



WAGNER'S *RING* CYCLE

BY DR DAVID KRAMAM

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Image – Leigh Ryan


THE GIST:

1. Something about Wagner
2. Reforming streams before Wagner
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4. Wagner's music-dramas
5. Das Rheingold
6. Die Walkure
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RICHARD WAGNER (1813-1883)

- Wagner and Verdi are the two opera giants of the nineteenth century
 - Wagner was born in Leipzig during the Napoleonic Wars. He learnt his craft as a conductor in small theatres before an important engagement in Dresden (South-Eastern Germany)
 - His early operas made him famous. However, he became involved in uprisings in 1848 and exiled himself to Switzerland
 - Wagner was a prolific writer. He envisioned a new, transformative role for art in Germany's future
 - After the middle of the century, he firmly established his reputation with the 'Ring' Cycle, Die Meistersinger, Tristan und Isolde and Parsifal
 - Along with the compositions of his friend Franz Liszt, Wagner was seen as the 'modernist' in German music
 - He influenced practically every composer, especially in the German speaking world and in France and Britain
 - The annual festival in the small town of Bayreuth still attracts thousands of international visitors
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THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN DRAMA – WAGNER'S ANTECEDENTS

Monteverdi – the greatest opera composer of the seventeenth century

Glück – the opera reformer of the eighteenth century

Beethoven – who opened a pathway to the nineteenth century for depth of musical expression and expansion of musical form

Berlioz – the French genius who thought big and wrote for huge orchestras



MONTEVERDI (1567-1643)



The seventeenth century witnessed the rapid development of opera (= 'works') where the musical chants of dialogue (= recitative) alternated with more formal musical forms to create a dramatic whole. Monteverdi was an outstanding example.

His works *Orfeo* and *The Coronation of Poppea* are still performed today



Slide 5

DK1

David Kram, 11/11/2013

GLÜCK (1714-1787)

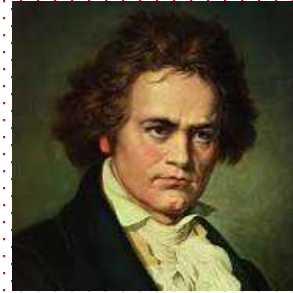


Extracts from preface to opera 'Alceste' - opera reform theories

- No repeats in arias (aka 'da capo' arias)
- Minimise virtuosic display and text repetition –simpler melodic lines
- No long melismas – more syllabic, intelligible word settings
- Blurring of the distinction between recitative and aria, declamatory and lyrical passages, with less recitative
- Overture that is linked by theme or mood to the ensuing action
- More prominence for the chorus



BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)



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- Whilst Beethoven is known more for his instrumental works, his opera *Fidelio* exercised a profound effect on Wagner.
 - The introduction to Act Two is a fine example of music illustrating not just the darkness of a dungeon and the clanking of chains – but also the psychological state of one unjustly imprisoned. With the melodrama “Wie kalt es ist...” one can see the germ of film music dialogue underscoring.
 - Beethoven’s ability to manipulate thematic material influenced not only Wagner but the whole music world of the nineteenth century.

BERLIOZ (1803-1869)



- The French composer Berlioz is noted for an eccentric genius who thought and wrote in grandiose scale, expanding the size of the orchestra beyond anything imagined.
- His *Symphonie fantastique* (1830, when Wagner was 27), combines symphonic form with programmatic content and is a fine example of the use of a theme in various forms to denote an object or a thought. It is known here as 'idée fixe'.



WAGNER ON BERLIOZ



“From the depths of this Germany of ours, the spirit of Beethoven has breathed upon him, and there were certainly times when Berlioz wanted to be a German; it is at times like these that his genius drove him to write in imitation of the great master, to express precisely what he felt was being expressed in his works. But as soon as he put pen to paper, the natural fire of his French blood would take the upper hand....

Dresdner Abendzeitung of 5 May 1841.

- Translated by Michel Austin <http://www.hberlioz.com/Predecessors/wagner1841e.htm>

WAGNER'S CONTRIBUTION TO MUSIC HISTORY

- Emancipated the supernatural and mythical into music-drama;
- His rich orchestration and expanded orchestral forces became the norm;
- Major transformer of opera from a 'numbers' show to a seamless drama which he called 'total-sound-art';
- He expanded harmonic language and started to blur the clarity of tonality;
- He found a way to emancipate opposites such as feeling and logic.

WAGNER AND LISZT (1811-1886)



- **Franz Liszt** championed Wagner's work and theories
- A famous pianist and also conductor, he pioneered the *Symphonic Poem* form
- To develop thematic material within a free form, he developed Berlioz' 'idée fixe' into a technique called 'metamorphosis of themes'
- Example – Symphonic Poem 'Les Préludes'. To see how themes transformed, go to <http://www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/maliepaard-liszt-les-preludes.pdf>

WAGNER'S MUSIC-DRAMAS

(NOT COUNTING EARLY OPERAS UP TO *RIENZI*)

The Flying Dutchman - A ghost story set in Norway, based on the legend of a Dutch sea-captain who challenged the Devil and was condemned to roam the seas until a woman could be found to offer supreme love.

A story of female self-sacrifice.



WAGNER'S MUSIC-DRAMAS

Tannhauser – Set in medieval Germany. The conflict of pagan erotic and Christian courtly-elevated love. Redemption by a woman who was maltreated. Also a story about the role of music.



WAGNER'S MUSIC-DRAMAS

Lohengrin – set in Medieval Flanders. The conflict of paganism and Christianity. and a promise which is too difficult to keep. No redemption this time, but Christianity wins out.



WAGNER'S MUSIC-DRAMAS

The Ring Cycle – to be explained in detail.



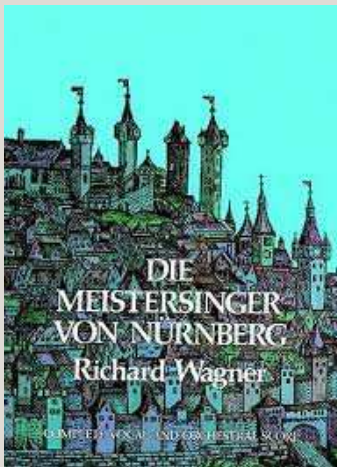
WAGNER'S MUSIC-DRAMAS

Tristan and Isolde – set in Celtic Britain. A story of forbidden love and its relationship to the death wish.



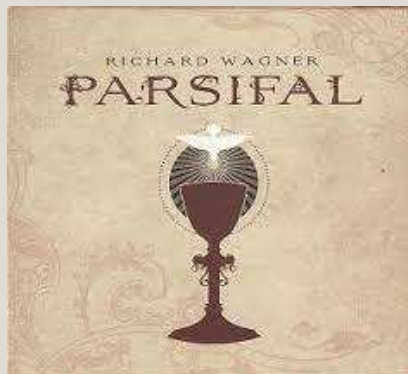
WAGNER'S MUSIC-DRAMAS

The Mastersingers of Nuremberg – set in Germany during the Reformation.
Wagner's greatest comedy. A celebration of Germanic music;.The conflict of conservative versus progressive music. A tangled love story.



WAGNER'S MUSIC-DRAMAS

- *Parsifal* – A story of the Holy Grail and redemption from forbidden love through a Christian miracle.



THE WORLD OF THE RING

- Nature – The Earth-mother (Erda), The water-creatures (Rhine-Maidens), the Fire creature (Loge), the Air creatures (Wood-bird and ravens), Time (The Norns).
- The Gods – Wotan, Fricka, Freia, Froh and Donner.
- The Giants – Fasolt and Fafner.
- The Dwarves – Alberich and Mime.
- The Valkyries – Nine daughters of Wotan and Erda, of whom Brúnnhilde is the most important, followed by Waltraute.
- The Superhumans – Sieglinde and Siegmund, children of Wotan and a mortal woman; Siegfried, son of Siegmund and Sieglinde; Hagen, son of Alberich and a mortal woman.
- The Humans – Hunding, Gunther, Guttrune, the Vassals.

INTERVAL CHART – THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE LEITMOTIFS

Harmonic series
Lowest Lower middle Upper middle Upper

5 Major scale (rational) Minor scale (rational, tinged)

7 Intervals
2nd 3rd 4th 5th 6th 7th "Ring" of thirds

12 Chords derived Chromatic scale (feeling - the spaces between rational)

15 Chromatic passing note (Love emotion)

17 Diminished chord (horror) Whole-tone scale (non-conforming, mystery)

DAS RHEINGOLD (THE RHINE-GOLD)

ONE ACT, 2 HOURS 30 MINUTES

Alberich wanders away from his underground domain, encounters the flirtatious Rhine-Maidens, wants to bond with them but is teased. In frustration, he curses love. This enables him to steal the Rhine-Gold and forge it into a Ring of power and a helmet which can change him into anything and also teletransport him.

The giants have built a castle (Valhalla) for Wotan, to show his power. As payment he had agreed to give them Freia, Goddess of immortality. He reneges on the promise. Loge, in human form, convinces the Giants to accept the Gold which Alberich has amassed as substitute.





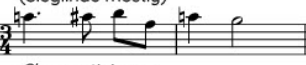





Underground, Alberich demonstrates his power to Wotan and Loge but is tricked into being captured.

Back on the mountain, Wotan wrests the Ring from Alberich who curses it. All will crave it, but the one who possesses it is doomed. Erda convinces Wotan to give it to the Giants. The moment they have it, Fafner kills Fasolt and goes off to a lonely cave to guard it and its treasure.

The Gods enter Valhalla in state, while Wotan decides to put together an army of slain heroes to regain the Ring and defeat Alberich.



Music notes to Die Walkuere

| | |
|---|--|
| <p>Prelude - hunt through stormy winter forest</p>  <p><i>(A simple minor scale ostinato (repeated figure))</i></p> | <p>Schubert - der Erlkönig (Frantic ride through stormy forest)</p>  <p><i>(similar trope)</i></p> |
| <p>5 Walsung family and their burdens</p>  <p><i>Root position common triads, minor key</i></p> | <p>Hunding's aggression and 'dog' totem</p>  <p><i>The Wagner tubas' bark! This is an example of a rhythmical figure repeated for example in Act two by the 'Stierhorn' ('Bull-horn')</i></p> |
| <p>9 One of the love themes (Sieglinde mostly)</p>  <p><i>Chromaticisms - feeling as opposed to organisation of major and minor scales</i></p> | <p>Fricka laments lack of love from Wotan</p>  <p><i>Chromatics again, this time in a downward direction. The 'spear' (i.e. magic authority) is hidden within it.</i></p> |
| <p>13 Wotan expresses love for Brünnhilde</p>  <p><i>Chromaticism again</i></p> | |
| <p>17 Commonly called the "Sword Nothing" theme, it also conveys a sense of sexual virility</p>  <p><i>A common major triad, applied as an arpeggio (broken chord) rising up, commencing and finishing on the dominant (5th of the scale)</i></p> | |
| <p>20 ceaseless smithying</p>  <p><i>"hocket" rhythm, trochaic (long short long)</i></p> | <p>Repeated horse whoop</p>  <p><i>iambic hocket (long long short)</i></p> |

DIE WALKÜRE (THE VALKYRIE)

3 ACTS, 4 HOURS 30 MINUTES

Act One

The ancient human world – clans, forest huts. Sieglinde has been captured by Hunding and serves him as slave-wife. While Hunding is out, Siegmund, a fugitive, is cared for by Sieglinde. When Hunding returns, he learns that Siegmund is a clan enemy. He can stay the night but the next morning they fight. Left alone, Siegmund laments the lack of a weapon. Sieglinde creeps in and tells Siegmund of a sword which none can pluck from a tree. They fall in love. Siegmund gains the sword and they elope.



DIE WALKÜRE (THE VALKYRIE) - ACT 2

In the hills. The task of the Valkyries is to gather up the cream of slain battlefield heroes and take them to Valhalla for Wotan's army. We see Wotan's love for his favourite daughter Brunnhilde. We then see Wotan's irate wife Fricka appear. Fricka is the goddess of marriage. Not only has her husband been unfaithful yet again, but he has sanctioned the adultery of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Not only that, they are Wotan's twin children! She demands that Hunding be victorious in the forthcoming duel and that Wotan should shatter Siegmund's sword – which Wotan had in fact plunged in the tree.

Wotan has told Brunnhilde to protect Siegmund. He now tells her to protect Hunding. She protests, which makes him very angry.

Sieglinde is very upset about the state of affairs. Brunnhilde appears before Siegmund to announce his impending death. When she sees how much he loves Sieglinde she promises to protect him, thinking that this is what Wotan really wants.

When the duel occurs, Wotan intervenes and shatters the sword. Hunding slays Siegmund; Brunnhilde escapes, nurturing Sieglinde and the shattered sword.



DIE WALKÜRE (THE VALKYRIE) – ACT 3

On a mountain-top, the Valkyries convene with their slain warriors. Brunnhilde appears in a panic with Sieglinde – Wotan is after her! She tells Sieglinde to run away to a lonely forest, with the sword – and a baby in her womb, baby Siegfried, destined to be the greatest of heroes.

Wotan confronts the Valkyries. Brunnhilde hears her punishment: Her immortality and virginity will be tripped from her. She will be put to sleep on this mountain, prey to the first man who passes by. The Valkyries scatter.

Brunnhilde then persuades Wotan to alleviate the punishment by putting a ring of fire around the mountain, so that none but the mightiest hero can claim her. At this, Wotan pours out his love for her and puts her to sleep.



Music notes for *Siegfried*

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"Raw nature" *minor 3rd* Natural gold (when first appears in Rheingold) *Minor 3rd* "Rheingold!"

8staves

7 Out of nature comes order Alberich curses love The power of the Ring

emergence of a (major) scale pattern the scale is inverted and turned to minor The 3rds now stand alone Chords arising therefrom

13

The ring becomes a theme, curling back on itself, often in triple time

21 Beginning of *Siegfried* Mime trying to forge a strong sword

Displacement of 3rd suggests unease and scheming The ostinato (repeated over and over) effect: feeling of obsession

27 Siegfried's horn fanfare - freedom and joy Siegfried's freedom song

The 3rds are still there (the horn being forged by Mime) but are rooted in a major triad The ingredients are derived from the preceding

32 Siegfried's frustration heightened by ostinato

Inverted 4ths in a minor key (natural but not happy)

38 Wotan wanders and observes Ordered Natural Disordered, supernatural Natural Unnatural

Major triads but wandering through unrelated keys and ending on a third below the original key Major triad Augmented triad Perfect 5th Diminished 5th

SIEGFRIED

THREE ACTS, FIVE HOURS.

ACT ONE

A lonely forest, years later. We meet the dwarf Mime, Alberich's brother. Mime, a master craftsman, had forged the magic helmet for Alberich but was constantly bullied by him. Mime had found Sieglinde in her birth-pangs. When she died, Mime brought up baby Siegfried, hoping that he would grow up to slay Fafner and bring the Ring to Mime. Siegfried is now a sturdy youth and his relationship with Mime is at a low ebb.

Mime encounters Wotan, who wanders the world in isolation. Wotan plays a game with Mime, telling him that he is doomed to die at the hand of one "who knows no fear". Mime tries to make Siegfried frightened, without success. Siegfried learns that the shattered sword belonged to his dead father. Mime, despite his skill, has not been able to reforge it. Siegfried does reforge it successfully and sets off for adventures, followed by Mime.



SIEGFRIED - ACT 2

Fafner has turned himself into a monster. He is not interested in ultimate power. He keeps the gold and the Ring in a cave, which he guards.

Siegfried and Mime reach the spot. Siegfried easily kills Fafner.

Accidentally tasting some of Fafner's blood, he discovers he can understand the language of the birds. The woodbird tells him to gather up the Ring and the Magic Helmet, that Mime is plotting his death, and that a beautiful woman awaits him on a mountain ringed by fire. After killing his would-be murderer, Siegfried sets off for Brunnhilde's mountain.



SIEGFRIED – ACT 3

At the foot of Brunnhilde's mountain, we encounter Wotan the Wanderer. In Act 2 he had told Alberich that he, Wotan, no longer fears defeat. He now summons Erda and tells her the same thing. Whatever will be will be.

Siegfried encounters Wotan, little knowing that Wotan is his grandfather. He is very rude to Wotan, who becomes aggressively protective of his daughter. But Siegfried easily shatters Wotan's spear of authority and proceeds up through the ring of fire.

Siegfried awakens Brunnhilde. They fall in love. These two sentences actually take half an hour to enact!



Goetterdaemmerung music notes

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Woe, anguish (falling semitone)
(in Rheingold)

Hagen's emergency call

6 Alberich curses love

Falling minor 7th

So ver - fluch ich die Lie - - be

8 Sieglinde rejoices at being pregnant to the man she loves.

Falling minor 7th

hehr - - - - - stes Wun - - der

Brünnhilde expresses her love for Siegfried

Falling minor 7th

10

GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG (THE TWILIGHT OF THE GODS)

THREE ACTS, OVER FIVE HOURS. A MARATHON – BUT WHAT A MARATHON! ACT ONE

After a ghostly prelude where the Norn-spirits recount past, present and future, we see Siegfried and Brunnhilde, radiant in love after their mountain-top honeymoon. It is now time for Siegfried to go off adventuring. Siegfried keeps the magic helmet but gives Brunnhilde the Ring as a love-token.

Human society has now progressed to a quasi medieval state. The Rhine is now dotted with castles, of which the most imposing belongs to Gunther, his sister Gutrune and their half-brother Hagen. Little do Gunther and Gutrune know that their mother, paid off with gold, had mated with Alberich to produce Hagen. Hagen is wise and cunning, a supreme manipulator, one of the greatest of operatic villains. Gunther and Gutrune are well aware that they need marriage partners before it is too late. Hagen tells them of Brunnhilde and Siegfried, omitting to tell his siblings of the heroes' union. Siegfried arrives on his travels. After drinking a potion which Hagen slips him, he completely forgets about Brunnhilde and falls madly in love with Gutrune. He forges blood-brotherhood with Gunther and offers to capture her as bride for Gunther – if Siegfried can marry Gutrune.

On her mountain top, Brunnhilde is met by her sister Waltraute, who, in vain, implores her to give up the Ring to its original source, the Rhine-Maidens. Wotan has returned to Valhalla with a death-wish and has prepared it for conflagration. Brunnhilde refuses – after all this is her wedding token.

Left alone, Brunnhilde joyfully thinks Siegfried is returning. Yes, it is he – but disguised through the helmet as Gunther. He tears the Ring away from her and whisks her away back to the Rhine.

This act alone lasts longer than the whole of Puccini's *La bohème*.



GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG ACT 2

Hagen dreams. appears to him, as he has done every night. He must get the Ring back – they will share the power. As always, Hagen is inscrutable. This is the last we see of Alberich – a ghostly vision.

Day breaks, Siegfried returns. He has given Brunnhilde, who is bereft, to Gunther. They prepare for the wedding, Hagen summons the vassals for a wedding feast. Brunnhilde sees the Ring on Siegfried's hand, not Gunther's. A tortuous scene ensues. Siegfried swears an oath that he did not betray Brunnhilde. Brunnhilde swears an oath that he did. Confusion reigns.

Left alone with Gunther and Hagen, Brunnhilde agrees that Siegfried must die. Hagen's plan is bearing fruit!



GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG – ACT 3

It is the day after the wedding. The men are out hunting. In a work characterised by high drama, a brief moment of lightness opens as we are back on in the Rheinland countryside and encounter the Rhine-Maidens, not seen since three operas ago. They meet Siegfried. Attracted by them, he almost gives them back the Ring but proudly refuses when they tell him about the Curse – he thinks it's all silly. They then go off to see if they can talk some sense into Brunnhilde.

Hagen, Gunther and the men meet Siegfried. He tells them the story of his adventures. He remembers everything up to the time he met Brunnhilde. When Hagen slips him another potion, these memories surge back. The men are shocked. So he DID betray his oath! Hagen takes the opportunity and slays Siegfried.

After a great solemn funeral march interlude, we see Guttrune, worried that Siegfried has not returned. Instead Hagen appears, lying to Guttrune that Siegfried died in a hunting accident. He claims the Ring. The brothers fight. Hagen kills Siegfried. He is just about to grab the Ring when Brunnhilde appears. The Rhine-Maidens have told her the whole sorry saga. Hagen is momentarily cowed.

The last twenty-five minutes of this act is essentially a great eulogy, Brunnhilde's immolation monologue. She will throw herself on Siegfried's funeral pyre. The Ring will be melted down and revert to its natural state. Valhalla will be consumed by flame. A new world will arise. Hagen make one last attempt but is captured and drowned by the Rhine-Maidens. The orchestra has the last magnificent word as the stage and lighting designers do their magic with the world consumed by fire and flood.



THE IMPACT OF WAGNER'S RING CYCLE

Wagner started off as a talented but conventional opera composer and a talented but verbose writer.

Through his seventy years of tumultuous life he transformed music and drama to heights which still influence the world of art today.

People travel the world to see Ring Cycles, One person has seen sixty-four productions!

There have been more books written about Wagner than almost any other person, Biblical or secular.

Wagner unfortunately became a symbol of Nazism, leading to post-war contention.

He was indeed a contradictory genius. Once you enter the world of Wagner, you are trapped!



WAGNER'S MUSIC AS INSPIRATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF COMPOSERS

Gustav Mahler (1860-1911) – saw Wagner conduct *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser* in Vienna
1875

Richard Strauss (1864- 1949) Munich, Meiningen (friend Ritter brought him to appreciate Wagner), Berlin, Vienna

Franz Lehár (1870-1948) Hungary – Vienna (Fibich, his teacher in Prague, was German trained and influenced by Wagner)

Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942) Vienna (teacher – Fuchs but devoted to Wagner ('Es war einmal' premiere Hanslick "Must they always Wagnerise?" [Beaumont 73])

SOME FILMS ABOUT WAGNER

- **Magic Fire (1955)**
- **Wagner (1983)**
- **Fry – Wagner and Me (2010) CLIP**
- **Stephen**

And several movies about Ludwig II:

- **Ludwig (Visconti 1972)**
- **Ludwig – Requiem for a Virgin King (Syberberg 1972)**



THE RING.WAGNER.ANIMATED

- **Wagner in 90 minutes**
- **Authentic sound-track based on his original motifs**
- **The choicest sung portions – in English, with surtitles**
- **Video game style animation (layering)**
- **Excellent recorded narration (Melissa Madden Gray)**
- **Wagner sonorities (saxophones at core)**
- **Leigh Ryan images**

DISCUSSION

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