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# Leitmotive

THE WAGNER QUARTERLY



*Richard Wagner*

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# The Editor's Thoughts

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I had what seems to me to be a curious experience with *Tannhäuser*. I became familiar with the overture (the first part) when I was just five: every Sunday afternoon the Metropolitan Opera broadcasted a half hour of vocal and orchestral music on NBC radio (then a fairly recent medium: it was 1935). They always opened and closed the program with the "Pilgrims' Chorus" music from the overture. I knew it so well that I sang or whistled it often.

Thus, even before I saw my first stage performance of it, an important part was already familiar. I have seen a great many productions since and have grown to love the work—not surprising. But what is surprising is that until I encountered the Otto Schenk version at San Diego Opera early last year (I had not seen the Met's similar renderings), I had never before been as "connected" with this opera. (By "connected" I mean having a profound emotional reaction: being deeply moved).

Had I only seen the recent San Francisco production before San Di-

ego's, it would seem obvious as to why I had not been connected. But I had attended dozens of other productions, all of which were more or less straightforward. I enjoyed each of them, but somehow the deepest (and most moving) significance of Wagner's story had not penetrated.

Subsequently I read Father Basil DePinto's piece on *Tannhäuser* that we ran in Summer 2008 (Issue 82) and now I have read Professor Colombo's thoughts in this issue: both reinforced my often repeated notion that Wagner knew precisely what he was about and if one is to have the maximum response possible, then studying all levels of his stories is key.

In the same light, understanding what Wagner does with his music is also crucial in fully absorbing his works: in this issue Thomas Grey concludes his marvelous analysis of the music of *Das Rheingold*—which I found even more interesting than the first part that we published in the Spring issue.

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## LEITMOTIVE—THE WAGNER QUARTERLY

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LEITMOTIVE—THE WAGNER QUARTERLY is a journal intended for all persons interested in the works, life, and influence of Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Although many of our authors and readers are scholars affiliated with academic institutions, many are informed lay persons with a keen interest in Wagner studies.

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David Dalto, Founding Editor (1985–1989)

Paul Schofield, Editor (1990)

## About the Authors

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**Joseph Colombo** is a graduate of The Divinity School, University of Chicago where he received his Ph.D. in 1986. Since 1984 he has been a member of the faculty in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego, his first and only academic post. He served his department for six years as Chair. Currently, he holds the rank of Professor and occupies the Clarence Steber Chair. While his main field of expertise is philosophical theology, he also frequently teaches in the areas of biblical, historical and systematic theology. He has published a book, *Towards a Theology of History*, a couple dozen articles, and many book reviews. For his passion for opera, Joseph Colombo is deeply indebted to his sophomore English teacher in high-school, Mr. Ernest Nappo, who generously took him to see his first opera at a Met matinee on 16 January 1971: Richard Strauss' *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*. The performance opened his eyes to the experience of an indescribable beauty. Professor Colombo currently resides in San Diego with his two rescued cats, Elsa and Sieglinde.

**Thomas Grey** ("The Musical Language of *Das Rheingold*"), is a Professor at the Stanford University Department of Music. He is a scholar specializing in 19th Century opera, the history of musical aesthetics and criticism, music of the Romantic era, and Wagner. He has published numerous articles and books, including *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera* and *The Cambridge History of 19th Century Music*. He was the editor and a contributor to the Cambridge Opera Handbook on *Der fliegende Holländer*. Most recently he was the editor and a contributor to *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Professor Grey received his doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley.

# The Problem of Tannhäuser's Sin

## *A Theologian Examines Wagner's Story*

My students tease me. Frequently, they observe that my introductory remarks on a particular topic are about as long as my exposition of it. In truth, this is a bad habit—one of many I probably acquired at the University of Chicago—and I will try to hold it somewhat at bay. However, I ask for your forbearance as I make five preliminary comments.

Throughout my adult life I have had two abiding passions: theology and opera. I am keenly aware that, unlike poor Tannhäuser, this essay is an opportunity to serve both my mistresses at the same time. For such a rare opportunity, I am genuinely grateful!

This is probably the best time for me to insert a general disclaimer. While I will speak with the customary self-assurance and in the apodictic tone of an academic, please note that everything I have to say about this opera here is, in fact, a tentative hypothesis. Despite being something of a *Lieblingskind*, like all good hypotheses, this one too must be open not only to revision but even to repudiation.

Second, my present reflections on the plot of *Tannhäuser* are something of an accident. It all began, appropriately enough, when I attended Los Angeles Opera's recent (and racy) staging of the opera. As usual, I was accompanied by my fellow opera-lover and former colleague from the University of San Diego, Dr. Patricia Traylor. Tough-minded as one would expect from someone in the natural sciences, chemistry, Pat Traylor has never been known by those who know her—legend has it since the time she began to talk some seventy-five years ago—to mince words. During the second intermission of the opera, as we were milling about the Chandler Pavilion, she exclaimed, "The music and singing are quite wonderful, but the plot's just so damn silly! All this fuss about sex!" I was, frankly, a bit stunned, not only by the comment itself but especially by the forcefulness with which she said it, and I found myself at an

unaccustomed loss for words. Truth be told, I hadn't really thought about the story all that much and I found myself rather sheepishly responding, "Is it *really* all just about sex?" I had a gut hunch that Tannhäuser's sin was something more than that, but I couldn't put my finger on it or say what that something might be. My friend's comment piqued my curiosity, not least because it mimicked the way many commentators pitch the story of Tannhäuser today. I can still hear in my mind, for example, the tag line in the radio announcement for San Diego Opera's recent production of the opera: "*Tannhäuser*, an epic struggle between two loves—lust and spiritual love, Venus and Elizabeth." Later that evening, after returning from Los Angeles to San Diego, I found myself reading the libretto, asking myself the question, "What *is* Tannhäuser's sin? Is it all, really and finally, just about sex?"

Third, unlike Friedrich Nietzsche and even some others today, I have little interest in baptizing Richard Wagner by transforming him into a Christian apologist or initiating him into the brotherhood or sisterhood of theologians. As far as I can tell from reading his prose works and letters, Wagner had little interest in and patience for the Christian religion and theology in his own day, let alone in his own life. And Bryan Magee is surely correct in his delightful book, *The Tristan Chord*<sup>1</sup> when he names Ludwig Feuerbach and Arthur Schopenhauer—Feuerbach a notorious atheist and Schopenhauer a nontheist—as the seminal influences in Wagner's intellectual life. Yet Wagner was a master when it came to retrieving and refashioning the cultural bric-a-brac of legends, folklore, myths, and pious practices that surrounded him, ultimately forming the substance of some of his libretti. On occasion, as in the case of *Tannhäuser* as well as *Lohengrin* and *Parsifal*, these materials were more or less entwined with the Christian tradition. To be sure, in the case of *Tannhäuser*, although he was loathe to admit it, Wagner freely drew on the work of others who were more or less his contemporaries: Heinrich Heine, E.T.A. Hoffman, Ludwig Tieck, and Ludwig Bechstein, to name only the most notable. But it is crucial to recognize, that these materials as they came to Wagner from his contemporaries and, ultimately, from the tradition that preceded even them, were not formless or shapeless "stuff." These materials came, to a greater or lesser degree, already stamped with their own narrative logic, bearing traces or echoes of history long past and perhaps even forgotten, exhibiting their own coherence as stories rooted in a more or less long folk tradition. Certainly, Wagner rarely used materials as he found them. His introduction and the complex composition of the character of "Elizabeth"—loosely connected

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1. Magee, Bryan *The Tristan Chord*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2001). Originally published in the United Kingdom in 2000 under the title *Wagner and Philosophy* by the Penguin Press, London.

with, as virtually every commentator notes, the historical figure of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary—to the Tannhäuser legend is a case in point. Even more dramatic, as I shall suggest, is Wagner's revision of the ending of the traditional Tannhäuser legend. But, while Wagner substantially refashions the tale of Tannhäuser to suit his purposes, such refashioning already presupposes some original fashioning. While I do not claim that my tentative identification of the historical reminiscences and reconstruction of the logic of the narrative was Wagner's explicit intention, I do claim that the story itself contains these reminiscences and exhibits a narrative logic that, if I am correct, Wagner implicitly accepted, and that this logic is still reflected in the opera even as he creatively went on to reshape that story for his libretto.

Fourth, let me present my hypothesis in a summary, skeletal form. Just as a fever is a symptom or consequence of a more basic malady, an infection; so the sin or disorder of Tannhäuser's lust is a symptom or consequence of a more basic sin or disorder: apostasy. It is the nature of this sin, apostasy, that drives the most basic developments of the libretto's plot. This hypothesis, I suggest, sheds light on two puzzling questions that arise from within the story of the opera. First, why isn't Tannhäuser simply forgiven by those gathered in the Wartburg?—after all, then as now, lust just isn't all that uncommon a sin. So why is Tannhäuser treated so harshly? Second, why undertake a pilgrimage to Rome? Is there something special about the nature of this particular pilgrimage such that the Landgrave enjoins Tannhäuser to make it?

Finally, when I initially considered this topic, I, perhaps foolishly, planned specifically to consider the character of Elizabeth. I say foolishly, because to my mind, Elizabeth is the most complex, perplexing and (for me) she is, at times, the least satisfying character of the opera. Thus, as a sort of coda, I will make some observations regarding this character.

### I – The One Sin That Cannot Be Forgiven

Music historian Timothy McFarland rightly notes that *Tannhäuser* is the most medieval of Wagner's operas.<sup>2</sup> It is also, I think, a paradoxical work. Minnesingers and knights, the Wartburg castle and a cave in the Horselberg, song-contests and pilgrimages, the new God and the old goddess, love and lust, even the Pope in Rome—*Tannhäuser* is a sprawling work of epic proportion that displays Wagner's brilliance as a librettist, deftly weaving historical fact and legend to provide a robust and colorful 19<sup>th</sup> century, romantic view of the

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2. McFarland, Timothy, "Wagner's Most Medieval Opera" in *Tannhäuser*. Opera Guide, ed. Nicholas John, no. 39 (New York: Riverrun Press, 1988), 25–32.

13<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, however, *Tannhäuser* is a profoundly intimate drama. Its dramatic core, its “problem” as literary critics like to use the term, is nothing more than the sin and salvation of a single individual. In less than three hours, Wagner poses and resolves one of the most elemental of religious questions: Is any individual utterly unredeemable? Is there any sin that cannot be forgiven? It is this ability to combine the epic with the elemental, the visual and auditory spectacle with intense existential drama, that perhaps validates Wagner’s boast that his operas were indeed unique, *Gesamtkunstwerke*, “total works of art.”

Nonetheless, many today may be skeptical of the claim that *Tannhäuser* is a profound religious drama. Modern audiences are apt to be a bit puzzled or bemused, if not annoyed like my friend, by the last fifteen minutes of the second act. During the song-contest in the Wartburg castle, and amidst increasing impatience with and edginess towards the idealistic platitudes of his brother minnesinger-knights, Tannhäuser lapses into a frenzied song of praise to Venus, ironically recapitulating the music of the first act when he thrice begs Venus to release him from her domain. Reacting with visceral horror, the men remain behind with drawn swords, ready to put him to death, while the ladies quickly but tastefully flee the hall! Watching this today we are apt subconsciously to evaluate this scene as an overreaction bordering on camp. Certainly Tannhäuser can be convicted of bad taste. Certainly Tannhäuser can be convicted of insulting conduct. Perhaps he should even be convicted of immoral behavior due to his sojourn with Venus—a sort of knightly romp—but deserving of death? Even after the selfless intervention of Elizabeth who places herself between the drawn swords and Tannhäuser and who intercedes on his behalf, reminding the gathering of the depths of divine forgiveness and mercy, the immediate punishment—complete ostracism—and the hope only reluctantly extended—a penitent’s pilgrimage to seek forgiveness from the Pope in Rome—seems to many today far too disproportionate. Should mere “lust” be so severely punished, especially when the guilty individual, Tannhäuser, seems so genuinely and abjectly contrite? After all, as I noted earlier the sin of lust was no less common in the 13<sup>th</sup> century than it is today! For some viewers, this scene—surely the dramatic core of the opera—appears to be a parochial reflection of a puritanical age past, a sort of hyper-Victorianism. And matters are not especially helped here when some who stage the opera today choose to frame the scene as one half of a juxtaposition between two worlds: the narrow, prudish, convention-bound world of the Wartburg as compared with the ecstatic, sensuous free-love of the Venusberg. Given contemporary sensibilities, it is something of a foregone conclusion that the latter will—contrary to

the story's intent!—always win out in the audience's mind!

But, in fact is lust Tannhäuser's sin? On first blush, it certainly seems so and most commentators describe the opera fundamentally as a conflict between lust or carnal love (Venus), and a so-called pure, spiritual love (Elizabeth), with the hapless protagonist somehow caught indecisively between the two.

Nonetheless, it seems too facile to see Tannhäuser as simply caught between lust and love, the putative two worlds represented by Venus and Elizabeth, because there is nothing lukewarm about Tannhäuser. He is not a Wagnerian version of Hamlet, an individual wracked by indecision, afflicted by interminable introspection. Consistent with Wagner's own observation in his 1852 essay entitled "On the Performance of *Tannhäuser*"—"Tannhäuser is nowhere and never 'a little' anything, but each thing fully and entirely"—Tannhäuser exists wholly in the world of Venus and wholly in the world of Elizabeth.<sup>3</sup> He is wholly Venus' vassal and, in turn, wholly Elizabeth's suitor. Wagner's observation may provide a surprising clue to Tannhäuser's sin.

There is a particular saying attributed to Jesus of Nazareth in the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. It is an enigmatic saying and was recognized as such early on in the Church's history. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' utters the pronouncement, "Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin" (Mark 3.28-29). This is a rather breathtaking statement: *all* sins, save one, can be forgiven—the sin against the Holy Spirit! Unfortunately, Mark never tells the reader exactly what the nature of this sin is, and his placement of this saying in the context of a dispute over the power by which Jesus exorcizes unclean spirits still leaves this sin's nature less than self-evident even in Mark's narrative. Curiously, the later Gospel of Luke also seemed to be perplexed by this saying that Luke took over from Mark. While Matthew retains Mark's context for this saying (Mt. 12.31–32), Luke—anticipating later developments—cuts the saying out from the narration of a specific episode in Jesus' ministry—the dispute over exorcisms—and pastes this same saying in quite a different and far more general context: Jesus' speech exhorting his disciples to persevere despite doubt in the face of adversity and persecution (Lk. 12.4–12). Of course, Luke's intent is that *his* readers, identifying with the disciples of narrative, are similarly to be exhorted to perseverance by Jesus' speech.

3. Wagner, Richard "On the Performance of *Tannhäuser*," in *The Theatre* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1894), vol. 3, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, 198. Also in the volume titled "Judaism in Music and Other Essays," of the 1995 University of Nebraska Press reprint.

Not long afterwards, by the second century when the Christian movement began to experience persecution by the Empire, there began to emerge, however, a rough consensus around the conclusion of the second-century apocalyptic seer known as the Shepherd of Hermas. Reflecting on one of his visions, he writes, "There is opportunity for repentance for them if they are not found to have denied from the heart. But if they have denied from the heart, I do not know whether they can live. I do not say this for these days, that someone who denies now might receive an opportunity for repentance, for it is now impossible for someone who denies the Lord to be saved" (*Similitudes* 9. 26. 5–6). In sum, there is no forgiveness today for those who have willfully denied the faith. In short order, the unforgivable sin of Mark's Gospel became identified throughout later Christian tradition with the sin of "apostasy" (as distinct from "heresy" and "schism" which were uniformly regarded as "forgivable" sins): the explicit, public, and voluntary denial and renunciation of the (true) faith and hence the (true) God. The Shepherd of Hermas thus continued, made explicit, and consolidated a line of interpretation already implicitly present in Luke's revision of Mark's narrative. This identification stuck. Even a millennium later, long after the age of persecution had ended, long after Christianity had triumphed and become the religion of the Empire, theologians like Thomas Aquinas—the historical Tannhäuser's 13<sup>th</sup> century contemporary—could still affirm that repudiation of the known truth of the faith is, in addition to presumption and despair, the sin against the Holy Spirit and hence an unforgivable sin.

Perhaps at this juncture, we should pause explicitly to take note of what is arguably the fundamental mythic theme presupposed by the Tannhäuser story: the so-called exile of the gods.<sup>4</sup> To parody General Douglas MacArthur, old gods never die; they don't even just fade away. Defeated by the spread of that new God of Christianity and driven from their Olympian heights, these older, more ancient gods simply went into exile. Literally, in the case of Venus, they went underground where, though a shadow of their former selves, they nevertheless remain, live and act as gods, reigning supreme in an admittedly now somewhat circumscribed realm. Place names figure prominently in Wagner's libretto and of these "*Venusberg*" is the most frequent, serving as the focal noun for both the condemnation of Tannhäuser by those gathered in the Wartburg and the denial of forgiveness by the Pope in Rome. But, it is important not to slip into anachronism here. The Venusberg isn't just a pleasure palace like an adult bookstore or after-hours sex club familiar in the urban

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4. Borchmeyer, Dieter, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 102–106.

landscape today. In these places one can pay an admission fee, tarry a while, and then return home to the family. True: to reside in the Venusberg, as Tannhäuser does, is surely to enjoy sensual delights. More importantly, however, it is to reside in *Venus'* domain, the place where *she* rules as god. Hence, the price of admission is a high one: the recognition and confession of Venus as queen and goddess! Venus, of course, knows all this full well and, in the first act, when her cajoling Tannhäuser fails to bring him to remain with her, she changes tactics and reproaches and threatens—one is tempted to say with the full fury of a goddess scorned—that to leave her domain is tantamount to renouncing and rejecting *her*. Tannhäuser also knows this full well and he declares—unlike Douglas MacArthur—I shall not return. Parenthetically, a subtle tension should be noted here. While Venus opines she might be willing to forgive Tannhäuser when he comes crawling back to her, the New God will have none of that, if apostasy is indeed the sin which cannot be forgiven!

Do these brief considerations shed any light on the drama of the opera and the problem of Tannhäuser's sin? I think so. What horrifies those assembled in the Wartburg is not just his tasteless insult to Elizabeth and those gathered in the hall, or even the disclosure to their imaginations of Tannhäuser's activities in Venus' pleasure realm for the year past. The horror is that Tannhäuser publicly calls on and addresses Venus as *Göttin der Liebe*, "Goddess of Love," declaring his allegiance to her and thereby expressing his abandonment of faith in the one true God—a God whom Elizabeth correctly identifies and calls on as the God of love and mercy in her intercession on Tannhäuser's behalf. Dramatically, we should not be too surprised at Tannhäuser's lapse in the Wartburg because during the first act, even when pleading with Venus to let him go, he addresses her both as *Göttin* ("Goddess") and *Königin* ("Queen"), thrice singing the refrain, "O Königin, Göttin, lass' mich ziehn—O Queen, Goddess, let me go." Both in Act I as in Act II, Tannhäuser's own words unwittingly bear witness to Venus as his Lady-liege and God, and to himself as her vassal and devoted disciple. Even worse, his song to Venus in the Wartburg ends with a call to those gathered to join him now in this, his apostasy. Tannhäuser the apostate becomes Tannhäuser the apostle of apostasy! Indeed, he is no less eloquent and enthusiastic in his proclamation of the gospel of Venus in the Wartburg than the Apostle to the Gentiles was in his proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ on the Areopagus. In sum, in the Wartburg, although physically removed from Venus' underground domain, his outburst signals to all that he not only still remains her vassal but has also become her apostle, making demonstrably transparent that one can take the minnesinger out of the Venusberg, but one cannot take the Venusberg out of the minne-

singer!

How does this shed light on the narrative? If Tannhäuser's sin is apostasy, and if apostasy is a species of the sin against the Holy Spirit, then the assembled guests do not forgive and forget Tannhäuser's sin, this simply because the sin of which Tannhäuser is guilty, apostasy, *cannot* be forgiven — "neither in this world nor in the next" as Matthew ominously adds to Mark's saying.

## II – A Special Exception

If Tannhäuser's sin is in fact apostasy, this may also shed some light on the slim shred of hope that Landgrave Hermann reluctantly, if not grudgingly, extends to the penitent Tannhäuser: join the pilgrimage assembling in my land and seek forgiveness from the Pope in Rome. Why this? Why a pilgrimage? Why the Pope in Rome? Once again, Timothy McFarland is surely spot on when he notes that the libretto "conforms to the general pattern of sin, penance, and forgiveness that is dominant in medieval moral narratives." And yet there is something too general, too broad, too vague about this observation.

Pilgrimages or travel to holy places is a phenomenon found in virtually every world religious tradition. Such holy travel is nearly as old as Christianity itself, with the first historical allusion to a pilgrimage dated around 217 AD as recounted by the fourth century historian, Eusebius of Caesaria.<sup>5</sup> By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, however, not only had such holy travel flourished as a pious practice, but the pilgrimage had also become incorporated as a standard item in the repertoire of Christian penitential discipline. Also by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there was a rough agreement or consensus that this discipline, the sacrament of penance, had three so-called parts: (1) the contrite confession of sins by the penitent, (2) the pronouncement of absolution or forgiveness by the confessor and reconciliation with the Church, and (3) the performance of some act of satisfaction or penance by the penitent. This last part, from which the entire sacrament derived its name, was some action, largely symbolic, that both manifested the genuineness of the penitent's contrition and that restored the honor of God, undoing or canceling out, so to speak, the dishonor done to the divine majesty by the sinful act itself.

Two things are noteworthy here. First, pilgrimages were usually very arduous affairs, not to be undertaken lightly. They were both expensive and time-consuming, and more often than not the pilgrim was exposed to significant danger by the very act of traveling itself. Hence the assignment of a pilgrimage

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5. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. Christian Cruse (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Publishing, 1974), 229.

as an act of satisfaction or penance was usually reserved for either the most serious or public sins, and was generally imposed on persons of rank and means. But, second—and more importantly for us—pilgrimages as part of a penitential discipline represent the *third* part of the sacrament of penance: it is the satisfaction performed by the penitent AFTER absolution or forgiveness has been pronounced. But, it is precisely this forgiveness that has been denied to Tannhäuser! Whatever else we may say about Tannhäuser's pilgrimage to Rome, it does not neatly fit a penitential model and the standard or ordinary sequence of confession-forgiveness-satisfaction.

It is therefore critical to recognize that *this* pilgrimage, assembling in the Landgrave's territory, is no ordinary affair. It is not holy travel undertaken as a form of penance. Those who gather, including Tannhäuser, are *seeking* forgiveness for their sins. What are we to make of this? The libretto itself may contain a clue here. The Landgrave commands Tannhäuser: "*nach Rom zum Gnadenfest*," "to Rome for the feast [or festival] of grace." What is this *Gnadenfest*? On the one hand, we can take the noun simply as a poetic hyperbole and quickly skip over it; on the other hand, perhaps we can take the noun as a historical reminiscence, describing something unique about this specific pilgrimage. Indeed, I wish to suggest that the term contains a reminiscence of and reference to a 13<sup>th</sup> century innovation, the institution that came to be known as the "Jubilee Year."

Loosely rooted in the provisions of Leviticus 25 whereby every forty nine years Hebrew slaves were to be set free, all debts were to be canceled, and cultivated lands were to lie fallow, the Jubilee Year became spiritualized in medieval Christianity as a special year—initially every one hundred, then in 1343 every fifty years—for the extraordinary remission of the most serious sins, universal pardon, and the acquisition of "excess" grace. While the first official Jubilee Year that can be documented was 1300 under Pope Boniface VIII in his bull *Antiquorum fida relati*,<sup>6</sup> a Latin hymn dating to the early 1200s strongly suggests the practice or something very similar to it was already in place in the previous century: "The blessing of the year of jubilee releases the debt of punishments. After sinners have been purged, the cause against them ends. All the guilty go free by the mercy of God's kingdom, as set forth in the law of Levi."<sup>7</sup> Importantly, in the original promulgation of the Jubilee by Boniface

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6. Boniface VIII, *Antiquorum habet fida* (Citta del Vaticano: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2000). Translations from the Bull are the author's.

7. Charles Hervermann et al., eds. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1907–1914), s.v. "Holy Year of Jubilee" by Herbert Thurston. The opening of Boniface's Bull—"There is a trustworthy report from those in the past that those who come to the honorable Basilica of the Prince of the Apostles in this city are granted a great remission and indulgence for [their] sins"—tends to confirm this claim.

VIII and the promise of “not only full and copious, but the most full, pardon of all their sins,” a pilgrimage visit to Rome was required. Specifically, the pilgrim from outside the city of Rome, having received the sacrament of Penance from a designated confessor in the city of Rome, was required to enter the Basilica of St. Peter’s and the church of St Paul’s Outside the Walls through a specific door fifteen times in order to complete the pilgrimage and to receive the extraordinary grace of the Jubilee. Is there perhaps a reminiscence of this specific ceremony in the accentuation of the word “Schwelle” [threshold] in Tannhäuser’s Rome narration? “Nach Rom gelangt ich so zur heil’gen Stelle, lag betend auf des Heiligtumes Schwelle—I came thus to Rome, to the holy place, lay prostrate, praying, at the threshold to the sanctuary.” Having been denied the sacrament, Tannhäuser remains alone outside, not having crossed—having been barred from crossing?—the threshold of the Heiligstum [Basilica]?. In short, having made the pilgrimage, Tannhäuser cannot complete its requirements and hence is denied the promise of its “most full pardon.”

To be sure, the Jubilee Year was not only a religious institution. It also no doubt well served the political and economic interests that formed a substantial part of the agenda for the late medieval papacy, i.e., the enhancement and consolidation of the power, authority and prestige of the Bishop of Rome a Supreme Pontiff, and the bringing of revenue to both the Eternal City and to its Bishop. But, if the *Gnadenfest* is in fact a reference to or echo of the Jubilee, the Landgrave’s command becomes intelligible and apt: maybe, just maybe, Tannhäuser’s sin (apostasy) which they cannot forgive and which seemingly cannot be forgiven by anyone according to God’s own Holy Word, *can* be forgiven during the extraordinary surfeit of grace of the Jubilee.

As Tannhäuser narrates in his Third Act monologue, however, his pilgrimage has been in vain. It is interesting to see what is *not* said in Tannhäuser’s narration of his encounter with the Pope. Tannhäuser does not tell us that the Pope claims that he *can* forgive Tannhäuser’s sin, but simply won’t. On the contrary, the Pope merely states a divine ordinance in the form of a conditional (“if—then”) sentence of the holy law, familiar to readers of the Torah: “hast du im Venusberg geweylt, so bist nun ewig du verdammt—If you have tarried in the Venusberg, then you now are eternally damned”. It should also be noted that the Pope freely acknowledges his own impotence in this matter by the very analogy he then immediately puts forward. He has as much power to forgive Tannhäuser’s sin as he has the power to bring forth green leaves from the dead wooden staff he wields as shepherd of the new God’s Church. How much power is that? Apparently none! This dramatic denial of forgive-

ness, thwarting the hope and promise of the Jubilee pilgrimage, only serves to accentuate the bleakness and desperation of Tannhäuser's plight: not even the Pope in Rome during a Jubilee can forgive a sin that God Himself, through his own Holy Word, has declared unforgivable!

In the fifteenth century legend (unlike Wagner's opera), having failed to find forgiveness, Tannhäuser returns to the only place he is welcome: to the Venusberg and to his goddess, Venus. The news of the miracle that the green leaves of new life has sprung from the Pope's staff arrives too late to save him. With nowhere else to go, Tannhäuser lapses back into his apostasy—we may wonder, "Did he ever really relinquish it?" —is "lost" forever, and becomes truly unredeemable. This traditional "ending" for the story no doubt functioned as a cautionary tale and encoded a simple moral message: even if a sin which cannot be forgiven were to be forgiven, that forgiveness can always come "too late." So don't commit the sin in the first place!

Not so for Wagner who boldly revises the legend's conclusion by having Tannhäuser himself receive in time the momentous news regarding the Pope's staff—a revision that serves Wagner's own dramatic and, ultimately, religious sensibilities. In the closing lines of the final pilgrims' chorus we find Richard Wagner's resolution of the problem of Tannhäuser's sin: "High above the entire world is God, and His mercy is *kein Spott* [no jest or taunt or mockery]." The implied criticism of the original legend is clear: the late arrival of the news of the miracle of the staff and the irrevocable loss of Tannhäuser to Venus ironically impugns the scope and depth of God's mercy, both taunting the sinner and mocking the power of the mercy of God to bring forth what it wills. For the God of love whom Elizabeth knows so well, not only does grace abound, but it is also—unlike the legend—ultimately triumphant, miraculously even overriding both God's own Word and His Church to reclaim successfully the one who otherwise appeared to be utterly beyond redemption. To this the younger pilgrims, and perhaps even some in the audience today, can only respond with the final words of the opera. "Halleluja! Halleluja!"

—Joseph Colombo

*(To be continued in the Fall 2009 issue)*

# The Musical Language of *Das Rheingold*: II

## *Music and Drama at the Beginning of the Ring*

The motivically grounded arioso idiom that remains the lingua franca of the *Rheingold* score can often be parsed into something roughly like the “periods” imagined in *Opera and Drama*, cohering around rhetorical text units, around a central point of tonal orientation (if not a clear tonic key), and around one or more leading motivic ideas. A typical example of this would be the first appearance of the Giants, in Scene 2. They are announced by their ponderous march-like motive in low brass with timpani, developed into a short phrase that prolongs the dominant of F (minor). Fasolt’s first speech of eighteen lines, announcing that their construction work for the gods is finished and that they await payment, represents a clear rhetorical unit, set principally to further iterations of the Giants’ motive (though also gesturing to the rhythmically related Valhalla motive). The passage begins and ends in F major, touching on related keys of D minor, B flat, and F in between. This would represent a particularly simple period, in keeping with the native simplicity of the character. (His brother, Fafner, is the one already corrupted by a tendency to human, or rather “god-like” cunning.) Our first glimpse of Mime and Alberich, at the beginning of Scene 3 (up to where Mime drops the Tarnhelm he has just finished making) presents a period of similar scope, divided now between two speakers, and much more tonally diffuse and agitated, in keeping with the nature of the action (Alberich’s rough handling of Mime). The thirty-six measures suggest an overall motion from B-flat minor, Alberich’s characteristic key, to its dominant, F minor. Until the (weak) cadence in F minor as Alberich demands the Tarnhelm (“Was hier und da? Her das Geschmeid!”), key areas are only loosely implied through dominant and diminished-seventh relations. The passage mainly coheres around limping dotted-rhythm figures reminiscent of Alberich’s appearance in Scene 1, transferred here to Mime’s cries of distress. The radically contrasting music of the Tarnhelm—a slow, mysteri-

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*This second installment continues the section “Formal strategies in the music drama” from the previous issue.*

ous chord sequence—defines a subsequent “period” of forty measures loosely rounded by A flat/G# minor, as Alberich tries on the magic cap or helmet. Once rendered invisible by this device, Alberich returns to tormenting Mime, and the twitching, limping gestures of the preceding period likewise return, again prolonging V of B-flat minor for a dozen measures or so.

These opening pages of Scene 3 suggest another important level of Wagner’s technique in *Rheingold*, also adumbrated in the theory of *Opera and Drama*. Short “periods” defined by motive, tonal center, and dramatic gesture or action may be contrasted and (loosely) reprised or varied, not unlike the periodic units of classical instrumental forms, though always maintaining the musical-dramatic prerogative of forging out in new directions or recombining disparate motivic ideas to suit the dramatic needs of the moment.

Another behavioral “prerogative” of the music drama illustrated in *Das Rheingold* is what we could call transitional or transformational procedure—what Wagner later referred to as his “art of transition.” This is most obviously, but also artfully, illustrated in the three extended orchestral transitions that move the action from the bed of the Rhine up to the neighborhood of Valhalla (between Scenes 1 and 2), from there back down to the caverns of Nibelheim (between Scenes 2 and 3), and finally back up to the heights of Valhalla (between scenes 3 and 4). As transitions, these passages are deliberately open in terms of tonality and motivic content, exhibiting what Robert Bailey termed Wagner’s practice of “directional tonality.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, for example, the first transition moves us from the C minor darkness of the Rhine, following the theft of its gold, to the resplendent D-flat major of Wotan’s great fortress, Valhalla. The second transition begins nowhere in particular, thanks to Loge’s slippery chromatic idiom that initiates it, but it lands us squarely in Alberich’s sulfurous tonal realm of B-flat minor, antithetically parallel (with its five-flat signature) to the resplendent D-flat major of Valhalla. The last transition is even more diffuse: it programmatically reverses the motivic process of the second one, illustrating, respectively, the journey into and out of the forges of Nibelheim and through the elements of earth, fire, and air. Significantly, however, Wagner defers the return to D-flat major of Valhalla until the end of the last scene, where a final, more grandly conceived transitional process is played out on stage: Donner gathers the storm clouds to generate the great thunderclap that will clear the air after the fateful bickering over the Ring that has clouded the scene up to here. The G-flat tonality of the rainbow bridge conjured by Donner and Froh becomes a large subdominant preparation to the final, regal

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14. See Robert Bailey, *Richard Wagner: Prelude and Transfiguration from “Tristan und Isolde”* (New York: Norton, 1986), 121–25 and Warren Darcy, *Wagner’s “Das Rheingold.”* 52.

emergence of the D-flat music of Valhalla, thus a kind of prolonged plagal cadence. This D-flat music does not reign undisturbed to the end, but has to contend, notably, with two interpolated “periods” reprising the Rhine Daughters’ singing from scene 1 (the second of these interpolated “periods” is tonally occluded in protest at the fate of the stolen gold). Finally, Wagner engineers a musical-dramatic transition on a still grander scale by introducing into this final phase of *Das Rheingold* the heroic, triadic gestures of Donner’s storm-call and of Wotan’s prophetic vision (what will become the “Sword” motive): both of these will be prominently reprised in the storm-scene that opens the next opera of the cycle, *Die Walküre*, creating a meta-transition of sorts between these separate dramas.

### The Birth of the Leitmotif

Wagner had been experimenting with the use of thematic reminiscences in his earlier operas from the time of *Rienzi* and even before. And he was not the only one, of course, thinking about how musical themes or short segments of them might acquire a special signifying status within the score of an opera by virtue of their association with certain texts, characters, and situations over the course of a work. But it was only in *Opera and Drama* that he first tried to imagine a whole new method of dramatic composition in which the entire score would constitute a continuous network of such signifying musical motives, with all the thematic material existing in some specific relation to the content of the drama. While Wagner would go on to implement the “leitmotif technique,” as we have come to call it, in all of his mature music dramas, the impulse for its systematic development as the foundation of an entire operatic score was bound up with the conception of the *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle. Here, as we’ve seen, Wagner was intent on building up a whole mythic universe from its own beginnings. Once he had decided to expand the single “Siegfried” drama (*Siegfried’s Death*) into a cycle of four works, he had even more reason to try devising a broad network of associative musical motives, such as might provide a crucial means of binding these several dramas into one integrated “work.”

As with the notion of a “poetic-musical period,” the “leitmotif” idea as developed in *Opera and Drama* was at once necessarily vague (prior to the actual compositional work on the *Ring*) and overly precise (in stipulating a systematic procedure that would turn out to be much too constraining to carry out in practice). In Part 3 of *Opera and Drama*, sections 5 and 6, Wagner gradually develops a theory of “orchestral speech” and its motives or “melodic elements”

(*melodische Momente*). The orchestra of the new music drama, he suggests, will be like the chorus of the ancient Greek tragedy, commenting on the past, present, and future of the characters and action. The orchestra may introduce a musical idea in anticipation of its actual dramatic function, hinting towards the future. This is how the motive of the Sword is anticipated in the final scene of *Das Rheingold*, when Wotan seems to be envisioning his plan to beget a race of human heroes to ensure the protection of the gods against their enemies. When a motive that has been orchestrally “anticipated” is first heard in a character’s vocal line, or when the character’s gestures explain the meaning of the motive (both of which occur, for example, when Siegmund dislodges the sword Nothung from the tree in Hunding’s hut, in Act I of *Die Walküre*), then the motive acquires its full semantic significance—it is officially “defined” in a sense. This enables the orchestra to recall the motive in any number of subsequent contexts—to speak in the past tense, as it were—and to inflect the motive with further layers of meaning, according to circumstances and to variations of harmony, instrumentation, dynamics, and so on. Thus, for example, the more anxious citations of the Sword motive while Siegmund is battling Hunding, and its resplendent, valedictory character at the climax of Siegfried’s funeral music, near the end of the cycle. Not all leitmotifs pass systematically through these stages of anticipation–definition–recollection. But *Das Rheingold*, as the prologue to the Nibelung cycle, is charged with a particularly important role in laying the leitmotivic foundations for the whole epic.

Some of these we have already noted. Three motives from the first scene—those of the Rhine-gold, the all-commanding Ring to be forged from it, and the “Renunciation of Love” required to wield its power—already comprehend, between them, the foundational parable of the entire drama. Beyond these, there are really only a small handful of ideas introduced in *Das Rheingold* that will maintain an important leitmotivic presence through the cycle: the Valhalla (Wotan) motive and the anticipation of the Sword, already mentioned; the descending scale-figure of Wotan’s Spear and the treaties engraved on it (example 63 in Deryck Cooke’s leitmotif guide);<sup>15</sup> the imitation of flickering flames connected with Loge, and later Brünnhilde’s protective ring of fire, among several ideas relating to Loge and fire (Cooke example 150); the repetitive figure of the Nibelungs’ hammering (Cooke example 32); the tail end of Freia’s beseeching motive, that will be subjected to many permutations of form and meaning (Cooke example 87); the mysterious chord sequence of the Tarnhelm (Cooke example 153); the motive of Alberich’s Curse on the

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15. See page 12 of Spring 2009 issue for CD information.

Ring (Cooke example 50); and the figure accompanying Erda's oracle about the danger of the Ring (Cooke example 8), which is also inverted here, and on later occasions, to portend the imminent downfall of the gods. Other motives are presented with distinct associations but recur only seldom after *Das Rheingold*: for example, the Giants' motive or that of Alberich's transformation as serpent, later borrowed by Fafner). Still others will never return at all after this prologue: the motive of Freia's Golden Apples of eternal youth, the energetic variant of that associated with her brother Froh, or the Rainbow Bridge of the final scene.

Beyond establishing this core repertoire of motivic associations, *Das Rheingold* also constructs a subset of motives relating to the natural world, alluded to earlier—motives which may later become corrupted or distorted in suggestive ways, and which, in their original forms, contrast distinctly with a repertoire of “unnatural” motives connoting magic or supernatural forces, traits of cunning and deceit, power and oppression, or subjective states of enchantment, illusion, desire, anger, or sorrow. The carefully gradated triadic arpeggations of the Prelude to Scene 1 are prototypical of the “natural” motive group. Wagner himself identified the horn-fanfare announcing the appearance of the Rhine-gold (Ex. 3) as a “simple nature motive.”<sup>16</sup> The Ring motive (Ex. 4), by contrast, outlines the unstable harmony of a minor ninth, moving in more tentative rhythms and circling back on itself uneasily: although the Gold will yield the Ring, these two things are, as objects and symbols, both morally and musically incommensurate.

The triadic or diatonic “nature” motives are easily transformed for symbolic and expressive purposes. The motive accompanying Erda's portentous appearance (Cooke ex. 8) is simply a transposition of the original Rhine or Nature motive of the prelude (Ex. 1a) from E-flat major to the lower and darker tonality of C-sharp minor. Erda speaks for the natural order, but sees its prospects threatened. A further transformation foretells the “twilight of the gods” simply by inverting the direction of this same motive when Erda warns “Ein düster Tag dämmert den Göttern—A somber day dawns for the gods.” We could call this transformation more symbolic than expressive, although the “Neapolitan” harmony of the inverted motive (a D<sup>6</sup> chord leading toward a C#-minor cadence) does effect a certain uncanny frisson. The motive of the Rhine-gold is similarly thrust into darkened, minor-mode contexts throughout this score and the rest of the cycle. A more overtly “expressive” transformation is that wrought on the Rhine Daughters' innocent hymn to the Gold

16. Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9, 188 (“On the Application of Music to the Drama”).

(Ex. 2) to signify the power Alberich has extracted from it to subjugate the Nibelung race (Ex. 6). Here the Rhine Daughters' delighted cry of "Rheingold! Rheingold!" has been chromatically shrunk and distorted, while the fleet, dancing continuation of their motive has become ponderous and grotesquely triumphant—an effect to which the orchestra also contributes significantly.

ALBERICH

Zit' - re und za - ge ge - zähmes Heer! Rasch ge horcht des Ring - es Herr!

(with cymbals) *f* *p* *p cresc. (with tamtam)* *ff*

*Example 6 The leitmotif of the Nibelungs' slavery: a harmonically diminished, minor-mode transformation of the Rhine Daughters' "hymn to the Rhine Gold"*

A particularly celebrated and subtle example of such motivic transformation—symbolic and expressive in equal degree—is effected across the end of the orchestral transition between Scenes 1 and 2, where the Ring motive, drifting through the “mists” of harp arpeggios, issues directly into the first statement of the Valhalla theme at the opening of the new scene. The upper line of the new theme preserves the exact contour of the Ring motive (transposed up a minor third). The harmony, however, has become “purified” into diatonic triads in D-flat major. Hence the Valhalla theme adopts the sound of a “nature” motive. Yet its implicit derivation from the Ring motive, as it is first presented to the listener, warns us to suspect, from the very outset, the foundations supporting the pomp and glory of Wotan’s fortress. Indeed, Wotan would like to believe that his power was firmly rooted in the natural order of his world. But as he (and we) will learn in the course of *Das Rheingold*, this is not case.

### Harmonic practices

Paradoxically, a central token of aesthetic progress in Wagner’s new music drama is precisely the kind of harmonic “corruption” to which its core repertoire of nature motives is subjected to signify alienation from a pure, primal state. As in so many cultural products of the later nineteenth century, modernity is identified with the loss of innocence and the threat of decay. At the same time, modern harmonic practice in *Das Rheingold* is also aligned with qualities such as enchantment or wonder and with intimations of the sub-

conscious. I have already suggested how a new fluidity of tonal design plays a role in the experiment with the open-ended, “naturalistic” formal syntax of the music drama. Here let me adduce a few representative examples—between the levels of motive, phrase, and short “period”—of the new harmonic language that is such a fundamental component of Wagner’s achievement in the *Ring*.<sup>17</sup>

The motive of Alberich’s oppressive power (Ex. 6) replaces the diatonic dominant-ninth chord of the Rhine-gold “hymn” with a diminished seventh (vii<sup>o7</sup>/f), irregularly resolved to G flat. Contrary half-step motion in the outer voices presses inward to form the highly characteristic Wagnerian sonority of the half-diminished seventh chord (the famous *Tristan* chord being one version of this structure). The spacing of this chord here and the slower tempo emphasize the dissonant relation of the root (G) to the seventh and tritone (F, D flat) above, in place of the sunny C major of the Rhine Daughters’ prototype, lending the outward-pressing resolution to F (as V of B-flat minor) a feeling of hubristic aggression rather than joy.

The phrase labeled “Renunciation of Love” (Ex. 5) also encapsulates, as a symbolic musical-textual formula or conjuration, the representation of nature’s corruption by means of harmonic distortion. The first three measures are purely diatonic in C, but in the minor mode, further clouded by the hushed dynamic and low orchestral register. A deceptive shift to A flat at “der Liebe Lust—love’s pleasure” destabilizes the second half of the phrase, and upward-creeping chromatic voices push past the return of C minor to end on the dominant of E, from whence the phrase had emerged a moment earlier. The sound of C minor, the “darkened” tonality in which the scene will conclude, is set off in a kind of tonal quotation marks, emphasizing perhaps the associative value of the key. And our attention is also drawn to the progression from diatonic C minor to a chromatic tonal disorientation that leads to a citation of the Ring motive embedded at the end of the phrase (“zum Reif zu zwingen das Gold”). Foreswearing love, Woglinde reports, is the prerequisite to forging the Ring and wielding its power. The musical formula of this utterance recapitulates the fall from grace implied in the text: together, the music and the text suggest a quotation of an oracular prophecy or a scriptural pronouncement,

17. Wagner famously acknowledged the influence of his friend and benefactor during the early years of his political exile, Franz Liszt, on his new approach to harmony in the *Ring* score. Liszt arrived with the Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein and their entourage to visit Richard and Minna in the newly appointed apartment on the Zeltweg in Zürich in July 1853. “Now for the first time I had the delight of getting to know my friend as a fellow-composer,” Wagner recalled in *My Life*. “In addition to many of his more recent and celebrated piano pieces, we went through several of his latest symphonic poems with great ardor, in particular his *Faust* Symphony. [...] My joy in everything I heard by Liszt was as profound as it was genuine, but above all it was productively stimulating; for after such a long interval I was myself about to begin composing again.”

moving from a major to a minor diatonic mode, and proceeding from there into a brief labyrinth of chromatic dissonance.

A similar encapsulation of how the diatonic-natural background of the drama yields to the corrupting pressures of the foregrounded action can be heard toward the end of Scene 2, when Loge observes the degenerative effects of abstinence from Freia's magic apples of eternal youth (Ex. 7). The first eight measures are purely diatonic in G major, reiterating the "nature-motive" of the Golden Apples. The contrasting limb of the "poetic period" ("Des Gartens Pflgerin ist nun verpfändet; an den Ästen darbt und dorrt das Obst, bald fällt faul es herab—She who tends the garden has been sold; on the tree's branches the fruit is failing") is initiated in the musical setting by a harmonic shift to flat-VI similar to the "Renunciation of Love" example just described, and again involving an A-flat chord (here as the "Neapolitan" relation to G). This alternates with the vii<sup>o7</sup> of that chord ("Des Gartens Pflgerin") in a gesture

LOGE

Die gold - nen Ae - pfel in ih - - rem Gar - ten, sie mach - ten euch  
The gold - en ap - ples that grow in her gar - den, have made you all

tüchlig und jung, ass't ihr sie je - den Tag, Des Gar - tens Pflgerin ist nun ver - pfändet; an dem  
doughty and young, ate ye them day - by day, The gar - den's keeper in pledge now is granted; on the

Ae - sten darbt und dorrt das Obst, bald fällt faul es her - ab.  
branches droops and dries the fruit, de - cayed soon it will fall.

Example 7 Loge speaks of Freia's golden apples and the effects of their loss: a diatonic "nature" motive is contrasted with a sinking chromatic progression evoking the threat of physical decay.

painful contraction, followed by a descending sequence led by chromatic lines in the outer voices, landing on an E-flat triad of indeterminate tonal status. The expressive gesture of decay and decline is manifest. Even clearer than in the “Renunciation of Love” example is the contrast between the background “natural” diatonicism and the corrupting influence of political and commercial negotiations, the mirror of modern human society. On a more specific level, however, the chromatic progression of this second phrase is an example of Wagnerian harmony attempting to describe inner, transformative states. The chromatic outer-voice-leading, the sequential structure, as well as the woodwind scoring all anticipate the music of Brünnhilde’s “magic sleep” in *Die Walküre*.

Shortly prior to Loge’s passage quoted here we see the effect of incipient aging on the gods where Loge asks, “Den seligen Göttern, wie geht’s? Trügt mich ein Nebel? Neckt mich ein Traum?—What ails the blessed gods? Am I tricked by some mist, or fooled by a dream?” Here, the natural, triadic theme of the Golden Apples is not merely contrasted with the “denaturing” effects of mortal decay, but enters into a hypnotic musical dialogue with the mellifluous Freia motive, sequencing chromatically downwards as if drawn by the gravitational force of mortality. Loge’s slithering gesture that concludes Ex. 7, the rhythmic elaboration of a simple chain of chromatically descending sixth chords, will likewise return at the end of *Walküre* along with his whole repertoire of flickering, shimmering “fire” music established in the score of *Das Rheingold*.

Both the transformative aspect of the slow sequence in Ex. 7 and the character of Loge’s assorted fiery figures introduce a group of harmonic effects conveying mystery, wonder, the effects of magic, and those of psychological introspection. A fairly simple representative of this group would be the distinctly profiled motive of the Tarnhelm (Cooke example 153). The materials are simple: two alternating triads, related by semi-tone, issuing in an open fifth. Because this open fifth that punctuates the phrase—another kind of incantatory “magic formula”—relates not to the first chord, but to its chromatic neighbor (as its implied dominant), the progression conveys the feeling of opening out onto something mysterious and alien. As Warren Darcy has shown, Wagner revised his original scoring of the passage, in low woodwinds, to a quartet of muted horns so as to maximize the contrast with what precedes it: Alberich’s hectoring of Mime. The timbral contrast lends emphasis to the tonal one.<sup>18</sup>

18. Darcy, *Wagner’s “Das Rheingold,”* 169–70.

Many of these harmonic and expressive threads are woven together in two passages from Scene 2 which occur shortly before the pair examples just cited describing the threat of mortality facing the gods in the absence of Freia and her youth-giving apples. These final two examples involve the reaction of Fricka and her husband, Wotan, to Loge's initial report about the Rhine-gold and the power that might be extracted from it. In Ex. 8 Fricka is tempted by thoughts of wealth and luxury, Wotan by the promise of universal power. The motive originally suggestive of woman's beauty and desirability (in Loge's narration earlier in the scene) is inflected here by the simple prolongation of a diminished-seventh chord, and colored by the timbre of a high-reaching solo violin, reminiscent of the sound of Venus' charms in *Tamnhäuser*. A descending chromatic series in tremolo strings harmonizes the Rhine-gold fanfare, softly (*ppp*) and caressingly while Wotan, "as if under a spell," contemplates the infinite promise of the gold. Almost imperceptibly, the Rhine-gold motive shifts from major to minor as if under the influence of that chromatic mirage hovering above it.

FRICKA (caressingly to Wotan.)

Ge-wän-ne mein Gat-te sich wohl das Gold?  
O, might but my hus-band win him the gold?

*dolcissimo*  
*p* *più p* *pp*

WOTAN (Wotan appearing more and more under the influence of a spell.)

Des Me-  
Rei - - - fes zu wal - ten. rath - lich will es mich dün - ken...  
thinks it were wise now sway o'er the ring to en - sure me...

*ppp* *sempre pp* *più pp*

Example 8 Fricka and Wotan are tempted, for different reasons, by the idea of the gold.

As Wotan speaks his thoughts the orchestra executes a miniature fantasia on the Ring motive, seamlessly emerging from the descending tremolo haze. A longer, somewhat diffuse “period” takes shape after the end of Ex. 8 and gradually coalesces around D major. Toward the end of this new period (Ex. 9) quotations of the Rhine Daughters’ playful music from the first scene (as Fricka denounces their unprincipled character) give way to a long pedal-point on D. Wotan remains lost in thought about the Ring, while Fafner convinces his brother that wealth is more useful than pretty women. The initial motive of Ex. 8 (signifying “woman” or female beauty, originally associated with Freia) is here further subjected to alteration. In both of these short passages, Wagner uses little more than that old standby of Romantic harmony, the diminished seventh-chord, to achieve his effects. In the first case he introduces it as a destabilizing agent; in the second case, it is subjected, in turn, to the

(Wotan stands silently struggling with himself. The other gods fix their eyes on him in mute suspense... Meanwhile Fafner has been conferring aside with Fasolt.)

**FAFNER** (to Fasolt)

Glaub' mir, mehr als Frei - a frommt das gleis - sende Gold:  
 Trust me, more than Frei - a boots the glit - tering gold:

(Fasolt's demeanor shows)

auch ew' - ge Ju - gend er - jagt, wer durch Goldes Zau - ber sie zwingt.  
 e - ter - nal youth would be won if the golden charm were our own.

that he finds himself convinced against his will.) (Fafner and Fasolt approach Wotan again.)

Example 9 Wotan and the Giants ponder the potential of the Nibelung's Ring.

centripetal force of an extended tonic pedal. The first passage evokes the raising of doubts and uneasy hopes; the second, instead, the momentary stilling of these, as Fasolt and Wotan each become independently convinced, each rather against his own instincts, of the value of the Ring.

The harmonic “psychology” of these passages is relatively simple in its means, yet sophisticated in its effect. Wagner’s deft sense of orchestral color plays an important role in his ability to yoke harmonic effects—whether the noble grandeur of the “nature” motives and their developments or the more complex weaving of chromatic voices—to expressive purposes. Starting with the composition of *Das Rheingold*, in fact, Wagner brought the role of orchestration further into the foreground of his composition’s process.

### Orchestration and instrumental color

Generally speaking, Wagner viewed orchestration as a matter of craft rather than art, something that could be worked out at leisure after the hard work of composition, in the strict sense, had been accomplished.<sup>19</sup> But craftsmanship, as Hans Sachs tries to teach Walther in *Die Meistersinger*, is not to be despised. On the contrary, it is essential to the value of the finished artistic product. And, as was just suggested, instrumentation became more closely integrated into the creative process of the *Ring* than ever before. Indeed, due to the epic scale of the *Ring of the Nibelung*, the exceptional scope of its mythic universe, and the prominent role of natural landscapes and natural phenomena (both “sublime” and “beautiful”), the orchestral palette of its score is larger and more variegated than in any other of Wagner’s works. Creating the all-important beginning of the cycle already made clear to Wagner the essential role that orchestral texture and color would play in the whole. When it came to trying to set down the original “visionary” inspiration for the flowing current of the *Rheingold* prelude, as later recalled in *My Life*, Wagner realized that he could no longer rely on a simple two-line sketch, as he had generally done up to this time. The prelude experiments with a detailed, layered conception of musical textures, and these textures are also crucially defined in terms of instrumental timbres.<sup>20</sup> The old world of melody line and harmonic bass has,

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19. It was especially important to Wagner, by contrast, to work on his first composition drafts (vocal line, bass, and increasingly, over time, details of inner voices, part writing, and advance thoughts on instrumentation) with as little interruption as possible, all the more so in the case of *Das Rheingold*, as he later noted. “But I didn’t let that problem arise in the case of *Rheingold*; the sketch for the whole composition was completed as early as January 16<sup>th</sup> 1854, and thus the plan for the musical structure of the entire four-part work was prefigured in this work’s thematic relationships. For it was here, in this great prelude [to the cycle], that the thematic foundation of the whole had to be laid” (Wagner, *My Life*, 505)

20. It was precisely the “new method of sketching” inspired by the requirements of the *Ring* project that made the continuity of the first stage of composition all the more necessary. See Robert Bailey, “The

at least for the moment, been left far behind.

The same applies to the end of this “prologue” to the cycle, from Donner’s conjuring of the storm clouds and the “Rainbow bridge” through the gods’ majestic progress into their new home, all of which forms a kind of matching musical pillar to the opening prelude. This concluding phase of *Das Rheingold* is the most immediately impressive example of Wagner’s new level of orchestral virtuosity. The summoning of the storm clouds works with pure triadic materials, elaborately arpeggiated, similar to the opening prelude. The elaborate use of divisi strings confirms that Wagner’s directions at the beginning of the full score regarding the personnel required by the string section are to be taken seriously: sixteen each, first and second violins; twelve each, violas and cellos; and eight double basses. The violas must divide into no fewer than six parts, later joined by the cellos similarly divided, with violins grouped the whole time in twelve separate parts. (And each these individual parts needs to project an element of “full” orchestral sound rather than solo timbre.) The arpeggiation figures cover an octave and a half, moving both up and down within individual parts and in contrary motion to each other, all this creating a billowing, shimmering, airy effect distinct from the deeper swells of the prelude. Another unprecedented extravagance here (approached only by some of the opulent whims of Berlioz’s scores) is the demand for six orchestral harps to take over the chordal arpeggiations of the rainbow music, after the great thunderclap signaled by Donner’s hammer, while the strings divide up the chords in smaller intervallic divisions to enhance the shimmering effect. As if these demands were not enough, a seventh harp needs to be placed off stage to accompany the complaint of the Rhine Daughters, who are likewise placed offstage to suggest their voices emanating from the depths of the Rhine valley below.

With their agility and versatility of range, the strings still provide the backbone of the new Wagnerian orchestra. But, despite the occasional stretches of old-style orchestral recitative, Wagner is learning to avoid a reliance bland, dry chordal accompaniments, or an abuse of string tremolo as a means of “italicizing” sustained harmonies, so to speak, as a reflex response to heightened emotional utterances. Whether it be the swimming Rhine Daughters, Loge’s mercurial flitting and flickering, the twitchy nervousness of Mime in the face of Alberich, or the calm, inexorable warp and woof of fate evoked by Erda, the job of Wagner’s string section in *Das Rheingold* is above all the precise, nuanced evocation of gestures, or more generally, styles of comport-

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Compositional Process,” in *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Peter Burbidge and Richard Sutton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 268–338 (esp. 287–95).

ment. Between contributions to the nature-painting of the prelude and the final scene of the opera, described above, the portrayal of Loge's fleet and slippery manner, and impassioned outbursts by various characters, the strings are called upon to move with a swiftness and accuracy scarcely demanded from any opera composer before this.

The popular association of Wagner with a heavy contingent of brass instruments is above all a product of the *Ring* orchestra, and the foundations of this sound, too, are laid in the *Rheingold* score. The birth of this brass-heavy "Teutonic" sound is the orchestral opening of Scene 2, where the stately Valhalla theme is introduced by what is essentially a small brass orchestra unto itself (two harps providing a discreet sort of "godly" continuo). This chorale-like motive is played by a quartet of so-called "Wagner" (tenor) tubas supported by bass tuba and bass trombone. These hybrid instruments, smaller than the traditional bass tuba, have a French horn mouthpiece and produce a somewhat darker, less incisive sound than the French horns. (These Wagner tubas are assigned to the players of horns five through eight once they have acquitted their role in the prelude.) The other trombones together with trumpets insert a drum-style tattoo-upbeat to the extension of the Valhalla theme. This impressive complement of brass will reprise the theme at the very end of the opera for the gods' entry into Valhalla, supported by those shimmering divisi strings and by a pulsating choir of woodwinds, such as had played a similar role in the final iteration of the Pilgrims' chorus at the end of *Tannhäuser*. Otherwise, the full brass are used somewhat sparingly, contributing their aggressive weight to Alberich's tyranny over the Nibelungs, for example, and to the sound of the Giants, Fasolt and Fafner, when wielding their full force.

Wagner's treatment of the woodwind section is not easy to summarize. The groups of three flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons are expanded by significant roles for English horn and bass clarinet. Most of these are kept busy a good deal of the time; the English horn, in particular, plays far more consistently than in any operatic or symphonic repertoire up to this time, where it was otherwise reserved for occasional cameo roles of plangent lyricism. In *Das Rheingold*, perhaps even more than in the subsequent *Ring* operas, Wagner tends to avoid giving extended lyrical, decorative "obligato" lines to solo winds, such as had been common in Italian opera since the time of Rossini. (Perhaps this was a conscious or unconscious reaction against the sound-world of bel canto as well as French grand opera, whose vocal forms and styles Wagner was so intent on repudiating now in the context of his vehement "reform" theories). Instead, shorter "speaking" gestures for flute, oboe, or clarinet are common, and frequently a particular instrumental tim-

bre will be closely associated with a particular leitmotif, such as the muted horns with the Tarnhelm, mentioned earlier, the horn quartet with the Golden Apples of Freia, or solo French horn with the fanfare-motive of the Gold. The oboe characteristically plays the wincing half-step that connotes the oppression of Mime and his folk.

Often, too, a mixture of timbres may characterize the sound of a motive, such as clarinets, bassoons, and horns for the *Ring*, or a combination of high woodwinds when Loge is making light of one or the other of his interlocutors (a quick-tempo parody of the Valhalla theme frequently accompanies his remarks in Scenes 3 and 4). The sinuous rising motive associated with Freia herself is often given out by one or another solo wind instrument, particularly the clarinet, although it is also heard in the solo violin, often when signifying the idea of woman or female beauty more generally. (It acquires an independent life in this form, and with this meaning, in the later *Ring* operas.) One of the most sensuously appealing passages in the whole *Rheingold* score, cited earlier in the context of Wagner's harmonic alteration of "nature" motives, involves an exchange of Freia's motive between oboe, English horn, and flute beneath a mist of chromatic string tremolo (Scene 2, Loge: "Den seligen Göttern, wie geht's? Trügt mich ein Nebel? Neckt mich ein Traum? — What ails the blessed gods? Am I tricked by some mist, or fooled by a dream?")

The possibility of recasting a motive in new timbral guise is of course essential to the technique of leitmotif, not as a repertoire of fixed signs or labels, but as a flexible vocabulary available to comment on all sorts of possible changes of circumstance. Far more than in any of his previous operas, Wagner treats the orchestra in *Das Rheingold* as a rich and expressive timbral palette that can provide him with an unprecedented range of sounds, whether applied with the minutest of brush strokes (Alberich as toad, for example) or to create a vast canvas of unparalleled grandeur, as when the curtain descends on the hubristic procession of the gods into Valhalla. With his orchestra, as with his newly flexible repertoire of motives and his new experiments in chromatic harmony and open-ended tonal structures, Wagner succeeded in laying exactly the foundation he needed for the great edifice that he would go on to construct in the rest of the *Ring*.

—Thomas Grey

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