Scene VII: Richard Wagner

With Richard Wagner, we reach a composer who was undoubtedly a genius even from his first opera, *Die Feen,* written when he was only 20 years old. Although *Die Feen* is flawed by virtue of its rambling without good cause, whereas *Rienzi* rambled *with* good cause, the musical vernacular here in 1833, two years before Bellini died and three years before Meyerbeer wrote *Les Huguenots,* is already wholly unique; it could not have been written by any other composer in history.

But here we reach a dichotomy which has never been satisfactorily resolved, and that, of course, was Wagner's rampant anti-Semitism and, more importantly, his weaving anti-Semitic characters and feelings into a few of his operatic works. This, of course, needs to be addressed, and we shall do so.

The first thing one should be aware of is that Wagner was not alone in his feelings. Frydryk Chopin, Ferenc Liszt (who later became his father-in-law) and Robert Schumann were all virulent anti-Semites; Chopin, in fact, was possibly the worst of them all.[1] But *they* didn't write long-winded articles attacking Jews in print as Wagner did, nor did they put their anti-Semitic views into their art works. Wagner did. Yet, as he grew older, his attitudes softened a bit, to the point where he would engage Jewish artists to perform at Bayreuth, including his trusted music director, conductor Hermann Levi. As long as they recognized his genius and served it well, he considered them allies.

And there is another thing…well, maybe two other things. Firstly, it was not Wagner himself who felt that Jews should be eradicated from the face of the earth; that was Adolf Hitler's view, and his alone. But his last wife, Cosima Liszt von Bülow Wagner, was clearly more anti-Semitic than her husband. It was she and her daughters who so ridiculed Levi that he resigned his post at Bayreuth (and, in a gesture of solidarity with the maligned Levi, Felix Weingartner permanently resigned from the Festival as a result). It was her son-in-law, Houston Chamberlain, who also railed publicly and in print against Jews, and it was her daughter-in-law, Winifred Klinworth Wagner, who befriended Hitler, made him a welcome guest at Bayreuth even before his arrest and prison term, and supported his anti-Semitic methods after his election as Chancellor in 1933. Thus there is indeed a connection between Wagner's family members and the Nazi Party, but to be honest, it is doubtful that Wagner himself would have approved of Hitler. Cosima, virulently anti-Semitic though she was, absolutely detested Hitler. She thought him a slimy, lower-class weasel who was trying to worm into the good graces of the Wagner family and wanted nothing to do with him. Siegfried Wagner, her son, was a closeted gay man who had his own problems and kept a low profile in this fight, but he too didn't like Hitler and kept complaining to Winifred about his hanging around their domicile.

On top of this, one must add the fact that Richard Wagner was a leech who attached himself to composers or other people in power in the hopes of catapulting his career, and when they didn't come through for him he attacked them as nastily as he did Jews. He had a two-in-one package in poor Meyerbeer, who wrote strong letters of recommendation for him, not only to get *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer* staged but also in getting his music in print via his own publisher, Schlesinger. When Wagner asked him to also recommend his next opera, *Tannhäuser,*

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[1] Among the many anti-Semitic comments in Chopin's letters is this one published online by the *Jewish Standard* (https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/chopins-antisemitism/): https://jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/chopins-antisemitism/): "I didn't expect such Jewish behavior from Pleyel… If we have to deal with Jews, let it at least be with orthodox ones…. Jews will be Jews and Huns will be Huns—that's the truth of it, but what can one do? I'm forced to deal with them…." He apparently conflated Jews with Huns on a frequent basis.

Meyerbeer wrote yet another strong letter of praise, but this time the letter was lost in the mail and never arrived. Wagner automatically assumed the worst, blamed Meyerbeer for abandoning him out of jealousy for his talent, and turned against him in a nasty way. Wagner made it clear to friends and colleagues that the whining, manipulative Mime in the *Ring* cycle was meant to represent Meyerbeer. But he also created Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger* as a cruel caricature of music critic Eduard Hanslick, who was *not* Jewish, simply because Hanslick criticized his works for having "exciting moments but long half-hours." Putting it plainly, Wagner was just a nasty little man—despite being a musical genius—who had to get his way or go with full guns blazing against those who didn't roll out the red carpet for him.

And let's not forget his other faults, such as racking up enormous debts and then fleeing to other countries where he couldn't be prosecuted to avoid punishment, or cheating on his wives and then bragging about it by making his feelings public in his works (the *Wesendonck Lieder* and *Tristan und Isolde,* written to celebrate his "consecrated" love for Mathilde Wesendonck while he was still married to Minna). Worse yet, he even had the temerity to cheat on Cosima after he married her with yet other women. In fact, his death was precipitated by a knock-down, dragged-out screaming match with Cosima when she found out he was cheating on her, something Cosima never forgave herself for and which was the real reason for her decades-long river of tears after his death.

To sum up, then, Richard Wagner was a transcendent genius of a composer and a revolting human being, while Cosima was just the latter, and it was she and her daughters (and son-in-law and daughter-in-law) who caused all the real damage. Now, on to the music.

Tannhäuser (1845 Dresden version)

Like many composers of his youth, Wagner wrote operas based on fantasy legends (*Die Feen, Der fliegende Holländer*) and historical dramas (*Rienzi*), but as time went on he became drawn more and more to Teutonic and Norse sagas for his subjects. *Tannhäuser* was the first such, actually combining two or more different legends, in this case Tannhäuser as the mythological German Minnesänger and poet and the tale of the Wartburg Song Contest. As to a certain degree in *Parsifal*, it centers around a struggle between sacred and profane love, opening with Tannhäuser lolling around the Venusberg with Venus herself, but wanting to leave all that and return to the real world—which he does (much to the dismay of Venus)—where he meets up with Wolfram and the gang of Minnesingers, falls in love with the lovely Elisabeth, but ends up shocking the Minnesingers at the songfest by singing of his love for Venus and eventually heads off to Rome for redemption.

Unlike other Wagner operas (or Music Dramas, as he insisted on calling them), *Tannhäuser* exists in two rather different versions, the one he originally premiered in Dresden in 1845 and the one he rewrote for Paris in 1861. (There is also an 1875 Vienna version, but except for retranslating the libretto from French back into German, the only real innovation here was linking the end of the overture to the beginning of the Bacchanale, and this is the way the music is almost always performed as part of the Paris version.) In the original Dresden version, Venus was a soprano and not a mezzo-soprano; there was a solo for Walther in Act II, and the orchestral introduction to Act III was longer. In the finale, Venus did not appear on stage as she does in the Paris version. Some of these things actually work better for the opera, but 99% of modern performances are of the Paris score, albeit sometimes with a few items from the Dresden original slipped in. We shall come to the Paris revision anon, but right now our attention is focused on the Dresden original.

Except for the Bacchanale, which is barely five minutes long in the original, the music for the Venusberg scene is the same except for two things. The pitch is higher due to its being sung

by a soprano (and higher yet at Bayreuth performances through the 1960s, where the pitch used was A=447, not A=440 as we are locked into today), and the underlying harmonies are somewhat plainer and less exotic than in his post-*Tristan* revision. Again, this is not necessarily a defect; the rest of the opera is very much in line, harmonically, with *Der flilegende Holländer.* The thrilling vocal ensemble which concludes Act II is so much in line with early Wagner that one would have thought he might even have deleted or changed this in 1861 in order not to make the opera sound too "early" in style.

In fact, as I went through the opera, Dresden-style, I felt that it was a more unified piece of musical drama than the revised version, simply *because* there was no dichotomy of musical style. I'm sure that some readers will disagree with me…after all, since Wagner was a genius and he revised the work to make it more harmonically sophisticated, isn't that better? But we are not here to judge musical superiority, only dramatic appropriateness, and there is nothing I heard in the Dresden version of the opera that was out of line of his dramatic intentions—except where the musical style was simply at an earlier stage of development, such as in the Tannhäuser-Elisabeth duet following "Dich, teure Halle." A few portions of this duet resemble the more sophisticated duets to come, as in *Lohengrin,* but much of it sounds like the Erik-Senta duet. (The latter portion of this duet is entirely different in the Paris version.) A good analogy, I think, is Stravinsky's opera, *The Nightingale.* He wrote the first half of the opera in 1908, around the time that he composed *Fireworks,* even before *The Firebird,* but didn't complete it until 1914, after he had finished *The Rite of Spring,* and the two entirely different musical styles are apparent—and don't really mesh. The revised *Tannhäuser* isn't quite as bad as that, but it does sound like a pastiche, which it is, and not a "pure" work like the earlier version. I also believe that we *have* to hear and appreciate the original *Tannhäuser* in its own time in order to understand where he went next in *Lohengrin.*

The essential musical pace of *Tannhäuser* is quick. The music does not float dreamily over the heads of the audience as in most of *Lohengrin,* the second and third acts of *Tristan,* most of *Parsifal* and many sections of the *Ring* (particularly *Siegfried*), and in this respect having the original score unadulterated by any of the Paris revisions suits this mood. Dragging out tempi in a performance of *Tannhäuser* actually kills the drama, because the more rapid pace is dramatic in context.

The later Wagner, of course, disagreed with me, which is why he revised it twice and why he purportedly said to Cosima, shortly before his death, "I still owe the world *Tannhäuser,*" but that's only to be expected of a composer who had just finished *Parsifal.* Compared to where Verdi, Meyerbeer and even Berlioz were in 1845, *t*he original *Tannhäuser* sounds like it came from another planet. It's an advance over *Holländer* due to its longer, more continuous scenes (even though some of them close with final chords) and a much lower intrusion of set pieces like the sailors' chorus in *Holländer,* which I've always felt not only stopped the action but went on too long. We certainly do get some orchestral pageantry music in the second act of the 1845 *Tannhäuser* (to which the chorus is added) that has to morph a bit before we resume a dramatic pace, but there's another factor to be taken into account: Wagner was a master of stage pacing, and knew that to make any opera interesting (especially in these early years) you had to entertain the audience with something visual between monologues and duets. Eventually, once he got Bayreuth to play in, he pretty much said "The hell with that" and did as he pleased, but in 1845 he still had to mollify the masses, and that's the way he did it.

I also like the longer orchestral prelude to the third act; it sets a tone entirely different from the bustling, busier first two acts. I do have a dramatic quibble, however. If Wolfram could come up with something as wonderful as "O du mein holder" in this act, when it doesn't matter, why couldn't he have come up with something better than he did during the song contest? But the en-

tire first half of this act seems to "float" in a manner similar to *Lohengrin,* including the pilgrim's chorus and Elisabeth's aria. There's a little motif played by the high winds that he later re-used in *Tristan* but also, later on, low string figures that look back to *Holländer*—yet he makes them work in this new context. Another resemblance to *Holländer* is Elisabeth's desire to "save" Tannhäuser the way Senta tried to "save" the Dutchman…and both fail. Tannhäuser's "Rome narrative" is considered by some to be a problem scene, since it is not quite dramatic declamation and not quite an aria to be simply sung, but a dramatically imaginative tenor can certainly put it over in such a way that it becomes a highlight. Thus despite Wagner's misgivings, he did gift the world with a masterpiece.

Tracking down a great performance of the Dresden original, however, is not easy. There is only one studio recording that is pure Dresden, conducted well by Bernard Haitink, yet despite the presence in the cast of the excellent tenor Siegfried Jerusalem, he sings Walther and not the title role. That was given to some thing called Klaus König, a strained, beefy-sounding tenor whose singing had neither ease of delivery nor interpretive nuance to compensate for this. As a result, my choice is for the 1962 Bayreuth performance with Wolfgang Windgassen in the title role, a young Grace Bumbry (here singing in the soprano register) as Venus, an even younger Anja Silja as Elisabeth, Eberhard Wächter as Wolfram and Josef Greindl as the Landgraf, conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch, even though it includes the Paris "Bacchanale" which must be replaced to make it authentically Dresden. (Use the Haitink recording from the overture through the very first line of Venus' entrance, and you'll have the correct music.) And take my word, folks: a more exciting commercial issue of *Tannhäuser* simply does not exist, in either version.

Tannhäuser (1861 Paris version)

Although Wagner did indeed made some substantial revisions to *Tannhäuser* in 1861. except for the first scene they were not nearly as substantial as Verdi's revisions of *Macbeth* and *Simon Boccanegra.* The more chromatic, Tristan-influenced music grafted on for the Paris and Vienna productions reflected his more mature style, and although it is something of a foreign element amidst the majority of the music in his earlier style, it gives an extraordinarily exotic feeling to the entire Venusberg scene. The musical language of the Wartburg song contest is essentially the same, but Wagner added dazzling contrasts between those straightlaced harmonies and the new version of the Venusberg. He strengthens his argument, rather than undercutting it.

Part of this change, however, was precipitated by the Paris Opéra insisting on a ballet. This was done, of course, to please the French and their fanatic love of ballets in operas, but Wagner double-crossed them by inserting his ballet immediately after the overture, when about a third of them hadn't even arrived at the theater yet, instead of in the second or third acts where they expected it. He also double-crossed them by making his ballet an erotic orgy depicting the carnal goings-on in the Venusberg rather than a cute little bouncy thing with pretty ballerinas in their tutus toe-dancing around the stage. This, plus the fact that the music was continuous, not allowing them to break out in applause at the end of every aria (and in fact there were only two set arias in the entire opera, Elisabeth's "Dich, teure hälle" and Wolfram's "O du mein holder Abendstern"), made *Tannhäuser* a flop at the Paris Opéra—at least, among the audiences. Hector Berlioz admired it tremendously, as did Charles Gounod, who commented, "May God grant *me* such a 'failure' as this!" Yet oddly, the opening night audience liked Act I; the whistling and catcalls began in Act II. By the end of the third act, the music was almost drowned out by the audience noise.

I noted a few of the smaller changes in my description of the Dresden version and we should not forget that the linking of the overture into the Bacchanale was NOT done for Paris, but for Vienna in 1875, but is so much preferred to his original concept that it is often done in

recordings of the Dresden version (such as the Sawallisch) and always done in recordings of the Paris version. Thus except for Act I, Scene 1 and some real musical changes which I noted in the Wartburg scene, plus the shortening of the Act III prelude, there isn't that much more to discuss.

It is exceedingly rare that nearly every music critic on the face of the earth agrees on a single recording of *any* opera, but such is the case for the Paris *Tannhäuser.* Ninety-nine out of 100 reviewers, myself included, opt for the early 1970s recording with René Kollo (Tannhäuser), Christa Ludwig (Venus), Hans Sotin (Landgraf Herman), Helga Dernesch (Elisabeth) and Victor Braun (Wolfram), conducted by Georg Solti. Perfection is perfection, and this is clearly it.

Lohengrin (1848)

For *Lohengrin,* Wagner reached far back to a mediaeval legend, *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach and its sequel *Lohengrin,* the latter of which was inspired by the legend of *Garin le Loherain.* King Ludwig II of Bavaria, the "mad king" who supported Wagner and eventually gave him Bayreuth, was so smitten by it that he renamed his abode the Neuschwanstein Castle after the opera's main character. For Wagner, it was a rare instance of his putting the cart before the horse, since he didn't write *Parsifal,* the "prequel," until 30 years later, and although there are some stylistic elements in common between the two operas, there are also many differences, the most obvious of which is that *Lohenrgin* is very "tuneful" in its own way while *Parsifal,* as we will see, conspicuously avoids tunes at every turn.

Perhaps the biggest innovation in this score was Wagner's use of divided strings, not only in the overture but also throughout the opera. Verdi was to borrow this technique for his preludes to Acts I and III of *La Traviata,* but for the most part other composers stayed away from this approach. By "divided strings," what I mean is that Wagner separated the first and second violins and seated them on opposite sides of the orchestra, rather than together as was the norm before this, and although they are not playing music that is very different from each other, the aural effect on listeners in the opera house, and on stereo recordings of the opera, creates a "halo" of sound that is an otherworldly effect. It was probably the most radical new approach to orchestral writing in an opera since Spontini's "wall of sound" in the second act of *La Vestale,* where the resonance of his orchestral writing practically bounced off the walls.

Although this is merely a breakthrough in aural experimentation, not a dramatic effect, this sound-world so permeates the opera that in and of itself it *becomes* dramatic. For the first time, opera audiences were aurally lifted out of the everyday world and put in a space where the very concept of sound was altered. In my view, this innovation was not only unique and in its own way dramatic, but also one-of-a-kind. There were to be further innovations in operas during the 20th century, but none quite as unique as this.

At the same time, however, *Lohengrin* was the last of his music dramas to be based to some extent on French Grand Opéra and stay rooted in conventional tonality. This is, of course, not a bad thing, just different from where he went after this opera. In order to devote himself completely to the task of writing it, Wagner shirked his duties as Kapellmeister of the Royal Dresden Court and lived a life of leisure. The first drafts were written in 1846; in September of that year, Wagner finished the draft of Act III—as in the case of *Der Ring des Nibelungen,* he wrote the text forwards but the music backwards—and then began fleshing out the orchestration.

The plot, as most opera lovers know, revolves around King Henry the Fowler in Brabant, where he has assembled various Teutonic tribes to remove the invading Hungarians as well as to resolve the mystery surrounding the disappearance of the child-Duke Gottfried. The Duke's guardian, Count Friedrich von Telramund, claims that the Duke's older sister, Elsa, murdered her brother to become Duchess. Telramund asks Henry to punish Elsa and make him the new Duke of Brabant.

But then, out of nowhere, help arrives in the form of a knight in shining armor riding a boat drawn by swans. He will not give his name, but professes to be there to defend Elsa's honor. He asks her to place her life in his hands, but also to honor him by becoming his wife. She agrees, the knight defeats Telramund, and all seems well…but unfortunately we have not considered Ortrud, Telramund's wife, a dark, sinister character who has ties to dark forces. Prior to the wedding of Elsa and the unknown knight, Ortrud prods her to ask him his name on their wedding night, suspecting that this will end their relationship and thus make Elsa vulnerable again. This is indeed what happens; the knight rebukes Elsa for insisting on his name, but before he can answer Telramund and his men break in. The knight kills Telramund, then asks Elsa to follow him to the King, to whom he will reveal his secrets. That's when we discover than his name is Lohengrin, but in a sense this is anti-climactic since that is the name of the opera. (It might have been more of a surprise if he said his name was Rumpelstiltskin.) As he bids Elsa farewell, he tells her that if she had kept her promise not to ask his name she could have recovered her kid brother—but it happens anyway due to a plot twist. Ortrud enters and reveals that the swan pulling the boat is Gottfried, who she had cursed and turned into a swan. The people demand that Ortrud be arrested for practicing witchcraft, Lohengrin prays and turns the swan back into Gottfried, a dove descends to take the swan's place and lead Lohengrin's boat had to Happy Land.

Lohengrin is thus the first of Wagner's operas to turn a one-hour plot into three hours and 40 minutes worth of music, which makes the opera proceed at a pace that feels like "real time." This in itself was another innovation; even Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* had telescoped events more than this; but the music of *Lohengrin* is so good and consistently interesting that most audiences don't care. As for the dramatic content, I would contend that it is there—not just the false accusation of Elsa and the machinations of Telramund, a sort of junior league Macbeth (and Ortrud, a junior league Lady Macbeth), but in the larger question of whether one *should* put blind trust in a stranger just because he appears to be just and good. Why shouldn't Elsa, at least, know his name as long as she would swear to keep it secret? Would any woman marry a man whose name she was forbidden to know? Of course, this is Middle Ages malarkey and not a drama of the era in which the opera was premiered, but to my mind this is the essential dramatic crux of the plot.

Strangely enough, too, a technical description of what Wagner did with the music almost defeats the musico-dramatic impression it makes on listeners. Broken down to essentials, he maintained as much as possible this silken, other-worldly sound, with occasional moments of faster, louder, more dramatic music as contrast, to create this completely new operatic world. And as a matter of fact, if one examines the score it seems to be somewhat repetitive music in primarily a single mood, but except for certain declamations—mostly by King Henry and his Herald—the music is tuneful and lyrical but never cheap or tawdry. Lohengrin's music, in fact, is an expanded, more modern version of the model that Wagner used for Rienzi's music. Elsa's music almost continually floats like a dream of its own in the upper-middle range of her voice, a very pretty effect that nonetheless does not strain her by keeping her in the upper tessitura as Verdi did with his sopranos. Most of the vocal writing is in the nature of what, for lack of a better term, I would call "aria-recitative." Even the duets sound like snippets from lyric arias, yet Wagner managed to keep everything flowing and blending constantly into and out of each phrase in a continuously moving flow that carried the drama but always kept it light and lyrical. How, for instance, can one describe the Elsa-Ortrud duet in Act II without intruding on the superb structure that Wagner created? It moves forward, it is lyrical, and it carries drama within each phrase, all at the same time, and the later choral interjections heighten the drama rather than intruding on it. The final scene(s) of the second act are clearly some of the most dramatic music Wagner ever wrote; the drama virtually explodes from the stage. *Lohengrin* was, as I alluded earlier, a unique balancing act, and fortunately one that he did not try to repeat in future operas, al-

though it clearly *could* have been used in *Parsifal.* Undoubtedly, the single most dramatic scene in the entire opera is Ortrud's outburst, "Entweihte Götter." This is four minutes of pure, black evil erupting out of her, and Wagner was up to the challenge.

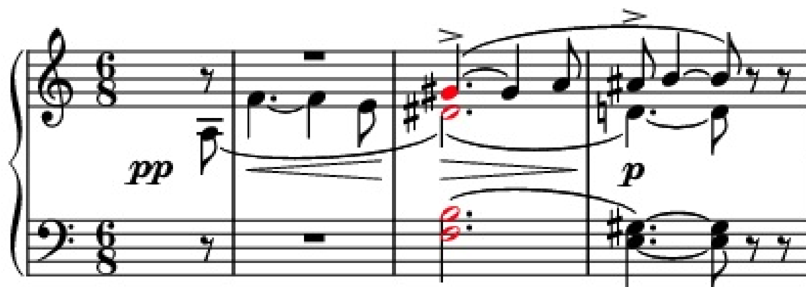
The last act has the most complex structure, opening with the fast, exciting prelude which is the polar opposite of the one in Act I: all brass and high strings with an insistent rhythm. This morphs into the choral passage that leads into the famous "Wedding March." After the wedding we return to more *Lohengrin*-like music for the bridal chamber scene, where Elsa asks the forbidden question of her new husband's name. Wagner deftly shifts musical gears in this last act between his excitable and "floating" music, and the work ends with a triumphant major chord.

Although the sound is in mono and not ideal mono, the most dramatic performance of this opera is the one with Wolfgang Windgassen (Lohengrin), Eleanor Steber (Elsa), Hermann Uhde (Telramund), Astrid Varnay (Ortrud) and Josef Greindl (Heinrich) conducted by Joseph Keilberth. No other recorded performance I've ever heard comes close to this. In terms of better sound and a fairly dramatic performance, however, you may prefer the one with Sándor Kónya (Lohenrgin), Elisabeth Grümmer (Elsa), Ernest Blanc (Telramund), Rita Gorr (Ortrud) and Franz Crass (Heinrich), conducted by Lovro von Matačic. The only really outstanding stereo recording is the one with Siegfried Jerusalem (Lohengrin), Cheryl Studer (Elsa), Hartmut Welker (Telramund), Waltraud Meier (Ortrud) and Kurt Moll (Heinrich), conducted by Claudio Abbado.

Tristan und Isolde (1857-59)

As in the case of Hector Berlioz, Wagner reached his creative peak in the late 1850s with this music drama. The difference, of course, was that he was 10 years younger than Berlioz and thus had longer to live and fulfill this astonishing musical promise. Yet as in the case of *Lohengrin,* the premiere of which was delayed due to Wagner's participation in the Dresden revolts and his having to flee, the premiere of *Tristan* was delayed several years due to the mess he had made of his personal life. Part of it, of course, stemmed from his love affair with Mathilde Wesendonck, yet ironically, he was able to complete the opera in peace by having Mathilde and her husband Otto take a vacation in Italy while his wife Minna went to a medicinal spa for her heart condition, but part of it, in this case, is that the opera was considered so musically radical that no one wanted to stage it. It should also be noted that, in addition to his affair with Mathilde, the opera was also inspired by Schopenhauer's philosophy of the inevitability of fate.

One of the sticking points regarding the music was Wagner's introduction of harmonic dissonance of a sort that had never been used in Western music before. Although this primarily revolved around the "Tristan chord," made up of the notes F, B, D# and G#, an augmented fourth, sixth and ninth above the bass note (see below), there are numerous instances in the opera where Wagner used similar but different dissonances.



The "Tristan chord" (*source: Wikipedia*)

Thus the premiere did not take place until 1865. At various times Wagner thought it would

be staged in Dresden, Weimar and Prague, but all failed. In Vienna, after more than 70 rehearsals between 1862 and 1864, it was dropped in that city as well. This gave *Tristan* the reputation as an unperformable opera, but here, for the first time, "mad" king Ludwig II of Bavaria, an avid devotee of the composer, stepped in, gave Wagner a generous stipend, and finally got the opera performed in Munich under the baton of Hans von Bülow—despite the fact that, by *that* time, Wagner was having an affair with *his* wife, Ferenc Liszt's daughter Cosima. The composer was just full of these kinds of shenanigans throughout his career.

Although the opera received mixed reviews, it was not so much offensive to audiences as just baffling, but more bad luck dogged the composer. The tenor Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, who created the title role, sang only four performances before he suddenly died. This led to widespread rumors that the role "killed" tenors. After Wagner's death, further rumors were circulated that it killed conductors as well, since both Felix Mottl and Joseph Keilberth died almost immediately after conducting the opera. Although all of this is just superstitious nonsense—von Carolsfeld actually died of pneumonia from lying exposed on the very drafty Munich stage after his death scene—the role of Tristan in its entirely is indeed too long for most tenors to sing. As a result, it is the only Wagner opera which is always somewhat abridged in the second act love duet in performances and recordings. The only fully complete performance I've ever heard was a Metropolitan Opera telecast from 1999 (later released on DVD) with soprano Jane Eaglen and tenor Ben Heppner, conducted by James Levine, and as far as I can ascertain, Eaglen and Heppner only sang this complete version six times in performance before abandoning it.

One can hear much of Wagner's harmonic innovations in the agitated Isolde-Brangäne duet in the first act, where the continually shifting harmonies, frequently chromatic, almost completely undermine the feeling of a tonal center. Nor is this just problematic for the orchestra; because the vocal line stays in tonality while the orchestra constantly moves away from it. Thus singing this opera is inherently dramatic not only by virtue of Wagner's astonishing harmonic audacity but also by frequently pitting the orchestra against an equally dramatic vocal line, which is set in a semi-parlando style. The young sailor's vocal solo is sung for the most part unaccompanied, but here Wagner shifts the tonality within this music. Putting it mildly, *Tristan und Isolde* demands not only the greatest of voices in nearly all of the roles but singers who have near-perfect pitch and can thus "hear" their music in their heads without having the orchestra to guide them. In the 20th and 21st centuries, it can still be a challenge in this respect, but fortunately familiarity breeds confidence—that, plus the fact that the further on you go in history, singers have better musical ear training and score literacy.

Although it is true that, once in a while, Wagner gives the singers a break and returns to tonal harmony in order to keep them grounded, the die was cast. Future composers of all races would eventually use *Tristan* as a basis for similar or even more audacious harmonic experiments. In this respect, it isn't surprising to learn that *Tristan und Isolde* was greatly admired by such innovators as Gustav Mahler, Claude Debussy, Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Alban Berg and Benjamin Britten. Thus, if modern audiences want to carp about operas "not sounding like 'real' music" to them, they need to go back and dump on Richard Wagner first.

The difficulties in rehearsing and performing *Tristan* as well as audiences' difficulty in appreciating it first baffled and then shocked Wagner, who had felt that the music was not really all that inaccessible, but only because "I was used to it." Henceforth, he used some of these innovations in his later operas, but never quite to the same extent.

Another interesting feature of *Tristan* is that, although it too is based on a legend, it is free of heavy pro-German ideology or any racist tendency. This, along with its moving if somewhat difficult music, has made it a favorite not only with all audiences but also with many conductors, particularly Jewish conductors, who had problems with some of Wagner's other late works.

Back to the music, however: although much of the first act involves long monologues for Isolde and lesser but also rather long monologues for Brangäne and Tristan, the music keeps on moving rhythmically, which keeps the listener from becoming bored. In fact, the rhythmic vitality, particularly in the first act which is the longest of the three, is so prevalent that the listener doesn't have any time to be bored despite the fact that not much action is going on. Thus the drama is very effectively conveyed through musical means alone. One notices little rhythmic "nudges," for instance, from the cellos behind Isolde as well as chromatically rising violin figures (sometimes followed by falling figures) which keeps both the music and the drama in flux. Although I do not recommend it, one could conceivably give a completely instrumental performance of *Tristan und Isolde* (picking some instruments to play the vocal lines) as a sort of long, continuous concerto and still hold a listener's interest. The same can also be said for portions of Berlioz' *Les Troyens,* but portions only. Wagner's *Tristan* is very much a dramatic symphony of high-pitched emotions and conflicts, and it is interesting to note that, except for the ends of each act, the music is never really resolved. Towards the end of Act I, just before she and Tristan drunk the love potion, there is a very dissonant passage for Isolde that I'm sure many an earlier soprano had trouble singing in pitch.

The second-act duet between Brangäne and Isolde, before Tristan's entrance, is also highly dramatic music, and here Wagner provides a few more "tonal signposts" for the singers to hold on to. (In a few places, he waits until the singers securely hit their notes on pitch before upsetting the tonal applecart.) Tristan's entrance is, as noted above, sexually feverish almost to the point of mania, wholly appropriate considering the effect of the love elixir on him.

One thing that I don't think too many listeners have commented on is how the slower portion of the love duet ("O sink' herneider") are pretty much a continuation of the fast section, simply slowed down, rather than a complete departure from it. This was pure genius on Wagner's part to find a way of doing this without disrupting the musical or the dramatic flow. There's a typically Wagnerian lapse in proportion by making King Marke's "Tatest du wirklich?" at least three times longer than it had to be, but this is the only part of this music drama that *is* out of proportion.

The third act, strangely, sounds very different from the first two. For one thing, it is primarily sad, dolorous music since it follows Tristan's being stabbed by Melot at the end of Act II and being moved to Kurwenal's castle in Brittany. For another, the music is, for a change, much more tonal in character, with only a few small deviations from normal tonality until Isolde's arrival. Since Tristan is wounded, he only sings in spurts, and neither very much nor very loudly. Kurwenal carries most of the more sustained singing, although Tristan's voice does eventually rise to dramatic climaxes, more so when he spots the ship arriving with Isolde on it. At this point, he tears off his bandages. I've always found this a sticking point for me from a dramatic standpoint; it doesn't really make sense. Had he kept the bandages on, he might not have died in Isolde's arms when she arrives, so what was the point? The only thing I can think of is that his mind, clouded by both the effects of the love potion and his fever, led him to do such a thing. (Yet even so, he certainly dies quickly for a guy who has been singing, sometimes quite strenuously, for the preceding 20 minutes.) During some of Tristan's delirium music, the tonality shifts around a bit, but in this case the dramatic situation clearly calls for this. King Marke and Melot arrive. Kurwenal furiously attacks the latter, Marke tries to stop the fight but to no avail; they kill each other. At the end of the opera, Isolde sings her aria describing her vision of Tristan risen again…and then *she* dies, for no apparent reason. Even the shock of losing Tristan certainly wouldn't kill her that quickly, but that's opera for you.

How to interpret the roles? As I mentioned earlier, we today base our perceptions of all these pre-20th century operas through recordings, often of the best singers of our time. Even in-

sofar as German opera singers go, we really have no idea what they sounded like, either vocally or, more importantly, dramatically. They may very well have sung the music *come scritto* and thus satisfied the composer(s); in fact, they probably did; but our shifting concept of what is dramatic in operatic singing must be judged by what has been left to us. Excerpts from *Tristan und Isolde* were recorded as far back as the acoustic era, particularly the soprano's closing narrative known to us as the "Liebestod," but this is probably the easiest portion of the opera to bring off well for the soprano. Bits of the love duet also exist, but this, too is not among the most dramatic parts of the opera (although when the very opening with its hectic tempi and feverish orchestra is also heard, one can judge a little better). The first nearly-complete recording we have to judge by is the 1936 London performance with Kirsten Flagstad (Isolde), Lauritz Melchior (Tristan), Sabine Kalter (Brangäne) and Emanuel List (King Marke), conducted by Fritz Reiner, and what we hear is a somewhat generic interpretation. The top three principals sing excitedly in Act I and sensuously in Act II, and all this is very good. In Act III, Melchior gives a very good account of Tristan's pain and misery; this is much more subtle acting than he was capable of in any other Wagnerian role he sang. Flagstad sings with angry energy in the first act, and a bit of hectic angst in the third, but not really enough to mark hers as a truly dramatic interpretation. Sadly, the great German soprano Frida Leider, whose career largely preceded Flagstad's and who was generally considered to be the superior interpreter, left us very little from *Tristan* and, from the third act, only the "Liebestod." Thus we have to say that we really don't know how pre-Flagstad and Melchior singers interpreted the title roles.

Yet sadly, both of these singers declined in interpretation over the years instead of growing more dramatic and subtle. None of Melchior's Metropolitan Opera *Tristans* come close to what he was able to do in 1936, and Flagstad's studio recording from 1952 shows a gray, matronly voice that has stature but neither drama nor sensuousness.

The two overall best recordings of this opera, for me, are the 1959 performance from The Hague with Martha Mödl (Isolde), Ramón Vinay (Tristan), Ira Malaniuk (Brangäne), Gustav Neidlinger (Kurwenal), Josef Greindl (Marke) and Jos Borelli (Melot), conducted by Ferdinand Leitner (but be sure you get the Opera Depot transfer in correct pitch—most of the others are transferred too low, which makes the lovers' voices sound very unsteady) and the stereo recording with a wonderfully intense-sounding pair of lovers, Jon Vickers and Helge Dernesch, with Christa Ludwig (Brangäne), Walter Berry (Kurwenal) and Karl Ridderbusch (Marke), superbly conducted by Herbert von Karajan (Warner Classics/EMI). Honorable mention goes to the digital recording with Siegfried Jerusalem, Waltraud Meier, Marjana Lipovšek (Brangäne) and Falk Struckmann (Kurwenal), conducted by Daniel Barenboim (Teldec).

Der Ring des Nibelungen:
Das Rheingold (1869)

Having learned his lesson with *Tristan und Isolde,* Wagner made an effort to tone down his dissonances for his next group of operas. Although there are four of them, he described them as a tetralogy, taking his cue from Greek drama where three tragedies are preceded by a "satyr-play." In this configuration, the satyr-play is described as a drama that has the structure and character of drama while adopting a happy atmosphere and a rural background. Wagner evidently felt that *Das Rheingold* met this requirement despite the very serious situation of Alberich stealing the magic gold from the Rhine and forging the magic ring from it, as well as the tense situation that arises when Fasolt and Fafner finish building Valhalla but claim the goddess Freia as their prize. Having seen a performance of *Das Rheingold* on the stage once (as fate would have it, the only *Ring* opera I was able to see in person), I can attest to the fact that at least more than half of the

music is indeed of a light nature, that some of the characters (particularly Loge) are lighthearted and funny, and that it does indeed have a happy ending.

But the *Ring des Nibelungen* is much more than the sum of its parts. In creating it, Wagner used not one or two but several old Norse and Teutonic legends, some of which had conflicting stories. He rewrote much of what he used and reconciled the differences between them the create a unified whole, something that had never been done quite this way either in opera or stage drama before him. He then modified the entire story to create a metaphor for the political and social life of his time. By not using any monarch's or leader's real names, he was able to get away with this. But the real genius of the *Ring* story is that it can be adapted to describe political and social life of *any* time because the basic nature of mankind does not change. The lust for power, greed and control of others exists in all societies at all times. It has become common, due to the unsavory associations of his family with anti-Semitism, to make the *Ring* a metaphor for Nazism, and that works, too, but if you simply transfer the anti-Semitic undertones to other people who, like Alberich and Mime, are greedy and power-mad but are not part of the ruling elite, a type that most certainly exists in our time as it did in his, one can find numerous parallels to the socio-economic structure of any era and any country.

He first made a sketch of the Nibelung myth in 1848, starting with the death of Siegfried, and started writing the music in 1850, but quickly realized that he couldn't portray Siegfried's death without telling of his life, and this in turn led to Siegfried's parents, the gods and Valkyries, and then backwards to the Nibelung Alberich stealing the magic gold from the Rhine. He finished his massive text in the early 1850s and then began slowly writing the music, taking breaks to compose *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger.* Between 1869 and 1876 he finished each of the four operas in order, eventually premiering the whole as a continuous cycle at his new playground, the Bayreuth Festspielhaus.

Probably because Wagner viewed it as the "satyr-play" prelude to his tetralogy, the music of *Das Rheingold* is generally swift in tempo. It is clearly the tightest of the four operas in structure; not a note or phrase is wasted, not a moment overplayed or dragged out too long. Both the music and events move at a very quick pace, despite the extremely slow, atmospheric opening with its sustained low organ chord and the repeated, rising motifs of the French horns, representing the Rhine. By this time, Wagner's writing style had clearly progressed beyond the style of his first *Tannhäuser;* all flows directly from one scene into the next, shifting moods and tonalities as easily as downshifting a car with an automatic transmission. In the opening scene with Alberich and the Rhinemaidens, one notes that Wagner has also found a way to make his parlando-recitative style sound aria-like without using the closed aria form. After their initial singing as a trio, each of the Rhinemaidens interact individually with Alberich, and it's interesting to hear how Wagner made *their* music sound lyrical and song-like while *his* is more strophic, at times descending into an early version of *Sprechstimme* or speech-song. Even if just listening to the music, one can almost hear Alberich slipping around on the rocks as he tries to capture a Rhinemaiden. After a while, one also notes how he brings the orchestra more into play, almost as a character in the drama, by giving it figures to play which match the mood and sometimes even the words being sung. And, of course, this is where he finally perfected the idea of the *leitmotif* or "signature music" for each of his characters or, as in the case of the Rhinemaidens, groups of characters. These were used not only to introduce each character but to suggest them lurking in the background, or just to remind the listener of the origin of a certain thought or idea, as the larger portion of the tetralogy unveils itself.

And there is something else, often overlooked, I think, because so many performances of the *Ring* operas, either separately or as a cycle, revolve around the selling of "big name" singers, and that is that this entire cycle works best when one uses a high-quality but dedicated group of

artists who work together as an ensemble. Granted, many of the characters have individual moments in which to shine—perhaps less so in *Das Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* than in the middle two—but the whole concept of the *Ring* is of a truly unified dramatic entity in which the singers, for all their need to have excellent voices and good characterization, are part of a group effort. Without the feeling of a cast working together, as much as possible like clockwork, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* would fall flat, as it often does nowadays (and sometimes even did so in the past). Yet it would be more than 20 years after the premiere of the *Ring* that other composers began to get the hint and write musical dramas that embraced the same concept.

As we eventually assemble all the various gods and engage in their conversations with each other, we naturally reach a bit more of a *parlando* style, yet even here Wagner manages to keep the music moving forward by means of his rhythmic vitality, and the orchestration becomes not more complex but, rather, simpler and subtler. He pulls back on both texture and volume to allow us to appreciate the text. This was something that Verdi finally arrived at by the time of *Don Carlo,* which we have yet to discuss, also in the 1860s, but even here he did not use it as subtly or in as complex a fashion as Wagner did in *Rheingold.* Naturally, the ear is drawn to the most dramatic and attractive passages in this opera: the descent into Niebelheim, the eventual return to upper earth, the music surrounding Loge's comings and goings, Freia's cries for help when the giants pursue her, the stunning explosion of sound when Donner strikes his hammer to elicit thunder, and of course the finale of the opera when the gods go into their Valhalla, but there are, as I say, so many other outstanding moments that one must constantly pay attention. One that is often underplayed dramatically, I'm sorry to say, is Alberich's curse; most baritones singing the role just sound somewhat complaining and grumpy in this scene when, in fact, it calls for so much more. But again, we are conditioned by what we hear on broadcast and recordings, and that is what we get most of the time.

Those who, like me, prefer their Wagner in at least first-class high fidelity if not stereo will undoubtedly complain about this, but the most dramatic rendering of this opera is the 1937 Metropolitan Opera broadcast with Friedrich Schorr (Wotan), Karin Branzell (Fricka), Eduard Habich (Alberich), Karl Laufkötter (Mime) and René Maison (Loge), conducted by Artur Bodanzky, even though most surviving transfers of this performance include the conductor's foolish decision to split *Rheingold* into two separate acts. (The one issued by Immortal Performances corrects this, but also replaces Doris Doe's Erda with a studio recording by Kerstin Thorborg.) Maison's Loge is entirely different from everyone else's; he gets into the mischievous side of this god, singing the music with a smile in the voice and a rhythmic bounce to the rhythm that no other Loge captures, and Habich, one of the greatest singing actors of his day, inhabits the character of Alberich like no other. His performance of the "curse" scene combines the acting skills of a Chaliapin with the interpretive skills of a great lieder singer.

But since one cannot rely on this as the only recording of *Rheingold,* I also recommend the best stereo recording of this opera, the 1958 Georg Solti performance with Gustav Neidlinger as a pretty good Alberich, Paul Kuen as Mime, George London as Wotan, Kirsten Flagstad as Fricka, Set Svanholm as Loge and Eberhard Wächter as Donner. Believe me, you won't need another stereo recording of this crucial *Ring* opera, although the digital recording conducted by Marek Janowski was also quite good.

Die Walküre **(1870)**

In *Die Walküre,* the official first opera of his tetralogy, Wagner faced a difficult moral decision, and that was how to present the obviously incestuous relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde in a way that would be palatable to morally upright audiences. Of course, he might have either excised them or, at the very least, changed the story a bit to make them somewhat

less closely related to one another (perhaps a different father for Sieglinde), particularly since the original *Volsingsaga* states that their father was Volsung, not Wotan himself disguised as Walse as in the *Ring* libretto. Volsung's wife was Hljod, the daughter of a giant, which would explain Sigmund's (the original spelling) and Siegfried's immense strength. Their daughter's original name in the legend was Signy, not Sieglinde. But Wagner simply had to tie this story in to create a unified story, thus he changed it so that Wotan, disguised as Walse, has sex with an unnamed mortal woman who gives birth to the "Walsung twins" but apparently dumps them off in the woods where they are raised by a she-wolf. Separated as youngsters, Sieglinde is eventually forced to marry a grumpy hunter named Hunding. Siegmund just happens to wander into the vicinity of the home during a terrible thunderstorm, seeks refuge, is taken in by Sieglinde, and somehow or other find out they are each others' long-lost siblings—and fall madly in love.

One of the ways Wagner managed to smooth this over was, as tenor Jon Vickers pointed out, writing the most overwhelmingly beautiful and sensual love duet of his entire post-*Tristan* career for them. The other way he made it palatable was by showing Fricka absolutely outraged by Wotan's protection of them, demanding that they be killed. Eventually, in the course of the opera, Siegmund is indeed killed, although Wotan's Valkyrie daughter Brünnhilde initially disobeys his orders, which is why he is forced to put a sleeping spell on her and isolate her on a rock surrounded by eternal, magic fire at the end of the opera.

Here, we do encounter some "long half hours," or at least long 20-minute stretches, in the Fricka-Wotan and Wotan-Brünnhilde duets. These passages clearly show the need for outstanding vocal actors; without the proper dramatic interpretation (clearly indicated by Wagner in his score with very detailed instructions for how to deliver the lines), much of the drama is lost. In most performances, it's not so much the Wotan or the Fricka who is deficient in this, but rather the Brünnhilde. Because the role is so incredibly difficult just to sing, the majority of sopranos who perform it have enough trouble just getting through it without suffering vocal difficulties, let alone find room for interpretation. As we shall see in the recommendations for recordings, this is and always was the most difficult role in the *Ring* to cast, and the few truly outstanding singing actresses who performed the role in the past, like Frida Leider, did not leave us a complete *Walküre* to treasure.

Even so, *Die Walküre* is the one *Ring* opera often performed as a stand-alone work outside of a full performance of the cycle, and that is because so much of its music is not only tonal but lyrical and/or rhythmically exciting, harking back in several respects to *Tannhäuser.* It also has a strong musical structure, something that cannot be said for the last two operas in the cycle. Yet Wagner builds his lyrical structure up slowly, musical brick by brick; the opening of the first act depicts, orchestrally, the heavy storm outside, and when Siegmund makes his entrance it is to music in which he sounds exhausted and spent, not forcefully belting out high notes to celebrate his finding shelter. The opening exchanges between him and Sieglinde are also more in the nature of strophic yet lyric recitative, the notes and sung phrases spaced in such a way that one needs to pay attention in order to follow the line of the drama. It is not explicitly spelled out for you as in Meyerbeer or Verdi. In this first act, too, leitmotifs are scarce; it is more the sound of hunting horns representing Hunding than anything else.

But Wagner even wrote what you might call a "theme song" for Brünnhilde and her sister-Valkyries, the famed "Ho-yo-to-ho," later expanded at the opening of Act III. This is, of course, an "action" piece, indicating their momentous energy, but it does relate to popular music form in its own way. (Music critic Robert Charles Marsh so detested it that he wished there was a Spike Jones version of the tune to play.) After the initial, exciting scene of Act II, however, the music retreats from the sound barrier for the long conversational duet between Fricka and Wotan. This is one of those "long half hours" that certain critics picked on, but when you break it down, the

music is wholly appropriate for the text, and in fact Wagner put some very specific instructions in the score for how he wanted the words to be delivered, which are not always followed—but then again, neither are the little grace notes or the trill in "Ho-yo-to-ho". This was the one hold-over from the bel canto era that Wagner retained into this late operatic cycle, the occasional use of trills for dramatic purposes, but by the time the *Ring* premiered as a complete entity it was a device that had even died out in Italian operas. One will note that there are no written trills in late Verdi, Faccio, Ponchielli or, of course, the even later "verismo" operas. Part of the reason, particularly in Wagner, was that the kind of voices that could handle these heavy roles normally couldn't trill, so why bother? But it is effective in context when the singer can do it. Anyway, when the Wotan and Fricka give their words the right dramatic accents, their duet is far from boring. Much later on, when Wotan is conversing with Brünnhilde, we hear a snippet of Erda's "Weiche, Wotan, weiche" in the orchestra to remind us of her warning to him. It's also repeated a few minutes later. One also notes how Wagner developed "slow build-ups" to musico-dramatic climaxes in scenes, a short of slow-motion (and very Germanic) use of the "Rossini crescendo."

And this brings us to another topic: how to conduct Wagner, particularly post-*Tannhäuser.* The conductor MUST understand the long line of the music plus the fact that, even if you choose slower tempi, you need to keep an underlying beat, however subtle, moving forward. This was something most of the old-time conductors (Knappertsbusch, Furtwängler, Toscanini, Walter and Keilberth among them) understood very well because they grew up in the tradition, but when you listen to some latter-day conductors, they simply don't know how to do this and still retain the structure of the music. When they slow down, the music sags and loses shape because they either forgot or didn't know how to move the beat forward even at a slow pace, thus when the music picked up in tempo and excitement, what they did sounded artificial and grafted on to the music rather than being an organic unit. Musicians will understand this, but most average listeners and even some music critics don't, thus they praise these defective performances. The late Klaus Tennstedt was one of the few late 20th-century conductors who understood the Wagnerian style, but ironically, he only left us excerpts.

There are suggestions of the Valhalla music in Brünnhilde's conversation with Siegmund, who thinks that his sword (called Walse) will defeat Hunding—but it won't, because Wotan has removed the sword's power. Eventually, however, Brünnhilde defies her father and restores the sword's power; Siegmund starts to defeat Hunding, but Wotan suddenly arrives and breaks the sword, giving Brünnhilde a threat heard by many an unruly child over the centuries: "Just wait 'til your father gets home!" Not everyone is aware that, at the beginning of Act III, the screamin' Valkryies are each supposedly carrying "the body of a dead hero." Who are these heroes, how did they die, and why are they carrying their bodies? This is never explained. But boy howdy, are they yelling about it. I'm sorry to say this, but whether or not you like the music (I find it a lot of fun, actually), this is a superfluous scene that adds little or nothing to the drama. Even so, many conductors, again, do not get the rhythm of the music right for the voices; there are little syncopated figures in their music that is often slopped over. In her conversation with her sister-Valkyries, Brünnhilde sings a phrase that will show up again, much later on, in the cycle. As expected, Brünnhilde catches hell for helping Siegmund when she was specifically told not to, but this is Wagner and not Verdi, so her punishment is neither swift nor quickly executed; rather, Wotan waits until the end of the opera to finally put her into an enchanted sleep on a rock and surround it with magic, eternally burning fire. And, of course, there's a long musical conversation between them that goes on for about 20 minutes.

The best stereo recording of this opera is the 1955 Joseph Keilberth performance with Ramón Vinay (Siegfried), Gré Brouwenstijn (Sieglinde), Josef Greindl (Hunding), Hans Hotter (Wotan), Georgine von Milinkovič (Fricka) and Astrid Varnay (Brünnhilde), but a very fine late-

mono recording is the 1960 Metropolitan Opera broadcast with Jon Vickers (Siegmund), Gladys Kuchta as one of the best Sieglindes ever, Ernst Wiemann (Hunding), Otto Edelmann (Wotan), Irene Dalis (Fricka) and Birgit Nilsson (Brünnhilde), conducted by Erich Leinsdorf.

Siegfried (1876)

Siegfried is clearly the problem child of the *Ring*. Except for some interesting exchanges between Siegfried and Mime (first act) and Siegfried and Brünnhilde (final scene), very little goes on that is theatrical. Most of the opera contains long-winded dialogues, mostly between Wotan, disguised as a Wanderer, and Mime or Alberich. From a dramatic standpoint, I've always wondered why Alberich, who probably knows very well where his brother is, never got involved in trying to get the broken remains of the sword Walse away from him. As a result, *Siegfried* is the one *Ring* opera that is almost never performed separately. (I would say "never," but since I'm only 98% certain of this, I don't want to risk being wrong.) Indeed, even some of the Mime-Siegfried exchanges and, really, all of the Siegfried-Brünnhilde duet, entail little or no stage action. This really was the one opera in the cycle that could have used some heavy editing.

Regarding a correct interpretation Mime, who has much more to sing in this opera than in *Das Rheingold,* opinion is divided. Some insist that he should deliver his lines in a fairly normal tone of voice, as Paul Kuen and Julius Patzak did, while others prefer a more over-the-top, wheedling delivery in order to emphasize his malicious character. The problem is that Wagner, who as I mentioned earlier was very meticulous in giving directions in the score as to how lines should be delivered, clearly did not favor the second method of delivery. None of Mime's music has accents or any indications that the words should be broken up or over-emphasized:[2]

And the music's notation does not change as we go from scene to scene. As examples of what I mean about being specific, note the numerous indications of volume, from *ff* to *p,* with

[2] Source: https://s9.imslp.org/files/imglnks/usimg/f/f8/IMSLP41251-PMLP21259-Wagner_-_Siegfried_(Act_I).pdf

szforzato and *messa di voce* markings, little phrase marks to indicate when notes should be sung in a slightly slurred manner and, in the sixth line of music above, the words, printed above the staff, "Er sinkt tiefer gerück, das Haupt nachdenklich neigend," which translates as "He sinks lower, his head bowing thoughtfully." Even in terms of how the characters were supposed to *move* on stage, Wagner left nothing to chance, which is one reason among many why Regietheater productions of his operas which ignore his instructions are invalid as theater.

The second act opens with orchestral sonorities rather new for Wagner: low brass (the "Wagner tubas" playing a dour, minor-key theme against soft violin tremolos in the upper register with occasional and very soft tympani interjections, followed by trombones playing Alberich's "curse" leitmotif. Alberich is keeping a vigil at the entrance to a cave where Fafner, who has turned himself into a dragon by using the Tarnhelm, is guarding the magic Ring; the Wanderer (Wotan) arrives and, as comedian Anna Russell put it, plays "20 Questions" with him.—another long scene set to sung *parlando.*

The forest scene with Siegfried, though generally slow music, is exquisitely handled by Wagner, setting a mood entirely different from the first. The clarinet plays the woodland theme against rustling strings as Siegfried sings his own semi-parlando lines. The scene between Siegfried and Fafner is rife with fascinating dramatic touches and a very clever balancing act between their two different characters by using contrasting musical styles. The third act opens with rather doom-like music played by the celli and basses, with low trombones and a horn theme that eventually rises up into the trumpet section, introducing the Wanderer yet again, This time he calls on his old buddy Erda, who cannot offer any advice. Eventually, the Wanderer confronts Siegfried himself, who answers him with indolence and heads down the path towards the rock surrounded by magic fire, on which, of course, Brünnhilde is in her magically-induced sleep. The Wanderer blocks his path, but Siegfried mocks his floppy hat and missing eye and breaks his spear—the source of Wotan's power—with one blow from Nothung, his magic sword. Wotan, recognizing that this is his fate, calmly collects the broken pieces of his spear and takes a powder. Siegfried slowly (through lots of solo music) makes his way to the rock, where he lifts the shield off Brünnhilde's chest and, recognizing that she is not a man (he has never seen a woman before this moment), quickly finds out what it means once she awakens. This time, no magic spell is needed for hero and heroine to fall madly in love with each other, and they sing of their bliss (again at some length) before capping off their encounter with high notes.

At this point, it might be instructive to at least try to trace the development of the Heldentenor, a voice category which is often ascribed to Wagner and his operas alone. In a doctoral dissertation written by one James Henry Shea III in 2014,[3] he begins the lineage with Louis-Gilbert Duprez, simply because he was the first to consistently sing high notes from the chest, but contemporary reviews of Dupréz' singing clearly indicate that he often had to strain to be heard over full orchestral passages, even at the start of his career, thus although he was surely the grandfather of the Heldentenor he was not one himself. Shea then jumps from Duprez to Francesco Tamagno, the first Otello, much later in the 19th century, but of course there were others in between. The ill-fated first Tristan, Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld, was clearly one of them, and the fact that his untimely death distressed Wagner greatly suggests that he was very difficult to replace. Of equal importance but much lesser fame was Albert Niemann, Wagner's Paris Tannhäuser and the first Siegmund, who sadly never made recordings although he lived until 1917.[4] Even less well known, but probably of even greater importance, was Georg Unger, who

[3] https://ir.ua.edu/bitstream/handle/123456789/1979/file_1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[4] Niemann was around 80 years old by then, but he could have made a few recordings 16 or 17 years earlier, just to show what his vocal quality was like.

created both Siegfrieds. Originally a theology student, he switched to singing only in his mid-thirties, an incredibly advanced age for that period, making his debut at age 37, thus his voice was well and truly settled before he ever stepped out onto a stage. Two years later, he was recommended to Wagner as Siegfried by conductor Hans Richter, who conducted the premiere performance of the complete *Ring.*

Interestingly, as we shall see, the impact of the Heldentenor voice ranged further than Wagner's music dramas; by the early 20th century, singers who could easily be categorized as "Heldentenors," such as Jean de Reszke, Leo Slezak and Jacques Urlus, also sang Italian and French operatic roles successfully. This suggests that the earlier Heldentenors had much better-trained voices than their successors; they were able to sing a smooth *legato* line, switch their voice production in the upper range from chest to head voice, and even produce exquisitely beautiful high notes in *voix mixte* or "mixed voice," combining the head and chest registers in a way virtually unknown to most of their successors (the Canadian Jon Vickers being a rare exception). Although de Reszke left no commercial recordings, a few of his live performances at the Metropolitan Opera, recorded on cylinders by Lionel Mapleson, reveal him switching easily from ringing top notes to suave and sophisticated head tones that floated over the audience, and in their commercial recordings, Slezak and Urlus also revealed the same ability. (So too did Karl Jörn, an extraordinary Latvian tenor who sang some of the more lyrical Wagner roles in addition to standard Italian and French fare.) In his early years, the famous Danish tenor Lauritz Melchior also showed an ability to sing high notes in *voix mixte* on occasion, but by the late 1930s he had either lost the ability to do so or chose to eliminate this feature from his singing. The last instance I can recall of his doing this was in the 1936 London *Tristan und Isolde* with Kirsten Flagstad.

The best stereo recording of *Siegfried* is, again, from Keilberth's 1955 Bayreuth *Ring,* with Paul Kuen (Mime), Wolfgang Windgassen (Siegfried), Hans Hotter (Wanderer/Wotan), Gustav Neidlinger (Alberich), Josef Greindl (Fafner), and Astrid Varnay (Brünnhilde), and once again, the best historical recording is the 1937 Met performance with Karl Laufkötter as an excellent Mime, Lauritz Melchior (Siegfried), Friedrich Schorr (Wanderer), Eduard Habich as the finest Alberich of all time, Emanuel List (Fafner), Kerstin Thorborg (Erda), and Kirsten Flagstad as Brünnhilde, although at the very end Flagstad forsakes her high C at the end of the duet.

Götterdämmerung (1876)

The very opening of *Götterdämmerung* is a problem that Wagner should have simply omitted, since all the Norn Scene does is recap everything that's happened in the preceding 10 hours of music drama (remember, he wrote this libretto first, not initially planning to write the other three). Not only is the Norn Scene superfluous at this point, but it's boring music and theatrically static. Much better to open with the "Dawn and Rhine Journey" music, which is not only excellent but also – if you play *Götterdämmerung* immediately after *Siegfried*—both musically and dramatically an excellent continuation of the preceding opera. Even though this music is also theatrically static, it is musically interesting and has a tremendous sweep that establishes the duo of Brünnhilde and Sigfried superbly as they apparently flutter up the Rhine towards the Hall of the Gibichungs (interestingly, it's never really explained *how* they travel up the Rhine…did they paddle a boat or do some kind of magic flying bit?) You really kind of feel sorry, as time goes on, for Gutrune and Gunther Gibich, because they seem like pretty nice people on the whole, yet their chief advisor is Gunther's half-brother Hagen, whose mother was a Gibich but whose father was Alberich, who apparently *did* get laid after he lost the Ring and the Tarnhelm. (Don't ask me how; he was still the same old ugly dwarf. Apparently, Gunther and Gutrune's mom got around.)

Hagen wants the Gibiches to secure the best partners in wedlock: Siegfried for Gutrune and Brünnhilde for Gunther. Since they're just kind of average leaders, nothing special, they don't

see a way to do this, but wouldn't you know, Hagen has a magic potion that, if given to Siegfried, will make him forget Brünnhilde and fall in love with the first woman he sees, which will be Gutrune. (I guess he borrowed it from Brangäne.) Although just sort of a local hero, however, Gunther apparently had a good reputation, because Siegfried heard of him in his travels (from who? Fafner? The forest bird? We're never told this) and thus wants to meet him.

As one can see, *Götterdämmerung* has the most holes in its story just as *Siegfried* has the most static music overall. There's just something about this story that doesn't all hang together properly, but when you consider how Wagner mixed and matched his various myths to suit his own purposes it does make a little, if not much, sense within its own strange world. And here, the conversational music is almost all set to medium or fast tempi; as usual for Wagner, each act is continuous, with no spots for the audience to break out in applause, and the music really does present the full character of Hagen, who is sort of a duality. Deep down, he's not as evil as Alberich or Mime, but since he feels an obligation to do as his father commands, he eventually stabs Siegfried in the back with his spear and kills him. By that time, Brünnhilde had washed her hands of him and married Gunther, but once Siegfried is dead she finally realizes that he was manipulated into his actions after discussing the matter with the Rhinemaidens. She also believes that Siegfried's betrayal and death were necessary for her to become an all-knowing and entirely free person. As the new Queen of the Gibichungs, she orders a huge funeral pyre to be built and lit, intending to return the magic ring to the Rhinemaidens after the fire has cleansed it of its curse. Hagen tries vainly to stop this, but they do get their ring back. In some productions, the gigantic collapsing fire is tied into the collapse of Valhalla.

Perhaps because the plot of *Götterdämmerung* is so complex, confused, and at times contradictory, Wagner compensated for this by writing music that is even better in terms of being appealing to the audience without condescending to conventional opera tunes as in the first act of *Die Walküre.* Yes, there are lyric passages for Siegfried and occasionally even Brünnhilde, but they never coalesce into arias. There is also a very dramatic scene between the latter and her sister-Valkrie Waltraute in which she seeks her advice. In several ways, then, Brünnhilde's character is fleshed out, making her much more interesting than she was in the previous two operas, and thanks to his magically-induced deceit, Siegfried, too, is somewhat more interesting as well. Wagner also deftly delineated the characters of Gunther, Gutrune, and the very complicated Hagen in an interesting manner. Although none of this music was used by other composers, Richard Strauss in particular learned a great deal from *Götterdämmerung* in writing his own early operas while retaining his own personal musical style.

Regarding what I have just said about arias, it may seem contradictory to consider the famous long "Immolation Scene" at the end of the opera. Here, moreso than in Wotan's "Magic Fire music" at the end of *Walküre,* Wagner created a fully dramatic scene for solo soprano and orchestra that could be, and sometimes is, performed as a separate entity outside the confines of the complete opera. He built both the music and the dramatic sense with absolute brilliance, finding a way to almost constantly alternate lyrical sections with strong strophic declamation. The soprano singing Brünnhilde really needs the nine-minute break that Siegfried's funeral march (another outstanding piece of dramatic music often performed separately) provides in order to reset herself and get prepared for what is undoubtedly the longest "aria" ever written. Yet at the same time, Wagner was considerate enough of his soprano to not place most of her music in the upper register. Most of what she sings in this long scene lies in the middle of the voice, going up only occasionally until we reach the final section. Here, she ascends into the upper range more often and with great force.

Being the most complex of the three Brünnhildes, the one in *Götterdämmerung* should ideally be sung by a soprano who can interpret the words and the role dramatically in addition to

having the requisite vocal quality and stamina required. This is one reason why most recordings and performances of this opera fail. Happily, the best stereo recording of his opera, the 1955 Bayreuth performance conducted by Keilberth, has an excellent interpretation of Brünnhilde by soprano Astrid Varnay. It also has a great Hagen in Josef Greindl, a very fine Siegfried in Wolfgang Windgassen, as well as Hermann Uhde as Gunther and Gré Brouwenstijn as Gutrune. Don't bother with anyone else's stereo recording.

*   *   *   *

And now that we have traipsed through the entire *Ring,* and discussed the best individual interpreters as well as the best stereo recordings, I'd like to cap off this portion of the book by recommending the absolute best complete *Ring* ever recorded by humankind. This is the one, in mono but very clear and well-focused mono, conducted by the great Wilhelm Furtwängler with a hand-picked cast that is as close to perfection as you will ever get. For all but *Die Walküre,* I am referring to the Radio Italiana tapes from 1953. Furtwängler was not entirely happy with *Die Walküre,* thus when EMI asked him to record his *Ring* commercially, he started with this opera (unfortunately dying later that year) and made some adjustments. He replaced Windgassen's Siegmund with that of Ludwig Suthaus, who also sang both Siegfrieds in the live broadcasts, following Wagner's preference for having one tenor sing both roles. He also replaced Hilde Konetzni's Sieglinde with the much more dramatic Leonie Rysanek, and Elsa Cavelti's Fricka with the great Margarete Klose, and conducted the entire opera at a somewhat faster clip (the 1954 recording is 11 minutes shorter than its 1953 counterpart). Here is the complete composite cast of this musical and dramatic masterpiece:

Sena Jurinac, *soprano* (Woglinde/Third Norn/Gutrune)
Magda Gabory, *soprano* (Wellgunde)
Hilde Rössl-Majdan, *mezzo* (Flosshilde/2nd Norn)
Gustav Neidlinger, *baritone* (Alberich DR)
Ferdinand Frantz, *bass-baritone* (Wotan)
Ira Malaniuk, *mezzo* (Fricka DR)
Elisabeth Grümmer, *soprano* (Freia)
Gottlob Frick, *bass* (Fasolt/Hunding)
Josef Greindl, *bass* (Fafner/Hagen)
Alfred Poell, *baritone* (Donner/Gunther)
Lorenz Fehrenberger, *tenor* (Froh)
Wolfgang Windgassen, *tenor* (Loge)
Julius Patzak, *tenor* (Mime)
Ruth Siewert, *alto* (Erda DR/Schwertleite)
Ludwig Suthaus, *tenor* (Siegmund/Siegfried)
Leonie Rysanek, *soprano* (Sieglinde)
Martha Mödl, *soprano* (Brünnhilde)
Margarete Klose, *mezzo* (Fricka DW/Erda S/First Norn/Waltraute G)
Erika Köth, *soprano* (Helmwige)
Hertha Töpper, *mezzo* (Siegrune)
Gerda Scheyrer, *soprano* (Gerhilde)
Judith Hellwig, *soprano* (Ortlinde)
Dagmar Schmedes, *mezzo* (Waltraute DW)
Johanna Blatter, *mezzo* (Grimgerde)

Dagmar Hermann, *mezzo* (Rossweisse)
Alois Pernerstorfer, *bar* (Alberich S & G)
Rita Streich, *soprano* (Waldvögel)
Wilhelm Furtwängler, *conductor*
RAI Rome Symphony Orchestra & Chorus
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

Parsifal (1882)

Parsifal is both Wagner's most problematic and most influential opera: problematic because of its almost continual, dirge-like music, which took me nearly a half-century to understand and appreciate, with extremely static stage action in addition to its confusing plot, yet influential *because* its floating, dirge-like music had a strong influence on the later French impressionist school of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Interestingly, Wagner himself did not call *Parsifal* a music drama or an opera, but rather "A festival play for the consecration of the stage." Based on the German epic poem *Parzival* by the Minnesänger Wolfram von Escehnbach, the same Wolfram of *Tannhäuser,* it recounts the story of King Arthur's knight Percival and his quest for the Holy Grail.

Although more than four hours long, not much really happens in this work. The Knights of the Holy Grail, celibate monks all, are led by Amfortas who has a stab wound in his side that will not heal. This is because he had a magic spear (aren't all spears magic in Wagner-land?) that was taken away from him by the evil wizard Klingsor (don't all Wagner operas have some evil magic character or another?) who stabbed him with it and still has said spear in his possession. Parsifal, who doesn't even know his name or his background—we eventually find out that this is *also* due to a spell being placed on him—is taken to head monk Gurnemanz by the Grail Knights for killing a swan with his bow and arrow. He eventually repents and is set free. In the meantime, a mysterious "wild woman" named Kundry shows up with an herbal balm she has run across to try to cure Amfortas' wound, but it doesn't work.

Act II has Parsifal in the magic garden of Klingsor, first seduced by his conjured-up flower maidens and then by Kundry, who is morphed into a beautiful young woman. She reveals his past and family history to him. Klingsor tries to kill him by throwing the magic spear, but Parsifal catches it in mid-air and thus breaks Klingsor's spell, turning his magic garden back into rubble or whatever it really was. In Act III, Parsifal turns up once again at the Grail Knights' domain, years later, having not been able to find it again for some time. He heals Amfortas' wound with a touch of the magic spear. For reasons not completely explained, however, Amfortas is demoted and Parsifal made leader of the Grail Knights. The End…except that, inexplicably, this now-celibate Grail Knight mates with someone (Kundry? we're never told) after the show is over and produces a son named Lohengrin.

Reaction to *Parsifal* by lay audiences, professional musicians and critics was decidedly mixed. Many saw it, as the 20th century critic B.H. Haggin did, as a diminution of Wagner's powers as well as insulting to any truly devout Christian, but the larger number were astounded by the spell the music cast over them in a live performance. Ironically, it was Wagner's longtime adversary, Eduard Hanslick, who offered considerable praise for the festival play despite adding a note of adverse criticism. "The third act may be counted the most unified and the most atmospheric," he wrote, though "It is not the richest musically." Discussing Wagner's creative powers, he added that "It would be foolishness to declare that Wagner's fantasy, and specifically his musical invention, has retained the freshness and facility of yore," but that "For a man of his

age and his method they are astounding."[5] And that is how I hear *Parsifal* as well. It rambles much more than I would like, but considering what he was aiming for and how well he achieved it, one cannot help but admire great portions of it. In many ways, its influence on others and the ways in which they brought them to fruition are *Parsifal's* greatest legacy.

The clearest analysis of what *Parsifal* is about comes from the website of Derrick Everett (https://www.monsalvat.no/story5.htm) who did his own research into what *Wagner* wrote and thought about when writing it. He came to realize that *Parsifal* was based on the philosophy of Arnold Schopenhauer, and Schopenhauer was as much if not more a devotee of Buddhism than Christianity, particularly the Buddhist concept of compassion. Thus what many commentators (too many, in Everett's opinion) see as a distortion of Christianity is actually a mixture of the two. Parsifal is the "holy fool" who begins his self-realization when he realizes how bad it was for him to kill the swan—the true turning-point in the story—but he also needed to wander a year or two before returning to Montsalvat in order to gain full enlightenment. Thus he becomes not only a Christian saint but also a Buddhist saint. Kundry not only represents, on one level, the human predicament in relation to what Buddhists call *saṃsarā,* the cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth, but is *also* Parsifal's karmic alter ego. In the first act she is constantly busy but confused: her not being able to find a balm for Amfortas' wound is symbolic of her confusion; but in the end she, too becomes enlightened, thus her transformation from loud and busy in the first two acts to nearly silent in the third, where the only word she sings is "Serve." Klingsor, of course, is pure evil, a being who will never find peace because he has no idea of his basic nature. (It is often forgotten that he was originally one of the Grail knights but was expelled because he was evil, which is when he became a sorcerer.) So when I say that "nothing much happens" in *Parsifal,* I mean this only from a *dramatic* standpoint, not a philosophical one. In essence, *Parsifal* was the first fully *psychological* opera, decades before Freud or Jung, and in this sense, too, it was a pivotal and influential work. It is also multi-layered and must be viewed from several angles at once.

Most critics deem Hans Knappertsbusch's 1962 recording the best because it is the only one he made in stereo, but he left two better performances in mono. The first, from 1958, has many of the same singers as in 1962 but with the superior singing and interpretations of Martha Mödl as Kundry (despite her Isoldes and Brünnhildes, her signature role at Bayreuth) and Ramón Vinay in the title role, along with George London as Amfortas. The second, and the one I recommend because, although it is in mono, the sound quality is superior to the 1958 recording and the cast is equally strong, is the 1964 performance (Knappertsbusch's last of this opera) with Jon Vickers (Parsifal), Barbro Ericson as a surprisingly good Kundry, Hans Hotter (Gurnemanz), Gustav Neidlinger (Klingsor) and the superb Thomas Stewart as Amfortas.

The best stereo recording is the one with Kurt Moll (Gurnemanz), Bernd Weikl (Amfortas), Yvonne Minton (Kundry), James King (Parsifal) and Franz Mazura (Klingsor) with the Bavarian Radio Chorus and Orchestra conducted by Rafael Kubelik—a true masterpiece.

Now that we're finished with Wagner, we move back in time to consider several of the operas being written by others during this same time.

[5] Quoted by Robert Hartford in *Bayreuth: The Early Years* (Victor Gollanz, 1980), p. 126f.