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Leitmotive

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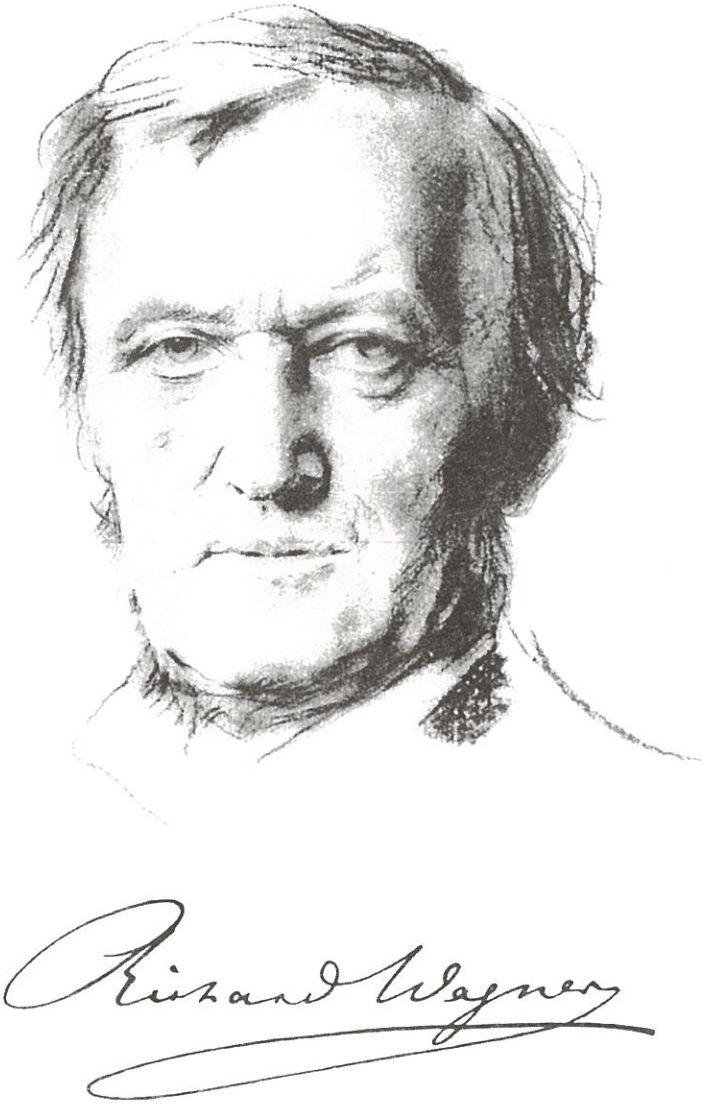

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The Editor's Thoughts

My grandmother, maybe 70 years ago, once told me, "Bob, people love fads—there is always the latest fad. But over time each of them disappears, as those people come to their senses. [You must learn to distinguish between genuine progress and temporary fad]."

My immediate reaction to this advice—I was 12—was to wonder what the old lady was talking about. In time, her perceptiveness became clear: as I got older I began to notice the behavior of my fellow human beings. However, the "learn to distinguish" part of her warning often turns out to be difficult.

Possibly two of the most obvious examples were the hula hoop craze and, earlier, the elaborate sun visors fixed on the outside of cars over the windshield. There were, and are, many other fads, some yet to be detected as being such.

I wonder if the 12-tone method of musical composition was actually only a fad; a number of composers used the scheme, but in a comparatively short time it was dropped; and today such music is only occasionally performed. Arnold Schoenberg's *Verklärte Nacht*, for example, is much more often heard than his 12-tone works. Later, some composers adopted the "minimalist" stratagem, which also seems to have had only passing popularity. Perhaps neither of these should be called "fads", but the fact is that each was in vogue for only a limited time.

I wonder if the phenomenon in opera that we have all witnessed for the last 35 years may also turn out to be only a fad, i.e. "Regie" producers changing Wagner's stories. Possibly I am old fashioned and not keeping up with the so-called "changing times", but I very much hope that opera producers will soon come to recognize that Wagner's stories are best left as he wrote them; and I also hope that these same producers will resist the apparently potent temptation to compete with the composers whom they produce.

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)*

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During the last decade of his teaching career he taught a course on German Opera which came to focus on Wagner. The last course before retirement was team taught with Patrick McCreles, Chairman of the Music Department at Yale and focused exclusively on Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelungen*. The text of this essay on *Rheingold* was the opening lecture of that course. It is directed at a student audience and does not attempt to bring in any scholarly apparatus.

Agustín Blanco-Bazán ("The Ring Around Brünnhilde"), has a most unusual and broad background both in the law as well as a journalist and lecturer, primarily on musical matters. For the past twenty-five years, he has been reviewing concerts and performances of opera for the oldest music magazine of Spain, *RITMO*. He is also a regular contributor to other music publications such as *Mundo Clásico* (Spain), *Operayre* and *Clasica* (Argentina). In addition to reviews, Dr. Blanco-Bazán contributes essays and other commentary for the program magazines of Teatro Real (Madrid) and the Teatro Colón (Buenos Aires).

He was born in Argentina in 1949 and received a Doctor of Laws degree from the University of Buenos Aires. He pursued post graduate work in Philosophy, Political Science and International Law at the University of Vienna from 1976 until 1979. From 1984 until 2009 he was employed by the UN in London as a lawyer for the International Maritime Organization.

He has reviewed all productions of the Bayreuth Festival since the mid-1980s and has reviewed Wagner productions in London (Royal Opera House and English National Opera), Amsterdam, Berlin (Staatsoper and Deutsche Oper), Hamburg, Glyndebourne, Stuttgart, Cardiff (Welsh National Opera), and Seattle Opera for various publications. He currently lives in London.

Wagner's *Rheingold*

A Literary-critical Reading

Introduction

Wagner assigned a peculiar generic subtitle for the first work in his monumental cycle of music dramas dealing with the legends from Norse and Germanic mythology concerning Wotan and Siegfried: "Preliminary Evening to the Festival Play." In every sense of the word this work is a preliminary or prelude to the drama proper and is virtually always performed with this function in mind, usually claiming an evening for itself prior to the more ambitious and much longer evenings to follow, where the three music dramas of the festival cycle are given. *Rheingold* is one continuous act, subdivided into four scenes, the second and fourth of which take place in the realm of the gods high in the mountains, the first in the depths of the river Rhine and the third in the subterranean realm of the Nibelungs. For most operagoers this continuous sequence of scenes with musical interludes for the transitions from each scene to the next is fully sufficient as a theatrical event. It may be a prelude but it also stands on its own and fills an evening more or less to the limits of a normal attention span in the audience.

Most discussions of the work occur in the context of more comprehensive attempts to interpret the Ring as a whole. Attention is also given primarily to the musical fabric of the work, the so-called leitmotifs in particular, and to the various mythological figures that appear in the various scenes and play their specific roles. As is also frequently the case in studies of Wagner, the question of sources in the texts of Germanic and Norse mythology and the study of these during the early nineteenth century, above all by the brothers Grimm, which were available to Wagner, have been thoroughly explored. Surprisingly little has been found, however, apart from the fact that most of the characters

in the drama derive from familiar figures in the mythology, which suggests that much of the action in *Rheingold* is actually Wagner's own invention. Insofar as this is indeed the case, it may be assumed that the events in the drama were introduced by Wagner primarily in order to prepare for the more complex and elaborate action to come in the three later music dramas. This claim is strengthened by the well known fact that Wagner composed the texts for the *Ring*—though not the music—backwards, so that the events of the later works which are prefigured in *Rheingold* had already been fully worked out.

My own response over the years, based on the experience of viewing performances (beginning with Bayreuth in the summer of 1953!) and on teaching the *Ring* in several different courses, including a fairly intensive treatment in my course on Wagner, has been increasingly an uncertainty as to what precisely should be said about *Rheingold* and its almost universal appeal to devotees of the *Ring*. There is no doubt that it works, indeed that it can stand fully on its own and convey a sense of high seriousness and diversity of mood appropriate to the drama it introduces. But I find myself increasingly uneasy about the challenge of integrating all aspects of this prelude into a coherent sense of what is essential and particularly effective both for the performance of *Rheingold* itself (as if it were a coherent and complete work in itself) and for the subsequent action of the *Ring*. It seems to me that the diversity of the work may finally be in conflict with its thematic purposes, so that those features which most entertain and even move us may be quite distinct from the central issues of the ensuing drama, something that may not be fully apparent to anyone experiencing the *Ring* cycle for the first time without a clear sense of what is to follow. In what follows I would like to offer a very preliminary and inadequate reading of *Rheingold* as dramatic structure with a few arbitrary glosses on literary sources that I believe were consciously used by Wagner.

Two Levels of the Drama

My basic argument is that the drama of *Rheingold* proceeds at two quite separate levels, which may be related to one another but are fundamentally contrasted in their relative importance for the *Ring* as a whole and in their immediate theatrical effect on the audience. The one level, more superficial and more immediately accessible, consists primarily in a kind of entertainment as spectacle, where Wagner's music is applied to situations and events that are essentially naturalistic and already familiar to the worlds inhabited by the characters of the work. The composer's genius as a creative innovator in the theater is fully at work here with triumphant success, but very little of what

constitutes the spectacular dimension of *Rheingold* is at all significant for the mythological drama of the *Ring* as such. This level of entertainment may also be viewed as a kind of popularization of obscure and remote mythical material, somewhat in the manner of blockbuster cinema or Walt Disney feature cartoons. To put it somewhat unkindly: Wagner seems to be working primarily with folklorish or fairytale motifs that are being translated into visual display with accompanying mood music. It is all very impressive as a sound and light show, but underneath there seems to be little motive other than the immediate effect—that aspect of Wagner's music that Thomas Mann parodied as the "Ah!"-effect—where the audience is perhaps moved, amused, entertained and ultimately tricked into accepting the illusions of the theater and the music as the symbolic representation of a fictional or mythical world. I will itemize some familiar aspects of what I have in mind shortly.

The other level of the drama has to do with the mythological background to the events that follow in the later dramas and constitute the ultimate cosmic tragedy of the *Ring*. These aspects of *Rheingold* will also be familiar to all devoted students of Wagner's *Ring* and they are very serious indeed. The prelude to the cycle is in this way much more than that: it is the source, origin or cause of everything that follows. Insofar as the end of the cycle, which is also the end of the gods and the world they rule—as Wotan affirms it in his long narrative to Brünnhilde in Act Two of *Die Walküre*: "Das Ende!"—, is a direct outcome of the events which take place in *Rheingold*, this opera may be called the beginning of the drama itself, the beginning from which all else inevitably follows. But this level of the action is less immediately apparent in performance and is much more difficult to perceive and comprehend for an audience. To a certain extent it may be argued that the importance of what happens in *Rheingold* is only apparent retrospectively from the vantage point of the subsequent dramas, which demonstrate the consequences of the events that occur in the prelude. Wagner is not quite working in a closed system, a kind of mythological vacuum, where understanding is only ever achieved through the experience of the whole; but insofar as he did indeed work backward in the process of composition from the end to the beginning, the result for the audience is to a large extent that the significance of the beginning only becomes apparent from the vantage point of the ending. This point will also need some clarification.

Theatrical Spectacle

Returning to the level of the spectacular and theatrical, I shall survey in sequence as they occur several of the most obvious examples.

The orchestration of the river at the outset with the sustained E-flat major chord, building from the double bass through the horns to the entire string section and then the orchestra as a whole, is famous and very powerful in its effect but finally not very subtle and not particularly moving. Once the point has been made, the rest can become a bit tedious—rather like a migraine headache. Then the appearance of the three Rhine Daughters, frolicking about in their native watery habitat is a bit like observing goldfish swimming around in a bowl. I have always found the playfulness of these mermaids, or sea nymphs, or sirens (however they should be named), to be rather heavy handed. This is perhaps due to the fact that the singers who perform the roles are often not at all suited to play the part. But it is also a matter of illusion. One can think of any number of foolish solutions to the problem of staging the scene, beginning with Wagner's own portable wagons with vertical poles on which the Daughters were perched. Patrice Chéreau staged them as prostitutes located around a hydro-electric plant in the centennial *Ring* at Bayreuth (1976) and Peter Hall, for his Bayreuth production in the mid-80s, had the singers completely nude, swimming around in a pool that was reflected by a diagonal mirror as visible image for the audience. Nor does the erotic banter and teasing between the Rhine Daughters and Alberich during the opening scene provide a very effective introduction for the chief antagonist to Wotan through the entire *Ring* cycle. Alberich tends to come across as an incompetent and very ugly toad or some other suitable mythological creature inhabiting the muck and slime at the river's bottom. All the comic bits of his chase up the slippery rocks, his sneezing and the mocking laughter of the Daughters strikes me as a rather debased form of comic humor. It is rarely at all funny and often seems simply embarrassing.

This opening scene is certainly crucial for the initial impact of the performance, but is any of it important to the drama? I suggest that until the sunlight of dawn descends to light up the gold, everything that takes place on stage is only superficial, an awkward attempt by Wagner to play for laughs. The only redeeming feature of the scene (for me, at least) is the probability that Wagner borrowed it from Goethe's *Faust*, where in the Classical Walpurgis Night of Part Two, Faust in his search for Helen of Troy confronts the water nymphs at the edge of the River Peneios in Greece, who are daughters of the river god and who playfully respond to his erotic desire and refer him to the centaur Chiron. The voices of the Rhine Daughters are also associated with the ancient Sirens, who lure men to their death by the sweetness of their singing (and who also play a central role in Goethe's Classical Walpurgis Night). Something of the Germanic legend of the Loreley also accompanies the Rhine

Daughters, as also the lore of mermaids, who are often encountered by sailors, especially when shipwrecked, and who by legend may also be temptresses to a watery grave. But none of this gets one very far. The Rhine Daughters seem primarily intended to offer comic relief before it is needed. They represent perhaps the naïve voices of a playful and innocent nature, pre-lapsarian and even pre-conscious—as witness the babbling of Woglinde's well-known opening chant. The fact that they lose their gold and spend the rest of the *Ring* cycle trying to get it back, which they ultimately succeed in doing at the very end of *Götterdämmerung*, is perhaps of interest thematically—as when their voices are heard lamenting their loss at the very end of *Rheingold*—but their role is not of much significance for the drama.

The celebration of the gold when the light of the sun strikes it, however, is far more effective both visually and musically, including also some rather peculiar descriptive formulations by the Rhine Daughters:

"Lugt, Schwestern! Die Weckerin lacht in den Grund!"
"Durch den grünen Schwall den wonnigen Schläfer sie grüsst."
"Jetzt küsst sie sein Auge, dass er es öffne."
"Schaut, es lächelt in lichtem Schein."
"Durch die Fluten hin fliesst sein strahlender Stern."

[Look, sisters, the waker laughs down to the ground!
Through the greenish gloom she greets the blissful sleeper.
Now she kisses his eye, so that it opens.
Behold, it is smiling in the brilliant shine.
Through the floods afar flows his beaming star.]

This highly metaphoric language portrays the light striking the gold as a mythological awakening, as if a goddess were caressing and kissing a sleeping youth to cause him to awaken. The language is thus interesting as a supplement to the music, which performs the action with appropriate Wagnerian orchestral motifs. Presumably the staging of the scene is intended to include some kind of visual correlative. But how important is all this to the action of the drama proper? Only when Alberich learns from the foolish Rhine Daughters that whoever renounces love and fashions a ring from the gold will have absolute power does the central theme of the drama emerge in the exchanges between them. And, finally, the moment when Alberich curses love and grabs the gold constitutes the one genuine dramatic moment of the scene. The theft of the gold is central without question to the subsequent events of the cycle, but the actual theft itself is surprisingly brief and insubstantial on the

stage, involving only the curse by Alberich: "So verfluch ich die Liebe!" and the striking musical motif that accompanies it. One could thus argue that the total yield of the entire first scene for the drama of the *Ring* itself is minimal and perhaps too accidental and occasional to serve as a true beginning of the drama, except indeed as a "prelude" to it. This point would bear further discussion.

In order to follow through with this survey of theatrical moments and devices largely independent of central thematic issues for the drama, I skip to the third scene, where Wotan and Loge descend into the realm of the Nibelungen to confront Alberich and trick him into yielding up his gold and the ring after they have made him their prisoner. This is the exclusive motivation for the descent, but the dramatization of it includes a great deal more, where Wagner uses a combination of spectacle and musical accompaniment to achieve his desired effect.

As the transition music modulates into the heavy beat of the Nibelungs forging their metals and extracting the treasure from ore in caverns deep below ground, Wagner introduces his anvil chorus, always effective as an extramusical sound that is almost accommodated to the orchestra. But does it serve any other purpose than to establish a mood for the scene to follow? And what does this mood signify other than the blatant abuse of power by Alberich, initially directed against his brother, the dwarf Mime? The exchange between these two figures prior to the entrance of Wotan and Loge has all the subtlety of a Punch and Judy show. The motif of the Tarnhelm introduces an element of magical transformation that adds to the theatrical trick of shape changing (however that is staged). But to have Alberich beating Mime with his fists while he is invisible is either bestial or silly, or both. The same holds true when Alberich later demonstrates his power over the Nibelungs by twisting the ring he has forged from the gold and wears on his finger, resulting in screams of agony from all the dwarfs in their subterranean caves. There is perhaps a bit more amusement generated by the tricking of Alberich, when Loge persuades him to transform himself, first, into a dragon—where the music curiously anticipates the subsequent leitmotif of Fafner as the (same?) dragon later in *Siegfried*, which guards the Nibelungen hoard—and, second, into a toad that can be easily and quickly captured. There is a kind of slapstick humor in the incident with the toad and its playful musical accompaniment, but I wonder whether Wagner is not exploiting somewhat our sense from the opening scene that Alberich already is a kind of toad.

All this, however, is of little consequence for the drama, since the true confrontation between Wotan and Alberich with regard to the Nibelungen

hoard and the possession of the ring does not occur until the fourth scene, after Alberich has been dragged up into the realm of the gods. Are we to consider this entire scene in the underworld as anything other than comic relief, heightened by the visual contrast of the underground realm to the heights where the gods dwell? The only further thought that comes to mind for me, again borrowing from a sense of literary sources, including Goethe's *Faust*, is the familiar Germanic legend of the dwarfs who work beneath the earth and forge metals into jewelry and weapons. In *Faust* the dwarfs and gnomes appear in the Carnival Masque of Part Two, where they appear in the company of the Emperor disguised as Pan, to thematize the digging of treasure out of the earth, which is central to the question of wealth in Goethe's drama and its association with the Devil. For Wagner there is also the fairytale motif of dwarfs and metal working, as it is known, for instance, in the medieval legend of Wayland the Smith (about which Wagner also drafted plans for an opera) and, in far more harmless form, in the familiar fairytale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. But is there anything more to the dramatization of the Nibelungs in the *Ring* than the sense of a community of subterranean dwarfs? After their appearance in the final scene of *Rheingold*, when they drag the hoard up to the tribunal of the gods, we never again see them in the dramas of the cycle that follow.

Spectacle in Scenes Two and Four

Let me make my central hypothesis about *Rheingold* as drama clear: the essential action, which is important for the subsequent cycle of the *Ring*, occurs exclusively in the second and fourth scenes of the opera, the scenes which take place in the realm of the gods on the summit of the mountains. I wish to make several points with regard to this action, but let me first indicate also the extent to which theatrical and spectacular effects for their own sake still occur in these scenes. Some of the most familiar and most moving moments in the entire *Ring*, which no devotee would want to miss, may also be regarded as essentially gratuitous show or superficial froth. But Wagner clearly was devoted to such show and froth.

In the second scene the tableau which appears as the mists clear, following the transition music from the scene beneath the Rhine, includes the irresistable motif of Valhalla as the great fortress first comes into view. Most productions of the *Ring* make the visual effect of this tableau almost as powerful as Wagner's music. But is it really so significant for the drama? Fricka and Wotan have apparently been asleep through the night out in the open—are they on

a camping trip, or do they have nowhere else to stay? There is perhaps an intentional allusion here by Wagner to the episode in Homer's *Iliad*, where Zeus is seduced by Hera on the summit of Mt. Ida, after which he falls asleep and forgets to control the fighting between the Greek and Trojan armies. There is also a sense that the sunrise, which we first witnessed under water in the opening scene, when the sun's light penetrated the river to awaken the gold, here shines upon the completed castle as a spectacle of revealed glory. (I also believe that Wagner is again borrowing from Goethe's *Faust*: the opening scene of Part Two, "Charming Landscape," where Faust is awakened by the rising sun as he lies asleep on an Alpine meadow.) The issue for Wagner's drama is not the completion of Valhalla as such, which we only see again at the very end of *Götterdämmerung*, when it burns with all the gods and the army of dead heroes trapped inside; it is the contract for payment to the giants for their labor of construction. So this scene, however appealing as tableau, is essentially superfluous to the drama.

We may also jump to the very end of *Rheingold* for a similar scene of spectacle, accompanied by some of Wagner's most glorious tone painting. After the resolution, however violent and tentative, of Wotan's conflict with Alberich and then with the Giants, Donner quite literally clears the air with his hammer (symbolizing a thunderstorm), resulting once again in the vista of Valhalla, this time illuminated by the evening sun. The audience always enjoys his strident command to the elements: "Heda! Heda! Hedo!" and we also respond to the lightning crash of his hammer against the rock that causes the air to clear. It is a wonderful theatrical spectacle, where Wagner's music is combined with whatever stage effects of swirling mists and clouds are used in the production, and who would want to miss this? But again, I submit that it is totally gratuitous and pure froth, except as it establishes and directs the mood for the ending to *Rheingold*. Similarly, the rainbow bridge constructed (am I correct?) by Froh, the third brother of the head gods, provides nothing more than a theatrical device that—so far as I am aware—has never quite succeeded in the theater. Either the rainbow is vividly portrayed (as in the recent Met production) or an elaborate physical bridge into Valhalla appears without any rainbow (as in several European productions of recent memory), and Froh celebrates the achievement with his brief but glorious tenor part. But does it all signify anything of real importance for the drama? The gods enter their new home, as Loge comments sarcastically that they are "rushing toward their doom" and the Rhine Daughters down below in the river sing their lament about the loss of their gold (singing the final lines of the opera):

Traulich und treu
Ist's nur in der Tiefe:
Falsch und feig
Ist, was dort oben sich freut!

[Trust and truth
dwell only here in the deep;
false and base
is all that rejoices above!]

Wagner's striking use of alliteration through Stabreim here provides a splendid sense of an epigram for the drama: 'Trusting and true is only what is found in the deep; false and cowardly is that which enjoys itself above.' (I can imagine Wagner's satisfaction in finding such balanced alliteration in the juxtaposition of "traulich" and "treu" with "Tiefe" and "falsch" and "feig" with "freut.") It all sounds so neat and clear cut; but does this epithet have any real validity for the drama? I don't see it, if it does. Yet how magnificent and even triumphant is the cadence of the ending: great sweeping chords in the orchestra, playing on the Valhalla motif, as the gods stride across the rainbow bridge into their new home. Given what follows in the three elaborate dramas of the cycle still to come, I would be inclined to say that Wagner has purposefully deceived his audience—one might even say seduced them through his music—into believing that some kind of closure is here achieved. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Dramatic Climaxes through Outsider Figures

There is no time in this short essay to address the far more substantive question of Wagner's achievement in the construction of a genuine dramatic conflict in *Rheingold*, but it will at least be apparent that from my perspective this occurs almost exclusively in the two scenes, two and four, which are set in the realm of the gods in view of Valhalla and which focus to a large extent on the role of Wotan in the *Ring* generally. What I would like to outline here briefly is a thesis about this dramatic structure, which so far as I know has not been noticed and explored in the vast literature on the *Ring*.

My claim is that these two scenes are constructed in parallel to each other and that by comparing the similarities and differences of this basic structure, it may be possible to state what Wagner is really concerned with in this prelude to his *Ring* cycle. To be quite simplistic and schematic: in each scene Wotan comes into central conflict with an alien force that places his legitimacy as

ruling god into question, for reasons that have to do with motives on Wotan's part that must be regarded as unethical, if not criminal. In each case, furthermore, a resolution is achieved only through the intrusion of a character who is essentially external, disinterested and neutral to the conflict which threatens to defeat Wotan: Loge in scene two and Erda in scene four. These two characters are in themselves very different, as are the kinds of resolution they offer; yet the basic structure of the conflict and resolution in both scenes establishes the fundamental tragic situation in which Wotan finds himself and which will ultimately defeat and destroy him.

In the first instance, of course, the conflict is between Wotan and the Giants with regard to payment for the construction of Valhalla. At stake also is the legitimacy of Wotan's status and rule with regard to his staff and the runes that are carved on it. In effect, he is guilty of trying to break a contractual agreement, which he made before construction of the fortress began and which promised the goddess Freia to the Giants. Her departure would mean the loss of her golden apples, which alone keep the gods young and strong. There is thus a genuine paradox at work here that only Loge resolves after he arrives like a *deus ex machina*. The irony of Loge's role, however, appears to be that he has no plan whatsoever for the resolution of the conflict between Wotan and the Giants, even though Wotan expected that he would have. The mention by Loge of the theft of the Rhine gold by Alberich seems to be only a casual report, as it were of the latest news from the outside world, though it quickly becomes apparent that both Wotan and the Giants are keenly interested in securing the gold for themselves, in Wotan's case above all the Ring as source of world power. The focus of the dispute is thus shifted toward Alberich and the hoard, with Loge proposing that he and Wotan descend together into Nibelheim to trick the dwarf and rob him of his loot. The giants, who also fear Alberich's power, declare themselves prepared to substitute the Nibelungen gold for Freia.

The fourth scene dramatizes the consequences of the strategy devised by Loge, resulting in the capture of Alberich and the forced removal of his hoard, including both the Tarnhelm and, much more crucially, the Ring. But Alberich utters his great curse on the Ring before he retreats again into the depths, a curse which (in my opinion) is far more powerful and fully articulated than his earlier renunciation of love. The Ring indeed brings with it from here on through the entire cycle the inevitable consequence that whoever possesses it will die. The validity of the curse is immediately demonstrated, of course, when Fafner kills his brother Fasolt. But the crucial moment of the scene, which also determines how Wotan is finally persuaded to give the Ring to the

Giants, is the appearance of Erda, the mystical goddess of Fate from her resting place deep within the earth. She is the source of the prophecy that everything will end and that Wotan's rule will finally collapse. Wotan seems just as helpless and ignorant in response to Erda as he had earlier been in response to Loge, so that the outcome of the conflict in both these scenes is achieved only through the intervention of the outsider, since Wotan is virtually helpless to deal with the crisis and to resolve the conflict.

The last point I want to make concerns a basic difference between Loge and Erda as figures of Fate, the former presumably in an unconscious and unintentional way, defined by wit and a sense of mischief, and the latter through a conscious and authoritative, quasi-mystical embodiment of the power of Fate itself. Loge, in other words, is a bit of a wild card, playful, whimsical, mischievous and totally unreliable. Yet he does provide the solution to an otherwise unresolvable conflict. Erda, by contrast, appears by her own design in response to Wotan's refusal to give up the Ring. She is all-knowing and all-wise (Ur-wala), the source of an absolute and apparently infallible truth about the way of the world. Loge is adapted by Wagner from the mythological tradition, where the god Loki functions as a kind of trickster; Erda appears to be Wagner's own invention, though the name suggests, of course, a familiar mythical personification of the Earth as Mother. This contrast is important for the manner in which the dramatic conflicts are resolved, and in certain ways both Loge and Erda continue to have importance and influence throughout the *Ring*. Loge never appears again as a character, but his fire plays a crucial role in all three of the subsequent operas. Erda is visited by Wotan sometime prior to *Die Walküre*, since he fathers Brünnhilde by seducing Erda. Erda is also summoned again by Wotan in the third act of Siegfried, and the three Norns at the outset of *Götterdämmerung* are closely linked to Erda. My point here is only that Wagner has introduced both characters—the one in scene two, the other in scene four—in order to resolve a conflict that serves to conclude *Rheingold* but that also points forward toward the dramas of the cycle still to come. This moment of prefiguration is indicated, for instance, in the mind of Wotan by the sudden introduction of the sword motif at the very end of the opera, accompanied by the cryptic stage direction that he is seized by a "great thought." This motif, which can only be recognized and interpreted by those who already know what is to come, serves as a prefiguration of the tragedy of the Volsungs, but it is also equally a direct consequence of what has already occurred.

Conclusion

My conclusion to these remarks about Wagner's *Rheingold* must be tentative and preliminary. It may seem that I am trying to diminish the apparent effectiveness of the work, both as theatrical spectacle and as musical structure. As regards the success of performance, this would be a misreading. Few of Wagner's works have enjoyed such relative accessibility and popularity in the opera houses all over the world. My point, however, is to distinguish the various effects of the work as theater and as music from the essential function it is intended to fulfill as preparation for the *Ring* cycle as such. This role depends, in my view, on the essential dramatic action of the piece. No student of the *Ring* would deny that Wotan stands at the center of *Das Rheingold* and that the question of his legitimacy as ruler of the gods and his dependence on the contractual basis of his office, symbolized by the runic staff he holds, carved from the world's ashtree, define a dramatic conflict that extends throughout the cycle and will only be resolved by his ultimate demise when Valhalla burns at the very end. In effect, Wotan's rule is already doomed before the cycle begins, and we are meant to recognize this, above all because of the god's dependence on these two figures of Fate—Loge and Erda—who enter the drama, as it were, from the outside. Precisely what this implies for the *Ring* cycle as a whole would require much further comment.

It should be noted, for instance, that it is Loge's fire that surrounds the sleeping Brünnhilde on the rock of the Valkyries and which finally sets fire to Valhalla at the very end, just as the eternal sleep of Erda, accompanied by the final break in the rope of Fate weaved by the Norns, signals that the end of time is at hand. These are issues that address the further consequences of the action that is dramatized in *Das Rheingold*. The significance of what happens in this prelude for what follows—the theft of the gold by Alberich and the forging of the Ring, the failure of Wotan to secure the Ring and to appease the Giants—needs to be traced through the subsequent three operas. But the fatal words of Loge and Erda resonate through the work to its end. Erda: "Alles, was ist, endet,/Ein düstrer Tag/dämmert den Göttern," ("All things that are, perish! An evil day dawns for the immortals,") and Loge: "Ihrem Ende eilen sie zu, die so stark im Bestehen sich wähnen." ("They are hastening on to their end, though they think they are great in their grandeur.") Both these agents of Fate emphasize that the events that have set the cycle in motion already imply its tragic end. We need to take such claims seriously.

— Cyrus Hamlin

The *Ring* Around Brünnhilde: I

A Personal Interpretation of the Ring

The Valkyrie's Long Ride

Wagner began composing "First Journey" of the *Ring* on 11 November 1851. He first decided that the title would be *Siegmund and Sieglinde: the Punishment of the Valkyrie.* Nine days later he changed his mind. In a letter to Franz Liszt he re-baptized his embryonic new work simply as *the Valkyrie* or *Die Walküre.* In her article *"The Emancipation of the Valkyrie"*[1] Manuela Schwartz concludes that this change reflects the appearance of Brünnhilde as the center stage character of the work. Rightly so, because few characters in the history of opera are able to reverse the course of the drama as Brünnhilde does in *Die Walküre.*

Brünnhilde's is a truly breathless ride, from tomboy at the mercy of an authoritarian father, to woman acting against all odds and conventions. She literally turns upside down a plot that at the time of her first appearance looks like a parade of doomed characters:

- Her father Wotan is hopelessly entrapped by his own political manipulations;
- Wotan's wife Fricka is equally entrapped in a loveless marriage; and
- The incestuous Siegmund and Sieglinde are trying to escape the punishment required by the law of the land.

Brünnhilde changes all this. She does so by being the only character in the history of music who needs to ride across three operas to put things straight. After *Die Walküre* she takes us through her sexual initiation, her confusion at her lover's betrayal and her final epiphany, when she interrupts the vicious cycle of power against love which had been created when Alberich forged his ring.

1. "Die Emanzipation der Walküre." Published in the program for *Die Walküre* by the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Berlin, for the 2002 performances.

Until the end of the Second World War, there were some nationalist blockheads in Germany who insisted on an interpretation of Wagner's *Ring* based on the cult of male heroes, namely of men who become heroes only if they die a *Heldentod* – namely if they die in battle with their Nothungs fighting the enemy. Against this male centered interpretation, based on the cult of the armed hero fighting a war, stood some German thinkers like the musicologist Paul Bekker (1882-1937) and the writer Thomas Mann (1875–1955). After the First World War they abhorred the concept of *Heldentod* that had been used to send so many soldiers to an inhuman death in the trenches. Both stressed the view that in Wagner, the bravery of heroes was secondary to female strength and wisdom; and both were forced to flee Nazi Germany. Mann could not return to Munich after a talk he gave on Wagner which was considered to be a direct attack against the interpretation of Wagner's work that was promoted by the Third Reich.

With these complexities in mind, I am focusing on Brünnhilde, not only to emphasize womanhood at the center of the *Ring* but also to prove the falsehood of male oriented misinterpretations which seem persistently to disturb the enjoyment of Wagner even until now. As many have read, only last year a Los Angeles County Supervisor moved to cancel performances of the *Ring* scheduled for this year in order to counteract the toxic political ideology he sees in the work.[2]

These apprehensions vanish once we understand Brünnhilde's seminal role in the *Ring*. After the war, Wieland Wagner explained this seminal role with the following words: "The *Ring* looks to me today as a great dialogue between love and power, represented, respectively, by the confrontation of female and male characters...In this dialogue, womanhood affirms its primeval, elemental and vital strength (*Lebensgefühl*) against the men driven by power and greed. As both judge and jury, Brünnhilde passes sentence on the world of men before she dies in the fire of her love."[3]

The Dangerous Toys of Power

The world of men on which Brünnhilde passes sentence is symbolized by two dangerous toys: Alberich's ring and Wotan's spear. These objects result from two acts of violent degradation of Nature, which are similar in concept to rape, namely:

2. *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 2009.
3. "Wieland Wagner" by Walter Panofsky. Bremen: Karl Schünemann Verlag, 1964. p39.

- Alberich's theft of the gold from its natural place; and
- Wotan's desecration of the World Ash Tree – when he breaks one of its branches to use it as the spear that symbolizes his power. The World Ash Tree withers following Wotan's action.

After the desecration of Nature by Wotan and Alberich, rape and humiliation of women follow throughout[4] the *Ring*. Just think of Freia debased by Wotan and the Giants as a mere ransom, or Sieglinde's rape by Hunding.

Then comes a very peculiar kind of rape or submission of womanhood by deception. Wotan tells Brünnhilde that he "overpowered" (*zwang*) her mother Erda, not because he loved her, but because he wanted to obtain more of her wisdom. He says that he overpowered her with "the magic of love," and we all know that in the *Ring* magic usually means deception. Erda told Wotan some of her secrets, but also took her revenge. In Wotan's words, she "exacted a fee" from him: she gave him a daughter. In the present Covent Garden production of *Die Walküre* (Keith Warner) Brünnhilde looks astonished when Wotan lets her know that she is the result of a somehow unwanted fatherhood.

In any case, this unlikely father is left with no alternative. Sooner or later, his own daughter will confront him in the same way that her mother Erda did in *Rheingold*, where Erda advised Wotan to yield, to get rid of the Ring. Erda's daughter Brünnhilde will press him to yield even more.

The Rebel Daughter

Wagner considered the first dialogue between Wotan and Brünnhilde the most important scene of the whole *Ring*.[5] Why? Because it is during this scene that Wotan actually begins to yield, to surrender his power. In his 1992 Bayreuth production of *Die Walküre*, Harry Kupfer eloquently shows the extreme feelings entangling father and daughter in this crucial scene.[6] It is an abstract, dark production, because it takes place inside the soul of the characters and it is very dark there in the second act of *Die Walküre*.

In the recent Seattle Opera production there was a nearly hysterical Wotan having his first tantrum following his confrontation with Fricka. Brünnhilde reacts by inviting her stubborn father to open his heart. Wotan is about to rest

4. For example, see *Opfer der Liebe. Gedankensplitter zur Rolle der Frau im* Ring, by Micaela von Marcard, published in the program for *Götterdämmerung*, Staatsoper am Unter der Linden, Berlin, 2002.

5. Letter to Liszt, October 3, 1855. *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt*, Volume 2. New York: Vienna House, 1973. p117. Earlier published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1897. W. Ashton Ellis, translator.

6. Available on DVD, Ubitel, Warner Classics. Wotan: John Tomlinson; Brünnhilde: Anne Evans. Stage Director: Harry Kupfer; Conductor: Daniel Barenboim.

his hand on his daughter's head but then he hesitates, because as he says, he is afraid to lose control of his will if he shares his real feelings. Brünnhilde then protests that this is not possible because she is Wotan's will: "You are speaking to your will...What am I, if not your will?" Wotan relents.

In fact, Brünnhilde is playing a trick on her father. She says that she is Wotan's will but she is not *only* this, as Wotan wants to believe. As a true daughter of Erda she challenges Wotan right away from the moment he indicates that his son Siegmund must die in order to preserve the political power of the Gods. Wotan then reacts violently. He literally humiliates his daughter by telling her that she is nothing more than "...his wish's blindly approving instrument."

Wotan's second tantrum, this time unleashed by the daughter, was staged by Kupfer as violent in the extreme. It looks as if Wotan is ready not only to sacrifice his own son, but to kill his daughter too. It looks as if he wanted to kill her with his spear. After all, nobody gets in the way of a dictator, not even his family.

After Wotan's departure, our Valkyrie has to confront yet another male tantrum: when Brünnhilde announces to Siegmund his *Heldentod*, namely when she tells him he is going to die in his duel with Hunding, Siegmund just wants everybody to die with him. He wants to kill Sieglinde and her unborn baby! The only way for Brünnhilde to prevent this double murder is to tell Siegmund that she is going to fight at his side. Just see how Brünnhilde overwhelms Siegmund with the wisdom of her heart.

Wotan Gets It

Brünnhilde has no particular problem in getting Sieglinde, the other female pillar of the *Ring*, to understand what she is trying to do. Unlike Siegmund, Sieglinde wants her baby to live, at any cost.

Wotan's epiphany takes substantially more work, but it finally comes. In the final scene of *Die Walküre* Brünnhilde starts arguing her case, just as any good lawyer would. In Kupfer's production we saw her studiously observing each and every one of Wotan's reactions and conferring with herself before speaking, as if saying, "Careful with what you say, or this bully will kill you, too!" The Valkyrie starts her plea by suggesting to Wotan that he cannot understand her because of one very simple reason: Wotan did not witness Siegmund's and Sieglinde's suffering. "You did not see him. *I did*," Brünnhilde tells Wotan, in her last attempt to unblock her father's unyielding position. This time she succeeds.

She speaks the wisdom of her heart, a wisdom she has learned by witnessing suffering. Like Parsifal, she has learned through compassion, namely through a clear understanding of the meaning of suffering. She finally manages to convince her father that in disobeying his power she actually helped him to achieve what he *truly* wanted.

In the words of Jane Eaglen, the great Brünnhilde of past Seattle *Rings*: "She is intelligent enough to *intuit* what he actually wants." In the second Act, this failed politician wanted a nihilistic end because he could not create free men but only slaves to his power. In his own words: "...for the free man has to create himself; I can only create serfs under my yoke." So, what he actually wants is a free man! In order to achieve this there is no alternative but to defy Wotan's own power and commit the unthinkable crime: to disobey him.

After some arduous deliberation, Wotan finally gets it. He stops being furious and menacing to those who challenge his authority. Unlike most directors, Kupfer staged the beginning of Wotan's farewell as an expression of joy. Wotan's epiphany has finally happened. Thanks to Brünnhilde's disobedience, Wotan is able to anticipate his end, but not at the hands of the son of Alberich or any other slave. Free men will replace this strange and weird world of Gods, giants and dwarfs. Wotan and Brünnhilde are finally at one.

Die Walküre is, more than any other opera, the opera of love and defiance, while *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung* are the operas of backlash.

—Agustín Blanco-Bazán

(To be continued)

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Editor-

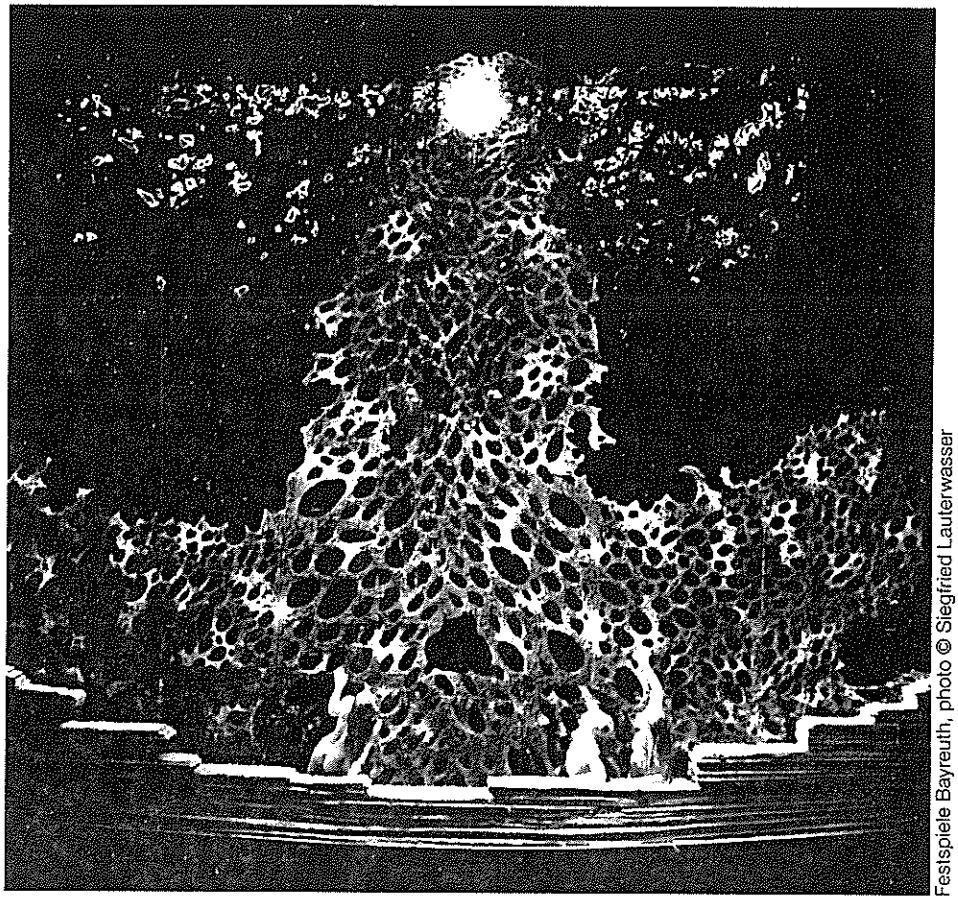
I enjoyed the Summer issue. Professor Colombo's article is quite convincing. I wonder what he can add in the second part.

I did not see the Los Angeles Opera production of *Tannhäuser*. I am ready to renounce all attendance at opera in the theater; concert versions by symphony orchestra would suit me just fine. I am sick to death of Eurotrash such as the new *Ring* at San Francisco Opera. I saw *Rheingold* and will not return for more. Names such as Francesca Zambello send me to the exit at once. If that makes me a fuddy-duddy reactionary, so be it. After a lifetime of being denounced as a pinko leftist in matters political, whether in church or state, it might be a pleasant diversion to be regarded as conservative. But I wouldn't take it too seriously.

—Basil DePinto

Father DePinto is a Roman Catholic priest living in the Bay Area and has written for this journal, his latest piece being Tannhäuser and the Human Dilemma *which ran in the Summer 2008 issue.*

20th CENTURY BAYREUTH: 1983



Festspiele Bayreuth, photo © Siegfried Lauterwasser

Perhaps the most spectacular set ever was this opening scene of Das Rheingold *in Sir Peter Hall's production that premiered in 1983 (mentioned in Professor Hamlin's essay on page 9). It appeared to the audience that the whole stage was occupied with an enormous aquarium, the width of the stage and its height extending from the stage floor to the topmost reaches of the curtain. Here we were submerged in the river, complete with the Rhine Daughters effortlessly swimming from the bottom to the very top surface of the river.*

The remarkable effect was achieved by constructing a huge, but quite shallow swimming pool on the stage with an equally huge mirror, the bottom of which was attached across the back of the pool and rising up at a 45 degree angle as high as the top of the curtain. Everything was big and expensive, but it worked! In general, the audience was mystified as to how this magnificent illusion was achieved, but once the Rhine Daughters began to sing, the technology was forgotten: at last Richard Wagner's dream had been achieved.

Extensive information about this production may be had in The Ring, Anatomy of an Opera *by Stephen Fay (Dover, New Hampshire: Longwood Press, 1985).*

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