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The Structure of the *Ring* and its Evolution

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Although we possess more preliminary material for the music of Wagner's works than for those of any of the other great composers, the vast bulk of it takes the form of complete drafts for the operas—often two drafts for each one. These do not answer the intriguing question of what Wagner had in mind when he finally sat down, after much preliminary thought, to begin the actual composition of one of his operas. In preparing his first complete draft of the music, when his immediate concern was to set his text, what was he using as a basis for the underlying musical structure?

He must have made crucial determinations about such things as the formal plan at this early stage, but with his later operas, at least, there is precious little documentary evidence showing how he planned them in musical terms. An important feature of Wagner's later works is the preparation of their musical structure in the structure of the poem itself; musical decisions were made in the act of turning into verse the dramatic conception which he had written out in detail in a complete Prose Scenario. Thus the musical structure of so vast a work as the *Ring* is to some extent the story of the evolution of its four poems.

It is well known that Wagner conceived those four poems in reverse order, that he began with the last poem and gradually worked backward toward the beginning. His first opera based on Nibelung material was *Siegfrieds Tod*, later on to be known in its revised version as *Götterdämmerung*. Wagner finished a poem in three acts late in November 1848, and the following January he added a prologue before Act I. With this he achieved a dramatic structure for the act that already suggests the development of musical plans. The essential details of that structure are presented in schematic form in diagram 3 (page 61); it is fundamentally the same as that of *Götterdämmerung*, Act I.

Dramatically, this act has three main parts, which are separated by orchestral interludes with closed curtain. The poem of *Siegfrieds Tod* specifies that the first of these interludes is to include Siegfried's horn call heard from a distance, and that the orchestra is then to take up the horn call and develop it in a "powerful movement" after the curtain closes.[1] Each of the three main parts of the act is in turn divided into two scenes. Siegfried, the central character, has a structural function here, for his entrances serve to define the second half of each part.

To separate the two scenes in Parts I and III, the poem provides for an orchestral interlude with open curtain, and Brünnhilde actually sings during the interlude in Part III, after the Valkyries have left the stage. In the middle part, however, there is no interlude, and Siegfried's entrance by itself serves the purpose of structural articulation.

Meanwhile Wagner balanced vocal registers in such a way that the opening halves of Parts I and III involve female voices only: the three Norns in Part I and Brünnhilde and the female chorus of Valkyries in Part III (this was changed to Brünnhilde and just one sister, Waltraute, in *Götterdämmerung*). The second halves of these two parts are also symmetrical in that they belong to Siegfried and Brünnhilde alone. The middle part contrasts with the other two by introducing the new characters—Gunther, Gutrune, and Hagen—with Siegfried added at the midpoint. As already noted, there is no orchestral interlude here, and that feature provides a further element of contrast.

The musical sketches that Wagner made for *Siegfrieds Tod* during the summer of 1850 concern only two passages in this structure, a draft for the opening scene of the Norns, which actually continues about a quarter of the way into the scene for Brünnhilde and Siegfried, plus music for the Valkyries in the first half of Part III.[2] Wagner put aside his work on the music, since the commission that he had hoped to have from Weimar never materialized. In addition, he evidently felt it necessary to mull over the problems of this new style for a while longer before attempting to realize it on a large scale. Instead he wrote *Opera and Drama* that autumn and early winter. And when he returned to the Nibelung materials the following spring, he created an entirely new dramatic poem as a companion piece for *Siegfrieds Tod*—the comedy *Der junge Siegfried*.

The idea of pairing a comic drama with a tragic one was not new, even for Wagner, as is well known. Immediately after he had completed the music for *Tannhäuser*, and before that opera was given its premiere in Dresden, Wagner conceived *Die Meistersinger* as a comic pendant to the tragedy. The two dramas would contrast two historical epochs and two artistic movements, the aristocratic Minnesinger of the fourteenth century and the bourgeois Meistersinger of the sixteenth. Instead of realizing this plan, Wagner went on to write *Lohengrin*, conceived soon after *Die Meistersinger*, and the comedy was set aside for a good many years, by which time it became a considerably different kind of opera from the mere comic addition to *Tannhäuser* that he had initially envisioned.

In the case of the Nibelung dramas, Wagner designed the comedy to *precede* the tragedy, so that the pair of works would contrast two generations, focusing on the youth of the hero in the first and on his downfall in middle age in the second. Wagner did not change the titles of these two operas until 1856, after he had finished the music for *Die Walküre*. The change in title from *Der junge Siegfried* to plain *Siegfried* has incidentally had the unfortunate side-effect of obscuring for many viewers the lapse of a generation that occurs between this opera and *Götterdämmerung*.

In the latter part of the summer of 1851, Wagner began sketches for the music of *Der junge Siegfried*. He had just written the essay *A Communication to My Friends*, in which he explored still further the aesthetic problems he had been posing for himself. On September 2, 1851, he wrote to his friend Theodor Uhlig:

I am now beginning the music, with which I really propose to enjoy myself. You cannot even imagine what is happening quite of its own accord. I tell you, the musical phrases are making themselves for these

[1] Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen*, 4th edn. (Leipzig, 1907), II, 173.

[2] These sketches are discussed in some detail in my essay "Wagner's Musical Sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod*," in *Studies in Music History: Essays for Oliver Strunk*, ed. Harold Powers (Princeton, 1968), pp. 459–94.

stanzas and periods, without my even having to take pains with them. It's all growing out of the ground as if it were wild. I already have the beginning in mind, and also some plastic motives such as Fafner.[3]

The Fafner motive may have been in Wagner's mind for some time before he wrote to Uhlig, since the poem for *Der junge Siegfried,* written in June, actually mentions that the motive is to appear in the first-act monologue for Mime just before the Wanderer enters[4]—a monologue later deleted from the drama. In addition, sketches for the motives of the Forest Bird exist, and they may have been made at this time. A larger number of different musical fragments is involved here than was the case when Wagner was working on the music for *Siegfrieds Tod,* in fact; but this time he never got as far as the stage of making a continuous draft for a complete scene, as he had with the Norns' scene in 1850. He never got even as far as the actual setting of text. In short, he broke off work even sooner than he had with *Siegfrieds Tod* a year earlier.

By about the middle of October, Wagner was able to inform Uhlig that he was "planning more great things for Siegfried: three dramas, plus a prologue in three acts."[5] The last two operas—the Prologue, *Das Rheingold,* and a "drama of pathos," *Die Walküre*—were conceived together. Wagner actually wrote his initial prose sketches for *Das Rheingold* first, so the order of conception of the four poems was not entirely backwards. *Die Walküre* was the first to be realized in verse, however.[6] In any case, the important thing here is that *Das Rheingold,* as Prologue to the trilogy, was definitely not an afterthought, and Wagner's conception of it "in three acts," plus an introductory scene, works in such a way that its structure duplicates that of *Götterdämmerung,* which has three acts and a prologue. In the *Rheingold* score, the opening scene and the three "acts" that follow are simply numbered as four scenes. *Das Rheingold* begins on a preconscious level, with the opening scene evoking a state of moral innocence; that scene thus stands outside the main action and time sequence of the *Ring.* Conscious action, and the central sequence of events in the dramatic cycle, begin with scene 2. In a fundamental sense, then, the introductory scene in the Rhine functions as a prologue, while the structure of the main action contrasts the two scenes on the mountain height before Valhalla with the intervening scene in Nibelheim. Once again, the dramatic plan is serving as an organizing device for the music to come.

The dramatic structure common to *Das Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* is in turn realized on a larger level as the form for the cycle as a whole: a prologue and three operas, whose progression, incidentally, follows the classical hierarchy of dramatic values—from pathos to comedy and finally to tragedy. Soon after the Bayreuth premiere of the whole cycle in 1876, Wagner himself referred to *Götterdämmerung* as "a recapitulation of the whole: a prologue and three pieces."[7] He was thinking at that time of separating the Prologue from the first act in order to intensify the structural parallel, but he wisely refrained from tampering with the three-part dramatic structure of that act as we have already described it—which had in fact turned out to be one of his most perfect structural achievements in music.

After he had finished the poems for *Die Walküre* and *Das Rheingold,* Wagner subjected the poems of *Der junge Siegfried* and *Siegfrieds Tod* to a thorough revision, which represents the final step in the evolution of the whole dramatic cycle. This was finished on December 15, 1852. In the case of *Siegfrieds Tod,* the revision included a completely new text for the Norns' scene and, as we have already mentioned, the reduction of the chorus of Valkyries to just one of their number, Waltraute. The lat-

[3] *Richard Wagner's Briefe an Theodor Uhlig, Wilhelm Fischer, Ferdinand Heine* [ed. Hans von Wolzogen] (Leipzig, 1888), letter no. 30, p. 99. The date for this letter is supplied in *Letters of Richard Wagner: The Burrell Collection,* ed. John N. Burk (London, 1951), p. 620.

[4] See the text of *Der junge Siegfried* in *Richard Wagner: Skizzen und Entwürfe zur Ring-Dichtung, Mit der Dichtung "Der junge Siegfried,"* ed. Otto Strobel (Munich, 1930), p. 117.

[5] Cited in Otto Strobel, *Richard Wagner, Leben und Schaffen: Eine Zeittafel* (Bayreuth, 1952), p. 43. Strobel conjectures that the letter was written about October 12.

[6] The exact dates are given in ibid., pp. 43–45.

[7] From the entry in Cosima Wagner's diary for September 9, 1876. See *Cosima Wagner: Die Tagebücher,* ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin & Dietrich Mack, vol. 1 (Munich, 1976), pp. 1001–02.

ter change serves as a reinforcement of the structural parallel between Parts I and III, since the three Norns of Part I are now balanced by two female voices in Part III. The placement of the male and female choruses is arranged so that the Valkyries now appear in the opening scene of *Die Walküre,* Act III, while the introduction of the male chorus (the Gibichungs) remains in the middle of Act II of *Götterdämmerung.*

Barring minor changes in versification made during the composition of the music, the whole poem now corresponds to the final version with which we are familiar, with the following exceptions:

a) the final speech of Brünnhilde
b) the titles of the last two operas[8]
c) the spelling of Wotan, which was originally Wo*d*an and remained so in the autograph full scores of both *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre.* All these items were changed to their final form in the late spring of 1856, soon after Wagner had finished the full score of *Die Walküre.* And finally,
d) the text of the initial part of the Siegfried-Mime dialogue of *Siegfried,* Act I, Scene 3.[9]

After completing the poem, Wagner waited some ten and a half months before beginning to compose the music for *Das Rheingold,* and we shall take advantage of this hiatus to recall two special uses of tonality that he had developed in his earlier operas. Though this may be going over familiar ground, these uses must be clearly grasped if we are to understand how the dramatic and musical structure of the *Ring* was evolving in the artist's mind.

The first of these can be called the "expressive" use of tonality, an outgrowth of sequential melodic construction. The repetition or recall of a passage is transposed up to underscore intensification, or shifted down to indicate relaxation. These shifts are usually made by a semitone or a whole tone. The three strophes of Tannhäuser's song to Venus in Act I present a straightforward example of this procedure; instead of all being in the same key, as customary in strophic song composition, Wagner's first strophe is in D♭, the second in D, and the third in E♭. This effectively heightens the anguish implicit in Tannhäuser's appeal to Venus, though it does not make the third verse easier to sing. This device usually amounts to mere mechanical transposition in Wagner's earlier works, but it becomes a much more subtle aspect of his harmonic art in his later ones.

A far more important side of Wagner's handling of tonality for the structure of the *Ring,* as this was forming in his mind during the early stages of his work with the poetic materials, is what might be called the "associative" use of tonality. This works in two different but closely related ways. First of all, specific melodies or motives can be associated with a particular pitch level; and secondly, a particular tonality can be associated with particular characters or, in the earlier operas, with underlying dramatic themes. The horn call in *Der fliegende Holländer* is a good example of the first procedure, since it is definitely rooted in the triad of B minor, though not exclusively confined to it. In this respect *Der fliegende Holländer* resembles Wagner's model for that opera, *Der Freischütz,* where the particular diminished-seventh chord associated throughout with Samiel has a fixed and unchanging pitch level and spacing, and always involves the same specific instrumentation as well. The diminished-seventh chord cannot be defined as belonging to any one tonality, and Weber took advantage of that fact to introduce it into several different tonal contexts. Similarly, the Dutchman's horn call is heard at its primary B-minor pitch level not only in B-minor sections, but also in others. Wagner might be said to have taken the next step after Weber by supplying the definite dimension of a specific key to the horn call. At the same time, of course, he extended the musical element thus defined into a longer configuration of full melodic value.

[8]On these first two points, see Otto Strobel, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Götterdämmerung: Unbekannte Dokumente aus Wagners Dichterwerkstatt," in *Die Musik* 25[5] (February 1933), 336 ff.

[9]It is not clear just when Wagner wrote the new text for this passage. In any case, he entered it in the special copy of the 1853 imprint of the poem, which he used in setting the cycle to music, *before* he reached this scene in his Preliminary Draft for the music, sometime in December 1856–January 1857.

This procedure is admittedly tentative in *Der fliegende Holländer,* and it assumes a rather different form in *Tannhäuser,* in which two associative tonalities are juxtaposed: E major for the demonic realm of the Venusberg, and E♭ major for the Pilgrims and the divine realm of which they are the earthly representatives. The opera turns on this contrast, beginning with the Bacchanale in the Venusberg in E, and ending with the chorus of the Pilgrims singing of Tannhäuser's redemption in E♭. In Act II, Wolfram's song to sacred love is in E♭; Tannhäuser's hymn to Venus, immediately following, is in E. This particular juxtaposition works also as an expressive heightening in the immediate context, as well as carrying one step further the "expressive" sequence of the three strophes of the same song in Act I. Venus's return in Act III is naturally also in E, which is directly juxtaposed with the E♭ of the conclusion. The semitone difference between the two associative tonalities creates at the end of the opera the effect of a relaxation down to the tonic.

This construction posed real problems for Wagner when he composed the overture, which he based on musical materials related to the Pilgrims and the Venusberg. Since the juxtaposition of E♭ and E presents in musical terms the central conflict of the opera, it would have been logical to reflect the large-scale structure of the music by retaining the two associated tonalities. But Wagner's musical language in 1845 was not equipped to handle the problem of constructing an instrumental composition with two tonalities a semitone apart. Things would have been further complicated by the fact that if the associated tonalities of the opera were adhered to in the overture, it would conclude in a tonality a semitone away from the key in which the opera begins. The overture thus presents the anomalous spectacle in which the Pilgrims' music appears in the "wrong" key of E major.

In *Lohengrin,* Wagner took steps to eliminate the problem he had encountered with associative tonality in *Tannhäuser.* Probably the most obvious feature is his change in the whole conception of the overture, where he made his well-known substitution of a *Vorspiel* of significantly smaller dimensions, based in this case exclusively on materials related to the title character. In addition, he increased his palette of associate tonalities to four. The main ones are F♯ minor for Ortrud, the demonic figure, A major for Lohengrin, the divine figure, and A♭ major for Elsa, the central protagonist in whom the main human conflict between demonic and divine takes place. The semitone difference between two of the associative tonalities is still present, just as in *Tannhäuser,* and is now used to distinguish materials of the two main protagonists. Wagner made brilliant use of this difference as an "expressive" progression in the middle scene of Act I, from the first appearance of Elsa on the stage (A♭) up to the arrival of Lohengrin (A). Finally, C major is associated with the trumpets on the stage played by the four royal trumpeters of King Henry the Fowler.

This association of a particular tonality with instruments on the stage is probably not the most crucial element for *Lohengrin* itself, but it is extraordinarily important for Wagner's later operas. In the *Ring,* for example, Siegfried's horn call, when played from the stage, is always associated with the tonality of F major. The *alte Weise* of the English horn on stage which haunts the first half of the third act of *Tristan* is similarly confined to F minor. These two thematic elements modulate only when they are transferred to the pit orchestra, and that transfer usually coincides with a change in scoring. (There is in fact no English horn in the pit orchestra during the first half of the third act of *Tristan.*) The trumpets and trombones on stage at the end of the first act of *Tristan* are associated with C, and they serve as a crucial stabilizing force for the establishment of C as the final tonic; the tonic triad is actually left resounding in these instruments from behind the closed curtain at the end of the act. In the second act of *Die Meistersinger,* the Night Watchman's horn on the stage has only the single pitch, F♯, which controls modulations between F and B. In a similar fashion, the four bells in *Parsifal* heard from the stage are fixed in pitch (C, G, A, and E), but here Wagner reached the last stage with this device and supplied two independent harmonizations—C major in Act I, E minor in Act III. In various ways, then, stage instruments function as controls of tonality, or

even of two tonalities, as in the example from *Parsifal.*

In the *Ring* Wagner's "associative" use of tonality differs from his practice in the earlier operas. First of all, motives associated with individual protagonists have no specific tonal association, but instead are left free for transposition so as to fit into the changing dramatic and musical context. Siegfried's horn call is a case in point, although it seems at first an exception to this principle. But its tonal association with F major derives exclusively from its appearances as a stage instrument. In the second scene of the *Götterdämmerung* prologue, for example, the motive of Siegfried's horn call is rhythmically transformed and played by the orchestra in both E♭ and B, the two tonalities of that scene. In other words, it is not the *motive* of Siegfried's horn call which has the tonal association, but rather the *stage instrument* representing Siegfried's horn.

The motives which do have a specific tonal association are connected with features of the poem other than individual characters—the Curse on the Ring, the Tarnhelm, the Sword, and Valhalla. Like the Dutchman's horn call, these motives are oriented around a specific pitch level, and we have seen that such an orchestral motive can be introduced into different harmonic contexts at its original pitch level. But in the *Ring,* Wagner adds a new dimension to this idea, whereby motives of this type determine the tonality of the larger structural units in which they appear as main themes. In some cases, a second tonal association can be added to the original one, which nonetheless maintains its primary position.

Finally *groups* of characters, as opposed to individual protagonists—the Valkyries and the Nibelungs—have a specific tonal association which functions as the tonic in structural units or scenes in which the particular characters are the primary ones. In these cases, the tonal association operates independently of melodic or motivic materials which may also be associated with these groups.

Thus the *Ring* has at least seven elements with fixed tonal association, two of which take on a secondary association in addition:

STAGE INSTRUMENT	Siegfried's horn—F major
GROUPS OF CHARACTERS	Valkyries—B minor
	Nibelungs—B♭ minor
MOTIVES	Curse on the Ring—B minor
	Tarnhelm—B minor
	Valhalla—D♭ major (later also E major)
	Sword—C major (later also D major)

We can now return to the evolution of the formal plan of the *Ring* and examine the structural remnants from Wagner's early musical sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod* and *Der junge Siegfried.* We have noted that when Wagner revised the poem of *Siegfrieds Tod,* he wrote an entirely new text for the Norns' scene. He discarded his early musical setting along with the early text, but not the tonality of the passage (E♭). Likewise, when the music conceived for the Valkyries in their scene with Brünnhilde was transferred to the beginning of the third act of *Die Walküre,* where the Valkyries now actually appear, the tonality of B minor was left behind in *Siegfrieds Tod* for Part III of Act I, where Waltraute substitutes for the whole group. We shall see that in the final musical setting, Wagner extends these two tonalities, E♭ and B, so that they control the structure of the entire first act of *Götterdämmerung.*

The sketches for *Der junge Siegfried* present a different problem. We have seen that Wagner claimed in 1851 that he had the beginning in mind. But his first draft for the music of the first act of the later *Siegfried* is curious in several ways. It lacks the customary date and title at the beginning, and in fact it shows that Wagner actually began work not with the *Vorspiel,* as was his usual practice, but with the setting of Mime's opening text. The Prelude is present in two individual sketches on one side of a loose sheet whose reverse side was used as a page of the draft itself. The first sketch is for the body of the Prelude, beginning with the Nibelung rhythm in B♭ minor. Below it appears the second sketch, labelled *Anfang,* for the introduction to the Prelude, built on the motive in descending thirds for the bassoons. If we disregard this introduction, which was sketched later in

any case, there is certainly no stylistic reason why Wagner could not have conceived the main part of the Prelude in 1851, and I am content to believe that this Prelude, without its introduction, is in fact the earliest music conceived for the *Ring* as we know it, along with the basic melodic material of the music for the Prelude to Act III of *Die Walküre.*

The tonal association of B♭ minor with the Nibelungs thus begins with the early conception of this Prelude, and it affects not only the opening of the later *Siegfried,* but also the short scene towards the end of Act II for Alberich and Mime, as well as the initial scene in Act II of *Götterdämmerung* for Alberich and Hagen, and the central Nibelheim scene in *Das Rheingold* (actually called scene 3).[10] This use of B♭ minor in *Das Rheingold* undoubtedly suggested D♭ major as the most obvious contrasting tonality for the framing scenes which take place before Valhalla,[11] since a related, not a foreign key was required here. Wotan and Alberich, the central protagonists of these three scenes, are to some extent analogues of each other; Wagner reflects that relationship by his reference to them in the poem as *Lichtalbe* and *Schwarzalbe* respectively. The appearance of D♭, then, at the beginning and the end of the main action of *Das Rheingold* serves to define the dramatic structure of the work, but at the same time Wagner reinforced the structural parallel of this opera with *Götterdämmerung* by concluding that opera in D♭ also.[12] The parallel uses of D♭ are reinforced by the association of the Valhalla music with that tonality—music which is scored for the special sound of the so-called "Wagner tubas" in both operas. The structural parallel is further intensified by the fact that Wagner uses the opening tonality of *Siegfrieds Tod* for the beginning scene of *Das Rheingold.*

An "expressive" shift in tonality a semitone upward from the D♭ conclusion of *Das Rheingold* is probably at least partly responsible for the opening of *Die Walküre* in D minor. *Die Walküre* has a special kind of dramatic construction which turns on its conflation of two relatively independent stories: that of Siegmund and Sieglinde on the one hand, and that of Brünnhilde and Wotan on the other. The first tale opens the opera and is essentially concluded by the end of Act II with the death of Siegmund. These two acts thus form a unit which begins and ends in D minor,[13] just as the three main scenes of *Das Rheingold* (scenes 2–4) begin and end in D♭ major. The Siegmund-Sieglinde story continues a generation later with *Siegfried,* and the first act of that opera concludes with Siegfried's reforging of the broken sword bequeathed to him by his parents. This is set logically enough in D major.

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[10]Lorenz (*Das Geheimnis der Form bei Richard Wagner,* vol. 1 [Berlin, 1924], pp. 49–50) claimed that "in the first act of *Götterdämmerung,* whose hero is Hagen, we observe that his tonality, B minor, stands in the same relation to the tonality of Siegfried's deed [the forging of the sword] as Alberich's tonality stands to the tonality of the Gods. We thus have a direct algebraic ratio, Siegfried:Hagen = Wotan:Alberich, or D major:B minor = D♭ major:B♭ minor." This is of course a typical example of the "symmetry" Lorenz was so eager to "discover" in Wagner's later works. While his contrivance seems clever at first glance, it is completely artificial and will not work.

Wagner seems quite clearly to have abandoned his earlier practice of associating tonalities with individual characters by the time of the *Ring.* The D♭ major/B♭ minor relationship is certainly a central one for the construction of the three main scenes of *Das Rheingold,* but it makes much more sense in that context to regard the association as between Valhalla and the Nibelheim—for D♭ is not specifically associated with Wotan throughout the cycle, and B♭ minor, as we have seen, relates to the Nibelungs in general and evolved from the opening of *Der junge Siegfried,* where Alberich does not even appear.

It also seems strange to call Hagen the "hero" of Act I of *Götterdämmerung* when Siegfried is the pivotal character of that entire structure, to say nothing of his obvious role as hero in the plain-language sense of the word. But more important is the fact that Lorenz's identification of B minor with Hagen, in no sense maintained throughout the remainder of the opera, ignores the origin of that tonality in association with the Valkyries from Wagner's earliest surviving sketches.

[11]In his Preliminary Draft for the music of *Das Rheingold,* at the point corresponding to the twenty-fifth measure before the beginning of scene 2, Wagner entered the rubric, *Walh: Des-dur,* showing that he had the tonality for that passage in mind before he finished composing scene 1. This page was published in facsimile by Otto Strobel, "Die Kompositionsskizzen zum 'Ring des Nibelungen'," in *Bayreuther Festspielführer* 1930, facing p. 120.

[12]It is of course significant for the cyclic nature of the work that it ends in D♭ where, in effect, it began. This fact alone led Lorenz (op. cit., p. 47) to call D♭ the "tonic" *(Haupttonart)* of the *Ring,* but it is unthinkable that the nearly three operas-worth of music in between are organized in relation to a tonic D♭. On a much smaller scale, the Wolf's Glen scene in *Der Freischütz,* for example, begins and ends in F♯ minor, but what happens in between the two F♯-minor passages is clearly organized around a tonic C.

[13]This was pointed out by Lorenz, op. cit., p. 32.

A direct link between *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre* is provided by the trumpet fanfare figure commonly known as the Sword motive.[14] It first appears in the final scene of *Das Rheingold* in C major and with its characteristic scoring for solo trumpet. This figure naturally determines the use of C in the middle of Act I of *Die Walküre,* and that use of C serves to throw the remainder of the act, in which Siegmund and Sieglinde come together, away from D minor and into G. In addition, the use of the fanfare at the beginning of the prelude to Act II determines the choice of A minor as the tonality for the Brünnhilde-Wotan story which opens that act. As the dominant of D minor and the relative major of C, A minor is the only tonality clearly related to D minor upon which the C major of the fanfare could be superimposed.

The Sword motive acquires its secondary tonal association with D major when Siegfried reforges the sword at the end of *Siegfried,* Act I. In Act III of *Götterdämmerung,* the motive is heard for the last time in D at the moment when Siegfried's arm rises up to protect the ring from Hagen, and this musical event precipitates Brünnhilde's entrance onto the stage. Meanwhile, the C-major orientation of the motive has determined the tonality of the funeral music for Siegfried, and its last appearance in the cycle occurs in C in Brünnhilde's Immolation.

This is a particularly revealing instance of a motive whose tonality on its initial appearance in *Das Rheingold* was determined by the tonality of certain later structural points where Wagner intended to use it, particularly those in *Die Walküre.* The same principle applies to the other three motives with specific tonal associations.

As a summary of all these aspects of associative use of tonality, diagram 2 (page 60) shows a hypothetical reconstruction of the plan for the *Ring* as Wagner had developed it before he began composing the music for *Das Rheingold* toward the end of 1853. He had probably worked out still more of it as well, but the surviving documentary evidence, coupled with logical conjectures from it, leads only this far. If Wagner had not had such a plan in mind, it is hard to see how he could have made his first drafts with such assurance.[15] He would have been in the position of an instrumental composer who had not yet made up his mind what key his symphony would be in, what the contrasting keys would be, or how the main modulations would work.

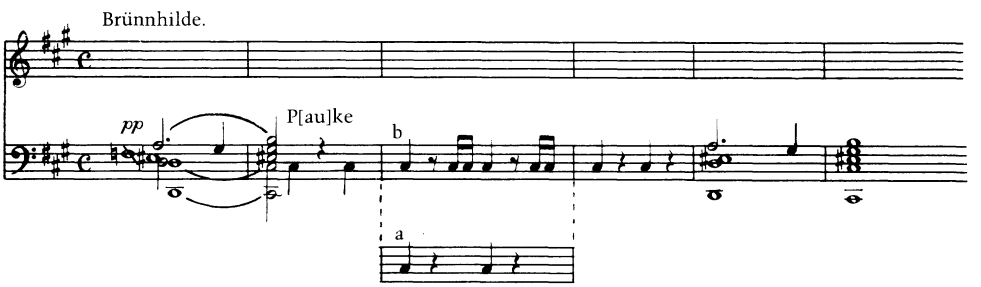
With this plan before us, we can now turn to a single scene to see how Wagner shaped the musical details on a local level in accordance with the large-scale structural and tonal elements devised in advance. The so-called *Todesverkündigung* (Annunciation of Death) is the crucial scene in Act II of *Die Walküre* where the two stories of the opera come together, each with a decisive effect on the outcome of the other. The Siegmund-Sieglinde story reaches its crisis with Siegmund's fatal decision, and the future unfolding of the Brünnhilde-Wotan story is determined by the change in Brünnhilde's character that results from her confrontation with Siegmund.

Wagner chose the tonality of F♯ minor for this scene, undoubtedly because it is equidistant from the D minor framing the first two acts

[14]This trumpet motive shows clearly the pitfall contained in the familiar names for Wagner's motives, which are often in fact quite extended melodies, and the even grosser error of assuming that the names themselves have any significance whatever. This figure appears frequently when no sword is mentioned in the text, and it is often absent when the sword is referred to. Its first appearance toward the end of *Das Rheingold* is a good example of the former situation—an appearance marking the crucial moment when Wotan experiences a foreboding of his scheme for moral regeneration of the world. In *Die Walküre,* that scheme is given momentary visual embodiment in the sword which Wotan leaves behind in Hunding's hut for Siegmund, eventually to be broken by Wotan himself during Siegmund's battle with Hunding, and finally reforged by Siegfried independently of Wotan's intervention. On the other hand, two of the last three appearances of the motive in the final scene of *Götterdämmerung* are not related to the sword at all. It would be more appropriate to regard the sword as a visual symbol of the motive, rather than the motive as a musical tag for the sword.

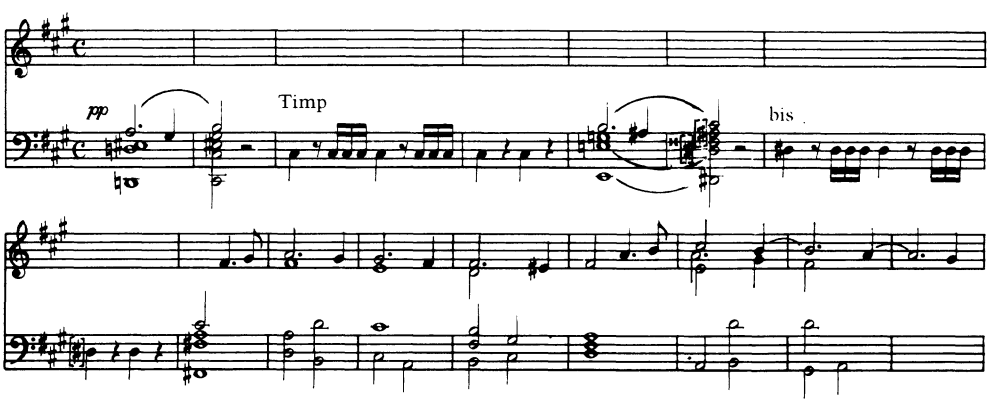
[15]These first drafts are discussed by Curt von Westernhagen, *The Forging of the 'Ring': Richard Wagner's Composition Sketches for Der Ring des Nibelungen,* trans. Arnold and Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1976). Since the tonal scheme discussed here is fully embodied in these drafts, and at this stage no longer caused Wagner any problem, it does not enter into Westernhagen's discussion.

of the opera and the B♭ minor of the contrasting episode within the scene itself, in which Siegmund addresses the sleeping Sieglinde. B♭ minor was already determined by the B♭ of the secondary episode in the latter part of Act I, which includes the so-called Spring Song. Wagner embodies the central tonal relationship between F♯ and D in a motive which juxtaposes just two harmonies—the D-minor triad, and a dominant-seventh chord on C♯, which suggests F♯. His first sketch for the beginning merely states this motive twice (ex. 1):



Example 1

Wagner next decided to move upward in sequence, simply using the melodic termination of the first statement (the note B) as the beginning of the second statement, as shown at the beginning of the second sketch (ex. 2):[16]

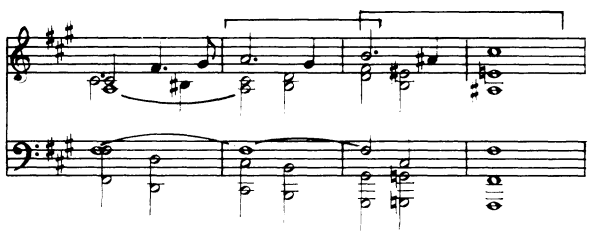


Example 2

He was now ready to add the melody which would function as the main theme of the scene, and the continuation of the sketch shows that the memorable melody familiar to us was not something that he had fully in mind before beginning to compose this scene. The first two measures are present, but Wagner only later hit upon the idea of simply duplicating his initial

[16]These two sketches have twice been published in transcription—by Werner Breig, "Das Schicksalskunde-Motiv im *Ring des Nibelungen:* Versuch einer harmonischen Analyse," in *Das Drama Richard Wagners als musikalisches Kunstwerk,* ed. Carl Dahlhaus (Regensberg, 1970), p. 230; and by Curt von Westernhagen, op. cit., p. 94. Both sets of transcriptions contain mistakes.

sequence an octave higher and reharmonizing it (ex. 3):

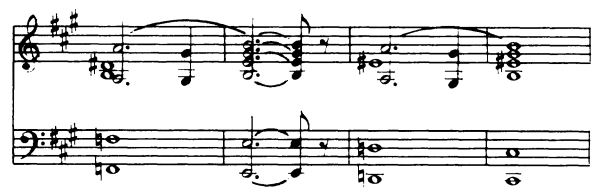


Example 3

The two sketches are both entered directly in Wagner's Preliminary Draft for the act. Made while he was actually composing the scene and setting his text, they are not preliminary studies of the usual sort, which Wagner customarily made on separate work-sheets. We catch a glimpse of a composer in the act of solving a compositional problem of detail that was to have far-reaching consequences.[17]

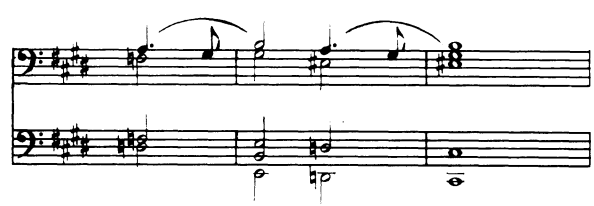
In its final form, then, this melody controls not only the design of the scene as the identifying embodiment of its tonic, F♯, but also the proportions of the scene. After the interlude in B♭, the melody returns in diminution and finally in double diminution, and the proportions of the three main tonic sections of the scene are accordingly 4:2:1 (diagram 1, page 58). In the course of the opening section, Brünnhilde sings the crucial melody first, but when Siegmund takes it, it appears with the slightly modified conclusion shown under no. 2 of the diagram. Nos. 1 through 4 use the original rhythmic form of the main theme and constitute the first half of the scene, and that section is balanced by the remainder, which consists of the interlude in B♭ (which Siegmund addresses not to Brünnhilde, but to Sieglinde), plus the sections in diminution and double diminution.

About midway through the first section, the initial motive that generated the main melody is stated twice in succession with different harmonizations, an event later to play a decisive role at the conclusion of the opera (ex. 4):



Example 4

B minor is the crucial tonality through the first half of Act III and also through portions of the final scene because of its association with the Valkyries. By the midpoint of Act III, the Brünnhilde-Wotan story has two tonalities—the A minor of Act II, and the B minor of the first half of Act III. In the final scene of the opera, which presents the conclusion of that story, Wagner shifts the tonality from B minor to E, which is midway between B minor and A minor. In addition, after Brünnhilde's last speech in the opera, her appeal to Wotan for the protective fire, Wagner alternates sections in E with sections in D, thus recalling the central tonality of the first two acts. Just before Wotan rises to summon Loge, there is a cadence to the pantomime in which Brünnhilde is put to sleep (ex. 5):



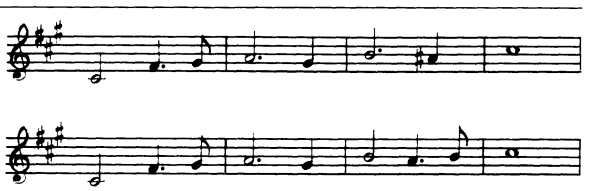
Example 5

The first statement of the motive now juxtaposes the triads of D minor and E, whereas the second statement is the original form of the motive from the beginning of the *Todesverkündigung* discussed above. Wagner now moves

[17]The two sketches occur at the end of a sheet in the Draft (at the bottom of the second side), and the final version begins at the top of a new sheet. Wagner may well have made an additional sketch on a separate work-sheet. The beginning of the new sheet was published in facsimile by Otto Strobel, "Richard-Wagner-Forschungsstätte und Archiv des Hauses Wahnfried," in *Bayreuth: Die Stadt Richard Wagners*, ed. Otto Strobel and Ludwig Deubner (Munich, 1943), p. 45.

4

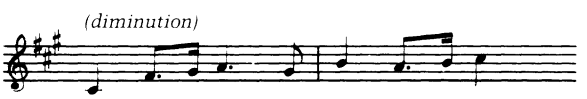
1. Brünnhilde informs Siegmund that he is doomed to die.
   f♯→F♯ (written G♭)
2. Siegmund must follow Brünnhilde to Valhalla.
   f♯→C♯ (written D♭)
3. Since Sieglinde cannot accompany him, Siegmund will not follow Brünnhilde.
   f♯→G♯
4. Brünnhilde warns Siegmund that death is inevitable since Wotan has removed the spell on the sword.
   f♯——modulating——C (SWORD)→



INTERLUDE
Siegmund addresses the sleeping Sieglinde; he reaffirms his decision not to go to Walhall.
b♭ (=a♯)

2

5. Siegmund scorns Brünnhilde.
   f♯→a
6. Siegmund will kill both Sieglinde and himself rather than be separated from her.
   a C (SWORD)→



1

7. Brünnhilde relents; she promises to defend Siegmund in the forthcoming combat.
   f♯→A

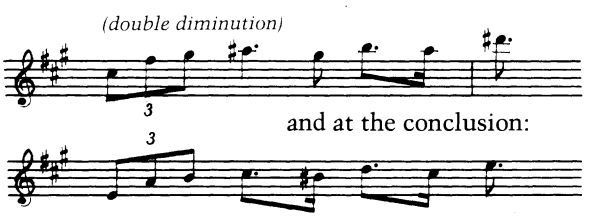
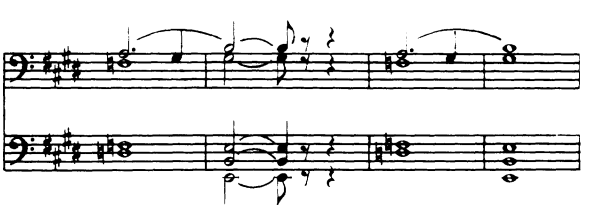


Diagram 1

from the triad on D minor to the dominant-seventh of F♯ minor in order to return to D, on the principle that any harmonic progression can be reversed and made to proceed in the opposite direction. Aside from the first of the four chords, this succession of two statements is exactly the same as that introduced in the middle of the first section of the *Todesverkündigung,* as shown in example 4. With the coming of the Magic Fire, the tonality of D returns to that of E for the last time. The real cadence of the opera is then formed with two statements of the first form of the motive, with the simple juxtaposition of the triads of D minor and E and the interval of a falling seventh in the bass (ex. 6).



Example 6

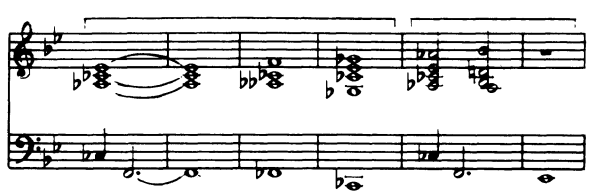
We shall conclude where Wagner began, with an examination of the structure of the first act of *Götterdämmerung,* which is outlined in diagram 3. Wagner took the two tonalities built into this act in the early musical sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod* and extended them to serve as the two polar tonalities for the entire structure. A favorite device of his was to provide some kind of signal for large-scale central relationships of this kind, and he has made that provision here by simply juxtaposing the triads of E♭ and B (spelled C♭) as the first two harmonies of the opera.[18] The relative importance of the two is roughly indicated by the fact that the initial E♭-minor triad occupies a single measure, whereas the B triad occupies seven.

The three main parts of the act are arranged so that on the largest level, the first part is entirely in E♭, the middle one goes from B to a weakened E♭, and the third is entirely in B. The two interludes with closed curtain linking these three parts make the necessary modulatory transitions from E♭ to B, but while their purely tonal function is the same, Wagner deliberately contrasted a loud climax for Part I with a "quiet climax" of even greater tension for Part II.

Part I is constructed so that the Norns' scene moves from E♭ to B, thus foreshadowing the ultimate progression of the act as a whole. The motive of the Curse functions as the cadence just before the orchestral interlude. In the second half of Part I, the Siegfried-Brünnhilde scene, B serves as the contrasting tonality to E♭, with the appearance of B defining the midpoint of this section.

In Part II, the first half moves from B to E♭, the mirror image of the tonal relationship in the Norns' scene. The Curse functions once again as a cadential refrain at the end of this first half, which is not only the midpoint of Part II but also of the whole act. Here, instead of an orchestral interlude, there is a strong cadential affirmation of B which coincides with Siegfried's entrance into the Hall of the Gibichungs. Meanwhile Siegfried's horn, with its associative F, had been introduced into the Rhine Journey, the interlude with closed curtain between Parts I and II. In the first half of Part II, just before the cadence in B, it appears again, and the tonality of F serves to weaken E♭ by deflecting it to B♭, which is equidistant between E♭ and F. This appearance of B♭ at the end of the first half of Part II prepares the tonal situation of the second half, in which B♭ nearly replaces E♭ altogether as the element of tonal contrast to B. In this way the weakening of E♭ is carried still further.

E♭ is established again at the beginning of Hagen's Watch, the extended cadential section at the conclusion of Part II. Wagner begins Hagen's Watch with the motive of the Tarnhelm, whose tonal association with B was prepared in the Nibelheim scene of *Das Rheingold* and reintroduced in the first half of Part II of this act. Thus a motive associated with B is now heard in the tonal context of E♭. By retaining the original associative pitch level of the motive itself and supplying a new continuation, Wagner brings together the central polarity of E♭ and B governing this entire structure (ex. 7):



Example 7

Because of the tonal association of this motive, this represents another dilution of the tonic strength of E♭. At the end of Hagen's Watch, E♭ is asserted clearly but with B♭ in the bass, so that the passage exploits the ambiguity of function between E♭ and B♭ (B♭ as V of E♭ *vs.* E♭ as IV of B♭). The creation of this ambiguity serves to undermine the potential tonic strength of E♭ even further.

Part III opens with E♭ once again as the contrasting key against the tonic B, but the B is transferred to its dominant, F♯, by Waltraute in

[18]The opening of *Tristan,* for example, has two short phrases which conclude with the dominant-seventh chords of A and C, the two main tonalities of the first act. *Die Meistersinger* begins with two balanced 13-measure phrases in C and F, the two primary tonalities of the first act in that opera. *Parsifal* begins with two nearly symmetrical units in A♭ and C, the central polarity of the act to follow.

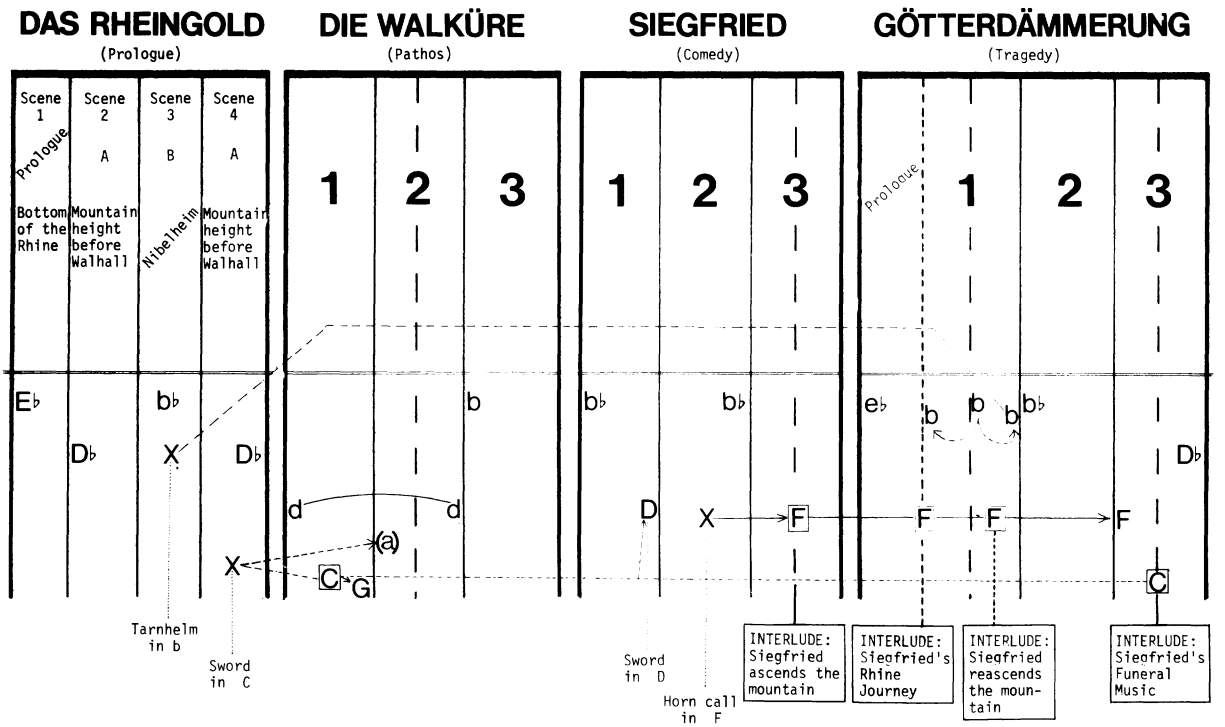


Diagram 2

her monologue. The central moment of that monologue prepares melodic material for the beginning of Brünnhilde's Immolation at the end of the opera and, even more importantly, the final subdominant cadence of the opera (the first ten of the opera's last twenty measures). This procedure with B and F♯ is analogous to that already applied to E♭ and B♭ in Part II. For the third time, the Curse functions as a refrain toward the end of the first half of Part III, but it now serves merely to initiate the cadential portion of the scene of which it is not really a part, and it is transposed to F♯ minor. The cadential section itself, together with the ensuing interlude in which Brünnhilde, alone on stage, actually sings, plays on the ambiguity of function between F♯ and B. The Curse thus retains its function as a *melodic* refrain, but loses its *cadential* function of tonal delineation. An important feature of the Curse is that it does not actually include the tonic triad. Something stronger is required for the final establishment of B as the ultimate tonic. That something is, of course, the Tarnhelm, stripped now of its continuation in E♭, and it appears at the beginning of the final scene where it serves to establish B. It functions within the scene as a recurrent refrain, and it finally functions as the determining element of the last cadence.

More than nineteen years separate the composition of this act from Wagner's sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod,* and his approach to tonality had undergone drastic and fundamental changes during that interval. The new approach permitted him to control larger structural units than ever before. The underlying tonal plan for the *Ring,* based on the principle of associative tonality, remained intact throughout, however, and Wagner was able in 1869–70 to exploit it far more thoroughly than he could have envisioned initially. The evolution of the *Ring's* structure thus parallels an evolution in Wagner's musical language which he himself could not have foreseen.

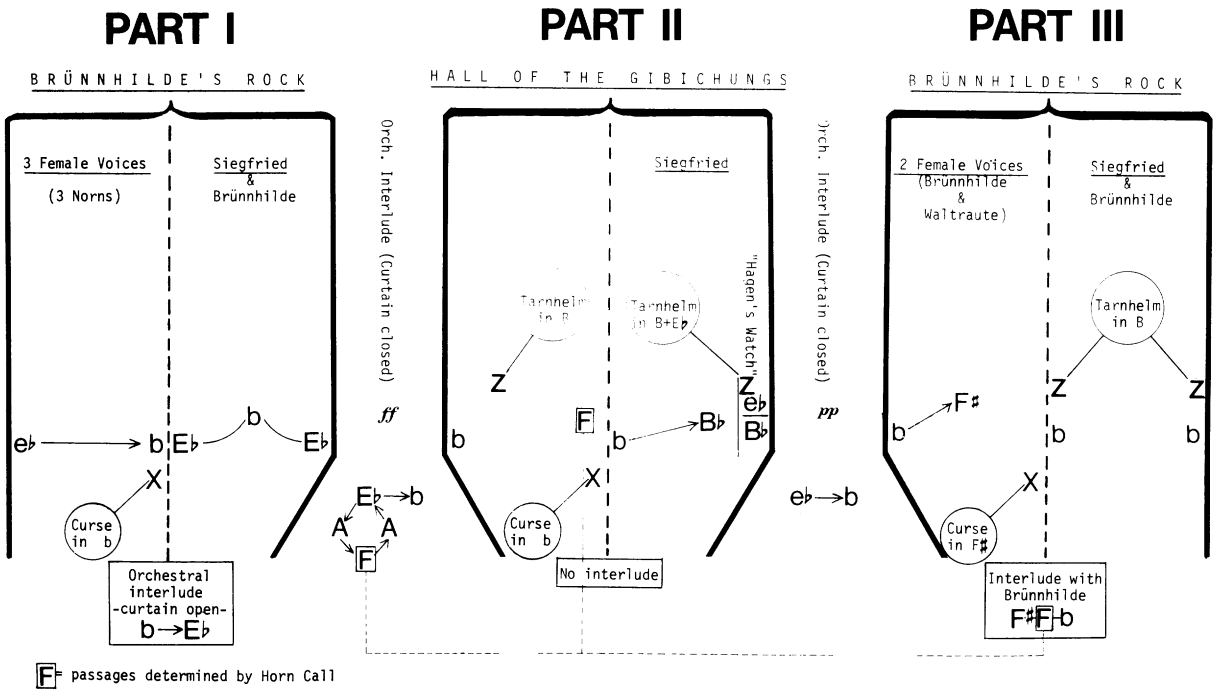


Diagram 3

In a recent commentary on the *Tristan* Prelude, Roland Jackson has remarked that "Wagner's process of composition might be called inductive, in that it seems to proceed from details to the whole, rather than, as is sometimes assumed, from a preconceived plan of the entire work."[19] The examples we have just examined indicate that while Jackson's remark may well have some truth with regard to the working out of the compositional details within an individual scene or structural unit, a "preconceived plan of the entire work" is precisely what guides the formation of those details and relates them to a much larger context. Wagner's procedure in fact seems analogous to that of an instrumental composer who devises his main melodic and motivic details with a view to how they will fit into his formal design. Wagner's position was surely similar to that of Charles Dickens who in the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend,* his most masterfully constructed novel and the last one he actually finished, expressed his concern for "the relations of its finer threads to the whole pattern which is always before the eyes of the story weaver at his loom."

[19] "*Leitmotive* and Form in the *Tristan* Prelude," *Music Review* 36 (1975), 42.