner's campaign against vivisection and his compassion for animals. Why then should we be surprised if there are strands of racism and anti-Semitism in his music dramas? In his essay *Jewishness in Music* Wagner dwelt in particular on Jewish speech patterns: "We are repelled in particular by the purely aural aspect of Jewish speech."[33] Mime, in his vocal style and his characteristic attitudes and behavior, would seem to embody what Wagner says about Jews in this offensive essay.

This is not, as some might say, a post-Nazi, post-Holocaust suggestion, although it was only to be expected that, in the wake of Nazism and Hitler's enthusiasm for Wagner, the composer's anti-Semitism would receive more attention and closer scrutiny than it had before. The composer Gustav Mahler, subjected to much anti-Semitic hostility in Vienna, took this interpretation of Mime more or less for granted: "No doubt with Mime, Wagner intended to ridicule the Jews (with all their characteristic traits – petty intelligence and greed – the jargon is textually and musically so cleverly suggested) . . . I know of only one Mime, and that is myself."[34]

[33] Wagner, "Judaism in Music," 28.

[34] Quoted in Cooke, *I Saw the World* End, footnote p. 264. On the same page Cooke writes that Wagner "never intruded his racialist theories into his works of art"!

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Wagner was consistent in his defense of Siegfried. Yet the manner of his defense in his long letter to Röckel indicates that either Röckel or others had, even before Wagner had begun work on the music of *Siegfried*, made some of the criticisms we have already mentioned. "My hero should not leave behind the impression of a totally unconscious individual," he writes defensively, "on the contrary, in Siegfried I have tried to depict what I understand to be the most perfect human being, whose highest consciousness expresses itself in the fact that all consciousness manifests itself solely in the most immediate vitality and action."[35]

Action is the expression of a consciousness, which we might otherwise expect to be expressed in words. But Siegfried is a singer in a music drama who has no choice but to use words. It is an unconvincing defense. We should notice too, that when Siegfried and Gunther swear an oath of friendship and mark it with a drink containing each other's blood, Hagen, son of Alberich, does not join in. As he explains, "My blood would spoil all your drink / my blood's not pure / and noble like yours." Whenever Hagen appears he is "represented by idiosyncratic music that illustrates his difference . . . and in doing so represents . . . Wagner's thoughts on the mixing of race."[36]

However, when it comes to Siegfried, the composer uses all his resources to give him the style and sound of a hero. And Siegfried is perhaps at his most convincing in the scenes with Brünnhilde at the close of *Siegfried* and in the Prelude to *Götterdämmerung*. This is consistent with Wagner's emphasis on the need for co-operation, even unity, between men and women: "Nor even Siegfried alone (man alone) is the complete 'human being': he is merely the half, only with *Brünnhilde* does he become the redeemer."[37] However, it is not until the final act of the tetralogy that it becomes clear in what sense Siegfried and Brünnhilde become "the redeemer." Until then the puzzle is to determine in what sense Siegfried can be seen as a heroic figure. At the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde urges him to go off and do "new deeds," but it is far from clear what these might be. Hagen gives us further insight: "Merrily seeking / adventures and fame, / he sails the Rhine, / he roams the world." Siegfried is to take on the role of the archetypal hero, gaining fame through feats of physical daring. When he meets the Gibichungs, he greets Gunther with "now fight with me, / or be my friend!" – the kind of machismo or bravado one comes to expect from an unthinking hero, where there are either friends or foes, and nothing in between.

[35] *SL*, 308–9.
[36] Marc A. Weiner, *Richard Wagner and the Anti-Semitic Imagination* (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1995), 312.
[37] Letter to Röckel of January 25/26, 1854, *SL*, 307.

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It is certainly true that Siegfried knows no fear, and this enables him to kill Fafner and to pass through the ring of fire which protects Brünnhilde on her mountain top. But this looks like an aspect of naïveté or cluelessness. True courage, or heroism, is shown by those who know both fear and the risks they are running but nevertheless act bravely.

If we are looking for heroism in the *Ring* then, as Berry has suggested, it is Siegmund who offers the best example.[38] His refusal to follow Brünnhilde to Valhalla when he discovers that his wife and sister cannot accompany him is an act of real courage, and one that inspires Brünnhilde to similar defiance. Thus the way is paved for the generation that will act as free individuals, independent of the gods.

Götterdämmerung

The problem is that both Siegfried and then Brünnhilde fall into the lethal trap that Hagen has set for them. After the Prelude to *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried bids farewell to Brünnhilde and sets off in exultant mood for the Rhine. But the music fades and darkens. Confidence and happiness are left behind, and we enter the dark world of the Gibichungs and Hagen's relentless plotting.

It is unclear how we should interpret the drink or drug which the Gibichungs give to Siegfried, which induces him immediately to forget Brünnhilde and focus his attention on Gutrune. Is Siegfried entirely the victim of their manipulation, or does his response reflect gullibility, and even the shallowness of his commitment to Brünnhilde? It is equally unclear what happens between Brünnhilde and Siegfried, disguised as Gunther, during the night that follows the horrible scene at the end of act one. One of them is lying about it in act two. Perhaps this merely illustrates the depths of their entanglement in Hagen's elaborate plan. Siegfried now plans to marry Gutrune, and Brünnhilde ensures his death by betraying him to Hagen and Gunther.

It hardly represents an auspicious start to the human order which is to replace the old, decayed order of Wotan and the gods. Yet Wagner's final title for the climactic finale to the *Ring* is *Götterdämmerung*. He was clear that the gods were doomed, and their end is a central theme of the drama, even though, apart from their ambassador, Waltraute, Brünnhilde's sister, they make no appearance in it. Waltraute's evocation of the plight of Wotan and his fellows waiting for the end is some of the most touching music in the score. But it leaves Brünnhilde unmoved, just as Siegfried is

[38] Berry, *Treacherous Bonds*, 165.

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deaf to the Rhinemaidens' plea to him to return the Ring to them. Yet in the end Brünnhilde does return the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, and this, understandably, provoked Röckel's question: "why, since the Rheingold is returned to the Rhine, the gods nevertheless perish?"[39] To this Wagner has no clear response, except to say, in effect, that the end of the gods is written into the entire sequence from the moment when Loge predicts their doom at the end of *Rheingold.* It is too late to save the gods and Valhalla but not too late for the Rhinemaidens to celebrate the return of the gold and the atonement of Alberich's original crime, accompanied by the drowning of his son, Hagen, still grasping at the disappearing Ring in the work's final bars.

The more taxing problem for Wagner was how to distill something positive and uplifting out of the immediate tragedy of Siegfried and Brünnhilde, with the pivotal event in the final act being the murder of Siegfried, which Brünnhilde herself has facilitated. No wonder that the composer drafted and redrafted the peroration with which she was to bring the drama to a close. There were, it seems, at least six different versions.[40]

Some things are clear in the sustained funeral oration. Brünnhilde does not spend any time or energy rebuking herself for her role in this final tragedy; but she does pay loving and generous tribute to Siegfried who, as she acknowledges, was faithful as well as faithless: "the purest hero, / though he was false!" She bids a warm and moving farewell to Wotan, while starting the fire which will consume Valhalla and its inhabitants. She joins Siegfried by immolating herself in the flames. Like Senta in *The Flying Dutchman,* Isolde in *Tristan and Isolde*, she is united with her lover in death.

Of the variant endings, two have attracted particular attention. One, drafted in 1852, exalted love as the one thing that mattered and endured beyond all life's worldly goods and customs. It is a rejection of Wotan's world of power and rules, and has a recognizably Feuerbachian tone to it. But, after he had been introduced to the thinking of Schopenhauer, Wagner had rather different ideas about how to end the work and produced a very different text. Now Brünnhilde is to sing of leaving behind the world of desire and delusion: "Grieving love's / deepest suffering / opened my eyes: / I saw the world end."[41]

In the end, neither of these passages was included in the final musical version of the text, although both were printed as footnotes, together with

[39] Letter to Röckel of January 25/26, 1854, *SL,* 309.

[40] See Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 95.

[41] Draft ending of 1856, quoted in Barry Millington, *Wagner* (Dent: London, 1984), 225–6.

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Wagner's own comments on them. Wagner declared that he preferred the later ending, and those many Wagnerians who have wanted to forget, or even erase, the young composer's involvement with revolutionary ideas and even action, have been happy to think that the *Ring* conveys a final message of pessimism: It is the world's end that we see being acted out and staged.

But there are problems with this gloomy interpretation. It is Valhalla that we see being destroyed, not the earth itself, meaning the world of the Rhine and of Siegfried and the now-human Brünnhilde. Carl Dahlhaus has drawn our attention to a letter Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck at the end of 1858, in which he suggests that Schopenhauer had failed to see how love, the love of men and women, can achieve "a total pacification of the will" and a release from its discontents.[42] At that time, at least, Wagner must have thought that the Feuerbachian conclusion of 1852 was the more valid one. But, above all, there is the music itself. The dark, intense tragedy of Siegfried's funeral march is left behind, and the whole drama ends in a mood of overwhelming exaltation, with the dominant motif being the radiant one with which Sieglinde greets Brünnhilde's news that the child she is pregnant with will be the hero Siegfried. However devastating the tragic outcome of *Götterdämmerung* may be, the music suggests that Wagner has not lost his belief in the saving power of love.

In the end, it may be wisest to recognize that, as Dahlhaus says, "Wagner himself was by no means certain what his own works meant."[43] This uncertainty is hardly surprising. The *Ring* is a vast work, of immense range and complexity, which the composer was writing and composing over a period of more than twenty-five years. Its musical unity is a unique achievement, and the continuity of the narrative across four very different dramas almost equally remarkable.

Once we understand how serious and committed Wagner was to remaking opera as music drama or, indeed, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, we can hardly be surprised to find how deeply they are permeated by his philosophy of life. He was open and receptive to a wide range of ideas, and they were fed into his work. Some of them, such as his obsessive prejudice against Jews and his preoccupation with race or blood purity, are objectionable. But they are there, along-side his critique of greed, industrial slavery, and lust for power, not to

[42] Letter to Mathilde Wesendonck of December 1, 1858, *SL*, 432, and see Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 104.

[43] Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 138. See also the section on meaning in the Introduction.

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mention his radical take on incest and his celebration of sexual love between men and women. Wagner never intended that his music dramas should be mere entertainment, and the best compliment we can pay him is to treat them with the wholehearted seriousness with which he composed and created them.

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