
DIE WALKÜRE: THE MUSIC AND THE DRAMA by Michael Ewans

In *Die Walküre*, the music is continuous throughout each of the three Acts. It was Wagner's intention that, in a purpose-built theatre with a covered pit, the text would always be audible; so voice parts are never allowed to overlap with each other except in the set-piece opening of ACT III. The only exception to this rule is that in moments of great passion, as at the end of ACT I, the start of one character's vocal line may dovetail into the last note of another. There are therefore no self-sufficient arias or ensembles; nor is there any overtly delineated recitatif. Each line of the text is treated equally with every other; the music simply responds with whatever degree of emotion is justified by the nature of the situation and the feelings of the character involved. And each of the three Acts comprises in one span well over an hour of symphonic music; but the musical conception of the drama is unified, both by an overall harmonic plan and by the use and development of certain well-shaped, highly memorable recurrent phrases and melodies which have become known (against Wagner's wishes) as *Leitmotive*.

These are the central features of Wagner's method of applying music to drama in *Die Walküre*. They are presumably well known to all serious admirers of this composer; but it is worth emphasising both their novelty, when this work was completed in 1856, and their rarity in the subsequent history of the musical theatre. No one else had ever composed a full-length opera in this manner before and Wagner himself had only previously attempted the new method in *Das Rheingold*, the one-act "Preliminary evening" to *The Ring*¹. Wagner himself maintained all the features of the method in *Siegfried*; but major deviations from it begin - as Bernard Shaw rightly noted - with the last scena of that work (which ends with an unequivocal love-duet); and they are redoubled in *Götterdämmerung* with its love- and oath-swearing duets, vengeance trio and extensive use of the chorus².

Parsifal and *Tristan und Isolde* contain several instances of overlap between voices (most notably of course in the second act of *Tristan*) and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, while retaining the symphonic continuity of *The Ring*, reverts with zest to the formal manner of French Grand Opera; Wagner happily incorporated arias and ensembles of every

¹ *Das Rheingold* was significantly easier to write, due to the large number of characters usually onstage and the predominance of political and social themes, by contrast with the depth of emotion which is lavished in *Die Walküre*, on the inward-facing predicaments of one or two characters at a time. cf. M Ewans, 'Music and stagecraft in Wagner's *Ring*', *Miscellanea Musicologica* 14 (1985), 83-98, pp. 91-92.

² Shaw's critique of *Götterdämmerung* is the starting-point for the article cited in note 1 above, which discusses the dramatic style of the first three dramas of *The Ring* and the extent to which Wagner diverged from it in the final work of the cycle.

imaginable kind into the fabric of the drama.

Nor was Wagner's ideal extensively followed by his successors. Richard Strauss came near to the formal practice of the first three *Ring* dramas in *Salome* and *Elektra*; but the ensemble for the Jews in *Salome* is a minor lapse from the style which Wagner established, and the duet for Elektra and her sister Chrysothemis, which Strauss explicitly asked von Hofmannsthal to add just before the final climax of *Elektra*, is a major one. Then, in and after *Der Rosenkavalier*, Strauss incorporates arias and ensembles into continuous symphonic music with as much zest as did Wagner himself in *Die Meistersinger*.

Debussy and Bartok followed Wagner's ideal with rigour in *Pelléas et Mélisande* and *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* - but each wrote only one opera. Of the major modern composers, only Janacek avoided overlapping of voices and provided a continuous symphonic illumination of an audible text in the manner striven for by Wagner. Janacek's musico-dramatic style is, however, wholly opposed to another main feature of Wagner's ideal, the use of recurring musical themes and of an overall tonal framework.

Wagner's new conception of the relationship between words and music was evolved during the five years of musical silence which followed his hasty flight into exile in Switzerland, after he had taken a prominent (though futile) role in the insurrection in Dresden in 1849. Wagner completed the score of *Lohengrin* (which was his last work actually to be termed an opera) in 1847. In 1848 he sketched an outline version of the Nibelung myth as basis for a drama, and then drafted the text for a "grand heroic opera" to be entitled *Siegfried's Death*. This was eventually, with substantial revisions, to become the text for the fourth "stage festival play" of *The Ring* cycle - *Götterdämmerung*. But Wagner was plainly dissatisfied with this text. He toyed with ideas for verse plays on the subjects of Jesus of Nazareth and Achilles. Both would have involved abandoning music and Teutonic myth.

When he had settled in Zurich, Wagner instead wrote three prose treatises, in and through which he completely re-examined his aims and methods as an artist. They are *Art and Revolution*, *The Art-Work of the Future* and *Opera and Drama*. They occupied Wagner throughout the second part of 1849 and the whole of 1850.

Wagner was the first to admit that he was not comfortable as an essayist and many parts of his prose treatises make difficult reading. But they shed a wealth of light upon the musical and dramatic practice of *The Ring* and of *Tristan und Isolde* and their importance to Wagner at the time was immeasurable. When he had finished them he returned to his Nibelung material with his conception of what a drama based on mythical material should be very much enhanced and, in the course of 1851, he totally modified his plan. He expanded the proposed work of art from a single opera about Siegfried to a trilogy

covering the entire Nibelung story as he had originally outlined it in his sketch and he renounced the conventional idea of opera altogether. The musical riches of *The Ring* are entirely directed towards the illumination of the action. Wagner marked this new dramatic orientation by the subtitles which he gave to its component parts. *The Ring* is a sequence of three "stage festival plays" (not "music dramas") preceded by a "preliminary evening". And the texts for the first three of these dramas are entirely different in form from any previous libretto.

While he was completing the orchestration of *Lohengrin* in 1847, Wagner read the only complete surviving cycle of Greek tragedies, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, for the first time. He writes in *Mein Leben* that the trilogy had an "indescribable" effect upon him and claims that the experience was such that:

I have never since been really able to reconcile myself with modern literature. My ideas about the significance of the drama and of the theatre were, without a doubt, moulded by these impressions.³

Mein Leben is not of course a book whose words should be taken literally and seriously where they are unsupported by collaborative evidence. It was Wagner's purpose to construct in his autobiography the most favourable presentation of his persona that he could. But the influence of the Greek example is so prominent in the three prose treatises and the specific example of *The Oresteia* is so evident in the formal practice and the content of *The Ring* that it would be foolish to deny this assertion.⁴

Art and Revolution opens with the statement that:

....in any investigation of the art of today, we cannot take a step without coming face to face with the art of the Greeks.⁵

And as the three prose treatises unfold, Greek tragedy plays a central part in the evolution of Wagner's theory of what his own art should become.

³ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, authorised English translation (London, Constable, 1911), p. 415

⁴ The relationship between *The Ring* and *The Oresteia* is discussed in greater detail in M Ewans, *Wagner and Aeschylus* (London, Faber 1982), see especially Chapter 2.

⁵ Richard Wagner's *Prose Works*, Vol 1, tr. W A Ellis (London: Kegan Paul, 1892), p. 32

He grappled with the reasons why the Greek playwrights could present intensely serious dramas and gain the enthralled attention of virtually the entire citizen body. This obliged him to confront at length the role of myth in ancient drama and the roles which it might play in his own; and also the part played by the chorus in Greek tragedy and the ways in which the orchestra (which occupies in the modern theatre the same intermediate position between actors and audience and even derives its name from the dance floor on which the chorus took their place) might fulfil a parallel function in modern drama. It is not surprising that these considerations led Wagner to create a completely new kind of operatic text.

When Wagner came to write the texts for *Siegfried* and *Die Walküre*, he was much influenced by Aeschylus' practice of staging only a single, isolated sequence of actions in each play. *The Oresteia* uses a limited number of characters and evokes the surrounding penumbra of related events, especially those from the past, only by allusion. The richness of Aeschylus lies in the wealth of imagery with which the events of the action are surrounded. That action itself is a simple, direct sequence of incidents drawn selectively from the many variants provided by myth.

And each drama of *The Oresteia* is shaped so as to lead up to one single climax to which all other incidents are subordinate. In *Opera and Drama*, after firmly proclaiming the virtues of dramatic economy, continuity and unity of texture, Wagner proceeds to argue that in a modern drama each phase of the action should, in a similar way, be shaped towards a single point, a "moment", into which as much "life-energy" as possible is concentrated. The number of such "moments" in a drama must be limited so that each may be adequately motivated and incidental complex side motives must be subordinated to this design, so that the causes of each decisive moment are fully intelligible to the audience.⁶

This is the structural principle on which *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* are built. Each act is completely shaped so as to lead up to one central event or decisive "moment" just before the end - in this drama, the union of Siegmund with Sieglinde, the death of Siegmund, and Wotan's renunciation of Brünnhilde to Siegfried. And the third and final "moment" is itself the culmination and consequence of the previous two and, therefore, becomes the most climactic moment in the entire drama.

Since there are no self-sufficient musical numbers in *Die Walküre*, this structure for the text demanded that the composer should sustain a musical continuity and a sense of the relationships between successive subordinate climaxes and the ultimate goal of the drama, over time spans which were unprecedented; and the two other innovations which Wagner

⁶ Richard Wagner's *Prose Works*, vol 2, (1900), p. 215

derived from his study of Aeschylus took him equally far from the kind of text which could be set using the musical techniques of conventional opera.

Wagner had noted and admired a feature of *The Oresteia* which is now known as the "mirror scene". Aeschylus invites his audiences to measure the conduct of the characters in each successive play against that of their predecessors and reinforces this general thrust of the trilogy by contriving to place scenes which clearly evoke moments in the preceding drama at a parallel position in the course of the second and third plays.

This method is echoed in *The Ring*. *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* both begin indoors with the hero suffering persecution at the hand of a host not of his choosing; and in each case the hero's self-liberation is symbolised at the end of the act in his wielding Notung for the first time, after a lyric sequence in which he comes for the first time to realise his identity. Then, in both dramas, the second and third acts are set outdoors, with the second a series of intense confrontations, while the third concludes with an extended scene set on Brünnhilde's rock, - which gives Wagner the opportunity to build, like Aeschylus, a strong contrast between the two successive agents, Wotan, who must renounce the daughter he loves, and Siegfried who has finally won her. (Wagner originally planned to reinforce the first Act parallelisms by having Wotan appear in person at the centre of *Die Walküre* ACT I just as he appears in Mime's cave in *Siegfried* ACT I, but Wotan's intervention in the first Act of *Die Walküre* was distinctly artificial and Wagner later abandoned the scene.

This kind of parallelism, if it were to be enforced musically over the large time spans of successive Wagnerian dramas designed to be heard on successive days, made a second demand on the music which would have to be created to accompany such texts; a demand for a style in which motives of reminiscence could be incorporated on a scale not previously thought possible, in order to bring out affinities between situations; a style which could re-create in modern music, on an even more intricate scale, the web of related images and thematic verbal phrases by which Aeschylus brought out the relationships (and the differences) between the characters involved in the "mirror scenes" of his successive plays.

The last feature of Greek tragedy to make an impact on the texts for *The Ring* was the *agon*, the formally structured contest between two individuals. This procedure is to be seen at the nearest to its Greek form in the colloquy between Mime and the Wanderer in *Siegfried* ACT I, and also in the confrontation between Brünnhilde and Siegmund known as the "annunciation of death" scene. Here Wagner even imitates the Greek concept of *stichomythia*, symmetrically structured exchanges between a "leader" and a "responder" with a decisive change in the dialogue form at the moment where the leadership changes. In this *agon* the change of leadership is marked, in both text and music, at the point where Siegmund ceases to question Brünnhilde and turns to statement instead.

But the antithetical, agonal characteristics of Greek tragedy are not confined to the two scenes in which they are most evident. Wagner gained, during these years, the confidence to structure whole acts around a series of extended confrontations between two individuals, with no intervening third character or operatic chorus to provide punctuation and an alternative focus for the attention of the audience and the orchestral music. *Siegfried* is in this respect the most austere of Wagner's late dramas; the entire work consists of a series of confrontations between pairs of individuals. And while *Die Walküre* is somewhat less economical than this - hardly surprisingly, given that Wagner's story line here is his distillation from some of the sections of the sagas which are richest in characters and incidents - it is still remarkable in its restraint. The theme of *Die Walküre* ACT I is the eternal triangle; but it is interesting to note how little of the act is given over to three-way exchange; only in scene 2, in Siegmund's narrative of his youth, does Wagner put the intense tension between Hunding and his wife to dramatic effect on stage. At the end of ACT II, - a cumulative series of explosive one to one confrontations leading to Brünnhilde's act of defiance - there are a few moments of spectacular effect in which the four protagonists are ranged against each other, in two pairs each consisting of human protege and divine protector and the temporary richness persists into the opening of ACT III, although it should be noticed that the Valkyries are now eight discernibly different, named individuals, in contrast to the operatic chorus of Valkyries which Wagner originally included in *Siegfried's Death*. And after they have been dispersed the last half hour of the drama is for Wotan and Brünnhilde alone.

The effect of this adoption of the agonal format is again to place quite new demands on the orchestra. We see in *Siegfried* and *Die Walküre* a dramatic idiom which has no place for the operatic chorus or the ensemble of soloists, in which the only group of persons to appear is treated as a set of eight individuals and in which - always with the exception of the climactic phrases of the Valkyries' almost ritualistic cries - there is no place either for repetition of words or for overlapping between successive singers. By writing the texts in this manner Wagner committed himself as composer to create music which would fulfil his vision - an orchestra which could act as a closely committed, involved commentator on the action and interpret the psyches of the characters for the spectator. For in no other way could the audience's interest be maintained over such long spans of dialogue between so few characters.

How did he do this?

Wagner claimed on several occasions that the orchestra plays the same part in his dramas as the chorus in Greek tragedy. Aeschylus placed a group of twelve singing actors in the *orchestra*, the circular dance-floor which lay between the spectators and the scenabuilding, in front of which the solo actors played much of their parts. The chorus played a collective character, which participates strongly in the action. Its comments and lyric meditations are interwoven with the rest of the drama, and contribute in themselves to the

advancement of the plot. Wagner held that in his dramas the Greek chorus was replaced in its emotional effect by the concealed instrumental musicians, who occupy a similar middle position in Wagner's theatre; while in its individual human reality the Greek chorus is replaced by the singing actors of Wagner's stage.

This claim has been too readily dismissed, chiefly because of the wide influence of Schlegel's false doctrine that the chorus played the part of an "ideal spectator" in Greek tragedy. Wagner had greater understanding. In 1861 he described the Greek chorus, correctly, as constantly:

seeking to understand the motives of the action, and to form
from that a judgement on the action;

and claimed that in a similar way:

the orchestra of the modern symphonist will take so intimate
an interest in the motives of the plot that while, as the
embodiment of harmony, it alone allows the melody to make
a definite expression, it will also keep the melody in the
requisite unceasing flow and so convincingly impress these
motives on the spectator's feeling.⁷

Wagner's orchestra in the late dramas is, like the Greek chorus, a medium for analysis which offers insight into the psyches of the characters; the difference is simply that it is a musical not a verbal medium. In Wagner's music his thought about the action of the drama is presented in the form of emotional understanding. The intellectual coherence of Wagner's late scores - so obvious when they are analysed in the study - should not be predominant when they are heard in the theatre. But it is well worth our studying how he uses music to make sense of his drama.

Wagner's aversion extended beyond the term *Leitmotif* to the ways in which it was used. Already in his lifetime over-eager Wagnerians were writing of the principal musical themes of *The Ring* (the composer himself used the term *Grundthema*) as if each of them were a musical equivalent for a character, prop or scenic effect; the "Notung motif", the "magic fire motif", the "Siegfried motif" and so on. Debussy rightly ridiculed the idea that the orchestra should, so to speak, be presenting the visiting cards of the various characters in an operatic drama; but this habit of thought has not died out, even today, in popular guides to *The Ring*.

⁷ Richard Wagner's *Prose Works*, vol. 3 p. 338.

An understanding of the way in which Wagner's music illuminates the action of this drama may well begin with an approach to the true role of these principal musical themes. They are never simply static, pictorial descriptions of people, events or objects. Those which are associated with particular objects - for example, the Ring and the Tarnhelm, Wotan's spear and the sword Notung - are mesmeric, dynamic realisations in music of the effect which these objects have on the people involved in action with them.

All the others are musical images or symbols of processes; processes whose form - an idea or image, depicted in or by the new musical theme - is given by the imagination of one character and which are then shown by the musical development to emanate from his or her psyche; created in the mind of one character, they may then be transmitted to others - or even actualised in the drama onstage.

A good example of this may be found towards the end of *Die Walküre*, in the passage beginning where Wotan pronounces his sentence on Brünnhilde ("I shall bind you/ in a deep sleep...") and leading through to the point at which he begins his scena of farewell ("Leb wohl..."); 950-973.⁸

The following principal musical themes are heard during this extract;

- 1 A new theme; a chromatic sequence of chords carried first by the woodwind and then by the strings. This is heard at the outset as Wotan creates the picture of Brünnhilde bound defenceless in deep sleep (950).
- 2 A second new theme, first heard early in Brünnhilde's response, as she sings "this one thing you must grant/ that my solemn fear begs of you./ Let my sleep be protected by fearful terrors." (958f.).
- 3 A theme for horns, which has been heard already when Brünnhilde told Sieglinde that she bears in her womb "the noblest hero in the world"; it is heard again now when Brünnhilde prays "that only a fearless, fully free hero will find me one day upon this rock!" (956-7).
- 4 The descending trombone motif associated with Wotan's spear as she sings "let all trace of her (ie Brünnhilde's own) body be destroyed by your spear" (960-1).
- 5 The brass fanfare associated, since the ACT II prelude, with the restless energy of Brünnhilde as Valkyrie; it was used as the basis of the "ride of the Valkyries" at

⁸ All references to the music of *The Ring* are by page numbers of the miniature study scores published by Eulenberg edition.

the start of ACT III. Here it appears as the stage-directions tell us that Brünnhilde is seized "with wild inspiration" and conceives the idea "At your command/let fire blaze up" (962-3).

- 6 At the same time, the restless semi-quaver figurations, which were associated in *Das Rheingold* with the machinations of the fire-god Loge, spring up in the upper strings.

These themes dominate the symphonic fabric in the remainder of this drama.⁹ They punctuate and inflect the moving farewell of Wotan to Brünnhilde - the scena in which Wagner exhibits a profound emotional understanding of the relationship between father and daughter and provides a universal image of the way in which each father must come to terms with the inevitable loss of his daughter to another man. It takes no particular analytical ability to spot their appearances; they are so clearly contoured and so distinct from each other in harmony and orchestration, that they become easily recognisable within at most two or three hearings of *Die Walküre*. But recognition of their presence has not always been accompanied by recognition of their purpose.

The dramatic situation in my extract is a confrontation, in which Wotan, who has just refused to alter his decision to punish Brünnhilde for her defiance, first announces his sentence (that she be confined in sleep upon this rock, at the mercy of the first man to find her); he then makes it less severe by accepting her proposal that she be enclosed in a ring of fire. Wagnerians are now so absolutely familiar with this dramatic situation - which is, as I have just indicated, one of the great, universally symbolic moments of *The Ring* - that we must make an effort and remind ourselves of three things - that this music was new once (when Liszt played it on the piano at the Wesendoncks'; reducing the music at sight from the full score while Wagner sang both parts); that it is designed to make a coherent emotional and intellectual impact on people who have never heard *The Ring* before in their lives; and above all that the characters of Wotan and Brünnhilde are experiencing this situation for the first and only time in their lives.

If you will adopt this perspective, it is possible to describe the purpose for which each of the principal themes appears in the passage. Each is there to perform two functions at once; to clarify the sequence of the singing character's thoughts and emotions, by giving vivid musical form and an emotional inflection to his or her flow of ideas as expressed in

⁹ There is also another theme, which I cite as my example 7. This beautiful, eloquent and plaintive theme is first heard in the moment of parting, as Wotan kisses Brünnhilde farewell for ever (1049-55); and is then heard again in the closing sinfonia, as Wotan "looks back sadly" for the last time. It is by any criterion of musical worth one of the principal themes in the Ring; but it never appears in *Leitmotiv* guides or musical analyses, simply because it is not heard anywhere else in the trilogy.

the text; and to convey the impact which these ideas make on the other character present on the scena. That is to say, the characters are linked together and encompassed by the continuous symphonic fabric; the orchestra both expresses the feelings of the character who is singing and expresses the impact of his or her thoughts and feelings on the character who is silent - almost as if that character could hear the instrumental music as we do.¹⁰

The opening chromatic sequence is not merely a static depiction of the state of sleep; the chordal progression is a sequential musical picture of a person sinking against her will into unconsciousness; it expresses a threat of increasing immobility, which explains and motivates the rapidly increasing animation of Brünnhilde's response.

Changes of key and of tempo - to "greatly agitated" - mark the opening of her reply ("if fetters of sleep are to bind me fast...") and the second new theme at first appears simply to be a measure of her agitation. But its impact on Wotan is immediately obvious; the fact that it persists under his grumbling response ("You ask too much/ too great the favour") tells us that his heart by no means rejects her request as unequivocally as the text implies. And it will emerge as a flexible, multifaceted theme; at the end of this section, when combined in the full orchestra with the brass motif which portrayed Brünnhilde's restless, unharnessed energy as a Valkyrie, it is the perfect vehicle for portraying the impact which her developed personality and her powerful renewed plea make on Wotan. By this means, Wagner explains how Wotan is led to accept it.

This passage also include rehearsals of four previously heard themes. These are of course "motifs of reminiscence" as Wagner termed them in *Opera and Drama*; one of their functions is simply to establish an affinity or cross-reference between the situation in the dramatic present and something which we have seen on stage or heard discussion of, earlier in *The Ring*. But we need to say more than this, to describe their effect.

Once a principal musical theme has been introduced in *The Ring* each new hearing develops and intensifies its dramatic impact. Consider the heroic theme in the horns which was first heard earlier in ACT III, when Brünnhilde told Sieglinde that she bears in her womb "the noblest hero in the world"; it is heard again here when Brünnhilde prays "that only a fearless, fully free hero will find me one day upon this rock!" This is traditionally labelled a (or even the) "Siegfried theme", but to do this is to ignore the fact that this music was not the accompaniment, when Brünnhilde gave Siegfried his name;

¹⁰ Wagner's insistence in rehearsal that the singers think about what the music is saying, even when they themselves are not singing, and respond accordingly with their body posture and facial expression, is not merely an isolated reaction against the worst habits of nineteenth century operatic acting; it is an integrated part of the basic aesthetics of the Ring. cf. H. Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the "Ring"*, tr. R Jacobs (CUP, Cambridge 1983) - especially p. 43, quoted below.

and also to ignore the way in which both text and situation are developing towards his actualisation on stage.

The theme's presence here, under Brünnhilde's appeals, is part of the explanation of its power - both its power to move the spectators and its power to convert Wotan. The back-reference tells us that the hope of Sieglinde's child lies behind Brünnhilde's vision now of a man who can brave such a fire; and this present hearing prepares us for the marvellous feeling of completion, when the motif is sounded again under the last three lines of text in this drama. At the end, Wotan signifies his full emotional acceptance that he must resign Brünnhilde's love to another by singing the words:

He who fears
the point of my sword
will never pass through this fire!

in unison with a *crescendo* declamation of this theme by four horns and the bass trumpet (1033f.).

It is next heard, of course, when Siegfried begins to grow to heroic manhood in the next drama of the cycle. My fundamental point here is that the principal musical themes of *The Ring* grow in dramatic significance with each recurrence; and this is true regardless of whether they have developed musically between appearances. Attention has been distracted from this crucial fact, partly because most *Ring* analysts are musicologists, more attuned to musical than to dramatic processes; and also by the regrettable fact that Wagner, in his own essay on the use of the *Grundthema* in *The Ring* ("*On the Application of Music to Drama*", 1878), chose as his example one of the minority of themes which receives substantial musical development - the motif of the Rhinedaughters' hymn to the untainted Rhinegold.¹¹

But the long-term recurrences of themes in unchanged forms are of fundamental importance, because they accompany the increasing dramatic actualisation of the emotional phenomena which they express. They mark the psychological development of the characters; even more importantly, by setting up patterns of expectation followed by fulfilment, they bestow on the action, for the audience, a feeling of inevitability. We have already seen how this is the case with the motif which expresses the fearless, forward-questing heroic power which is going to become associated with *Siegfried*; we should also note how this happens to two other themes which occur in the last phase of *Die Walküre*. One of my examples is of a process internal to the scena, while the other

¹¹ Wagner analysed its transformations, from the opening of *Das Rheingold* through to the appearance of a remarkable, sinister variant behind Hagen's short scena in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*.

spans the entire compass of the next drama, *Siegfried*.

Brünnhilde sings "with wild inspiration", "At your command/let a fire be kindled..." and Wagner's musical image for this fire is the flickering, restless semi-quaver figurations which were associated in *Das Rheingold* with the appearance and increasingly intense presence of the fire-god Loge. For spectators of the trilogy as a whole the recognition is immediate and foreshadows the coming of fire but we need to observe the way in which this musical image is employed in this scena. First it operates as part - the final and the clinching part - of Brünnhilde's plea to Wotan. Next, its recurrence early in Wotan's response (at "a bridal fire/shall blaze to protect you/ as never has burned for a bride") shows how he has accepted literally the burning intensity of the idea which her imagination has created.

Then a feeling of absolute completeness is bestowed on the end of the drama when Wotan has kissed her to sleep and conjures up Loge to circle the rock with flames. The image which was created in Brünnhilde's mind and transferred to that of Wotan now blazes up to become a reality. If they are adequately matched by the spectacle on stage, the semiquaver figurations take on an almost hypnotic quality, when they become a permanent ostinato suspended over the complex of themes in the closing pages of the score (1017-69) and they create such a powerful picture that the spectator is left with a telling image of Brünnhilde imprisoned but also protected - for the next eighteen to twenty years - behind her wall of fire.

Let me return, finally, to the new theme introduced when Brünnhilde first pleaded to be protected by "fearful terrors". The key to its function in this scena is its dual character. Played fast and between piano and mf, it conveys her agitation at the threat of becoming a defenceless mortal girl - but then, its presence beneath Wotan's response (grumbling but not refusing) indicates the power of her attraction for him. That is why, played loudly and more slowly, in the lead-up to his accepting outburst "Leb wohl", it expresses all the noble beauty of the mature, mortal Brünnhilde whom Wotan has now to recognise as being other than himself, and resign to another. And then, in great fortissimo alternations between strings and brass, it accompanies the climax of their last embrace in which Wotan resigns himself to his loss (994-7).

It therefore depicts the beckoning attraction which Brünnhilde possesses, as the mortal woman whom she now becomes; its many repetitions to accompany the final tableau of the drama, under the flickering ostinato of the fire music, completely cement this impression. And we should also note its textual association, on its first appearance, with the concept of fear.

These two associations enable Wagner to make powerful long-term use of this theme to create expectations in *Siegfried*. It first occurs in that drama when Mime tries to

persuade Siegfried that he needs to learn fear (276f.). Mime expects him to do this by fighting Fafner; but the association of this motif with Brünnhilde at the end of *Die Walküre* undermines that expectation of Mime's, in the audience's eyes, from the start. Once again we are embarked on a journey from imagination to actualisation. The theme recurs every time learning fear is mentioned in the text, and in this way the expectation is powerfully increased that Siegfried will only learn fear when he finally encounters Brünnhilde in the flesh. That expectation is of course abundantly fulfilled in the last scena of the drama (991 - 2).

Wagner always regarded *Die Walküre* as the darkest section of his trilogy and he declared it to be "the most tragic work which I have ever conceived."¹² Each Act moves gradually and inexorably towards a traumatic moment of inevitable but tragic choice; and each of the three climaxes is more severe than the one before. The first choice confronts Siegmund who can defend his love only by accepting the power of the sword Notung. The second and third confront Wotan himself, who is obliged in ACT II to renounce his love for Siegmund and kill him, and in ACT III to renounce his love for Brünnhilde and part from her for ever.

This drama is overshadowed by the central idea underlying the cycle as a whole; that to whatever extent we need to acquire power, by that we diminish our capacity to love (and for that reason the melancholy theme to which Woglinde told Alberich of the need to renounce love to gain the Rhinegold, is heard again both as Siegmund draws the sword Notung - the sword both of need and of suffering (214f.) - and as Wotan renounces Brünnhilde for ever (1004f.).

But it is also a drama of moral growth. By promoting the union between Siegmund and Sieglinde, Wotan attempts to break one of the most basic taboos of nineteenth century society - that against incest. Defeated in this attempt by Fricka, he reaches in the second scena of ACT II an extraordinary degree of self-loathing; and with bitter irony he resigns the world, the "empty glory of divinity" to Hagen.

In ACT III however he moves beyond that position. As we have seen, in the closing scena he finds the strength to consign the world - and with it, now, the dearest of his daughters - not in anger to Hagen but in full, calm acceptance to Siegfried. And he does this under the influence of that favourite daughter, who first appears in ACT II as a restless tomboy but is forced into knowledge and self-awakening first by the depths of Wotan's dilemma and then by the love and self-sacrifice with which Siegmund rejects her promise of Valhalla in the fourth scena. The capacity to feel compassion is born in her then; and it is this quality which she gives back to Wotan in the final scena.

¹² *Correspondence of Wagner and Liszt*, tr. F Hueffer (London 1888), letter of 13 December 1855.

This is the plot of *Die Walküre*; and the "intimate... interest in the motives of the plot" which Wagner's orchestra takes is not confined to those moments where a principal theme is being played to set up a relationship with some other part of the cycle. The orchestral score of *Die Walküre* is unprecedented not merely in the new relationship between music and drama, which I have discussed in this paper but also in the sheer wealth of detailed illumination bestowed upon each moment of the drama, to explain the development of the characters. The music makes sense of the stage action - as Wagner first put the point, in *The Art-Work of the Future* - by "enclos(ing) the performer with an atmospheric ring of Art and Nature"¹³. Wagner means, I think, that the orchestra in those new dramas must relate the actor's inner emotions both to those of other characters and to his or her surroundings or environment; and this is evident right from the opening.

The raging storm of the Prelude supplies both background to and contrast with the exhausted soul of Siegmund, whose emotional responses to the room in which he collapses are precisely charted in the rise and fall of the cello line as soon as the curtain has risen (20-1). This is followed by the tentative, hesitant growth of compassion in Sieglinde, when she sees the stranger; and then the beginnings of the transformation of this compassion into love, in the solo cello line when she gives him a drink of water and they look into each others' eyes (25-7). As Scene 1 proceeds, the music charts with great care the gradual growth towards love of their loneliness and their feeling of affinity; each gift which Sieglinde bestows on her unknown guest evokes from Siegmund a greater intensity of emotion - carefully prescribed by the stage directions and reflected by the ever-greater richness of the orchestral response. Heinrich Porges, who took notes at Wagner's request during rehearsals for the first production of *The Ring*, drew attention in his commentary on the first two scenes to:

the connection between the instrumental music and the silent stage action. Both are the expression of emotions slumbering, as it were, in the depths of the soul and now on the verge of becoming conscious. Passion, which does not yet govern the desires of the protagonists, is making itself felt not in words but involuntarily in a look or a glance. Passages of this kind are most convincingly enacted by performers who make a habit of singing the instrumental melody to themselves; every nuance of the intimate psychic process will then be spontaneously reflected in their facial expression.¹⁴

¹³ *Prose Works* 1.191

¹⁴ See note 10 above.

expression.¹⁴

It would be a lengthy but by no means an impossible task to expound in detail how Wagner's music illuminates the drama throughout the cycle. This is what Deryck Cooke promised to do in his book, misleadingly titled *I Saw the World End*.¹⁵ I for one would much prefer it if he had drafted his musico-dramatic analysis, rather than the exhaustive discussion of the mythical material behind the first two dramas, which he did complete before his death. But it would extend the paper unduly if I were to offer an example of how this could be done, or to discuss in detail the new acting and staging styles, which are demanded by this style of dramatic music. But my argument has two important general implications.

- (1) statuesque acting styles are precluded because they would be insufficiently responsive to the detail of the orchestral commentary. The vigour, animation and detail of Patrice Chéreau's production accord well with Wagner's intentions.¹⁶
- (2) though the dramas do not demand literalist interpretations of all the stage directions, as in the ill-fated *Ring* production by Sir Peter Hall at Bayreuth, they do demand some proper visual realisation of all the prescribed scenic and environmental effects. Pace Wieland Wagner, a minimalist, bare-stage production would not provide the visual complement required by this style of music.

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¹⁴ See note 10 above.

¹⁵ O.U.P. London 1979

¹⁶ cf. my review article, "The Bayreuth Centenary Ring by Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez", *Miscellanea Musicologica* 14 (1985) 167 - 173.
