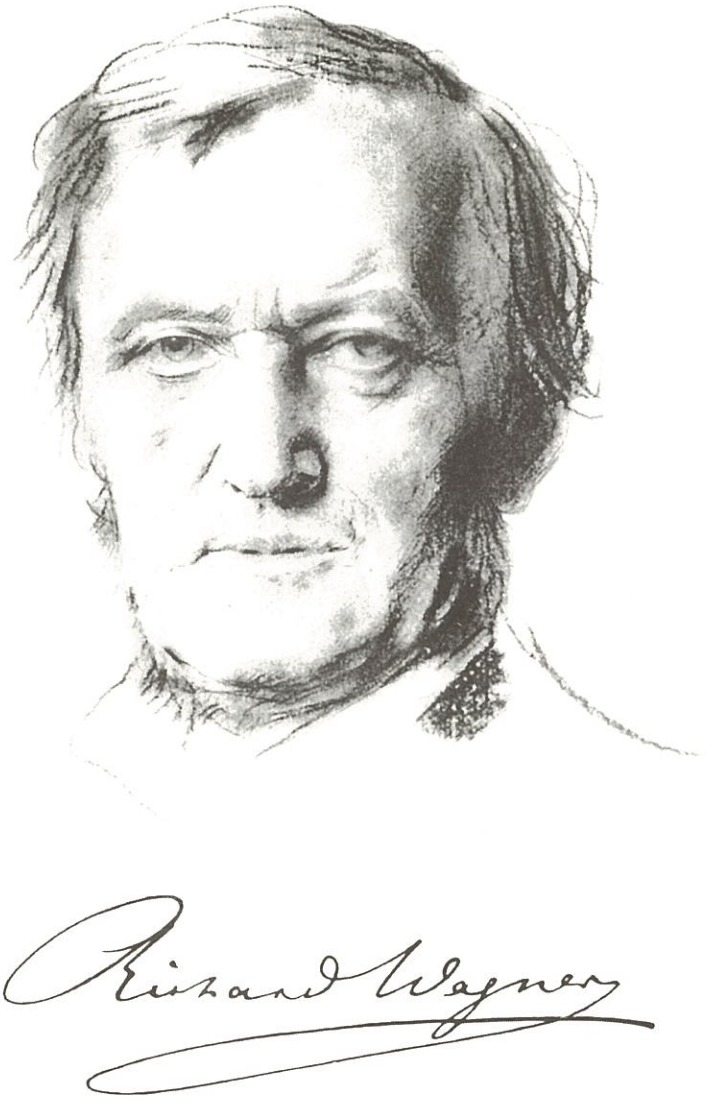
$7

Leitmotive

The Wagner Quarterly



Volume 23, Number 3

Fall 2009 ISSUE 87

EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

CONTENTS

The Editor's Thoughts

Ernest Newman, in his monumental four-volume biography of Wagner, many times expresses his view that Wagner was unique among all composers in many ways, but, especially with respect to his enormous knowledge of history and religions: excepting for specialists in particular fields, few persons who have ever lived had the wealth of information in these areas (and many other areas, too) that Wagner had gained from his incessant reading and study.

As I read, and re-read, Professor Colombo's penetrating analysis of *Tannhäuser,* I was repeatedly reminded of this virtually unique human phenomenon—the unusual breadth of Wagner's areas of competence. Nothing I have previously read about this opera (and that is a lot) dealt with anywhere near so many of the historical and religious incidents with which our author is obviously conversant. Some writers mention one or two such important early events, but never have I encountered the whole of what Colombo has given us here. And each of his references is important, and often crucial—if we are to fully understand this remarkable opera and what Wagner was telling us.

Reading the third section of his essay, which addresses the role of Elizabeth, I again felt a significantly improved understanding. My enjoyment and emotional response would have been much greater the many times earlier when I have seen *Tannhäuser*—had I then only known of this analysis. Additionally, it is a joy to again have further confirmation of the extraordinary depth and richness—which we often miss—to be found in each of Wagner's operas. I wonder if it is possible ever to understand, completely, the whole of what Wagner has given us: surely assessments, rare as they are, like this by Joseph Colombo will help.

Last August's Seattle *Ring* was superb. We have two articles singing its praises.

LEITMOTIVE–*THE WAGNER QUARTERLY*

Robert S. Fisher, Editor
Lisa Burkett, Associate Editor
Typography: Francisco Moreno

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.

LEITMOTIVE–*THE WAGNER QUARTERLY* is published four times a year as Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter issues. Actual publication dates can vary, but all annual subscriptions to this journal are for four issues. There are no "double" issues. Views expressed are those of the authors of the specific articles in this journal, and are not necessarily the views of the Editor or the Publisher.

We invite all interested persons to submit articles for publication: please see the back cover.

Subscriptions: $28 US and Canada, ($38 overseas) for four issues. Substantial discounts are available to groups. Single copies, when available, $7, postpaid in the US and Canada. Orders should be mailed to the address on the back cover. A list of back copies of this journal, and a short description of contents, is available at no charge if the request is accompanied with a 9" x 12" (or larger) manila envelope with first class postage for four ounces.

The Publisher of LEITMOTIVE–*THE WAGNER QUARTERLY* is the Wagner Society of Northern California, PO Box 590990, San Francisco, California 94159.

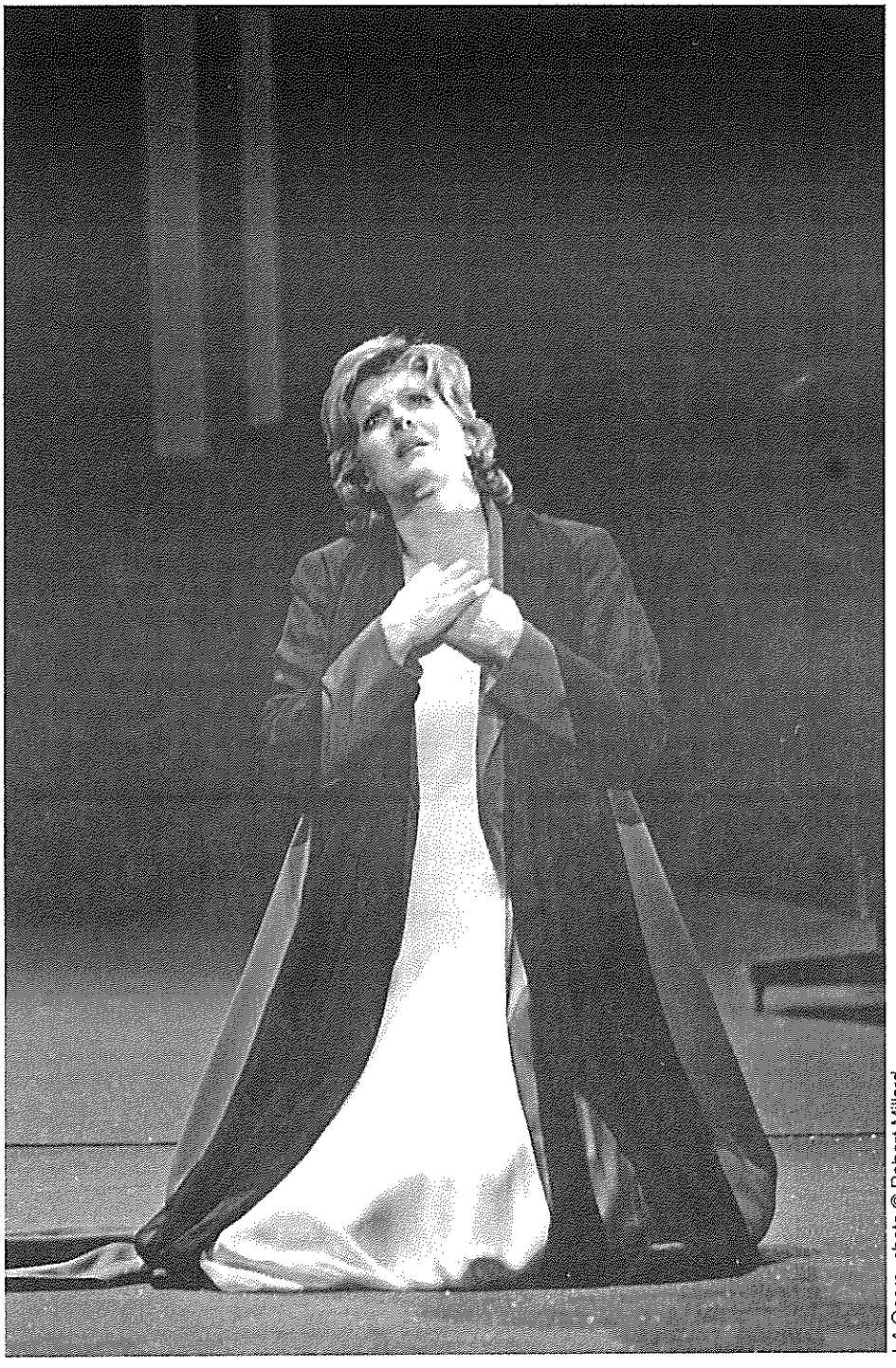
David Dalto, Founding Editor (1985–1989) *Paul Schofield, Editor (1990)*

About the Authors

Joseph Colombo "The Problem of Tannhäuser's Sin: II", 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.

Lisa Burkett "Zurück vom *Ring*" is Associate Editor of *Leitmotive–The Wagner Quarterly.* She is a 27-year member of The Wagner Society of Northern California and a former member of its Board of Directors. She is a graduate of San Francisco State University and the proud guardian of a 14-year-old cat named Brangäne.

Robert S. Fisher "A Great *Ring* That Only Gets Better", is Editor of *Leitmotive–The Wagner Quarterly.*



LA Opera, photo © Robert Millard

Elizabeth earnestly prays in Act III to the Virgin Mary for Tannhäuser to be forgiven for his "unforgivable" sin, apostasy. Professor Colombo, in this concluding part of his article, explains the dual role played by Elizabeth in what can be, in some productions, an extraordinarily moving experience. Petra Maria Schnitzer sings here in the Los Angeles production of 2007 which was in modern dress, but nonetheless true to Wagner's story.

The Problem of Tannhäuser's Sin: II

A Theologian Examines Elizabeth's Role

In the previous issue, Professor Colombo explained that in the Christian tradition all but one sin can be forgiven—but only when circumstances are appropriate. The one sin that cannot be forgiven is that of apostasy: renouncing ones faith, which Christians consider to be a sin against the Holy Spirit. It is explained exactly how this appears to be the sin of Tannhäuser and how it relates to Venus. However, a special exception to the one Unforgivable Sin is suggested, involving a pilgrimage to Rome during a special year—a Jubilee Year. This, the author contends, appears to be a likely explanation of one aspect of Wagner's plot. However, as those familiar with this opera know, although he makes the pilgrimage, Tannhäuser is not forgiven in Rome. The nature and details of his ultimately being forgiven are explained in the first part of this article. Copies of the previous issue are available postpaid for $7. —Ed.

III Elizabeth

The story of Tannhäuser is, ultimately, a miracle story in both the broad and narrow sense of the term "miracle." In the broad sense of the term, the forgiveness Tannhäuser receives and accepts is both unexpected and wondrous, not least because it revises and thwarts the intent of the traditional ending of the tale. But, it is also a miracle story in the narrow sense of the term, the violation of a law of nature with respect to the Pope's staff signifying a far more profound and puzzling violation of the divine ordinance itself. The question, "How does this come about?" comes rushing in and any so-called answer is inextricably bound up with the character of Elizabeth.

When one mentions the character of Elizabeth in *Tannhäuser,* then talk about Saint Elizabeth of Hungary cannot be far off. Born to King Andrew II of Hungary in 1207, Elizabeth resided in the Wartburg castle from age 4 when she was betrothed to Ludwig, the eldest son of Hermann, Landgrave of Thuringia until her death in 1231. Arguably the second most famous denizen of the Wartburg—Martin Luther being the first—she was married at age 14, widowed as a mother of three at age 20 when her husband died of plague on

his way to join the Sixth Crusade, herself dead at age 24, and canonized a saint a scant four years later in 1235. Strongly influenced by that new-fangled religious movement called the Franciscans, whose lay Third Order she appears to have joined following the death of her husband, she became renowned for her works of charity among the physically sick, the poor and the destitute. Parenthetically, whatever else we might say about poor Tannhäuser and his plight, he does not fit any of *these* categories!

Music historians have noted that the character of Elizabeth was among the last elements to take shape in the genesis of Wagner's libretto. The truth is that if print space is any index, Wagner himself appears to have been somewhat ambivalent about her. In the same 1852 essay I mentioned earlier, Tannhäuser receives about ten pages of print, Venus about a page and a half, and poor Elizabeth only about fifty words! Be this as it may, it was, no doubt, Elizabeth of Hungary's geographical association with the Wartburg that permitted Wagner initially to incorporate reference to her into his libretto together with the other two originally independent literary streams on which he also drew: "the Tannhäuser and Venus" stream, and "the song contest in the Wartburg" stream. To be sure, Wagner most certainly expects and wants his listeners to catch this reference. Tannhäuser's last words is his exclamation, "Heilige Elizabeth, bitte für mich!" Usually—and correctly—translated, "Holy Elizabeth, pray for me!" the word *heilige* does double duty in German, sometimes functioning as the ordinary adjective "holy," but also functioning as the proper word for "saint." "Saint Elizabeth, pray for me!"

Yet one may wonder whether this reference to Saint Elizabeth is sometimes stressed too much, that reference being more on the order of a real but still casual allusion rather than a sustained identification. After all, there are more, far more significant dissimilarities than similarities between Elizabeth of Hungary and the Elizabeth of *Tannhäuser*! Moreover, the ready identification of these two Elizabeth's threatens to foreshorten our perspective, occluding recognition of other potential sources for this complex character, for example, Mathilde von Falkenstein, the "prize" of the song-contest in E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Der Kampf der Sänger*. Further, this ready identification threatens to make us overlook the remarkable transformation Elizabeth undergoes in the course of the opera and the real fundamental identification that may be at work in Act III. Indeed, the depth of this basic transformation tempts me to speak about the two Elizabeths exhibited in Wagner's libretto.

We first *see* Elizabeth in Act II when she returns to the Wartburg after having absented herself since Tannhäuser's disappearance. In the first two scenes, she presents herself as humble, demure and (presumably) chaste, but her ec-

static salutation to the Wartburg Hall and subsequent duet with Tannhäuser also discloses that she is deeply in love with him. There is no reason to think, so far as I can tell, that this love is only a Platonic or solely a spiritual love. The simple fact of the matter is that the flesh-and-blood Elizabeth loves the equally flesh-and-blood Tannhäuser. What the Landgrave refers to as Elizabeth's "sweet secret" is nothing other than the fact of this worldly love and its anticipated consummation in the announcement of a betrothal to Tannhäuser who, it is assumed, will be the easy victor in the song contest. Presumably, this worldly but ordered love includes a physical, sexual component, thus suggesting that the facile dichotomy within which the opera is sometimes expressed—carnal lust (Venus) versus spiritual love (Elizabeth)—is a superficial, false opposition.

When we see Elizabeth in the third act—I'll return to the final scene of the second act in a moment—she is wholly transformed, a transformation that is briefly but dramatically represented in her prayer. Three facets of this prayer are worth attending to.

First, Elizabeth's prayer is not addressed to God or to the Savior, but to the "Almighty Virgin," ("Allmächt'ge Jungfrau") that is, Mary, drawing on the rich and varied tradition of Marian piety and devotion that exploded in the 12th century and continued—especially in southern Germany—down to Wagner's own day. In Elizabeth's prayer, Mary is implicitly addressed and represented as the Mediatrix of All Graces, a title that first begins to attain prominence in the 13th century. Roman Catholics my age or older may vividly remember this function attributed to Mary in the prayer called the *Memorare.* Widely, although erroneously, attributed in the 19th century to the 13th century Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the *Memorare* was recited at the conclusion of each Latin or Tridentine Mass until the late 1960s:

> Remember, O Most Gracious Virgin Mary,
> that never was it known that anyone who fled to Thy protection,
> implored Thy help or sought Thy intercession, was left unaided.
> Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto Thee, O Virgin of Virgins, my Mother;
> to Thee do I come, before thee I kneel, sinful and sorrowful.
> O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my petitions,
> but in Thy clemency, hear and answer me.
> Amen.

This is not the first reference in the opera to Mary as Intercessor and Mediatrix. After all, it is through his invocation and appeal to her in the final words of the second scene in the first act—"Mein Heil liegt in Maria!"—that

Tannhäuser is finally set free from the Venusburg and transported to the Thuringian fields. Further, Wagner's own stage directions specify that in both the third and fourth scenes of Act I and throughout Act III, a small Marian roadside shrine—not unlike those that can still be seen in Bavaria today—is to be placed in the foreground of the stage. In short, Mary is quite present from the beginning to the end in Wagner's opera, the silent agent whose presence and actions bring about the critical dramatic developments: Tannhäuser's release from the Venusburg and the redemption of his soul.

Second, Elizabeth's prayer, specifically her appeal to Mary to "make [her] pure and angel-like" and to overlook Elizabeth's own *"tör'gem Wahn"* ["foolish fancy"], *sündiges Verlangen* ["sinful longings"], and *weltlich Sehnen* ["worldly yearnings"] is fascinating because Elizabeth is usually presented as a one-dimensional desexualized character. These phrases constitute, we could say, the problem of Elizabeth's sin! What could this petition refer to other than the previous quality of Elizabeth's love for Tannhäuser, previous that is to the last fifteen minutes of the second act? In fact, her petitions indirectly confirm that Elizabeth's love of Tannhäuser in Act II was something more than just a Platonic or spiritual love, and they mark out, *ex post facto* so to speak, the break between the two Elizabeths.

Third, and most importantly, both in her prayer *and* through her actions in the third act, Elizabeth becomes *the* intercessor for Tannhäuser. Before our eyes, Elizabeth functionally comes to play with respect to Tannhäuser, the very role she universally ascribes in her prayer to the Almighty Virgin. *Now* her love for Tannhäuser is purely spiritual; *now* her interest is solely focused on the forgiveness of his sin. Further, Elizabeth's suffering and sorrow over Tannhäuser's spiritual condition in the sequencing of the third act suggests that her death to and in the world is both the culmination and consummate pledge of the earnestness of her transformation, and a critical link in the miraculous supernatural causal chain of events by which Tannhäuser's redemption is effected. The consonance of this theme with the medieval devotion to the Seven Sorrows of Mary, the explicit focus of the Servite Order (founded in 1239), would be here a fruitful line of inquiry to pursue further. Indeed, at this juncture, I can only put forward a hypothesis even more tentative than the one regarding Tannhäuser's sin. While Wagner certainly *references* Elizabeth of Hungary in the third act, the more apt *identification* of Elizabeth in this final act is with the Virgin Mary herself, with whom Elizabeth becomes functionally equivalent. In other words, in Act III Elizabeth becomes the this-worldly icon of the heavenly Queen. Perhaps this functional equivalence is already adumbrated in the parallelism exhibited between two critical changes

of place in scenes two and four of the first act that are essential to the dramatic development of Wagner's narrative: just as Tannhäuser is transported from Venus' domain to Thuringia through his calling on the name of Mary, so also Tannhäuser is brought back and turns from the Thuringian fields to the Wartburg, thereby completing his "return," by Wolfram's calling on the name of Elizabeth, "Bleib bei Elizabeth!" ["Remain by Elizabeth!"]. In both cases, these names powerfully function as virtual talismans, able to bring about what otherwise would not be able to come to pass.

Wagner's genius as a librettist lies in the artistry by which he brought together disparate elements to fashion a new whole. That genius is not least on display in the way he both brings together and establishes continuity and discontinuity between the two Elizabeths: the Elizabeth of Act II, Scenes 1-3 and the Elizabeth of Act III. The development lies in what I have called the dramatic core of the opera, the last half of Act II, Scene 4, where we see—and hear—the transformation take place before us. I will simply mention the three most noteworthy elements here.

First, in this scene Elizabeth clearly begins to take on the intercessory function that will figure so prominently in Act III. Here she successfully intercedes with the knights gathered in the Wartburg to spare Tannhäuser's physical life; in the third act she will with equal success intercede with Heaven itself to spare Tannhäuser's spiritual life. Second, Elizabeth herself recognizes the change the revelation of Tannhäuser's apostasy has brought on her. Foreshadowing her physical death in Act III, three times she exclaims that the toll exacted on her by Tannhäuser's disclosure is nothing less than her death. In this, she is surely correct: the Elizabeth of the previous scenes, the one for whose foolishness she begs forgiveness in her prayer, has effectively been slain by the events in the Wartburg Hall. Third, the fact of this transformation is not lost on those present who through their response shape the way the audience is to respond to this "new" Elizabeth. Six times the knight-minnesingers and/or Tannhäuser himself explicitly describe Elizabeth as now having taken on the appearance of a heavenly being, specifically an "Engel" ["angel"], preparing us, I suggest, for her further development in the third act into a worldly icon of the heavenly Virgin. More precisely, through a stunning entwinement and repetition of these last two literary themes, Wagner effectively transforms Elizabeth, the maiden of a truly worldly love for Tannhäuser into his worldly and, ultimately, otherworldly intercessor. No wonder Wagner chose as Tannhäuser's final words, "Holy Elizabeth, pray for me!"

— Joseph Colombo

Zurück vom Ring!

The Ending of the Ring *as Executed by Seattle Opera*

Following Hagen's closing line, Richard Wagner penned in his libretto very specific and seemingly impossible stage directions:

> Woglinde and Wellgunde twine their arms around his neck and draw him with them into the depths as they swim away. Flosshilde, swimming in front of the others toward the back, joyously holds up on high the regained ring. Through the cloudbank, which has settled on the horizon, a red glow breaks out with increasing brightness. By its light, the three Rhinemaidens are seen, swimming in circles, merrily playing with the ring on the calmer waters of the Rhine, which has gradually returned to its bed. From the ruins of the fallen hall, the men and women, in great agitation, watch the growing firelight in the heavens. When this reaches its greatest brightness, the hall of Walhall is seen, in which gods and heroes sit assembled, just as Waltraute described in the first act. Bright flames seize on the hall of the gods. When the gods are entirely hidden by the flames, the curtain falls.[1]

Unquestionably a challenge even to the opera company with a boundless budget, stage directors and impresarios have struggled with this problematic ending. Some choose to stage a few aspects of it; some dispense entirely with Wagner's directions. In the Stuttgart *Ring* production, available on DVD,

1. Richard Wagner, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, English translation by Andrew Porter, W.W. Norton & Company, 1976

director Peter Konwitschny opted to project the text of Wagner's directions verbatim on a screen and dispense with staging the closing moments.

In creating his company's *Ring* production, which premiered in 2001, Seattle Opera General Director Speight Jenkins stated repeatedly that the production team would work first on the ending of *Götterdämmerung*. In his own words, Mr. Jenkins describes the complexity: "What is astonishing about this is the graphic painting by the orchestra. No production has in the last 129 years visually portrayed what the music tells us. One would have to burn down the theatre and then flood it to do this. But the music makes us see what happens. As Wagner wanted, the drama is contained within the music."[2]

Seattle Opera's staging of the final moments of the *Ring*, as directed by Stephen Wadsworth, was met with some confusion at its initial presentation in 2001. *New York Times* critic Anthony Tommasini, who generally lavished praise on the production, found fault with the ending and repeated his concerns in a May 2009 article.[3] In our current cyber age, his comments stirred up a bit of controversy in the blogosphere.

2. *Magic Fire, Broken Vows, and Passionate Love: Speight Jenkins' Guide to Wagner's* Ring, audio CD, 2005
3. Anthony Tommasini, "Gods in Castles and Mobile Homes", *New York Times*, May 22, 2009

Seattle Opera, photo © Rozarii Lynch

A jubilant Flosshilde (Jennifer Hines) holds aloft the recovered ring.

"Anthony Tommasini wrote an interesting article for the *New York Times* on Sunday about current productions of the *Ring*. I have to quibble with Mr. Tommasini when he says about the Seattle *Ring*: 'The one miscalculation the director Stephen Wadsworth made in his imaginative *Ring* for the Seattle Opera, which I saw at its premiere in 2001, was the ending of *Götterdämmerung*. This outdoorsy, environmental staging, the "green *Ring*," returns to the company this summer. At its conclusion, as the river overflows its banks and the ring is returned to the Rhinemaidens, the gods appear out of nowhere in some nether realm, exchanging congratulatory hugs, now that the curse is broken and the natural order restored. No! The gods should be kaput.'

I'm sorry if it looked to Mr. Tommasini, in 2001, as if our gods survived the apocalypse. In 2005, with the increased technical possibilities of McCaw Hall (as opposed to 2001's Seattle Opera House), it was more clear that the gods were hugging each other in farewell; that they would not in fact survive. I'm also fascinated by his description of Seattle's *Ring* as 'outdoorsy' and 'environmental'. More to come on that later..." [4]

By 2005, following the opening of McCaw Hall, the ending of *Götterdämmerung* had changed immensely. The new hall contains a critical feature sadly missing from the old house: traps beneath the stage. Hagen vanished via a trap door; the gods were assembled on a platform which descended via an elevator at the time of their demise. Members of the public and critics alike lauded the improved staging:

"The finale always presents a huge staging challenge. This year's imaginative restaging has a handsome live horse (the one Brünnhilde is to ride into the flames), a powerful confrontation between Brünnhilde and Hagen with the former suddenly tossing the hotly contested ring to the airborne Rhinemaidens, and a fascinating tableau in which Valhalla slowly rises aloft—complete with Wotan and all the gods, now white-haired with age.

"Finally the clouds clear away, and the original forest set is restored in all its pristine natural glory. It's a thrilling conclusion to four glorious nights of opera." [5]

Not everyone was absolutely won over by the transformation, however. The Fall 2005 issue of *Leitmotive* featured a review positive in nearly every aspect except the staging of the final moments:

"The finale of *Götterdämmerung* had become altogether more convincing; there is no longer any doubt that the Gods perish, 'entirely consumed by fire.'

4. Commentary by Jonathan Dean, Seattle Opera Education Artistic Administrator, http://seattleopera.blogspot.com/ May 28, 2009

5. Melinda Bargreen, "Best for Last: 4th Opera Caps *Ring*", *Seattle Times*, August 25, 2005

Is it carping to suggest that after the magical effect of so much real fire onstage the cyclorama flames here were an anticlimax, and there it was underwhelming simply to have swirling clouds 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 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 (no) (or sequoia?) burgeoning now with new growth and new life."[6]

So what would 2009 hold? Many of us had experienced the production in its previous incarnations and hence had preconceived biases. Over half of the cast, however, was new to this production. How would their performances affect the overall experience and the critically important ending?

Whatever an audience member's perceptions of, or reactions to, the ending may be, it is difficult to imagine anyone leaving less than exhilarated. I had the great fortune to attend two cycles this year, at the first of which the computers controlling the stage machinery malfunctioned in Acts I and II of *Götterdämmerung*, each time forcing Maestro Robert Spano to stop the orchestra. Discussion ensued among the audience at the second intermission along with pleas to Valhalla to spare the closing scene from such a fate!

Let us hear the reactions of two very perceptive *Ring* participants, beginning with Rick Davis from Canton, Ohio:

"The final five minutes of the *Ring* must have cost a fortune. ...The most significant change this year was the ending to *Götterdämmerung*. As Brünnhilde finishes singing, the sets go up, projection scrims come down, and the Rhinemaidens are all back with Brünnhilde and Hagen. Then we are inside of Valhalla with all of the gods gathered together on a platform. Wotan and Fricka give each other a hug (I guess for old time's sake), Loge ignites a flame, and flames are projected all around. Then the scrims go up and we have a wonderful outdoor scene from *Rheingold* with a pristine new world and new growth sprouting out of everything. It truly left me speechless and I was unable even to applaud for quite awhile."[7]

Another seasoned Wagnerian, Terry Quinn, traveled from the U.K. to experience this *Ring* production once again and offers his impressions:

"*Götterdämmerung* was the perfect end to a terrific *Ring*. The ending is per-

6. Dr. Paul Dawson-Bowling, "The Seattle Ring – 2005", *LEITMOTIVE*, Volume 19, Number 3, Fall 2005.

7. This quotation originally appeared in the September 2009 issue of *WSNC* – E-Notes, Sandra Molyneaux, Editor. Reprinted with the permission of the author and the editor.

haps the most complex piece of staging I and most of those I was with have ever seen. Brünnhilde throws a blazing torch onto the bier and the fire engulfs the stage. Grane returns to be led into the fire. (The real name of the horse is appropriate—Star!) On the return of the nature motif the Rhine floods and the Rhine Daughters reappear, swimming above the drowning Hagen. Everything fades behind a scrim with projections of both fire and water as the music builds. Then after the final pause, the music that was previously known as the redemption motif, but now relabeled as the glorification of Brünnhilde, appears together with one final appearance of the Siegfried motif.

"The scrim lifts to show the return of the opening scene from *Rheingold* with trees, rocks, moss and all. But growing from the trunk of the decaying fallen tree are three new saplings signifying the start of a new world. The scene becomes progressively brighter up to the climactic ending. The effect is stunningly beautiful. Most *Rings* end on a decided downer, this one is uplifting and uniquely optimistic."[8]

With at least four scene changes in fewer than five minutes, it is understandable that some observers were perplexed. A friend who attended previous cycles insisted that this time she saw Brünnhilde amidst the gods on the platform as they met their ending. I tried to persuade her that she was looking at some other character, that Brünnhilde was already consumed by the fire before the gods' appearance. Only after a call to the Seattle Opera office was she convinced that it was Waltraute whom she spotted. Another attendee was certain that he saw the broken pieces of Wotan's spear protruding from Loge's chest, as the Norns describe in the prologue. Really? How did I miss that, I wondered? It turns out that I didn't miss it nor did you: the observer was anticipating such an image and incorrectly believed it to have been included.

For me, the most important enhancement to the conclusion of *Götterdämmerung* was Wotan's clear recognition of the ring's recovery by the Rhine Daughters. Seconds before Valhalla and the gods perished, Wotan, portrayed by Greer Grimsley, stepped forward to acknowledge Flosshilde swimming away with the ring she had received from Brünnhilde. Here was a prime example of Mr. Wadsworth adhering not only to Wagner's stage directions, but more importantly, to the directions indicated in the "graphic painting by the orchestra" that Mr. Jenkins referenced.

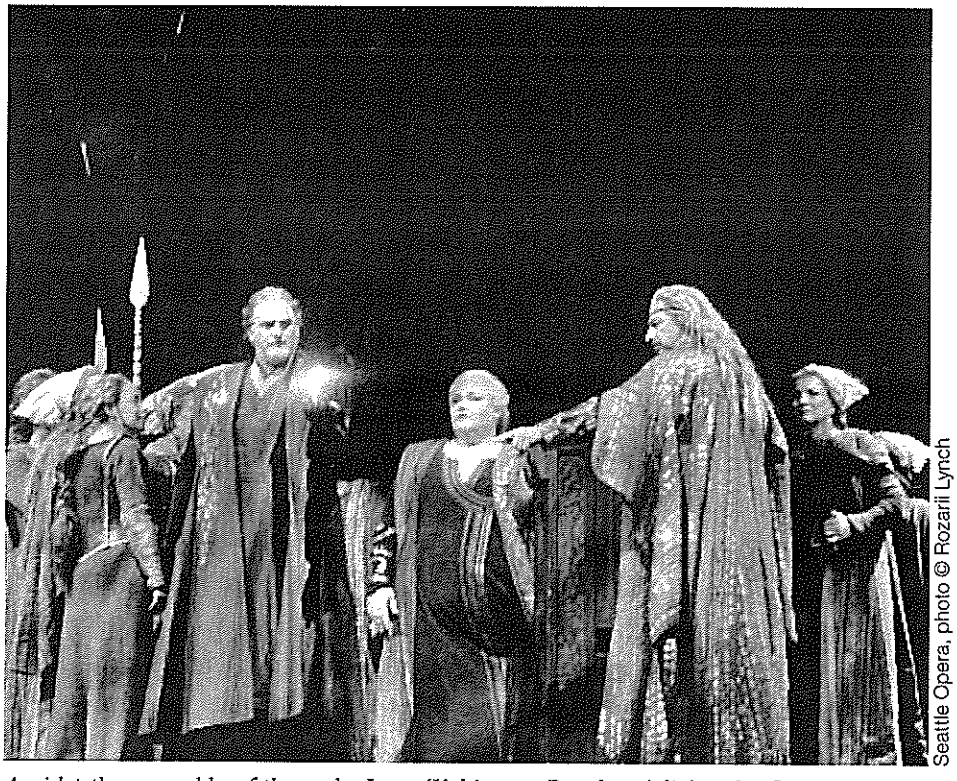
Whatever our interpretation of the ending of the *Ring*, or our perception of Stephen Wadsworth's staging, we exited the performance enlightened and, for many of us, embarking on a state of serious *Ring* withdrawal. "We really

8. Ibid.

have to wait until 2013 to see this production again?" lamented a devotee at the post-performance Q&A session. "Four more years is a long time!" tweeted one of my Twitter followers. I will close with a quote from an educator who contributed immeasurably to the appreciation of the *Ring* for scores of audiences, the late Director of Education at Seattle Opera, Perry Lorenzo. In his concluding remarks on *Götterdämmerung,* he stated "...the *Ring* is an open work and it has to find its meaning's fulfillment in our own personal exploration of it."[9]

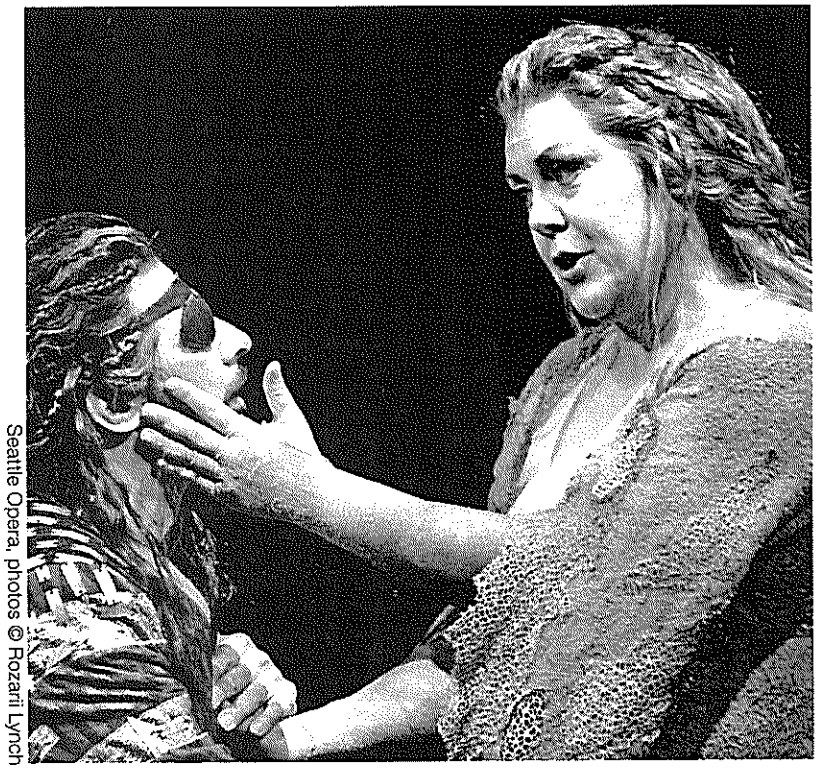
— Lisa Burkett

9. *Exploring the* Ring *with Perry Lorenzo,* Disc Four: *Götterdämmerung,* audio CD, 2001.



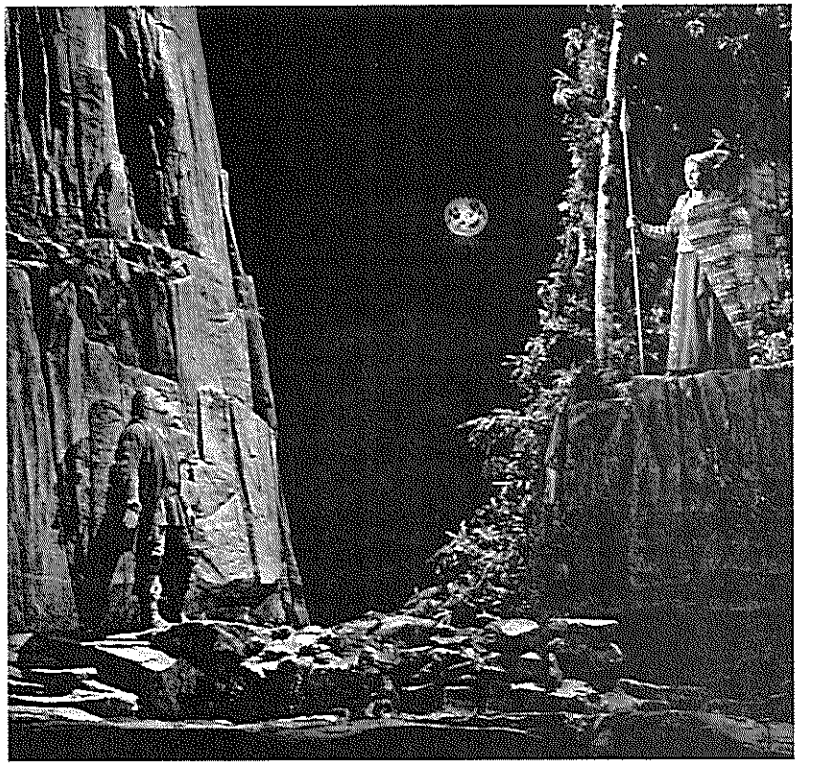
Seattle Opera, photo © Rozarii Lynch

Amidst the assembly of the gods, Loge (Kobie van Rensburg) lights the flame signaling their demise (with Stephanie Blythe as Fricke and Greer Grimsley as Wotan).Although not clearly shown in this photograph, the platform on which the assembled gods were standing (in the 2009 production) was a quite large replica of the top (capital) of an ancient Greek, Corinthian column. Our editor sees this as a masterstroke in that this specific type of column brings forth in the audience's mind, consciously or unconsciously, an association with governments—this because governments' buildings so often use Greek architectural motifs. In this case, it is a government that is about to disappear, as the gods are about to die from the fire. Although the power of the ring reverts to Nature as represented by the Rhine Daughters, they have demonstrated that their ability to protect that power is limited. What the future holds is most unclear.



Seattle Opera, photos © Rozarii Lynch

In Das Rheingold, *Erda (Maria Streijffert) has a somewhat chummy conversation with Wotan (Greer Grimsley). So often the characters in Wagner's operas stand still and sing at each other. In Wadsworth's Seattle production there was much touching.*



In Die Walküre, *it can be deeply moving when Brünnhilde (Janice Baird) sings the Todesverkündigung (announcement of Siegmund's (Stuart Skelton) soon to come death). She is high above him in her most magisterial form. Sieglinde (Margaret Jane Wray) is asleep to the right, just outside this photograph.*

A Great *Ring* That Only Gets Better

Seattle Opera Refines Its Authentic Production

I. Myth Undisturbed

Probably the single most important element of this production is that the *mythology* that Wagner wrote into the work is fully intact—and, equally significant, nothing that he did *not* write was gratuitously added. Obviously many other things are also very notable in this presentation, but unlike almost all other current productions, worldwide, Seattle has been true to what Wagner wrote. Perhaps not everyone sees that as a virtue; some opera-goers are mainly interested in the singing and do not miss being moved by the totality of the presentation—an experience that can be extraordinary (as it was in Seattle). Others doubtless find that clever modifications to what Wagner wrote are entertaining—again, being moved by the totality of Wagner's work is not particularly important to them, and that is their privilege. But for those of us who come to the *Ring* to get its full impact and to be emotionally moved, sticking with Wagner is important.[1]

II. The Greek Influence - Mythology

Virtually everyone who reads this article knows that Wagner was enormously impressed with the ancient Greeks and especially with their drama —which, as contrasted to the European opera of Wagner's time, involved the entire community, both the economically poor and the economically privileged, alike. Further, as the basis for their stories, the Fifth Century B.C. Greek plays employed the then current Greek mythology, which was widely familiar to almost every member of the Greek community. Wagner understood the

1. I do not mean to suggest that the staging need be as Wagner produced it in 1876. On the contrary, Wieland Wagner (with the assistance of Wolfgang), after World War II, produced what seem to have been incredibly moving accounts (unfortunately, I never was able to attend any of them). But Wieland did not tamper with Wagner's story: the myth was intact. And there have been other productions that do not distort Wagner's story.

key importance of mythology as a means of imparting ideas in his drama that the community members (German) all understood and as a powerful means of expressing the realities of life itself. Accordingly, he saw myth as being a fundamental building block for his *Ring*.[2]

Although Wagner used Norse and Germanic mythology in the *Ring*, a key to understanding the *Ring* is that one notice that mythology is a critically important part, possibly the single most important constituent of the entire work. Wagner wrote at length of the importance of myth[3] and of how it conveys to the observers fundamentals about life and the world, but without the distraction of seeing ourselves on stage.

Understandably, accurate portrayal of the myth that Wagner wrote into his *Ring* will not, by itself, necessarily make an exciting production.

III. *Gesamtkunstwerk*

In addition to Wagner's use of myth, most readers also have some familiarity with Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. He wrote extensively on this matter where he examines and praises the idea of bringing all of the arts together—an "integration of the arts"—in opera.[4] Each art form, e.g. singing, orchestral music, drama, etc., has the capacity by itself to move us – to bring forth in us an emotional response. Because of the potential power that each art form has within itself, Wagner felt, that if the several different art forms are presented to the spectator simultaneously, each carrying an emotional jolt in the direction of his story, then the total reaction in the audience would be much greater than if fewer were used. Thus not only is the singing important for Wagner, but similarly the acting, the music, the poetry, the costumes, the staging, the lighting, etc.—each has its role in achieving the sought-after end—which is to deeply move all of those watching and hearing. And, most importantly, each of these art forms must be fashioned to work *together* with all of the others so as to achieve the desired end.

Accordingly, the music and the poetry must be *synchronized*—they and all of the other arts employed must work together towards the goal of moving the

2. A most interesting and useful account of this part of Wagner's background is *Wagner and Aeschylus* by Michael Ewans (London: Faber and Faber, 1982). Also particularly useful in understanding the myth in Wagner's works is *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, by Dieter Borchmeyer (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003). Originally published by Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2002.

3. One example of many: "The incomparable thing about [myth] is, that it is true for all time, and its content...is inexhaustible throughout the ages." *Opera and Drama: Part II* (included in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Volume 2). Trans., William Ashton Ellis. (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1893). Reprinted 1995, University of Nebraska Press. p.191. The reprinted volume is titled *Opera and Drama*.

4. A comparatively short essay on this subject was earlier published in this journal. It has five parts starting with the Fall 1998 issue. Written by Dr. David Ostwald, these back issues are available as a set of five for $17, postpaid in the U.S.

audience. The current Seattle Opera *Ring* probably comes closer to achieving this than any other production of the work anywhere in the world today.

The reason for this pre-eminence is that so many other contemporary *Ring* productions are examples of "regie theatre"—productions where the director's pet ideas supplant the ideas that Wagner left us. In short, the director's ego, in these productions, has become more important than Wagner's story: a new story, the director's own, is introduced. The inevitable result is that the many elements of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Wagner had conceived get mixed up and no longer all support each other: sometimes in such productions they even are in direct conflict with each other.[5]

Stephen Wadsworth (Director of the Seattle Opera *Ring* in each of its several complete productions beginning in 2001), told the audience at a symposium held in August 2009 (on the day between performances of *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried*) that in Seattle they produce the work as Wagner had written it. And with very minor exceptions, this is certainly true – and bravely at odds with almost every other important current *Ring* production in the world. Wadsworth and Jenkins believe that Wagner knew what he was doing and respect his great art—current fads elsewhere to the contrary notwithstanding!

IV. Subtle Changes

The August 2009 performances in Seattle constituted the third time that the Wadsworth *Ring* has been given. At each succeeding series of presentations, the basic production has been the same, i.e. scenery, costumes, lighting, etc. However, and of major importance, there have been a number of subtle revisions and changes, that, in each instance, have resulted in a significant increase of the work's impact on the audience.

As an example, consider the extraordinarily poignant scene at almost the very end of *Die Walküre* where Wotan tells Brünnhilde that he is going to put her into a long sleep and that the first man who comes along will awaken her and claim her as his bride. She pleads that this will result in essentially any man, of no character whatever, forcing her to succumb to his will. At the least, she urges, place a ring of fire around her so that no one but a true hero will be

5. A single, recent example might be the Washington,DC—San Francisco Operas' ending of *Das Rheingold* where Wagner has the gods cross a rainbow bridge to enter Walhalla. The music is among the most serious, dignified and stately that Wagner ever wrote. Obviously the gods are quite solemn as they prepare to enter their new fortress with much hope that it will protect them from the realities of the world: it is a profoundly reflective moment for them. At this point, in the noted staging, the gods are dressed in the casual clothes of the Hampton's of 1930 walking up the gangplank of a yacht, apparently going for a cruise around Long Island Sound—completely oblivious to the uncertain and threatening nature of their world. Here this production ignores Wagner's story resulting in the destruction of the entire mythological-musical relationship—the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

able to take her. Wotan agrees, but Brünnhilde continues to implore Wotan to leave her awake and in charge of herself. Of course, he does not go back on his decision, and ultimately he prepares to place her in a sleeping position on her rock, she all the while beseeching him to leave her in a state of freedom.

Wotan rejects all of her supplications and as he finally places her in her concluding position, preparatory to her long sleep, Wadsworth has Brünnhilde silently but pleadingly look up at her father while gently raising her left arm towards him in this, her last effort to achieve forgiveness and freedom. That effort fails.

For me, it was at most a minor gesture, but devastating: this girl full well understands what is about to happen to her, but resists to the very end, however so humbly and quietly.

It all happened in an instant, but it welled up, in me, the awful reality of what was happening to a young woman about whom we have come to care and whose sin actually seems pretty minor. It was a moment when I (and doubtless many others) suddenly grasped in but a second the sadness and inevitability of what life itself truly can be.

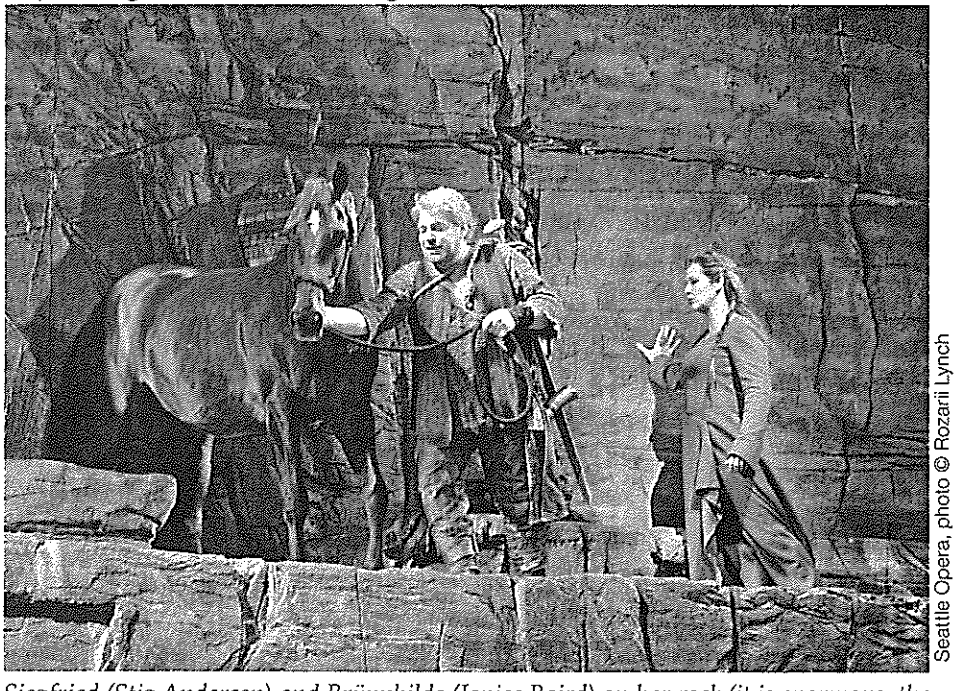
I am confident that Wagner wanted exactly the response that I experienced; and the wonder is that Wadsworth discovered how to bring it about: such subtleties are extraordinarily illusive, but, even though quite small in the grand scheme of the work, still, they move us deeply. And after the first instance in which we are moved, others come more easily.

I must add that not having seen a video of earlier renditions of the Wadsworth Seattle *Ring*, I obviously cannot be absolutely certain that this brief but powerful snippet did not occur before, but was missed by me (remember, this gesture of Brünnhilde's takes but a split second and had I scratched my eyelid I would have missed it). Also, and because there were a number of cast changes in this, the most recent presentation, it is possible some of the "subtle changes" were initiated by the singers: even so, Wadsworth had to approve and believe the result of each would be a real enhancement.

But even if it did occur before, there were a number of other such nuances that Wadsworth has woven into his whole that grabbed me. Examples include when in Act III of *Siegfried* our hero quickly kisses Brünnhilde's cheek, and, after he has moved back, she lightly touches, with her finger, the spot that he had kissed. To me this clearly demonstrated that while Brünnhilde may well be a warrior maiden, she also was a woman and had feelings: seeing her as a person with feelings caused me to connect with her unlike in most productions where she tends to be a one-dimensional fighter—to accept her as a feeling person drew me into her role and her place in the entire, huge drama.

Seattle Opera, photo © Rozarii Lynch

Early in Götterdämmerung, *when Waltraute (Stephanie Blythe) visits Brünnhilde (Janice Baird) on her rock, begging her to return the ring to the Rhine Daughters, Brünnhilde refuses. Unlike most productions, the two sisters clasp each other, thereby emphasizing their emotional exchange.*



Seattle Opera, photo © Rozarii Lynch

Siegfried (Stig Andersen) and Brünnhilde (Janice Baird) on her rock (it is enormous, the set weighing an actual 20,000 pounds). He is about to leave on his Rhine Journey with her horse, Grane. Usually live animals distract the spectators from the drama, but in Seattle it seemed perfectly natural.

Obviously the singer playing Brünnhilde in that act has a great deal to think about, especially the major singing that she must do. I do not know if the singers react painfully to Wadsworth's requests to remember these added bits of acting or if they agree with him. Whatever the case may be, a little tingle went down my spine when she gave us this crumb of evidence of her character's emotion—emotion that was immediately transmitted to us.

In Scene 1 of *Rheingold* the gold is on the top of a rather large rock, high up. Further, the rock is not easily accessible. When it is time for Alberich to steal the gold, in this production, he first must make a significant leap up onto the rock: that effort underscored the intensity of his drive to gain power. Had he simply been able easily to walk up to the gold, we would not have understood his resolve—believing and understanding that resolve is important for us if we are to be drawn in and live the drama as it unfolds. And this is necessary if we are to experience the emotional impact from the work that it is fully capable of producing when done well, as in Seattle.

In Act II of *Die Walküre* at one point Wotan gently strokes Brünnhilde's cheek– an obvious reflection of his affection for her. Without this brief movement, we might intellectually understand from the words that he loves his daughter, but we would likely not feel his love. For us to be connected, we need to feel that love.

In Act III the Walküre sisters bid good-bye to Brünnhilde: it is teary. That is meaningful for the audience and, again, draws us into the drama.

After all, the *Ring* is a gigantic metaphor for human life and that is a major reason why it is so extraordinarily fascinating. With his *Ring*, Wagner presents us a story that is akin to a fairy tale. Accordingly, we do not immediately see it as a representation of human life. As a consequence, we consider what is happening on stage differently than we would if we viewed the work as a very long morality lesson, aimed at us. But actually the Gods behave pretty much like humans; they encounter moral problems, they interact with each other as humans interact, ultimately they die—all like us. Wagner uses this ploy to reduce our preconceived notions (e.g., recognizing ourselves on stage accompanied by everything we know about us), about what we are experiencing. In time, we at least unconsciously recognize that the *Ring* is really about us.

Another little touch was in the first act of *Götterdämmerung* during the Waltraute scene when Brünnhilde gently, but perceptibly, weeps at the news Waltraute gives her (the latter sung by Stephanie Blythe: a wonder if there ever was one. Actually the whole cast was quite strong and well balanced in this production; it is just that Ms. Blythe blows your socks off.)

Each of these nuances is short and hardly cataclysmic, yet as a whole their

cumulative effect is to draw us in and help us to experience the power of this awesome work.

Subtleties are not easy for the stage director to pull off—it is much easier to make clever changes to Wagner's story, but when that is done, usually the result is not nearly as impressive to the audience as doing what Wadsworth has done in Seattle.

There were many more examples of Wadsworth's directing art. I recognize

Seattle Opera, photo © Chris Bennion

At the end of Die Walküre, *just before Wotan puts Brünnhilde to sleep, she pleads with him and, in this production, he seems touched, but resolute. Janice Baird and Greer Grimsley.*

that not everyone has the same reactions as I to what they see on the stage. Doubtless there are those who are quite excited by one "regie" director's cleverness[6] or that of another. And that is fine.

V. All Good Things Must End

But a great many of us are ever so grateful that Seattle Opera, its General Director, Speight Jenkins, and his chosen director for this *Ring*, Stephen Wadsworth, have put together such a magnificent production for us. Among other things, for me, and I believe for many others, the director having concentrated on those nuances that can move the audience had wonderful results: this *Ring* is the most moving one that I have ever seen (out of about 50) and in each iteration only becomes more so.

When the final curtain came down and the lengthy, tumultuous applause subsided, I got up from my orchestra level seat to leave. Of course I was elated and thrilled, but also this third series of the Seattle *Ring* was a sobering experience: I realized, sadly, that what I had just seen was today in all the world unique—not available elsewhere. I so hope to see it the last time it is given, in 2013. After that, where do we who love Wagner go if we seek an authentic production? Understanding the motivation of the general directors of the world's opera companies is puzzling: why do they permit their stage directors to so distort Wagner's masterpiece? Can it be simply that they want to be hip? I would guess not. But it is discouraging and sad.

As I neared the doorway, Speight Jenkins was standing directly in front of me, looking at me. He said, "Well, what did you think?"

Much moved and deep in thought, I could respond with but one word: "Overwhelming."

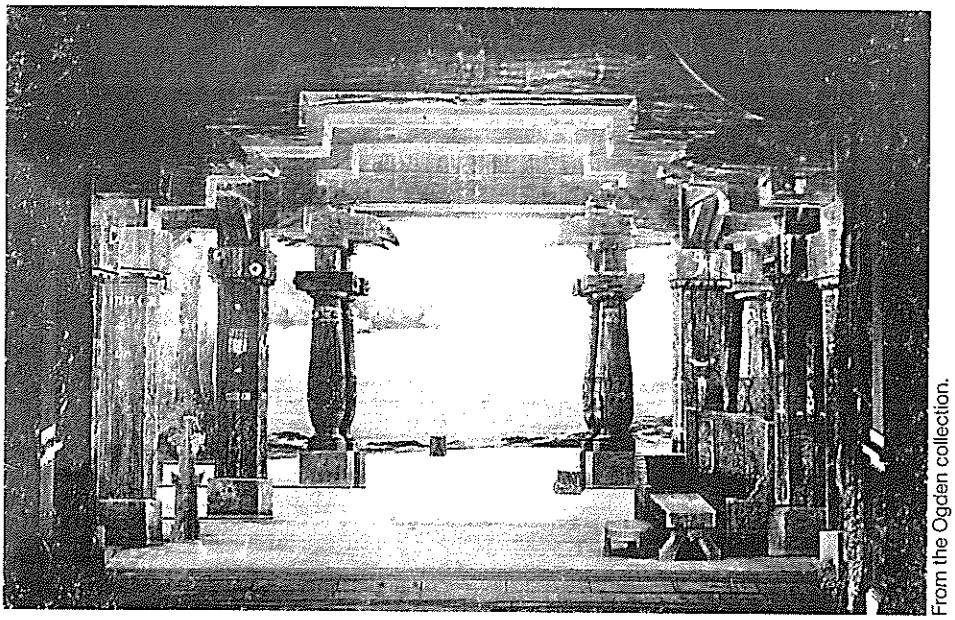
He thrust his hand out to shake mine and, grinning with his trademark smile, he said, "Good!"

Actually it was better than good—it was the best there is. I have no doubt but that Wagner would have loved it. Can we ask for more?

—Robert S. Fisher

6. A New York Times columnist recently wrote of the Los Angeles *Siegfried*, that in that opera Wagner had completely forgotten about Fricka and therefore the director had taken it upon himself (contrary to Wagner's libretto), to have her appear in the first act, thereby reinforcing her role as Wotan's conscience. My reaction to such cleverness is that (1) it is highly doubtful that Wagner forgot anything at all about his *Ring* and (2) by showing Fricka, the director has only succeeded in distracting the audience from the issues on which Wagner intended the audience to be concentrating. Had Wagner felt adding Fricka at this point would enhance the spectators' response to the work, he would have written it into the libretto. Further, it doesn't seem to me that there is much evidence that Wagner, especially with respect to drama, was an ignoramus.

19th CENTURY BAYREUTH: 11



From the Ogden collection.

Cosima's Gibichung Hall in the 1897 production of Götterdämmerung. *Although most of this scenery was canvas stretched on wood frames, the message is clear that we are in an ancient ruler's impressive castle, complete with mythic animals atop the columns.*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Editor,

I enjoyed reading the Winter '08–'09 issue (Volume 23, Number 4), which contained the articles on Harry Kupfer's *Ring* in Bayreuth, 1988, and on the revival of the Götz Friedrich *Ring* in Berlin. There is an interesting anecdote I can relate concerning "deviating" from Wagner.

In 1988, David Dalto, Steve Sokolow and I all thought that the Funeral March scene in Kupfer's Bayreuth *Ring* was a master stroke. As Siegfried's body lay alone center stage, a large pit opened up, taking the body down with it. Wotan entered from one side and knelt by the edge of the pit, throwing the broken pieces of his spear into it. Then Brünnhilde appeared from the other side, and knelt by the edge. They stared at each other across the pit for the duration of the funeral march, with Siegfried's body in the pit between them. (Judy Bogart, reviewing the '89 performance, also thought they stared at each other.) A couple of days after our show, Steve had a chance to talk with Mr. Kupfer, and he mentioned how great an idea it was to have the two characters stare at each other over the dead body of Siegfried. Kupfer said, "No, no, they don't see each other. They are just staring at the body." Kupfer that year was often criticized for "deviating" from Wagner. David, Steve and I, in our imaginations, had "deviated" from Kupfer.

One quick note on the cast: Dr. Cicora mentions that Anne Evans sang Brünnhilde. Actually, Ms. Evans took over the role in1989, and it is she who appears on the DVD. In 1988, the role was sung by Deborah Polaski.

Paul Schofield

AUTHORS' SUBMISSIONS

LEITMOTIVE – *THE WAGNER QUARTERLY* encourages both academic and informed lay persons to submit articles for possible publication in this journal: this has been our policy for over twenty years.

All articles are subject to the approval of the editor and one or more members of the journal's Editorial Advisory Board. Articles are subject to editing; however, an edited draft will be available for review by the author. The author's response to the edited draft must be returned to the editor within one week or it will be concluded that the edited draft is approved by the author.

There is no compensation for published articles, however, up to one dozen copies of the published issue will be made available without charge to authors, if requested before printing.

It is recommended that prior to spending significant time writing an article for this journal that prospective authors contact the editor to discuss the proposed article, determining thereby the probability of publication, desirable length, and similar issues. All inquiries will receive a prompt reply.

The preferred method of submission is by e-mail with the text as an attachment. Virtually any Macintosh or Windows word processing program may be used.

The Editor can be reached, as follows:

U.S. Mail: PO Box 8832, Emeryville, California 94662.

Telephone: (510) 985–0260

Fax: (510) 985–0261

E-mail: leitmotive@comcast.net

Performance Reviews: We receive many more performance reviews than we have space to publish. Further, it is desirable that the author recognize that LEITMOTIVE – *THE WAGNER QUARTERLY* is a quarterly publication and therefore is not timely in the sense of a daily newspaper. Accordingly, performance reviews in general will be of interest to our readers if they succinctly describe any unique elements of the performance or staging. Authors of performance reviews should make arrangements with the Press Office of the opera house at the time of the performance for the use of photographs, including permission to publish. Also the e-mail address of the Press Office should be provided.