

THE RING CYCLE BACKGROUND FOR NC OPERA

By Margie Satinsky

President, Triangle Wagner Society

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Wagner's famous *Ring Cycle* includes four operas: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walkure*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*. What's so special about the *Ring Cycle*? Here's what William Berger, author of *Wagner without Fear*, says: "...the *Ring* is probably the longest chunk of music and/or drama ever put before an audience. It is certainly one of the best. There is nothing remotely like it. The *Ring* is a German Romantic view of Norse and Teutonic myth influenced by both Greek tragedy and a Buddhist sense of destiny told with a sociopolitical deconstruction of contemporary society, a psychological study of motivation and action, and a blueprint for a new approach to music and theater."

One of the most fascinating characteristics of the *Ring* is the **number of meanings** attributed to it. It has been seen as a justification for governments and a condemnation of them. It speaks to traditionalists and forward-thinkers. It is distinctly German and profoundly pan-national. It provides a lifetime of study for musicologists and thrilling entertainment. It is an adventure for all who approach it.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE RING CYCLE

Wagner was extremely critical of the music of his day. Unlike other composers, he not only wrote the music and the libretto, but also dictated the details of each production. The German word for total work of art, **Gesamtkunstwerk**, means the synthesis of the poetic, visual, musical, and dramatic arts with music subsidiary to drama.

As a composer, Wagner was very interested in themes, and he uses them in *The Ring Cycle* in different ways. The most familiar of these themes are **194 distinct musical leitmotifs** that identify characters, remind audiences of earlier events, and reinforce ideas expressed in the text. The leitmotifs are not an end in unto themselves but are employed in the service of the drama. They guide the listener through the action, interpreting, anticipating, accompanying the psychological development of the characters and the ebb and flow of the drama. Subtly changing in melodic or rhythmic outline, in harmony, in dynamics, in orchestration, they convey the emotional and situational changes in the work.

The *Ring Cycle* is filled with many **objects that assume the form of characters**. Examples are the Spear, Notung, the Tarnhelm, the Ring, the Rheingold, the Hoard of Gold, Grane, the two Ravens, Gibich, Grane, Grimhilde, the Heroes of Valhalla, Helle, and the World-Ash Tree, Siegfried's Lime Tree and Wotan's Missing Eye.

Wagner also uses **visual themes**. For example, he wanted the Rhine maidens to be bathed in greenish twilight, Erda and the Walsungs to be associated with the color blue, and Nibelheim to be depicted as red. He uses phonetic themes or verbal motifs and narrative themes with repetition of certain incidents. An obvious theme is the glance that occurs at critical moments. In *Das Rheingold*, for example, Freia's gaze, visible through the heaps of gold, motivates the giants to insist that Alberich's Ring of power be added to their treasure.

The five **natural elements** play an important role in *The Ring Cycle*. They include earth (Erda), water (Rhine, various potions such as those given by Sieglinde to Hunding and by Hagen to Siegfried), fire (ring of fire surrounding Brunnhilde and the demolition of Valhalla), wood (World-Ash tree) and metal (spear and sword). The natural order is disturbed until the end of *Gotterdammerung*, when the Ring is restored to its rightful place in the Rhine.

The way in which Wagner **builds on myth and molds it to his liking** is brilliant. Ever the creative genius, he preferred to create his own narrative in order to express what he wanted to say. For example, Wotan, like the mythological Odin, is the head of a homestead. Unable to remain at home, Odin/Wotan and his son go into exile. In the myth, Odin disappears, leaving his son to fend for himself. Thus far the myth and *The Ring Cycle* are similar. But Wagner adds an additional element. Even after Wotan and his son Siegmund separate, Wotan has a hand in his son's destiny. He promises his son that a sword will be available to him in his hour of need. Wagner's approach to the incestuous relationship between the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde also deviates from myth. Rather than condemn the two as would have been the case in Greek mythology, Wagner's Wotan understands that his children share a sense of compassion for others and that love triumphs over power.

The Ring Cycle presents a surprisingly **positive role of women**. Brunnhilde sets the world right. Her willingness to rescue Sieglinde jeopardizes her own position. She learns to understand and experience love, trading her status as a goddess for humanity. Sieglinde offers both hospitality and kindness to Siegmund and eventually falls in love with him, in spite of the fact that he is her twin brother. Erda offers advice and an accurate prediction of events to come. In *Gotterdammerung*, Brunnhilde forgives Gutrune, who had no idea that Siegfried had already married Brunnhilde when he succumbed to the potion caused him to forget his previous life.

The Ring is also an allegory for the **disintegration of corrupt society**. Greed and lust for power unbalance the world and disrupt the natural order. The five natural elements, water, metal, earth, fire and wood, play a predominant role. Siegfried, the hero, is born to redeem the world at a steep price – i.e. his own death. In the end, the arrogant gods are destroyed, the Ring is returned to its rightful place in the Rhine River, and the natural world is restored.

The **concept of time** is another interesting aspect of *The Ring Cycle*. The saga takes place over a long period of time, allowing both the characters and listeners to remember what has happened before and to anticipate what might lie ahead. Wagner uses the untranslatable German word "Ahnung" to describe this enormous time span

Still another feature of *The Ring Cycle* is the idea of **loss**. In each of the four operas, each main character suffers a great loss. Sometimes the loss is retribution for greed, deceit, or some other negative behavior. At other times the loss impacts those with the best of intentions.

A LONG TIME IN THE MAKING

Wagner's **writing of *The Ring Cycle*** is a saga unto itself. Many compare it to the drama of Wagner's own life, including his political struggles, his many love affairs, his financial problems, and his deep philosophical studies. When he began working on the *Ring* he believed in anarchism and free love. By the time the *Ring* project ended, he could be described as more of a Buddhist who believed it was up to each person to redeem him or herself.

It took Wagner 28 years (1848-1874) to complete both the drama and the music for all four operas. He was 35 when he wrote his first dramatic sketch and 63 when the first production of the full *Ring Cycle* took place at Bayreuth. Wagner began his effort in 1848 with a prose outline called *The Nibelung Myth as Scheme for a Drama*. He then wrote the four operas in the reverse order in which they appear in *The Ring Cycle*, starting with the libretto that he called *Siegfried's Death* and that eventually became the germ of *Gotterdammerung*. Realizing that Siegfried needed a life before his death, Wagner worked backwards, writing *The Young Siegfried*, which corresponds to what we know as *Siegfried*. Next came *Die Walkure*, and finally *Das Rheingold*, the introduction to the three subsequent operas. The many flashbacks were there from the outset, not because Wagner wrote the operas in reverse chronological order.

Although Wagner wrote the stories in reverse chronological order, he wrote the music from front to back. After he had composed the first two acts of *Siegfried*, he paused for almost 12 years for emotional, artistic, and financial reasons. During this interim period, he composed *Tristan und Isolde* (1865 premiere) and *Die Meistersinger* (premiere 1868).

Wagner originally conceived of the drama in all four operas as focusing on **groups**, not individuals. For example, there were groups of giants and groups of Volsungs who were in danger of corrupting their heroic race through breeding with inferior races. Musicologist Robert Greenberg describes four groups of characters. Erda and the Rhinemaidens are eternal creatures. Wotan and his fellow gods represent the corrupt European aristocracy, and by the end of *Das Rheingold*, Wotan has already lied, cheated, and stolen. The giants represent the working class. They are powerful brutes that do the dirty work, and they are a group who are driven by lust and greed. The Nibelungs may represent the Jews. As makers of jewelry, they aren't threatening so long as they remain in their place in the shtetl, represented by the caves of Nibelheim. If their desire for power and hunger drives them to the surface, as it does for Alberich, they threaten the existence of the nations that live above ground.

When Wagner returned to *The Ring Cycle*, his challenge was to determine the **ending**. During the many years when *The Ring Cycle* was in process, he had already considered nine different versions. Initially, the gods survived, thanks to Brunnhilde's sacrifice. But Wagner thought this ending too positive and not good theater. He also decided against the negativity of what he called the "Schopenhauer ending". He ultimately returned to one of his earlier ideas – the redeeming power of love where the world of the gods comes to an end, the Ring is restored to its original, and natural home, and hope signals the dawn of a new age. The music, not words, expresses the final outcome.

THE FIRST RING CYCLE AT BAYREUTH

Wagner first produced the complete *Ring Cycle* in 1876. The venue was the recently constructed Festival Opera House at Bayreuth. Why Bayreuth? Wagner wanted his works to be the center of attention. He preferred not to present his masterpiece in a city where works by other composers would be performed. As was his intention, acting, poetry, and music all came together. Wagner was in total control. He not only wrote the words and music, but also designed the theater, wrote the program notes, invented and commissioned the construction of special musical instruments for the performances, hired the singers, and directed the productions.

RING CYCLE PRODUCTIONS

Although the brilliance of both the music and drama of *The Ring Cycle* are well recognized, both the scenic and costume design have challenged producers since the outset. For example, *Das Rheingold* begins under water. The scenes change quickly as characters morph into dragons and toads, rings of fire, and flying horses. In the first production, the Rhine maidens sat on top of bobbing contraptions that were miraculously wheeled around by stagehands. Just as in the Metropolitan Opera's highly criticized production (2011-2013), the Rhine maidens had to be coaxed to climb onto their dangerous modes of transportation. In that same original production, curtains of steam surrounded the character transformations, causing George Bernard Shaw, a great admirer of *The Ring*, to claim that special effect made the opera house smell like a laundry!

Wagner himself was aware of his shortcomings with respect to design sense. After the premiere, he promised a different production next time. He had already invented the invisible orchestra that sat in a covered pit at Bayreuth. Now he suggested an invisible stage and an invisible audience. These comments puzzle critics and listeners to this day.

The challenge with the *Ring Cycle* has always been that it is meant for the stage. The question that is repeatedly asked is "Should it be realistic or should it be symbolic and abstract?" Until the 1930s, most opera houses remained true to the original production. The planned 1933 Bayreuth production caused a major uproar. Heinz Tietjen, the manager of the Prussian State Theaters, and the designer Emil Preetorius staged a new production with new sets and costumes. In the politics of the time, change was regarded as "Jewish" or "Bolshevik", as contrasted with traditional and pure Aryan. Given the political importance of Bayreuth to the Nazis, Preetorius modified his designs and costumes.

After World War II, Richard Wagner's grandson Wieland Wagner's stripped all references to the Third Reich from his 1951 production. The Nazis had insisted on realistic representation of details and faithfulness to the original stage directions. The post-war production had no representation of details and minimal stage direction. "Neutral" might be the best adjective to describe everything about the opera. Traditionalists were angry, but Wieland held his ground.

In 1965, Wieland produced a second *Ring Cycle*. After Henry Moore declined to design the sets, Wieland designed them himself. The effect was similar to Stonehenge or a sculpture garden. In the 1970s, directors and designers began having fun with *The Ring*. A 1974 production in Cassel, Germany earned the nickname *Space-Age Ring*. Sadler's Wells produced a *Ring* in English that was part outer space and part everything else. Science fiction and fantasy, both of which had influenced Wagner in the beginning, influenced other productions.

1976 was the 100th anniversary of the premiere of *The Ring Cycle*, and all eyes were on Bayreuth. Another grandson, Wolfgang Wagner, commissioned two Frenchmen, Pierre Boulez (conductor) and Patrice Chereau (production) to create a new performance. Like most *Ring Cycle* performances, this one was controversial. Chereau staged the operas as face value Marxist analysis, with Wotan taking the part of the Capitalist, complete with top hat. Although there was great controversy at the time, retrospective opinions of this production were favorable. More recent productions have been a combination of styles without a particular theme. The Seattle *Ring Cycle* by Speight Jenkins and more recently the Washington Opera's *Ring Cycle* (shown in San Francisco in 2018) have been very popular. The new Metropolitan

Opera production created a negative reaction. Advances in technology allowed numerous production innovations that malfunctioned and became a tremendous distraction to both the audience and the singers.