

# FROM PAGE TO STAGE

## INTERPRETING THE CHARACTERS OF THE RING

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According to the old myths, the legendary hero Siegfried was carried in his mother's womb for seven years before birth, an exhausting detail that Wagner actually used in one of his early drafts but - mercifully for Sieglinde – dropped again soon afterwards. In those circumstances, it would have been debateable who was the more heroic, the son or the mother! The mythology that provides much of The Ring's narrative is peppered with such details. They make fascinating reading but they are not at the heart of what Wagner had in mind when he decided to write an opera based on the old Nibelung sagas and the legends of Siegfried.

Then again, it seems to me, as a layman, that Siegfried as he appears in The Ring would be a most interesting candidate for psychoanalysis. He certainly presents some fascinating possibilities for a stage director. Orphaned at birth, he is raised in complete isolation by a devious guardian whose intention is to exploit him when he is old enough and then kill him. The boy identifies more with the local animals than with his guardian, who has kept him in the dark about his real parents. When Siegfried does extract a few details about them he becomes obsessed with the image of his mother, imagining, amongst other things, that she is speaking to him through bird song. He kills his guardian (the only father he has known), and marries the first woman he encounters after mistaking her for his mother. I think you can see where this is leading.

However, if we are to understand how Siegfried and the other characters in The Ring evolved, we need to go back to the 1840s to see exactly what motivated Wagner to write an opera (just one opera in those days) based on the Nibelung legends. These stories were immensely popular in the post-Napoleonic days of Wagner's youth, when German unification was in the air and poets and playwrights were keen to demonstrate the richness of their own culture in the face of foreign (notably French) influences. A number of plays, both serious and comic, used the Nibelung stories. There was at least one opera, by Heinrich Dorn, in which Wagner's own niece sang the role of Brünnhilde. In fact, the legends had been popular for a very long time and in the sixteenth century the historical Hans Sachs had written a seven-act tragedy about Siegfried. No doubt efforts in the early nineteenth century to celebrate authentic German culture struck a responsive chord with Wagner, especially after his unhappy experiences in Paris while trying to make a name for himself as a composer. His feelings then were made very clear in a semi-autobiographical short story of 1841 called *An End in Paris* about the death of a young German musician in the midst of a glittering but uncaring metropolis.

Soon afterwards, he was appointed Kapellmeister at the King of Saxony's court in Dresden and had notable successes with *The Flying Dutchman* and

*Tannhäuser*. But he also ran up against powerful vested interests opposed to his entirely reasonable reforms. Thus the seeds of rebellion were sown.

The idea of an opera on the Death of Siegfried took root at that time, coinciding with a ground-swell in many parts of Europe for radical social and political reforms. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published their Communist Manifesto, and the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, an acquaintance of both Wagner and Marx, advocated the violent overthrow of the state. For his part, Wagner published a poem called *Die Noth* – ‘The Need’, advocating the overthrow of capitalist structures as well as the accompanying evils of greed and usury. It is hardly coincidental that he was later to name Siegfried’s sword *Nothung* – ‘Needful’.

As a student in Leipzig in the 1830s, he had been attracted to political activism, and subsequently wrote, ‘I became a revolutionary, and reached the conviction that every aspiring human being should concern himself exclusively with politics.’ He was therefore ripe for the Dresden events of nearly twenty years later.

So, the Ring as first conceived, was a political allegory of the nineteenth century. The authoritarian regime (represented in the narrative by Wotan and the other gods) was succumbing to the greedy capitalism of the industrial revolution (represented by Alberich the Nibelung). But eventually, argued Wagner, a new and more humane society would arise, inspired by noble aspirations represented by the heroic Siegfried, a man who, in a loveless world, ‘never ceases to love’. During the course of the intended opera - then called *Siegfrieds Death* - the hero would confront the gods, Brünnhilde would purge their guilt by an act of self-immolation, Alberich would be redeemed from his loveless existence and a reformed Wotan would continue to reign in splendour. The lovers would share a glorious after-life together. Meanwhile, in the political arena, Wagner was publicly expounding the notion that the existing regime should be swept away while the reformed Saxon king would remain, like Wotan, father of his people and head of a crowned republic. Thus, life would imitate art. This was Wagner’s starting point in approaching his most demanding work.

The upshot was that Wagner sided with the revolutionaries in 1849, and was involved in writing pamphlets, ordering munitions and reporting on troop movements. However, the Dresden uprising was suppressed and a warrant was issued for his arrest for treason. With the help of Franz Liszt, he managed to escape into Switzerland and exile.

At heart, he was an impassioned artist, not a rational political thinker, and his revolutionary leanings were motivated primarily by his artistic frustrations. He railed against the shallow attitude of the public towards art, and against a society that perpetuated such shallowness. Bakunin admired Wagner’s music but came to the conclusion fairly early on that he was an impractical dreamer. ‘I never committed myself to any joint action with him’ said Bakunin, rather pointedly. Wagner’s dreams were to take shape, not at the barricades but in the opera house.

In 1848, while developing ideas on the relationship between myths and historical events, Wagner wrote an essay called: *'The Wibelungs: World-history as Revealed in Saga'*. Many have scoffed at this as a crackpot idea, but that is to misinterpret what Wagner was struggling to understand, with no scientific points of reference in his own day. He was feeling his way intuitively, seventy years before Carl Gustav Jung made his observations on the collective unconscious, and its application to the contents of mythology.

For five years after he went into exile he wrote practically no music but threw himself into essay writing, trying to make sense of his life, and thinking – as few had thought before – about the function and mechanisms of opera. During this process, 'Siegfried's Death' expanded to include all of the works we now know as 'The Ring of the Nibelung'.

A powerful influence on Wagner's thinking at this time was the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. One of his ideas was that the 'glorious necessity of love' should take precedence over the law. This was Wagner's motto in his early sketches for The Ring, and he never entirely abandoned it. He once told Franz Liszt: 'The state of lovelessness is the state of suffering for the human race...we recognize the glorious necessity of love...and so, in this way we acquire a strength of which natural man had no inkling, and this strength – increased to embrace the whole of humanity – will one day lay the foundations for a state on earth where no one need yearn for the other world, for they will be happy – to live and to love. For where is the man who yearns to escape from life when he is in love?'

Feuerbach also proclaimed a new religion of humanity, in which God was perceived as a projection of the hopes and needs of men and women. In The Ring these ideas are dramatised in the incestuous, adulterous relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde - a relationship that challenges divine law - and in the confrontation between Wotan and his consort Fricka, goddess of wedlock. When Fricka asks how her husband could countenance such goings-on between brother and sister, he replies that things may happen spontaneously that have never happened before, and that a marriage contract *without* love is a greater crime. Fricka foresees the end of the gods if love is preferred to the law. As *she* sees it, the authority of the gods (which for Wagner meant 'church and state') is based on compacts, compromises and constructions of the law. Love doesn't come into it.

But love did come into it, and led Wagner to draft an ending to The Ring (not the final one) in which Brünnhilde specifically rejects possessions, wealth and divine splendour in favour of the redeeming power of love. It is compassionate love that dominates the scene of the annunciation of death to Siegmund, and leads to Brünnhilde's defiance of Wotan, Sieglinde's escape, Siegfried's birth, Brünnhilde's mortality and, ultimately, the downfall of the gods. The love that Alberich had renounced now becomes a prime catalyst for change, and flickers back into life on a stormy night in front of Hunding's hearth. It marks not only the onset of Spring and the relationship between brother and sister but also the essential transformation of old myths into new.

The role of Fricka may be approached sympathetically, from her perspective, or unsympathetically, from Wotan's. Is she a nagging wife or the victim of an overbearing and habitually unfaithful husband? In their showdown in Act Two of *The Valkyrie*, Fricka has no truck with Wotan's morality of convenience, and she doesn't mince her words. She accuses him of pretending to be stupid and deaf. If he grants respectability to the incestuous pair then he will have to sanctify the fruit of their liaison. The very idea stops her heart and causes her brain to reel. With a 'what are you going on about woman' tone, Wotan suggests she would be better off accepting what has happened, smiling on love and blessing the union. Fricka wonders why she is even bothering to discuss such matters with a man who is constantly gratifying his own fickle fancies. She notes that he had taken to roaming the world like a wolf, begetting common mortals and humiliating his consort before a she-wolf's litter. He might as well finish the job, fill the cup full and trample on the wife he has cheated.

In interpreting a character like Fricka, we have to consider not only the words she uses but also the music that conveys so much about her state of mind and attitude. Her words might be those of a shrew but the music tells us she is a woman of dignity, and one in emotional pain. Fricka lacks imagination and is incapable of moving beyond a very conventional view of the world, but she has remained childless while her husband has been fathering offspring left, right and centre. In the circumstances, her reaction is understandable.

By the mid-1850s Wagner had become a very different man from the starry-eyed revolutionary of the Dresden years. His idealism had gone and he was profoundly cynical of all forms of government. He wrote to Liszt: 'Let us treat the world only with contempt; for it deserves no better; but let no hope be placed in it, that our hearts be not deluded! It is evil, evil, *fundamentally evil*...It belongs to Alberich: no one else!! Away with it!' This was a cry of despair, soon to be echoed by Wotan in *The Valkyrie*.

But let's look at Alberich for a moment. It was the desire for love that had prompted his overtures to the Rhinedaughters, and he only renounced love out of frustration when they provoked him. He was not inherently evil and they were only doing what came naturally – flirting in order to distract attention from the gold. From such innocence can evil arise.

The most profound development in Wagner's approach to The Ring – and perhaps to his own life – coincided with his work on the scene in Act Two of *The Valkyrie*, in which Wotan wrestles with his own nature, using Brünnhilde as his *alter ego* to explore the very depths of his being.

Trapped in a political and moral quagmire, Wotan begins to accept the inevitability of his demise and the end of the gods. His favourite Valkyrie daughter Brünnhilde implores him to confide in her. He sinks into deep thought and says that if he speaks about his concern, won't he then lose control of himself. Softly she assures him that he is speaking to himself when he speaks to her. Who is she if not his will – his other self? He finally

acknowledges that what goes unsaid will remain unspoken forever, and that he is only talking to himself when he speaks to her. And so he lets go and everything comes pouring out. 'With loathing, I can find only myself in all that I have created' he says. 'I must forsake and murder the son whom I love and who trusts me. ... Let what I have built fall apart. ... I desire only one thing: the end, the end!' This scene was written in 1854, two years before the birth of Sigmund Freud.

Wagner conducted a most illuminating correspondence with August Röckel - conductor, composer and his former assistant in Dresden. Röckel had been arrested in 1849 and sentenced to death, but his sentence was commuted and he spent thirteen years in prison. In his letters to Röckel, Wagner goes into considerable detail about *The Ring* and its characters, and he explains the importance of what had happened to Wotan in the following terms: '...the remainder of the poem' he says, 'is concerned to show how necessary it is to acknowledge change, variety, multiplicity and the eternal newness of reality and of life, and to yield to that necessity. Wotan rises to the tragic heights of *willing* his own destruction. This is all that we need to learn from the history of mankind: *to will what is necessary* and to bring it about ourselves. The final creative product of this supreme, self-destructive will is a *fearless* human being, one who never ceases to *love*: *Siegfried*.'

In the same letter he goes on: 'Following his farewell to Brünnhilde, Wotan is in truth no more than a departed spirit: true to his supreme resolve he must now allow events *to take their course*, leave things as they are, and nowhere interfere in any decisive way; that is why he has now become the 'Wanderer'; observe him closely! He resembles *us* to a tee; he is the sum total of present-day intelligence, whereas Siegfried is the man of the future whom we desire and long for but who cannot be made by us, since he must create himself on the basis of *our own annihilation*.' Surely it is not so much Wotan as Wagner who has grasped the inevitability of change, willed the destruction of his old persona and set out, like Siegfried to claim a new destiny.

In the mid-1850s, while still engaged on *The Valkyrie*, Wagner encountered the writings of the contemporary philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer; writings that matched his mood perfectly and gave him an intellectual framework for the remainder of his life's work. He had previously been moved philosophically, he said, by the 'cheerful' Greek view of the world, but Schopenhauer's thesis (which has much in sympathy with Buddhism), offered the annihilation of the will and complete self-abnegation as the true means of personal redemption. What does this mean? Schopenhauer called the instinctive, driving energy within human beings, the 'will', and to this will he attributed all evil and strife. Willing, wanting, longing, craving are not just things that we do: they are things that we are. Schopenhauer argued that the inherently destructive consequences of this instinctive 'will' could be avoided only by achieving a state of detachment from it, and the arts - especially music - offered a temporary means of doing this. Only in this way can human beings free themselves from a propensity to self-delusion and self-harm, or '*Wahn*' as Hans Sachs calls it in *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*.

During the last three decades of his life, Wagner became more concerned with metaphysical issues than with political ones, a change that is highly relevant to the interpretation of characters, although of course individual stage directors might or might not take advantage of this.

What then is the engine that drives the narrative of *The Ring*? What is the impulse that gives form and direction to this story of gods and heroes and the apparently irreconcilable dichotomies of power and love, artifice and nature? To my mind, it is the inevitability, indeed the desirability of *change*. How did Wagner put it? ...the necessity of acknowledging 'change, variety, multiplicity and the eternal newness of reality and of life, and of yielding to that necessity'. *The Ring* shows us that 'change', or if you like 'transformation' is not to be feared but to be welcomed. The positive characters embrace change – the negative ones resist it. Even Wotan in the end welcomes change, as we see in Act Three of *Siegfried*, when he declares to Erda that the downfall of the gods no longer fills him with fear because it is what he desires. In rage and loathing he had been prepared to surrender the world to Alberich, but now he bequeaths it gladly to Siegfried. On the other hand, Wotan's dark counterpart, Alberich, resists change and is tormented to the end. 'Hate happy people' he instructs his son Hagen in Act Two of *Götterdämmerung*. Having renounced love in order to gain power, he is left with neither. If Siegfried, awakened to love by Brünnhilde, is to be the man of the future, *his* dark counterpart Hagen, who has never known love, is surely the man of the past.

The idea that the future belongs to Siegfried, which is to say to fearlessly-loving human beings, is an attractive one, but even Wagner the 'impractical dreamer' found it unsustainable. His own maturing during the quarter of a century that separated the commencement and completion of *The Ring* led him in quite another direction. Thus we see the processes of change at work once more, not only within the characters but also in the structure of the work as a whole. The rather unsettling truth is that *The Ring* has inherent contradictions, which can be either a blessing or a curse for the stage director. Most directors these days welcome such flaws because they open the door to many and varied interpretations. Like the grit inside an oyster shell, they can become, in the right circumstances, a lustrous pearl. In the wrong circumstances they remain just a piece of grit.

As the Nibelung dramas evolved, it became clear to Wagner that the central character was really Wotan not Siegfried, and that the great moral and philosophical messages of *The Ring* were to be provided by Wotan and Brünnhilde. Indeed it is Brünnhilde, not Siegfried, who becomes the real hero of *The Ring*. That was a major realignment of the story but it explains why Siegfried was left in the depths of the forest for a whole twelve years while Wagner immersed himself in *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*. Siegfried as a character had gone seriously off the rails.

Despite all the references to heroic expectations, Siegfried ends up doing very little that can be described as heroic. He doesn't understand what the fuss over the ring is all about and he certainly doesn't try to use it, other than as a token of his love for Brünnhilde. He is deceived, drugged, betrayed and

eventually murdered. Some hero! He is no longer the gods' redeemer but just an innocent abroad, a symbol of hope in a hopeless world, caught up in machinations he doesn't comprehend. In *Götterdämmerung*, he even recreates all the mistakes Wotan had made in *Das Rheingold* - embracing power, entangling himself in false treaties and renouncing true love. Ultimately then, Siegfried becomes a truly tragic figure. The mature and rather pessimistic Wagner had no doubt that human beings were going to make the same old mistakes over and over again, and would never learn from past experience. There was no political escape from this cycle, only a personal one. Which brings us to the last of the characters affected in a major way by the forces of change - Brünnhilde.

We see her to begin with as an exuberant favourite daughter of Wotan, then as his confidant – no, more than that - his *alter ego*. It is precisely because she is this that she rebels against him, for in truth he is rebelling against himself. When he punishes her he is punishing himself and when he abandons her he is abandoning himself. The feeling of compassion that overwhelms her when confronted with Siegmund's love for Sieglinde marks her first step towards humanity and mortality. Stripped of her godhead, she is awakened to new life by Siegfried who, in that moment, finds both love and fear. The old world of the gods is of no consequence to the lovers, and they foretell its end.

So why do things go terribly wrong between Brünnhilde and Siegfried, and how are they put right? Hagen stands behind all their problems, and behind Hagen looms Alberich. Lovelessness is making one last effort to get the upper hand. Through Hagen's intervention, Siegfried is made to forget Brünnhilde - a terrible catastrophe in terms of the mediaeval values of the main sources for *Götterdämmerung*. Physical separation is natural, even desirable, as Siegfried fulfils his destiny in the world, but to forget a loved-one is unforgivable. Far from continuing to love Siegfried, Brünnhilde now joins in the plot to kill him. Hagen-induced hatred is eating into her soul just as the twisted harmonies of the ring are eating into the musical fabric of *Götterdämmerung*.

Only when Siegfried's memory of Brünnhilde returns at the moment of his death, does the drama head towards its glorious conclusion. Brünnhilde learns of the true nature of events and, in the process, is transformed once again. 'He, the truest of all men, betrayed me' she says, 'that I in my grief might grow wise'. Her revelation is that hope resides not in the 'essential nothingness of appearances' (to use Schopenhauerean terminology) but in the inner wisdom born of love – love to the point of suffering and sacrifice. This of course establishes a philosophical springboard to Wagner's last work *Parsifal*, where wisdom is born of love in the form of compassion – the ability to share the sufferings of others.

So, Brünnhilde articulates Wagner's final thoughts on The Ring, but it is left to the orchestra alone to convey, most eloquently, the mysteries of this tremendous moment.

