

LOVE OR POWER - THE FATAL CHOICE

Precis of Talk prepared by Miss Susan Mackerras
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Wagner's use of the motive known as the Renunciation of Love (by Baron von Walzogen) at the moment when Siegmund pulls the sword out of the tree, has puzzled opera-goers and critics for the past century.

However, a careful study of the usage of this motive throughout the Ring will show that the phrase does not describe the renunciation of love at all, and that Wagner was being quite consistent.

The motive in question is first heard when Waglinde reminds her sisters that only he who forswears Love's Power can master the magic to make a ring out of the gold. Wellgunde has already told Alberich that this ring will confer Mastery of the World on its forger.

Thus, World Mastery, or Absolute Power, can only be won by renouncing love; but the converse is also true. He who would love and be loved, must renounce the desire for absolute power and domination over others. The two are incompatible.

Most of the major protagonists in the "Ring" are offered the "Choice between Love and Power" and this is what the motive in question represents. This Choice is the central theme of the music-drama. Wagner shows us that the hunger for power brings destruction, but that love brings life and

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renewal. Indeed Wagner expressed this intention in one of his letters and although many motives representing either love or power in their various aspects have been named, the motive which presents these two forces as the opposite of each other has not yet been identified.

In future, I shall refer to the motive previously called the "Renunciation of Hope" as the "Choice Motive".

The Choice Motive occurs more than 40 times during the "Ring" and consists of two parts. The first part is the well-known passage sung by Wagnlinde quoted above and is used when the characters are actively choosing either love or power. The second part is less well-known, although it occurs more often than the first. It is a sad, defeated-sounding phrase of six descending notes and first heard during Loge's Narrative to the words "fur Weibes Wonne und Werth" and tends to be used either in a retrospective sense or when the Choice of Power, not Love, has been forced by circumstance. The entire motive with both parts is rarely heard - the moment when Wotan kisses away Brunnhilde's god head is such an occasion.

There is only one motive derived from the Choice Motive, the Surrender Motive (called Hingebung in German). It occurs for the first time in the second section of Loge's Narrative to the words "als Weibes Wonne und Werth." It is virtually identical to the second part of the Choice Motive except that there is a trill on the third note which transforms the dejected sense of the parent motive to a more positive and idealistic character. It is used to portray the devotion between men and women and occurs quite frequently in Act 3 of "Siegfried."

There are a number of occasions when the Choice Motive is used and Love, not Power, is being chosen. For example, when Fasalt says he was prepared to build Valhalla, Wotan's Seat of Power, in exchange for Freia, when Wotan gives up the Ring to ransom Freia, when Brunnhilde asks Siegmund to entrust Sieglinde to her, and when Wotan allows Siegfried to pass after the spear has been broken (here Wotan is acknowledging that the old age of rule by might is over). The motive is heard in full when Brunnhilde tells Waltraude that she will not return the Ring to the Rhine maidens because it represents Siegfried's love.

To fully understand the use of the Choice Motive when Siegmund pulls the sword out of the tree, it is necessary to consider another motive first - one called the "Purpose of the Sword" Motive by Derryk Cooke.

At the end of "Das Rheingold", Wotan is faced with a dilemma - if ever Alberich regains the Ring, the gods and the world are doomed to a loveless existence, but Wotan himself cannot retrieve the ring from Fafner because he is bound by his bargain. So he plans to beget a race of heroes who, driven by their need yet free from his guidance, will win the Ring back for him. This is the meaning of the Purpose of the Sword motives which occurs for the first time with the Sword Motive as Wotan greets Valhalla "So-gruss ich die Burg, sicher vor Bang und Graun". It reappears later, when Siegmund, sitting by the fire, recalls the sword his father promised him in his hour of need.

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This motive appears for the third time followed by the Choice Motive as Siegmund pulls the sword out of the tree. As Siegmund says "Walse verhiess mir in Lochster Noth", the music reminds us that Wotan intended Siegmund to use the sword to win back the Ring, but Siegmund then announces that "Heiligster Minne Hochste Noth" will be his inspiration. He is renouncing Wotan and the quest for World Mastery in favour of upholding the value of Love in the World.

The use of the Choice Motive at this point is therefore not only logical, but also returns the attention of the audience to the central theme of the drama and of Life itself.

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