

Reforging The ring: origins and new beginnings

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Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 153, No. 1918 (SPRING 2012), pp. 19-36

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41442080>

Accessed: 07-11-2017 23:11 UTC

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ARNOLD WHITTALL

Reforging *The ring*: origins and new beginnings

WITH A COMPOSER as endlessly written about as Wagner, re-inventing the wheel – and recycling the clichés – should go naturally with the writer’s territory. There’s a good example in a recent article about *Lohengrin* that eventually gets round to asking what the authors rightly regard as ‘an old question: are states of mind amenable to musical representation? Can certainty and doubt, honesty and duplicity, mental anguish, all receive specific and recognizable musical gestures?’ Fortunately, the authors promptly answer in the affirmative: ‘music [...] reflects and explicates a character’s choices and psychological condition, bringing to the foreground what is contemplated and left unsaid. Thus it allows us to perceive states of mind’.¹

Stating the obvious as if newly minted is a perfectly reasonable strategy if there is sufficient novelty in the context and sufficient authority in the supporting narrative. These conditions are generally well met by Chrissochoidis & Huck. Yet such qualities are even more important when the subject under discussion is part or all of the *Ring* cycle: and any attempt to say something new about ‘the coherence of Wagner’s attempt at a *Gesamtkunstwerk*’² is particularly bold when offered to readers suspecting that such attempts invariably deliver less than they promise.

One way of solving the problem is to open up the context to pre- or post-Wagnerian materials. But even before he moves on from Wagner to Schreker, Adrian Daub is able to provide a notably thoughtful statement about one of *The ring*’s central and most satisfyingly multivalent images: the way word-play and note-play converge around Loge, ‘luge’, ‘lohe’, and the ‘redness’ of fire and gold; also, though Daub doesn’t mention it, blood.

Two particular elements in Daub’s interpretation merit emphasis here, and fit neatly into the foundations for this study of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle. Starting from the well-rehearsed observation that Loge disappears as a ‘person’ from the tetralogy after the first evening, Daub suggests that ‘Loge’s dissipation into the purely motivic aspect of the musical drama and his complete disappearance from the embodied drama [*failing the intervention of imaginative stage directors*] constitutes a promotion rather than a demotion. [...] Loge’s disappearance [...] leads to a motivic proliferation along metaphoric axes: the unsteadiness of fire becomes the unsteadiness of lying [...] and comes to signify undoing, subversion, and destruction *tout court*’.³

Daub’s second point is that ‘Loge [...] has to do with signification, but, in keeping with his divine attribute of fire, Loge has little to do with the

1. Ilias Chrissochoidis & Steffen Huck: ‘Elsa’s reason: on beliefs and motives in Wagner’s *Lohengrin*’, in *Cambridge Opera Journal* 22/1 (2010), pp.77–78.

2. Adrian Daub: ‘The power of the “Verfluchte Lohe”: (post-) Wagnerian redheads and the coherence of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in *Das Rheingold*, *Fredigundis*, and *Irrelohe*’, in *The Opera Quarterly* 26/4 (2011), p.530.

3. *ibid.*, p.528.

accurate messaging that can take place in signification [...] but instead everything to do with the deception and distortion that can plague the signifying process'. Although Daub doesn't put it this way, Loge becomes the chief guarantor of *The ring's* modernity. And Daub makes his own contribution to the recently-favoured topic of Wagner, love and the erotic:⁴ 'Loge's ambiguous, ambient redness, his flame-like quality, turns sex into simply another sign, something to be exchanged, bartered, and substituted. As such, he both grounds the *Ring's* erotics and remains indifferent to them'. However, when Daub drives to the conclusion that 'Loge's [...] willingness to undergo transformations does not so much deconstruct the coherence of Wagner's attempt at a *Gesamtkunstwerk*: it is rather its *conditio sine qua non*'⁵ he risks suggesting that the cycle is 'tied together' (if only in neo-Riemannian fashion⁶) to a well-nigh symphonic degree. At the other extreme, analysis in terms of 'sudden disjunctions, mysterious failures of explanation, and multiplicities of motive'⁷ comes closer to those principles of 'rhetorical dialectics' – continuity vying with discontinuity – loosely defined by Wagner himself in his 1879 essay 'On the application of music to the drama'.

Stopping short

Coherence of a loosely harmonic rather than tightly motivic kind is a particular quality of Wagner's 1850 'setting of the prologue to *Siegfrieds Tod*' which remains the most substantial musical source of *The ring's* pre-history.⁸ The flowing quavers of the initial accompaniment suggest the weaving of the Norns rather than the flowing of the Rhine, and although the Rhinegold and Alberich are mentioned as early as bar 10, only a chord change from tonic minor triad to a diminished seventh 'efficiently' incorporating that triad's root and third characterises the momentarily destabilising consequences of Alberich's theft (ex.1a). Harmony might be on the cusp of turning motivic with the progression marking the first change of key from Eb minor to E minor. However, if this is what eventually led Wagner to the uncanny musical essence of the Tarnhelm, it is more notable in the *Siegfrieds Tod* prologue for introducing the narration's first mention of 'Valhalla' (named only as 'Der götterburg') and the giants who built it – not identified by name either (ex.1b).

Robert Bailey's comparison of the *Siegfrieds Tod* sketch with the Prelude to act 1 of *Götterdämmerung* makes the obvious points accurately and economically. Even if the dialogue between Brünnhilde and Siegfried as drafted in 1850 has less in common with the dialogue between the newly-weds in act 3 of *Lohengrin* than might be expected, it would appear that no Wagner adept has thought it worthwhile to continue composing in this manner to

4. See for example Barry Emslie: *Richard Wagner and the centrality of love* (Woodbridge, 2010) and Laurence Dreyfus: *Wagner and the erotic impulse* (Cambridge, MA, 2010).

5. Daub: 'The power', p.530.

6. For recent consideration of *The ring* in relation to neo-Riemannian harmonic theory, see Steven Rings: *Tonality and transformation* (New York & Oxford, 2011).

7. See JPE Harper-Scott: 'Medieval romance and Wagner's musical narrative in the *Ring*', in *19th Century Music* 32/3 (2009), p.234.

8. See Robert Bailey: 'Wagner's musical sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod*', in Harold Powers, ed.: *Studies in music history: essays for Oliver Strunk* (Princeton, 1968), pp.459–94. See also Edward R. Haymes: *The Ring in 1848* (Woodbridge, 2010).

Ex. 1a: Wagner's sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod*, bars 1–11

Langsam. 4 1st Norn 5 2nd [Norn]

In os - ten wob ich. In wes - ten wand ich.

[3 bars]

6 3rd [Norn] 7 2nd [Norn] 8 2nd [Norn]

Nach nor - den werf ich. Was wan - dest du im wes - ten? Was wo - best du im

9 1st Norn 10 1st Norn 11 1st Norn

os - ten? Rhein - gold raub - te Al - be - rich, schmie - de - te ei - nen Ring,

pp

Ex. 1b: Wagner's sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod*, bars 24–31

24 1st [Norn] 25-28 29 2nd [Norn]

In os - ten wob ich. *etc. until* os - ten?

30 d. 1st Norn 31 32 33

Der göt - ter burg bau - ten rie - sen, be - gehr - ten dro - hend zum dank den Ring:

pp

demonstrate what a complete version of *Siegfrieds Tod* in 1850 might have been like. As for the later version of the Norns' scene, Wagner's thinking in 1869 clearly favoured playing up the associations with spear-carrying Wotan, Valhalla and with Loge as fire – with the character of the cycle's eventual ending, in other words. Only in the final stages of the Norns' scene (ex.2) does the reference to Alberich's theft of the Rhinegold (equivalent to bar 10 of *Siegfrieds Tod*) appear, and despite the passing motivic confirmation, there is no more emphasis on the original guardians of the gold in the *Götterdämmerung* prelude than there was in the *Siegfrieds Tod* prologue.

1. Norn
das Rhein-gold raub-te Al - be-rich einst: weisst du was aus ihm ward?

Orchestra
p

Ex.2: Wagner: *Götterdämmerung*, act 1, bars 269–71

Perhaps this represents Wagner's own sceptical awareness that beginning the last evening of the cycle with a trio of sisters, having begun the first evening with another female trio, also sisters, but this time with three individual names, would set up exactly the kind of parallels and gestures towards 'coherence' that were best emphasised as little as possible. At the same time, bringing the Rhine-daughters, not the Norns, back at the start of the third act of *Götterdämmerung* created the opportunity for an even more intense exploration of ambivalent signification. The Rhine-daughters grow increasingly Norn-like in this scene – in the *Siegfrieds Tod* libretto they are called 'Wasserfrauen', suggesting a degree of maturity to which the 'Rheintöchtern' can only aspire – yet they revert to their original carefree identities during their silent (and preferably invisible) contribution to the drama's purely orchestral finale.

9. See in particular W. Breig with H. Fladt, edd.: *Dokumente zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Bühnenfestspiels Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Wagner: *Sämtliche Werke*, 29/1 (Mainz, 1976).

Muddying the waters

After Werner Breig,⁹ no recent scholar has spent more time explaining how the 'real' *Ring* cycle actually got under way than Warren Darcy. Back in 1989 Darcy argued that 'in transferring to the Rhine-daughters certain musical gestures conceived in connection with the Norns, Wagner wishes

to underscore musically a dramatic parallelism between these two sets of sisters. When during the composition of the Erda episode of scene 4 [of *Das Rheingold*] he associated *different* material with the Norns and their mother, he then felt compelled to go back and incorporate this new material into the Rhine-daughters scene and its preparatory Prelude. The final version of the *Rheingold* Prelude thus owes much to the composition of the Erda episode, just as its original version is indebted to the *Siegfrieds Tod* sketches'.¹⁰ In the same year as Darcy's essay on *Das Rheingold* was published, Patrick McCreless showed how an organicising, theory-based approach to analysis need not overlook such momentary details as the 'Tristan' chord and its role as a link between the Norns scene and the first scene of *Das Rheingold*.¹¹ Darcy's own embrace of Schenkerian methodology in his 1993 monograph on *Das Rheingold* as a whole reinforced the relevance of such 'classical' modes of thinking about structure to Wagner's innovative operatic style, and the ways in which such analysis constructively complements Alfred Lorenz's motivic-formal perceptions has been widely acknowledged.¹² Yet the more closely scholars have studied such 'grands projets' the more they have felt the need to provide a counterbalance in detailed analyses of distinct episodes which risk vanishing from sight and sound when the forces of all-embracing organicism are unleashed in work-spanning commentaries. And in this respect no group of characters has been seen as more in need of 'redemption' – or resurrection – than the Rhine-daughters. Hence the strategy of Kimberley Fairbrother Canton in her discussion of one way in which the trio can be made to seem a good deal more complex and significant than they might at first appear.

Canton uses the 'unmistakable' resemblance between the Rhine-daughters and the Norns as the basis for exploring 'the destabilising notion that these three giggling girls embody both the Apollonian and the Dionysian impulses, and thus are the only autonomous beings in the *Ring*'.¹³ The main reason for this proposal is that 'like the Norns, the Rhinemaidens announce fate without being subject to it, and so they retain an Apollonian detachment from the world, even as they speak the Dionysian wisdom that comes from their unification with nature'.¹⁴ Canton refers to Nietzsche's celebration of 'music as the ultimate expression of the Dionysian spirit, and clearly the Rhinemaidens' dance music accords with this idea. But their music is also Apollonian – not in its sound *per se*, but in the way in which it formally controls the entire musical drama'. How does Canton justify this big claim? 'The first two notes Woglinde sings – a falling whole tone [F–Eb] – is the kernel from which Wagner develops the *Rheingold* theme. This "uncommonly simple" theme [...] recurs, as Wagner explains, "in manifold alliance with almost every other motive of the drama's widespread movement", which has the effect of "creating the impression of

10. Warren Darcy: 'Creatio ex nihilo: the genesis, structure, and meaning of the *Rheingold* Prelude', in *19th Century Music* 13/2 (1989), p.82.

11. Patrick McCreless: 'Schenker and the Norns', in Carolyn Abbate & Roger Parker, ed.: *Analyzing opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, 1989).

12. Warren Darcy: *Wagner's Das Rheingold* (Oxford, 1993); Alfred Lorenz: *Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner, i: Der musikalische Aufbau des Bühnenfestspiels Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1924; repr. Tutzing, 1966).

13. Kimberley Fairbrother Canton: 'Redeeming the Rhinemaidens: a reconsideration of their Dionysian and Apollonian attributes', in *The Wagner Journal* 2/2 (July 2008), pp.40–41.

14. *ibid.*, p.49.

large-scale formal coherence". Wagner wrote that he played on this kernel "to see what type of variations the Drama can engender", and although the "variations" sometimes seem to depart radically from their "theme", it is possible, as Darcy notes, "for all subsequent motives [...] to be traced back to the opening measures". This supreme formal control, intricately linked to the Rhine-maidens, is as Apollonian as their dancing is Dionysian'.¹⁵

One can't fail to be impressed by Canton's unveiling of this seamlessly coherent progression from Wagner through Nietzsche and on to Darcy (by way, implicitly, of Lorenz). It is too good to be true? Surely, there must be more to Dionysian disruptiveness in *Das Rheingold* than the Rhine-daughters' dance music, or any other such overtly patterned material? Might not the Rhine-daughters' apparent duality be better thought of as two kinds of Apollonian classicism? As such, their musical style (and not just the first two notes of Woglinde's first line) does indeed 'ground' the musical drama, the more effectively to provoke a multivalent resistance to the classical, the Apollonian. This runs a good deal deeper than can be supported by the claim that the Rhine-daughters are different from all the other characters in the drama, not just the Norns. To indicate some of the consequences of this more intricate understanding, the following technical narrative for parts of scene 1 of *Das Rheingold* explores how classicism (and therefore the Apollonian ideal) is put into question – out of dramatic necessity – from an early stage. Wagner's 'manifold alliance' is in truth a deeply uneasy coalition of inherently unstable forces, as prone to break apart as to converge on common ground.

'Auf dem Grunde des Rheines'

Das Rheingold may be 'Vorabend', not 'Erster Tag', but in introducing the drama it also forms an indispensable part of that drama. Its materials and procedures are paradigmatic, and in certain respects it encompasses the dramatic and musical essence of the entire tetralogy. These are large and familiar claims. Yet *Das Rheingold's* enduring freshness is no less fascinating than the entire cycle's uniquely grand perspectives; the sense of Wagner trying certain things out for the first time – or, to put it more cautiously, trying certain things out in such ways that connections with tradition (and especially the traditions of his own romantic operas) can seem of relatively little account. Not that this has discouraged musicologists from making comparisons, whether the kind of general connection pointed out by John Deathridge's observation that 'the prelude to *Das Rheingold* is a powerfully suggestive musical idea with roots in the instrumental pastorale of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'¹⁶ or to Lawrence Kramer's very specific reminder that 'the opening of *Das Rheingold* is often thought

15. *ibid.*, p.49.

16. John Deathridge:
Wagner beyond good and evil
(Berkeley, Los Angeles &
London, 2008), p.50.

to owe a resentful debt to the opening of Mendelssohn's overture 'The fair Melusine' (1834).¹⁷

Connections in Wagner himself are no less pertinent. The graded crescendo and prolonged major-triad arpeggiations of the *Rheingold* Prelude are foreshadowed in the 'dawn' music from act 2 of *Lohengrin*, but in that work the Grand Opera context is quickly reinforced. In *Das Rheingold* the generic associations are radically different, and although Wagner's conceit of 'the world's lullaby'¹⁸ is often subject to grandiose psychological interpretations,¹⁹ the link between singing to sleep and childlike, innocent play remains a persistent presence throughout scene 1. Indeed, the scenes in Shakespeare's *A midsummer night's dream* in which the fairies sport with Bottom can seem more direct precedents for Wagner's scene than anything operatic.

Had Thomas Hardy been a Wagnerian he might well have associated the Prelude to *Das Rheingold* with the 'before life' of 'Before life and after', that time 'before the birth of consciousness when all went well'.²⁰ The orchestral Prelude is special in the unambiguous image it presents of evolution without conflict. One way in which Preludes as a genre tend to differ from overtures in 19th-century practice is that the tonal and expressive oppositions or dialogues of sonata form are absent. So, while the Prelude to act 1 of *Tristan und Isolde* is obviously very different in style from that of *Das Rheingold*, both compositions share an overriding concern with continuity, with ensuring that the music grows, expands and intensifies without being diverted into complementary or conflicting areas of expression. The overriding difference between the two is that, while the *Rheingold* Prelude is the epitome of expressive and technical stability, the *Tristan* Prelude is consistently unstable, driving towards and beyond the affirmation of its main tonal centre in such a way as to make the establishment of that centre appear to be a secondary factor. At the same time, of course, it is inevitable that the unstable music should seem more substantial, as the context and motive for extensive thematic development and harmonic mobility, than the stable. Nothing of substance, musically or dramatically, can happen in *Das Rheingold* until the harmony starts to change, not just to move, and the most important musico-dramatic genre to which Preludes are preludial is that of evolving dialogue, or 'period-complex', as Thomas Grey defines it:²¹ the primary site for the representation of tensions, conflicts, and resolutions – for drama.

There is therefore much more to this beginning than mere music: Dieter Borchmeyer is one commentator who has emphasised that the presence of 'three elemental beings, water sprites, the daughters of the river Rhine' goes with the sense in which 'not only do we see the origins of the world and all visible matter, we also witness the birth of language'.²² Lawrence

17. Lawrence Kramer: '“Longindyingcall”: of music, modernity, and the sirens', in *Critical musicology and the responsibility of response* (Ashgate, 2006), p.294.

18. Cosima Wagner: *Diaries*, tr. Geoffrey Skelton (London, 1978), vol.1, p.127.

19. See for example Jonathan Christian Petty & Marshall Tuttle: 'The genealogy of chaos: multiple coherence in Wagnerian music drama', in *Music & Letters* 79/1 (1998), pp.72–98: also Jonathan Christian Petty: *Wagner's lexical tonality* (Lampeter, 2005).

20. As set by Benjamin Britten in *Winter words* (1953).

21. See Thomas Grey: *Wagner's musical prose: texts and contexts* (Cambridge, 1995), especially chapter 4.

22. Dieter Borchmeyer: *Drama and the world of Richard Wagner*, tr. Daphne Ellis (Princeton, 2003), p.218.

Kramer characteristically pushes the point further by arguing that ‘when the Rhinemaidens [...] move from voice to speech, when they begin to discuss who they are and what they ought to do, they introduce at a stroke all the elements of modernity that have so far been held in suspension: narrative, history, responsibility, law, the possibility of transgression, the seeds of retribution’. For Kramer, the ‘siren song’ itself enacts a ‘fall’ that is re-enacted rather than originated by Alberich as ‘the heartless spirit of modern enterprise’.²³ However, that re-enactment marks a contrast between two very different attitudes to the Rhinegold itself: for the Rhine-daughters it is something to be celebrated for what it is, while for Alberich it is a means to a very different end. This contrast is well expressed by Simon Williams: ‘the Rhine-daughters’ playful adoration of the gold evokes the mental freedom that we experience in contemplating a work of art. The Rhinegold embodies energy beyond the immediacy of the sensate world, which, while giving humans a sense of purpose and joy, is not bound to any utilitarian purpose’. However, when Williams continues with the claim that ‘It is nonetheless, vital to the survival of the human race’,²⁴ the implied attribution of ‘humanity’ to the Rhine-daughters shows the risk inherent in mapping ‘real life’ interpretations onto works of art that traffic in myth and magic. After the model of the mythic humans in the Garden of Eden, the daughters have been allowed free will by their ‘father’: but the consequences their behaviour sets in motion for ‘the world’ do not require them to be regarded as entirely real, entirely human. Quite recently, Daniel H. Foster has issued a salutary reminder that, where *Das Rheingold* is concerned, ‘none of these beings are human beings, even if they are anthropomorphic. Like Hesiod’s *Theogony*, which *Das Rheingold* closely resembles in so many other respects, the opera lacks what Hegel calls “the strictly human reality which must alone provide the truly concrete material for the sway of the divine powers”’.²⁵

Scene 1 of *Das Rheingold* is the first of the *Ring* cycle’s dialogues, in which the essential dramatic topic of assertions of, and challenges to power and authority is mirrored in music which consistently challenges its own formal and ‘linguistic’ foundations. This process begins, appropriately enough, with the entry of the voices: generically speaking, the initial song of the Rhine-daughters also acts as a transition from the supreme stability of the Prelude to the ‘real world’ of the texted drama. In one of his most memorable pieces of writing about Wagner, Deryck Cooke described the *Rheingold* Prelude as ‘an appropriate expression of the unending amoral pleasure-principle of nature, represented by the non-human characters who appear when the curtain rises’.²⁶ Despite the plausibility of comments like those of Foster and Cooke, it might still seem difficult not to view most of the characters in *The ring* in terms of a common ‘humanity’. Even Sandra Corse, who sees the Rhine-daughters as representing nature, and as echoing

23. Kramer:
“Longindyingcall”,
pp.294–95.

24. Simon Williams:
*Wagner and the romantic
hero* (Cambridge, 2004),
pp.76–77.

25. Daniel H. Foster:
*Wagner’s Ring cycle and
the Greeks* (Cambridge,
2010), p.94.

26. Deryck Cooke:
‘Wagner’s musical language’,
in Peter Burbidge & Richard
Sutton, ed.: *The Wagner
companion* (London, 1979),
pp.244–45.

‘not only the Lorelei of German myth but also the witches of *Macbeth* and the Fates of Greek mythology’, moves directly to a ‘real-life’ angle in declaring that ‘the impulse to treat women as more natural creatures than men is also an impulse to dominate them by depriving them of the power of intellect, an impulse that Wagner, in spite of his glorification of such women as Brünnhilde, could not escape’.

There may well be a point to Corse’s contention that ‘the “natural” world of this first scene is already political and cultural, a world in which womens’ roles are already tied to nature and purity’:²⁷ but the dangers of applying such a broad ideological brush where matters of gender and genre are concerned should not be overlooked. Cooke seems on more solid technical ground that Corse when he proceeds to locate the thematic activity of *Das Rheingold*, once it has moved beyond simple arpeggios and scales, in relation to what he terms ‘the twin poles of musical expression: the appoggiaturas from the sixth to the fifth degrees of the major and minor scales, so similar from the point of view of musical structure, and yet so opposite in their emotional effect – the first expressing pleasurable longing, the second pure anguish’.²⁸ This deftly transforms an account rooted in text and character into one focused on details of compositional technique, and it is not necessary to subscribe to the entire aesthetic and technical thesis of Cooke’s *The language of music* (Oxford, 1959) to find this point of interest, and capable of considerable development.

That development could do worse than start from Wagner’s claim in his essay *Eine Mitteilung an meine Freunde* (1851) – written just before the earliest musical sketches for what was to become *The ring* – that ‘alliterative verse [...] in keeping with true speech inflections, can be adapted to suit the most natural and lively rhythms’, and that such verse ‘is at all times readily capable of the most infinitely varied expression’.²⁹ In *Das Rheingold* this naturalness and liveliness mean, above all, an avoidance of melismatic vocal writing: not just a tendency to set one syllable to one note – though this is what happens most of the time – but a tendency to do so even when using appoggiaturas and suspensions, those conventionally expressive decorative devices of traditional opera – as shown, for example, in Lohengrin’s monologue ‘In fernem Land’. A hypothesis might therefore be developed that Wagner embarked on *Das Rheingold* with a new alertness to the singular, the life and function of single notes and syllables. This encouraged him to take a fresh look at that most basic agent of tonal prolongation, the neighbouring note, and although this might have started out by promoting the kind of simple binary opposition that Cooke claimed for the appoggiaturas from the sixth degrees of the major and minor scales – the major representing the Rhine-daughters, the minor Alberich – we can soon identify ways in which Wagner seems more concerned with the multiple functional and expressive

27. Sandra Corse: *Wagner and the new consciousness: language and love in the Ring* (Rutherford & London, 1990), pp.74–77.

28. Cooke: ‘Wagner’s musical language’, p.245.

29. Cited in Stewart Spencer: ‘Language and sources of “The Ring”’, in Nicholas John, ed.: *Das Rheingold* (London, 1985), p.33.

potential of neighbouring-note motion, complete or incomplete, upper or lower, on any degree of the scale or beat of the bar, and also turning one singular function, neighbour-note, into another – passing note.

The Rhine in close-up

A little detailed analysis along these lines goes a very long way, but the rewards in enhancing appreciation of the richness of Wagner's musico-dramatic discourse justify a brief demonstration of what such analysis involves.

Wagner's setting of the first 19 lines of the *Rheingold* text is spread over 29 bars (137–65, ex.3), and within this space the music does three principal things. First, it inflects (plagally) the E \flat triad of the Prelude, creating 6/4 and 6/4/2 harmonies over the E \flat bass, giving pitches that were purely decorative in the Prelude the capacity to destabilise rather than simply reinforce the harmony. Secondly, from bars 148 to 157 the music reinforces the root position E \flat major chord, with further inflection, still diatonic, confined to a single bar (149). Thirdly, the music enacts the work's first bass-line progression, from tonic, via submediant, to dominant.

In the Prelude the E \flat chord-tones are the stable, sustained consonances, the other scale-degrees appearing as mildly dissonant, inessential passing and lower neighbouring notes. Only with the entry of the voices, and the first plagal inflection of the harmony, is the accented upper-neighbouring-note function introduced. Woglinde's F \sharp appears three times as an upper neighbour to E \flat , although the first F could be regarded as passing from the viola's G of bar 136. (B \flat also appears melodically as a passing note and as an upper neighbour – bar 138 – filling out the pentatonic profile.)

The four bars between 144 and 147 give F the function of scale degree 2 in the 6/4/2 passing harmony over E \flat that leads to the reassertion of the root-position tonic in bar 148. In contrapuntal terms the F is changing its function from upper neighbour to passing note. Yet we should not assume that the vocal line is simply fitting in with the procedures of the orchestra. With Wellgunde's 'Woglinde, wachts du allein?' question-and-answer appear for the first time in *The ring*, and as if to underline this breakthrough, this establishment of a dialogic mode, Wagner detaches the F from its immediate vocal dependence on either E \flat or G. He does this, moreover, by way of a clear allusion to the 1851 sketch material for *Der junge Siegfried*, where it has the heading 'Waldvogel'.³⁰ In voice-leading terms it could be argued that the Middleground structure of the vocal line here still presents F as upper neighbour to the E \flat which Woglinde reaches in bar 148 – a completion all the stronger for the way in which the lead-up to it (the vocal line of bar 147) provides a simple variant of Wellgunde's phrase. Bars 148–50 then

30. See Robert Bailey: 'Wagner's musical sketches', p.465.

give the Rhine-daughters the opportunity to discover for themselves the passing-note function of F as it leads up to the G of Woglinde's 'Sicher von dir!' Here the approach to closure is strengthened by the increased rate of harmonic motion – still without any change of bass note – and by the breakthrough of the text to the non-alliterative phrase 'Sicher von dir!'

Ex.3: Wagner: *Das Rheingold*, bars 137–65

[Ruhig heitere Bewegung]

Woglinde
Wei - a! Wa - ga! Wo - ge, du Wel - le, wal-le zur Wie - ge! wa-ga-la wei - a!

Orchestra

137 138 139 140

Woglinde
wal - la-la, wei - a-la wei - - - a!

Orchestra

141 142 143

Woglinde
Mit

Wellgunde
Wog - lin - de, wach'st du al - lein?

Orchestra

144 145 146

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Woglinde Wellgunde Orchestra

Well-gun - de wär' ich zu zwei. Si - cher vor
Lass seh'n wie du wach'st!

147 148 149

Woglinde Flosshilde Orchestra

dir!
Hei - a-la wei - al!

150 151 152
mf *dim.*

Wellgunde Flosshilde Orchestra

Floss - hil - de, schwimm! Wo - glin - de flieht:
wil - des Ge-schi - ster!

153 154 155
p

Detailed description: The image shows three systems of a musical score. Each system includes vocal lines and an orchestral accompaniment. The first system features Woglinde and Wellgunde. Woglinde's part has lyrics 'Well-gun - de wär' ich zu zwei. Si - cher vor' and 'Lass seh'n wie du wach'st!'. Wellgunde's part has lyrics 'Lass seh'n wie du wach'st!'. The orchestra part includes measures 147, 148, and 149. The second system features Woglinde and Flosshilde. Woglinde's part has the lyric 'dir!'. Flosshilde's part has the lyrics 'Hei - a-la wei - al!'. The orchestra part includes measures 150, 151, and 152, with dynamics *mf* and *dim.*. The third system features Wellgunde and Flosshilde. Wellgunde's part has lyrics 'Floss - hil - de, schwimm! Wo - glin - de flieht:' and 'wil - des Ge-schi - ster!'. Flosshilde's part has the lyric 'wil - des Ge-schi - ster!'. The orchestra part includes measures 153, 154, and 155, with a dynamic of *p*. The score is in a key with two flats and a 4/4 time signature.

Ex.3 continued

Wellgunde hilf mir die Fließ - en - de fan - gen!

Flosshilde Des Gol - des Schlaf

Orchestra 156 157 158 159

Flosshilde hü - tet ihr schlecht! Bes - ser be - wacht des

Orchestra 160 161 162

Flosshilde schlum - mernd - en Bett, sonst büsst ihr bei - de das Spiel!

Orchestra 163 164 165

Ex.3 continued

For the eight bars from 150–57 the Eb triad is reinforced, and the similarity of the orchestral parts to the Prelude is obvious, though they are not a literal repetition. Apart from the ‘incomplete’ neighbour-note – Cooke’s scale-degree 6 to 5 at last – in the word ‘Geschwister’ (bar 153) the

vocal parts conform entirely to consonant arpeggios in ways which grow out of the material of the previous vocal phrase but lack their shapeliness. The middleground objective is to reinforce the high G, but the dramatic effect is to make the sudden switch to C minor harmony at bar 158 properly momentous. Flosshilde's anxiety about the gold is a human quality, quite distinct from Cooke's 'amoral pleasure-principle of nature', and it is therefore fitting that the character of the music should change. For the first time in the work there is a neighbour relation – C to B♭ – in the bass (bars 165–66): and a chord is established, enriched and transformed to facilitate progression to a new chord, not to the reassertion of the first. To increase tension further, there is the first use in the vocal line of the lower-neighbour, minor-second relation, given great prominence through the alliterative parallel of 'Schlaf' and 'Schlecht'. And in Flosshilde's second four bars the opera's first chromatics appear as the C minor chord is transformed into B♭'s dominant. In this process the vital element is no doubt the role of the sustained A natural (oboe) as passing from G to B♭. But Wagner's voice-leading is full of bold details, such as the leap of the vocal line to the high G♯ (bar 164) now thoroughly destabilised as it clashes with an F two octaves lower in English Horn, an F preceded by G♭.

It would be foolish to suggest that similar elements and procedures could not be found in Wagner's own earlier works, and in works by other composers. But it is the alliance between 'old' structure and 'new' expression that is so remarkable at the beginning of *Das Rheingold*. The best way to convey the newness of expression embodied in the Rhine-daughters' music is to compare it with Wagner's own earlier attempts to create a comparable emotion of carefree innocence. There is no need to go further back than the Bridal Chorus in Act 3 of *Lohengrin* to observe something much more regular in form – though this does not deprive the episode of ambiguity, as Carl Dahlhaus noted in his comment that 'the innocuousness of the music, which has helped the piece to a misconceived popularity, is oppressive when heard in context' – heard, that is, 'against the shadow cast over the scene by the hopelessness of the situation'.³¹

The first 29 bars of the first scene of *Das Rheingold* are of particular importance for the scene as a whole, adumbrating the E♭/C polarity which spans the scene, and suggesting by this move the dangerous ease with which delight can yield to despair. The possibility arises that a conjunction between destabilising and evolutionary factors has become more fundamental to Wagner's method than closural, balancing factors. In Alfred Lorenz's terms, the four principal structural units constituting Scene 1 evolve from Bogen to Barform,³² and however the formal subdivisions are read, it is not correspondences as such but the contrasts over and above the correspondences that should seize the analyst's imagination.

31. Carl Dahlhaus: *Richard Wagner's music dramas*, tr. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1979), p.40.

32. See Lorenz: *Das Geheimnis*, i: Period 1, pp.166–67, Transition, p.134, Period 2, pp.209–10, Period 3, pp.155–56.

Wider perspectives

The initial 29 bars do not encapsulate the full progression from calm to catastrophe found in scene 1 as a whole. Yet such is the transformational potential of their material that it is surely not too far-fetched to see the basis for the Rhine-daughters' final outburst of despair in Flosshilde's early variation on Woglinde's carefree song. Such is Wagner's mastery of developing variation, the 'classical' complement of his hyper-romantic, proto-modernist delight in conflict and discontinuity. Alberich's entrance initiates an extended dialogue that intensifies the essential instability that first impinged at the moment when Flosshilde acknowledged that the Rhinegold was not being well guarded. Treating Alberich like the gold, as a plaything, with false promises of friendship and even of love, is not a good basis for constructive dialogue, and the generic characteristics of the music become polarised between the daughters' exultant carefree song and the predator's menacing arioso. The daughters' adaptation of their song-texture and form to reflect the disruptive predations of the dwarf's seventh-emphasising C minor is reactive, too late to affect the outcome, and their cries for help go answered. The 'father' who ordered them to guard the gold and then became an absentee remains absent.

It is Loge who shows the greatest sympathy for the plight of the Rhine-daughters during his scene 2 narration. But when, near the end of scene 4, the time comes for them to be heard again (but not seen) the severity of that plight is underlined by the sense of non-dialogue. Wotan hears the song, but refuses to reply directly, while Loge responds with a sardonic statement that allows for no debate about the rights and responsibilities of ownership or guardianship. So, although tonally and technically the presentation of the two verses of the daughters' song are absorbed into the potent Valhalla-orientated D \flat major, such musical convergence cannot erase the strong sense of dramatic distance.

The situation at the end of *Götterdämmerung* seems significantly similar, and also significantly different. This time the daughters are seen (according to Wagner's scenario) but not heard, and the initial bars of their Rhinegold music, rather than the trio-based hymn of celebration, are absorbed into the more dominant process of the D \flat major destruction of Valhalla and the 'glorification' of Brünnhilde.³³ There is no suggestion that the Rhine-daughters, unlike the gods, are not truly immortal: but this seems to be at the price of remaining relatively primitive life-forms.

A powerful aspect of *Götterdämmerung* is the alignment of references to the Rhine-daughters' cry of loss with the social security (ephemeral, it emerges) of Valhalla: this is most poignantly represented during Waltraute's narration (ex.4). But the pathos-imbued, idealised construction

33. John Deathridge discovered Wagner's own description of the motive commonly labelled 'Redemption through love' in a letter from his wife Cosima dated 6 September 1875. See Deathridge: review-article in *19th Century Music* 5/1 (1981), p.84.

[Wieder bewegt, wie vorher]

Waltraute

raunt' er das Wort: — des tie - fen Rhein - es Töch-tern

Orchestra

pp

gä - be den Ring sie wie - der zu - rück, von des Fluch-es Last

p

Langsam

er - lös't wär Gott — und Welt!

dolcissimo *pp* *ppp*

Ex.4: Wagner: *Götterdämmerung*, act 1, scene 3, bars 133-44

of compatibility between the two orders (which Brünnhilde recalls in the changed circumstances of her final address to the world) contrasts powerfully with the 'reality' of the cycle's second period of dialogue between the daughters and a male predator.

The first scene of act 3 resonates with a potent mix of nostalgia and menace, retrospect and prospect, starkly outlined at the outset with the

opposed horn calls representing Hagen and Siegfried. The ‘original’ Rhinegold motive then emerges from the flowing arpeggios suggesting a return to natural fundamentals. But Wagner allows a new song for the daughters to evolve, recognising their changed circumstances: even if they remain ‘relatively primitive life-forms’, they can remember, and have learned something from experience. So they engage Siegfried in discussion and debate, not simply taunting him, like Alberich, but asking him to return what Alberich stole, and warning him of the consequences if he does not do so. However, with a telling reversal of roles, Siegfried childishly treats them as playthings, pretending to return the ring and then – uniquely for the cycle – merging his voice with theirs to make the trio a quartet. However, it is a quartet during which an increasing physical distance between female trio and male solo is called for, and Siegfried’s words reveal that he himself is still primitively in thrall to the delusions imposed by Hagen’s potion as well as by his own nature.

It is sometimes suggested that the ending of *The ring* involves a Larkinesque homily to the effect that ‘what will survive of us is love’. Brünnhilde and the order from which she emerged do not survive. But the Rhine-daughters do – presumably – survive: as Simon Williams sees it, ‘in returning the ring to the Rhine-daughters, Brünnhilde restores the Rhinegold to its proper element so that its primal energy can once again serve as a source of human vitality’.³⁴

In keeping with his focus on ancient Greek drama, Daniel H. Foster elaborates a similar point by arguing that ‘the reappearance of the Rhine-daughters at the end of *Götterdämmerung* opens up the possibility for a future drama that would reunite the three Greek art-sisters as they once were in Athenian tragedy and at the beginning of the *Ring*. But in this new type of drama not religion but nature would constitute the new ethical order. And love, not conventional law, would bind *das Volk* together’. Foster dubs this a ‘message of hopeful anarchism’, pointing out that ‘we do not actually witness this newer, more natural world’. Rather, ‘Wagner relishes demonstrating what this society and artwork of the future should not be rather than what it should be. The Rhine-daughters only hold out to us an enticing possibility; they do not actualize it’. For this reason, ‘the end of *Götterdämmerung* could equally well ‘signify fruitless negation and the eternal return of the same’. Yet Foster’s assertion that ‘the finale functions both as the beginning of something new and hopeful and of something old and hopeless’³⁵ surely pushes proto-modernist ambivalence to an unnecessarily bald binary opposition. If the Rhine-daughters can preserve their new, Norn-like wisdom borne of bitter experience, and enter into dialogues with positive rather than negative outcomes to do with the extent to which cooperation is preferable to theft or rape, and in which men can rise above stereotyping

34. Williams: *Wagner and the romantic hero*, p.101.

35. Foster: *Wagner’s Ring cycle*, pp.236, 241–42.

women as either playthings or shrews, then a fairer and more just society might be in prospect. To talk like this is to risk confusing music theatre with real life, aesthetics with politics. Just like Wagner did.