

to Society

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WAGNER'S RING CYCLE

An Anthropological Study and Introduction

Athenaeum Paper

February 3, 2011

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This summer, after spending seven years on a waiting list, my cousin and I finally received tickets to see Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle in Bayreuth. This had been a 25 year dream for me; unfortunately for you, the Ring will be the subject of this paper.

Bayreuth is a small town about the size of Hopkinsville located in Bavaria about one hour north of Nurnberg. Prior to the construction of the Festival Hall in 1875 especially for performances of the Ring, it was merely a modest market town in upper Franconia. Today, it is still modest in size, but each summer it attracts thousands of worshipers to the sacred shrine – at least that is how some Wagnerites see it. The Hall, which is used only in the summer months to present only Wagner operas, is unairconditioned, which was a problem this past summer when it was unusually warm in Bavaria. While I was there, the temperatures reached 90 degrees most days. Of course, the hall is shut tight during performances so that outside sounds do not intrude on the experience. Furthermore, the Festival has become an important social event, so patrons wear their finest attire – tuxedos for men and ballgowns by famous designers for women. Noise from the patrons is discouraged by the audience, so any fanning must be surreptitious. The seats are not particularly comfortable – they are barely upholstered seats with half backs, not very wide, without very much leg room. No American theater could survive with amenities like Bayreuth's, but because it is Holy Ground to Wagnerites, no discomfort is too great for the pilgrims.

The most unusual feature of the theater, and its most famous, is its covered pit. All of you have seen performances in the Alhambra, and probably most of you have been to TPAC or other large theaters, whether in Atlanta, New York, or Europe. If you have paid any attention at all, you are aware of the pit that separates the audience from the

stage and contains an orchestra when the show calls for music. Usually you can see the conductor's head sticking out of the pit; those in the balcony can usually see the musicians and their stand lights. About half of the musicians are usually out in the open, the other half back under the front part of the stage. In Bayreuth, the pit was modeled on one Wagner had seen in Riga when he was Kapellmeister there for a year (Gutman). There is a curved cover that projects the sound back to the singers on stage and only a small opening between the cover and the front of the stage. Most of the orchestra is underneath the stage, with the brass section deep under the stage. While most orchestras for musicals number 15-30 players and most opera orchestras number 50-60, Wagner's opera orchestras number close to 100, although most do not play at once. Still, the incredible heft and richness of the sound is a perpetual balance problem for conductors, who need to help the singers project over the voluminous sound of the orchestra. In the case of the Bayreuth theater, the covered pit is quite helpful, since it serves to make the orchestra sound more distant to the audience. For the conductors, however, the covered pit poses acoustical problems, since the sound must travel past the singers and bounce off the back wall before it reaches the audience. Ensemble is always a challenge at Bayreuth and not all conductors overcome it. The man conducting the performances we heard had no problems.

A typical performance day for a Wagnerite would start off with breakfast, followed by a two hour morning lecture on the opera of the evening, given by some erudite scholar. We attended lectures organized by the Wagner Society of New York, which had hired a musicologist from Juilliard. Most Wagnerites have read the librettos (texts), studied the scores (music), and listened to multiple recordings to prepare

themselves for this pilgrimage. They have usually even read scholarly tomes on Wagner, his works, and his themes. So, they come to the lectures prepared to argue their pet positions. Thankfully, the New Yorkers and their guests mostly allowed the lecturer to speak, except for the one gentleman who wanted to insist that Fricka's actions were all motivated by love. Having prepared myself in the typical way, I did not find the lecturer's comments particularly insightful or interesting; my cousin, who had made little scholarly study, felt the same way.

After a long lunch, which we usually ate at a garden restaurant located on the hill above the theater, the patrons dress for the performance and begin arriving about an hour of so ahead of time, in order to secure parking, check their furs, see, and be seen. For the Ring, the first opera began at 6:30 and proceeded without intermission until it finished around 9:00. The other three operas began at four; each consisted of three acts with an hour long intermission between each of the acts. During the intermissions, the patrons would stretch their legs, cool off in the shade, take a drink or ice, and watch the assembled throng. There were also restaurants located on the property at which patrons could make reservations for meals. The establishments timed the meals to be ready during the intermissions so that the diners could finish their dinners in the allotted hour and still make their way ^{BALK}~~bake~~ to their seats before the curtain rose. A few minutes before the intermission ended, the brass section would appear on the outside balcony of the theater and play a few excerpts of themes from that evening's work to call the patrons to their seats.

After lunch each day, my cousin and I would venture to the local grocery store, purchase bread, meat, cheese, fruit, beverage, and dessert, check it at the coat check, then

eat it during intermission. We would also visit with those fellow patrons we recognized from the lectures, so they did provide at least that benefit to us. The three long operas each ended about 10pm, and, allowing for applause, the patrons would be on their way back to their accommodations about 10:30. Because my cousin and I received our tickets off the waiting list, we were unable to book rooms in Bayreuth, so we stayed in Nurnberg and drove up for each of the operas. We would reach our hotel shortly before midnight, only to watch a little television, stroll the city walls briefly, and turn in to be ready for the next day.

Decorum at Bayreuth is slightly different than in Hopkinsville. After every performance in Hopkinsville, the audience leaps to its feet in acclaim that has not always been earned, if we are truthful. After a few minutes of applause, the audience quiets down and begins to move quickly for the doors. In Bayreuth, which hires world class performers at the top of their careers, the audience remained seated after each performance. In fact, they did not begin applauding until after the very last note had dissipated in our ears. Then, the audience applauded for about 15 minutes each night, remaining seated the entire time. On the last night of the Ring Cycle, the applause did not begin for a full 10 seconds and took some time to really get rolling; the faithful were moved by the beauty of the work and the excellence of the performance into near religious bliss. After they began applauding, they applauded a full 20 minutes seated, giving numerous curtain calls to the cast and crew. Finally, when the entire orchestra was brought up out of the pit and put on stage, the audience stood up and applauded them for ten minutes. At the very end of the applause, the producer was brought onto the stage. The current production is not universally esteemed, and he received a number of

boos from the audience. Because the seats are in long rows and you can only exit at the ends, the whole audience waits in the theater until the applause dies, then exits together to their waiting cars. There is no sneaking out prior to the end of the opera.

Wagner was born in Leipzig in 1813 into a theatrical family. In 1836, he married his first wife, the actress Minne Planner, to whom he was constantly unfaithful and from whom he separated in 1863. In 1864, he began an affair with Cosima von Bulow, an illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt. After Minne's death and Cosima's divorce, the two married in 1870. They already had three children together. Wagner finally died in 1883 in Venice. Cosima then devoted the remainder of her long life to promoting the works of the Master. While he was possessed of tremendous talent and innovation, personally he was horrible. He cheated on his wife Minne many times over, even cheating on his mistresses. He borrowed money he never returned, fleeced the husbands of his mistresses, and concerned himself always and solely with himself. When a patron was no longer of use to him, he would just walk away and make insulting remarks about them. He was also a virulent anti-Semite, saying the Jews were "the congenital enemies of humanity and all that is noble in it." (Gutman, p. 450) The Nazis did not have to invent anything; they had only to repeat Wagner's own words. It is easy to understand why he was such a favorite of theirs and why performances of his works continued unabated at Bayreuth and elsewhere during the war. Today, every music lover must make his own peace between the glorious music and the horrible man. (Gutman and Hilmes)

The Ring Cycle consists of four operas: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walkure*, *Siegfried*, and *Gotterdammerung*, or the *Twilight of the Gods*. The operas are usually referred to by their German titles, regardless of the tongue of the speaker. The cycle is known fully as

Das Ring der Nibelungen, or the Ring of the Niebelungs. It tells the story of a ring of great power and the havoc it causes. The basis for the operas is a set of Germanic and Nordic legends which exist in numerous forms and with various characters; Wagner studied these intensely and wove them together, borrowing bits from many and filling and inventing when he felt it necessary. Originally, he was going to tell just the story of the death of Siegfried, the human hero who unwittingly obtains the ring. While writing his libretto, which he began doing in 1847, he discovered that he had too much material for one opera, so he turned it into two, finally ending up with four operas, or as he sometimes put it, three operas and a prologue. He finally finished his text in 1852 and began work on the music of Rheingold in 1853. The first opera, Rheingold, is sometimes referred to as the prologue; by itself, it lasts 2:30 hours. Each of the other operas lasts four hours or more, depending on tempi and cuts. He essentially wrote his librettos backwards, starting with the end of the story. However, he composed forwards, starting with Rheingold and moving through the operas in order. By 1857, he had completed Rheingold, Walkure, and the first two acts of Siegfried, when he stopped working on the Ring, mostly in order to earn money by writing a few single operas, but also because of turmoil in his personal life. When he picked up the writing again some 12 years later, his style had matured greatly and he had abandoned his old theory of using single leitmotifs and singers in favor of more traditional style operatic writing, weaving together multiple themes and encompassing duets and even choruses. He finally completed Gotterdammerung in 1874. (Gutman)

Rheingold and Walkure were first performed in 1869 and 1870 respectively in Munich at the Court Theater, basically at the insistence of King Ludwig II, Wagner's

great patron. Wagner preferred to await the completion of the entire Cycle, but Ludwig could not wait. Siegfried and Gotterdammerung received their premiers at the brand new Festival Hall in Bayreuth in August 1876. The first American ring was produced at the Metropolitan Opera in 1889, conducted by Anton Seidl, against the wishes of his second wife Cosima Wagner, who felt that the Master's works should only be presented at Bayreuth. (Gutman and Hilmes)

The operas are usually performed in complete cycles; rarely does a company mount only one of the operas, unless it is preparing a new production of the Ring, in which case it will mount one opera each year until it completes the Cycle and will then mount complete cycles. Companies usually perform the cycles spread over six days, with breaks between Walkure, Siegfried, and Gotterdammerung. This is done out of consideration for the singers, since the same characters appear throughout the operas and the vocal lines are quite strenuous. The breaks also benefit the patrons, who have the opportunity to rest their weary bones after sitting for so long!

Wagner developed his own unique musical style. He is primarily known for his use of the leitmotif, or signature tune as the great comedienne Anna Russell called it. While other composers had used leitmotifs to some extent before Wagner, he developed it to its apogee. Each character or force in the opera has its own motif; characters like Brunhilde and Siegfried who spend a great deal of time on stage and have complex characters and roles have several attached to them. Scholars have grouped the leitmotifs into families. We will not discuss the groupings of the motifs, since scholars argue about the placement of the motifs in the various families and even what the families are. The leitmotifs appear in conjunction with a character, action, emotion, or thing. For instance,

the first opera, *Das Rheingold*, opens in the Rhine River, with one of the most famous opera openings ever – a long sustained E flat that is heard, underpinning the music that develops for some 136 measures. Over this fundamental E flat, we slowly hear a motif based on an E flat major chord that corresponds to River Rhine itself, followed by a variation on that motif that belongs to the Rhine Maidens, a sort of aquatic Andrews sisters who live in the Rhine River and guard a lump of magical gold. Apologies to Anna Russell again. By way of a diversion, Anna Russell was a well-known mid-20th century British comedienne, who, among other acts, did a famous send-up summarizing the Ring Cycle in 25 minutes, complete with musical examples. All students and aficionados of the Ring know this work. Going back to the issue of the leitmotif, these two similar sounding motifs can be grouped easily into a family often called Nature. There are many more motifs in this family, but we will not discuss those today, nor will you hear about families of motifs again. Suffice it that you know they exist. (EXCERPT)

Soon, we see Alberich the dwarf clambering about on the rocks and pursuing the Rhine Maidens, who spurn and taunt him. After hearing that anyone who renounces love may claim the lump of gold and shape it into a ring of great power, he renounces love, steals the lump of gold, and takes it with him back to his home in Nibelheim, where he indeed shapes it into a ring of great power, which he uses to oppress his fellow Niebelungs and amass great treasure for himself, including a helmet that enables its wearer to change shape.

The scene now shifts to Walhalla, the castle that Wotan is having built for his wife, Fricka. Wotan is the most important German god, similar to Zeus or Jupiter. Fricka is the goddess of marriage, among other things. She hopes that the construction of

a proper home will induce her husband to wander less. Wotan has contracted with two giants, Fasolt and Fafner, to build the castle, which is almost completed. As part of their wages, he has promised them Freia, the goddess of Youth. Fricka points out his idiocy to him, reminding him that Wotan cannot go back on his word, since his will enforces all contracts, but neither can he give up the goddess of Youth, who alone keeps the gods young with her magical apples. Wotan is stumped, but decides to call for Loge, the god of Fire, to help him. Like fire, Loge is shifty – he makes an excellent negotiator. Wotan waits and waits for Loge to appear, and when he does, Wotan says “Endlich Loge”, or “finally, Loge”, one of the few truly comic moments in the sixteen hours of opera. Loge has heard about the ring Alberich has created and suggests offering it to the giants in exchange for Freia. The giants accept the exchange, but, since Wotan does not yet have the ring, they seize Freia and carry her off until such time as Wotan delivers the ring. Immediately, the gods begin to age and grow lethargic.

Wotan and Loge then descend to Nibelheim, where in short order, they essentially compliment Alberich on his craft and persuade him to show off the power he has derived from the ring and helmet. Alberich assumes several different shapes, the last of which is a toad. When Alberich becomes the small toad, Loge seizes the helmet and Wotan stands on the toad, prohibiting its escape. Loge and Wotan then take Alberich, the helmet, and the ring back to Walhalla, where they force Alberich to give them the ring, the helmet, and all his treasure in return for his freedom. In despair and fury, Alberich curses the ring, dooming all who hold it to a life of care and all who do not have it to desire it.

(Rheingold libretto)

Now that Wotan has the ring, he is reluctant to give it to the giants. However, after a visit from Erda, a primeval earthmother goddess type, who warns Wotan of the consequences of keeping the ring and not keeping his word, he agrees to turn over the ring to the giants, who then return Freia to the gods. Fafner has taken most of the Niebelung treasure, while Fasolt has taken the ring, which he does not possess long, for Fafner quickly kills Fasolt in order to possess the ring. From the orchestra, the motif of the curse rings out again. In this case, as so often throughout the operas, Wagner uses the orchestra almost like a Greek Chorus to comment musically on the happenings on stage. The opera ends on a lighter note, with the Gods moving into Walhalla.

We will come back to the issue of leitmotifs at the end of the paper in order to discuss the combinations of motifs Wagner could create in order to bring layers of understanding into the work.

The second opera, *Die Walkure*, opens with Siegmund fleeing from his pursuers. When he happens upon a house, the mistress of the house, Sieglinde, invites him in, offering him the hospitality of her husband. As it turns out, the two are the twin offspring of Wotan and Sieglinde's husband, Hunding, is the one pursuing Siegmund. Hunding is not happy about the presence of Siegmund in his home, but cannot abjure the rules of hospitality, so allows him to stay the night before preparing himself for combat in the morning. After drugging her husband's nightcap, Sieglinde and Siegmund play twenty questions, eventually ascertaining the truth about themselves and discovering that they love each other, and not in a fraternal way. Hunding's house has an unusual feature – a tree grows in the middle of the hall and the trunk has a sword stuck in it. This being an

opera based on folk legends, you know that Siegmund will pull the sword out of the tree. The sword gets its own leitmotif, which will recur throughout the remaining operas.

Mrs. Wotan, otherwise known as Fricka, goddess of marriage, is not happy about the incestuous pair, so she rides off to see Wotan in high dudgeon and, after some nagging, convinces him not to take Siegmund's side in the coming fight with Hunding. Since Siegmund is a warrior hero, Wotan gives the job of announcing his death and collecting him after it to Brunhilde, one of the Valkyries, sometimes known as Wish Maidens. Their job is to collect fallen heroes and escort them to Walhalla, where they will live in honor for eternity.

After a long flight, Sieglinde is delirious with fatigue, so she and Siegmund pause for a rest. Once he soothes her to sleep, Brunhilde appears and invites him to Walhalla. She explains that Wotan lives there, along with the heroes, and that he will see his father, whom he knows as Walse, there as well. When Siegmund asks if he will embrace Sieglinde there, Brunhilde reports that no, Sieglinde will continue among the living. Siegmund replies: "Then greet for me Valhalla, greet for me Wotan, greet for me Walse and all the heroes; greet also the gracious wish-maidens: I will not follow you to them." (Walkure libretto) This response shocks Brunhilde into revealing that once a man has seen a Valkyrie, he has no choice but to enter Walhalla. Siegmund refuses to go, preferring to kill himself and Sieglinde with his sword rather than live in Walhalla without his beloved. Brunhilde is so moved by this declaration that she vows to protect Sieglinde and stand with Siegmund, completely against Wotan's orders. Since she chooses to fight on Siegmund's behalf in his fight against Hunding, Wotan is forced to step into the battle on the side of Hunding, much against his own personal wishes.

Siegmond shatters his sword on Wotan's spear, enabling Hunding to kill him. We see Hunding exulting in his victory for a moment, then Wotan kills him with a wave of the hand.

Brunhilde now flees on her horse with Sieglinde, attempting to protect the unborn issue of her union with Siegmund. Not knowing where else to go, she ^{flee} flees to her sisters, the other Valyries. As they gather together, we hear some of the most famous music in opera ever, the Ride of the Valkyries (EXCERPT). While Sieglinde lies exhausted and prostrate with grief, Wotan storms in, demanding that his traitorous daughter show herself. Note that Brunhilde is another daughter of Wotan. After a great deal of singing, Wotan ends up punishing Brunhilde for her disloyalty by disowning her and relieving her of her duties. From henceforth she will be as other women. He puts her to sleep on a rock and surrounds her with impenetrable fire. Like Sleeping Beauty, she will sleep until her prince arrives.

The third opera concerns itself with the education of the eponymous hero, Siegfried, son of the incestuous coupling of Sieglinde and Siegmund. Because his mother died shortly after giving birth to him, he has been raised by Mime, Alberich's brother. More than anything else, Mime wants to obtain the ring and the helmet, and he needs a hero of Siegfried's stature to do it for him. Mime is a gifted smith, having crafted the magic helmet himself, and he has taught his craft to Siegfried. Although they possess the shards of the shattered sword of Siegmund, Mime is unable to reforge it. However, because Siegfried has never known fear, he can and does. In an effort to teach Siegfried fear, the two go off to the cave where Fafner dwells in the form of a dragon, watching over his ring and helmet. Siegfried the fearless rushes into the cave, slays the dragon,

and takes the booty in the form of ring and helmet. Blood drips from Fafner's wound onto Siegfried; he licks away the blood. Because he has dragon's blood in him, he can now understand the wood creatures and hear people's inner thoughts. This becomes evident in a comic scene with Mime in which Mime tries to congratulate Siegfried on his victory and offer him a refreshing brew, but Siegfried hears his real thoughts in which Mime tries to poison Siegfried and take the ring and helmet. Because of his new knowledge, Siegfried kills Mime. Note the curse at work again.

Siegfried hears a woodbird singing of love and is intrigued. She tells him of a maiden asleep on a rock who can only be won by one who knows no fear. Well, of course Siegfried is the man for that. On the way to the rock, he encounters Wotan, who tries to stop him from waking Brunhilde. With one blow, Siegfried shatters Wotan's spear, thus ending the hegemony of the Gods and beginning their downfall. He follows the bird to the rock, penetrates the fire, and sees Brunhilde covered by her helmet and breastplate. Upon removing them both, he says: "This is no man!" She is, after all, the first woman he has ever seen. She's also his aunt, since she is a daughter of Wotan and he a grandson of Wotan. The very sight of her teaches him fear, from which he recovers quickly enough. She is also, more understandably, afraid, since she is now a mortal woman in the presence of a warrior hero. They quickly fall in love and "go in for some competitive singing – sort of anything you can sing, I can sing higher." (Anna Russell)

In *Gotterdammerung*, the opera opens with the happy couple on the rock, singing of their love. Siegfried leaves for adventure, leaving the ring with Brunhilde and taking the helmet with him. He quickly encounters Gunther and Guttrune, brother and sister, and their half-brother Hagen. Since we know that Hagen's father is Alberich, we know that

dirty work is afoot. Gutrune is quite taken with Siegfried, so she prepares a potion that causes him to forget Brunhilde and fall in love with her. Hagen knows all about Siegfried from his father, but Gunther and Gutrune are innocent of his history. Hagen tells of the beautiful maiden living by the rock and persuades Siegfried to woo her on behalf of Gunther. He puts on his helmet, allowing him to assume the form of Gunther, claims Brunhilde as a bride for his newly sworn friend and ally, Gunther, and wrests the ring from her. When she is brought back to the house of Gunther, Siegfried resumes his normal appearance. She approaches him, but he knows her not. Of course, she is furious – a woman scorned and all that. She reproaches him with infidelity, pouring out her heartache in accusations. The assembled crowd is understandably curious, but Siegfried denies any knowledge of the woman. She then plots with Hagen and Gunther to avenge her honor by the death of Siegfried.

While out on a hunt, they pause for refreshment and Hagen induces Siegfried to tell the story of his life. While recounting his tale, he drinks from a potion Hagen has prepared that counteracts the love philter given him by Gutrune. Without realizing what he is saying, he tells of how he found and won Brunhilde. Gunther is appalled by Siegfried's perfidy and rises in shock. When Siegfried turns his back, Hagen takes his sword and stabs him. We hear the theme of the curse once more.

Once Siegfried's body has been born back to the hall of Gunther, Hagen demands the ring as his spoil. When Gunther refuses, Hagen slays him too. As Hagen reaches out his sword to cut the ring off Siegfried's finger, Siegfried's hand rises up threateningly and all fall back, even Hagen. By this point, Brunhilde has discerned the treachery committed by Hagen and forgiven Siegfried, so she calls for a funeral pyre to be built,

mounts her horse, places Siegfried's body on the pyre and the ring on her finger, lights the pyre and rides onto it. Siegfried burns up, she burns up, and Walhalla burns up. Once it has all become smoking embers, the River Rhine overflows its banks and the Rhine Maidens reclaim their lump of gold. Hagen lunges after the Rhine Maidens, seeking the gold, but they drag him under the water.

Throughout the last act of Siegfried and the entirety of *Gotterdammerung*, we hear Wagner's fully mature style, in which he interweaves multiple leitmotifs to further the action and comment upon it. In the excerpt you will now hear, he quotes from several leitmotifs, summarizing the action and reminding us of the players. Although we will not hear it this evening, the motif of the Rhine Maidens, first heard 16 hours ago, appears once more. You will hear, in order, the motif of Walhalla, the castle of the Gods, in the brass and the motif of the Power of the Gods in a dotted-eighth sixteenth note in the bass; then the motif of the hero Siegfried as a brass fanfare followed immediately by the motif of the Twilight of the Gods, a descending pattern in the strings and woodwinds; leaving only the motif of Love's Redemption to sound alone at the end of the cycle of operas.

(EXCERPT) After six days and sixteen hours, the opera has at last ended with the theme of love's redemption, signifying the final triumph of human love over the venality of the gods. The audience, and yes, you too, are finally free to go, exhausted, but sated by the musical journey.

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