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LEITMOTIVE

THE JOURNAL OF THE WAGNER SOCIETY OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

"THE BEST *RING* IN THE WORLD!" [1]

Why Seattle Opera's Production Is So Satisfying

Few of the spectators, including the many Europeans present, would dispute the above quotation. This past August, Speight Jenkins, Stephen Wadsworth and the rest of the 2001 team[2] succeeded in improving an already magnificent production. One knowledgeable Wagnerian told me that the Third Cycle *Walküre* was the finest, over all, of any she had ever seen (and she has seen many dozens of performances of the work). Another widely experienced spectator told me that he found the Second Cycle *Siegfried* to be the finest he had ever attended. And so it went: my own reaction was that it was the most satisfying *Ring* that I have experienced (out of 43 complete presentations). I heard almost no negative comments about anything: virtually everyone there was excited and pleased with nearly everything.[3]

Some of us feared that the near-perfection of the wonderful performances of four years ago might be 'improved', but in a manner that would reduce the enormous audience impact of those earlier three cycles. So often producers cannot bring themselves to leave well enough alone — I have encountered some who, in consequence, I would guess, of seeing rehearsals for weeks and weeks followed by attending every performance — get to the point that they (but not the audience), have become bored with some elements of the production. Mistakenly they come to believe that their personal over-exposure has also been experienced by the audience. And that leads to 'fixes'. Bad fixes. Fortunately, that did not happen in Seattle last August.[4] The changes were comparatively minor. Our review, starting on page 6, includes descriptions of some of the relatively few changes.

II. German Producers

The immense contrast between Seattle's production and those very different ones at almost every other opera house in the world is striking, to say the least[5]. After again witnessing Seattle's triumph, one has to wonder what motivates the producers of the ubiquitous 'other versions'? Why do they elect to avoid what seems so obvious, i.e. adhering to Wagner's conception? The producers of those 'other versions' almost universally justify their often wild deviations from Wagner's clear instructions by citing his alleged verbal comment following the first, 1876, presentation at Bayreuth (I believe as reported later by Emil Heckel): "Next time we will do it differently."[6]

Wagner undoubtedly was dissatisfied with some facets of what had been done in 1876. It had not quite reached the pinnacle of which he had imagined and for which he had hoped. He was always intensely focused on creating a profound aesthetic-emotional experience for the audience — not just ordinary entertainment: his standards were extremely high. But, irrespective of Wagner's own reservations, from the first-hand accounts that we have from persons who attended in 1876, it certainly seems that everyone was tremendously impressed, even Kaiser Wilhelm, I.[7]

At the end of World War II, the great Ernest Newman wrote,"...we may perhaps sum up that the 1876 performances were equal at their least good to the average good of today [1946], and, at their best, better than their present-day best."[8]

But what Wagner intended by that remark ("next time...differently"), which may seem, perhaps, to have had such unfortunate consequences, was (in my view) that he wanted something more akin to what Speight Jenkins, Stephen Wadsworth & Co. have given us. But even if the remark had never been attributed to Wagner, it seems almost certain that the perpetrators of the many current productions which deviate so conspicuously from Wagner would have come up with some other rationalization to justify their work.

This is partly because, especially for the German producers (whose productions generally have substantial influence on all other producers, world-wide), there are extensive historical and cultural biases

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Not everyone would agree with the fellow quoted in the title of our first article, but virtually everyone would agree that the Seattle Ring *is an important production of Wagner's monumental work. We explore the reasons why so many of the other productions in the world are so different from Seattle's. Dr. Paul Dawson-Bowling returns to our pages with his usual comprehensive and perceptive observations about the Jenkins-Wadsworth production. Finally, Professor Alfred Turco concludes his fascinating essay on Shaw and Wagner.*

NOBODY'S PERFECT: GBS AS WAGNERITE - PART II

The first part of this essay appeared in the previous, Summer issue and is based on a talk which Professor Turco gave earlier.

A *third reason* for the endurance of the *The Perfect Wagnerite*: Shaw definitively established the centrality of Wotan to the drama's meaning. Referring to the original *Siegfried's Death*, he stresses that "A single drama, in which Wotan does not appear and of which Siegfried is the hero, expanded itself into a great fourfold drama of which Wotan is the hero."

Anyone can tell that Wotan has the longest role, but Shaw lays out his tragic predicament with a sharpness of focus and cogency of expression that has become the touchstone (gold standard?) of *Ring* criticism. The epigraph (q.v.) I placed at the head of Part I of this piece may serve as paradigm, recognized or not, for many later interpretations of the *Ring* — including some by authors whose specific views are quite unlike Shaw's! Granted, this skeletal structure of the god's self-entrapment may be viewed in political (e.g., Marxist) terms, but could equally plausibly be construed in philosophical (e.g., Schopenhauerian) or psychological (e.g., Jungian) terms.

Among myriad other possibilities, a psychoanalytic perspective is a rich lode. I do not know of a single major concept in Freud which is not prefigured in Wagner, by which I do not mean merely that Freud's ideas are useful as tools for interpreting the music. I mean, rather, that much of Freudian theory is emergent, in discernable shape, in Wagnerian opera.

To return to Wotan, Shaw understands that "[the god's] assumed character of lawgiver is altogether false to his real passionate nature," that he "longs in his inmost soul for the advent of that greater power whose first work, though he does not see it as yet, must be his own undoing," and that he is represented by Wagner as "finally acquiescing in and ... working for his own supersession and annihilation." (I have coalesced several passages in that sentence.)

With a steady hand, Shaw guides the reader through the involutions by which Wotan's ingenious design to resolve his problem of bondage to covenants by the creation of the Hero results only in deepening his enslavement to the point where, by the middle of *Die Walküre*, he desires only one thing: "das Ende! das Ende!" — declaimed to Brünnhilde, the Wish-Maiden who, in disobeying her father's command, fulfills his will by coming to Siegmund's rescue in his duel with Hunding.

Coming to *Siegfried* itself, Shaw keeps the emphasis on Wotan's four appearances as the Wanderer — the exchange of riddles with Mime in Act I, his droll playacting of mentor to Alberich beside Fafner's lair in Act II, and his climactic meetings with the Wala (Erda) and Siegfried in Act III.

In discussing these scenes, Shaw devotes more space to Wotan than to Siegfried, the designated hero who turned out to be so much less interesting than the problem he was designed to solve. (Shaw would not have known entries in Cosima's diaries from the 1870s in which Wagner suggests that he is losing interest in Siegfried and finds Wotan the more tragic figure.)

When Shaw finally gets to *Götterdämmerung*, he does more than merely nod to what he calls "the last relic of the tragedy of Wotan" — by which he refers to the meeting which follows Waltraute's ride from Valhalla to Brünnhilde's rock. At first Brünnhilde is overjoyed to see her much-missed sister, whom she dares hope has come to reveal that Wotan has forgiven her; but this hope is dashed when the terrified Waltraute reveals instead that she has fled in secret to implore Brünnhilde to grant Wotan's last wish that the ring be returned to the Rhinedaughters. He has sent his warriors to fell the world ash, bade them pile its logs around Valhalla, convened the council of gods, and then — *nothing!*

Not quoted by Shaw is Waltraute's description of Wotan: "So he sits/ says not a word/ silent and grave/ on his hallowed seat/ with the splintered spear/ held tight in his hand/ [Freia's] apples/ he does not touch ... he was thinking, Brünnhilde', of you!" Does anything in the *Ring* surpass the power of this tremendous image of Wotan, in total desolation, waiting for

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the return of his ravens with a message of peace that will enable the god to smile one final time and welcome "das Ende"?

After giving a fair summary of this episode, Shaw opines that its "highly effective air of mystery" derives from its "very senselessness" in relation to the tetralogy's overall design — a view disabled by his own discussion! He complains as well that Brünnhilde's Immolation Scene "yields nothing to resolute intellectual criticism except an elevated exploitation of theatrical pathos," but later extols her valedictory consolation —"Peace, peace, thou God" — as "sublime in its deep conviction."

In some way that Shaw didn't quite grasp, these scenes must have gripped him — the most likely explanation being that they complete the arc of the tragic destiny of Wotan, who centers the whole cycle even when he is not on stage. Perhaps what Shaw really felt was not what he thought he thought. (Does that remind you of someone else?)

The *fourth reason* gets to the heart of the book. Many figures in the other arts, great in their own right, have written on Wagner — poets (Baudelaire), novelists (Mann), and of course philosophers (starting with his friend Nietzsche). But Shaw's is the only book on Wagner written by one who, like him, was a major dramatist — and, moreover, a dramatist whose works, again like Wagner's, are structured around a dialectical interplay of ideas.

Both the *Ring* and Shavian dramas like *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, and *Heartbreak House* are allegorical — but as Shaw explains in the *Wagnerite*: "An allegory is never quite consistent except when it is written by someone without dramatic faculty, in which case it is unreadable. There is only one way to dramatize an idea; and that is by putting on the stage a human being possessed by that idea, but none the less a human being with all the human impulses which make him akin and therefore interesting to us."

Despite persistent disparagement of his own plays as didactic, Shaw had the rare gift of seeing an issue from several sides at once. That is why the two most memorable pieces of sustained verbal bravura in Shavian drama — I mean the Devil's "force of Death" tirade in "Don Juan in Hell" and the Inquisitor's minatory address to the court in *Saint Joan* — are spoken (sung?) by figures whose views are sharply opposed to Shaw's own.

In his introduction to *Man and Superman*, Shaw wrote: "All my characters ... are right from their several points of view; and their points of view are, for the dramatic moment, mine also. This may puzzle the people who believe that there is such a thing as an absolutely right point of view, usually their own. It may seem to them that nobody who doubts this can be in a state of grace. However that may be, it is certainly true that nobody who agrees with them can possibly be a dramatist, or indeed anything else that turns upon a knowledge of mankind. Hence it has been pointed out that Shakespeare had no conscience. Neither have I, in that sense."

Shaw's relativism enables him to regard Wagner's characters with more empathy than has been usual in his day or ours. In offering evidence for this view, I must be selective.

Let's start with Anna Russell: *Remember Alberich*? While describing him as deformed by "a brutish narrowness of intelligence," Shaw does not ridicule the dwarf for offering himself to the three Rhinedaughters as a sweetheart. On the contrary, their repulsion of him is told from Alberich's own point of view: "They mock him atrociously ... heaping ridicule and disgust on the poor wretch until he is beside himself with mortification and rage."

"No one will renounce love willingly," Shaw explains. "What is left to him then but to curse the love he can never win, and turn remorselessly to the gold? ... His choice is forced on him." When in *Rheingold*'s last scene, Wotan and Loge are set to take the ring back by force, Shaw gets inside Alberich's little mind: "Here the dwarf ... feels the very foundations of the world shake beneath him at the discovery of his own base cupidity in a higher power ... His appeal to Wotan to forgo [taking the ring] is almost terrible in its conviction of wrong."

Surely Wagner thought so too, since he grants his nominal villain one outburst of furious eloquence when he warns Wotan: "If ever I sinned, I sinned freely against myself: but you ...will sin against all that was, is, and shall be — if you brazenly wrest the ring from me now!" It is the god who draws the Shavian dart: "[Wotan] reminds Alberich that he stole the gold from the Rhinedaughters, and takes the attitude of a just judge compelling a restitution of stolen goods. [But] Alberich know[s] perfectly well that the judge is taking the goods to put them in his own pocket ..."

Without quoting it, Shaw recollects Alberich's apposite taunt: "Shameless deceit! You upbraid me, you crook, for the wrong you so fondly desired?" What Shaw seems headed toward here is the sense of Alberich and Wotan as alter egos — different aspects of the same being — as acknowledged later by Wotan's reference to himself as "Light Alberich" and to the dwarf as "Black Alberich." Though he doesn't take up that analogy, Shaw is true to Wagner's emphasis in his resolve not just to judge Alberich — so easy to do! — but to show what it would feel like to *be* Alberich.

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Alfred Turco

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NOBODY'S PERFECT

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The Nibelung may plausibly arouse empathy because of his status as underdog; but what of Shaw's even more startling treatment of Fricka, who issues commands from the top of the hierarchy of Godhead? You would expect Shaw, arch-satirist of Victorian domestic morality, to scorn this figure that represents the "mechanical force" of conventional idealism. No doubt she would not qualify as an "advanced thinker"; nonetheless, in his exposition of Act II of *Die Walküre*, Shaw expresses Fricka's arguments far more trenchantly than she ever could herself.

Here is Shaw: "A hero may have defied the law and put his own will in its place; but can a god hold him guiltless, when the whole power of the gods can enforce itself only by law?" Fricka gets rather more personal about it: "You begot those dissolute Wälsungs," she accuses Wotan, "severing ties that you yourself forged ... You've always played false with your true-hearted wife ... seeking out ways of indulging your fondness for change and of tauntingly wounding my heart!"

Shaw catches the *precise* ambiguity of the libretto's phrasing when he grants that "Fricka is absolutely right when she declares that the ending of the gods began when [Wotan] brought this wolf-hero [Siegmund] into the world." Fricka does get the point that, if Siegmund's incestuous adultery with Sieglinde goes unpunished, then the order of the gods, depending as it does on inviolable covenants, is doomed — but the *deeper* point she misses is that the dying of this old order would be propitious — because it is the precondition for creating a new and higher order of Heroes.

"[Wotan] is hopelessly beaten in the argument," says Shaw. Wotan thinks so too: "She saw right through me," he tells Brünnhilde a few minutes later. Can we blame Fricka for suspecting doubletalk when Wotan explains that "A hero is needed who, lacking godly protection, breaks loose from the law of the gods: thus alone is he fit to perform that feat which, needful though it is to the gods, the god is forbidden to do"? It is not unintelligent for her to inquire "what lofty feat could heroes perform that their gods are prevented from doing, since it is the gods alone who endow these heroes with power to act?"

One of Shaw's shrewdest insights is that Fricka, "who stands for state law, ... does not assume her allegorical character in *The Rhine Gold* at all, but is simply Wotan's wife and Freia's sister: nay, she contradicts her allegorical self by conniving at all Wotan's rogueries." Shaw doesn't provide details, but Wagner does. In Scene Two of *Rheingold*, Fricka's complaint goes beyond Wotan's dalliances; it also involves his having kept her in the dark about the contract to use Freia to pay for the giants' labor in constructing Valhalla: "I'd have hindered such deceit; but you mettlesome menfolk kept us women out of the way."

Fricka's feeling and fears for Freia are very real, and she senses well before Wotan that his "shabby deal" is going to lead to unintended consequences. The first words she utters in *Rheingold* — "Wake up, husband, and consider" ["*Erwache, Mann, und erwäge*"] — break the halcyon calm of the setting of Scene Two. There is a touch of pathos in that the building of Valhalla was *her* idea for keeping Wotan close to home: "A glorious dwelling, domestic bliss, were meant to entice you to tarry and rest" when his mind turned to adventures, amorous and otherwise.

The following exchange takes place shortly after she first hears of the ring and its powers.

FRICKA (*softly to Loge*) Might the golden trinket's glittering gem be worn by women and serve as fair adornment?

LOGE A wife might ensure that her husband was true if she lovingly wore the bright shiningjewel ...

FRICKA (*cajolingly, to Wotan*) Might my husband win the gold for himself?

The lachrymose melody accompanying her in the solo violin hints that it is not "state law" that speaks here, but a neglected wife — calculating and vulnerable at the same time — who perforce resorts to collaboration with her deceivers. Wagner portrays Fricka as human, all-too-human; and Shaw enables us to see what Wagner has done.

The most powerful moment of humanized allegory in the *Ring* is the one time Wotan and Siegfried actually meet — which is also the last scene in which Wotan (as the Wanderer) appears in the cycle. The god starts by asking the young man a series of questions along these lines: Where are you going? How were you able to understand the Woodbird's song? Who set you on to kill the dragon? Who forged that sword you're carrying? Siegfried provides all the right answers; but when Wotan finally inquires who made the mighty fragments of the sword, he loses patience: "What do I know about that?" He understood only that the pieces would be useless unless he forged the sword anew.

For Wotan, this interrogation is loaded with significance; for Siegfried, it's much ado about Notung: all *he* wants is for the old man to tell him where is the rock, surrounded by fire, at whose peak a maiden sleeps. "If I'm old," Wotan admonishes him, "you should show me respect." "That's a good one," laughs Siegfried. "I've had quite enough of one old man in my life already" — recalling the late unlamented Mime.

Emboldened, the youth demands to know why Wotan is wearing that big hat pulled down over his face and "what happened to one of your eyes?" Shaw's comment here: "Wotan replies allegorically that the eye that is gone — the eye that his marriage with Fricka cost him — is now looking at him out of Siegfried's head. At this, Siegfried gives up the Wanderer as a lunatic."

Domineeringly, Wotan points his spear toward the mountain top. "Look up to the heights? Do you see the flames ... Aren't you scared? Get back!" "Get back yourself," snaps Siegfried; "I'm going through the fire to Brünnhilde."

So when Wotan holds up his spear to bar the way, Siegfried, wielding Notung, splits it in two — exactly reversing Wotan's holding up the same spear on which Notung was split in two when wielded by Siegmund. Allegorically, it's all very neat: in Act II of *Die Walküre*, the weapon of the hero was shattered on

the symbol of contracts and law; in Act III of *Siegfried*, the symbol of contracts and law is shattered by the weapon of the hero. Wotan has contrived a trial to test Siegfried's fearlessness, and he passes with flying colors. "Go on your way! I cannot stop you!" The operation is a complete success.

Yet not quite. For remember, a god is only human. Shaw reflects that "Wotan is a little hurt. Outworn life may have become mere error; but it still claims the right to die a natural death." It is as if, somehow, Wotan wanted to be *appreciated* by Siegfried as the source of the design of which he is the fulfillment. A quite unreasonable expectation — Siegfried hasn't read the play! — but emotionally it rings true. "If you but knew me/ brave-hearted youth/ you'd spare me this affront!/ So dear to you,/ I'm sorely wounded by your threats."

I cannot believe that Wotan is playacting here, for the orchestra takes on a darkly troubled coloration based on the obsessive winding motive previously associated with Wotan's frustration. Shaw says nothing about the music, but senses the pain of a father-figure who has discovered that his newly matured spiritual offspring has no interest in him at all. (Many a middle-aged, middle-class, nonmythological modern parent will know how he feels.)

Now — to stand back — by way of overview to the approach developed so far ...

I have shown that Shaw's interest in Wagner is only superficially the result of common political ideology, but stems more deeply from a shared dramatic way of imagining the world. But I think the deepest source of his fascination with Wagner was that Shaw felt the same "contradiction between his intuitions and his conceptions" that Wagner took such pains to explain in his letter to Röckel.

In writing *The Perfect Wagnerite* in 1898, Shaw looked back to Ibsen with this very point in mind. "Some years ago" he noted, "in the course of an explanation of Ibsen's plays, I pointed out that it was by no means certain or even likely that Ibsen was as definitely conscious of his thesis as I. All the stupid people, and some critics...not stupid...saw nothing in this but a fantastic affectation of the impossible self-conceit of knowing more about Ibsen than Ibsen himself."

No surprise, then, that in writing the *Quintessence* in 1891, Shaw was already looking ahead to the composer of the *Ring*: "One of the greatest poets of our own day ... Richard Wagner ... has expressly described how the intellectual activity which he brought to the analysis of his music dramas was in abeyance during their creation."

Both Ibsen and Wagner were Shaw's means of exploring this paradox: "It is only the [naive person] who goes to the creative artist with absolute confidence in receiving an answer to his 'What does this passage mean?' That is the very question which the poet's own intellect, which had no part in the conception of the poem, may be asking him."

Now you may be wondering why Shaw, of all people, would be intrigued by this question — wasn't he an ultra-cerebral type, all head without heart, a dry rationalist? No, he wasn't — though he wryly confessed that "My heart is never in the right — meaning the expected — place."

No surprise then, either, that in his essays of the 1890s Shaw was emphatic — not only in upholding the ability to reason as a valuable tool by which "we can calculate our actions so as to...fulfill our will," — but also in denying that reason can ever be a "prime motor" in cultural evolution. Then and thereafter, Shaw insisted that the true "motive power" in life is "not the fulfillment of moral law or of the deductions of reason, but the satisfaction of a passion in us of which we can give no account whatever."

Shaw is not merely *thinking* about feeling here, for he believes that it is feeling that sets one thinking; and he saw his relation to his own creative work in a light similar to that in which he saw Ibsen and Wagner's relation to theirs.

Listen to him, not in the 1890s, but fifty years later in his own nineties: "When I write a play I do not foresee nor intend a page of it from one end to the other: the play writes itself. I may reason out every sentence until I have made it say exactly what it comes to me to say; but whence and how and why it comes to me ... I do not know."

These words chime with what he had been saying for decades. My favorite instance is an interview he granted to a London newspaper after the shaky premiere of *Heartbreak House* in 1921.

EDITOR. What is the meaning of the play?

MR. SHAW. How can I tell you? I am the author.

EDITOR. How do you explain the failure — or threatened failure — of the play?

MR. SHAW. I suppose people don't like it.

It was no feigned perplexity that caused him to add: "I am not an explicable phenomenon: neither is *Heartbreak House* ... These things are not to be explained."

So don't go to Shaw's plays expecting to find only seasoned debaters like John Tanner (aka Don Juan) in *Man and Superman*, Andrew Undershaft in *Major Barbara*, or King Magnus in *The Apple Cart*. His most celebrated hero, Joan of Arc, is the least cerebral of all: she is inspired by strange voices. Whether these come from God or her own imagination makes no difference to Shaw, who contends in his Preface that "the test of sanity is not the normality of the method but the reasonableness of the discovery."

Joan's goal is to drive the English out of France and legitimize the hapless Dauphin by crowning him as Charles VII in Rheims cathedral. In that most unlikely task she succeeds all too well, only to be condemned for heresy (*not* witchcraft) without understanding the issues in her own trial. Joan may not realize what the play she is in is about, but that does not lessen her worth in Shaw's eyes. To portray his hero as allegorically embodying the nascent forces of Protestantism and Nationalism does not mean that she had to *know* that she did all that. What Shaw calls the "unconsciously reasoned conclusions of genius" often arise before the intellect can explain them.

In this sense Joan is like Siegfried and Shaw is like Wagner, whose impact

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THE SEATTLE *RING* — 2005

The Polishing Of The 2001 Production

Beg, borrow, steal, or just start saving now for the next Seattle *Ring* in 2009. Those lucky enough to be there this year were left drunk with a headier vintage than wine — Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* in all its richness, as Wagner himself might have hoped to stage it. No, that is not quite true; even with Maschinenmeister Carl Brandt, Wagner could never have imagined staging the *Ring* like this. "What you hear in the music, that you see on the stage" was his maxim, but his hopes of making this a reality at Bayreuth were defeated by the impossible challenges he had set himself, above all by the special effects. He admitted as much when he said, "Next year, we will do it all differently." That longed for next year never came in his lifetime; it needed other visionaries, Wieland Wagner at Bayreuth and Stephen Wadsworth at Seattle, to make his aspirations come true.

At Seattle the special effects were pantomime elevated to sublime heights, part of a staging that really was "the music made visible" (Wagner again). There was a visionary reality about the depths of the Rhine, with green, golden light filtering down from above. In this scene almost every bar of the score has the running figuration of water ceaselessly flowing and eddying, and the stage picture was the visible embodiment of Wagner's music. The swimming Rhinemaidens were not a theatrical whimsy but the final element in ensuring harmony between what the ear heard and what the eye saw. The same was true of the magic fire and the devastating Fafner dragon, a worm with monstrous tusks and a mouth worthy of a tyrannosaurus; all these elements had the same purpose, to heighten vividness. They helped conjure the *Ring* and its myth, imprinting its deep truths and its regenerative power on the imagination with such cathartic force that it became a life-time experience.

It was already a lifetime experience when I reviewed it four years ago, but the Seattle team had done the impossible and made it even better. Phillip Joll's noble but fraying Wotan from 2001 has given way to Greer Grimsley's cutting edge assumption, and it was Greer Grimsley who gave the key to another element of Seattle's success in one of those blinding glimpses of the obvious that producers today tend to overlook. He said "You can often get the best out of a story simply by telling the story. By doing that, without the distraction of an overlying concept, one is better able to communicate to the audience the relationships. That's what theatre is about — relationships, tragic, comic, or heroic. The beauty of simplicity in the theatre is that it can be the biggest hammer in the tool-box." There was plenty here for the people for whom the *Ring is* an opportunity for cerebral lucubrations about the producer's intentions and the work's contemporary relevance.

He was right; the relationships at Seattle fairly made the air buzz and crackle. A good example was Stephanie Blythe's appealing Fricka, a passionate woman and a wise one, who made it clear, not least through her sensuously beautiful singing, that she never stops longing for her rash, misguided husband, and never stops trying to save him from his mistakes. This gave their confrontation in *Die Walküre* rare intimacy and depth. The extraordinary moment created at the end of Act II of *Die Walküre* became somehow even more heartrending this time; it is here that Stephen Wadsworth brings Fricka back onstage to hail and solace Wotan for having done the difficult right thing. She makes as if to enfold him in her embrace, but he brushes roughly past her; she has won the battle but lost the war, lost her husband forever. Earlier, in *Das Rheingold* there had been a special relationship between her and Loge, the wise and mellifluous counsellor portrayed by Peter Kazaras; they had gazed at each other in mutual dismay as Wotan and his companions troop over the bridge (a real rainbow incidentally), regardless of nemesis staring at them in the guise of the dead Fasolt.

There were instances where the staging has developed from 2001. The reactions of

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The Todesverkündigung *(Annunciation of Death) scene in Act II of* Walküre *was one of the most moving in the entire work. Chris Bennion photo.*

Das Rheingold *scene 4, the Gods are soon to ascend to Walhalla. Rozarii Lynch photo.*

Die Walküre *Act II. Chris Bennion photo. All photos courtesy Seattle Opera.*

THE SEATTLE *RING*

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the Valkyries as they fled from the Wotan and their doomed, imploring sister were more varied this time. Some shuddered and turned their backs; one just slipped away; others touched her with a furtive tenderness; and two embraced her boldly before losing courage. The finale of *Götterdämmerung* had become altogether more convincing; there is no longer any doubt that the Gods perish, "entirely consumed by fire." Is it carping to suggest that after the magical effect of so much real fire onstage the cyclorama flames here were an anticlimax, and that it was under-whelming simply to have swirling cloud for much of the final four minutes when the orchestra is all about elemental, momentous things? If this Ring is filmed or videoed — and no *Ring* during the last thirty years has better claims to cinematic immortality — this is the one section that could do with further attention and development. All imperfections were redeemed by the final stage picture, which was emblematic of this radiantly positive American Ring. It shows the forest glades from the Valhalla scene of *Rheingold* and the fallen ash (or sequoia?) burgeoning now with new growth and new life.

As this indicates, the staging was just as remarkable for its sheer beauty as for its truth to Wagner. Instead of endless darkness, all sicklied o'er with too many semi-digested ideas, the Seattle stage pictures were a feast for the eye. Thomas Lynch, the set designer is evidently an artist of rich imagination and consummate technique. His Valhalla scene still makes the audience gasp, a forest setting that was luminous and American, not brooding and Northern. Through the glades the fortress was visible on a high top in the distance, slightly larger and more imposing than in 2001. Here and everywhere the trees were breathtaking, while the rock faces of Brünnhilde's eyrie were extraordinary for their geological truthfulness; they were majestically reminiscent of Yosemite National Park, one of the world's natural wonders which we had just had the luck to visit.

An interesting feature was that Stephen Wadsworth placed different Acts, different locations, in the same scenery, albeit subtly modified. The spur for this was originally economy, the need to keep within budget, but Wadsworth turned a constraint into a resource, using it to enrich the action with cross references. He modified the Valhalla glades for the forests of Mime's smithy, and he had poppies springing up in *Siegfried* where Fasolt had fallen in *Das Rheingold*. The mountain pass where Hunding destroyed Siegmund became both the forest scene where Siegfried destroyed the dragon and the scene by the Rhine where Hagen destroyed Siegfried. When Siegfried's memory reawakens just before his murder, Wadsworth had him looking round, puzzled, at a landscape half recalling where the woodbird had first sung to him, a world of lost innocence.

I could happily take up the whole review in descriptions of the scenery, but that would leave no space for the singers. It was an excellently sung *Ring*. Richard BerkeleySteele was the British tenor who had bailed out the Seattle *Ring* last time round by taking over the role of Siegfried, and this time he was even better in the role of Siegmund. Lyrical and elegant vocally, he succeeded in cutting a youthful figure through sheer acting; he is no teenager, but his body language was all strippling nonchalance with Hunding; and he was a courteous, dashing romantic with Sieglinde, sweeping her off her feet. The Mime of Thomas Harper was a positive force of considerable menace, mostly muted, but he cast aside anything muted when it came to his quarrel with Alberich; as in 2001, it was Mime who hurled the first stone. There was nothing muted about Stephen Milling who played Fasolt and Hunding. His magnificent bass has all the subtle colours to make Fasolt warm-hearted and sympathetic but his Hunding was black. There was a genial, macho Siegfried (Alan Woodrow) with a baritonal centre to his timbre, an appealing if ample Sieglinde (Margaret Jane Wray). There was a most musical Alberich (Richard Paul Fink), and a sonorous Hagen, beautifully sung by Gidon Saks, even if neither of them was as formidable as they can be.

Most of the cast deserve praise and

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The Cast

Das Rheingold

Woglinde	Wendy Hill
Wellgunde	Mary Phillips
Flosshilde	Jennifer Hinest
Alberich	Richard Paul Fink
Fricka	Stephanie Blythe
Wotan	Greer Grimsley
Freia	Marie Plette
Fasolt	Stephen Milling
Fafner	Gidon Saks
Froh	Thomas Rolf Truhiffe
Donner	Gordon Hawkins
Loge	Peter Kazaras
Mime	Thomas Harper
Erda	Ewa Podles

Die Walküre

Siegmund	Richard Berkeley-Steele
Sieglinde	Margaret Jane Wray
Hunding	Stephen Milling
Wotan	Greer Grimsley
Brünnhilde	Jane Eaglen
Fricka	Stephanie Blythe
Gerhilde	Holly Hallt
Heimwige	Caroline Thomas
Waltraute	Stacey Rishoi
Schwertleite	Luretta Bybee
Ortlinde	Marie Plette
Siegrune	Sarah Helttel
Grimgerde	Fredrika Brillembourg
Rossweisse	Jennifer Hines

Siegfried

Mime	Thomas Harper
Siegfried	Alan Woodrow
The Wanderer	Greer Grimsley
Alberich	Richard Paul Fink
Fafner	Gidon Saks
Forest Bird	Wendy Hill
Erda	Ewa Podleś
Brünnhilde	Jane Eaglen
Horn Call	Mark Robbins
The Bear	Steven Goldstein

Götterdämmerung

First Nom	Ewa Podleś
Second Nom	Stephanie Blythe
Third Nom	Margaret Jane Wray
Brünnhilde	Jane Eaglen
Siegfried	Alan Woodrow
Gunther	Gordon Hawkins
Hagen	Gidon Saks
Gutrune	Marie Plette
Waltraute	Nancy Maultsby
Alberich	Richard Paul Fink
Woglinde	Wendy Hill
Weligunde	Mary Phillips
Flosshilde	Jennifer Hines

individual mention, something that space prevents, but it would be bordering on negligence to miss mentioning Jane Eaglen. Jane Eaglen was in far better voice than in 2001, and totally justified a reputation that hitherto seemed slightly surprising. Her battle cry and "Fliegt heim" had the same fearless certainty as they did with Birgit Nilsson. Generally that sweet, creamy voice, so perfectly in tune, its power so well masked under the veil of loveliness, and so musically deployed, was so expressive, so mesmerising that it nullified any possible reservations about Jane Eaglen's generous proportions and modest acting capacity. These things did not matter; she made a wonderful Brünnhilde.

Neither my impressions from 2001 nor the broadcast recordings make it clear why Franz Vote, the conductor last time, had been dropped. His replacement was Robert Spano who was new to the

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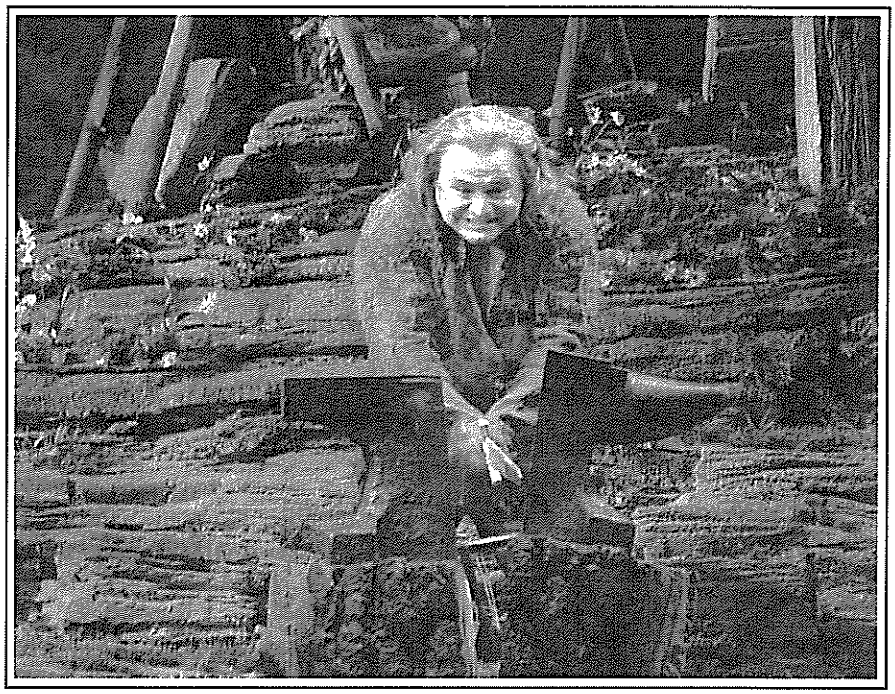
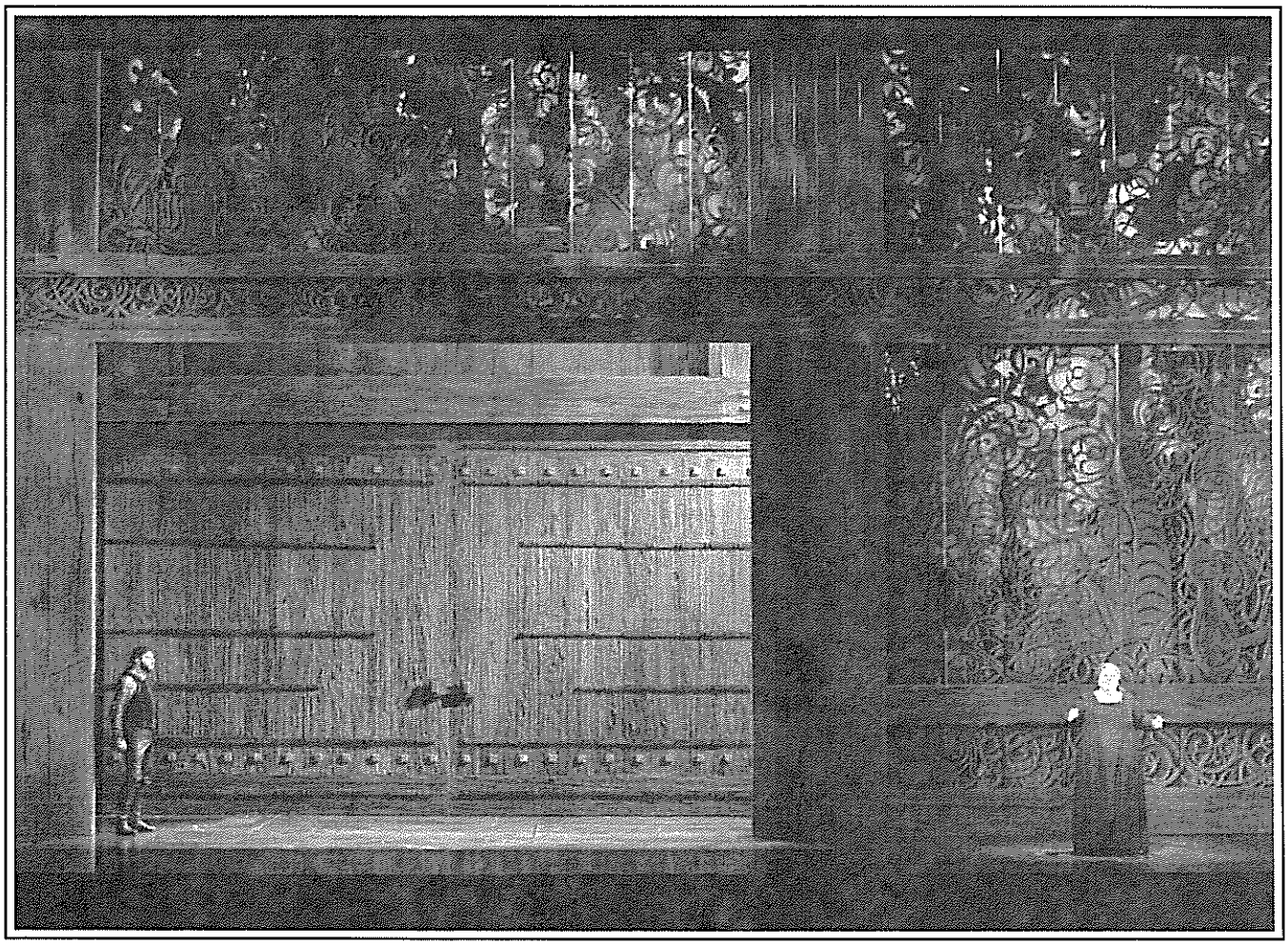


Siegfried, *the end of Act I where Siegfried splits the anvil (and here, the stump on which it rests, as well): this can be an unnerving episode, but it worked perfectly! Rozarii Lynch photo.*



Act III of Götterdämmerung *in the magnificent Gibichung Hall. Chris Bennion photo.*

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which affect them. Their changes, in many cases, definitely alter the perceptions the audience has of the work.[9] Nonetheless, it may be useful to try to understand the motivations of those producers who do deviate so extremely.

One important causative factor affecting most German intellectuals (including opera producers) which leads the producers to indulge in their radically changed (from Wagner) productions is to enable them to promote a social-political agenda which often seems to stem, at least in part, from a continuing remorse regarding Hitler, coupled with their perception of that unhappy state of mankind that made it possible for him, in 1933, to gain power.[10] In addition, these same people also often seem to feel that mankind cannot function reasonably in a free-market economy, yet they tend to seek a liberal-democratic government for Germany; and they also appear to want German national solidarity, even patriotism. But they fear what they call 'nationalism', a concept they associate with the Nazis. However, they generally seem, at the same time, to recognize the short-comings of Stalin and even the former East German regime.[11] This is complex and, to outsiders, a confusing matter. Nevertheless, one can understand that the Third Reich experiences which they have personally undergone (or learned from older, close friends and relatives) have burned deeply into their brains. And for good reason.

The result of all this *angst* is that many German intellectuals (including opera producers) are frustrated in that there seems to them to be no answer to our lives other than to endure and with the motto that "things are bad and getting worse." This outlook on life is what often characterizes their productions (and, not just their productions of Wagner).

The problem, for those of us who did not undergo the grisly realities which those who lived in Germany during the Nazi period (and its smoldering aftermath) experienced, is that while some of us may be pessimistic about mankind, and even life as a whole, we do not share that specific remorse that has so widely invaded German intellectual life, since 1945, in particular. Wagner, following Schopenhauer, was pessimistic about life, but he did not express that remorse characteristic of so many of the current-day producers. It is my observation that the vast majority of American opera-goers tend to be the opposite, generally quite optimistic.

III. Non-German Producers

Understanding the motivations to deviate which are expressed by non-German producers (and who do not suffer a link to the Nazi era) is, however, more difficult. These men obviously do not share the same national history with which the German producers must contend. For a few examples, I am thinking of the French Patrice Chereau, the British Richard Jones, and the American Robert Wilson — there are others, of course. Why should these men choose to ignore much of Wagner's staging instructions?

It is interesting to note that before World War II it was different: all of the producers followed Wagner's staging instructions fairly closely. It is hard to imagine that at least some of them did not feel pessimistic about life. However, that did not seem to matter then: they simply followed Wagner's instructions. The only major exception was Adolphe Appia (1862 –1928) — whose ideas so influenced Wieland Wagner. He did design a single notably deviating production — *Tristan und Isolde* in 1923 at La Scala, Milan.[12] But the conforming-to-Wagner approach was almost universally the case until Wieland's first productions in 1950 at Bayreuth. After that, almost all producers, world-wide, suddenly copied Wieland, more or less; later, it was Chereau who was copied.

Chereau, who had not previously been a producer of operas — he was a producer of plays and films — did two things: (1) he borrowed from the theater (with which he was completely familiar) a comparatively recent innovation, that of performances in "modern dress", and (2) in preparation for producing his first opera, he read Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite* and was apparently much impressed with Shaw's Fabian Socialist, sometimes stretched, interpretation of Wagner's work. As we all know, Chereau's production was initially a scandal of major proportions, but over time it became accepted (importantly, and unlike the subsequent Sir Georg Solti — Sir Peter Hall 'English' *Ring* of 1983,[13] Chereau made significant refinements each year during the five years that his *Ring* ran).

Chereau obviously wanted to make a splash (his was first done in 1976, as the centennial production). But perhaps of equal or even greater importance, Chereau was not a product of the traditions of the Wagner world. He was an outsider. He had been selected by the conductor, Pierre Boulez, himself heavily focused on the new. I am unaware of Chereau having done any further Wagner works since his *Ring* of nearly 30 years ago. His devotion to Wagner thus was ephemeral — unlike some of his followers.[14]

IV. Pandora's Box

Wagner's imagination, as we all know, was without bounds. In the heat of creating this immense work, he wove in certain staging requirements which were completely impossible to achieve in the 19th century and many of which still are impossible to achieve even today.[15] However with these few exceptions, his other instructions were readily followed. Every producer (including Wagner himself in 1876), has therefore had to decide how to depict these 'impossibilities': each producer of the *Ring* finds himself confronted with a large confusion of choices.

By asking for the impossible, Wagner potentially opened Pandora's Box: once it was established that there was no choice but to deviate from his instructions (because they were not possible to follow), and other factors came into play (especially the changes of Wieland and Chereau), the more adventurous producers automatically felt no constraints about any of the work.

One might ask what if Wagner had limited his imagination to the point that the requirements he made were actually

practical? Would that have taken, from those who wish to deviate, the license that Wagner seems to have given them by making it mandatory *not* to follow his written requirements (because no one can do so)? Would the present day producers then not deviate so extremely? I do not know, but I suspect that because the deviating German producers are so imbued with their negative outlook on life and their intense desire to express their philosophy (which has resulted from their special circumstances), it is likely that they would make the same wholesale changes which they now make.

V. Other Motivations

For many producers today, it has become quite the fashion to see how far they can go (while seemingly forgetting about what effect on the audience their extreme solutions will create). Many are trying to 'make a name for themselves', and being radical is one route to take. Further, there seems to have been a change in some producers' outlooks in that they often appear more interested in the response to their productions from their fellow producers than in the audiences' response. Impressing other producers is quite a different matter from that of impressing audiences.

Perhaps, as some respected writers have said, the whole matter is little more than a reflection of the deviating producers' extravagant egos[16]. I believe that may be part of the explanation, at least in some cases, but not all. A somewhat different factor is that no producer wants to be criticized as being 'behind the times' or 'old hat' by those whom he respects; thus, creating a 'novelty' production is their approach,[17] even though Wagner and the audience suffer.

VI. Wieland vs. Chereau

As for the influences on present-day producers generated by Wieland Wagner and Chereau, it is important to note that there was a fundamental difference between the two. Wieland (referring to him by his surname can be confusing: we mean no disrespect by using only his first name), to some extent following Appia, removed the elaborate scenic designs and costumes that had been used by Wagner in 1876 and had been preserved, more or less, by Cosima, Siegfried, and Winifred (each of whom had successively been the general director of Bayreuth through the end of World War II).

However, and of greatest significance, Wieland avoided changing the representations on the stage that expressed the myths. These provide the very foundations upon which the entire work depends, at least as Wagner had conceived it. Wieland produced the *Ring* twice, each production quite different from the other. But, in each, when Richard Wagner had a character die, the character died at the moment Wagner indicated. And, as another example of Wieland following his grandfather, the entire cycle begins, according to Wagner, in what can be described as a primordial, watery environment, in many ways similar to the conditions in which life began. Wieland's productions no longer appeared like those of 1876, but his changes neither modified the basic roles nor the mythology that Wagner had associated with the characters; nor did they change the story itself.

Chereau, on the other hand, made the underwater realm of the Rhine Daughters (as a single example of many) an on-land modern hydro-electric facility. As noted above, Chereau was creating his ideas of a 'modern dress' version of the *Ring*, and with little (or no) regard for the importance of the mythological foundations on which Wagner had based his work. He was translating the whole into a story easily and immediately understood by contemporary audiences (and without study); but, in making his changes from Wagner, Chereau pretty much destroyed the truly important understanding which Wagner had given us, i.e. an archetypal rendering which connects (often subliminally) to knowledge which is buried deeply in our individual and collective psyches, and therefore ultimately of value to most of us. If the reader is not comfortable with this Jungian configuration, perhaps Michael Tanner's observation will suffice, "[Wagner] used one myth after another to cast light on the torment of existence..."[18]

Obviously one cannot remove these myths and simultaneously retain Wagner. It remains clear that Chereau made changes that were fundamental in nature. In a sense, his *Ring* would be perhaps more accurately described not as being "by Richard Wagner", but as "after Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, with the original score."

Chereau's *Ring* was interesting entertainment; but what Wagner wrote was far more than mere entertainment. Wagner engages our intellect, and he explores many of the ultimate meanings that life can hold. Through the myth in the *Ring*, he delves into the innermost understandings of our psyches; through metaphor and allegory he pulls back our conscious minds' heavy curtains that guard us from that which may be painful or simply too scary for us to face.[19] In this process, as with the ancient Greek tragedies, we experience deep feelings, but we also learn. By taking from us the critically important elements of what Wagner gave us, by (in a sense) sanitizing the work, Chereau, as well as those who have followed in his footsteps, have eliminated the part that counts the most.

In re-writing the *Ring*, Chereau also demonstrated his considerable dramatic talent, but who would assert that, as a dramatist, he was on the same level as Richard Wagner? The drama in the Chereau *Ring* was lots of fun, even if it deviated far from Wagner. And, the efforts of the deviating producers who have followed Chereau are often similar. In some ways, the trendy example set by Chereau is not so different from those motion picture producers who remake highly successful classic films. They can entertain us and, for those spectators unacquainted with the original, sometimes provide an impressive evening. But the original, it is not. In Chereau's concept, important substance has been lost, replaced by other lesser elements having little or nothing to do with those fundamentals of the universe with which Wagner was dealing. It is a process known today as "dumbing down"

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— everything made simpler and more direct, with a story easily understood and associated with current (or recent) events. The demands on the audience were greatly reduced, no longer had they to do much thinking, mostly because everything is obvious and on the surface.

None of the above comments about Chereau is intended to detract from the masterful way in which he went about creating his production: the results yielded an interesting story, and the whole was never boring (remember the wonderful Brünnhilde of Dame Gwyneth Jones). Further, he managed to get unusually good acting from most of the singers. But much of the all-important myth was gone. And it is through the myth that we reach the deeper revelations of Wagner's profound thinking. It has been a big loss, not just for Chereau's production, but, more importantly, his *Ring* was not an isolated event: he effectively had opened the flood gates for his seemingly endless followers.

I do not pretend that my argument is new, only that it is valid. If we are to understand those current producers who deviate so extremely, I believe we must first look at Chereau, not Wieland, as having provided the initial, significant deviations, this as he, by and large, abandoned Wagner's mythology.

VII. *Gesamtkunstwerk*

As everyone who has read this far knows, Wagner had an elaborate theory that he called *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 'Total Work of Art'.[20] Again reviewing what the ancient Greeks had done, he concluded that all elements of an opera must work together — must reinforce each other — if the maximum impact on the spectators is to be achieved.

Thus, if those producers who do not follow Wagner's instructions (which after the Chereau *Ring* of 1976, almost universally has entailed changing Wagner's story and eliminating or greatly modifying the myth), then in the resulting production, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is destroyed or badly weakened. That is not to say, however, that such productions will not be entertaining and/or promoting a non-Wagner concept which just may be dear to the hearts of some of the audience.

However, in this kind of deviating production, one can be certain that, as only one example, the music (that Wagner composed to work with the story which he wrote), will almost surely fail to produce the result which the identical music can produce in productions which adhere to the text. Again, this is not to say that the audience will not enjoy the music (it *is* great music); but the potential, full force of the production will be gone.

Without the *Gesamtkunstwerk* concept being fully functional, we are much less likely to experience the overwhelming aesthetic-emotional event for which Wagner aimed and which almost all of us seek.

VIII. The Role of Myth

Wagner's *Ring* is a complex work with many dramatic themes that portray many ideas. Wagner seriously thought that great art (his) could change the world, that through his works, major and important reforms to society could be brought about. Wagner had such notions early in his career, certainly when he first began thinking about the *Ring* in the heady days of the 1849 uprising in Dresden. He had extensively studied the ancient Greek approach to drama, and he concluded that they had gotten it all right. He set out to follow in the path which they had blazed. Fundamental to the Greeks' many works, and to Wagner's *Ring* as well, is the matter of myth. Through the various myths, both the ancient Greeks and Wagner believed that the dramatist is able to create in his work the metaphors and allegories requisite to move the spectators emotionally, but also (and of at least equal importance) to *teach*, thereby, to the audience truths about the world. The entry in Cosima's Diaries for May 9, 1880 includes, "R. [referring to Wagner] describes how art works in metaphors and allegories as such, but at the same time conveys to the emotions [of the spectators] the truth behind the dogmas."[21]

My Marxist friends would probably argue that the myths which Wagner employed are simply reflective of the mid-Ninteenth century and do not relate to our present world. I would respond that Marx's notion of everything being true only for the period in which it first occurred is false. I find the truths in the ancient Greek tragedies, in Shakespeare, and others, to be every bit as valid for us as they were long ago. Thus, when Wotan and Fricka argue; when the Wanderer confronts his grandson; when Hagen plots — all, and more, reflect not the Nineteenth century, but eternal elements of human nature with which we all must contend, at one time or another. Marx was correct in noting the influence which the circumstances and conditions of each age have on the thinking of that age; but as the Soviet scientist Lysenko inadvertantly demonstrated to the world in the 1930s,[22] some elements of our universe are not simply a function of the environment they are in; some things are, in fact, true for all time. Wagner's myths fall into the latter category.

As Chereau showed the world, changing the story in the *Ring* can yield an entertaining production: many producers since have also demonstrated this. But in doing so, much is lost: the function of the myth, metaphors and allegories used by Wagner are either badly distorted or entirely gone. This takes from us the profound meanings inherent in what Wagner wrote and leaves us with sometimes clever entertainment and at other times with not much at all. Wagner's first goal was *teaching* his audience, but through an entertaining medium (he wanted us to experience deep feelings during the performances, and to learn about the world by having those feelings). What he was teaching evaporates when his story is changed. Wagner employed metaphors, allegories, and myth to convey to us what he felt to be important. The myths in many ways are mysterious; we do not understand exactly how they are able to penetrate the innermost regions of our minds, but they do. Few would doubt that they are potentially a powerful part of drama.

> Myth, [Wagner] reasoned, was the wisdom of the ages, untouched

> by temporal societal whims or transitory public fancy. Myth, he contended, represented the universal truth of mankind, a truth that had been filtered, purified, and honed by the aeons of time. Myth, he claimed, was the understanding of all experience.

So wrote the late Professor William O. Cord.[23]

Wagner himself wrote,

> The incomparable thing about the Mythos [myth] is, that it is true for all time...[24]

Wagner *is* different, and it is because of the way that he uses myth.

IX. What Is "Deep"?

Most of us live our lives thinking only of the here and now — dealing with the daily problems with which we all must constantly struggle. This tends to absorb all of our available energy. But if we can have occasion to better understand the deeper, more fundamental things that shape life, we are then better able to manage ourselves, achieve our goals, and (in a non-materialistic sense) succeed with our lives much more effectively.

Life incorporates many things which we do not understand and it is these that so often Wagner, in his operas, addresses. As one example, none of us is born with comprehesive knowledge about how humans interact with each other. Over time, many people (not all) learn quite a bit in this realm, but almost every thinking person will admit to frequent failure in always understanding why other people behave as they do: often it is of great importance that we do understand others, but we so often unhappily fail. It is one of many aspects of life which we do not fully understand.

Another area which gives virtually everyone trouble is always knowing what is ethical and appropriate. All of us are pressed on occasion to do things in our lives that, on reflection, we can see were not right and later we regret — but at the time, whatever it was that was pressing us took control of our decisions, and we thereby made a bad choice.

Wagner deals with these, and many other issues of the universe which are "deep" — fundamental to our lives and not on the day-to-day surface. He does so through the myth, allegories, and metaphors in his works. I do not mean that Wagner gives us the answers to all that troubles us; certainly he does not. But he does introduce us to issues about which we most probably otherwise would not think or consider. He brings them before us. And he does so in an exciting, dramatic manner that thrils us. He very cleverly teaches us much about the world, more so than any other opera composer.[25]

The way he teaches us is indirect: it is by getting our attention with his drama and music and thereby getting us to ponder and think about each issue which he has presented to us. Often he employs a means of presenting an issue to us that makes the answer unclear — just as it is in real life. But we are able to think about it without being threatened because the whole thing is on the stage, not in our daily lives.

And that is why if a producer drops Wagner's myth, allegories, and metaphors when that producer modifies Wagner's works, we are, in some sense anyway, cheated: the teaching that Wagner has attempted is thwarted. Learning does not take place. This is not to say that we will not enjoy a modified version without some or all of the myth, quite often we do. But one of the most important things that makes Wagner so attractive to us is the underlying foundation of his works that deals with these basic matters through myth, allegories, and metaphor. One cannot remove the stones that support the entire structure without, at the same time, seriously weakening the edifice, often to the point of utter collapse.

X. Seattle's Triumph

For whatever reasons the majority of producers of the Wagner works choose to deviate, it remains sad for so many of us to see our old friends, Wagner's operas, effectively taken from us, no longer giving the wonderful, overwhelming aesthetic-emotional experiences and the learning that these glorious works are capable of creating.

It would be a mistake not to recognize that some members of the opera-going audience are uncomfortable with fundamentals and genuinely enjoy the wildly variant, less demanding productions; but many of us do not because the vital essence of Wagner's immense creation has been left out. Considering the vast sums that every production costs (remember that someone pays for every last one of them), it is a shame when they fail to create the response in the audience which that audience has sought.

Whatever it is, those who were lucky enough to get tickets for Seattle's *Ring* this past summer are ever grateful for Speight Jenkins, Stephen Wadsworth and their most effective team.

When Jenkins, Wadsworth and the entire cast took their bows at the conclusion of the final *Götterdämmerung*, the broad smiles on every face attested to the fact that they — and the cheering, standing audience — all knew these men had superbly created something quite extraordinary. In the present-day world, their production was truly unique. Every element came together to yield a result which we will probably never see elsewhere. The Seattle production — true to the text, true to Wagner — could hardly be better or more satisfying. Long may it be with us!

— Robert S. Fisher

NOTES

1. A quotation by a member of the audience during one of the lengthy (and packed) post-performance discussions (usually at midnight or after) held by the indefatigable Speight Jenkins in the 400 seat Nesholm Family Auditorium (which is part of the opera house building).
2. Stephen Wadsworth, Director; Thomas Lynch, Set Designer; Martin Pakledinaz, Costume Designer; Peter Kaczorowski, Lighting Designer.

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3. Opera producers (here I mean all of those involved in making decisions about the production: the general director, the stage director, the scenic designer, the costume designer, the lighting designer and others) do not have an easy task. Preparation for Seattle's *Ring* this year (despite the fact that it was a revival of the 2001 production) entailed ten-hour days, sometimes even longer; six days a week; and a total of nine weeks. After such intense immersion, thinking about the whole has to be difficult.

4. Some people felt that the "improvements" to the beautiful Terry McEwen *Ring* of 1985 (in San Francisco, Nikolaus Lehnhoff, director) that were made by Andrei Serban in the 1999 revival were in this category. But maybe Mr. Serban simply differed with Mr. Lehnhoff on the most effective solutions.

5. The Met production dating from 1989 is the single major exception.

6. A perhaps more reliable comment is when, on September 7, 1876, Wagner wrote Lilli Lehmann — who had sung one of the Rhine Daughters and the Forest Bird: "There is so much we will have to put right next year; I hope that most of the performers will be willing to work towards my goal of achieving an increasingly correct production." At the time, he still was expecting to repeat the *Ring* the next year, 1877. Written expressions from Wagner are more reliable than reports of his verbal comments. From *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, by Stuart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York and London: W.W.Norton, 1988), p. 859.

One would venture that Wagner was concerned not only with the physical production (scenery and costumes), but perhaps more pointedly he was focused on the singing and acting. See endnote #7.

7. Wagner wrote an essay, "A Retrospect of the Stage-Festivals of 1876," which was originally published in the *Bayreuther Blätter* of December, 1878. He speaks both of the "deep artistic satisfaction I was privileged to reap," but also of the "outward failures of my pains": on the whole, he seems to have felt the performances were successful and that the whole enterprise was remarkable (as indeed it must have been). He writes of the scenery problems and describes them as "relatively insignificant blemishes." Wagner was writing here for publication, not necessarily revealing his innermost thoughts; however, his often cited letters to King Ludwig may also have an inaccurate bias in that Wagner was hoping for a further grant to pay Bayreuth's debts. The above quotations, in English, were originally published in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works* (London: Kagan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1897), Volume VI (*Religion and Art).* William Ashton Ellis was the translator. It was reprinted as simply *Religion and Art* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1994). pp 95ff.

Also see *Cosima Wagner's Diaries, Volume II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980). p.475. Cluttering those metaphors and allegories (which Wagner had placed in his works) with other material that is mostly a collection of comparatively current events seems almost certain to result in the spectators missing what Wagner sought. However, these producers may be of the same camp and agree with the comment I heard not long ago, "Wagner's intentions are no longer relevant for us."

8. Newman, Ernest *The Life of Richard Wagner 1866 – 1883.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), p.489. These were the days of Melchior, Flagstad, Traubel, Thebom etc.

9. Professor Dunbar Ogden, writing about the English National Opera and San Francisco Opera joint production of *Parsifal* (in 2000, later performed at the Chicago Lyric Opera), examined changes that were made from what Wagner had written and the effect of those changes on the audience's perception. LEITMOTIVE Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer, 2000, p.9.

10. See "The Nazi Exploitation of the Wagner Image" by Pamela M. Potter. LEITMOTIVE Summer, 1992, Volume 6, No. 2. Professor Potter, currently at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, explores Wagner's anti-semitism and the Nazi use of it.

11. An excellent, if difficult, treatise on the subject of German intellectuals (politically of the right, center, and left) is *Another Country, German Intellectuals, Unification and National Identity*, by Jan-Werner Müller. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000). Mr. Müller examines, in considerable detail, many of the major German intellectuals who were active from 1945 until 2000 (when the book was published). "[German intellectuals] called for national solidarity (without nationalism)...one of their most basic political dispositions was a distrust of nationalism, but also, to some extent, *a distrust of the Germans as a people as such.*"p.284, (italics added). Although all producers of Wagner's operas may not consider themselves to be intellectuals, those who do not, generally hold similar ideas and outlooks. Müller is a fellow of All Souls College, Oxford University.

12. See *Adolphe Appia* (London: John Calder (Publishers), 1982). Appia does not seem to have been a particularly pessimistic person, but he badly wanted to eliminate the complicated, busy look of Wagner's sets.

13. A particularly engaging book describing Sir Peter Hall's 1983 so called "English" *Ring* is *The Ring, Anatomy of an Opera*, by Stephen Fay and Roger Wood (Dover, New Hampshire: Longwood Press, 1985). In part a reaction to the Chereau production (which immediately preceded it at Bayreuth), it is interesting to note (concerning Sir Peter), that early in his career, "... his work became increasingly naturalistic, and his passion for the true text, inspired by the teaching of F.R. Leavis at Cambridge, became almost obsessive" (p.33). Sir Peter's production aimed, like that of Wadsworth's in Seattle, at being 'true to the text'. The 1983 Bayreuth *Ring* (Hall's) received intense criticism from those who wanted a 'concept' larded on top of Wagner's already complex work. "The conceptualists' case [in 1983] was based on memories of the work of Chereau, and Wieland Wagner; and in Wolfgang Wagner's insistence...that the *Ring* should be continually reinterpreted so that it had contemporary relevance. They totally rejected the idea that the *Ring* could be told simply, as a story. They never seemed to realize that what appears to be the easy way to direct the *Ring* is possibly the most difficult of all, because the demands that Richard Wagner makes on the director are so extravagant"(p.205).

One might also question Wolfgang Wagner's above-noted 'insistence' (if the quotation accurately reflects Herr Wagner's thinking). Is not the sum and substance of the *Ring* that it is timeless? That its plot, and all of the sub-plots, were based, by Richard Wagner, on myth precisely because by doing so the message which the composer (consciously or unconsciously) wished to communicate to the audience would not, thereby, be distorted and confused by current, and therefore transitory, issues? See Magee,Bryan *Aspects of Wagner*, first edition. (New York: Stein & Day, 1969), p.17. Also see the second paragraph of footnote #7, above.

14. I wonder what Wagner might have thought about these two Frenchmen unleashing a nearly thirty-year trend of productions contrary to the composer's instructions.

15. "A vivid flash of lightning breaks from the clouds; in it the Valkyries, in a closely packed group, are seen with their bridles loose, wildly riding away." This quotation is from the Karl Klindworth piano arrangement of the complete vocal score of *Die Walküre* (New York: G.Schirmer, Inc. undated, probably about 1900 or so), p. 263. Exactly how

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is this to be shown on the stage?

Almost everyone will remember that in Seattle's previous *Ring* (which François Rochaix directed), the famous life-size plastic horses were used. They were hanging (including brave, singing riders) from the rafters — by steel wires. They moved both up and down, left or right, as well as front to back (two stage hands were required for each horse). Although their motion was comparatively slow (they were not actually flying, of course), it was perhaps the most successful solution to the problem to date. The effect on the audience was surprisingly profound. It was an ingenious idea and impressive, but still we cannot say that it was precisely 'true to the text', even though close.

16. Bryan Magee wrote that so many current producers "superficialize" Wagner's works, primarily because they seem not to comprehend what art really is. *Aspects of Wagner*, pp. 86, 87, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

17. See "The Trap of Novelty" by Arnold Wolf, LEITMOTIVE, Fall 1999, Vol. 13, No. 3.

18. Tanner, Michael, *Wagner* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 183. This is one of the great Wagner books and deserves multiple readings.

19. For anyone unacquainted with the importance of myth in the *Ring*, I highly recommend Robert Donnington's *Wagner's 'Ring' And Its Symbols* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963). Although Donnington writes from a predominately Jungian view, no one can read this book without becoming acutely aware of the role of myth in the *Ring*, irrespective of the particular psychological interpretation one may favor.

20. Ostwald, David "The Concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*." Dr. Ostwald's five part article began in LEITMOTIVE for Fall 1998 (Vol.12, No.3); Summer 1999; Winter 1999; Spring 2001; Spring 2003.

21. Incidentally, in the same entry, Wagner pronounces Aeschylus' *Oresteia* to be more profound than the Eleusinian mysteries — in effect, more profound than anything. A fascinating comparsion of Wagner and the *Oresteia* is Michael Ewans' *Wagner and Aescylus, The Ring and The Oresteia.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).

22. In the 1930s, Soviet agricultural biologist T.D.Lysenko claimed to have scientifically demonstrated that only the environment controlled plant life, i.e. that nothing of a permanent nature (such as genetics) played a role. He pointed out that this was in accord with Marxist theory, and in 1938 he was made president of the Soviet Academy of Agricultural Sciences, a most prestigous position. The only problem was that it was later discovered that he had effectively falsified the results of his experiments: some things are in fact true for all time.

23. Cord, William O. *The Teutonic Mythology of Richard Wagner's 'Ring of the Nibelung'*, (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), Volume 1, p.2.

24. Wagner, Richard *Opera and Drama*, (Lincoln,Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p.191.

25. At one time, I thought Wagner calling his later works "music-dramas" was simply pretentious: he wanted to be sure that we thought of these works as being distinctly different from other operas. But, it turns out, they indeed are different in many ways, perhaps the most important of which is their unique ability to teach us about fundamentals. People new to Wagner often, after initially and seriously getting into one or another of the works, exclaim how fascinating everything is and that it is all underscored by the incredible music. Many writers try to teach us about fundamental matters, but few of them suceeds like Wagner in doing so while simultaneously thrilling and exciting us.

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Ring. Spano had interesting ideas and launched the whole cycle with one of them; he started the first long low E flat at an inaudible ppppp, and then made a very long gentle crescendo, so as to have the music slowly emerging into time out of primeval silence. The trouble was that for half its playing time, this all important E flat was too soft to be heard, and it was therefore effectively far too short; the nice idea did not work. Generally however Robert Spano went on to generate *brio*, drama, and considerable passion with tempos that were mobile and elastic, constantly burgeoning and relaxing. He drew much finely honed playing from the orchestra, and dense passages like the Prelude to *Siegfried* Act III revealed an emphasis on leading melodic lines, sometimes at the expense of the music's harmonic density (more Kempe than Furtwängler). He presented the music in limpid analysis, and this mostly went well with Wadsworth's staging. Even so, there is a visionary quality about the *Ring* music, the very quality that lies at the heart of Wadsworth's conception, and this momentous dimension sometimes proved elusive. When the Wagner tubas played the fate motiv, they remained Wagner Tubas playing great music very well; they did not become harbingers of awe and darkness from another world.

This review would also be negligent if it passed over the figure crucial both for this *Ring* and for the rise and rise of Seattle Opera. Opera Houses generally owe their greatness to an autocrat, often a supreme musician, a Mahler, a Karajan or a Solti, or a producer like Götz Friedrich at Berlin or Rudolph Hartmann at Munich. Generally when administrators take the reins, greatness goes into eclipse; but Speight Jenkins is the exception to every rule. He is gifted with the sensibilities of a musician and a dramatist. He has an amazing knowledge of the works he puts on (his four CD commentary on the *Ring* is penetrating) but just as impressive are his industry, his grasp of the nuts and bolts of an opera house, and his victorious grapplings with crises and hazards. He is a team builder, leading from within, spurring his cast, his orchestra and the technical staff to create something extraordinary. He has established persuasive publicists (Tina Ryker) and exciting study sessions (Perry Lorenzo) in support, but it is Speight Jenkins himself whose diplomatic arts coax the wealthy of Seattle (this is Bill Gates country) into parting with sizeable donations. These people are also his audiences. The auditorium is full of glittering Seattle luminaries, but they are not the bored, reluctant guests of corporate hospitality to be found boosting their image at Covent Garden or Glyndebourne; his donors become enthusiasts, who stay on at the end and flock to a magnificent subterranean lecture theatre for the audience discussions that take place after

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NOBODY'S PERFECT

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on Shaw's own art and thought was immense. Besides containing dozens of verbal echoes from Wagner's librettos, Shavian drama highlights a number of troubled relationships between fathers and daughters, settings that eerily recall Nibelheim and Valhalla, and even a barely averted conflagration at the end of *Heartbreak House* — now regarded by some as his greatest play. Most striking of all is the two dramatists' shared preoccupation — bordering on obsession — with the theme of uniting spiritual wisdom with "Plutonic" worldly power.

While there probably are times when Shaw did raid Wagner's operas, the most intriguing resonances may have been unconscious. Like Joan, Shaw didn't have to know what he was doing. He just did it.

Let's go back to *Back To Methuselah* — that cycle of five plays (originally planned as four) published in 1921, so Wagnerian in scope and ambition (as Shaw himself noted) though not in success of realization. Beginning in the Garden of Eden and concluding in the year 31,920 A.D., the Shavian Pentateuch includes Biblical characters (Adam and Eve), figures from history (Confucius, Napoleon), parodies of European statesmen and portraits of ordinary people during the period of WW I, as well as mythological figures — who may be classical (Pygmalion) or invented (Ecrasia, Arjillax — who are they?)

At the end of the final play, called "As Far As Thought Can Reach," the Ghost of Lilith (in rabbinical tradition Adam's first wife but here representing the Life Force) intones a lengthy and majestic peroration explaining why she will let humanity survive a few brief eons longer to help life struggle in its journey upward toward the infinite. Lilith's sudden emergence from nowhere, her mystical aura, her vatic tone — all remind me of Erda in the *Ring*. Both these ominous female spirits (Lilith is a "night demon" in Isaiah) take a very long view of human destiny. Indeed, Lilith's prophecy — "Of Life only is there no end" — can be heard as a Vitalist corrective to Erda's Pessimist warning to the gods in *Rheingold*: "All that is, ends."

But I detect no sign that Shaw means us to be aware of the relation, or even that he was aware of it himself. In the first play of the cycle, "In the Beginning," the Serpent counseled Eve: "You see things; and you say 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say 'Why not?'" Could the source of this deep quip be Wotan's prosaic rebuke of Fricka in *Die Walküre*: "Age-old custom/ is all you can grasp;/ but *my* thoughts seek to encompass/ what has never come to pass"?

I hear an echo here, but did Shaw? Perhaps he had imbibed Wagner so deeply and for so long that it never occurred to him. I could pursue other connections and parallels between other plays and operas, but the subject of Wagner's subliminal permeation of Shavian drama deserves a lecture that must wait for another day! For now I suspect that you will be as relieved as I to have finally reached ... *Das Ende.*

— Alfred Turco

NOTE

Of translations consulted for this article, I have relied primarily on that of Stewart Spencer in *Wagner's RING of the Nibelung: A Companion* (co-edited with Barry Millington). I have sometimes altered wordings or substituted Shaw's phrasing. For Wagner's correspondence, I use Spencer and Millington's immaculate *Selected Letters of RW* even when its renderings differ from Shaw's own.

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every performance. It is Speight Jenkins who leads these, sometimes continuing into the small hours. It is Speight Jenkins who ensures that any evening at Seattle Opera is a festive occasion; and it is Speight Jenkins who ensures that the *Ring* at Seattle is something supremely festive. Yes, start saving now!

—Paul Dawson-Bowling

Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor are welcomed whether intended for publication or otherwise. Letters may be published if, in the editor's opinion, they have sufficient general interest and if there is space available. Without exception, every letter is carefully read by the editor. Regretfully, time often does not permit replies; nevertheless we appreciate all letters. All published letters are subject to editing.

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