

# Reflecting on Wagner

By Frank Lewin

A detailed examination of text and music in the mature works of Richard Wagner, with particular attention to the four dramas of *The Ring of the Nibelung*

## About the author

This monograph was written by composer and teacher Frank Lewin (March 27, 1925-January 18, 2008) during the last two years of his life. Having lost his eyesight in 1997, Lewin drew on his extensive knowledge of Wagner's works, plus new research. The text was not quite complete at the time of his death and much of it had not been polished. His assistants and family have done minimal editing to make this work-in-progress available to the public, and hope to have correctly interpreted all of Lewin's intentions, without introducing any errors.

Translations of passages in foreign languages are, for the most part, by the author; the few that were added are marked with an asterisk. Professor Froma I. Zeitlin of Princeton University provided assistance with three passages in Greek. Andrew Oster checked facts relating to Wagner's works. Musical examples, set by Scott Smallwood, are rendered as Lewin requested, using accidentals instead of key signatures. Items that appear as footnotes were left on the voice recorders Lewin used for notes to himself, and were transcribed by his writing assistant, Saraswathi Shukla.

Lewin hoped that a wide variety of musicians and scholars would find these reflections of interest. In 2007, he wrote the following by way of introduction to the monograph:

*I was born in Breslau, Germany (now Wrocław, Poland). My father, who loved music but was not a musician, introduced me to music and took me to the opera three times. Two of the operas were by Richard Wagner, and this experience established my life-long interest in his work. After the Nuremberg Laws went into effect in 1935, Jews could no longer attend public performances. I continued listening to music on the radio and on phonograph records, and took piano lessons for several years. In 1939, my family emigrated to Cuba, and in 1940, we were able to enter the United States.*

*My aim always was to write music; after graduating from high school, I studied music at night, while working in a letter shop during the day. As soon as I was able, I started studying music full-time. My teachers included Felix Deyo, Jack Frederick Kilpatrick, Hans David, Roy Harris, Richard Donovan, and Paul Hindemith.*

*I was active as a composer for over 45 years, writing concert music as well as scores for theater, film, and television. Whenever possible, I wrote for the voice: three song cycles, a requiem for Robert F. Kennedy, a cantata I conducted at the White House in 1965, and*

*the opera Burning Bright, based on the novel and play by John Steinbeck. I also became expert in recording and editing sound for motion pictures. In 1971 I started teaching composition at the Yale School of Music, and in 1975 I began to teach the course Music in Modern Media at the Columbia University School of the Arts.*

*Throughout my professional life, I have profited from my study of Wagner's dramatic and orchestral techniques. I have applied his principles in my film scores as well as my vocal compositions.*

For more information on Frank Lewin, please visit his website, [www.franklewin.net](http://www.franklewin.net).  
Scholars are free to quote from this monograph, provided proper attribution is granted.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Literary devices and sources</b>	page 4
<b>End rhymes</b>	page 7
<b>Alliteration: spoken versus sung</b>	page 10
Digression: The Vocalic R	
Digression: Kundry	
<b>Greek theater</b>	page 26
Digression: Onomatopoeia	
<b>Prosody</b>	page 34
Digression: “Mann”	
Digression: Representing teenage characters	
<b>Meter</b>	page 37
<b>Leitmotifs</b>	page 40
<b>Triads</b>	page 50
<b>Up and down</b>	page 53
Digression: Acting	
Digression: Anti-Semitism	
<b>Intervals</b>	page 64
<i>Unison</i>	
Digression: Hans Knappertsbusch	
<i>Interval of the second</i>	
Digression: Tessitura	
<i>Interval of the third</i>	
<i>Interval of the fourth</i>	
Digression: <i>Götterdämmerung</i>	
Digression: Overtures and preludes	
<i>The Tritone</i>	
<i>Intervals of the fifth and sixth</i>	
<i>Interval of the seventh</i>	
Digression: <i>Parsifal</i>	
<i>Interval of the octave</i>	
<i>Interval of the ninth</i>	
<b>Wagner’s innovations</b>	page 88
<b>Interaction of words and orchestra</b>	page 97
Digression: Language	
Digression: Nibelungenlied	
<b>The Valkyrie Rock</b>	page 110
<b>Orchestral instruments</b>	page 114
<b>The <i>Ring</i> as a theatrical experience</b>	page 122
Digression: Transformations	
<b>The <i>Ring</i> of the future</b>	page 127

## Literary devices and sources

In his stage works, Richard Wagner (1813-1883) addresses our senses through a variety of means: singing voices, the orchestra, and scenic imagery. His texts, which he wrote himself, employ literary devices that include alliteration (initial consonants echoed in subsequent words), assonance (the mirroring of vowels in subsequent syllables), and end rhymes. In this article, the examination of alliteration will also consider the vocalic qualities of initial consonants. Assonance will, at the same time, deal with the color of vowel sounds.

Wagner's employment of all these devices is already present in his early works. (See my article, "The Music of Language in a Passage from *Tannhäuser*," *Ars Lyrica*, vol. xiii, 2003.) In the mature works, they become integral to the language, as shown in the excerpt from *Parsifal* later in this section. The four dramas of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* dispense almost entirely with rhymes, and concentrate on alliteration. This form of poetry originated in the Nordic sagas from which Wagner drew his material for the *Ring* cycle.

The text of each of the mature operas is peculiar to its subject matter. The *Ring* dramas rely on alliteration, and their language may seem at times complex. The text of *Tristan und Isolde* is sometimes involuted. *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, in contrast, is direct, often colloquial, and full of popular German sayings. An example is Eva's words to Hans Sachs: "*Ja, lieber Meister, schilt mich nur; Ich war doch auf der rechten Spur*" ("Dear Master, I deserve this slight, yet feel my path did lead me right"). An occasional *Schnitzer* (verbal slip) can characterize a person. In Act II, Beckmesser complains in

exasperation that despite Sachs's interruptions, he must go on with his malaprop serenade: "...*Herr Gott, ich muss! Sachs, euch gedenk' ich die Ärgernuss*" ("...Good Lord, I must! Sachs, you will pay for this business"). Beckmesser changes "*Ärgernis*" to "*Ärgernuss*." He does it—like the weasel in the eponymous poem by Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914)—"*um des Reimes willen*" ("for the sake of the rhyme"). In another instance, in Act III, the apprentice David describes the feeling of his betrothed for him as "*innerlich*" ("interior") instead of "*inniglich*" ("intimate").

The language of *Parsifal*, while quite direct, contains the various poetic devices almost as if they have become second-nature. A representative example may be cited from Act I: the youth, Parsifal, is being guided by the elder Knight of the Grail, Gurnemanz, to the castle of the Grail. The lines are as follows (the English translations in this article attempt to reproduce the patterns of the German text):

Parsifal: *Ich schreite kaum,*

*doch wähn' ich mich schon weit.*

Gurnemanz: *Du sieh'st mein Sohn,*

*zum Raum wird hier die Zeit.*

A rendering into English might be:

Parsifal: I start my steps,

yet sense a distant place.

Gurnemanz: You see, my son,

here time turns into space.

The second and fourth lines have end rhymes. *Schreite/schon* and *wähn/weit* are examples of alliteration; the direct echo *ich/ich* is, ipso facto, both an alliteration and an

assonance. The word *mich* is an assonance as well. Other assonances are: *schreite/weit*, *kaum/Raum*, and, of course, *schreite* with the end rhyme *weit/Zeit*. Between the second and third lines: *doch/Du, mich/mein*. The third and fourth lines: *siehst/Sohn, zum/Zeit*. (The word “wird” is probably not felt as an alliteration.) The poem *Parzifal*, by Wolfram von Eschenbach (c. 1170-c. 1220), the source for Wagner’s drama, also contains end rhymes.

Wagner also drew on the poem *Perceval*, by Chrétien de Troyes (fl. 1170). Descriptions of which parts of the poems found their way into Wagner’s drama can be read in *A Companion to Wagner’s Parsifal*, edited by William Kinderman and Katherine R. Syer, which came out in 2005. This book contains a host of references to other writings about *Parsifal*, including articles on the music. As with Wagner’s last work, *Parsifal*, all previous music dramas, starting with *The Flying Dutchman*, are based on legends, myths, and historical events become mythic. These sources include the Prose Edda, the Nibelungenlied, and the Volsunga Saga; all of them were recounted in medieval manuscripts. Starting with *Lohengrin*, Wagner conflated several sources into his texts. His only work based on a historical figure is *Die Meistersinger*.<sup>1</sup> *Rienzi* tells the story of a 14<sup>th</sup>-century Roman tribune—advocate of the people—fictionalized in the novel by the English writer Edward Bulwer Lytton (1803-1873). *The Flying Dutchman* derives from Wagner’s experience in a small boat that brought his family, including a large dog, from Riga to Paris in 1839. A prose sketch for an opera, *Le vaisseau fantôme*, resulted from this experience; it was eventually set to music by another composer. *Rienzi* still preserved the Meyerbeerian dimensions of five acts. *The Flying Dutchman* is, in

---

<sup>1</sup> WAGNER B30-31: *Die Meistersinger* is the only work not based on Medieval customs and practices and contains one historical character, Hans Sachs, but reshaped in Wagner’s image.

essence, one unbroken act. All subsequent works contain three acts. This constraint causes some acts to be long: Act I of *Götterdämmerung* lasts two hours and links together three scenes encompassing six events. The third act of *Die Meistersinger* also lasts two hours.

### End rhymes

All of Wagner's stage works, other than *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, have end rhymes.<sup>2</sup> End rhymes carry several expectations: anticipation of how a word will be echoed, being startled by an unusual combination of words, or—ideally—an effect so natural that the rhyme seems unquestioned. (Stephen Sondheim is a modern master of rhymes that are ingenious yet inevitable.) In spoken poetry, the rhymes will sound close enough so that they can be clearly felt. When sung, however, lines may stretch to such a degree that the rhyme cannot be heard as an echo anymore. When the lines are short, the rhyme can be perceived even when sung.<sup>3</sup> Long lines, however, may lose the sound of rhymed words. This effect is particularly noticeable in the often very slow music of *Tristan*, i.e. the rhyme is of little sonic importance.

When the rhymes themselves are the feature of the text, the setting will usually be fast enough so that they can be appreciated. The text of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* is in the form of so-called “*Knittelreime*,” which is almost the equivalent of what we call “doggerel.” (The first part of *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) is also

---

<sup>2</sup> WAGNER B71: Rhyme—the similarity of sound, i.e. the power of assonance

<sup>3</sup> WAGNER B75: A, B, A, B, rhyme heightens the expectation (long, long, short, long)

in this traditionally German form of verse.) *Die Meistersinger* contains particularly felicitous rhymes. Some consider it Wagner's greatest work. Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941), piano virtuoso and composer—and also the first Prime Minister of Poland—declared it to be “the greatest work of genius ever achieved by any artist in any field of human activity.”

As mentioned earlier, the four dramas of the *Ring* use very little rhyme, though end rhymes do occasionally occur; the effect is so startling that they evidently express irony. One instance occurs in Act I of *Götterdämmerung* when Hagen explains to the not-so-swift Gunther how he can obtain Brünnhilde for his wife: “*Brächte Siegfried die Braut dir heim, wär' dann nicht Brünnhilde dein?*” (“If now Siegfried brought the bride home, would not Brünnhilde be your own?”) (This kind of *unreine Reim*—impure rhyme—was acceptable in German literature of the nineteenth century, although avoided in previous periods.)

Another instance of a rhyme within an otherwise unrhymed context is “*Von Menschen verlacht, verlustig der Macht*” (“By humans denied, deprived all might”) in Fricka's peroration in her scene with Wotan in Act II of *Die Walküre*. The sudden appearance of rhyme in these words brings one up short. This rhyme tends to direct attention to the sound of the words rather than their meaning. An instance is “*Marguerite, sois maudite!*” (“Marguerite, be damned!”), uttered by Mephisto near the end of *Faust* by Charles Gounod (1818-1893). Somehow the patness of the rhyme detracts from the portentousness of the message. The reaction to this close rhyme may tend toward the risible rather than conveying the intended terror. Fricka's final rejoinder to Wotan is couched in a conventional song form, in character with the goddess guarding

“conventions.” The orchestra introduces the song with a typical accompanimental figure of repeated notes—as if Fricka were putting herself in position to deliver her message:

*Deiner ew'gen Gattin heilige Ehre beschirme heut' ihr Schild!*

*Von Menschen verlacht, verlustig der Macht, gingen wir Götter zu Grund!*

*Würde heut' nicht hehr und herrlich mein Recht gerächt von der mutigen Maid.*

Your eternal spouse's holiest honor be sheltered by her shield!

By humans denied, deprived of all might, we the gods would be gone

If today my highly honored right be not avenged by the masterful maid.

As puzzling as the sudden rhyme *verlacht/Macht*, is the juxtaposition *Recht/gerächt*—an intentionally awkward linguistic lapse—a pun? The rhyme in the midst of this passage sounds commonplace. The whole “number,” with its phrases, sequences, and cadences, may be meant as an ironic summation of Fricka's position. Possibly the words are intentionally awkward to show up her failure to understand Wotan's high-minded precepts. Yet, withal, the music does express Fricka's nobility. A parallel may be drawn to some of the language in the cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), where the often commonplace words—sometimes repeated over and over—are less significant than their inner meaning, expressed in the music.

Following Fricka's accepting an oath from Wotan that he will not have Brünnhilde shield Siegmund in the coming fight with Hunding, Brünnhilde herself enters. How a motif is varied according to the onstage action may be observed at this point: still offstage, Brünnhilde sings the Valkyrie motif in a jaunty tempo. As she becomes aware of Wotan and Fricka standing in confrontation, the motif changes to minor and slows down considerably—mirroring Brünnhilde's feelings and actions. The question arises

whether Brünnhilde's physical movement should slow down with the orchestra. Such an effect may be slightly comical—what, in a film today, would be called “Mickey-Mousing.” On the other hand, the changes in the Valkyrie motif may be staged so that they represent Brünnhilde's inner feelings, and thus might accompany her after her steps have come to a halt.

One more example of a seemingly unmotivated rhyme occurs in *Siegfried*. Alberich stands outside of Fafner's cave and announces—presumably to the world or the audience—“*In Wald und Nacht vor Neidhöhl' halt' ich Wacht*” (“In forest dark the dragon's cave I guard”). It is difficult to discern Wagner's purpose in this rhymed opening. (Was he inverting Shakespeare's practice of ending a scene with a rhymed couplet?)

### **Alliteration: spoken versus sung<sup>4</sup>**

Among the initial consonants that have a vocalic quality may be counted L, M, N, and, especially, R.<sup>5</sup> In Isolde's words recalling the wounded Tristan—“*Siech und matt in meiner Macht, warum ich dich da nicht schlug?*” (“Weak and mute, mine to command, why did I then fail to strike?”)—the piled up M's could probably be pronounced so that their intent is slightly sarcastic, and then she could become serious with the following line. An instance of an extended initial N can be heard at the end of Hagen's Watch in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*. It is combined with a compression of alliteration on D and

---

<sup>4</sup> WAGNER B98: Rhyme, meter, assonance, color of vowels, alliteration

<sup>5</sup> WAGNER B66-7: expressive combinations of consonants—“dr”, “kn”, “st”, “br”, “pl”

the repetition of the bright vowel “ie”. Not only is the initial N eloquent at the slow tempo of this passage, but the contrast of the bright vowel “ee” and the darker vowels “u” and “oh,” when the voice descends an octave, creates a descriptive sonic image: “*Dünkt er euch niedrig, ihr dient ihm doch, des Nibelungen Sohn*” (“Though he seems lowly, still you serve the Nibelung’s son”). **[Ex. 1, pages following].**

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a vocal and piano piece. Each system consists of a vocal line (bass clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The lyrics are provided in both German and English.

**System 1:**

Vocal line: *Hier sitz' ich zur*  
I sit here and

Piano accompaniment: *f* (forte), *più p* (piano).

**System 2:**

Vocal line: *Wacht, wah - re den Hof, weh - re die Hal - le dem Feind.*  
watch, guard - ing the hall, ward - ing off harm from a foe.

Piano accompaniment: *pp* (pianissimo), *poco sf* (poco fortissimo), *p* (piano).

**System 3:**

Vocal line: *Die eig' - ne Braut ihm bringt er zum*  
He brings his own bride here to the

Piano accompaniment: *p* (piano).

Example 1: *Götterdämmerung*, Act I

The image displays three systems of musical notation for Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, Act I. Each system includes a vocal line (bass clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The lyrics are provided in both German and English.

**System 1:**  
 Vocal: Rhein; Rhine; mir a - ber bringt er den He al - so brings me the  
 Piano: *più p*, *molto cresc.*

**System 2:**  
 Vocal: Ring! Ring!  
 Piano: *sf ff*, *dim.*, *p*, *più p*

**System 3:**  
 Vocal: Ihr frei - - - en Söh - ne You free - - - born fell - ows,  
 Piano: *pp*

Example 1: *Götterdämmerung*, Act I (continued)

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a vocal and piano piece. Each system consists of a vocal line (bass clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The lyrics are provided in both German and English.

**System 1:**

Vocal line: *fro - - - he Ge - sel - len, se - gelt nur lu - stig da - hin: mer - ri - ly sail on your way:*

English translation: *frisk - - - y com - pan - ions, mer - ri - ly sail on your way:*

**System 2:**

Vocal line: *dünkt er euch neid - rig, ihr dient ihm doch, des Nib -*  
*You think him low - ly, and yet you serve the Nibe -*

Piano accompaniment: *sfp*, *ff*, *dim.*

**System 3:**

Vocal line: *lun - gen Sohn. lung's own son.*

Piano accompaniment: *più p*, *pp*

Example 1: *Götterdämmerung*, Act I (continued)

The expressive power of sonorous vowels has already been described in my *Ars Lyrica* article on *Tannhäuser*. Ancient Greek poets applied devices describing physical events in words that painted the objects by bright vs. dark vowels. In addition, the option of substituting a long syllable with the equivalence of two shorts provided another means of pictorializing in sound. Both practices may be observed in line 280 from the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*: “augēs d' eplēsthē pukinos domos asteropēs hōs” (“Bright radiance flamed high, lighting the trim little dwelling lightning-like”). The long syllable in the description of the small house (*pukinos domos*) is not created by a long vowel, but rather “by position,” i.e. two adjacent short syllables whose final and initial sound are consonants. The image described is the goddess inside an ordinary house. In an opera—and especially in the work of Wagner—the orchestra here also takes over pictorial functions implicit in the words.<sup>6</sup> Format illustrating image does occur occasionally in Wagner. At the end of Hagen’s Watch, in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, his concluding words are “...des Niblungen Sohn.” The relatively bright vowels are placed on accented spondees, whereas the shorter vowels sound on the short syllables. Further, musical pitches strengthen the contrast: the bright “e” on the top note of the phrase with the

---

<sup>6</sup> WAGNER B76-79: When the orchestra is mostly accompanimental, the words and the rhymes become the main point of interest. On the other hand, when the orchestra takes part in telling the story, the rhymes are of lesser consequence. And the words of the text must share interest with what is being said by the instruments. [...] of what is being said simultaneously or interactively with what the instruments are saying. WAGNER B80-87: When words are sung, the expectation of end rhymes still exists, even though singing slows down the pace and separates the rhyming words further than they would be if spoken. That process does not work the same with initial consonants, i.e. alliteration. In singing, the initial consonants are also separated, but the main interest now falls on the vowels and syllables; they are stretched or made into melismas—exactly what the music wants to do. [...] as opposed to speaking, then. Thus, there is no expectation of hearing an echo in the initial consonants, because they are now separated further than in speaking. Another factor inhibits the function of the initial consonants as linking or binding elements: that quality is that certain consonants have an expressive value built into them, whereas others serve merely the function of defining the meaning of the word. Consonants that have inherent expressive power (and now list them)

WAGNER B89: Even at very close range, vowels without inherently expressive power have no contribution to make. *Wonniges Weib, / Sonniges Sein*

darker “o” an octave lower. The rhythmic pattern is  $\sim-\sim-$ . The orchestra can supply shadings of color—i.e., meaning—on its own. An example occurs in the prelude to *Parsifal*, when the initial theme returns. It is, at first, heard over a deep bass tremolo. Then, the bass drops out and a tremolo in the high strings accompanies the theme, which remains unchanged in its upward movement. The exact significance of this radical change of color is left to the listener’s imagination. Instances demonstrating the expressive qualities of vowels occur throughout Wagner’s dramas. In the *Ring*, Mime—in the first act of *Siegfried*—complains that his efforts to bring up Siegfried earn him ingratitude as “*Lohn*” (“reward”). The drawn-out “o” makes the word sound like a mock moan. A long “ah” is associated with the dragon Fafner in Act II of *Siegfried*. Words like “*schlafen*” (“to sleep”), and “*Frass*” (“grub”) suggest the wide stretching of his mouth. The word *fressen* refers to voracious feeding by both animals and humans. The noun “*Fresse*” for the mouth occurs in Siegfried’s address to the dragon, who opens his jaws in order to swallow the hero: “*Eine zierliche Fresse zeigst du mir da...*” (“What a neat set of choppers you show me there...”) In Brünnhilde’s final invocation in Act III of *Götterdämmerung*, the repeated soothing sounds of the extended “oo” in “*Ruhe, ruhe, du Gott*” are reinforced by the accompanying horns in the orchestra, which seem to produce the same sound as the long vowels. The appearance of an extended vowel may also lift the word from surrounding vowels of lesser potency. In the *Parsifal* excerpt described above, the *au* in “*kaum*” and “*Raum*,” as well as the *ei* in “*weit*” and “*Zeit*,” let these sounds stand out against the other vowels in the passage with lesser resonance. As will be described further on in a description of Hagen’s Watch in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, the same applies to lifting the word “*Feind*” from the surrounding words.

Unless the words are part of an animated recitative or fast patter song, the vowels between consonants are exactly what musical settings want to elaborate: stretch them, make melodies out of them, or just linger on them. As a result, initial consonants are separated further than they would be in speaking the same words, and become less impressive.

The refrain of the Norns at the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*—“*Weisst du wie das wird?*” (“Know you how that will be?”\*)—is derived from the refrain in the *Sybil*’s *Prophecy* in the *Elder Edda*: “Seek you wisdom still?”. This is how it is recited on a reading of Patricia Terry’s translation entitled *Poems of the Vikings: The Elder Edda*, produced by Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic. Wagner’s version contains alliterations on the words “*Weisst,*” “*wie,*” “*wird,*” and “*du,*” “*das.*” In spite of the proximity of these consonants, what the ear seizes upon are the bright sounds of *ei*, *ie*, and long *ah*, and, to a lesser degree *u*. Besides, the elapsed reading time of “Seek you wisdom still” is 2 seconds, whereas it takes 7.5 seconds on the Solti recording to sing “*Weisst du wie das wird?*” A reading of the German “*wisst ihr was das bedeutet?*” takes about 3 seconds. That translation appears in *Die Edda: die ältere und jüngere* by Karl Simrock (1802-1876), which appeared in 1851.

When alliterations are close enough together, they *can* be felt in singing. But if the initial consonants have no intrinsically expressive value, the emphasis will always be directed towards the vowels. This is true even when alliterative consonants occur in adjacent words.<sup>7</sup> Some examples from Act III of *Götterdämmerung* demonstrate this point.

---

<sup>7</sup> WAGNER B17: The initial consonants define the meaning of the word.

WAGNER B72: Singing increases the potency of assonance and decreases the power of initial consonants echoing.

Siegfried's words "*wonniges Weib*" ("delightful woman") do not focus on the two soft W sounds, but rightly on the interior of the syllables.<sup>8</sup> A change of initial consonant might be "*sonniges Sein*" ("sunny existence"). Even when the vowels are short and relatively unsonorous, they will deflect attention from initial consonants.

Gutrune's words "*Wie fasst mich Furcht vor dir!*"<sup>9</sup> in Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, do not throw emphasis on the relatively unexpressive initial F's, even though the short vowels in the syllables also have no strong expressive qualities. On the other hand, if both initial consonants and the following vowels form syllables which clearly echo each other, both alliteration and assonance combine to realize the expressive intent.

Siegfried's words in Act III of *Siegfried*, "...*brünstig...Brünnhilde*," even though they are separated by several other words, still echo each other. Besides, the "br" combination has expressive qualities of its own which the singer can utilize.

But even in the Valkyries' cry "*Hojotoho*" the "o's" predominate against the alliterative H's. When first heard, sung by Brünnhilde at the beginning of Act II of *Die Walküre*, the sound is that of a young girl expressing joy. Later, the cry extends the final "o" into an upward leap of an octave. Sung by Brünnhilde or the other Valkyries, this whoop rarely sounds musical. Actually, such a sound is not against the nature of the cry reported from the legendary Valkyries as they swooped over the battlefield. (The Valkyries are the counterparts of the Gaelic banshees, who were also known for the noises they produced.) Their terrifying sound presaged the selection of warriors to be

---

<sup>8</sup> WAGNER B90: "Delightful woman, / Sunny existence" In both cases, the interior of the syllables create the impression, not their initial consonants; they serve to determine the meaning of the words.

<sup>9</sup> WAGNER B27: I feel much fear of you!

slain (the word “*Walküre*” is composed of two nouns: “*wal*” means “slain warrior,” and “*Kür*” means “one who chooses”). Thus, the “Ride of the Valkyries” is not a youthful romp, as it is sometimes represented in performance. On the contrary, it is intended to be terrifying; it was appropriately used that way in the 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*, in which loudspeakers mounted on helicopters emitted this fearful sound as they strafed a Vietnamese village.

The Valkyries had various tasks. After they had selected the warriors to be slain, they conveyed them on their horses to Valhalla—“Hall of the Slain.” There, the heroes banqueted and enjoyed themselves through further combat. (Somehow, before the corpses reached Valhalla, some field hospital must have reconstituted their bodies.) The Valkyries had additional functions, enumerated by Wotan in Act III of *Die Walküre* when he deprives Brünnhilde of these qualities. The Valkyries were *Wunschmädchen* (“Wish Maidens”); in this capacity, they attended the warriors in Valhalla. Most likely, they also took part in the drinking. On earth, women took part in the feasting, and it was they who selected their drinking partners for the night. Valkyries were also called *Schildmädchen* (“Shield Maidens”). This function is directly connected with Shield Maidens on earth. These were young women who took part in the battles; they led groups of warriors. In their right hands, they bore shields, and in their left hands they might hold a banner. (Legend has it that one shield maiden had her left hand hewn off so that her banner dropped to the ground.) A third function mentioned by Wotan is that of *Loskieserin* (“Chooser of Lots”). Further, he deprives Brünnhilde of her function as *Heldenreizerin* (“Inciter of Heroes”). His last deprivation sums up her whole nature: *Walküre* (“Valkyrie”). Her main function of selecting warriors to be slain is represented by

Wagner in the *Todesverkündigung* (“Announcement of Death”) to Siegmund in Act II of *Die Walküre*. Brünnhilde describes the enticements of Valhalla, including the presence of the *Wunschmädchen*.

To return to a consideration of the effectiveness of alliteration, how much the alliterated initial consonants can be perceived depends, in large measure, on the potentially vocalic quality of the consonant’s sound. Some consonants contain the possibility of stretching to the point where they have a vocalic quality. Among them are L, M, N, S, and, of course, initial R. An example of the caressing L sound is in the opening of the duet in Act I of *Die Walküre*: “*Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond, in mildem Lichte leuchtet der Lenz*” (“Winter’s storms vanish before Maytime comes, Spring brings its milder light”). The relatively innocuous W’s in the first line give way to the caressing L’s in the second line. It may be noticed also that the text used vowels with discrimination, similar to the Greek quotation from the Hymn to Demeter; the first line contains one long vowel—“*Mond*”—whereas the second line contains short vowels, except for one word, “*leuchtet*,” i.e. both word and vowel glow. The initial L has a similar caressing function when Isolde begins her final peroration,<sup>10</sup> “*Mild und leise, wie er lächelt, wie das Auge hold er öffnet...*” (“Mildly, softly, he is smiling, and his eyes are gently opening...”)

Digression: The Vocalic R

An initial R can be rrolled. In Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde’s words “...*mir*

---

<sup>10</sup> WAGNER B18: The L on which a singer can “llinger”...

*den Ring entriss...*” (“...ripped off my ring...”) can be felt not only as alliterations, but also as an expression of the physical act. Coming upon lines full of alliterations by reading them can be confusing. For example, Wotan’s long musings in Act II of *Die Walküre* may seem impenetrable without hearing the music. In addition, it is helpful to know the story of all the dramas in order to decipher the meaning of this passage. Questions are resolved when the words are sung: they are experienced more slowly than they would be if read, and are supported by the eloquent orchestra.

The vocalic quality of an R can be heard in the eerie outcry “*Irre, irre*” (“Wander errantly”) in Kundry’s malediction to Parsifal in Act II. The R’s actually take the place normally occupied by vowels. The word contains only a schwa at the beginning and end. The R is maintained for a half-note plus a quarter-note in a moderate tempo. In German, *Irr-* also connotes confusion as well as insanity, as part of composite words: *Irrsinn* (“insanity”), *Irrer* (“insane person”). Although not intended, *Irre* can also mean “insane female person”—a quite apt description of Kundry’s state of mind at this point in the drama. She refers to madness earlier in the act, when she is called up from the depths by Klingsor, and inarticulately utters: “*Ach! Ach! Tiefe Nacht... Wahnsinn...*” (“Ach! Ach! Deep and dark... Madness...”).

The full text of Kundry’s incantation is “*Irre! Irre! Mir so vertraut! Dich weih’ ich ihm zum Geleit!*” (“Errant, errant, how well I know, so may you stray without a guide”). It has become the custom that singers try to stretch the weak “i” sound as if it were a syllable of its own, disregarding the fact that the R’s belong to two syllables. In execution, it makes the word sound like *Ire* (Irishman). If the German R were given its full value, its guttural sound could imitate a wild animal snarling. Even though the

English R is softer, being pronounced further forward in the mouth, “grrrr” (as mentioned in the *Ars Lyrica* article referred to earlier) is used in comic strips to indicate a savage growl.

The brutality of this sound may also be heard in Act III of *Götterdämmerung* when the vassals question Hagen about why he has just killed Siegfried. In Hagen’s answer “*Meineid rächt’ ich!*” (“For false oaths, reckoning”) the R can, again, express fierceness. (As in Fricka’s peroration described above, the ear associates “*rächt’*” with “*Recht*”—an association that is clearly intended.) In fact, Hagen’s character has been revealed previously by words beginning with R or another consonant preceding the R and merging with it. In Act I, his words to Gunther are “*nur wer durch das Feuer bricht, darf Brünnhildes Freier sein*” (“Only he who braves the flames takes Brünnhilde as his bride”). Of the ten words, eight contain an R, with three of them in the initial position. It is possible to consider this example as a sentence in which the R’s are not necessarily expressive by intent. In the words near the end of Hagen’s Watch in this act, the parade of R’s is unmistakably intended to lead up to the climactic word “*Ring*”: “*Die eig’ne Braut ihm bringt er zum Rhein; mir aber bringt er—den Ring!*” (“He brings his own bride here to the Rhine, but to me he brings—the ring!”) This word is further emphasized by being sung after an upward skip of a seventh; at the same time, Hagen’s malevolence is indicated through the weighty tritone in the bottom of the orchestra. His savage nature should suggest to the singer not to roll the R, but to attempt a guttural sound. The key word for Hagen is “*Ring*.” The four last words of the entire cycle contain two R’s. Hagen exclaims “*Zurück vom Ring!*” (“Don’t touch the ring!”) as he is about to be dragged down by the Rhine maidens. One of his most memorable R’s is a most terrifying “*Rächt’*

*ich!*” (“Reckoning!”) When he kills Siegfried, his words preceding the slaying also bristle with initial R’s: “*Erräth’st du auch dieser Raben Geraun’? Rache riethen sie mir!*” (“And can you guess what the ravens said? Revenge was their advice!”) The word “*Rache*” can be particularly repulsive with its two sounds deep in the throat. In the Solti recording, Gottlob Frick brings the requisite malevolence to his R’s. So does Josef Greindl in both the 1955 recording conducted by Joseph Keilberth and the 1956 Knappertsbusch performance. In other performances, a singer could be heard shouting the words rather than singing them. As a result, Hagen has lost his fierce malevolence and merely sounds like a stock villain.

Double meanings and puns occur occasionally in the *Ring* dramas. A common example is the phrase “*Rheingold! Rheingold! Reines Gold*” (“Rhinegold! Rhinegold! Finest gold”). The two words contain a pun, since *Rhein* and *rein*, even though spelled differently, are homophones, referring to the river and the word “pure.” Another example is Loge’s sarcastic line, “*Den sel’gen Göttern, wie geht’s?*” (“How do things stand with the blissful gods?”) The word “*selig*” has both the meaning of “blessed” and “late,” applying to a person deceased. Thus, his use of the double-edged word “*selig*” is in character. The direct meaning of the word can be encountered in Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, when Gunther speaks of “*zwei sel’ge Paare*” (“two blissful pairs”). He is evidently referring to living persons, i.e. Siegfried and Gutrune and Gunther and Brünnhilde. It is doubtful which of the two meanings is meant in Brünnhilde’s final apostrophe: “*Siegfried, mein seliger Held*” (“Siegfried, my blessed hero”). (The double meaning of *selig* can also be encountered in the witty libretto by Viktor Léon [1858-1940] and Leo Stein [1872-1947])

for the operetta *The Merry Widow*, composed in 1905 by Franz Lehár [1870-1948], when Count Danilo contrasts his own blissful self with the widow's late husband. The double meaning may also be found in "U.S.A.," standing for "*Unser Seliger Adolf*," a locution current in Germany after the end of World War II.)

#### Digression: Kundry

To return to Kundry's "mad scene" in Act II of *Parsifal*: the second segment of her curse, "*Mir so vertraut*," rather than being delivered, as is customary, as a less forceful aside, could probably be given manic intensity. A deep breath or gasp in the pause between "*Mir*" and "*so vertraut*" could reinforce her feeling of desperation. The final phrase "*Dich weih' ich ihm zum Geleit*" ends as a B in the middle of the staff. Invariably, singers take the B an octave higher, so that the word *Geleit* seems to end in a triumphant shriek. Kundry's part contains a number of high notes prior to this spot; each time, a shriek-like exclamation is appropriate to the words. If the word *Geleit* is pronounced with the proper vehemence, the final three notes—6-flat, 5, 1—should be sufficiently dramatic. The two other characters in this act have made similar, forceful conclusions to highly charged emotional outbursts, using the same downward steps: in the first scene, Klingsor uses this progression on the words "*furchtbare Noth*" ("dreadful fate"). Later in the act, in his scene with Kundry, Parsifal rejects the temptress with "*Verderberin! Weiche von mir! Ewig, ewig von mir!*" ("Destroyer of men! Be gone from me! Forever, ever from me!") Other composers have used these two steps to denote equally emphatic finality. One example is the inexorably repeated phrase in Giacomo Puccini's *Suor Angelica* in the title

character's scene with the Princess.

Consonants which have little or no vocalic content—i.e., they cannot be stretched—do not contribute much to the feeling of alliteration. One instance is the alliterative W's in the Norns' refrain, described above. Another would be an initial H. In Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, Gunther's first words are "*Nun hör', Hagen; sage mir, Held: sitz' ich herrlich am Rhein...*" ("Now hear, Hagen, speak, my hero, of my high Rhenish might...") To emphasize these H's would not contribute to the expressive quality of the passage, but, on the contrary, would lead to parody. Where such parody is intended, the emphasis on an initial consonant can be effective. For example, in the second act of *Siegfried*, in Mime's line "*Ich will dem Kind nur den Kopf abhau'n!*" ("I only want that the child's head be chopped clear off!"), the singer can emphasize the initial consonants grotesquely.

Sometimes an alliteration draws unusual attention to itself. In *Das Rheingold*, Fasolt's words "*Freia, die Holde, Holda, die Freie*" ("Freia, the lovely, Holda, the free one") falls into this category. That play on words is nonsense. Apparently, Fasolt is trying to show that he can be as witty as Wotan. Actually, Wotan brings this comeback onto himself by addressing the giant "*von oben herab,*" i.e. "from on high." For example, he asks Fasolt in arcane alliterese, "*Nennt, Leute, den Lohn; was dünkt euch zu bedingen?*" ("You people should name your fee; what do you think it should be?") The word "dünkt" brings up an unpleasant association with the homonym "*dünkt,*" which means "applies dung." Fasolt's gaffe consists of equating Freia with Holda. That would be like comparing apples with prunes. In Nordic mythology, Freia was the goddess of youth and

love. She also had a martial aspect: it was said that half of the warriors slain on the battlefield went to her, while the other half went to Valhalla. By contrast, the German Frau Holda—also known as Frau Holle—was portrayed as an old woman. She protected children and wild animals. Her region was the white snow. She was reputed to reside inside the Hörselberg—the same mountain where Tannhäuser dallied with Venus. Strangely, the first words Tannhäuser heard after leaving the mountain were sung by a shepherd boy: “*Frau Holda kam aus dem Berg hervor...*” (“Frau Holda came out of the mountain...”)

Occasionally, a line may attract undue attention because it calls up an unintended image. In Act III of *Götterdämmerung*, as Siegfried recalls waking Brünnhilde from her sleep, his words are “*Der Wecker kam.*” By now a German-speaker associates the word “Wecker” automatically with “alarm clock.” Possibly, this word was not as common in Wagner’s time, although its meaning goes back a century before his time. The words could easily be altered to “*Ich weck dich nun*” (“I wake you now”).

## **Greek theater**

The dictionary definition of “drama” is: “a prose or verse composition presenting in dialogue and action a story involving conflict or contrast of characters, intended to be performed on the stage.” The defining characteristic in a drama is “dialogue.” Not until Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.) introduced the second actor was dialogue—and thus, drama—possible. Aeschylus not only wrote the text of his plays, but also composed their music, directed them, and acted in them. We may consider Wagner a latter-day Aeschylus—he

certainly did. While he did not act in the staging of the dramas, it is reported that he sang every vocal line while rehearsing the singers (the words probably framed in strong, Saxon accent). Throughout his life, he revered the Greek dramatists. As late as 1882, in Cosima's diary for April 16, the *Philoctetes* by Sophocles (496-406 B.C.) is mentioned. Philoctetes, one of the warriors traveling to Troy, had been given the unerring bow of Hercules from Apollo. He also received a festering wound from the god, which smelled so powerfully and caused him to cry out in such pain that his companions left him on the island of Lemnos. As described in the *Iliad* (circa 800 B.C.), the Trojan War was not concluded even after nine years of siege. An oracle declared that only by bringing the bow of Hercules and Philoctetes to Troy would the Greeks win. Odysseus and Neoptolemus, the young son of Achilles, traveled to Lemnos and tricked Philoctetes into coming with them to Troy. Father M. Owen Lee, in his lecture entitled *Wagner: The Wound That Would Not Heal*—published in *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art*—details the psychological and symbolic implications of the legend on the composer in particular, and artists in general. A more concrete illustration can be found in comparing the *Philoctetes* with *Parsifal*. Both contain scenes of temptation. Odysseus requests the inexperienced Neoptolemus to forget his principles for one day and lie to Philoctetes. In *Parsifal*, Kundry tries to bribe the young man to forget, for one hour only, his quest to solace Amfortas, and give himself to her.

Wagner also studied the architecture of Greek theaters, in 1848. The architectural principles of the theaters he later incorporated in the *Festspielhaus* in Bayreuth: unimpeded sightlines from a raked seating area, and—especially—the acoustic properties of the structures, which enabled the voice of the actor to reach the audience without

diminution of the power inherent in the words. Intended as a temporary structure, built mostly from wood out of the nearby forests, the *Festspielhaus* still exerts its magic more than 130 years after it was built. According to an assistant conductor, experts from all over the world study the theater, intending to reproduce its properties. When they go back to their design studios, however, they make changes. Thus, the acoustics of the *Festspielhaus*, like those of the ancient Greek theaters, have never been duplicated. The still-extant theater in Epidaurus lets the visitor experience its extraordinary acoustics. (A scientific study in the April 2007 issue of the *Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* offers yet another explanation of the auditory phenomena in Epidaurus: corrugations in the limestone of the seats.)

The Greek theater was a public institution. Epidaurus contains 14,000 seats, and a guide will demonstrate by dropping a pin on the stage that, indeed, sound travels to the outer reaches of the amphitheater. In a performance, it is uncanny to sit in the last row and hear the words with hardly any attenuation. A similar effect—although in a smaller, indoor location—is achieved in the *Festspielhaus*: sitting in the outmost seat in the last row of this 1,925-seat theater (expanded from Wagner’s original design for 1,460 seats), a member of the audience can hear every word clearly, aided by the fact that the sunken pit—Wagner called it “*der mystische Abgrund*” (“the mystic abyss”)—melds and slightly attenuates the large orchestra. Sightlines are impeccable.

The historical outdoor drama grew up in America as a supposed successor to the Greek theater. More than 40 open-air theaters now exist in which plays are performed during the summer in various parts of the country, each play dealing with the history and myths of its particular locality. Contrary to the ancient Greek theaters, these theaters are

smaller, yet make no concession to the ear. The ancient Greek plays were performed during the day, whereas the outdoor dramas are performed at night. Thus, the actors' voices often compete with crickets, night birds, even distant traffic and the occasional plane overhead. (In one community, local residents make it a sport to fly over the theater at low altitude.) Some of these impediments in a theater not particularly friendly to sound detract from a full participation on the part of the audience.

*The Lost Colony* by Paul Green (1894-1981), in Manteo, North Carolina, started this theatrical movement in 1937. The theater for *The Lost Colony* originally contained 2,000 seats; now it holds 1,530. Yet the actors' voices do not carry well throughout the theater, and eventually body microphones were installed. The next theater to be built, for *Unto These Hills* by Kermit Hunter (1910-2001) in Cherokee, North Carolina, contains 2,800 seats. This theater also finally resorted to amplification for the voices. It may be added that amplification of the speaking or singing voice has become common in indoor theatrical productions, even though the relatively small size of the auditoriums should make communication so much easier than the vast spaces of the ancient Greek amphitheaters.

The power of Greek drama was mainly absorbed through the ears. At such long distances from the stage and the orchestra—the space where the chorus operated—the visual spectacle shrank to almost postage-stamp size. Thus, the language of the dramatist carried the performance to the ears rather than to the eyes. In his treatise *Laocoon*, the German dramatist Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) praises the superiority of the spoken word against visual art. He cites line 45 from Homer's *Iliad* in which words—underlined

here—imitate the rattling of Apollo’s arrows in his quiver: “*tox ōmoisin echōn amphērepha te pharetrēn*” (“carrying across his shoulders the bow and hooded quiver”).

#### Digression: Onomatopoeia

Such onomatopoeia did not become a feature of Wagner’s texts, for the orchestra assumed that function: for example, the baying of hounds, simulated by French horns, in Act II of *Die Walküre* when Sieglinde imagines she hears her husband, Hunding, pursuing her. Other instances in the *Ring* cycle can be found in the halting music after Siegfried hands his horse, Grane, to Hagen. You can hear that Grane does not go willingly! In Act II of *Götterdämmerung* when Hagen addresses the vassals and makes a sardonic reference to sacrificing rams, the sound of the animals is reproduced in the orchestra. Richard Strauss (1864-1949) went even further in depicting zoological events when he had the brasses imitate the bleating of sheep in his *Don Quixote*. (At the risk of pursuing this matter a bit far, Alban Berg [1885-1935] cites Strauss sonically in *Wozzeck* when the Doctor orders Wozzeck to eat only mutton.) In *Parsifal*, a bit of sound painting antedates Richard Strauss (and Hollywood): the harp glissando accompanying the spear being thrown by Klingsor at the end of Act II.

The orchestra can paint physical occurrences. Alberich scrabbling up the rocks to reach the Rhine maidens above is portrayed in the orchestra, complete with the occasional backslide. Another instance of physical action mirrored in the orchestra occurs at the end of *Das Rheingold*: Donner strikes a rock with his hammer, suggestive of lightning. The following thunder is, of course, represented by a timpani roll, which

decreases in intensity. As previously described, the increasing motion in the prelude to *Das Rheingold* is suggestive of the surging river. At the end of *Die Walküre*, the flames surrounding Brünnhilde's rock are paralleled by fast figurations in the high strings. It would be close to impossible to execute this music in complete unanimity. In fact, Richard Strauss, in his treatise on instrumentation, states that Wagner counted on the inevitable imprecision of executing these string passages, portraying the myriad tongues of flame. The rustling of leaves is suggested in Act II of *Tristan*, when the offstage horns of the hunting party merge into oscillations in the orchestra.

Occasionally, Wagner employs onomatopoeia in the voice. An instance is Brünnhilde neighing like a horse on the word "*wieherst*" when she addresses Grane during the final scene of *Götterdämmerung*.

To return to the Greek theater: the dramatists used alliteration and assonance to reinforce the power of the words. If we imagine the scene in the *Elektra* by Sophocles when Elektra calls out to her brother, Orestes, after she has heard the first outcry of their mother, Klytemnestra, being killed, whatever gestures the actor, and, possibly, massed movement by the chorus can show are surpassed by the powerful line "*paison, ei stheneis, diplēn*" ("get her, if you can, again!"). The alliterative "p's" convey explosive power. The "s's" may well have been pronounced with an exaggerated hissing sound reminiscent of a snake.<sup>11</sup> The Greek line, reaching the ears with full force, contains an additional punch: the word *paison* calls up the word *pais* (child) in the listener's mind. It

---

<sup>11</sup> WAGNER A38-39: The constantly exploding p's and the hissing s's are in conformance with the person and the situation. Such correspondence of sound with situation cannot be found in a random assembly of initial consonants which, by themselves, have little or no expressive value.  
WAGNER B35: In Greek, the exploding P's and hissing S's are dramatically expressive.

is an appropriate pun, since Elektra, until a few moments ago, had known of Orestes only as the “child” who was carried from the palace. The actor must have screamed this line, not only to express its ferocity, but also to reach the distant Orestes’ ear inside the palace. In opera, the orchestra can supply the exaggerated emphasis required by such hysterical utterances. In Richard Strauss’ opera *Elektra*, the librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929), has compressed these violent words to: “*triff noch einmal*” (“hit yet again”). The actor no longer makes the powerful point, for, in the opera, the words are spoken hurriedly—not even sung. The following orchestral outburst expresses the fury and horror of the situation. Another example is the orchestral eruption after Isolde’s words “*drum such’ er meine Huld*” (“let him now pay me heed”) in her scene with Kurwenal in Act I, boiling up out of the orchestra without a word being sung. This brief, but violent, orchestral outburst evidently signifies Kurwenal’s reaction to the insult, without being put in words. A similarly violent orchestral outburst precedes Otello’s “*A terra! e piangi!*” (“Fall down now, start weeping!”) near the end of Act III of Verdi’s opera *Otello*. His words are unaccompanied by the orchestra, but his feelings are expressed in the horrendous outburst surrounding these lines.

The Greek actor’s voice could have added to the power of this line by exaggerating the pitch accents which characterized the ancient Greek language. With these accents, the language must have sounded like what to modern ears would be called singsong. It was this musical aspect of Greek that the Florentine *Camerata* tried to emulate when they created what, in effect, became opera. That innovation eliminated the spoken aspect of the language, and concentrated on its musical potential. What became known as *recitative* is the compromise eventually arrived at: the rhythm and speed of

speech given musical pitches.

The Greek word *theatron*, our “theater,” derives from *theaomai*, “to view, to gaze,” thus a place for a show. The attendees, however, we do not call “spectators”—a term reserved for sporting events—but “audience.” In fact, around 1727 the term “auditorium” became established, acknowledging the importance of the aural component of a presentation.

The Greek drama was intended for the people, not merely an elite. Wagner also intended his audience to be the common folk, rather than aristocrats. In order to fill the ancient Greek amphitheater, Pericles (circa 495-429 B.C.) established a subsidy to enable poor people to attend. The reason may well have been altruistic, but the subsidy undoubtedly helped the nobles who bore the cost of dramatic performances. Today, we might call it “papering the house.” Wagner had similar ambitions for his *Festspielhaus*. When attendance for the eight performances of *Parsifal* in 1882 fell below expectations for the first three performances—which had largely been paid for through *Patronatsscheine*, i.e. subscriptions—he also admitted persons of any standing at reduced prices. To carry things even further, when attendance at Bayreuth fell off sharply during the Second World War, the Nazi Party issued free tickets to its members.<sup>12</sup> After the Festival reopened in 1951, it did not lack for visitors. Eventually, ordinary citizens had to wait years before obtaining their tickets.

---

<sup>12</sup> WAGNER A65: Hitler sent wounded veterans to Bayreuth.

## Prosody

Even though complex, the texts of the dramas are always grammatically correct. Even long sentences are clarified when sung in the relatively slower tempo of song versus speech. The music helps to elucidate the meaning. An example is Kundry telling Parsifal of his father in Act II: “*So rief, als in arab’schem Land er verschied, dein Vater Gamuret dem Sohne zu, den er, im Mutterschoß verschlossen, mit diesem Namen sterbend grüsste*” (“Greeted thus, when still in his mother’s womb concealed, by your father, Gamuret, when dying in Arabia”). Accentuation of words is always in conformance with the rhythm of the music. Exceptions occur when Wagner uses misplaced accents for comic or emphatic effects. An example of the former is Beckmesser’s serenade in Act II of *Die Meistersinger*, which makes the misplaced accents sound ludicrous. A more serious instance is Brünnhilde’s words in Act II of *Götterdämmerung* when she points to Gunther and sings that the ring “*...ihn entriss mir dieser Mann!*” (“It was ripped off by this man!”) Normally the accentuation would stress *dieser*. In this musical setting, however, *dieser* is reduced to an upbeat to the stressed word *Mann*, suggesting a question. (A similar questioning intonation is common among today’s teenage girls when they lift their voices at the end of declarative sentences.) We know by now that Gunther lacks a number of manly qualities and so the words “this man” are meant ironically. Later in the same scene when Brünnhilde accuses Siegfried of committing perjury she calls him “*dieser Mann*” with the accent on *dieser*, the natural way of setting that word in a sentence.

## Digression: “Mann”

The word “Mann” has several meanings in German: 1. male human being; 2. strong male with “manly” qualities; 3. husband; 4. vassal, liege. Brünnhilde, in her confrontation with Gunther and Siegfried, described above, referred to meanings 2. and 1. In Act I, Hagen had described Siegfried’s prowess and added: “...*den wünsch’ ich Gutrun’ zum Mann*” (“I hope he will be Guttrune’s husband”). The expected meaning is 3.—husband. In the Knappertsbusch 1956 recording, however, the superb bass Josef Greindl extends the usually short “a” in “Mann,” giving it a questioning inflection. Possibly, he is hinting at sense 4.: that Siegfried would be Guttrune’s vassal as well, i.e. a social inferior, according to the rank-conscious Middle Ages, when the sources for these dramas were written down. Later in the act, Siegfried “proposes” to Guttrune: “*Deinem Bruder bot ich mich zum Mann: der Stolze schlug mich aus; trüg’st du wie er mir Uebermuth, böt’ ich mich dir zum Bund?*” (“I pledged to be your brother’s man, the proud man turned me down; would you refuse with equal pride, that I should join with you?”) Her response is one of the loveliest moments in a work rich in memorable details. No words, just the orchestra answers Siegfried: after an appearance of the Hagen tritone—as if Guttrune is looking to him for advice—a tender orchestral interlude describes her virginal, bashful character in responding to Siegfried’s offer.

Earlier in this scene, a brief orchestral passage also speaks for the wordless characters onstage. After the portentous reception of Siegfried by Hagen, to the overwhelming impact of the curse motif, two quizzical phrases represent first Gunther’s reaction, then Guttrune’s: a variant of the Gibichung theme, first in the horns, then in the

oboe. The impression is that both are spellbound by Siegfried's appearance. After a definite pause in all action—onstage as well as in the orchestra—Siegfried's motif enters strongly: the spell is broken. The orchestral Gutrune is most of the time more believable than the physical reality of a mature singer representing a teenager.

#### Digression: Representing teenage characters

Many of the Wagnerian heroines are young. Senta and Elsa build their actions on the fantasies of young girls. Elisabeth may not be a teenager anymore, but the lung power required for "*Dich, teure Halle*" does not correspond to the outpourings of a young girl. Brünnhilde, at her first appearance in Act II of *Die Walküre*, is certainly quite young: a hoyden. Over the remaining course of this drama, she gains stature but the impression of youthful exuberance stays with her. Gutrune is another such unspoiled young girl. Singers in this role—in both voice and physique—are usually too heavy to express that innocence.

One solution to this quandary might be in a recording—for separate listening or as the soundtrack to a visual medium—in which the voice is altered electronically. Formant synthesis, for example, which allows the envelope of one sound to take the place of another voice or instrument, is a technique that might be used. A soprano could be altered into a mezzo, or changed in the other direction, to that of a young voice. Such a transformation would make Senta and Elsa convincing in their roles as vision-struck teenagers. As soundtracks of a visual medium like film, the impersonation could be complete by having someone of the correct age lip sync the part. Another character who

would benefit by sounding young would be the virginal Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung*. Her part lies high in a few passages and is of necessity usually negotiated by a well-developed soprano voice. Electronic alteration has been used before: in the Solti recording, the tenor's voice was changed to become baritonal when Siegfried impersonates Gunther, at the end of Act I in *Götterdämmerung*.

## Meter

Wagner's music has been accused of being metrically square, especially in his earlier works. This criticism does not, however, take into account the fluctuations in tempo that Wagner assumed to be executed during a performance. What he termed the "*melos*" suggested fluctuations, frequently as demanded by the texts. Wagner was an experienced conductor—author of the treatise *On Conducting*—and would have been the first to resent a rigid interpretation of his music.

A change of meter is used occasionally for dramatic purposes. The change from duple to triple meter is generally an indication of derision. One example occurs in Act III of *Die Walküre* when Wotan describes part of Brünnhilde's punishment: "*Hieher auf den Berg banne ich dich; in wehrlosen Schlaf schliesse ich dich fest; der Mann dann fange die Maid, der am Wege sie findet und weckt*" ("Here onto this rock you are confined; in defenseless sleep will you be locked; the man who will capture the maid will find her on the road and wake her up"). At the word *Mann*, the meter changes from 4/4 to 6/4.

Another change from duple to triple meter expresses Beckmesser's indignant rejoinder to Hans Sachs in Act I of *Die Meistersinger*: "*Ei! Was kümmert doch Meister Sachsen, auf*

*was für Füßsen ich geh'?*” (The reference is to Hans Sachs’s accusing him of partiality because he is “walking on the feet of a wooer”—“*Geht der nun gar auf Freier’s Füßsen...*”—one of the many colloquialisms in the text.) Another example of the dramatic use of meter appears near the end of Hagen’s Watch. He addresses the absent Gunther and Siegfried with the words “*Ihr freien Söhne, frohe Gesellen, segelt nur lustig dahin*” (“You freeborn fellows, frisky companions, merrily sail on your way”). At “*segelt nur lustig dahin*” the previously duple meter changes to the feeling of a rolling triple meter. This phrase is immediately echoed by a trumpet in the orchestra, after which the more rigid duple rhythm takes over again. In the powerful interlude that follows, duple and triple rhythms are superimposed: the trumpet again gives the feeling of a triple meter, combined with the Ring motif in duple time. The trumpet phrase recurs at the beginning of Act II, when Hagen is sitting with open eyes yet seemingly asleep. Presumably he is sleeping in the same position as in Act I, keeping watch. The trumpet phrase is heard as if recalling a memory in Hagen’s mind. In this version, however, the final note of the phrase is missing like an unanswered question.<sup>13</sup> The trumpet motif is heard twice more before Hagen’s father Alberich joins the scene—in body or in spirit.

The Solti recording of this surreal scene merely sounds unreal: Hagen’s voice, previously on mic, now has shifted from the foreground to a distance somewhat remote from the microphone. Alberich’s words sound even more distant—thanks to added reverberation—when he first joins the conversation. He gradually comes closer, but both characters remain at some remove from the listener. In this quasi-surreal scene, which never makes clear whether Hagen is actually talking to another person or is conversing

---

<sup>13</sup> WAGNER B42: The trumpet—the second half in triple meter is repeated twice more with the last tone missing, as if leaving a question open.

with himself in his sleep, it would seem more appropriate to have both voices as close as possible—as if, indeed, we listened to their inner thoughts. When the scene has concluded, and the orchestra portrays the arrival of daylight, Siegfried appears suddenly on the scene. When Hagen greets him, he is sitting evidently in the same position we left him in Act I: at close range.

In another of Wagner's works, the change from duple to triple meter may be symbolic: in the recapitulation of the *Tannhäuser* Overture, the Pilgrims' Chorus is heard in 4/4, while the strings continue their feverish figurations carried over from the preceding Venusberg music. Then, the meter changes to 3/4, as it had appeared at the beginning of the Overture. The intention may have been to contrast the profane duple with the triple meter, the latter formally sanctioned by the Church as the only one permissible because it represented the Trinity.

The rare use of an irregular 5/4 meter is heard when Tristan is about to die in Act II and raves out of his mind. This kind of "irrational" meter is traditional in Western music to describe madness. One example can be found in the opera *Orlando* by George Frederick Handel (1685-1759).

The end of Hagen's Watch is also an example of an instrument immediately repeating a vocal phrase. This repetition acts as a reinforcement of the preceding words. Another example that may be cited is Brünnhilde's oath in Act II of *Götterdämmerung*. She touches Hagen's spear, swearing that Siegfried had committed perjury. Her words are echoed by a solo trumpet, reaching its peak of intensity on the high notes echoing the word "*Spitze*" ("point").

## Leitmotifs

The usual translation of “*Leitmotiv*” is “leading motif.” A more accurate translation might be “guiding motif” (the German word *leiten* means both “to lead” and “to guide”).

Whereas a symphonic motif consists of several melodic units, a leitmotif is a small melodic cell. Its treatment does not include fragmentation or breaking up into separate components. The leitmotif originated from the practice in opera of recalling an event or a person by repeating the music first heard, termed “reminiscence motif.” The term *Leitmotiv*<sup>14</sup> was provided by critic Ernst von Wolzogen (1855-1934). Each motif, when first introduced in the score, is associated with a person or an abstract concept. Wagner himself did not approve of putting labels on these motifs. Some of his terms were *melodisches Moment* (“melodic moment”), or *thematisches Motiv* (“thematic motif”).

Wagner’s purpose is probably achieved more readily when listeners do not seek to identify the motifs by their association with persons or situations, but let their emotional impact complement the words being sung or—in the purely orchestral sections—create an imagined occurrence. The musicologist Viktor Zuckerkandl (1896-1965), in his article “*Das Theater des Singenden Menschen*” (*Der Merkur*, October 1963), denied that these small units were motifs at all. (He also had a rather quaint description of Wagner’s process of creation: “*Nein, da hat sich einer an seinen Schreibtisch gesetzt, alle Ausdrucksmittel, deren er bedarf, um sich versammelt, und beginnt einfach zu erzählen*” [“It may be hard to believe, but here is someone who sits down at his desk, gathers around him all the means of expression he requires, and simply starts to tell a story”].)

---

<sup>14</sup> WAGNER B53: Overhoff—... leitmotif as variation technique

Leitmotifs vary in their characteristics. If associated with rigid objects or states in nature, the motif remains closely associated with the form of a triad. It does not seem to have any built-in tendency to advance tonally (modulate), and can be repeated over and over, side by side, if necessary, with changes only in coloring or major/minor. An example of the latter is the mindless repetition of the Nibelungen rhythm. Siegfried's horn call falls into this category. Another is the sword motif. In addition to harmonic modifications, the motifs are also varied rhythmically, dynamically, and through orchestral colorations. Such transformations may be observed in the short scene in Act I of *Die Walküre* when Siegmund, left alone in Hunding's hall, realizes that he has no weapon to defend himself against Hunding in the morning. This brief scene, in fact, shows the transformations that a motif can undergo. Most of the musical material for this scene consists of two elements: a one-note ostinato in the rhythm of the Hunding motif, and various versions of the sword motif [Ex. 2]. This motif is first heard in minor, played by the bass trumpet. After Siegmund appeals to his absent father for the sword he promised him, the motif is heard in the trumpets in major. From now on, all variants of the motif in the scene are also in major. Once more the motif is heard on the trumpets, but softer and more lyrical. After one more statement on a very soft solo trumpet, legato as opposed to the more detached previous statements, the motif is now heard on the solo oboe as Siegmund remembers that Sieglinde looked at the ash tree before she left the room with Hunding. Another statement on the tender solo oboe is now followed by a forceful statement on the solo trumpet, and then softly on a solo horn. Another loud sounding on the trumpet is followed by a soft trumpet, playing legato, before the scene comes to a quiet close with the Hunding rhythm pulsing on the timpani. Also included in





waltz-like theme into a sturdy dotted duple meter. It sounds like a forerunner of the prelude to *Die Meistersinger*.

Throughout each work leitmotifs are varied harmonically, including the traditional major/minor, bright/dark antithesis. The power of the change of expression from major to minor is found in all of Wagner's works. Even the change of one note can change the affect noticeably. For example, in Act I of *Tannhäuser*, Wolfram describes to the returning Tannhäuser the effect his singing had on the maid, Elisabeth. Even though the knights defeated him in their song contest, he alone obtained one prize: Elisabeth's love. Wolfram sings: "...den du allein errangst" ("...which you alone obtained"). The phrase is the end of a quasi-aria. As is customary in opera of that period, the last line is repeated, but here with a difference: the word *allein*, which had been sung to the steps 6, 5, is now 6-flat, 5. That small change expresses the poignant regret in Wolfram's voice, for he is himself hopelessly in love with Elisabeth. In the 1954 Bayreuth recording, conducted by Joseph Keilberth, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau sings the part of Wolfram, and he brings out the momentary sadness in his repeated line.

As has been noted, in *Das Rheingold*, at the moment that Alberich curses love, the Rhinegold fanfare, previously a major triad, is heard in minor. In Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, during the wild scene of Brünnhilde accusing Siegfried of falsehood, the Rhinegold fanfare appears with the last note of the triad raised half a step—i.e. an augmented triad. The augmented triad that characterizes Hagen in this act may be alluded to.

Siegfried's horn call [Ex. 5], first heard in Act II of *Siegfried*—already suggested in faster tempo when he runs out of the forest in Act I [Ex. 6]—also undergoes changes



**Example 9: *Götterdämmerung*, Act III****Example 10: *Götterdämmerung*, Act I**

A striking transformation takes place with the theme for Amfortas's suffering in Parsifal. When first heard at the beginning of Act I, it descends constantly and is orchestrated in the somber colors of instruments in the lower range of the orchestra. At the end of Act III, when, with the touch of the spear, Parsifal heals Amfortas's wound, the theme—now in radiant major—is played in the higher regions of the orchestra.

The harmonic variation of a motif gives it a different emotional color. Varying the dynamics of a motif can alter it powerfully. When the giants appear in *Das Rheingold*, their motif is supported in the orchestra with soft timpani [Ex. 11]. Later in the scene, the timpani are played *fortissimo*, and render the giants truly gigantic for that instant.

**Example 11: *Das Rheingold*, Scene II**

The motifs form a vocabulary out of which the musical continuity of the four dramas is constructed. For example, in the first act of *Götterdämmerung*, the theme associated with Gunther, the Gibichung, is four-square with a regular IV-V-I cadence [Ex. 12]. In the last scene of Act I, Siegfried approaches Brünnhilde disguised as Gunther through the agency of the *Tarnhelm*. Gunther's theme is orchestrated with more abrasive brass sonorities, and the cadence evades its natural conclusion—changes shape, in effect—and leads to a different tonality [Ex. 13]. It is also incomplete: the last note of the

cadence is missing. Before this variant recurs, Gunther's theme is heard twice with the entire cadence eliminated.



Example 12: *Götterdämmerung*, Act I



Example 13: *Götterdämmerung*, Act I

The rhythm of a leitmotif may link it to another, related motif. For example, the two notes of the descending interval—frequently a fifth—with the rhythm accented short-long, characterizes the Gibichungs. It may be no coincidence that the name “Gunther” carries the same rhythm. By contrast, the upward moving fifth in this rhythm forms the beginning of Siegfried’s horn call. The descending version of this accented short-long rhythm also portrays the half-Gibichung, Hagen, with his characteristic tritone. The same two-note rhythmic shape also defines Hagen’s other motif consisting of a descending minor second. Kurt Overhoff (1902-1986)—whose theories will be described further on—even finds a relationship between the melodic and rhythmic shapes of the *Tarnhelm* motif in *Götterdämmerung* and the motif in *Parsifal*, derived from the so-called “Dresden Amen.”

Much has been written about the leitmotifs and their transformations. Musicologist Deryck Cooke (1919-1976) prepared a wide-ranging examination of how leitmotifs are generated from one another, in his introduction to the path-breaking Decca recording conducted by Georg Solti (1912-1997). (The introduction is now available on two CDs independent of the Solti recording.) For example, Cooke points out the connection of the first words in *Das Rheingold*, sung by the Rhine maiden, Woglinde, [Ex. 14] and the not-so-readily apparent kinship with the five-note motif of Brünnhilde's sleep near the end of *Die Walküre* [Ex. 15]. The connection with the woodbird's song [Ex. 16] in Act II of *Siegfried* is more easily recognizable. The phrases of that motif are played successively by solo oboe, flute, and clarinet. The theme could easily be played by one instrument, such as the flute, the traditional imitator of birdsong. Why the change of tone colors here? Siegfried, when he first becomes aware of the bird, addresses the chirper. Does the bird change plumage with each tone color? The answer can be found in one of the sources for this scene, i.e. the Wälsungensage—the Volsunga saga. After Sigurd kills the dragon, Fafner, he becomes aware that he can understand the language of birds. He listens to several of them, each giving him advice. Thus, apparently Siegfried heard not only one, but several birds. Confirmation comes later in the scene, after Siegfried has come to understand their language. The three instruments, which had played the phrases of the motif separated by a slight pause, now are heard with the end of one phrase overlapping the following one. And Siegfried himself now talks of understanding the birds—plural. In fact, the birds' motif is heard in the horn at this point, indicating that Siegfried not only understands, but also speaks the language of the

woodbirds. Eventually he converses with only one of them, sung by an offstage soprano. In the Solti recording, this voice is that of the supreme song bird, Joan Sutherland.



Example 14: *Das Rheingold*, Scene 1



Example 15: *Die Walküre*, Act III



Example 16: *Siegfried*, Act III

In Wagner's drama, Siegfried acquires knowledge of birdsong when he dips his finger in the dragon's blood, feels heat, and puts his finger to his lips to cool it. The account in the Volsunga saga has the same cause—touching his lips to cool the burn—but it is Fafner's heart that Siegfried touches. He had killed the dragon after being incited to this deed by his foster father, Regin. Wanting to please Regin, Sigurd cuts out the heart of the beast and roasts it on a spit so that he can give it to Regin for a meal. As in the *Nibelungenlied*, the events are much bloodier in these sources than the scenes which Wagner put onstage.

### Triads

The triad is the basis of many leitmotifs. Great expressivity can be invested in these simple tonal constructions. Wagner's hero, Beethoven, likewise concentrated tremendous

energy in some of his purely triadic themes. Consider the *Eroica* symphony: the first theme of the symphony consists of eight notes of the tonic triad, expanded to fourteen notes in the development section. Paul Hindemith (1895-1963), in the first volume of *The Craft of Musical Composition*, states the matter strongly: “Music, as long as it exists, will always take its departure from the major triad and return to it. The musician cannot escape it any more than the painter his primary colors, or the architect his three dimensions.”

*Das Rheingold* begins with a gradually evolving triad, whose first notes outline the overtone series. This theme—an E-flat major chord—gradually expands in range and complexity, introduces passing notes, and becomes ever more resplendent orchestrally. The theme may be considered to represent primordial nature, or the ascent from the bottom of the Rhine. This chord is maintained for 133 measures. To anticipate for a moment, the conclusion of *Das Rheingold* contains a veritable plethora of triadic motifs. The motif associated with the rainbow bridge to Valhalla, the home of the gods, is first heard in shimmering orchestration as the bridge appears. (The Nordic sagas relate that a rainbow bridge connected the land of the humans and the realm of the gods.) This theme eventually grows to triumphant proportions—some may say blatantly—as the gods enter the castle. The apparent blatancy of the gods’ music may well have been intended by Wagner in portraying the gods, who are, with the exception of the wily fire god Loge, rather unsubtle beings.

Loge does not join the gods. He is only half god, the other half presumably being in the shape of fire. Like his element, he can be useful at times but also often destructive. Thus, his snide comment on the final words in *Das Rheingold*—and he is never again

seen in his humanoid form in the other dramas—sum up his unsteady character. As he watches the gods enter Valhalla, he opines: “*Wer weiss, was ich tu’?*” (“Who knows what I’ll do?”) (It may be noted that here, again, the vowels—**air**, **ice**, **too**—draw the attention rather than the alliterative “w’s.”)

On his way into Valhalla, Wotan picks up a sword lying on the ground. At this point, the sword motif [Ex. 2] is heard for the first time in the dramas; it is also built on a triad. Another triadic motif is the fanfare that greets the first appearance of the Rhine gold. The *Rheingold* fanfare is stated four times. Each appearance adds one more note to the triad, similar to the formation of the theme at the beginning of *Rheingold*. Like our military *Taps*, it contains only tones of the triad. The fanfare outlines a major triad, until it is heard when Alberich curses love; then it becomes a minor triad. Among other triadic motifs are the motifs for Siegfried and the Valkyries; the latter may be taken to simulate the rhythm of a galloping horse. It will be noted that these, and other themes, have a strong, upward motion.

Even though some motifs contain passing or neighboring tones, their triadic outline remains clear. This is the case with the first theme sung by the Rhine maidens in *Das Rheingold* [Ex. 14].

An augmented triad stands midway between major and minor. Its true nature is established by what precedes or follows it: whether it proceeds into major or minor. It is the sound associated with Hagen. In Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, the Gibichung vassals, called together by Hagen to greet Gunther and his bride, respond to his sardonic comments on the gods with “...*da Hagen, der Grimme, so lustig mag sein*” (“...since Hagen, the grim one, so merry can be”). The augmented triad is heard twice before

resolving to a major cadence. Earlier in the act, when Hagen sits brooding as the dawn breaks, the brasses sound his augmented chord twice, before resolving to a minor triad, which, appropriately, is part of the *Tarnhelm* motif, since, suddenly, Siegfried appears, seemingly out of nowhere.

The leitmotifs are also built from other chordal constructs. The Ring motif is a descending and then ascending seventh-chord on the leading tone. This shape may be thought of, in fact, as a ring returning to its source. In minor, the seventh-chord assumes an ominous character. The Ring motif even appears in the good old diminished seventh-chord. As a seventh-chord on the second step of the scale, it gradually evolves into the Valhalla motif during the interlude from the Rhine to the abode of the gods [Ex. 17]. Whereas the Ring motif is tonally ambiguous, the Valhalla motif is a solid tonic triad with a lower third and one passing note. The noble solidity of this motif is established by the progression of simple, long-familiar harmonies: I, IV, I, V, I [Ex. 18].



Example 17: *Das Rheingold*, Scene I



Example 18: *Das Rheingold*, Scene II

## Up and down

Ernest Newman (1868-1959), a biographer of Wagner, stated that music goes either up or down. In the tradition of Western music, musical up and down motion can be associated with both physical and symbolic movement. Such correspondence of physical as well as

symbolic meaning dates back to the origins of the Catholic liturgy. The sequence, *Dies Irae*, of the Requiem Mass has a motion that tends constantly downward, since it speaks of the descent into Tartarus. The motif associated with Amfortas's suffering, in *Parsifal*, descends almost without change of direction. By contrast, a rising motion is the obvious rendition of the *Et ascendit in coelum* from Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*: the voices rise, and when they have reached their highest point, the orchestra continues upward. Verdi conveys a combined symbolic meaning in his *Messa da Requiem*: at the end of the Kyrie, the voices sing a continuous, abasing, downward movement on the entreaty, "eleison." When the voices cease, the orchestra reverses this movement in an elevating motion.

In Western music, one upward-moving pattern recurs which does not reach the top [Ex. 19]. Deryck Cooke, in *The Language of Music*, defines it as "the innocence and purity of angels and children, or some natural phenomenon which possesses the same qualities in the eyes of men." The Communion Theme, with which *Parsifal* opens, belongs to this category. The strong accents of the pattern occur on 1, 6, and then the fall-back to 5. In its simplest form, this pattern—with small variations, mostly repeated notes—can be encountered in music of diverse periods: the chorale *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme* (Sleepers Awake) by Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608), whose text speaks of angelic tongues [Ex. 20]; the tenor aria, "Then, then shall the righteous shine forth...." from the oratorio *Elijah* by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) [Ex. 21]; and the Prayer from the opera *Hänsel und Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck (1854-1921) (Humperdinck was Wagner's assistant on the production of *Parsifal* in 1882. After Wagner lengthened the music for the Transformation Scene in Act I and it was found to be still too short for the

unrolling scenery, Humperdinck composed the few additional measures required.)<sup>19</sup> [Ex. 22]



Example 19



Example 20: *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, by Philipp Nicolai



Example 21: *Elijah*, by Felix Mendelssohn



Example 22: *Hänsel und Gretel*, by Engelbert Humperdinck

In its more expanded form, the pattern dates back to the Requiem Mass, where it is set to the words *In paradisum deducant te angeli* (“May the Angels lead you into Paradise”) [Ex. 23]. The variation consists of a detour between step 6 and its fall back to 5. A more extended detour—but still preserving the fall from 6 to 5—is found in the first phrase of the Communion Theme in *Parsifal* [Ex. 24]. Wagner was concerned that he might have been encroaching on the theme heard at the beginning of the second movement of the cantata *The Bells of Strasbourg Cathedral* by Franz Liszt (1811-1886). That theme, however, only outlines the triad and goes on to the sixth step; it does not

<sup>19</sup> WAGNER B23-24: Scenic effects for the transition, such as the *Wandeldekoration* at the premiere, which took so long that Wagner had the musical interlude lengthened. Translation of *Wandeldekoration*: “scenery of change”

contain the characteristic falling back to the fifth. (A recording of Liszt's cantata, beautifully performed, has been issued on the Hungaroton label.) Wagner described the Communion Theme as representing "*Glaube, Liebe, und Hoffnung*" ("faith, love, and hope"). One component, though, should be added: pain. After reaching step 6 of the pattern, the theme moves up to 7, 8, and back to 7—a series of half-steps which Deryck Cooke says "[gives] the effect of a burst of anguish." When the theme reaches 7 on its descent, this note becomes the fifth step of a C-minor triad. That this E-flat is indeed synonymous with step 5 of an A-flat triad is confirmed when the second phrase begins with this note now unquestionably step 5 of an A-flat triad. The emotional impression of this C-minor triad contrasted with A-flat major is one of anguish. The relationship of tonal areas by thirds will become an ongoing process in the rest of the score. It may be noted that the second phrase descends and cadences in A flat. Included in this return to the tonic are the four ascending notes of what will become the spear motif. The cadence does not come to rest on the tonic note, but remains hovering on the third. Both phrases are stated in unaccompanied unison. The theme is repeated immediately with rich orchestral sonorities defining the chord progressions. Then the process of unison—full orchestra—is repeated with the same material in C minor: the third-relationship of tonalities is thus established at the very outset of the work. This time the detour reaches the quite remote E-minor triad. The identity of the third—G—is, however, again confirmed as the fifth step of C at the beginning of the second phrase. The cadential line this time ends on the tonic note, preceded by an accented appoggiatura on the lower neighbor, i.e. leading tone. (In *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*, theories on the harmony of the music as well as other information on the score can be found. One section

describes in detail how Wagner lengthened the music for the Transformation Scene in Act I, because the unrolling of the painted scenery took longer than planned.)



**Example 23: *In paradisum***



**Example 24: *Parsifal*, prelude**

A symbolic and sonic transformation of the Communion Theme at the end of Act III, after Amfortas has been cured, removes the fall from 6 to 5 and its pain-depicting detour: the theme goes straight up, without impediment, modulating to the key a fifth above. The feeling of ascent is reinforced when the unseen choir takes up this theme, sounds it five times, each time in a higher voice and modulating up a fifth [Ex. 25]. The work concludes with a final statement of this ever-ascending theme, played by the trombones and achieving a feeling of triumph.



**Example 25: *Parsifal*, Act III**

The second theme in the prelude to *Parsifal*—the traditional Dresden Amen—also has an upward movement [Ex. 26]. The third theme, on the other hand, has a downward slant. When it is later developed sequentially, it descends from the high register of the orchestra down to its lower region. Forerunners can be heard at the end of *Tannhäuser* in

the song of the Younger Pilgrims announcing the miracle of the Pope's staff sprouting green, signifying that Tannhäuser has been forgiven.



**Example 26: *Parsifal*, prelude**

Both downward and upward movement can be heard in the very first sung phrases in *Das Rheingold*: Woglinde's song goes down and up, suggesting a wave. Occasionally, the music may contradict text. A strange example is the Horst Wessel Song, the signature tune of the Nazis. The opening words are "*Die Fahne hoch...*" ("With flag raised high..."): this opening phrase, as well as subsequent phrases, has a constant downward motion.

In Act II of *Parsifal*, the first motif [Ex. 24] appears in minor, when Kundry tells of meeting Jesus. Probably by coincidence, in a phrase in Act IV of *Otello* by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), which premiered in 1887, this pattern in minor occurs also [Ex. 28]. [Editor's Note: Ex. 27 skipped intentionally.] In 1855, Verdi asked his friend, the conductor Emanuele Muzio (1821-1890) to send him the scores of *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*—as mentioned in the biography *Verdi*, by Mary Jane Phillips-Matz. The descent from 6-flat to 5—repeated here—shows the sorrowful quality of the descending minor second, the universal pattern in Western music to express woe.



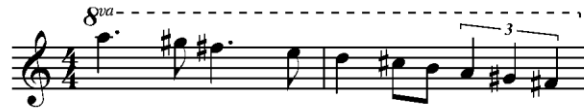
**Example 28: *Otello*, Act IV, by Giuseppe Verdi**

In *Das Rheingold*, the motif associated with Erda rises up as she rises from the earth [Ex. 29]. By contrast, the motif describing the decline of the gods is a downward scale derived from the Erda motif [Ex. 30]. In *Parsifal*, Kundry has a precipitously descending motif, first heard when she jumps off of her horse—offstage—at the beginning of Act I. Motifs associated with Wotan take a downward path, whatever this fact may indicate about the god. The motif associated with his spear, as well as contractual obligations, is a descent down the scale [Ex. 31]. The motif associated with the spear in *Parsifal*, on the other hand, begins with four diatonically ascending notes, followed by chromatically descending steps before returning to the first note preceded by an appoggiatura. The ascending four notes—which return as a fragment throughout the score—may stand for the raised spear, while the chromatic descent could represent the wound inflicted by the weapon [Ex. 32]. When Siegfried eventually shatters Wotan’s spear in Act III of *Siegfried*, the staggered notes in the music portray this event [Ex. 33]. In Act II of *Die Walküre*, during Wotan’s confrontation with Fricka, the motif of his frustration and anguish is heard for the first time. It is triggered by a reference to his son, Siegmund, finding his sword “*in der Noth*” (“in distress”). These words are followed immediately by a downward-moving motif that expresses Wotan’s own distress, i.e. his anguish at being cornered by Fricka [Ex. 34]. The motif is set off by a musical turn, suggesting a sudden physical movement, like a nervous twitch. In Act III, when Wotan confronts Brünnhilde after she has disobeyed his instruction to kill Siegmund, the musical twitch occurs many times in more powerful form. This short musical figure also expresses Parsifal’s mental anguish after Kundry reports to him his mother’s death. The

third motif associated with Wotan, now disguised as the Wanderer in Act I of *Siegfried*, also meanders downward over a considerable length of time.



Example 29: *Das Rheingold*, Scene IV



Example 30: *Götterdämmerung*, Act III



Example 31: *Die Walküre*, Act III



Example 32: *Parsifal*, prelude



Example 33: *Siegfried*, Act III



Example 34: *Die Walküre*, Act II

Newman's statement did not take into account musical material which consists of a pattern of repeated notes. In the *Ring* music, repeated notes or chords, which go neither up nor down, can be thematic. Examples are the brooding syncopated motif of Alberich, or the repeated woodwind chords describing Kundry's laughter in *Parsifal*. Another is the

lapidary repetition of two minor triadic chords which forms the basis of the funeral music in Act III of *Götterdämmerung*. These powerful chords, repeated in varying dynamic shades throughout the funeral music, are derived from Hagen's words after he killed Siegfried: “[*Meineid*] rächt' ich” (“reckoning”). Before the onset of the funeral music, these two notes can be heard softly in the timpani—like a heartbeat; the soft string triplet which will connect the chords are also represented rhythmically, albeit on a single note, by the timpani. Where a one-note ostinato occurs, there is naturally no question of up and down. The insistence of such a theme played over and over again, especially on percussion instruments, for example, the Nibelung motif, which permeates both the descent and ascent of Wotan and Loge in *Das Rheingold*, provides a constant obsessive pulse to themes in the foreground. This theme represents the sound of hammering in the Nibelung smithies. The rhythm is introduced by the actual hammering on steel, executed by 18 anvils grouped stereophonically around the stage or—as called for in the score—offstage. (In the Solti recording, Alberich's mocking laughter after he has snatched the Rhinegold is in the rhythm of the Nibelung motif—although the score does not specify any pitch.)

#### Digression: Acting

The motif of Wotan's mental anguish takes a certain amount of time to unfold, before Wotan continues his dialogue with Fricka. The question arises: what does the actor DO during these lacunae in the action? Wagner, when directing the premiere, relied on spontaneous gestures by the actor, as well as specific instructions from himself. The

entire process of directing the four dramas of the *Ring* in 1876 is documented by a precise description of Wagner's directions, written by Heinrich Porges (1837-1900). Wagner had asked Porges to undertake these observations day by day, and they provide a fascinating insight into Wagner's directorial practices. For every moment of the action, an accompanying gesture was established. In addition, considering the perfect sightlines of the *Festspielhaus*, Wagner asked the actors to express in their faces what the orchestra was communicating in these pauses in the singing. These gestures became formalized and when, after Wagner's death, his widow, Cosima, took over the festival performances, she insisted that the staging of the 1876 premiere performances be strictly adhered to. The grip of this rigid "Bayreuth style" did not loosen until Cosima retired in 1906, but was carried on by their son, Siegfried, until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. This style of acting was contemporary with the emerging silent films of the period. This fact was confirmed in a performance of *Siegfried* (in a movie theater) in Purchase, New York in 1989. The professional cast and full orchestra were conducted by Richard Weitach. The singer of Brünnhilde acted with outsize gestures that did recall silent movie acting. Surprisingly, her acting and the music fit together to elicit a genuine emotional response, a glimpse into Wagner's own time. Today's directors find different solutions for providing movement for the ecstatic music. An extreme was reached by Wieland Wagner (1917-1966) when he at times substantially reduced movement in his grandfather's scores. An instance observed occurred during the love duet in Act II of *Tristan*: near the climax of the love duet, while voices and orchestra boil, the two lovers STOOD stock-still. Wieland's apparent desire to counteract the music was further shown by his directing Brangäne to abandon her watch and stagger across the stage at this climactic

moment, thus undercutting the arrival of the hunting party. How the lovers can be portrayed onstage—or in any other visual medium—is a question still to be resolved satisfactorily. A realistic staging of the erotic writhings of which the music speaks would be pornographic, besides making it devilishly difficult for the singers to sing their strenuous parts. Such a staging would have confirmed the fears of mothers in former times who forbade their daughter to attend a performance of this work, lest they be corrupted morally. In 1971, the Metropolitan Opera in New York presented the love duet as seen through a scrim which covered the whole proscenium. The lovers sang from an elevated platform. Unfortunately, the effect was vitiated because the lights from the orchestra pit lit up the scrim, so that the pair did not appear as if in a void. (In the first act of this staging, the scenery helped—probably without intention—the singers. When standing in front of a large flat, representing part of the ship, the voices gained a surprising additional amount of resonance.)

It may be added that Wieland Wagner seems to have had a penchant for contradicting his grandfather's stage directions. In *Tannhäuser*, the little march of the pages collecting ballots before the song contest is carefully delineated in the music, yet was completely smudged in Wieland's staging. Wolfgang Wagner (b. 1919), in his staging of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, similarly flouted some stage directions: at the end of the second act when the audience should bask in the tender description of the summer night—to be shaken out of their reverie by the loud chord accompanying the descent of the curtain—with the stage empty after the cessation of the riot, in Wolfgang's staging we find the beaten-up Beckmesser limping along, dragging his loot.

### Digression: Anti-Semitism

Heinrich Porges's day-by-day account provides a valuable insight into Wagner's staging intentions. Despite Wagner's often-expressed anti-Semitism, he had no qualms asking the Jewish Porges to undertake this important documentation. In fact, in his professional dealings, Wagner never hesitated to employ Jewish artists. Hermann Levi (1839-1900), the son of a rabbi, conducted the premiere performances of *Parsifal* in 1882. Whatever the source of Wagner's anti-Semitism—a protesting-too-much against the suspicion that his real father was the Jewish actor Ludwig Geyer (1779-1821), or his antipathy toward Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791-1864), or conformance with the temper of the times, with its nascent, pseudoscientific theories of race—he never let this attitude change his relations to Jewish artists. (As to Jewish creativity, one of the points he raises in his essay *Das Judentum in der Musik* describes Jewish composers as adopting the style of the country in which they live, because they lack a tradition of their own. A quite positive result of this thesis is the growth of popular music in America. Two streams have fed this cultural development: the tradition of African-American music, and the work of a number of Jewish composers, including Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Richard Rodgers.)

In an article in *The New Grove Guide to Wagner and His Operas*, musicologist Barry Millington finds traces of anti-Semitism in *Die Meistersinger*, including a reference to a folktale about a Jew in a hedge of thorns, in Walther's song in Act I. Winter is described as hiding in such a hedge, "*Grimm bewehrt*" ("grimly armed"). The pun is supposed to refer to the Brothers Grimm, who published an account of the folktale. This folktale had an anti-clerical bias, rather than an anti-Semitic one, when it was

current in pre-Revolutionary France. Details may be found in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* by Robert Darnton, published in 1984. It should also be remembered that Beckmesser was originally named “Hanslick” to parody the Jewish critic Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904). If such traces of anti-Semitism exist in the work, they are evidently subsumed in the general feeling for human beings and their foibles.

## **Intervals**

Wagner’s use of the expressive power of leitmotifs may even be traced to dramatic implications of individual intervals—scale steps or simultaneous sounds.

### *Unison*

The quality of repeated notes, or chords, has already been described above. In the orchestra, doubling instruments at the unison has two purposes: to create a new tone color, or to rob an instrument of its solo quality. An instance of subtle coloration of the strings by winds occurs near the end of the prelude to Act III of *Die Meistersinger*: the sequence of three statements of the initial theme of the prelude is reinforced, successively, by a high French horn, a clarinet, and an oboe.

Another instance may be heard at the very beginning of *Parsifal*. In the opening of the prelude—performed by violins, ‘celli, one clarinet, and one bassoon—after a few notes a solo English horn gilds the curve of the phrase [Ex. 24]. This subtle change of

color can be felt rather than heard, and was so experienced in a 1962 performance in Bayreuth, conducted by Hans Knappertsbusch (1888-1965). The ambience of the Bayreuth sound is captured on a recording made that year. In the immediately following repetition of the opening section, a high trumpet is added to the ensemble, giving a radiant glow to the theme. On the other hand, the 1956 recording of the *Ring* cycle conducted by Knappertsbusch in Bayreuth does not convey an impression of the house. In this re-mastered release, the voices come through with great force and clarity. The orchestra, however, sounds dim and has a limited dynamic range.

#### Digression: Hans Knappertsbusch

In the book written by Franz Braun of the Hans Knappertsbusch Society in 1988, memorializing the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conductor's birth, the author describes Knappertsbusch's style of conducting: measured, broad, but in deepest sympathy with text and music. He relates an anecdote, showing Knappertsbusch's will and determination. The staging by Wieland Wagner of *Parsifal* dispensed with most scenery and props, relying on lighting effects to suggest locations. At the end of the drama, a white dove is supposed to descend. This event had already been mentioned by Lohengrin in his final narrative. Of course, it was missing in this staging, and Knappertsbusch protested strongly. To pacify the conductor, a dove was lowered from the flies, but only far enough so that the conductor seated in front of the mystic abyss could see it, not the audience.

The length of the acts in the music dramas necessitates that the conductor sit, even if he is not aged. In fact, conducting in the *Festspielhaus* requires a particular skill: whereas the sound of the singers goes straight out to the audience, the orchestral sound rises from the hidden pit, ascends to the ceiling, and then reaches the ears of the listener. The split-second difference must be taken into account when giving cues to singers and orchestra. The eminent present-day conductor Christian Thielemann (b. 1959) relates that at one point Knappertsbusch always stood up: in the small pause before the onset of the funeral music in *Götterdämmerung*. Evidently, this energized the orchestra. When Thielemann conducted the *Ring* cycle in Bayreuth in 2006, a slight thud could be heard in the broadcast at this same point, carrying on “Kna’s” tradition.

#### *Unison continued*

Doubling an instrument with its own kind is often done to increase its sonority. This practice applies especially to brass instruments. Solo trombones, for example, do not possess the power of massed trombones doubled at the unison. For a heroic example of this sound, we may find it in the works of Berlioz and—in Wagner—in the overture to *Rienzi* and the prelude to Act III of *Lohengrin*. In fact, Wagner apparently did not trust the essential sound of a solo trombone—at least in his own time—for in the theme preceding Sachs’s *Wahnmonolog* in Act III of *Die Meistersinger*, the score reads that if an adequate soloist cannot be found, a horn should play this passage. On the other hand, he must have had a very good trumpet player for the high-lying passage in the repetition of the opening section of *Parsifal*. Doubling a clarinet produces a new tone color. Near

the end of Act I in *Parsifal*, as the Knights of the Grail disperse, a rich sound is produced when all three clarinets join the violas when the descent of the faith motif [Ex. 26] reaches the lower strings.

### *Interval of the second*

The step of a descending major second is associated in the *Ring* with the Rhine River. It occurs usually on steps 6, 5, harmonized with IV, I, or, in a slightly different harmonization, VI, I. This descending second is identified in *Lohengrin* and in *Parsifal* with the image of the swan. In its minor form, the descending second permeates the *Ring* with different harmonizations—some quite dissonant. As mentioned above, the descending minor second is the traditional depiction of woe and sighing. A notable instance occurs in *Tristan und Isolde* when Isolde asks Brangäne to bring her the death potion. Brangäne's words, "*tiefstes Weh*" ("deepest woe") are surrounded by the sighing minor seconds. A comical version of this expression of woe occurs in *Das Rheingold*, when Wotan and Loge find Mime cowering in his smithy. A squeaky minor second on the solo oboe precedes the dwarf's expressions of pain from having been drubbed by his brother, Alberich. Hagen uses this interval when he calls the vassals together in Act II of *Götterdämmerung*: "*Hoiho! Hoihohoho!*" (The repeated "hohos" evidently mimic laughter.) In *Götterdämmerung*, transferred to the low bass register of the orchestra, the descending minor second represents the menace associated with Hagen.

In Act I of *Parsifal*, the orchestra plays the step of a minor second before Gurnemanz's words "*der König stöhnt*" ("the king moans"). Most forcefully, this

desperate exclamation is heard in Act II on the word “*Amfortas...*” and thereafter, when Parsifal recognizes Kundry as the cause of Amfortas’s condition. A short while later, Parsifal’s words “*Erlöse, rette mich...*” (“Redeemer, rescue me...”) are sung to the same interval.

#### Digression: Tessitura

The tension expressed in the two notes is also due to their position high in the tenor’s range. The strain of producing high notes is a reflection of high emotional states. In some Italian and French operas, high notes exist to show the prowess of the singer. Not so in Wagner’s works. Although the entire tessitura of a role may lie high, and thus is strenuous to perform—Tannhäuser and the lead in *Siegfried* are two—such notes express dramatic tension.

A thrilling example of the contrast between the same note sung in the extreme of a singer’s range as compared to the same note in the comfortable region of another’s may be heard at the dramatic climax of *Parsifal* near the end: Amfortas is urging his knights to kill him to end his suffering, when Parsifal enters with the healing spear. Amfortas sings high G-flats which call for extreme effort, whereas Parsifal’s music is in the clarion range of his voice. The same note considered in actual pitch—Amfortas’s G-flat and Parsifal’s F-sharp—changes from despair to radiant sureness. This moment can be experienced in most recordings. Regrettably, in the 2005 release of a Vienna performance conducted superbly by Christian Thielemann, the Deutsche Grammophon recording completely

muffs this transition. The way-upstage entrance, far from the microphones, and obscured by surrounding stage noises, scotches this supreme moment.

A high C in the part of Isolde gave rise to an endearing anecdote. In 1952, Kirsten Flagstad (1895-1962) recorded the work with the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886-1954). She was 57 years old at the time and the note was no longer within her range. Soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (1915-2006)—wife of Walter Legge (1906-1979), the recording's producer—stood near her and sang the note.

At the end of the strenuous duet which concludes *Siegfried*, the soprano is asked for a high C, but has the choice of an alternate note an octave lower. The tenor is not asked for this extra exertion. On the other hand, in Act III of *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried is asked to sing a high C when he answers the call of Hagen and the Gibichung vassals with several “Hoiho”s. The note must be grabbed out of thin air, without preparation; it seems like a dare for the singer. Knowledge that this note is coming produces the same anticipation in the audience as attendance at a daring athletic event: “Will he or won't he?”

### *Minor Second Continued*

Wagner occasionally uses the simultaneous sounds of a minor second as a sound effect to suggest a feeling of unease. In Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, steer horns are heard from offstage when the Gibichung vassals assemble, called together by Hagen: the horns blare on different pitches, creating simultaneous minor seconds. When, in Act I of *Parsifal*, Gurnemanz describes the broken eye of the swan which Parsifal had just killed,

the words are punctuated with minor seconds.

In Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, an extraordinarily simple but powerful dramatic effect is achieved by changing a minor-second trill to major. Siegfried is about to drink Hagen's potion of forgetfulness. Probably anticipating the many drinks which will be part of the inevitable Scandinavian feasting, he sings [Ex. 35]—to music from the last scene of *Siegfried*—his first toast to Brünnhilde: “*Vergäss ich alles was du mir gab 'st von einer Lehre lass ' ich doch nie; den ersten Trunk zu treuer Minne, Brünnhilde bring ich dir!*” (“If I forget all that you gave me, one lesson I still hold in mind: my first drink praising true love, Brünnhilde, is to you!”) These words are sharply ironic, considering that in a few moments the drink will make him forget. (In characteristic operatic fashion, the three persons in his immediate vicinity who would be very much interested in these words conveniently do not hear them.) At the point where the music approaches its cadence, a trill occurs. The leading tone trills to the tonic. Almost imperceptibly, the trill changes from a half-step to a full-step, and from then on the music turns to describing Gutrune. Thus, the exact point at which Siegfried's memory begins to shift gears is made audible. The change of pitch is clearly heard in both the Solti and the 1955 Keilberth recordings, but is inaudible in the dim orchestral acoustics of the 1956 Knappertsbusch performance.



Example 35: *Götterdämmerung*, Act I

A similar small event affects the expected flow for a moment in *Lohengrin*, sounding almost like a mistake. Lohengrin addresses the swan after its return, in a passage throughout in A major. Near the end, there is a sudden intrusion of an F-major

chord, and then the tonality returns so suddenly that a cross-relation between the C of the chord and the C-sharp chord sounds somewhat alien. The explanation is found in the text: “...dann, durch des Grales Macht befreit, wollt’ ich dich anders wieder seh’n” (“...then, set free by the Grail’s strong power, in altered form you’d come again”). The alien chord occurs on the words “wollt’ ich dich anders.”)

The upward moving minor second can express longing. Its most well-known appearance is as constituents of the Tristan theme. The upward minor second is also heard when Parsifal remembers the mother that he had neglected.

### *Interval of the third*

The scale step of the third has no intrinsically expressive significance. It is, of course, a component of any motif outlining a triad. On the other hand, as a harmonizing interval, thirds have expressive intent: they convey a feeling of femininity. The preceding example [Ex. 35] is harmonized with coupled thirds. The Brünnhilde motif [Ex. 36] is often heard in parallel thirds—for example, in *Götterdämmerung* during the orchestral interlude preceding the scene with Waltraute.<sup>20</sup> A mocking application of this interval, suggesting effeminacy, occurs in Act I of *Tristan*, to Isolde’s words: “*Da die Männer sich all’ ihm vertragen, wer muss nun Tristan schlagen?*” (“Since the men all agree, who sees to Tristan’s slaying?”)



**Example 36: *Götterdämmerung*, prologue**

<sup>20</sup> WAGNER A4: Parallel thirds also harmonize music depicting Guttrune. WAGNER A58: Feminine thirds when Freia returns with the giants.

In the opening scene of *Die Walküre*, Sieglinde's awakening love for Siegmund is described instrumentally with strings moving in thirds. Another instance is Mime's descending motif of thirds which accompany his musing. The inherently somber sound of the low woodwinds is softened by the harmonizing in thirds. The same softened somberness may be heard when the Ring motif—in its major and minor incarnations—is harmonized in thirds.

### *Interval of the fourth*

The step of the fourth<sup>21</sup>, in whichever direction—5, 8 or 8, 5—gives the beginning of a theme a decisive impetus. In Western music, it is found in uncountable songs, hymns, concert works, as well as in operas. Among the countless occurrences may be named *The Magic Flute*, which contains a number of scenes beginning with this interval. Other instances are the triumphal trumpets in *Aïda*, and several themes in the first act of *Madama Butterfly*. Among the numerous symphonic movements that begin with the step 5, 8 may be counted the slow movements from Beethoven symphonies numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5, and the third movement of number 6, the main theme in the last movement of the *Symphony No. 1* by Johannes Brahms, and the finale of the violin concerto by Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957). It may be added that almost all tunes in *The Merry Widow* start with the 5, 8 step. We can also recognize this step at the beginning of each phrase of the bugle call *Taps*. In Wagner, beginning with the fourth occurs in many places. Among the leitmotifs in the *Ring*, the sword motif, and the motif for the Valkyries

---

<sup>21</sup> WAGNER B56: step of the fourth throughout Lohengrin's narration; beginning phrases

all start with this decisive step, as well as the Norns' refrain, "*Weisst du wie das wird?*", in *Götterdämmerung*.<sup>22</sup> *Die Meistersinger* is full of themes that begin with the 5, 8 step.

An instance where the steps 5, 6, 7, and 8 serve both as the conclusion of an entire orchestral interlude and the beginning of the next scene occurs in *Götterdämmerung* at the end of Siegfried's Rhine Journey [Ex. 37]. This passage, the transition to Act I, represents a powerful demonstration of the orchestra's *Sprechvermögen* (speaking ability): the joyfully tumultuous orchestral interlude has quieted down. We hear the Rhinegold fanfare in its original major mode. Two measures follow, which are a reminiscence of the *Flying Dutchman* Overture (as well as the *William Tell* Overture by Gioachino Rossini), followed by another statement of the fanfare. Both are in major. A modulation brings on another statement of the fanfare, this time in minor. Now follow two statements of the motif of the descending second—designating the Rhine River—in the minor, which has come to represent servitude to the power of the Ring. A fragment of the Rhine maidens' song in minor is heard twice. Two descending intervals—linked by a brief downward scale-motif—in the rhythm accented short-long, which will be heard at the beginning of the next scene, identify the Gibichungs. The final IV-V-I cadence acts both as a conclusion of the entire preceding orchestral interlude and the beginning of the first phrase of the following scene—the I representing the above-described energetic step of the fourth with intervening notes. This brief musical episode demonstrates the ability of the orchestra to tell a story.

---

<sup>22</sup> WAGNER A61: Step of the fourth—denotes strength, power; two versions of the curse motif, both of which can be heard at the end of the Norn scene in *Götterdämmerung*



**Example 37: *Götterdämmerung*, transition to Act I**

This step of a fourth is the cornerstone of Western music, whether beginning a theme or ending it. It is like an *idée fixe* running through the literature. (The *idée fixe* in the *Symphonie fantastique* by Hector Berlioz, indeed, starts with these scale steps.) Soft fourths on the timpani accompany the first greeting of the Gibichung vassals as Gunther and Brünnhilde enter in Act II of *Götterdämmerung*.

#### Digression: *Götterdämmerung*

*Götterdämmerung* is the most “operatic” of the four *Ring* dramas. It contains a chorus, which the other three do not. And in operatic tradition, it is not over until the (sometimes too visibly) fat lady sings. Unique, however, is the orchestral postlude, and here the mystery deepens. The brief orchestral introduction built on the steps 5, 8 precedes Brünnhilde’s command: “*Starke Scheite schichtet mir dort, am Rande des Rhein’s zu Hauf!*” (“Sturdy with stems stack for me there, at Rhine River’s rim piled high!”) This formidable task is accomplished during the 15 minutes of Brünnhilde’s concluding summation of events in the *Ring*—the kind of time compression believable in opera. In the Short Lay of Sigurd in the Edda, Brünnhilde describes how she and Sigurd (Siegfried)

are to be burned, together with a number of thanes. No such toll is exacted in *Götterdämmerung*. Here, the only other casualty for the moment is the horse, Grane. Then catastrophe is supposed to strike: the hall of the Gibichungs collapses, the Rhine River swells above its banks, with the three Rhine maidens swimming on top toward Hagen to retrieve their gold.<sup>23</sup> Hagen has the last words of the cycle: “*Zurück vom Ring!*” (“Don’t touch the ring!”) but is dragged under. Then follows an orchestral postlude.

Strangely, the music of the postlude diverges from the action described in Wagner’s text. The end of *Götterdämmerung*, and thus the entire cycle, has remained a puzzle to this day. Deryck Cooke, in his 1979 book *I Saw The World End: A Study of Wagner’s Ring*, puts in question the very idea of “interpreting” the *Ring*—a question that is absent with *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*, and certainly with *Meistersinger*, where we can readily identify with the characters. The depth and heights of philosophical and psychological speculations may be found in *Wagners Nibelungen-Tetralogie* by Kurt Overhoff. This director was mentor to Wieland Wagner throughout the 1940s; Wieland Wagner’s staging of *Parsifal* in 1951 owed a great deal to Overhoff’s ideas. The book is a collection of introductory lectures to the four *Ring* dramas that Overhoff delivered in Salzburg in 1970; he was a professor at the Mozarteum. It finds deep meanings in the personages and actions of the *Ring*. (Overhoff’s ideas are expressed in an involute language which rivals that of Wagner’s own prose writings. Surprisingly, the summations of the action of the dramas contain a number of gaffes. For example, he places Siegmund’s recital of his childhood in the scene after Hunding and Sieglinde have left the hall, whereas Siegmund told his story to Hunding and Sieglinde in the previous scene.)

---

<sup>23</sup> WAGNER B94: The curse motif breaks off at the end of *Götterdämmerung* after the Rhine maidens retrieve the ring.

The end of the cycle was questioned from the very inception of the *Ring*. When the prose sketch of the dramas was published in 1853, Wagner's friend August Röckel (1814-1876) asked in a letter of 1853 why the gods had to be destroyed, when the Rhinegold—the cause of all the trouble—had been safely returned to the Rhine maidens. (Röckel, like Wagner, took part in the revolution of 1848. Whereas Wagner was able to escape in 1849 to Switzerland, Röckel was imprisoned and did not gain his freedom until thirteen years later.) Wagner could not answer Röckel's question, and in his reply of 25 January 1854, fell back on the notion that in a good performance, the spectator/listener would *feel* what is correct. Speculations on the meaning of the end can be found in the article *Über den Schluss der Götterdämmerung* by Carl Dahlhaus (1928-1989). However, it sheds little light on the dichotomy between stage image and music. According to the stage directions, *Götterdämmerung* ends in a cataclysmic destruction of the world and of Valhalla. In Wagner's original outline, however, the ending was more positive. In fact, what we hear in the music contradicts the catastrophic description onstage. Three themes interweave: (1.) the innocent chant of the Rhine maidens from *Rheingold* [Ex. 14]—not their more serious music at the beginning of Act III of *Götterdämmerung*; (2.) the Valhalla motif [Ex. 18]; and (3.) the theme associated with human love, first heard in Act III of *Die Walküre*, when Brünnhilde tells Sieglinde that she will bear a child. The motif is heard again only near the end of Brünnhilde's final words in *Götterdämmerung* [Ex. 38]. The Valhalla/Wotan theme grows ever more majestic, with no trace of dissolution. Then one more statement of the Siegfried motif is heard, followed immediately by the descending scale denoting the gods' decline [Ex. 33]. The last music heard in the *Ring* now follows, with the ascending scale in the motif of human love effectively

counteracting the descending scales just heard. The entire cycle concludes with a brief plagal ending. Thus grandeur and reconciliation characterize the music, while the stage directions speak of a colossal calamity. Wagner seems to have camouflaged this musical “happy ending” with his stage directions. The change from the Nordic *Ragnarök*, which means “Fate of the Gods”, to *Götterdämmerung*, “Twilight of the Gods,” gave this concluding drama of the tetralogy a more inclusive—or possibly more grandiose—name. Patricia Terry, in her English translation of the Prose Edda, mentions *Twilight of the Gods* as “Wagner’s famous mistranslation” of *Fate of the Gods*. In fact the term *Götterdämmerung* appears in one of Wagner’s sources: *Die Walküren der skandinavisch-germanischen götter-und heldensage* by Ludwig Frauer, published in 1848. He describes a never-ending battle, in which the slain warriors come to life again each night, lasting until “*Götterdämmerung*.” The latter presumably refers to the end of the world. The title *Götterdämmerung* for the last of the *Ring* dramas is itself misleading, since the gods who partook in the previous struggles are not mentioned until Brünnhilde invokes them near the end. The original title of the drama, *Siegfrieds Tod*, does describe the actions leading up to that event. Thus, it seems that the conclusion of the *Ring* cycle has never really been clarified.



**Example 38: *Götterdämmerung*, Act III**

The view that the end of the *Ring* does not describe a cataclysm is held by Kurt Overhoff. He states that neither gods nor men are obliterated, but rather that they are

reconciled. He says that the music approaches the range of feeling later explored fully by Wagner in *Parsifal*.<sup>24</sup>

An even more radical departure from conventional interpretations of the *Ring* may be found in the 2007 book *The Redeemer Reborn: Parsifal as the Fifth Opera of Wagner's Ring*, by Paul Schofield. The author was at one time a Buddhist priest. He interprets the characters in *Parsifal* as reincarnations of persons in the *Ring* dramas: Alberich/Klingsor, Wotan/Amfortas, Brünnhilde/Kundry, and Siegfried/Parsifal. He advocates performing all five dramas in sequence and thus demonstrating their relationship. Remarkably, the book makes no mention of the music of *Parsifal*. It also leaves a few characters dangling: what happened to Hagen in another life, and from whom was the genial chatterer, Gurnemanz, reincarnated?

#### *Interval of the fourth continued*

Returning to a consideration of the step of a fourth at the beginning of a theme, this interval—whether harmonized as I, I or, more rarely, V, I—confirms the feeling of tonality. The overtures to Wagner's early operas all begin with themes that start with the steps 5, 8: *The Flying Dutchman*, *Tannhäuser*, and *Lohengrin*. The opening of the *Rienzi* overture, after the initial solo trumpet note, has a downward moving fourth, i.e. 8, 5, followed by another descending fourth. (Wagner has been accused of poverty of invention because he used the same sequence of four notes for the sound of the bells in *Parsifal*—as if no other composer ever included earlier material in his works!) [Ex. 39]

---

<sup>24</sup> WAGNER B46-47: Overhoff makes the point that the end of *Götterdämmerung* foreshadows *Parsifal*. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, neither the gods nor the men remain in power; there is a third element which might be called "reconciliation."



**Example 39**

Within these operas, a number of themes begin with 5, 8: in *Tannhäuser*, the Pilgrims' Chorus and the music for Venus, Wolfram's appeal to Tannhäuser, Elisabeth's entreaty to the knights as well as their injunction to Tannhäuser to travel to Rome, and Elisabeth's prayer to the Virgin Mary. *Lohengrin* contains several numbers beginning with the steps 5, 8: King Henry's prayer in Act I, the wedding march in Act II, and Lohengrin's narrative at the end of Act III.

In Wagner's more advanced works, this step of a fourth is equally omnipresent. In *Tristan*, it begins Kurwenal's song in praise of Tristan in Act I, the theme in the Act II duet which in Act III forms the basis of Isolde's *Liebestod*; also in this act, Kurwenal's theme, which begins with 8, 5. In *Parsifal*, this step is heard at the beginning of the faith motif [Ex. 26] and the theme for the Grail knights—a rhythmic variant of the bells. It is also the beginning of the love theme [Ex. 40] in Act I of my opera *Burning Bright*, based on the novel and play by John Steinbeck. Instances in the *Ring* and *Die Meistersinger* will be described below.



**Example 40: *Burning Bright*, Act I, by Frank Lewin**

Digression: Overtures and preludes

The overtures of Wagner's early operas are patterned on the exposition/development/

recapitulation formula of the symphony. Since these overtures are usually built on themes from the opera itself, they also serve the function of introducing the musical material to the listener before the action starts. The overtures to Wagner's first three operas follow this three-section pattern. They stop with a strong cadence, and allow for applause, or for latecomers to find their seats. With *Lohengrin*, Wagner wrote what can be called a tone poem—the Grail descending to Earth and returning—which, without pause, leads to the opening of the curtain. The preludes to *Tristan* and *Parsifal* are likewise freely developed musical entities, connecting without pause with the action. The *Meistersinger* prelude, of course, consciously harks back to the older form of the operatic overture. The opening musical passages for each drama in the *Ring* are likewise brief, mood-setting introductions.

The preludes to Wagner's second acts, including in the *Ring* dramas, are mainly intended to prepare the atmosphere of the ensuing action. On the other hand, several of the preludes to the third acts—*Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, *Tristan*, *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*—are individually formed musical portraits.

The prelude to *Die Meistersinger* opens with the decisive steps 8, 5. The second theme—derived from the traditional *Lange Weise*—also starts with this interval. Other themes in *Die Meistersinger* with the 5, 8 beginning: Walther's "*Fanget an*" ("Let us start"), preceding his song in Act I; Kuthner's reading of the mastersinger rules; Beckmesser's misshapen serenade in Act II; and David's ditty at the beginning of Act III. The song "*Fanget an*" of Act I is repeated musically in the "*Wachet auf*" chorus in Act III to the words of the historic Hans Sachs.

*Interval of the fourth continued*

When the notes between 5 and 8 are filled in, they tend to reinforce the feeling of energy. An example is the first theme in the *Symphony No. 41* by Mozart. In *Das Rheingold*, the theme of the giants starts with grace notes on the steps 5, 6, 7. In more moderate tempo, 5, 6, 7, 8 begins Hans Sachs's final address in *Die Meistersinger*, preceding the words "*Verachtet mir die Meister nicht...*" ("Let me not hear the masters scorned...") In the 2007 Bayreuth production of the work, Katharina Wagner—Wolfgang's daughter—introduced some bizarre staging touches. One of them featured a troupe of supposed ghosts of old masters—Kleist, Schiller, Bach, and Wagner himself cavorted around Hans Sachs in Act I. At the end of Act III, when Sachs admonishes his audience not to scorn the masters, he was shown with busts of Schiller and Goethe. One of the masters to whom Sachs—and through him, Wagner—would most likely have referred was Christoph Willibald von Gluck.<sup>25</sup> The determined 5, 6, 7, 8 introduction to Sachs' admonition recalls the overture to *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Gluck was not fashionable in Wagner's time, yet Wagner revered him. In fact, he revised *Iphigenia* and provided a different ending. With this new end, the listener suddenly enters the sound world of *Lohengrin*—the opera Wagner was composing during that period.

Katharina Wagner's *Meistersinger*, first staged in 2007, is the third of recent controversial productions at Bayreuth. The other two were the *Ring* cycles directed by Tankred Dorst, which deconstructed persons and locations at some variance from the

---

<sup>25</sup> WAGNER A41: In the staging by Katharina Wagner for the 2007 festival in Bayreuth, she calls upon Goethe, Schiller, and Wagner himself to appear when Hans Sachs speaks of honoring the masters. In fact, what probably *is* intended here is an honor to Gluck.

text, and the *Parsifal* directed by Christoph Schlingensief, first seen in 2004, with its images of a rabbit decomposing over the course of the three acts. Some in the outraged audiences probably would agree with George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), who stated in the preface to the fourth edition of *The Perfect Wagnerite*: "...my favorite way of enjoying a performance of the *Ring* is to sit at the back of a box, comfortable on two chairs, feet up, and listen without looking. The truth is, a man whose imagination cannot serve him better than the most costly devices of the imitative scene painter, should not go to the theatre, and as a matter of fact does not."

Both the descending and the ascending fourth with the notes filled in can be heard at the beginning of the chorale *Ein' feste Burg ist unser Gott* (A mighty fortress is our God) [Ex. 41] by Martin Luther (1483-1546). The opening chorale in *Die Meistersinger*, "*Da zu dir der Heiland kam...*" ("As to thee our Savior came"\*) [Ex. 42], follows the same pattern and contains the rhythmic quickening characteristic of Luther's chorale. The *Meistersinger* chorale is, at the same time, another version of the opening theme of the prelude [Ex. 43].



Example 41: *Ein' feste Burg*, by Martin Luther



Example 42: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Act I



Example 43: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, prelude

The step of a fourth is heard strongly at the end of the funeral music in *Götterdämmerung*: it is affixed to the basic chords of the main theme, lending further emphasis. When the Siegfried motif then enters, it also begins with this forceful fourth—the kinship is clearly established.

As a simultaneously sounding interval, the fourth is, again, a constituent of themes with triadic origin—i.e., it has no expressive qualities; it is, like the third, very often part of a triad. Not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century did chords built out of fourths become part of the musical vocabulary. The steps 5, 8 are not only common at the beginning, but also as concluding steps—or chords—of a composition. To cite one example out of a multitude, the third act of *La Bohème* by Giacomo Puccini begins and ends with a forceful statement of this interval.

### *The Tritone*

The tritone has a longstanding reputation as the “*diabolus in musica*,” thus it is applied to express negative affects, such as malevolence. It characterizes Hagen in the *Ring*, as heard at the beginning of Hagen’s Watch in *Götterdämmerung* [Ex. 10].

Associating the name of a character closely with its theme so that, in effect, it spells it out for the listener, is not what occurs in Wagner’s works. Even the small reaction of Gutrune after Siegfried enters in Act I of *Götterdämmerung* sounds like a musical phrase rather than a “Gutrune” chord, which could be read into its rhythm. In Wagner’s successor, Richard Strauss, a close verbal association with the name of a character sometimes works against identifying the person and instead, merely recalls the

name. An example is the powerful “Agamemnon” spelled out in the beginning of *Elektra*. The many variations on this motif rarely call up the person of Agamemnon, but rather sound like variations on the name itself. A similar effect is the theme for Keikobad in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Each repetition recalls the name, rather than a particular character.

Sounding as a simultaneous interval, the tritone is also the component of several seventh-chords. For example, the diminished seventh-chord contains two tritones.

### *Intervals of the fifth and sixth*

The scale step of a fifth—like that of the third and fourth—is a usual ingredient in themes outlining the triad. As a two-note beginning for a motif of the Gibichungs, a descending fifth with a strong accent on the first note is heard in *Götterdämmerung*. Possibly, this mimics the pronunciation of the word “Gunther.” The sound of the open fifth suggests neither major nor minor. It is appropriately assigned to the motif for the shapeless *Tarnhelm*. The sixth is likewise a component of major or minor triads: it has no intrinsic expressive qualities.

### *Interval of the seventh*

The descent of a seventh is a component of themes denoting human love. It can be heard in the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, as well as in several motifs in the *Ring*. Two examples are the motif of Brünnhilde’s love for Siegfried [Ex. 38] and the motif associated with the power of human love in Act III of *Die Walküre*, when Brünnhilde

tells Sieglinde that she will bear a child. The kinship of the two motifs is most likely intentional: the first five notes are the same, albeit at slower tempos, and both contain the seventh. The descending seventh is also a constituent of the Brünnhilde motif. Human love denied is also represented by the interval of a descending seventh. In the first scene of *Das Rheingold*, Alberich curses love with the words “...so verfluch’ ich die Liebe!” (“...thus I curse all loving!”); the interval is sung to the word *Liebe*.

Digression: *Parsifal*

Another denial of human love occurs in Act II of *Parsifal*, when Kundry describes her encounter with Jesus: “*Ich sah Ihn—Ihn—und lachte!*” (“I saw Him—Him—and laughed!”). The word “*lachte*” is set to a downward plunge of an octave and a seventh [Ex. 44]. Most commentators, including William Kinderman in *A Companion to Wagner’s Parsifal*, accept the received but unsubstantiated notion that Kundry’s encounter with Jesus took place at the cross. The location of the encounter is not specified in Wagner’s book. There are a number of reasons why this scene did *not* take place at the cross. For one, from his height, it would have been difficult for Jesus to isolate the source of the laughter from among the crowd at the foot of the cross. For another, even if he did identify Kundry, his look might not have made such a profound impression on her at that distance. Also, if the darkness described in the Gospels had already set in, the communication would not have been so penetrating. More likely, Kundry met Jesus on his *Via Dolorosa* in the crowded streets of Jerusalem as he was staggering under the weight of the cross he was carrying. If Kundry was among the

crowd of jeering onlookers, she could have been close enough to Jesus to receive that glance which haunted her throughout her ensuing lives. In his book *Kna*, on Hans Knappertsbusch, Franz Braun also holds the opinion that the encounter took place on the *Via Dolorosa*.



**Example 44: Parsifal, Act II**

*Interval of the octave*

The step of an octave, again, is contained in statements built on the triad. One impressive independent occurrence is heard near the end of *Götterdämmerung* to Brünnhilde’s words: “*die treueste Liebe trog keiner wie er!*” (“The most trusted love no other betrayed!”) This downward skip of an octave was previously heard in Act II, when Siegfried describes his bridal night with Brünnhilde to Hagen and Guttrune. That explanation seems like a fudge. The image of Siegfried’s sword separating the two during the night originally occurred during another part of the legend. Here, conflated with Siegfried’s description of his sleeping with Brünnhilde in Gunther’s shape, it does not seem reasonable. The descending octaves carry great weight, reminiscent of the beginning of the second movement of Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9*. As mentioned before, the addition of an octave heightens the effect of a downward moving motif: Tristan cursing himself [Ex. 45], and the precipitous drop in Kundry’s word “*lachte*” in *Parsifal* [Ex. 44].

den Won - ne schlür - fend je ich ge - nos - sen,

ver - - flucht sei, \_\_\_\_\_ furcht - ba - rer Trank!

Example 45: *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III

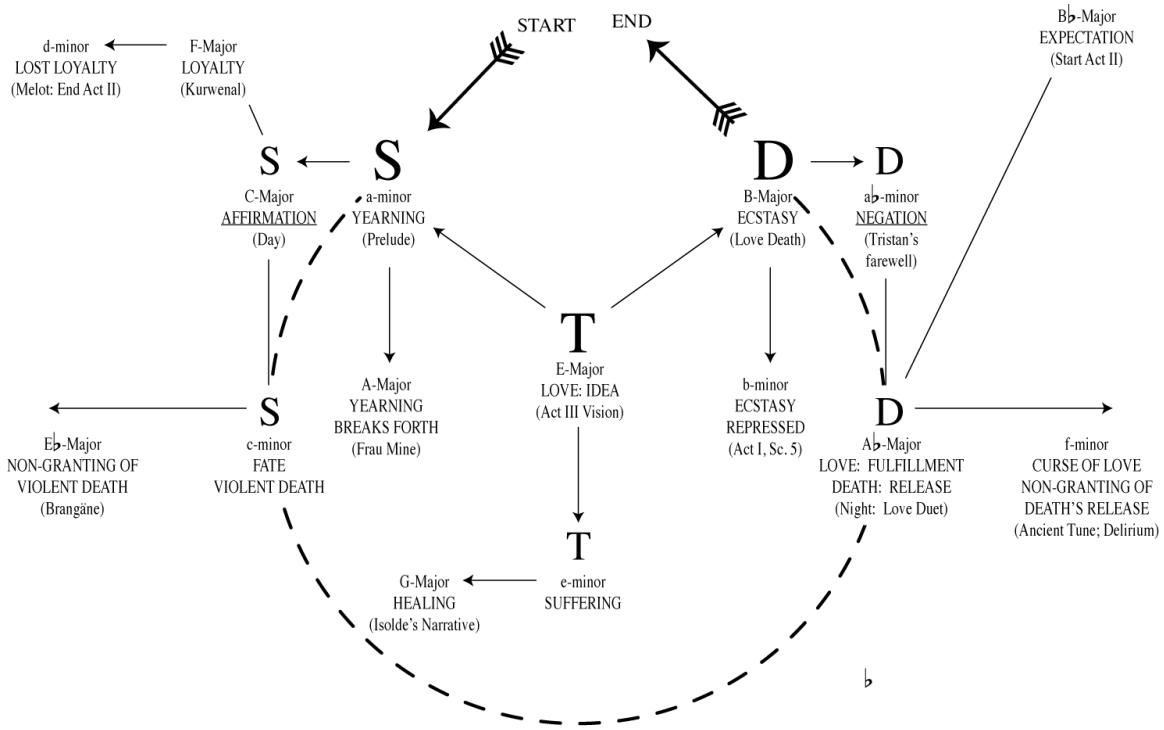
### *Interval of the ninth*

Even so extended a leap downward as the ninth finds its place in the *Ring*, with Siegfried's words "...wie ich dich leiden könnt" ("...how I could like your ilk") in Act I of *Siegfried*.

### **Wagner's innovations**

Even though Wagner advanced almost all areas of musical composition, his basic materials and processes are rooted in the tradition of Western, tonal music. In so

seemingly radical a departure from tonality as *Tristan und Isolde*, which has been considered the beginning of the disintegration of tonality, clear key connections have been discovered by Alfred Lorenz (1868-1939), in *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner (The Secret of Form with Richard Wagner)* [Ex. 46]. In fact, Lorenz posits that dramatic opposites in *Tristan* are expressed by related tonalities; for example, A-flat major is the region of “night,” which is the positive environment of the two lovers. C major, on the other hand, portrays “day,” their enemy. The duet in the second act is in A flat, whereas the end of Act I is a blazing, C-major triad played by the onstage trumpets. In fact, *Tristan* is the only mature stage work by Wagner that does not open and close in the same key. As Lorenz points out, the prelude is in A minor, the final cadence in B major. Accordingly, the main tonality of the work is in E major, a tonality that is fully expressed only once: in Act III, when Tristan envisions Isolde approaching over the ocean. Thus, the prelude is in the minor subdominant and the end in the dominant—made more prominent by the last chord’s position, with the third, i.e. the leading tone of E major, on top.



Key Relations in *Tristan und Isolde* Expressing Dramatic Contrasts  
(Alfred Lorenz, *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*)

### Example 46

In the second act of *Die Meistersinger*, Hans Sachs reminisces about the song of the young poet Walther: “*es klang so alt, und war doch so neu*” (“it sounded so old, and yet was so new”). One might turn this around and say that the *Tristan* prelude sounds ever new, even though it contains old patterns common to Western music. Within the opening three measures of the prelude [Ex. 47] are heard three elements of the score. These themes recur singly or in various combinations throughout the entire work: [47a] the three half-tone steps which express yearning; [47b] the upward skip of a minor sixth, then descending stepwise; [47c] the Tristan chord, an inversion of the minor II<sub>7</sub> chord which may represent the equivocal status of the lovers, who never reach fulfillment—i.e. a perfect cadence—until the very end of the opera.

**Example 47: *Tristan und Isolde*, Act I**

This upward-striving phrase is also found in music by Mozart and Liszt. In the Venusberg scene in *Tannhäuser*, this motif is heard repeatedly. It has, however, an earlier antecedent in the 1841 *The Flying Dutchman*. In Act II, the Dutchman describes his vision of a perfect mate: “*Wohl hub auch ich voll Sehnsucht meine Blicke...*” (“I raised as well with yearning my own vision...”) The three semitones occur on the words “*Sehnsucht meine.*” The word “*Sehnsucht*” (“yearning”), of course, may be considered a one-word summary of *Tristan und Isolde*. The pitches are identical to those of the *Tristan* prelude: G-sharp, A, A-sharp, B. Its tonal implication in *The Flying Dutchman* is steps 3, 4, 4-sharp, 5 in E major. In the *Tristan* prelude, the pitches are 7, 8, 8-sharp, 9 in A minor. At the very end of Act III, the pitches constitute 6, 6-sharp, 7, 8 in B major. Appropriately, this time the yearning theme comes to rest on the tonic.

As is customary in Western music, reversing the direction of a passage indicates negation. Isolde’s description of the sick Tristan disguised as Tantris is set to a downward version of the yearning *Tristan* motif [Ex. 48]. An even more potent reversal occurs near the end of Tristan’s delirium in Act III [Ex. 49]. Here, the reversal of the motif is exacerbated by the insertion of a sixth between two of the notes.



**Example 48: *Tristan und Isolde*, Act I**



**Example 49: *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III**

In *Die Meistersinger*, the opening of *Tristan* is quoted when Hans Sachs declares that he did not want to share with King Marke the predicament of an older man with a young wife. This exact citation is, however, not a mere illustration out of context. The three ascending semi-steps have been heard throughout Eva's effusive thanks to Sachs for helping her to win Walther and not admitting his own hidden longing for her. The last appearance before Sachs's reply are the words "*Euch selbst, mein Meister, wurde bang*" ("Even you, dear master, felt unease") [Ex. 50]. This brief passage may serve as an example of how voice and orchestra interact as if in a dialogue. What do the five notes between "*meister*" and "*wurde*" say? Crassly, one might substitute an internal comment by Eva: "*...sagt mir doch ehrlich...*" ("admit it freely"). There is no need, however, to put words into anyone's mind or mouth—voice and orchestra address the listener, each in its own mode.



**Example 50: *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Act III**

The opening cello phrase in the *Tristan* prelude is patterned on a similarly shaped phrase in *Roméo et Juliette* by Hector Berlioz (1803-1869), the premiere of which

Wagner attended in Paris in 1839. The two brief excerpts from the movement *Roméo seul* [Ex. 51] show the similarity. Someone accused Wagner of “ripping off” Berlioz. The truth of the matter is that the first four notes form a pattern indigenous to Western music for a similar effect. It consists of an upward skip and a diatonic descent, in the rhythm ~– ~–. The fact that this pattern can be arrived at independently may be demonstrated by the music for the love scene in Act I of *Burning Bright* [Ex. 40]. Not until this current investigation into Wagner’s practices, was I aware of the family resemblance.



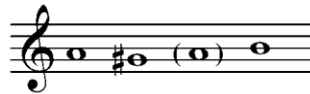
**Example 51: *Roméo et Juliette*, by Hector Berlioz**

The “Tristan chord” resolves, in the prelude, into a dominant seventh—a relative novelty as a tonal place of rest. The acceptance of the dominant seventh chord, formerly considered dissonant, may be compared to the recognition in medieval music that the major triad is a consonance at a cadence. The origin of the Tristan chord is an inversion of the minor  $\text{II}_7$ . The Tristan chord derives from the Phrygian cadence [Ex. 52] which has served as a means to express a question. As a formula for a question, the motif consists of the tonic followed by the leading tone and the step above the tonic: 8, 7, 9. The tonic note may be inserted as a passing tone between the leading tone and step of the second: 8, 7, 8, 9 [Ex. 53]. It is usually harmonized IV-V. The following two excerpts show this progression: *St. Matthew Passion* by J.S. Bach [Ex. 54] and *Elektra* by Richard Strauss [Ex. 55]. Klytemnestra’s question in *Elektra* is: “*O Götter, warum liegt ihr so auf mir?*” (“O gods, why place such a load on me?”) An instance from Wagner is the question “*Wohin nun Tristan scheidet, willst du, Isold’, ihm folgen?*” (“Wherever Tristan goes now, will you, Isolde, follow?”) [Ex. 56]. In *Parsifal*, the formula for a question occurs,

among other instances, in Act I when Gurnemanz inquires of the attendants to Amfortas whether a recently acquired herb has eased the pain of the open wound: “*Ich wähne, dass das Lind’rung schuf?*” (“It surely must have brought relief?”) [Ex. 57]. A more direct question which uses this formula occurs later in the act when Gurnemanz asks Parsifal: “*Was that dir der treue Schwan?*” (“What harm did the swan do to you?”) In Lohengrin’s narrative near the end of Act III another instance of the question formula occurs, even though that question is only implied: “*...bleibt als sein Ritter dort er unerkant?*” (“...if as his knight he there remains unknown”).



Example 52: Phrygian Cadence



Example 53: 8-7-8-9

Example 54: *St. Matthew Passion*, by J. S. Bach

O Göt - ter wa - rum lugt ihr so auf mir?

Example 55: *Elektra*, by Richard Strauss

Wo - hin nun Tri - stan — schei - det, willst du I - sold', ihm fol - gen?

Example 56: *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II

ich wäh - ne, dass es Lind' - rung schuf?

Example 57: *Parsifal*, Act I

The Fate motif in the *Ring* consists of the three basic notes of this pattern of question: 8-7-9. The motif has two resolutions. Once to the dominant of the tonality, and then to the dominant seventh of the relative minor [Ex. 58]. Here, as in the prelude to *Tristan*, the dominant seventh chord feels like a point of arrival. Whatever its harmonic derivation, the Tristan chord needs no resolution. It has become a free-standing sound which instantly recalls the idea of erotic attraction. This association comes immediately to mind when the chord is heard in other works, especially *Parsifal* and, in fact, in works of subsequent composers. Barry Millington, in his article on *Parsifal* in *The New Grove Guide to Wagner and His Operas*, cites the appearance of the Tristan chord in Act II of *Parsifal* during the flower maiden scene, as well as at the point of Kundry's arousal of Parsifal with a kiss. In more subtle appearances, the Tristan chord—a variant of the



duet in Act II. Scenically, the lovers are interrupted by the arrival of King Marke's hunting party. Musically, the expected final chord is replaced by a sharp dissonance. As Joseph Kerman (b. 1924) points out in his book *Opera as Drama*, the expected conclusion of this musical build-up occurs at the very end of the opera in Isolde's *Liebestod*. With some irreverence, one might say that Tristan and Isolde never get their act together in this life. Thomas Mann (1875-1955) phrased it more elegantly in his short story *Die Hungernden*, summing up the plight of the lovers as "*leidende Einheitssehnsucht*" ("suffering, yearning for oneness")—possibly an allusion to the definition of love in Plato's *Symposium*. The Tristan chord occasionally occurs dissected into melodic steps. One instance is the end of the prelude, in the lower strings [Ex. 59]. Another begins the love duet in Act II: "*O sink' hernieder, Nacht der Liebe*" ("O sink upon us, night of love"). [Ex. 60]. The minor  $II_7$  chord from which the Tristan chord is derived becomes, in several inversions, the "mystic chord" in *Parsifal*. Lorenz, in *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner*, gives the number of occurrences for each of the four positions. Instances of the chord in the Tristan position are described above.



**Example 59:** *Tristan und Isolde*, prelude



**Example 60:** *Tristan und Isolde*, Act II

## Interaction of words and orchestra

To appreciate—and fully capture—what Wagner has created, it is almost mandatory that the listener understand the original text. Repeated listening to the works—possible nowadays through recordings—renders the words familiar. Eventually, the intellect can relax in its effort to comprehend the meaning of the words. Habit takes over and, in fact, the listener anticipates especially familiar passages.

Distracting or noisy stage action, as well as imprecise diction on the part of the singer, may militate against a clear transmission of the text. In that case, an important aspect of the work is lost. The important point to remember in listening to Wagner's music dramas is that the text is paramount and determines whatever the orchestra "says." The orchestra, however, does contribute greatly to what is being conveyed.

The power of the orchestra to "speak" has been commented on frequently. In *Der Fall Wagner*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) states that "*Wagner hat das Sprachvermögen der Musik ins Unermessliche vermehrt*" ("Wagner has immeasurably enlarged the ability of music to speak"). Another description of Wagner's method is contained in the following quote: "*...hat aber häufig auf die unbedingte Notwendigkeit der Übereinstimmung von dramatischem und musikalischem Geschehen hingewiesen*" ("...but [Wagner] often pointed to the unconditional necessity of conforming dramatic and musical events"). Wagner himself said that "*Das Orchester besitzt unleugbar ein Sprachvermögen*" ("Undeniably, the orchestra possesses an ability to speak"). About the role of the orchestra in its interaction with the singing actors, he declared "*...das Ausbleiben einer Gebärde die ihr dazugehörigen Musik sinnlos erscheinen lässt*" ("the

omission of the proper gesture that renders the corresponding music meaningless”). Thus, Wagner’s intentions are stultified if the orchestral music is performed without the concurrent words. Orchestra-only compilations from the bodies of the dramas are quite unsatisfying when a listener has heard these excerpts with their proper vocal complements. For example, in Leopold Stokowski’s (1882-1977) *Symphonic Synthesis of Tristan*, the glutinous portamentos which take the place of Tristan’s opening lines at the beginning of the love duet in Act II seem a strange holdover from a more innocent time. The number of existing orchestral compositions by Wagner that he meant to be heard on their own—overtures, preludes, interludes—should provide enough material for concert programs.

Thus, Wagner believed that without the words being sung, the orchestral music had no independent meaning. Even as eminent a musician as the composer Roger Sessions (1896-1985) states—in the 1938 article “To Revitalize Opera”—that “everyone certainly knows his moments in the Wagnerian maze where he wishes that those people on the stage would keep quiet, in order that he might listen to the music in peace.” In the same article, Sessions also disparages opera in the vernacular, citing a performance of *Siegfried* in Italy. On the other hand, if a listener knows the text in its own language, hearing it in translation will recall the felicities of the original even though word settings may not be as adroit in regard to vowels and consonants. An example is in a recording of *Parsifal* in Italian, with Boris Christoff (1914-1993) as Gurnemanz and Maria Callas (1923-1977) as Kundry. No better illustration of Wagner’s admiration for the *bel canto* style of singing can be found than Boris Christoff.

For the production of *Tannhäuser* in Paris in 1861, Wagner made a translation into French, which required, at times, that he alter the vocal lines to accompany the language.<sup>26</sup> As a composer of vocal music, including opera, I would prefer in a live, as contrasted with a recorded, performance that the listener understand the words rather than following them in printed programs or subtitles. Today's solution lies in providing subtitles in the language of the country in which the opera is being performed. On the other hand, like taking your eyes off the stage to look through an opera glass, reading subtitles,<sup>27</sup> whether they are projected above the stage or, as at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, shown on small screens in front of the individual seats, severs for a moment the emotional bond between stage and audience, between singer and spectator/listener. Until Bayreuth introduced the completely darkened auditorium, opera houses left the audience area lit. Thus librettos could be read (or the latest gossip sheet, if the performance did not engage the viewer's full attention).<sup>28</sup>

The orchestra has myriad devices in its dialogue, or interaction, with the voices: harmonic changes, changes of orchestration, changes of rhythm, interaction with the voice alternately or underpinning it; the resultant effect has been described by some critics as an extension of the old *recitativo accompagnato* technique. Wagner called the unbroken flow of music throughout each act "*unendliche Melodie*" ("unending melody"). That description does not, however, mean that the flow of music throughout an act is unsegmented. Cadences—some perfect, some deceptive—make small incisions in the

---

<sup>26</sup> WAGNER A22: When Wagner translated *Tannhäuser* into French for the Paris production, he did not hesitate to make small changes in the note values to accompany the language.

<sup>27</sup> WAGNER A19: Understanding the words made easier through subtitles. In former times, neither Wagner nor Verdi would have given a second thought to having their operas translated into the language of the country.

<sup>28</sup> WAGNER A20-21: In some opera houses, the house lights were left on just enough so that the audience could have its own subtitles, that is, they were able to read along in a printed libretto.

flow. At times, the music includes set forms, what is usually called a “number.” Act I of *Siegfried* may serve as a demonstration. Each of the characters—Mime, Siegfried, and the Wanderer—have a set piece embedded in the whole. Mime’s “*Als zullendes Kind zog ich dich auf...*” (“As a babbling child I brought you up...”) is a small song form.

Interestingly, it departs from its initial tonality when Mime talks of Siegfried growing up and moving away. Before Siegfried runs off again into the woods, he sings a jaunty ditty. Later in the act, of course, he sings four verses of a “song” while forging his sword—the first three stanzas in minor, the last in major. Before that, Siegfried’s exuberant “*Aus dem Wald fort in die Welt zieh’n, nimmer kehr’ ich zurück!*” (“From the woods, moving into the world, never will I return!”) can also be considered a little “number,” with well-defined phrases and sequences. When the Wanderer enters, he has slow-moving phrases. Later, before Mime answers the first and second questions, the orchestra has a little interplay between Mime’s motif and that of Wotan’s spear.

Act III of *Die Meistersinger* constitutes an unbroken dramatic and musical progress. Yet it is built almost entirely out of set pieces (marked with a bullet), linked by less formal passages. • The prelude depicts Hans Sachs in his various aspects. (In Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*, the composer Leverkühn describes an unidentified piece, praising its beauty, after which all that is left to compose is parody. In *Die Entstehung des Doktor Faustus*, Mann identified the composition as the Act III *Meistersinger* prelude.) His apprentice David enters, and sings his little song • “*Am Jordan Sankt Johannes stand...*” (“Saint John stood by the River Jordan”\*), culminating in his surprise that today is Hans Sachs’s name day. Following his departure, Sachs describes man’s follies in the monologue • “*Wahn! Wahn! Überall, Wahn!*” (“Mad! Mad! All is Mad!”\*), a formal

musical structure. When Walther von Stolzing enters, Sachs instructs him in the art of creating a master song. Sachs does so in a song form himself: • “*Mein Freund, in holder Jugendzeit...*” (“My friend, in lovely days of youth...”\*) He prescribes that Walther compose his dream in bar form, i.e. AAB. (Alfred Lorenz and others have noted that the entire *Meistersinger* is a giant bar form: events in Act I are reprised in Act II in altered form: the apprentices setting up the singing school for the masters/the apprentice dance at the beginning of Act II; Walther’s trial song/Beckmesser’s misshapen song which he tries out on Eva; the confused voices of the Master Singers/the riot; the quiet ending with Sachs leaving the church/the stillness after the riot. The third act is the long B section of the form.) Walther then sings the first stanza of his dream: • “*Morgenlich leuchtend...*” (“Morningtime shining...”\*)—the future prize song. Walther’s song is evidently in song form even though a bit “free.” After he has composed a second stanza • “*Abendlich glühend...*” (“Eveningtime glowing...”\*) and leaves with Sachs, Beckmesser enters to the accompaniment of • a small tone poem describing his battered state. At the end of his sly by-play with Sachs about the purloined song, he thanks Sachs in • a dizzy waltz, ending in the parody of an operatic solo turn on a high, sustained note (here sung in falsetto). When the principals are again assembled in the cobbler shop, Walther sings a third stanza of his song • “*Wunder ob Wunder...*” (“Wonder of wonders...”\*). Before Eva expresses her gratitude to Sachs for arranging things so fortuitously, Sachs covers his emotion by beginning another cobbler’s song, • “*Hat man mit dem Schuhwerk nicht seine Noth!*” (“If you don’t have trouble with making shoes!”\*) Eva’s exuberant expression of thanks is followed by • a musical quotation of *Tristan und Isolde*. After some not formally structured activity, Sachs launches into a prescription for baptizing Walther’s

new song, • “*Ein Kind ward hier geboren...*” (“A child was born right here”\*). This passage mimics Kothner’s reading of the rules in Act I, with its fanciful melismas on the last word of each line. A quiet string interlude leads to the formal quintet. (A similar string interlude leads to Brünnhilde’s final statement in Act III of *Götterdämmerung*.)

The second half of Act III is a veritable string of formal, musical “numbers”: • the processions of the three trades; • the waltz in which David takes part; • the entrance of the Master Singers; • *Wachet Auf*, the chorale sung to words of the historic Hans Sachs; • “*Euch macht ihr’s leicht...*” (“You make it easy for yourself...”\*), Sachs’s response to the crowd—also in an articulated musical form; • Beckmesser’s parody of the prize song; • the prize song itself, its stanzas now linked and interspersed with reactions from the populace; the passage after Walther’s refusal of the Master Guild insignia, when Hans Sachs chides him and at the same time addresses the crowd: • “*Verachtet mir die Meister nicht...*” (“Let me not hear the masters scorned...”), telling them to honor artists, especially German artists. The final chorus • “*Ehrt eure deutschen Meister...*” brings back the music of the prelude to the first act. The entire Act III of *Die Meistersinger* lasts close to two hours, yet its formal constituents are joined so seamlessly that, in a good performance, elapsed time has no meaning: “*unendliche Melodie*” indeed.

The voice usually has a melodic line different from that of the orchestra. Having two interrelated strands of music dates back to the *cantus firmus* technique of early music. In this process, two melodies, each with a text of its own, sound at the same time. Usually, the voice in longer note values—the *cantus firmus*—contains text quite unrelated to the faster-moving second strand. Eventually, the words of the *cantus firmus* could be eliminated; yet if the listener knows the original words, their meaning will be

implied. If not, the two strands of music carry only the meaning of the vocal line. This technique, of course, was brought to its highest point in the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. The combination of an instrumental line—albeit with some meaning implied—and a vocal line may be considered a parallel to the voice singing words and the orchestra playing motifs with some subjective content—the equivalent of Wagner speaking to the listener with both words and orchestra.

In Wagner's works from *Das Rheingold* to *Parsifal*, the singing voices and orchestra form an unbroken continuum in each act. Yet the orchestra is not entirely uninterrupted. Occasionally, it pauses, especially at cadences, a practice common in musical stage works by all composers. With the orchestra so ever-present, a sudden pause is naturally impressive. At such times, the voice is thrown into relief and the words tend to come through more clearly than when they have to contend with a 70- to 80-piece orchestra. In the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*, Tristan utters the word “*verlöschen*” (“extinguish”), as part of a rather complex sentence: “*Wie du das Licht, o könnt' ich die Leuchte, der Liebe Leiden zu rächen, dem frechen Tage verlöschen!*” (“As you doused the light, could I cause the luster, in vengeance for love's long anguish, of brazen day to extinguish!”) During this word, the orchestra drops out. The effect passes so quickly that it may be called illustrative rather than dramatically important. But immediately the free flow asserts itself again, and the form of the music follows the text closely.

A more perceptible gap occurs at the end of the wounded Tristan's 20-minute monologue in Act III. Accompanied throughout by increasingly complex orchestral strands, Tristan comes to the realization that he himself is responsible for his woes. He describes his experiences as a potion—an allusion, evidently, to the potion Isolde gave

him in Act I—and curses himself for having brewed it: “*Verflucht, wer dich gebraut!*” (“Accursed be he who brewed thee!”) At the words “*wer dich gebraut*” the orchestra drops out entirely, highlighting this searing self-accusation.

Another instance where a word is highlighted by the sudden reduction of the orchestration occurs in the first act of *Götterdämmerung*: Hagen, the half-brother of the Gibichung Gunther, has been left to guard Gibichung Hall, while Gunther and his guest Siegfried are sailing off to conquer Brünnhilde—through trickery—to be Gunther’s wife. The passage starts with the following words: “*Hier sitz’ ich zur Wacht, wahre den Hof, wehre die Halle dem Feind*” (“I sit here and watch, guarding the hall, warding off harm from a foe”). The alliterative pattern is “h”...“w” (the latter pronounced as a “v” in German), “w”...“h,” “w”...“h”. The “h” sounds cannot be emphasized because the consonant has no vocalic quality. As mentioned above, the “w” sounds have some sonic value, but the only echoes really noticed are the words “*wahre*” and “*wehre*.” It is the orchestra that conveys the story. In the three measures before Hagen starts to sing, the orchestra first sounds Hagen’s motif and a variant of Siegfried’s horn call [Ex. 6]. In brief, we hear the polarity between the two characters. The instruments somberly underline Hagen’s words in the first three phrases. The passage builds in dynamics and orchestration. On the word “*Feind*,” the orchestra is reduced to a single, *piano* note in the low strings [Ex. 1]. The reduced dynamics, orchestration, harmony, and lowering of register combine to bring the voice into stark relief on the word “*Feind*” (“foe”), as if a spotlight were turned on it. The word receives further emphasis by its bright vowel, as compared to the relatively less sonorous vowels in the preceding words. The point, of course, is that Hagen himself is the “foe” of Siegfried and Gunther: his aim is to obtain

the ring that his father Alberich had forged from the Rhine gold. In performance, the singer can bring out the irony of the word “*Feind*,” not only by coloring his voice or making it a bit louder, but also by inserting a tiny *Luftpause* before pronouncing it (Gottlob Frick does just that in the Solti recording).

The text or the situation onstage determines the interaction of the orchestra with voices (or independent preludes and interludes describing an unseen action). Frequently, the orchestra expresses what the characters onstage do not communicate through words. One such instance occurs at the beginning of *Die Walküre* when Siegmund and Sieglinde meet for the first time. Extended instrumental passages occur between the singing of the two characters, communicating their growing feeling of attraction.

Most of the time, the orchestra interacts with the voice, elaborating on the meaning of the words. This may take the form of alternations between singing and instrumental music, or a simultaneous sounding of both strands. At significant points, both orchestra and voice coincide, although they may be in different registers. One such example is the tremendous impact of the curse motif when Hagen greets Siegfried, who is entering the hall of the *Gibichungen* in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*. Voice and orchestra reinforce each other to convey the feeling of tremendous menace implicit in this meeting.

Although the orchestra in the main comments on the meaning of the text, it may occasionally contradict the words. An instance occurs in *Tristan und Isolde*, when Tristan asks Isolde to avenge Morold’s death by taking up the sword and killing him: “...*War Morold dir so werth, nun wieder nimm das Schwert, und führ’ es sicher und fest, dass du nicht dir’s entfallen lässt!*” (“...If you mourn Morold’s fate, lift up your sword’s sharp blade, be sure that you hold it fast, so it will not escape your grasp!”) Under the word

“*fest*,” one would expect an orchestral accent. That accent, however, is immediately followed by another short chord a fourth down. Thus, the orchestra questions the immovability implied in the word “*fest*” and suggests that, in fact, a slip or a drop does occur.

#### Digression: Language

The point at which Tristan challenges Isolde to kill him marks a change of his attitude. This change is expressed through his language, which thus far has been respectful. The English language has removed the barrier between formal and informal address. The word “you,” originally second person plural, serves both purposes. German, on the other hand, has retained the contrast between familiar and formal address. The second person singular is used in speaking to a subordinate or a very familiar person. The second person plural denotes respect.

At the beginning of the scene, when Tristan enters, he is on his guard. He addresses Isolde with the respectful second person plural: *Ihr, euch*, etc. Isolde, on the other hand, maintains her aloofness by using the second person singular, i.e. she pretends superiority over Tristan. At Tristan’s challenge to her, he switches to the singular: *dir*, the imperative *nimm, dein*, etc. Singer and director may take this change into account in physical stance or vocal colorations. After the chorus is heard offstage, Tristan for the moment seems to lose his connection with his situation and issues the unguarded exclamation: “*Wo sind wir?*” (“Where are we?”) Isolde answers him with the double-entendre “*Hart am Ziel*” (“Near our goal”). When Isolde asks Tristan whether he has

anything to tell her, he switches in his answer to the distancing third person singular:

“*Des Schweigens Herrin heisst mich schweigen...*” (“The Queen of Silence bids me be silent...”) Finally, as he is about to drink the potion, he addresses the vial of poison itself: “*Dich trink’ ich sonder Wank!*” (“I drink thee without fail!”) After both have drunk the potion, all barriers are gone for both of them, linguistic and otherwise.

A similar distancing in language occurs in *Götterdämmerung* when Siegfried, in Gunther’s shape, confronts Brünnhilde. He demands that she submit to him and Brünnhilde resists forcefully. When he tears the ring off her finger, however, she yields. Siegfried demands that she share her chamber with him for the night. Brünnhilde replies, as if she were addressing another person: “*Was könntest du wehren, elendes Weib!*” (“What could you refuse now, pitiful wench!”)

Digression: Nibelungenlied

Brünnhilde’s conquest by Gunther/Siegfried has a precursor in the medieval Nibelungenlied.<sup>29</sup> (In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, this poem became a focus of national feeling in the German countries before they achieved their political union; this is described in the 1991 book *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*, by Elizabeth Magee). The story, however, unfolds differently in the Nibelungenlied: Gunther, king of the Burgundians with a court at Worms on the Rhine River, marries Brünnhilde, queen of Iceland. On their wedding night, she puts up a strong struggle and Gunther is not able to consummate the marriage.

---

<sup>29</sup> WAGNER A24-25: In this medieval poem—raised to the status of a national epic in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gunther, King of the Burgundians, marries Brünnhilde, queen of Iceland. The marriage is not consummated because Brünnhilde puts up a fierce struggle on their wedding night.

His vassal, Siegfried, uses his *Tarnhelm* to turn into Gunther's shape. Again Brünnhilde puts up a fierce struggle, but she cannot resist and finally submits.

The Nibelungenlied gives a different account of Brünnhilde's rage at discovering that it was Siegfried, not Gunther, who spent the night with her. In this poem, Siegfried has a wife, Kriemhilde, Gunther's sister. In a quarrel with Brünnhilde, she reveals the deception. When Hagen, another vassal, offers his help to Brünnhilde to avenge her wrong, it is Kriemhilde who confides the secret of Siegfried's vulnerability to Hagen, expecting that he would protect her spouse. In *Siegfried*, it is Brünnhilde who has tried to protect the hero. She shields him from the front, knowing that he would never turn his back on a foe. In the Nibelungenlied, Siegfried acquires his protection by bathing in the slain dragon's blood. As a result, he was coated with a horny scale which no weapon could penetrate. However, the leaf from a linden tree had fallen into the blood; it lodged in a spot that left a gap in the armor, on Siegfried's back near his shoulder. (In the music drama, Siegfried soliloquizes that he is seeking shade under a linden tree. However, no eventually fatal consequences ensue.)

The Nibelungenlied is an epic poem composed in about 1200, describing historical events that occurred about 700 years before. They deal with the court of King Gunther on the Rhine and battles fought with tribes, one of whom had the assistance of the Huns. Attila, the Huns' leader, died in 453 and appears in the epic as Entzel. The Huns were known as ferocious fighters who killed without mercy. The appellation "Hun" to the brutal German soldiers of World War I was actually reintroduced into the language by Kaiser Wilhelm II—who considered his "empire" to be second in line after the vanished Holy Roman Empire. In a speech in 1900 to German soldiers taking part in the

expeditionary force suppressing the Boxer Rebellion in China, he said: “Just as a thousand years ago the Huns under their King Attila made a name for themselves, one that even today makes them seem mighty in history and legend, may the name German be affirmed by you in such a way in China that no Chinese will ever again dare to look cross-eyed at a German.”

As had become customary at the time, the *Nibelungenlied* employs end rhymes as well as accentual meters. In November 2007, an exhibition on the *Nibelungenlied* opened at Yale’s Beinecke Library. One of the curators, Michael Savage, said that it had a “soap-operatic plot.” The poem reflects the values of the nobles at the time and is full of revenge, hatred, and mass murder, as well as the supposed nobility of its heroes.

Siegfried, one of the characters taken over into the dramas by Wagner, first appears in the *Nibelungenlied* as a young man who has killed more than 700 people with his sword in order to get what he wants. The fact that the subject matter is brutal need not demean the entire epos. Recent research indicates that the siege of Troy was actually no more than a pirate raid by nobles from the mainland. Over the centuries, the *Iliad* gained stature, and by about 800 B.C., it served to entertain the contemporary nobility, who saw themselves glorified in its heroes.

The *Nibelungenlied* served a similar function.<sup>30</sup> Despite its popularity, the poem was never printed, and disappeared for three hundred years. A manuscript was discovered in 1754 and translated from its Middle High German into High German by Johann Jakob Bodmer (1698-1783). Its publication helped spark the renaissance of German as a literary language, foreseen in Hans Sachs’ final address. Other contributing factors to the

---

<sup>30</sup> WAGNER B29: Medieval manuscripts which perpetuated a mixture of Nordic legends, myths, and history

rejuvenation of the native language were translations of Shakespeare into German, and concern with ancient Greece and its epic poetry. Wagner's interest in the subject was in tune with the rising fervor for the *Nibelungenlied* as a nationally unifying force in the early nineteenth century, while the political unity for the fragmented German states still lay in the future. In fact, the *Nibelungenlied* came to be considered the German equivalent of Homer's *Iliad*, described in Magee's *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*.

Wagner took very few elements of the *Nibelungenlied* into his dramas. He went back to what he thought were earlier sources, such as the Eddas. Mainly he included the relationships of Gunther, Siegfried, and Hagen. Brünnhilde became an entirely different figure, and the events of the second half of the epic—which take place far from the Rhine River—are completely untouched. The relationships of gods and men is also a purely invented component of Wagner's dramas.

### **The Valkyrie Rock**

In *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried's demand that Brünnhilde share her chamber with him is not a figurative image. The previously barren rock apparently had a human habitation (*Steingemache*, i.e. a cave) which did not seem to exist when Siegfried broke through the flames in the previous drama. There, he soliloquized: "*Selige Öde auf sonniger Höh'!*" ("Wasteland so peaceful on sunny high peak!") (It may be noted that the translation "*Öde*"/wasteland—as found in dictionaries—suggests a connection with *The Wasteland* by T. S. Eliot. In this poem, Eliot cites words from *Tristan und Isolde* in German: "*Öd' und leer das Meer*" ["Bare and empty the sea"]. "*Öd*" [*Öde*] here is the adjective.) After

Siegfried had awakened Brünnhilde, they evidently spent the night under some covered location/cave. They issued from that abode at the beginning of Act I of

*Götterdämmerung*.

The question of Brünnhilde's living quarters is not consistent in the text. In Act II of *Siegfried*, the woodbird sings that Brünnhilde sleeps on a high rock and that "*Feuer umbrennt ihren Saal*" ("Fire surrounds flaming her hall"). This description is repeated by Hagen in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, when he describes Brünnhilde to Gunther. It appears again when Siegfried tries to remember after drinking the potion of forgetfulness, and later, after he regains his memory in Act III. This reference to a "*Saal*" seems a remainder from the description in the Volsunga Saga. There, indeed, Brünnhilde dwelt in a spacious room surrounded by fire. In the saga, Siegfried penetrates the flames astride his—apparently equally fire-proof—horse, here called Grane. In Wagner's version Siegfried walks through the flames and finds the sleeping maid and the sleeping horse. Later, after the bridal night, Brünnhilde gives the horse to Siegfried and *its* name is now Grane.

When Siegfried had penetrated the flames, however, he found only "a wasteland so peaceful..." No mention of any habitation. In the manner of *Sleeping Beauties*, Brünnhilde required neither nourishment nor elimination during her suspended animation. That period was as long as Siegfried's growth from embryo in the womb of Sieglinde to his growth as a young man. Even though Wotan had not provided her with a protective glass coffin, the elements did not affect the sleeper or her horse. Once Brünnhilde and her horse wake up, she is now a living, breathing woman—not a Valkyrie any longer. As mentioned before, Siegfried and his bride apparently spend the night in

some habitable cave which the barren rock did contain. In the Prologue to *Götterdämmerung*, both issue forth—after what must have been a good, strengthening breakfast—and the husband goes off to work, to perform “new deeds.” Somehow, he has acquired a sturdy boat that will hold him and the horse, Grane. So he sets off while his wife waves to him. As is customary even today, after entering his vehicle he returns her salute by tooting his horn.

In a further *reductio ad absurdum*, let us consider how Brünnhilde will exist, now that her husband is gone for an indefinite length of time. She presumably keeps house until Siegfried returns. By now the cave must be more than a mere rain shelter. But a hall? She will need food and supplies. Since her only mode of aerial transportation is in the boat with Siegfried, and shopping through the wall of fire would not be easy, she evidently relies on deliveries from the Valhalla Supermarket. It is also questionable why Siegfried took the horse along (not even accounting for the fact that someone must have stocked the boat with oats for the trip). Siegfried was evidently going upstream in search of the Gibichungs’ castle. Since the castle must have been built right on the banks of the Rhine—without regard to its location in the flood plain, for it was going to be swamped at the end of the opera—a horse was not really required. Meanwhile, Gunther, Hagen, and Gutrune confer in the Gibichung premises. Hagen proposes plans: Gunther will conquer Brünnhilde with Siegfried’s help. Again he describes that she is in a hall surrounded by flames. Hagen proposes a potion that Siegfried will drink in order to make him fall in love with Gutrune. These contingencies can only come true if Siegfried shows up, and he does—on cue. He appears almost immediately after being hailed by Hagen—in other words, it takes him almost no longer to disembark with his horse than to walk

onstage from the wings. He brings the horse into the equivalent of the Gibichungs' living room. No one seems to consider this out of the ordinary and Hagen even leads the reluctant—as described above under “Onomatopoeia”—animal to what must be a stable. Actually, Grane does not appear again until Brünnhilde rides him into the pyre.

As to the fire around Brünnhilde's rock, its final disposition is not explained consistently. In Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried tells of carrying Brünnhilde at dawn down the rock, in the shape of Gunther. At that point, the fire apparently goes out. Yet, in Brünnhilde's final apostrophe at the end of Act III, she asks Wotan's ravens to direct Loge, in the form of his still-flaming fire, to leave the rock and let the flames burn Valhalla.

Another inconsistency in the dramas may be mentioned: in Act II of *Die Walküre*, Wotan claims that he lost one of his eyes while wooing Fricka. At the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*, however, one of the Norns relates that Wotan lost his eye while breaking a branch from the World Ash.

The implausibility of some operatic events led Wieland Wagner further and further away from realistic staging. He considered that Wagner's works were an outgrowth of medieval mystery plays. Thus, an event like Lohengrin's arrival in the swan boat was portrayed through abstract images and lighting. As quoted by Patrick Carnegie in his 2006 book *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, Wieland explained that if the swan boat were real, one had to imagine that the animal pulled the boat from Spain, along the coast of France, through the English Channel, then turning right into the River Schelde, swam up upstream, and deposited the knight in Antwerp. Wieland's stagings owed a great deal to his study of Greek theater. He relied on the power of the music together with

variations in the intensity of the lighting and changes of color. As in the mystery plays, some operatic events must simply be taken on faith.

### **Orchestral instruments<sup>31</sup>**

In addition to their function in the orchestral ensemble, instruments can assume onomatopoeical or characterizing tasks. In *Tristan und Isolde*, the high trill of the flute represents the flag of joy on Isolde's ship as she comes to join the dying Tristan. The pristine sound of two flutes in thirds characterizes Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung*.<sup>32</sup> Three piccolos howl like the wind during the ghostly chorus of the sailors of the Dutchman's ship near the end of *The Flying Dutchman*.

The plaintive sound of the oboe—playing descending minor seconds—surrounds Brangäne's words "*O tiefstes Weh*" ("O deepest woe") when Isolde orders her to prepare the death potion. Its gentle character describes the tenderness of women. For example, the giant Fasolt describes the joy of a woman companion while a solo oboe speaks with him.<sup>33</sup> Also mentioned may be the oboe representing Sieglinde's gaze at the ash tree, which Siegmund recalls when left alone in Act I of *Die Walküre*.

The English horn plays an extended role when it comes to represent Tristan in Act III of *Tristan*. The *Alte Weise* ("ancient tune") is first played by a shepherd offstage, and then comes to be Tristan's alter ego. It weaves in and out, as stage sound or orchestral

---

<sup>31</sup> WAGNER A14-15: Apart from their function as constituents of the orchestra, some instruments—solo or in groups—can serve dramatic purposes.

<sup>32</sup> WAGNER A16: The flute, in pairs, characterizes Guttrune in *Götterdämmerung*. The paired flutes also sound at the beginning of Act II, when the moonlight illuminates the scene.

<sup>33</sup> WAGNER A52: Oboe actually doubles Fasolt in *Rheingold* when he talks about "Weibes Wonne". WAGNER B33: solo oboe when the giant talks of yearning for a woman.

component, during his monologue. A touch probably only appreciated by someone reading the orchestra score occurs at the very end of the opera, after Tristan has died: after the Tristan theme has been played on the English horn in the final measures, the instrument is the only one absent from the very last chord.

The clarinet is associated with female characters: Brünnhilde in the *Ring* dramas, and Kundry in *Parsifal*. For example, the clarinet echoes Siegfried's words as he prepares to drink the potion of forgetfulness in Act I, recalling Brünnhilde. Its mellow tone is an appropriate change from the virginal flute of Guttrune, heard a few measures before. In Act II of *Parsifal*, the clarinet interacts with Kundry's voice as if it were another participant in the drama. When Kundry tells the young man of his mother, the clarinet weaves in and out of her narration. (It is important that the performer on the clarinet match the vibrato—or lack thereof—in the voice of the singer. When this is not done, the imitative effect between voice and instrument tends to get lost.) When Kundry tempts Parsifal, the solo clarinet as well as the violin weave around her words. The solo violin<sup>34</sup> had been associated with womanhood since the music of Freia in *Das Rheingold*. Richard Strauss carried the identification of a solo violin with a woman to some length in his tone poem *Ein Heldenleben*: the various moods of the hero's wife are portrayed by a miniature concerto. Kundry's attempt begins with an invocation of Parsifal's mother, the point where he is obviously vulnerable. With growing horror, Parsifal then describes Kundry's body movement—head, locks, arms, leading to the ominous kiss—while the solo violin and clarinet weave around his words. A last echo of the clarinet's role as Kundry's mirror image of seduction occurs during the scene of Parsifal's temptation. The words are: “*Nur*

---

<sup>34</sup> WAGNER B25: solo violin for woman—Freia, “*Weib*” in *Siegfried* Act II, and Kundry

*eine Stunde mein! Nur eine Stunde dein...*” (“For one hour only mine! For one hour only thine...”) On “*dein*,” the clarinet doubles the voice for just a moment. A chaster portrait of a woman may be heard when Siegfried muses about the mother he has never known.

The two clarinets in unison produce a hollow sound. Also doubled by the English horn, they are heard in a brief phrase in Act I of *Tristan*, underlining his words just before he drinks the supposed potion: “*Tristans Ehre, höchste Treu’!*” (“Tristan’s honor, highest trust!”)

The bass clarinet speaks feelingly for—and with—King Marke in Act II of *Tristan und Isolde*.

The bassoon mainly functions as the bass of the woodwind choir. Solo, it accompanies Hagen’s offer to avenge Brünnhilde’s insult, near the end of Act II in *Götterdämmerung*. Under his words: “*Vertraue mir, betrog’ne Frau!*” (“Put your trust in me, mistress betrayed!”) the bassoon, in its low register, repeats the music first heard when she swore the oath, earlier in the act. A short while later in this scene, a bassoon in its high register interacts with Brünnhilde’s words: “*...Nicht eine Kunst war mir bekannt, die zum Heil nicht half seinem Leib’!*” (“No single art was known to me which did not benefit his health!”)

The French horn came into its own when pistons were added to the instrument in 1815. Before then, horns could only play the overtone series of a specific scale. For example, Carl Maria von Weber (1786-1826) could only write a melodic passage in his 1821 opera *Der Freischütz* by mixing horns tuned to different keys. Even though pistons provided the instrument with fully chromatic capability—and Wagner used it that way on occasion—the horn often represented a state of nature or purity in the stage works. The

prime example, of course, is the opening of *Das Rheingold*, where nature is portrayed not only through the tone color but also through the fact that the tones proceed in the order of the “natural” overtone series. The instrument’s association with Siegfried and his hunting horn is evident. In Act I of *Parsifal*, the French horn underlines the words “*denn nie lügt Kundry, doch sah’ sie viel*” (“Kundry never lies, but has seen much”). Under the first part of the sentence, the French horn represents Kundry’s purity, whereas in the second part, the orchestra reverts to the shadowy coloration accompanying this scene.

A solo trumpet often sounds heroic themes like the Siegfried and sword motifs. Its use echoing Brünnhilde’s words of her oath in Act II of *Götterdämmerung* has been mentioned above. When a darker color is required for the sword motif, heard in its minor variant at the beginning of Siegmund’s scene in Act I of *Die Walküre*, a bass trumpet plays the part. This rare instrument can also be heard just before the First Norn begins to sing in *Götterdämmerung*, where it descends to the lowest notes of its compass. It also states the somber version of the Rhinegold fanfare at the end of Siegfried’s Rhine Journey. The use of trombones—solo or massed—has been examined above.

For the *Ring*’s music, Wagner had a set of tubas constructed, whose tone color is slightly duller than that of the French horn. The instruments are, in fact, played alternately by four of the French horn players. Their distinctive tone color is first heard when the Rhine maidens describe the power inherent in the Rhinegold. The Wagner Tubas are also the ponderous sound associated with Hunding in Act I of *Die Walküre*. The bass tuba has an obvious affinity for the dragon in both *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried*.

Timpani play an important role in the orchestration of the music dramas. Besides their function of punctuating beats, they have dramatic properties throughout their

dynamic range. Already mentioned has been their thunderous underlining of the giants' tread in *Das Rheingold*. Similarly, in the transformation music in Act I of *Parsifal*, they resound as reinforcement of the notes of the Grail Temple bells. The endurance of the instrumentalists in the covered orchestra pit must be admired when the drums let loose with full force. Wagner called his players "Nibelungen"—an apt description for these subterranean toilers who sit in their T-shirts, and must perform in the un-air-conditioned house, especially strenuous during a heat wave. (One such hot spell occurred in 1983, when Georg Georg Solti conducted the *Ring*.)

At the other dynamic extreme, soft timpani express an air of mystery or solemnity. The hardly perceptible roll at the beginning of *Siegfried* then persists and a few moments later, the tritone in the rhythm of the giants' motif lends further mystery to this depiction of the dragon and the dark woods in which his lair is located. Mentioned previously are the soft fourths in the timpani during the welcoming chorus for Gunther in Act II of *Götterdämmerung*. That passage also contains a soft roll on a *Rührtrommel*, i.e. a tenor drum.<sup>35</sup> Cymbals are used in their range from the whispering of Alberich's incantation in Nibelheim in *Das Rheingold*, to the splashes underlying chords in Siegfried's Rhine Journey in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*. With full force, clashed cymbals accompany the climax of the funeral music in Act III—an effect sometimes performed too loud when the sound takes over instead of blending with the rest of the orchestra. Triangle and glockenspiel are used sparingly. Two particularly charming examples of the latter may be cited: at the beginning of Siegfried's Rhine Journey and during the Dance of the Apprentices in Act III of *Die Meistersinger*.

---

<sup>35</sup> WAGNER A18: Rare use of the soft snare drum at the end of the Gibichung's greeting receiving Gunther and Brünnhilde.

As a component of the orchestra, the harp fills the usual function of emphasizing strong beats with arpeggiated chords. A typical instance is the Valhalla motif. Its ability to portray fluid motion is fully explored in *Das Rheingold*. The first scene with the Rhine maidens contains glissandos and arpeggiated chords. The final scene of *Das Rheingold* calls for a veritable phalanx of six harps to create an incandescent shimmer when the rainbow bridge appears. In the study score, the six parts are printed as a separate appendix. Wagner was once confronted by one of the instrumentalists who gently complained about the difficulty of the interlocking arpeggios. The composer is reported to have replied that it was difficult enough to write out the parts, and he could not be expected also to instruct how to play them. For full effect, the instruments should probably be distributed across the stage, similar to the anvils in the interlude of Wotan's and Loge's descent into Nibelheim. One can even imagine the instruments placed in loges throughout the auditorium, so that the listener is immersed in the sound. Today's recording technique would simulate such an experience with surround sound. In actual practice, however, the harps are usually massed together in the orchestra pit; thus, the sound proceeds from a single point and might as well be performed by fewer instruments. In the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, James Levine had the six harps requested. They were placed in a niche under the overhanging stage, a place where at other times a grand piano stood.

A seventh harp is required in the final scene of *Das Rheingold*; offstage, it accompanies the plaint of the Rhine maidens. In Act III of *Götterdämmerung*, an offstage harp also accompanies the Rhine maidens. As a solo instrument, the harp in the orchestra pit supplies the sound for the instruments played by the contestants in *Tannhäuser*. In the

*Ring* dramas, a notable occurrence accompanies Brünnhilde's awakening in *Siegfried*. These high notes, however, lack a certain resonance. Another instance of a single chord, also in the high register of the instrument, can be heard at the moment of Tristan's expiring in Act III. The notes are those of the Tristan chord. Like the glissando depicting Klingsor's throw of the spear, in *Parsifal*, the listener may not react with appropriate seriousness to these musical effects. Wagner did not explore the sonorous bottom register of the harp, possibly because the instruments of his time did not possess much carrying power of these notes. In today's practice of close micing, these sounds contribute a strong bell-like, even percussive, effect in a recording. Close microphone placement, including inside the sound box of the instrument, makes these notes available to present-day composers.

### *The Human Warmth of Strings*

When human warmth is to be expressed, Wagner relies on the sound of stringed instruments. A solo violin portrays the goddess Freia and is also associated with the seductive quality of Kundry in *Parsifal*. A solo violoncello expresses the love growing up between Siegmund and Sieglinde after she has refreshed him with a drink.

High strings in close intervals, without any other orchestral underpinning, are associated with the bright sun. A long passage describes Siegfried's reaction to his surroundings after penetrating the flames in Act III. When Brünnhilde greets the sun as she awakes, trills on the high violins accompany her vision. In the prelude to Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*, the burning sensation of the sun is represented by high strings

ascending from the lower regions of the orchestra. During Tristan's ensuing delirium, the burning rays of the sun are represented onomatopoeically in the high strings.

The sound of massed strings expresses a feeling of love and humanity. One instance, already mentioned, is in the scene in the opening of *Die Walküre*. Sieglinde's awakening love is expressed both by the tone color, and by harmonization in thirds. In Act III of *Tannhäuser*, Wagner contrasted the sound of human strings with the otherworldly implication of wind instruments: Elisabeth's prayer is accompanied exclusively by wind instruments, whereas Wolfram's questions to her are colored by the warm strings. An extraordinary instance of this dichotomy can be found in the *Todesverkündigung* in Act II of *Die Walküre*, when Brünnhilde faces Siegmund with his unconscious wife in his lap. In the extended dialogue, Brünnhilde is accompanied by winds, harp, and percussion. As she describes the glories of Valhalla, its attractive girls, and the fact that he will meet his father there, she is accompanied by colorful sounds which at first do not contain any strings. Siegmund answers her questions accompanied by warm string sonorities. As Brünnhilde gradually gains an insight into the feelings of a human being, strings invade her accompaniment. This evidently gradual growth of human sympathy seems to be misunderstood by Overhoff, who calls Brünnhilde's conversion "Blitzartig" ("lightning-like"). In *Götterdämmerung*, after Hagen concludes the words of his "watch," a powerful postlude continues the mood of foreboding, orchestrated entirely by winds and brass. After its fury dampens down, the Tarnhelm motif is heard swiftly in the winds. Following a considerable silence, the same theme is played by the warm strings—we are entering the seemingly more human world of Brünnhilde in the ensuing scene.

Returning to Brünnhilde in Act II of *Die Walküre*: when she fully understands Siegmund's feelings for Sieglinde—"Alles wär' dir das arme Weib, das müd' und harmvoll matt von dem Schosse dir hängt?" ("All your worries are for the poor waif, who mute and ailing meekly hangs from your lap?")—strings alone surround her words.

In Act II of *Parsifal*, strings expressing deeply human suffering follow Kundry's almost inhuman—both vocally and dramatically—steps. (A precursor to this theme is the aria "Buß und Reu" ["Repentance and remorse"] in Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*.)

Violent emotions can be portrayed by vigorous string passages. Two instances are Brünnhilde's confrontation of Siegfried after she discovers the deception with Gunther in Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, and the last scene of Act III where Gutrune accuses Hagen of murdering Siegfried, accompanied by furious string figures.

### **The *Ring* as a theatrical experience**

The first performances of the four *Ring* dramas in 1876 must have made an overwhelming impression on their audiences, especially on some of the composers who attended: Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Saint-Saëns, and, of course, Franz Liszt. Wagner, however, was not satisfied with the scenic aspects of the dramas. He describes one of the inadequacies in his 1878 *Rückblick auf die Bühnenfestspiele des Jahres 1876* (*A Retrospective of the Stage-Festivals of 1876*). The dragon in *Siegfried* was constructed in England. Only the body and head, however, arrived in Bayreuth—the neck remained delayed somewhere en route. How detrimental to the intended effect when the dragon

rears up to his full height!

Wagner himself said, “now that I’ve created the invisible orchestra, I wish I could create the invisible theater.” As described above, George Bernard Shaw created his own invisible theater by only listening and not looking. Today, of course, it is possible to do likewise: listening to a good recording.

The invisible theater—a recording or broadcast of a performance—can supply the images in our imagination that the text and music call forth. In an article in *High Fidelity*, John Culshaw (1924-1980)—the producer of the Decca Solti recording of the *Ring*—describes the recommendation of pianist Glenn Gould (1932-1982) for the ideal listening environment for an operatic recording. Technology has made it possible to install such a system in the average home. In the 2006 Bayreuth production of the *Ring*, in the interludes, the curtain actually came down immediately after the singers stopped singing, and the audience had to imagine what the music was telling them.

Another way of meeting the requirements of a Wagner drama is a visual medium like film. For one, it would circumvent one of the perennial problems in staging Wagner: how to portray young females—Senta, Elisabeth, Elsa, the young Brünnhilde, Gutrune, and even Kundry in her seductive guise—through singers who are far from that age (and girth).

Opera on film solves the problem of representing singing characters in different ways. In its beginning, filming an opera did not achieve satisfactory results. Applying the technique of the lip-synched theatrical film, little regard was placed on matching the physical movements of the actors with the effort required for singing. A 1953 *Aida* may serve as an example: Sophia Loren portrayed the heroine while Renata Tebaldi sang the

words on the soundtrack. The effortless posture of the visible Aïda against the strain of a high note defeated credibility. By the time Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007) produced his charming 1975 *Magic Flute*, the technique had advanced. In this film, the orchestra was prerecorded, while the singers/actors were recorded on the set. The filmed *Parsifal* of 1982, directed by Hans-Jürgen Syberberg (b. 1935), lip-synched actors to a recorded performance of singers and orchestra, conducted by Armin Jordan (1932-2006). Now Wagner's reliance on facial gestures can be realized to the full. The image of Amfortas's face in close-up—played by Armin Jordan himself—stays in memory.

Films and other visual media, with their possibilities of special effects, could realize some of the hard-to-stage events of the *Ring* dramas. For example, the Ride of the Valkyries might be represented by huge cloud formations approximating the shape of riders on horses chasing over barren fields or a wilderness. Such a visualization would be in accord with the supposed origin of the legendary Valkyries. Atmospheric events, such as meteors, storm winds, cloud movements, etc., seem to have been the basis for these imaginary creatures.

#### Digression: Transformations

Gods changing from whatever shape gods otherwise possess, or humans changing into animals, is a constant theme in mythology and fairy tales, from Zeus to Harry Potter. Zeus turns himself into a bull, or swan, or shower of gold—generally for sexual pursuits. (A surprising transformation takes place in the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite: she turns herself into a virgin to entice Anchises.)

A familiar transformation from god to man is Odin/Wotan becoming a human being. In the Volsunga Saga, a poem composed in the Middle Ages but dating back to Icelandic sources, Odin is described as traveling through the world in the shape of an old man with a beard. Wagner's "Wanderer" is his descendant. The Saga relates that the old man—with the flap of his hat covering his missing eye—interposed his spear in a battle in which Sigurd fought. As in Siegmund's fight with Hunding, the sword shattered. Symbolically, in *Siegfried*, the hero will use the re-forged sword to split the Wanderer's spear—man taking power over from the gods. In Icelandic myth, possibly based on history, Odin was a king of Norway who became a god. Odin's lineage was traced back to King Priam of Troy. According to this legend, the Trojans wandered westward and eventually settled in Scandinavia.

In transformations into animals, wolves figure prominently. When Siegmund tells his host Hunding of his history, in Act I of *Die Walküre*, he pretends that his father's name was "Wolfe." He describes how he and his father set out on a hunt. They got separated and when Siegmund returned home, he only found an empty wolf's skin, but never saw his father again. "*Ein Wolf war er feigen Füchsen!*" ("As wolf he chased craven foxes!") Whether the foxes were human beings turned into animals or the animals themselves is not explained. That they both turned into wolves, however, is made clear by an episode in the Volsunga Saga: Sigmund—son of King Wälse—and his own son, Sinfjotli, go into a forest and find two wolf-skins in a hut. They put them on and are transformed into howling wolves. When they return to the hut, they change back into

humans and leave behind the empty wolf-skins.<sup>36</sup> In Wagner's version, Wälse turns out to be Wotan in human form. Left alone after Hunding and Sieglinde leave, he calls upon Wälse to send him a sword promised by his father. Siegmund's cry of "Wälse" is sustained for a long time. It is also very loud, and amazingly, does not wake Hunding, (admittedly, he is drugged). Tenors enjoy showing off their lung power in this sustained note; some are known to have been cut off peremptorily by the conductor.<sup>37</sup>

A human changing into another human is also a theme in mythology. Both the Nordic sagas and Wagner's derivation make the change from Siegfried into Gunther an important element in the plot. A believable transformation into an animal or other person will always present a problem onstage. Modern film techniques could solve these changes by employing a process such as morphing. In *Das Rheingold*, it would make it possible to show the effect of the gods losing the rejuvenating power of the golden apples after Freia has been carried away by the giants: their instant aging could be made clearly visible. Another image that comes to mind is the change that occurs in the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), where the metallic slick on the road transforms itself into the pursuing policeman. In *Das Rheingold*, this technique would do wonders for showing Alberich turning himself first into a dragon and then into a toad. It would also solve how to portray Siegfried changing into the shape of Gunther after Siegfried penetrates the fire around Brünnhilde's rock before she notices him approaching in Act I

---

<sup>36</sup> WAGNER A40: The source of this reference to wolves may be the Volsunga Saga, where father and son, Sigmund and Sinfjotli, find wolf skins in a hut, put them on, and are turned into wolves hunting in the forest, until they come back and shed the wolf skins again.

<sup>37</sup> WAGNER A34: and Sieglinde calls him ecstatically *ein Wälsung*

WAGNER B20: Later, when he is alone with Sieglinde, he calls his father "Wälse", and she ecstatically answers him, "So you are a *Wälsung!*"

WAGNER B22: "(Some singers hold the first syllable of 'Wälse' so long that the conductor cuts them off by giving the downbeat of the next orchestral cue.)"

of *Götterdämmerung*. In Act II, when Siegfried suddenly appears before Hagen, we hear his horn. It would be awkward to see him suddenly become visible while blowing his horn—on the other hand, if the horn were blown offstage, it would spoil the surprise of Siegfried's sudden appearance. Wagner solved the problem by having the solo horn in the orchestra sound Siegfried's horn call while he appears. If morphed, the horn could sound from its proper perspective onstage while the shape of Gunther appears. By the time the call is over, one could see Siegfried appear just as he takes the instrument from his lips. A slight realignment of the score would be necessary, for in the present version Siegfried's first word overlaps with the last note of the horn call.

### **The *Ring* of the future**

It is clear that some of the scenic requirements of Wagner's works will never be fully realized on a proscenium stage. They involve large scale objects and great distances as well as natural events that cannot be contained on a conventional stage. For example, a mechanical dragon will always be slightly questionable as a source of terror. The reason is that in a proscenium, the dragon is contained by a frame, whereas overwhelming terror should be shown in an unconfined image. Another instance may be the descent of Wotan and Loge in *Rheingold* into the earth, into what should be eons of geological distance. And, of course, that supposedly most magical of events, the magic fire in *Die Walküre*, could not be realized given the regulations of fire departments.

The size of the problem, however, does not mean that the audience needs to be short-changed. In a 2007 production of *Die Walküre*, by the Washington National Opera,

the broadcast clearly indicated that at the end of Act III, Wotan bangs his spear on wood, most likely the stage floor. The actual requirements are not that difficult to produce: a metal spear point hitting a rock. There is more than just the sound effect involved here: hitting metal on rock is an ancient method of producing sparks, which can ignite materials. Thus, Loge is not only called upon to appear, but Wotan's sparks could also spread into a wall of flames that would leave no room for doubt that a real wall of flames is burning around the rock. If this production took place outdoors or were staged with special effects on a visual medium, the effect should, indeed, seem like magic.

What comes into play here should be an overwhelming of the senses. The theater can only provide impressions on the eye and the ear. Contemporary cinematographic devices can remove limitations on what the audience sees. The gigantic opening maw of the dragon, unconfined by frame, might make the requisite impression. However, a future medium might make us actually *feel* the enveloping horrific surroundings. The "feelies" described in Aldous Huxley's 1932 science fiction novel *Brave New World* might also have accomplished the task.

Another sense that might be appealed to is smell. Experiments have been made, for example at some of the exhibits at Expo 67 in Montreal. Expo also had Circle Vision, in which a standing audience was surrounded by images so that, in effect, there was no more fixed point and the audience seemed to be moving, yet standing still. Such an impression might adequately represent the descent of Wotan and Loge into Nibelheim.

With the introduction of high definition television, the sense of sight can again be called upon. The sense of smell will probably not be engaged if the experience at Expo 67 is a guide. Distributing scent through the air was found to conflict with the air

conditioning system, rendering smells largely inoperative. As to the “feelies”—it is too early to judge.

To sum up, experiencing fully the possibilities of Wagner’s music dramas is probably best achieved through an imaginative film, taking advantage of the most recent visual and aural technical advances. Such a project will be costly. The late opera expert and film producer Alan Wagner (1931-2007) once estimated that such a production would cost about \$200 million. With productions of the *Ring* occurring almost yearly in different parts of the world, no doubt some patron will step up to do a definitive version of the *Ring* cycle that engages all our senses. But this realization of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—especially as represented by the four *Ring* dramas—still lies in the future.

\* \* \*

*In the absence of sight, I benefited from the skills in transcribing, researching, and editing of my wife Elsbeth and our daughters: Miriam and Naomi Lewin, and Eva Radding, as well as those of my assistants, Alexander Lewis, Saraswathi Shukla, and Scott Smallwood. I gratefully acknowledge their contributions.*

—Frank Lewin

## Bibliography

Braun, Franz. *Kna*.

Bachman, W. Bryant Jr. *Four Old Icelandic Sagas and Other Tales*.

Carnegy, Patrick. *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*.

Cooke, Deryck. *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's Ring*.

Cooke, Deryck. *The Language of Music*.

Dahlhaus, Carl. *Richard Wagner: Werk und Wirkung*. 1971. The end of *Götterdämmerung* on page 97-115 (*Über den Schluss der Götterdämmerung*).

Frauer, Ludwig. *Die Walküren der skandinavisch-germanischen götter-und heldensage*. Monograph. Weimar, 1846.

Golther, Wolfgang. *Die sagen geschichtligen der ringdichtung Richard Wagners*.

Grimstad, Kaaren. *Volsunga saga: The Saga of the Volsungs*.

Hindemith, Paul. *The Craft of Musical Composition*.

Kerman, Joseph. *Opera as Drama*.

Kinderman, William and Katherine R. Syer. *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*.

Kinderman, William. *Dramatic Recapitulation in Wagner's Götterdämmerung*.

Kinderman, William. "Die Entstehung der 'Parsifal'-Musik."

Lee, Father M. Owen. *Wagner: The Terrible Man and His Truthful Art*. "Wagner and the Wound That Would Not Heal."

Millington, Barry. *The New Grove Guide to Wagner and His Operas*.

Magee, Elizabeth. *Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs*.

Overhoff, Kurt. *Wagners Nibelungen-Tetralogie: eine zeitgemässige Betrachtung*.

Schofield, Paul. *The Redeemer Reborn: Parsifal as the Fifth Opera of Wagner's Ring*.

Simrock, Karl. *Die Edda: die ältere und jüngere*. 1851

Terry, Patricia Ann, translator. *Poems of the Vikings: The Elder Edda*.

Troyes, Chrétien de. *Arthurian Romances*. ed. and trans. William W. Kibler and Carleton W. Carroll.

#### Consultants

Robert Gutman, author

Lois Lavery, singer

Michael Wachtel, Princeton University Slavic Department

Richard Weitach, retired associate conductor, Metropolitan Opera

*Nibelungenlied*, read and commentated by Peter Wapnewski

#### Recordings

##### *Ring Cycle:*

1955, Bayreuth; cond. Josef Keilberth

1956, Bayreuth; cond. Hans Knappertsbusch

1958-65, Vienna State Opera; cond. Georg Solti

2000, Metropolitan Opera broadcast; cond. James Levine (CDs privately obtained)

2006, Bayreuth broadcast; cond. Christian Thielemann (CDs privately obtained)

##### *Parsifal:*

1913 to 1928, *Parsifal: The Complete Karl Muck Parsifal Recordings*

1950, in Italian, with Boris Christoff and Maria Callas

1981, studio; cond. Herbert von Karajan

2005, Vienna State Opera; cond. Christian Thielemann

##### *Tristan und Isolde:*

1953, studio, Philharmonia Orchestra; cond. Wilhelm Furtwängler

1972, studio, Berlin Philharmonic; cond. Herbert von Karajan

1982, studio, Staatskapelle Dresden; cond. Carlos Kleiber

##### *Die Meistersinger:*

1967, Bayerischer Rundfunk; cond. Rafael Kubelik

1990, Deutsche Oper, Berlin; cond. Eugen Jochum

*Elektra:*

1997, Vienna Philharmonic; cond. Giuseppe Sinopoli

**Other:**

2001, Bells of the Strasbourg Cathedral (Franz Liszt)

*Nibelungenlied*, read and commentated by Peter Wapnewski

© 2010 Miriam Lewin, Literary Executor for Frank Lewin, Deceased