Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*: A Dramaturgical Analysis

I. Introduction

Like Wagner, and like the gods and heroes of the *Ring Cycle*, we live in a time of dramatic change. Technological innovations and global interconnectedness are constantly changing what it means to be a member of a community, and even what it means to be a member of the human race. The world has reached a constant state of flux in which anything is possible. Yet, despite the almost unbelievable changes that we have undergone in the relatively short time since Wagner lived, the fact that the *Ring Cycle* still resonates with modern souls just as it did audiences in centuries past proves the truth of Wagner's theories and methods. The inexhaustibility of myths has prevailed; regardless of the mutations of society, myths are "true for all time" (Wagner, 1951).

The story of Richard Wagner's life is the story of his works. His art - in particular, his need to revolutionize art, and his conviction that to do so would be to revolutionize society and life - consumed him, and his life and art bled into one another so much that it is nigh impossible to separate his biography from his oeuvre. Events in his life (the mystery of his parentage, current events, new relationships, new lovers, to name the most obvious few) became events in his works, and so too did the events in his art send their own echoes out into reality.

Throughout his life, Richard Wagner was a true revolutionary. His fidelity to his revolutionary impulses to change the world for the better far surpassed his loyalty to anything else in his life, including his wives, friends, or creditors (who often were one and the same). An extremely charismatic man, Wagner was the sort of person who could inspire boundless devotion in others, though he reserved his own devotion for the revolution of society through a revolution in art.
Wagner lived and created in a time when theater, though subsidized by the government, was more-or-less unadventurous. In a political pamphlet written in May of 1848, Wagner argued for the creation of a German national theater, and criticized the low standards of current theater and opera, which, for the most part, merely catered to the shallow whims of the audience. Although Wagner's works – and the Ring Cycle in particular – present far more challenges than most other theatrical or musical productions might, it is extremely important that they be performed, as they even to this day provoke ideas and the passion to revolutionize art.

II. Wagner's Life and Other Works

Richard Wagner was born on May 22, 1813 to Johanna Rosine Patz and, supposedly, Carl Friedrich Wilhelm, her husband. Carl died less than a year after Richard's birth, however, and the alacrity with which his mother moved on (by marrying a very close 'family friend,' Ludwig Geyer) called Wagner's actual parentage into question. Later in life, in his fifties, Wagner himself uncovered some family letters that further substantiated the theory that Wagner's true father was Geyer. Many of Wagner's works, including the *Ring Cycle*, incorporate the concept of not knowing who one's father is: for example, in the *Ring Cycle*, Siegfried, though raised by Mime, is burdened by the mystery of his dead parents.

As a young child, Wagner attended school in Dresden. When he was eight years old, Ludwig Geyer died, and Wagner went to live with Geyer's brother, Carl, who was a goldsmith. At nine, he entered the Kreuzschule in Dresden, where his musical, historical, and mythological passions were nurtured. At the age of thirteen, he translated the first twelve books of Homer's *Odyssey* into German and began his first tragedy, *Leubald*, which he finished in Leipzig, after another change of schools. *Leubald* was largely inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and was later described by Wagner as "gigantic in the extreme" - featuring 42 deaths (and 42 resulting ghosts), this "great tragedy" consumed the adolescent Wagner for two years (Wagner, 1843). (*Leubald* was eventually given up as a lost cause, and
was not performed until 1989.) For the most part, Wagner was a disinterested student, preferring to pursue his own interests (and write *Leubald*) rather than complete his schoolwork. Although he finally was given a music teacher after revealing to his family his musical ambitions, his studies were destined to be short-lived; instead, Wagner chose to write orchestral overtures. As part of his self-determined training in composing, he copied out the entire score of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which would continue to be an enormous influence on Wagner's works, both musical and theoretical, throughout his life. (Scroll down to listen to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.)

At age seventeen, Wagner composed three overtures, one of which was performed at the Leipzig theatre. Shortly before he turned eighteen, Wagner went to study music at Leipzig University, where he continued to be a less-than-exemplary student, despite composing a number of successful pieces under the tutelage of Theodor Weinlig, including incidental music to Goethe's *Faust*, Piano Sonata in B flat major, Concert Overture in D minor, and Piano Fantasia in F sharp minor, which was inspired by Beethoven and contains the seeds of musical ideas that were to be developed in Wagner's future operas.

Wagner terminated his studies at Leipzig University before 1832, but continued to compose, and it was not long before his pieces were performed in both Leipzig and Prague. In 1833, at the age of twenty, Wagner was offered his first job, as a chorus master in Würzburg. In 1834, Wagner became the musical director for a well-established operatic company's summer season in Bad Lauchstädt, where he met Minna Planer, an actress, who became his wife. He also finished his first complete opera, *Die Feen* (The Fairies), which, though never performed in Wagner's lifetime, ran in Munich for ten years from 1888 (five years after his death) to 1898, and was revived in 1976 and 1983 (Sabor).

Minna Planer was four years older than Wagner, and had an illegitimate nine-year-old daughter, who was passed off as her little sister. Wagner, far from being put off, embraced the "opportunity for renouncing plebeian morals," and Minna Planer became Frau Wagner in November of 1836, the same
year that Wagner completed his second opera, *Das Liebesverbot*, which translates as 'The Ban on Love' (Sabor).

*Das Liebesverbot*, which was based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, indicated Wagner's enormous growth as a composer. It was performed in Magdeburg in 1836, but was forced to close after only one performance, as the singers could not be bothered to learn their parts, or even remain civil to each other; they "engaged in arguments, fisticuffs, and open warfare," and thus Wagner's brief career as conductor at Magdeburg came to an abrupt halt (Sabor). Wagner later gave the score for *Das Liebesverbot* to his patron, King Louis II. Eventually the score ended up in the possession of Adolf Hitler; it, like Hitler, hasn't been seen since 1945.

Wagner spent a large amount of his life in quite a lot of debt, which vexed Minna to no end. In 1837, Wagner lost his job as music director in Königsberg due to the theatre's sudden bankruptcy, and shortly after lost his wife to a more fiscally-solvent man named Dietrich. Wagner, preparing for the possibility that a hasty departure might become necessary, accepted a job as conductor in Riga, a Russian sea port. The theatre in Riga had an unusual design - the audience sat in the dark in an amphitheater-shaped auditorium, and the orchestra was placed below the rest of the auditorium. Wagner would later adopt - and popularize - these conventions when he built his Festspielhaus in Bayreuth.

By October of 1937, Minna returned to Wagner, and he began his third opera, *Rienzi*, which was based on the life of Cola di Rienzi, an Italian populist who lived in the 14th century. In 1839, Wagner and Minna were forced to flee Riga in the middle of the night to escape Wagner's creditors. Their trip to London was a trying ordeal, to say the least. Minna, who was pregnant, miscarried when their carriage overturned on the way to the boat out of Riga. Wagner, Minna, and their Newfoundland, Robber, had to be smuggled past the harbor authorities (as applying for passports would have tipped off Wagner's creditors), and, to make things worse, the eight day voyage actually took twenty-two.
Next they headed for Boulogne, where Wagner met and impressed Giacomo Meyerbeer, a successful composer of Parisian Grand Operas. Meyerbeer provided a number of letters of introduction to contacts in Paris, and Wagner and Minna moved there in September of 1839. None of Wagner's efforts to take Paris by storm succeeded in the least, and he soon found himself selling his and Minna's wedding rings to pay for meals and rent. During this time, Wagner wrote articles and novellas for the Revue et gazette musicale de Paris, and began to develop his theories about music, opera, poetry, and true drama, which is the unified collaboration of all three.

*Rienzi* was completed in 1840, and was to be performed at the new opera house in Dresden, but despite that minor success, Wagner was languishing in Paris. He had escaped his creditors in Germany, but had not left behind the habits that made creditors necessary, and so found himself once more in serious debt. He made Minna write a letter to a friend saying (falsely) that he had been arrested and put in the debtor's prison, and Wagner himself wrote a pleading letter to Meyerbeer that was so shamefully self-abasing that some biographers hypothesize that the resultant embarrassment was one source of Wagner's developing anti-Semitism (Sabor).

In 1842, the Wagners returned to Dresden, where *Rienzi* and *Die fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman) were performed for the first time. *Rienzi* succeeded in part due to the preexisting fame of the singers who originated the main roles, and in February of 1843, Wagner was appointed the Royal Saxon Court Conductor. Wagner's next opera, *Tannhäuser*, combined history, German legends, and Greek mythology, and was a great success following its premiere in 1845. In 1846, Wagner fulfilled a lifelong dream by conducting Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Despite his acclaim, however, Wagner still managed to accrue staggering debts.

Wagner completed his next opera, *Lohengrin*, in 1848. *Lohengrin* drew on medieval German stories and traditions, and is perhaps best known today for its Bridal Chorus (often colloquially called 'Here Comes the Bride'). 1848-1849 was also a year of great political involvement for Wagner; he
wrote a number of political pamphlets in addition to prose drafts (*Die Wibelungen* and *Die Nibelungensage [Mythus]*), of dramas that would eventually develop into *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, and a prose sketch of a drama called *Jesus von Nazareth*. Wagner never continued working on his proposed opera about Jesus, but many of his ideas regarding it found an outlet in the Ring - parallels between the Rhinegold and the Holy Grail, or Siegfried and Jesus, for example, are drawn in Wagner's prose outlines. It is unsurprising that the ideas were connected in Wagner's mind, given their synchronous gestation, and the archetypal nature of myths.

Wagner again conducted Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Dresden in 1849, and, after a rehearsal one day, met Mikhail Bakunin, a Russian anarchist who was active among the soon-to-be revolutionaries in Dresden. In his autobiography, *Mein Leben* (My Life), Wagner recalled the meeting: "He came up to me and told me that, though all the music might perish in the coming world conflagration, this symphony must be preserved, even at the peril of our own lives" (Wagner, 1911). A number of uprisings in Prague, Frankfurt, Berlin, Vienna, and Paris preceded the 1849 Revolution in Dresden. On May 5, fighting between the army and the people's militia broke out. Wagner reported on movements of the troops from the tower of the Kreuzkirche, where he had gone to school as a child. On May 7, the Dresden Opera House was aflame, and Bakunin joined Wagner on the Kreuzkirche tower, perhaps providing the impetus for Wagner to leave town rather quickly. While Wagner and Minna waited for the fighting to stop in Chemnitz, Bakunin and Wagner's close friend August Röckel were both arrested and sentenced to death (both sentences were eventually changed to life in prison, and neither Bakunin nor Röckel actually served the full sentence). On May 16, 1849, a warrant for Wagner's arrest was issued, reading: "Wanted, in connection with the recent disturbances in which he has played an active role, Richard Wagner, Court Conductor of this town..." (Sabor). Wagner evaded the police by hiding in villages under the pseudonyms 'Professor Werder' and 'Professor Widmann.' He soon escaped to Zurich, where his first act was to gather a group of friends, to whom he read his first
completed draft of the libretto of *Siegfried's Tod*, which would metamorphose into one quarter of his (artistically) revolutionary *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

From Zurich, Wagner made his way to Paris, at the behest of both Minna and Franz Liszt, a dear friend. However, a month later, he was back in Zurich, where he wrote *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (Art and Revolution), and *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (The Art-Work of the Future), in which he expounded upon his theories regarding the ideal dramatic form: the Gesamtkunstwerk, which essentially means the "totality of the arts" (Sabor, Goldman and Sprinchorn). The theories espoused by Wagner in these pivotal works are remembered for their insight and imagination; Wagner's next publication would not be so well received by future generations. *Das Judentum in der Musik* (Jews in Music), published in 1850 in *Die Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, states that Jews cannot create (specifically, compose) true art, because they lack the necessary cultural and linguistic roots that tie an artist to his nation. Of course, the Jews can't be blamed for this rootlessness, says Wagner, but "it lies beyond our present scope to occupy ourselves with the cause of this phenomenon" - which is to say that Wagner didn't have space (or the right audience) to air his many grievances about Christianity in addition to his claims about the artistic consequences of being Jewish (Wagner, 1850).

During his exile, Wagner met Jessie Laussot, the wife of a wine merchant. The two fell passionately in love, and planned to each escape an unhappy marriage by running away together to Asia Minor. Predictably, their plans fell through; Laussot's husband found out, locked up his wife, and threatened to shoot Wagner. Wagner returned to Minna, and in 1851 wrote his major theoretical work, *Oper und Drama* (Opera and Drama), and the autobiographical *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* (A Communication to my Friends). He also continued to draft *Der junge Siegfried, Rheingold*, and *Walkürie*, and in 1852 wrote to Theodor Uhlig, "I am shameless enough to proclaim: this is the greatest thing I have ever written. Your Nibelung Prince, Alberich" (Sabor).

In 1853, Wagner was introduced to Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophical writings, which
dramatically changed and clarified his ideas of what Der Ring des Nibelung needed to convey. Wagner completed the score of Das Rheingold in 1854, then began composing Die Walkürie. He wrote to Wilhelm Fischer, "By Easter 1856 the whole thing will be complete. Then comes the impossible - my own theatre." Of course, in reality, the Ring would not be performed in its entirety for twenty more years.

Wagner conducted eight concerts in London in 1855, all of which were reviewed terribly by the press. Wagner himself was not impressed with the English public, and wrote, in a letter to Otto Wesendonck, "Your typical Englishman is your typical sheep" (Sabor). However, his visit to London was not entirely a waste; he was well-received by the Queen, even despite the fact that he was still, officially, on the run, evading arrest for his involvement in the Dresden Revolution.

In 1857, Otto and Mathilde Wesendonck offered Wagner a house on their property in Zurich, so he and Minna moved to the newly-titled 'Asyl' (resting place), where Wagner put off writing his Ring in favor of the composition of Tristan und Isolde. Mathilde, his muse for Tristan und Isolde, became his newest paramour, despite the presence of both his and her respective spouses. After Tristan und Isolde was completed in 1859, Wagner decided to return to Paris once more, a decision he financed by selling the rights to his Ring - twice. This time around, Wagner finally succeeded in Paris, and, during his stay, he was granted partial amnesty, and thus finally allowed back into Germany (but not Saxony).

For the next few years, Wagner continued to work on other compositions besides the Ring, and conducted numerous concerts. Tannhäuser premiered in Paris in 1861, but closed after three performances. Theater in Paris at the time was essentially ruled by the members of the influential Parisian Jockey Club, who were enraged by Wagner's refusal to put a ballet in the second act of Tannhäuser (members of the Jockey Club typically partied before attending the theater, and thus never arrived before the second act). Threatened by Wagner's failure to yield, the Jockey Club actively sabotaged the performances in protest, and succeeded in disrupting the performances to the point of
Wagner received full amnesty in 1862. In 1864, just when Wagner had managed to bury himself in debt (yet again) and was (yet again) facing the threat of imprisonment, King Ludwig II, who was eighteen at the time, summoned Wagner to court, where he cancelled Wagner's debts, and gave him money, free housing, and a salary. Wagner accepted the offers, and sold the *Ring* for a third time to Ludwig, who paid 30,000 florins in commission. This was the beginning of a nineteen-year-long patronage and friendship that lasted until Wagner's death.

By this time, Wagner had moved on to his next muse: Cosima von Bülow, the already-married daughter of Wagner's friend Franz Liszt. In 1864, Cosima and her two daughters went to live with Wagner in the house provided by Ludwig, and scarcely 10 months later, Cosima gave birth to Isolde, Wagner's first child.

The premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* in 1865 was a great success, but the unexpected death of Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfield, who played Tristan, a month after the show opened resulted in disaster. The press blamed his death on the outrageous vocal and physical demands put upon Wagner's actors, and Wagner, who had already been subjected to bad press for his relationship with the King and his involvement in the love triangle with Cosima and her husband, was asked to temporarily leave Bavaria. He retreated to Switzerland and began his autobiography, *Mein Leben* (My Life).

The end of the 1860s saw Wagner's continued relationships with Cosima and Ludwig (relationships of a dramatically different nature, of course). In 1866, Minna died, and in 1867, Wagner and Cosima's second child, Eva, was born. Ludwig (whose sanity was later called into question, though he was never actually diagnosed or proven to be mad) begged Wagner to return to Munich, but, upon his arrival, refused to see him. Wagner's only comedy, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg), was completed in 1867 and performed in 1868, in Munich, and was conducted by Cosima's husband, Hans von Bülow. The next year, Wagner finally (after taking a 12-
year-long break) resumed work on *Siegfried*. Also in 1869, Cosima and Wagner had their third child, a son named Siegfried. Hans von Bülow agreed to a divorce a week after Siegfried's birth, and Wagner and Cosima were finally married in 1870.

Wagner devoted most of 1871 to the completion of the Ring Cycle. The town of Bayreuth offered land upon which to build Wagner's dream Festspielhaus, and Wagner laid the foundation stone on May 22, 1872. In order to fill the Festspielhaus with singers worthy of its glory, Wagner and Cosima toured opera houses from 1872 to 1873, in order to scout out talent. Wagner also began composing *Götterdämmerung* in 1873, but the plans for the Festspielhaus did not go as well. Financial troubles had stalled construction almost to a complete halt, but after a short time, King Ludwig came to the rescue, once again, with a massive loan of 100,000 thalers (the equivalent of $400,000 in 1990). Incredibly, this fiscal deliverance was not even the most significant occurrence of the year, for on November 21, 1874, Richard Wagner completed *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, twenty-six years after it was begun.

However, the practical considerations involved in the production of such a grand production were such that the Ring Cycle was not performed until August 13, 1876. Though the cycles were a huge success and were attended by royalty and such esteemed persons as Tchaikovsky and Nietzsche, Wagner was depressed by the disparity between his vision of the Ring Cycle and the version that was achievable on the stage. In addition, the festival did not make enough money to pay for continuing expenses, which put a festival in 1877 completely out of the question.

Around this time, Wagner worked on completing *Parsifal*, another opera based on medieval German literature. Naturally, another opera required another muse - which he found in Judith Gautier, the daughter of a French novelist and poet. *Parsifal* was completed in January of 1882, and as was his fling with Mme. Gautier. *Parsifal* was performed at the second Bayreuth Festival in 1882.
On February 13, 1883, Richard Wagner suffered a fatal heart attack while writing an essay entitled "Über das Weibliche im Menschlichen" (On the Feminine Element in Humanity.) The last words he wrote were "Liebe - Tragik," which, even out of context, are full of significance for a life such as Wagner's.

III. Politics and Philosophy.

i. Feuerbach

Wagner's early prose writings are largely inspired by (and, in the case of Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, dedicated to) the philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), whose most important work, Das Wesen des Christentums, or 'The Essence of Christianity' (1841) helped shape many of both Wagner's personal ideas and the ideas about humanity, divinity, and love that are deeply embedded in Der Ring des Nibelungen.

Many of Feuerbach's arguments resonated deeply within Wagner, and confirmed his own instinctual conclusions. One of the Feuerbach's ideas that Wagner took most to heart was the concept love drives all human actions: "love creates and destroys; it gives life and takes it away; it is being and not-being as one" (Sabor). The degree to which Feuerbach influenced Wagner's theoretical development cannot be exaggerated; in his dedication to Feuerbach in Der Kunstwerk der Zukunft, Wagner writes, "...I merely return to you what has been yours all along" (Wagner, 1849).

Feuerbach, like Wagner, saw himself as a "prophet of a new culture" (Harvey). Feuerbach believed that, in order for humanity and culture to progress, idealism and religion (Christianity, in particular) must be renounced. Wagner, who firmly believed that Christianity was hypocritical in the extreme for enforcing strictures contrary to human desire, found Feuerbach's justifications very appealing.

Among those philosophical arguments that must have been most redolent of Wagner's own ideas
are: the idea of sensuousness: i.e. that humans relate to the world through their bodies and senses; and that the species-being (essence) of man is found in community, and man's need for community is as fundamental as our basic biological needs.

Wagner's own philosophy regarding the importance of the Gesamtkunstwerk derives many of its concepts from Feuerbach's account of sensuousness, and the immense degree to which Wagner identified with the concept of the communal nature of man is obvious in practically every one of his written works. Even his less-admirable works, like Das Judentum in der Musik, have at their core an earnest dedication to the community of his birth. (It is the strength of Wagner's nationalism that made his works and theories so susceptible to appropriation by Hitler.)

ii. Schopenhauer

Wagner's later theoretical work was informed by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), and, in particular, his Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung (The World as Will and Representation), which was published in 1819, which Wagner read four times.

For Schopenhauer, the world is just a metaphysical objectification of the Will (Voice). The Will, argues Schopenhauer, is "a mindless, aimless, non-rational urge at the foundation of our instinctual drives" (Wicks). The objectification of the Will is the translation of Willed acts into perception. Thus, there are two aspects of the world: the Willing, and the perception, or representation of what was Willed. These concepts were useful to Wagner on a very personal level, as he discovered Schopenhauer at a time of metaphysical crisis in his life, but they also were extremely beneficial to his works: Schopenhauer's account of the Will allowed Wagner to finally understand his Wotan, who, he wrote, is not after all so very different from us.

Because Schopenhauer saw the world as a basically evil place, owing to the fact life is just endless strife and endless senseless Willing, he argued that, in order to overcome the "fundamentally painful human condition," one must engage in the constant negation of the Will (Wicks). Only when
one has renounced the will-to-live can one transcend animalistic struggles and live in tranquility.

In addition to his arguments about the negation of the Will, Schopenhauer also wrote extensively about his theories about art. Given the hellish nature of reality, Schopenhauer found it necessary to discover some source of tranquility; he settled on art. Art, argues Schopenhauer, directs one's consciousness towards more "extraordinary, universal, and less-individuated states of mind," at which point one is freed from the pain of existence and can be at peace (Wicks). Schopenhauer advocated for a "state of aesthetic perception," which, though only attainable by artistic geniuses, allows one to contemplate ideas, create art that expresses these ideas more clearly than usual, and as a result, "communicate the universalistic vision to those who lack the idealizing power to see through, and to rise above, the ordinary world of spatio-temporal objects" (Wicks). In other words, most of us cannot see past the blinding fetters of physical reality; it is the holy task of artists - like Wagner - to allow ordinary people to see beyond, into the universalistic, archetypal qualities of objects.

Schopenhauer's philosophical theories regarding music were also of great interest to Wagner. Schopenhauer held that music embodied the "abstract forms of feelings," thereby allowing us to perceive emotions themselves. Wagner fully espoused this theory, and ultimately rejected standard theatrical conventions, which focussed on providing clear motivation for actions, in favor of a kind of theater focussed instead on one critical emotional moment. Wagner relied on the music to make things clear to the audience that might stymie their understanding in a piece less successful in encompassing the totality of all the arts.

One of Wagner's most important theories about drama followed from a synthesis of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer: "In the drama, we must become knowers through feeling. The understanding tells us, 'So is it,' only when the feeling has told us, 'So must it be' (Wagner, 1851).

iii. Nietzsche

Wagner had a complicated relationship with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Nietzsche
became acquainted with Wagner's works as a teenager, and they met for the first time in November of 1968 at the Leipzig home of Hermann Brockhaus, Wagner's brother-in-law. Their mutual enthusiasm for the philosophy of Schopenhauer incited a friendship, of sorts. Nietzsche, too, had been composing music since his teens, and both attended the University of Leipzig for a time. In 1869, Nietzsche wrote that "his friendship with Wagner was the "greatest achievement" of his life" (Wicks). Wagner helped to inspire Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of a Tragedy* (1827), and, predictably, "showered the book with praise," despite its lukewarm reception elsewhere (Wicks). The book portrays the tragic spirit of contemporary German art, particularly as embodied by Wagner and Beethoven, as the "potential savior of European culture" (Wicks). Between 1873 and 1876, Nietzsche again drew inspiration from Wagner for his *Unfashionable Observations*, a series of studies on German culture which lauded both Wagner and Schopenhauer as "heroic inspirations for new cultural standards" (Wicks). This further celebration of Wagner's positive influence on German culture stands in stark contrast to Nietzsche's later works, for Wagner and Nietzsche's friendship was not to last much longer.

In 1878, Nietzsche renounced Wagner in *Human, All-Too-Human*, in which Nietzsche's unflattering portrayal of "the artist" is merely an extremely thinly-veiled representation of Wagner. Although Nietzsche suffered from deteriorating health, he continued to write, and continued to wage war on Wagner in many of his final writings of 1888, including *Der Fall Wagner, Ein Musikanten-Problem*, or 'The Case of Wagner, A Musician's Problem', in which Nietzsche mocked Wagner's theatrical style and condemned Wagner for "having confounded the public's taste in music" (Wicks). Nietzsche's scornful condemnations continued in *Götzen-Dämmerung, oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophiert* (Twilight of the Idols, or How One Philosophizes with a Hammer), and *Nietzsche contra Wagner, Aktenstücke wines Psychologen* (Nietzsche vs. Wagner, Out of the Files of a Psychologist), in which he claimed that Wagner had been corrupted by Christianity.

**iv. The Revolutions of 1848**
1848 was a climactic year throughout Europe. Starting in France in February with the protests of artisans and workers in the streets of Paris, the revolutionary spirit rippled outward, affecting almost the entirety of Europe and many Latin American countries as well. Though the uprisings were concurrent, none of the revolutions were connected to those in other countries. They all, however, were driven by some combination of a few basic issues: dissatisfaction with current political leadership, a desire for more active involvement and participation in government, the unmet needs of a growing working class, and a surge in support for nationalism. Led by disgruntled middle class workers, the revolutions were, in general, not very well organized, and all collapsed within the year, but did bring about some significant change.

In Germany, revolutions took place mainly during March (hence the name 'The March Revolutions'), and were focussed in the south and west of Germany. The intellectuals who spearheaded the revolutions called for a greater sense of national unity, and the freedoms of press and assembly. In Dresden, specifically, revolutionaries found the traditional political structures lacking, and demanded electoral reform and a written constitution.

The revolutions throughout Europe were quashed quite rapidly by the conservative aristocracy, and many liberals, including Wagner, were forced into exile. There were very few lasting political or structural effects of the revolutions.

IV. The Ring Cycle and Bayreuth

Das Rheingold – Synopsis:

SCENE ONE

The Rhinedaughters - attractive, youthful water dwellers who guard the Rhinegold, a trove of red gold treasure with mystical properties - are splashing about in the Rhine when Alberich, a dwarf, emerges from a crevice and begins to attempt to woo them. The three Rhinedaughters, Woglinde, Wellgunde,
and Flosshilde each flirt with him in turn, but cruelly mock him and his looks once he begins to fall for
their spiteful coquetry. After Alberich is rejected by all three Rhinemaidens, a light suddenly
illuminates a spot in the middle of the Rhine, which glows. The Rhinemaidens reveal that this is the
Rhinegold, from which a ring to rule the world can be fashioned. However, in order to gain the ability
to forge such a ring, one must renounce love. Alberich, his recent rejections still fresh, decides that love
is not too high a price to pay, and seizes the Rhinegold. The Rhinemaidens, helpless to prevent the
thievery, cry out as Alberich makes off with the Rhinegold.

SCENE TWO
The curtain opens on a flat area in a mountain range, on which the audience can see Wotan, the ruler of
all the gods, and Fricka, his wife, the goddess of matrimony, asleep. Fricka awakens and sees that
Walhall, a home/fortress commissioned by Wotan, has just been completed by the giants who had been
enlisted by Wotan. Fricka and Wotan argue a little, for it turns out that Freia, Fricka's sister and the
goddess of love and youth, had been offered as the giants' payment. Shortly after, Freia enters, pursued
by the giants, Fasolt and Fafner, who have come to claim their wage. Wotan tries to bide time, for
Loge, who Wotan had asked to find a way out of the contract made with Fasolt and Fafner, has not yet
arrived. Fasolt, stricken with love for Freia, demands that Wotan stick to the agreed contract,
particularly since Wotan's spear holds the runes of contractual agreements, and it is this which
legitimizes his power. Fafner, however, wants Freia because she is the only one who can grow the
golden apples that provide the gods their everlasting youth; without Freia, the gods will age, and die.
Froh and Donner, Freia's brothers, arrive just as Fasolt and Fafner are about to carry Freia away. Wotan
prevents Donner from using force against the giants, and, finally, Loge arrives. He tells Wotan and the
others how he has traveled the world in search of something more valuable to men than the love of a
woman (which might then replace Freia as payment). Loge reports that not a soul valued anything
more ... except one dwarf, the the Nibelung Alberich, who renounced love in favor of the Rhinegold. The Rhinemaidens, says Loge, beg Wotan to return their gold to them, but Wotan, enticed by the Ring, decides (with Loge) to steal the Rhinegold from Alberich, pay the giants with the bulk of it, and keep the Ring for himself. The giants decide to keep Freia as collateral while Wotan and Loge descend into Nibelheim to get the gold, and her absence immediately causes the gods to weaken with age.

SCENE THREE

Deep in the caverns of Nibelheim, the land of the Nibelungs, Alberich abuses his brother, Mime, who has been set the task of forging the Tarnhelm, which gives its wearer the ability to disappear and change shapes. Mime attempts to keep the Tarnhelm for himself, but Alberich takes it, and, while invisible, pummels Mime for his attempted trickery. Alberich leaves, and Wotan and Loge arrive. They discover from Mime that Alberich controls the entire race of the Nibelungs, and is using them to mine gold, which he finds with the use of the all-powerful ring. Alberich returns, and Loge tricks him into transforming himself into a dragon, and then a toad. Loge and Wotan capture Alberich-the-Toad, tie him up, and drag him back to the mountaintop.

SCENE FOUR

Back on the surface, Alberich agrees to give all his gold to Loge and Wotan in exchange for his freedom. He summons the Nibelungs, who bring the treasure up to Wotan and Loge, who, at the last moment, also demand Alberich's Ring and Tarnhelm. Alberich has no choice, but, as he relinquishes the Ring, he places a curse on it, so that it will bring misery and death to all who possess it, and overpowering envy to all who do not. Wotan and Loge release Alberich and rejoin the other gods just as the giants return with Freia, whose presence instantly rejuvenates the gods. Although Wotan has successfully delivered the gold, Fasolt protests that he could not possibly give up Freia while she is in
his sight. So, the gold is piled up in front of her, until she is completely obscured. Fasolt is not satisfied; he can still see her hair, and her eyes, so he demands that the Tarnhelm and Ring be added to the pile as well, to conceal them. Wotan is about to refuse to give up the Ring when Erda, the goddess of the earth, emerges from below to warn Wotan that the Ring will bring about the demise of the gods. Wotan heeds her warning, and Fasolt begins to collect the treasure, Tarnhelm, and Ring. Fafner, however, sees no point in sharing the booty, and kills Fasolt.

Fasolt's murder awakens Wotan to the true danger of the Ring's curse, and after Fafner leaves, the gods cross a rainbow bridge to Walhall. Loge hangs back, contemplating the approaching demise of the gods, as the Rhinemaidens bewail the loss of their gold in the distance.

Die Walkurie – Synopsis:

ACT ONE

Siegmund enters a hut built around the trunk of a massive ash tree. The hut belongs to a man named Hunding, whose wife, Sieglinde, tends to the exhausted Siegmund. Siegmund, calling himself Wehwalt (world-weary), relates his story to Sieglinde and Hunding, describing how, as a child, he and his father returned from a hunt one day to discover his mother murdered, his twin sister kidnapped, and their house burnt to the ground. Siegmund and his father, Wolfe, wandered the woods for a while, but were eventually separated after a battle. Siegmund then traveled, but always was at odds with society. His most recent predicament, which immediately preceded his escape to Hunding's hut, began with his efforts to save a maiden from a loveless marriage, and ended with the death of the maiden and most of her kinsmen, the rest of whom still pursued Siegmund. Hunding realizes that the men killed by Siegmund were his kinsmen, and he consequently announces that, while Siegmund has his (unwilling) hospitality for the night, they must duel to the death in the morning.

Hunding leaves for bed after Sieglinde drugs his nightcap, and Siegmund worries about the coming
duel. His father, we discover, promised that Siegmund would find a sword in his moment of direst need. Sieglinde reenters and tells Siegmund the story of her wedding, at which a stranger approached, and thrust a sword into the trunk of the ash tree, which no man has since been able to remove. Siegmund realizes that the sword is the one promised to him by his father, and also that Sieglinde is his long-lost twin sister. Siegmund draws the sword from the tree, names it Nothung (needed), and Siegmund and Sieglinde fall passionately in love.

ACT TWO

Up in the mountains, Wotan discusses the coming battle between Siegmund and Hunding with Brünnhilde, who is his daughter (with Erda), and is a Valkyrie. (It is the duty of the Valkyries to fetch slain warriors from their battlegrounds and bring them to Walhalla, where they will feast with Wotan and the gods forever.) Wotan tells Brünnhilde that she must ensure that Siegmund wins the battle. Brünnhilde agrees to carry out his will. Fricka enters, enraged. As the goddess of marriage, she demands that Siegmund and Sieglinde be punished for their incest and adultery. Wotan, who was depending on Siegmund to redeem the gods and prevent their downfall, is reluctant, but is eventually forced to accept that Siegmund is not a free hero, and, due to Wotan's considerable influence in his life, cannot bring about the salvation for which Wotan had hoped. Dejected, Wotan bends to Fricka's demands, and he calls Brünnhilde back to reverse his instructions.

Subsequently, Siegmund and Sieglinde enter, on the run from Hunding. Sieglinde faints, and Brünnhilde arrives to tell Siegmund of his fate. He convinces Brünnhilde to protect him in battle, and, as Brünnhilde knows Wotan's true desires, she agrees. The fight takes place, but Brünnhilde's attempts to shield Siegmund are impeded by Wotan's arrival. Wotan shatter Siegmund's sword, Nothung, with his spear, allows Hunding to kill Siegmund, and then immediately kills Hunding with a contemptuous gesture. Brünnhilde flees with Sieglinde, in order that Sieglinde might give birth to Siegmund's child,
who would be the great hero needed.

ACT THREE
Brünnhilde begs her sister Valkyries to help shield her and Sieglinde from the wrath of Wotan. None dare to aid her, so Brünnhilde gives Sieglinde the shattered fragments of Nothung, and sends her into a forest to hide until her son is born.

Wotan enters, and, despite the protests of the other Valkyries, sentences Brünnhilde to sleep on the mountaintop until a man comes and awakens her, after which she will live out the rest of her life as a mortal. Alone with Wotan, Brünnhilde begs for mercy, and explains that she only acted in accordance with what Wotan truly willed, before he was persuaded by Fricka. Ultimately, Brünnhilde's punishment is not revoked, but Wotan agrees to circle her sleeping body with fire, in order to deter all but the bravest of men.

Siegfried – Synopsis:

ACT ONE
Mime, the dwarf who forged the Tarnhelm, is working at an anvil in a rocky cave deep in the forest. We learn that Mime has raised Siegfried, the son of Siegmund and Sieglinde, in hopes that he might kill Fafner, who has used the Tarnhelm to become a dragon, and win the Ring (for Mime, of course). Mime is trying to forge a sword for Siegfried, who has broken every sword yet. Siegfried enters, leading a bear on a rope, which then proceeds to chase Mime around the cave. Siegfried then demands to be told the truth about his parentage, and Mime tells him that he (Mime) took pity on a woman he found out in the forest years ago, and welcomed her into his cave. She died giving birth to Siegfried, however, and so Mime raised the child himself. Mime brings out the fragments of Nothung, and Siegmund excitedly demands that Mime forge the pieces together before leaving.
The Wanderer (who is actually Wotan in one of his many disguises) enters, and stakes his head in a bet that he can answer any questions posed to him by Mime. Mime asks who dwells deep beneath the earth, on the surface, and in the cloud-covered heights, each of which the Wanderer answers correctly: the Nibelungs, the giants, and the gods. The Wanderer demands that Mime answer his questions next, for the same stakes. He asks the name of the tribe dearest to Wotan, though he treated them harshly (the Wälungs, Siegmund and Sieglinde's family), the name of the sword Siegfried his destined to wield (Nothung), and who will reforge the sword and make it whole. Mime does not know the answer to this last question, so the Wanderer tells him that the answer is the 'one who has never known fear.' The Wanderer does not claim his prize (Mime's head), but instead leaves it for the foretold fearless one. When Siegfried returns, Mime is determined to teach him fear. However, Siegfried merely begins to work on reassembling Nothung, so Mime plots how he will poison and murder Siegfried after the boy has vanquished the dragon. Siegfried finishes the sword, and strikes the anvil with it, which splits the anvil in two.

ACT TWO

The Wanderer approaches Fafner's cave, and sees Alberich keeping watch over it. The Wanderer warns Alberich of Siegfried and Mime's impending arrival, and then wakes Fafner and asks if he will relinquish the ring. Fafner refuses, and the Wanderer wanders away into the forest. Siegfried, having set out on his way to battle the dragon, hears the song of a Woodbird, and attempts to fashion a pipe out of a reed, so that he may sing back. However, he soon gives up, and blows on his horn, instead. This rouses Fafner, who emerges from his cave only to be quickly cut down by the victorious Siegfried. Some of Fafner's blood drips onto Siegfried's hand, and burns it. Putting his hand to his mouth, Siegfried tastes the dragon blood, and is suddenly able to understand the Woodbird's song, which tells him to take the Ring and the Tarnhelm from Fafner's cage. It also warns him that
Mime plans to kills him.

When Siegfried meets up with Mime once more, he discovers that the dragon's blood also enables him to hear Mime's treacherous thoughts, and, after hearing all of Mime's plans, Siegfried is so repulsed that he kills Mime with Nothung. Unsure what to do next, Siegfried asks the Woodbird for advice, which tells Siegfried of a warrior who lies asleep on a mountain and is ringed with fire. The Woodbird flies off to show Siegmund the way, and he follows.

ACT THREE

The Wanderer calls Erda, the earth goddess, from her slumber deep underground. They discuss Brünnhilde's punishment, and he announces that he no longer fears the end of the gods, but, rather, desires it, for the Wälsung hero, Siegfried, will inherit after Wotan's death, and will redeem the world, which is currently afflicted with Alberich's curse, through his goodness.

The Wanderer and Siegfried meet near Brünnhilde's cave, and they talk. The Wanderer is pleased with Siegfried, but Siegfried interprets this as condescension, and reacts impudently. The Wanderer is enraged by Siegfried's blatant lack of respect, and attempts to bar Siegfried's way to Brünnhilde. However, Siegfried, who has become convinced that the Wanderer is the man who killed his father, shatters the Wanderer's spear with own blow of his sword. The Wanderer suddenly disappears, and Siegfried walks through the wall of fire towards Brünnhilde. He first mistakes her for a man, but realizes his mistake after removing her armor. In this moment, he learns fear, and, in the desperation of the moment, kisses her, which wakes her from her prolonged slumber. Though Brünnhilde is initially put off by her new mortality and resulting weakness, she eventually succumbs to passion, and the two embrace.

Gotterdammerung – Synopsis:
PROLOGUE
The three Norns, who are the daughters of Erda, weave the rope of destiny, and discuss the past, present, and future. They are shocked and distraught when the rope that they are weaving breaks, and they descend deep into the earth.

At dawn, Siegfried and Brünnhilde emerge from the cave. Brünnhilde encourages Siegfried to go out into the world and do heroic deeds. He gives her the Ring as a parting gift, to signify his unending devotion to her, and she gives him her horse, Grane. They say their farewells, and Siegfried and Grane depart down the Rhine.

ACT ONE
In the palace of the Gibichungs, we meet Gunther, the chief, and his sister, Gutrune. Their half-brother, Hagen, is the son of their mother and Alberich. Hagen tells Gunther that he should find a husband for his sister, and find a bride for himself - ideally, Brünnhilde, who will be won through deceit.

Siegfried arrives at the hall, and is welcomed. He tells them of the treasure and the ring, and drinks to his memories of Brünnhilde and their shared love. However, the drink, brought to him by Gutrune, is laced with drugs that cause him to forget Brünnhilde. Having lost his memory, Siegfried almost immediately proposes that he and Gutrune wed, and offers to win Gunther a wife as well. Gunther and Hagen tell him of Brünnhilde, hidden away high on her mountain, and, after swearing blood-brotherhood, Siegfried and Gunther head towards Valkyrie Rock, where Brünnhilde awaits.

Before the men arrive, Brünnhilde is visited by her sister, Waltraute, a Valkyrie, who reports that Wotan and the other gods have lost hope, and fearfully await their demise. Waltraute urges Brünnhilde to save them all by returning the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, but Brünnhilde refuses to give up her love token. Waltraute leaves, and Siegfried enters, disguised as Gunther by the Tarnhelm. He claims her for his wife, snatches the Ring from her, and they spend a chaste night together, with Siegfried's sword placed
ACT TWO

During the night, Alberich comes to Hagen in the hall of the Gibichungs and urges his son to acquire the Ring. At dawn, Siegfried arrives at the hall, having switched places surreptitiously with Gunther along the way. There is a celebration of the two weddings, which is interrupted by Brünnhilde's shock and fury when she sees Siegfried with Gutrune. Noticing the Ring on Siegfried's finger (although it had apparently been taken from her by Gunther), she realizes the deception, and alleges that Siegfried dishonored his blood-brothership with Gunther during the night that he spent with Brünnhilde in the cave, disguised as Gunther. Although Siegfried protests such accusations, the damage has been done. All but Brünnhilde, Hagen, and Gunther exit to attend the wedding feast, and Brünnhilde ends up collaborating with the half-brothers on a plan to murder Siegfried. She informs Hagen and Gunther that her runes made all of Siegfried impenetrable - except for his back, for she knew that he would never turn his back on the enemy in battle.

ACT THREE

The Rhinemaidens lament their lost gold on the banks of the Rhine near a valley in the woods. Siegfried approaches, having been separated from the rest of the hunting party. The Rhinemaidens beg him to return the Ring, but he refuses, and returns to the hunting party, at which point Hagen urges Siegfried to tell his life story, and gives him a drink to restore his memory. When Siegfried reaches the point in his life story at which he awoke the sleeping Brünnhilde with a kiss (a fact he only just remembered), Gunther is outraged. Two ravens (Wotan's messengers) fly overhead, causing Siegfried to look up at the sky; Hagen uses this opportunity to stab Siegfried in the back with his spear. The hunting party bears Siegfried's body back to the hall. Hagen and Gunther both attempt to take the Ring,
and Hagen kills Gunther. As Hagen approaches Siegfried's body to take the Ring, Siegfried's arm rises into the air, which shocks and horrifies everyone in the hall.

Brünnhilde enters, orders a funeral pyre for Siegfried's body, and declares that in his death, Siegfried has atoned for his guilt. She takes the Ring, and, after Siegfried and his pyre have been lit, she rides Grane into the flaming pyre, causing the entire palace to burst into flames. The flames consume everything, and the Rhine overflows its banks. The Rheinmaidens reclaim the Ring, and Hagen, who attempts to seize it once more, is dragged under the waves. As the building collapses, we see the gods and heroes in Valhalla. Before long, the flames spread to Valhalla, and it is engulfed in flames, thus marking the foretold end of the gods.

V. Production History and Technical Challenges

*Der Ring des Nibelungen* has a long and impressive production history. The original production (not including the unauthorized productions of *Das Rheingold* (1869) and *Die Walkürie* (1870) which were put on in Munich at King Ludwig's demand, without Wagner's support) took place in 1876, in Bayreuth, at Wagner's Festspielhaus, which he had had designed and built specifically for this purpose. The Ring Cycle was performed three times over two and a half weeks, and was received with enormous enthusiasm. 'Richard Wagner Societies' had been formed by fans of Wagner's in cities around Europe in order to fund the Festspielhaus, and these fans were not disappointed. Wagner's intention was to make the act of going to the theater more like a pilgrimage than a casual event, and, indeed, that is the attitude with which Wagner's audiences approached his works then, and they continue to do so now, as exemplified by the fact that it is sometimes necessary to book tickets for a performance at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus up to seven years in advance.

Wagner fulfilled or, at the very least, had a hand in all aspects of the original production, including the orchestration and coordination of technical effects. After his death, Cosima, his wife, took
over as head of productions, but all productions of the Ring Cycle, both in and out of Bayreuth were essentially "homage stagings" until 1906, when Siegfried Wagner, Richard's son, took over. At this point, three-dimensional sets were introduced for the first time, instead of merely using painted backdrops. Similarly, Siegfried replaced the gas lighting with electric lights. Many purists loathed any and all deviations from Wagner's original production - which was why all productions for thirty years were essentially identical. Accordingly, Siegfried's seemingly small changes were actually quite radical. (Such critics must not have been aware with the suicidal depression that overcame Wagner after the original production due to the inability of the stage to do justice to what he imagined.) Siegfried continued to be in charge of productions at Bayreuth until 1930.

The first real radical innovator was Adolphe Appia, whose highly stylized stagings at Basle from 1920 to 1925 relied heavily on the creation of space through lighting effects. Predictably, a number of Wagnerites were simply appalled - such changes might as well have been blasphemy against Wagner, the Master.

Siegfried Wagner's set became the convention at Bayreuth, and after his death in 1930, his wife, Winifred Wagner, decided to continue replicating his productions. However, in 1933, new, progressive scenery was introduced, as Adolf Hitler, who attended performances of the Ring Cycle, "expected a Ring that would pay homage to the National Socialists' concept of monumentalism in art" (Sabor). Of course, many people were dismayed, and demanded a return to the more naturalistic sets of the past. Though Hitler's support of the Bayreuth festivals and his fondness for Wagner's works are now seen as a blight on Wagner's name and reputation, it is more than a little irrational to blame the composer for the tastes of a man who wasn't even born when Wagner died. It is true that Wagner is notorious for his antisemitic views, and there is no reason to make excuses for that. However, being antisemitic, especially in Wagner's time period, does not mean that one would have shared Hitler's values. Both men had revolutionary ambitions - but then, so did Martin Luther King Jr., the suffragettes, and so do
gay rights activists today. Just as it is possible to be a revolutionary but not be evil, it is possible to appreciate Wagner's works without that implying any sort of agreement or even association with Hitler.

The Festspielhaus was closed for period as a result of both WWI and WWII, resulting in no productions in Bayreuth from 1914 to 1924, and from 1944 to 1951. The longer break after WWI was merely due to financial issues, but between 1944 and 1951, the Festspielhaus was hardly recognizable. At various points, it served as a church for American soldiers, a theater for the Glenn Miller Orchestra and the Rockettes, and a theater for productions of Italian operas such as La Traviata. When it reopened in 1951, a notice was posted which read, "Our concern is art. Kindly abstain from talking politics" (Sabor).

Productions since the 1950s have varied widely, and have run the gamut from the most abstract possible, to the most naturalistic possible. Inevitably, a number of interpretations of Wagner's cycle have arisen, including many based on Bernard Shaw's interpretation of The Ring as a condemnation of capitalism, in which everything has an economic connotation. Also popular is Robert Donington's interpretation of the cycle in Jungian terms, in which it is simply overflowing with mother-longing and escapist infantile fantasies (Cooke). Even more radical are those productions which set the operas in the biblical ages, or in a 'Time Tunnel' (Sabor).

However significant the value of exploring different contexts and understandings, the Wagner we discover through his theoretical and prose publications is certainly not the kind of artist who would be very supportive of outlandish interpretations - or, really, any interpretations at all. Wagner would say that the meaning is already there, in the gesamtkunstwerk, and over-intellectualizing the tragedy will simply prevent audiences from 'knowing through feeling,' as they should.

**Technical Challenges:**

Wagner wrote stage directions like one might write a novel, or a dream - with all the freedom
that comes with unlimited imagination, and with none of the restrictions that accompany one who is conscientious of the realities of stage productions. Whether he guessed it or not, Wagner wrote his stage directions for the future. Effects that in his lifetime were unachievable have since become commonplace, and those that were hardly even imaginable in the late 19th century have, at least, become within the realm of possibility. Even so, the challenges presented by any production of the Ring Cycle are substantial and rather daunting.

**Das Rheingold:**

*Das Rheingold* may have the greatest abundance of technically challenging situations. To begin with, the three Rhinemaidens, Woglinde, Wellgunde, and Flosshilde are all swimming about in the Rhine when Alberich, the Nibelung climbs out from a chasm below. The next scene takes place on a mountain, above which Walhall (Valhalla) is visible. A journey from the mountain into the cavernous subterranean land of the Nibelungs is described in detail between scenes one and two, and that same journey is made in reverse between scenes three and four. In the meantime, it is necessary for a golden helm to make Alberich invisible, and transform him into a dragon and a frog, in turn. At the end of *Das Rheingold*, the gods walk across a rainbow up to Walhall. Thus, the stage directions call for a set which allows for movement and action on multiple levels, each of which is truly its own world. That some action takes place simultaneously in different worlds, so to speak, and the fact that the transition from the mountain to the underground world of the Nibelungs is so important (a rather expansive chunk of music is devoted to the downward and subsequent upward movement), only make the set designer's job more difficult. Other, less formidable, technical challenges include the fact that the gods must grow very old quite rapidly and visibly at the end of scene two (and then regain their youth when Freia returns), the actors must assemble a pile of gold large enough to conceal a fully-grown woman in scene four, and, throughout the entirety of the opera (and, indeed, the Ring Cycle as a whole), certain characters - the giants, Fasolt and Fafner - must appear significantly larger than all others.
The historical techniques used to make the Rhinemaidens swim are perhaps best-documented. In the original production at Bayreuth, Richard Wagner collaborated with Carl Brandt, the leading stage technician of the time, and Richard Fricke, a ballet master, to create 'swimming cradles,' which were essentially long poles with wheels on them, topped by a sort of nest which supported the body of each Rhinemaiden, from which they would move their arms about in a manner which created the illusion of swimming. However, unsurprisingly, the vocalists found it challenging to sing in such contraptions, and so the singers performed from offstage, and ballet dancers took over all movement. This set a precedent which has been followed in many productions of the Ring Cycle. The giants, too, were made taller by standing on rolling trolleys which were concealed beneath costumes and pushed around by hidden stagehands (Stone). Initially the plan was to have them stand on stilts, but this idea was discarded in favor of the trolleys.

The dragon, meanwhile, posed its own unique set of problems. Wagner went to great personal expense to have a custom-made dragon created and mailed from England, but the pieces of the dragon were mailed separately, and some simply never arrived.

Rudolph Sabor relates an amusing anecdote from the original production regarding Alberich's difficulties clambering around on the rocks when he is attempting to capture the Rhinemaidens:

"Carl Hill [who played Alberich] was an outstanding singer and a plausible actor, but was prone to dizzy spells. 'Slippery slime,' Alberich cries, 'I stagger and stumble!' Promptly a trap-door opens, and a lift whisks him from the top to the bottom. Hill's protests were countered by the resourceful Fricke. 'In Brandt's machinery, plunging down becomes a positive pleasure!' Hill was terrified, but he let himself be persuaded. 'I would not have done this for anybody in the whole world,' he later declared, 'except for Wagner.' The composer realized the extent of Hill's effort. When the trembling singer arrived at the bottom, he found a bottle of champagne waiting for him. Wagner had labelled it 'Rheingold." (Sabor)."
Die Walkürie:

*Die Walkürie* welcomes us gradually into the world of humanity, and is, consequentially, filled with far fewer spectacles of a supernatural nature. However, the changing locations call for a versatile set that can look dramatically different from night to night and from scene to scene. The opera begins in Hunding's hut, which is built around the trunk of an enormous ash tree, from which Siegmund pulls the sword, Nothung. Act two takes place in a rocky, mountainous landscape, as does act three, which occurs at the summit of a mountain, but must also have a forest easily accessible.

The primary technical challenges for *Die Walkürie* are the flying horses upon which the Valkyries ride. The Valkyries' mounts are often a source of frustration for production teams and audiences alike. Some productions have omitted the horses completely, resulting in some awkward moments during which the Valkyries refer and react to horses that are, apparently, invisible. This is a particularly significant issue throughout the rest of the Cycle, for Brünnhilde's mount, Grane, goes on to play a fairly significant role in the continuing action. Other, more minor challenges include the moments when Wotan's spear shatters Siegmund's sword, and when Wotan has Loge surround the sleeping Brünnhilde in a ring of fire.

Siegfried:

The technical challenges in *Siegfried* are largely concerned with animals. To begin with, Siegfried leads a bear into the cave where he and Mime live, and the bear subsequently chases Mime around. A fatal tussle with a dragon follows in the next act, and a talking Woodbird plays a role later on. In act three, Siegfried must run through the ring of fire encircling Brünnhilde's sleeping body.

As with *Die Walkürie*, *Siegfried* concerns increasingly human affairs. The involvement of the gods is quite limited, and, as such, there are fewer instances of magical or extraordinary happenings.

Götterdämmerung:

Though *Götterdämmerung* introduces an entirely new location (the hall of the Gibichungs) in
addition to a slew of new characters, the true challenges are found at the very end, when the world of the humans and the world of the gods finally collide (metaphorically, of course - to be clear, they aren't actually different physical worlds, and their collision is more metaphysical than anything else). The gods' direct involvement in the humans' lives finally comes to an end when the tables are turned, and the actions of humans take on pivotal importance for the fate of the gods.

Though most of the action takes place in the hall of the Gibichungs or on Brünnhilde's flame-enclosed rock, Wagner simply could not let it be that simple, and so the set must also allow for Siegfried to arrive at the hall on a boat (which also must hold a horse, Grane), and leave again the same way. At the end of the first act, Siegfried dons the Tarnhelm and disguises himself as Gunther - a challenge both physically and vocally, as Gunther is a bass-baritone, and Siegfried is a tenor.

After Hagen, the son of Alberich, kills Siegfried by plunging a spear into his back, the need for special technical effects increases exponentially. A funeral pyre is created for Siegfried, and Brünnhilde, wearing the ring, rides Grane into the pyre, causing the entire building to burst into flame. Then the Rhine overflows and floods the stage, and the Rhinemaidens drag Hagen into the depths, drowning him. Finally, the audience sees the gods and heroes assembled in Walhall, surrounded by the logs of the World Ash Tree - and then Walhall, too, is engulfed in flames, bringing about the ultimate end of the gods. The challenges presented by such a deluge of elemental powers hardly need to be elaborated upon. After all, how can one physically create a scene conveying such awe and fearful majesty as is described by Wagner without putting one's audience in almost simultaneous danger of both burning and drowning?

VI. Dramatic and Musical Theories

Wagner was very fond of philosophizing, particularly about his medium of choice: musical drama. As he saw himself as a prophet of new forms, it was important that he outline exactly what his
artwork of the future entailed. However, the majority of Wagner's theoretical work was done earlier in
his life, and his views changed in many ways by the time he completed some of his greatest works.
Thus, one must take his theories with a grain of salt: though they are always fascinating, they may not
always apply to or exemplify Wagner at his best.

**On the Decadence of Society and the Necessity of Revolution**

Wagner's involvement in the Dresden Revolution of 1848 (and his consequent exile) may
perhaps have quenched his thirst for such active involvement in political movements, but it only
increased his interest in the importance of revolution as a concept and a vehicle for cultural change.
"The lofty goddess Revolution" was an important character in his writings in 1849, and, much as
Alberich's curse heralds Ragnarök (Scandinavian for 'the twilight of the gods' - Götterdämmerung is the
German translation), Wagner thought that the decadence of his present society heralded the collapse
and rebirth of social and cultural structures. The "old world is crumbling, a new world will rise
therefrom," declared our self-labeled prophet, almost 22 years before he would conclude his greatest
masterpiece with exactly this sentiment.

For Wagner, revolution was the release of natural forces, and only revolution "can give us back
that highest artwork," derived, as it should be, from Nature. As such, revolution ought to "destroy each
trace of this mad state of things," starting with the cultural enlightenment of the masses. Wagner was
well-justified in believing society to be mad; his experience with the Parisian Jockey Club during his
production of *Tannhäuser* would certainly be enough to make anyone lose faith in the present order.
However, his distaste did not encompass all of humanity - indeed, Wagner thought man (especially one
man in particular!) was capable of extremely lofty and meaningful accomplishments. Wagner asserted
the significance of "genuine drama: that one, indivisible, supreme creation of the mind of man," and
believed that such glorious art could change minds and souls, and, therefore, the world. Thus, "the
perfect artwork...tragedy... must be born anew," proclaimed Wagner, from "the great Revolution of
Mankind," and simultaneously, the perfect artwork would light the spark of revolution, and set flame to
the kindling of the old world's structures.

**On the Greek Ideal**

Wagner drew many of his concepts about the most perfect art form from Greek drama. Wagner
believed that the structure of Greek dramas was superior to that of any other theater, for "when, to all
the rich elements of spontaneous art, the harvest of the fairest and most human life, he [Dionysus]
joined the bond of speech, and concentrat[ed] them all into one focus, [he] brought forth the highest
conceivable form of art - the drama." To Wagner, 'drama' meant something different from what we
generally assume it to mean now; true drama was the perfect amalgamation of song, dance, and words.
Indeed, the "dissolution of drama" and tragedy occurred when "drama separated into its component
parts." Only when all aspects of drama are combined, as they are meant to be, can the artwork "for
every age" be created.

However, this is not to say that all theater that involves words, music, and movement will
automatically be the "highest conceivable form of art" - far from it. In fact, although Wagner's
contemporaries also composed operas with all of these elements, Wagner, for the most part, detested
popular opera of his time, and called for an "upheaval of the traditional operatic form." Thus, true
drama must go beyond the mere inclusion of certain elements - it takes much more than that. True
drama exists "only where these twain Prometheuses - Shakespeare and Beethoven - shall reach out
hands to one another... there first, in the communion of all his fellow artists, will the poet also find
redemption."

**On Myth, Love, and Feeling**

As is obvious to anyone even remotely familiar with Wagner's works, he found great inspiration
in ancient myths and legends. He believed that community, especially in the sense of a shared history,
was integral to one's identity, and asserted that, "only by the folk, or in the footsteps of the folk, can
poetry be really made." To clarify, by 'folk,' Wagner didn't mean people of a certain economic class or social position; rather, "the 'folk' is the epitome of all those men who feel a common and collective want."

Myths, for Wagner, were the "native, nameless poem of the folk... the eternally intelligible, the purely human." Indeed, "the myth is the poem of a life view in common." Myths resonate with everyone, regardless of the changing times, because they represent a concentrated and compressed essence of things, which appeals to the "universal receptive force of man." We can understand myths, no matter how distant their world, because they ask the questions that are at the base of all human experience, and all humans, whether they were born in the 7th century, the 1800s, or 2012, share the experience of seeking these answers.

One of the major connection forces in life, argued Wagner, is love: "All understanding comes to us from love alone." Ironically, some of Wagner's most optimistic theories derived from the arguments of Schopenhauer, philosophy's famous pessimist. From Schopenhauer's argument that "our consciousness has two sides: ...one's one self, which is the will; ... [the other is one's consciousness] of other things... visual knowledge of the outer world," Wagner developed the idea that "Art... is nothing but the fulfillment of a longing to know oneself in the likeness of an object of one's love or adoration, to find oneself again in the things of the outer world."

Perhaps one of Wagner's most conclusive and firm theories was that the essence of drama is knowing through feeling. Wagner's works demonstrated a sizable shift from the theatrical conventions of his time: rather than ensuring that the audience understand why all the action must happen intellectually, Wagner focused on creating and inducing strong, momentous feelings. "In the drama," declared Wagner, "we must become knowers through the feeling. The understanding tells us, 'so is it,' only when the feeling has told us, 'so must it be.' .... An action which is to justify itself before and through feeling, busies itself with no moral; its whole moral consists precisely by the feeling out of
Wagner primarily relied on music to achieve this goal - there are many times in the Ring Cycle when the orchestration brings us to a sense of emotional fervency or closure that is left largely unexplained in the text. Indeed, most textual analyses of the Ring Cycle end up focusing on its many problematic sections (for example, if the Ring is returned to the Rhinemaidens, why must the gods still fall?) - for there are quite a few - even though one is never confused when watching the performance. Somehow, inexplicably, the music, which Wagner saw as "essentially the artistic, original image of the world," allows us to feel fulfilled regardless.

VII. Sources for Der Ring des Nibelungen

The Poetic and Prose Eddas

The Poetic Edda, also called the Elder Edda, is a collection of nineteen strophic poems by anonymous authors, and was most likely written between 1150 and 1250. The poems were probably intended to be sung, and almost certainly existed as oral tradition for centuries before they were transcribed. As the Edda was fashioned from the content that German, Norse, Anglo-Saxon, and Celtic legends had in common, it is not surprising that the same or similar names, concepts, or magical mechanisms seem to arise in a number of other sources, including the Volsunga Saga and the Nibelungenlied. The Poetic Edda has two fairly distinct sections: one is devoted to stories of the gods, and the other to stories of heroes. The heroes celebrated in the Edda are primarily from the Teutonic heroic age, which was the "era of the migrations of the Germanic tribes, the Goths, the Huns, and the Burgundians" (Gutman). The Elder Edda is often called the Iliad of the North, and for good reason. It represents a compilation of the traditions and tales of all the individual Teutonic ethnic and linguistic groups, even though the original tales were lost to time.

Among the many characters of the Poetic Edda are Sigurd (who becomes Siegfried in the Ring
Cycle), Gunnar (Gunther), Högni (Hagen), the dwarf Regin, who raises Sigurd (Mime), the dragon Fafnir (Fafner), Gudrun (Gutrune), and Sigdrifa, who is awakened by Sigurd (Brünnhilde).

Interestingly, there is also a Brynhild, who receives a golden ring from Sigurd, although that is where her similarities to Wagner's Brünnhilde end.

Wagner, who outlined the importance of alliteration in his *Oper und Drama*, was also influenced by the eddic technique *stabreim*, which is essentially the alliteration of two or more words within one or two lines.

Although the oral tradition of the Poetic Edda was spread across half the globe by the eighth century (due to the various migrations of different Teutonic groups), the stories would surely have died out completely had not a few battered vellum sheets been preserved in an Icelandic farmhouse until their rediscovery in the seventeenth century.

The Prose Edda, sometimes called the Younger Edda, was written by Snorri Sturluson, who lived from approximately 1179 to 1241. The Prose Edda is largely based on the poems of the Poetic Edda, though it tweaks and interprets the myths differently. The Poetic Edda also includes a brief summary of the story of the Volsungs, which, like the Ring Cycle, begins with the events preceding the placement of the curse upon the gold.

(No one really knows exactly what 'edda' means; that's simply what the documents are called.)

**The Volsung Saga**

The Volsunga Saga was written by an anonymous Icelandic author about fifty years after the Prose Edda was written. It expounds upon the Volsung poems found in the Edda. Many of the characters and situations in the Volsunga Saga have direct parallels in the Ring Cycle - for good reason, as the Volsunga Saga was Wagner's main source of content. As such, the similarities between the Ring Cycle and the Volsunga Saga are simply too numerous to list. Although Wagner glosses over a
generation or two, almost all of the important stories and striking images from the Volsung Saga are included in the Ring Cycle - for example, the Volsung line (the Wälsungs, for Wagner) are descended from Odin (Wotan), and, after quite a lot of other things happen, the line is continued through the incest of Sigmund and Signy (Siegmund and Sieglinde) - after, of course, Sigmund demonstrates his superiority (and, naturally, the superiority of the Volsung line) by pulling a sword from a tree. One significant difference here is that Wagner's incest is the result of love, whereas Signy simply wants to breed the strongest Volsung, and she accomplishes her goal through trickery. Regardless, the child, Sinfjotli, wanders the woods with Sigmund for a while, and then (and here is another deviation on Wagner's part) father and son go to the house of Siggeir (Signy's husband), and, at Signy's behest, slay all of her children by Siggeir. They then set Siggeir's hall on fire, and Signy runs into the burning building to perish with her husband.

Obviously Wagner took liberties with chronology and assigned different actions to different characters, but the sheer quantity of similarities in this tiny section of the Volsunga Saga (the above is a summary of the first three stories in the saga; there is a total of forty three) demonstrates the extent to which Wagner drew from this source.

The Nibelungenlied

The Nibelungenlied was written in Austria, in the beginning of the thirteenth century. Although the Nibelungenlied was written at approximately the same time as the Volsunga Saga, in it, the legends of the Volsungs and Nibelungs have been radically changed to represent and respond to the medieval concept of chivalry and the moral values of a Christian society.

The Nibelungenlied begins with Siegfried's arrival at King Gunther's court, after which he wins Brunhild's (Brünnhilde's) hand for Gunther. In exchange, Siegfried gets to marry Gunther's sister, Kriemhild (Gutrune). The brides quarrel, and Hagen murders Siegfried, just as in the Ring Cycle.
However, unlike the Ring Cycle, the Nibelungenlied does not end there; it continues to tell the story of Kriemhild's next marriage and her efforts to avenge Siegfried's murder. Wagner evidently did not care much about this part of the Nibelungenlied, as he decided to make Gutrune a considerably smaller character than she is in the Nibelungenlied.

Though Wagner drew more heavily from the Volsunga Saga for most of the Ring Cycle, certain characters and scenes (like Hagen, and Siegfried's death), clearly rest more heavily on the Nibelungenlied.

**The Grimm Brothers**

The Grimm brothers compiled a collection of common fairy-tales in their "Fairy-Tales for Children and Home," published between 1812 and 1815. Given the popularity of their stories today, it is much easier for a modern audience to recognize the influence of the Grimms' stories on the Ring Cycle. The most obvious parallel is to the story of Sleeping Beauty, in which the prince must cross through a wall of thorns to wake the slumbering princess. Less obvious is the parallel between Loge's manipulation of Alberich and the story of Puss-in-Boots goading a magician into transforming himself into an elephant, then a lion, and finally a mouse, which Puss eats. There are also a number of other, more minor connections, like the golden apples in 'The Golden Bird' and Rheingold, and the dead body raising its arm in both 'The Stubborn Child' and Götterdämmerung.
Annotated Bibliography

- Cooke's excellent analysis of the first two operas in the Ring Cycle is one of the most thorough ever written. His untimely death prevented him from completing what would have been a full examination of the entire Ring Cycle.

- This article gives a concise overview of the most important of Feuerbach's philosophical arguments.

- Based on the transcripts of a his radio program, M. Owen Lee's brief text is an excellent introduction to Wagner's Ring Cycle.

- The introduction of William Morris' acclaimed translation of the Volsunga Saga is written by the
founder and director of Master Classes at the Bayreuth Festival, Robert Gutman. It contains a thorough and exact examination of the influences of various historical texts on Wagner's Ring Cycle, and provides a summary of the the Volsunga Saga.

- Arthur Rackham illustrated the Ring Cycle in 1909.

- Sabor's companion to the text covers all major influences and contains a detailed production history.

- Shaw outlines his interpretation of the Ring Cycle as economic allegory.

- A brief section on the Ring Cycle discusses the challenges associated with the giants and Rhinemaidens.

- This short, simple introduction to the basic myths contained in the Poetic Edda also contains illustrations by Lorenz Frölich.

- This lecture covered Schopenhauer's position on the meaning of life.

- This edited compilation of Wagner's most important prose writings provides great insight into the mind behind the Ring Cycle.

- This translation also has side-by-side German and English texts, an index of the significance of names, and other extremely useful resources. This translation is also the best, in my opinion.

- This article gives a concise overview of the most important of Schopenhauer's philosophical arguments.

- This article gives a concise overview of the most important of Nietzsche's philosophical arguments.

The following are all articles published in the *New York Times* between 1876 and the present.


“THE BAIREUTH FESTIVAL: FIRST DAY OF THE GREAT TRILOGY. WAGNER’S OPERA OF ‘RHEINGOLD’--WONDERFUL SCENIC EFFECTS AND ILLUSIONS--AN AUDIENCE OF EMPERORS AND BRILLIANT LIGHTS IN LITERATURE AND ART--THE APPLAUSE


“THRONGED HOUSE HEARS ‘WALKUERE’: The Annual Matinee Cycle of Uncut ‘Ring’ Resumes at the Metropolitan Opera SCHORR HAS WOTAN ROLE Kirsten Flagstad Appears as Brünnhilde and Lauritz Melchior as Siegmund.” Accessed December 5, 2012. 


