

Wagner's Personal Focus on Independence

Sid Samberg, Spring 2018

Richard Wagner did not only leave us some of the most important operas ever composed, but also a tremendous wealth of writings and letters, giving us enormous insight into his life and philosophy. It is no surprise that the 1983 film *Wagner*, in its entirety, runs nearly nine hours- we know enough about his life that a depiction of it easily became a sweeping, grand-scale movie, no less dramatic than a full cycle of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, his unprecedented four-opera epic. Wagner was no devotee of subtlety or restraint; his only goal was to bring as much fulfillment and wonder to his audiences (and especially in Wagner's case, to himself) as possible, using a combination of multiple arts and daring levels of intensity in his work never experienced before. However, he placed special emphasis on music as a uniquely critical practice- elevating it to the point of mythical godhood, as though it had an agenda of its own. As he described in his manifesto *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* ("The Artwork of the Future", written in 1850- notably, around the same time he began serious work on *Der Ring des Nibelungen*):

*"Thus has Music of herself fulfilled what neither of the other severed arts had skill to do. Each of these arts but eked out her own self-centred emptiness by taking, and egoistic borrowing; neither, therefore, had the skill to be herself, and of herself to weave the girdle wherewith to link the whole. But Tone, in that she was herself completely, and moved amid her own unsullied element, attained the force of the most heroic, most lovable self-sacrifice,- of mastering, nay of renouncing 'her own self; to reach out to her sisters the hand of rescue. She thus has kept herself as heart that binds both head and limbs in one; and it is not without significance, that it is precisely the art of Tone which has gained so wide extension through all the branches of our modern public life."*¹

¹ Richard Wagner, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, 1850, p. 122
(<http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagartfut.htm#d0e1794>)

This depiction of “tone” as a selfless and immortal heroine may seem familiar to those who have experienced Wagner’s works, in particular *Die Walkure*. It bears a striking resemblance to the plight of Brunnhilde, the Valkyrie, who defied her father Wotan (king of the gods) for the sake of love, or more generally, *independence* from outside rulers, a theme Wagner returns to again and again. This theme of independence runs deeply through both the Ring cycle and Wagner’s own personal philosophy. There are a number of instances in the Ring in which the idea of *love* appears central to the plot, on a surface level. To list a number of examples:

Alberich, the Nibelung dwarf responsible for stealing the Rhinemaidens’ gold to make the ring of power in the first place, is unable to do so until he renounces love to gain the ultimate power- which, previous to the events in the story, was thought by the gods to be the ultimate deterrent to those hoping to claim such a prize. When Brunnhilde defies her father, as mentioned before, it is for the sake of the love she witnesses between Siegmund and Sieglinde, two humans around whom she would normally have to act as an otherworldly and uncaring outsider. Wotan, Brunnhilde’s father, had ordered Brunnhilde not to help Siegmund in a battle, in order to regain control of the Ring; a renouncement of his own love, for Wotan had secretly fathered the mortal Siegmund. At her betrayal, he maroons her (after turning her into a mortal) on a desolate rock to sleep forever- until, that is, she is awakened by one who loves her, the hero Siegfried, who is the son of the aforementioned Siegmund and Sieglinde. At the end of the epic, when Siegfried is murdered in cold blood by the other gods, Brunnhilde throws herself onto his funeral pyre, destroying the gods and their home in the process. Love is a powerful force in this story; but running even deeper through it is the idea of *independence*, a force inextricably connected to what we see as “love” but also running *apart* from love, a dream perhaps not as easily attained. All of the examples of love given above in the opera also have to do with independence, in addition to a number of other crucial scenes which (seemingly) have less to do with the concept of

love, but a great deal to do with independence. I will examine how Wagner hoped to use *Der Ring des Nibelungen* to suggest his love for independence, for better or for worse, and will explain why I believe that his ultimate goal was to show its importance.

When Alberich renounced love to steal the ring from the Rhinemaidens, was he really renouncing “love” in the superficial sense? What we often refer to as “romantic love?” The British musicologist and Wagnerian scholar Robert Donington didn’t think so. He reminds us that “a mermaid’s embrace does not stand for human intercourse” (a crude but perhaps relevant point- could Alberich have been after something more meaningful?), and proceeds to theorize that,

*“On this level of interpretation, the essence of what Alberich renounced was not the love of woman. It was an undue dependence on the love of woman. He renounced the infantile fantasy of being mothered through life...”*²

This is an important distinction, although it may carry a misogynistic undercurrent. It is very possible that Alberich’s renunciation of love was meant to be a desperate grasp at autonomy; he might well have known that the Rhinemaidens would *never* accept him as somebody to show affection towards, and used this as an excuse to unleash chaos upon the world as much as possible- sadly, a not-uncommon occurrence amongst misguided men. Was Wagner warning against such a *dependence* on love- or even more broadly, acceptance? Some have theorized that Wagner was a sort of champion of women (whether it was intentional or not) in his operatic stories, citing the heroism and triumph of Brunnhilde and comparative downplaying of Siegfried’s role in man’s salvation as possible proof of this idea³. However, we also know that Wagner’s personal life was wrought with insecure love and infidelity- and marked by a mistrust

² Robert Donington, *Wagner’s ‘Ring’ and its Symbols* (Faber & Faber, 2013), p. 62

³ Natasha Walter, *Wagner’s Women*, (The Guardian, 2006)

(<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/apr/15/classicalmusicandopera>)

of women, including his own mother⁴- so we cannot know for sure his views on feminism.

Regardless of this, the idea that Alberich may not have *renounced* love so much as *claimed* independence from it may be the beginning of Wagner's long-form operatic manifesto.

With all the dramatic heroism surrounding Siegfried, the child of the mortals Siegmund and Sieglinde, it can be easy to forget that he is the son of an incestuous brother and sister. They are not aware of this when they become lovers; just as they are not aware that each is the child of Wotan, king of the gods, who had fathered each separately and in secret with mortal women. Wotan's wife, Fricka, illustrates to Wotan that his *dependence* on sexual love (especially from those over whom he holds great influence and power) has also given birth to a crisis. He had attempted to create a sort of superhuman via the mixing of godly and human DNA, curiously meant to protect the gods themselves (a simplified Nietzschean idea?)- but, now that his children have inadvertently committed incest, Fricka (who also reminds Wotan that she is the goddess of marriage) declares that Siegmund must not be assisted in his fight with Hunding (Sieglinde's original husband, now incensed at her affair with Siegmund.) Wotan's response to Fricka's disgust is a surprise, made even more shocking by the fact that these are *his own children*:

"Learn from this that things can ordain themselves though they have never happened before. That these two love each other is obvious to you. Listen to some honest advice: Smile on their love, and bless Siegmund and Sieglinde's union."

Wotan's perspective is probably not only about the beauty of pure love, as it may seem at first glance- his words may call for independence from the *norns*, mythical beings who spin the thread of fate for the gods, allowing them the blessing (or more often, the curse) of knowing exactly what events will befall them, and when. Wotan knows that the norns have foreseen his

⁴ Michael Kennedy, *Wagner and his Ring of Women* (The Telegraph, 2004) (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3633651/Wagner-and-his-ring-of-women.html>)

end, along with the rest of the gods, now that Alberich set such a cataclysmic event in motion with his theft of the magical gold. Bryan Magee suggests that Wagner “is speaking through Wotan” with this further rejection of fatalism⁵:

“You only want to understand, always, what you are used to: my mind is reaching out towards things that have never happened.”

What could be the point of this unusual display of open-mindedness and carefree thinking from such a commanding and relentless figure as Wotan, king of the gods? Perhaps he too desires a life of independence (or independent thinking) from others, especially in this case from his wife, whom he intensely defies in planning to keep Siegmund alive in his altercation (although he later relents.) The quote above may relate to Wagner’s idea of the “Artwork of the Future”- is it possible that he saw himself as the only artist willing to “look ahead” to the future of artistic practice, his mind “reaching out towards things that have never happened”? This type of independent thinking had been expressed by Wagner, who unabashedly saw himself as the first composer to truly pick up the baton of grand artistic creation after Beethoven (whom he idolized as having brought music to its former apotheosis with the 9th symphony)⁶. Perhaps with the creation of the Ring cycle itself, Wagner was making a statement- that only he, working independently, was able to bring music to its next heights in the western world.

This idea of the lone hero with a creative duty- one which he alone can and must carry out- also shares a similarity with the story of Siegfried (the son of Siegmund and Sieglinde) and his rise to heroic heights, as told in the third opera of the cycle. Raised by the dwarf Mime (the brother of Alberich, the original thief of the gold), Mime is constantly attempting to craft a sword which Siegfried might use to slay the giant Fafner (now transformed into a fearsome dragon, watching over the gold.) His efforts are always fruitless, as Siegfried is able to smash each

⁵ Bryan Magee, *Aspects of Wagner* (Stein and Day, 1969), p. 65

⁶ J. Peter Burkholder, *A History of Western Music* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2014), p. 683

sword in two immediately- perhaps in the same way that, according to Wagner, the efforts of all other musicians following in the footsteps of Beethoven had led to nothing:

*“Beyond [Beethoven’s final symphony] there can be no progress, for there can follow on it immediately only the completed artwork of the future, the universal drama, to which Beethoven has forged for us the artistic key.”*⁷

Forged for us! Beethoven’s “artistic key” may easily be represented by the sword, which ultimately is indeed forged- but only once Siegfried decides to take matters into his own hands. Acting independently, he forges the perfect sword himself, just as Wagner attempted to forge the “unbreakable” artwork, previously thought unattainable by mere mortals since mythical legends (such as Beethoven) once walked the earth.

However, even with this interpretation, which glorifies the independence of the creative hero taking on a burden, something is still not right in the story. Siegfried only *thinks* he is acting independently in forging such a perfect creation. The reality is that Wotan orchestrated the forging of the sword to his own end. He wanted to slay Fafner as well, to attain the gold, but knew he needed Siegfried (“the man who knows no fear”) to forge the appropriate weapon- and even Wotan only knew of this crucial ability thanks to the norns, bringing everything back into the hand of fate, rather than resulting from any sort of independent action. This idea of invisible powers pulling the strings behind notable events was problematic to Wagner; so much so that for much of his life, he was an avowed political anarchist, even having taken part in the Dresden Uprising of 1849⁸.

In his deep analysis of Wagnerian politics and philosophy, *The Tristan Chord*, Bryan Magee finds perhaps the greatest argument of all for *independence* representing the pinnacle of

⁷ Richard Wagner, *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft*, 1850, excerpt found in J. Peter Burkholder, *A History of Western Music* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2014), p. 686

⁸ Matthew D’ancona, *The Politics of Wagner’s Ring* (The Guardian, 2016) (<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/22/matthew-dancona-the-politics-of-wagners-ring-cycle-opera-north>)

Wagnerian utopia. The end of the reign of gods over men, the *Gotterdammerung* (“Twilight of the Gods”, the name of the fourth and final opera), is brought on by two young and independent thinkers, Siegfried and his former- Valkyrie bride Brunnhilde. Their very relationship stands in rebellion to Wotan, who had conspired (however much it was originally against his will) to keep Siegfried from being born, and who had imprisoned Brunnhilde in endless sleep. It was an ironic twist of fate for Wotan that Siegfried was the one who was able to wake her; together, they end the grip of power held by the gods over mortals once and for all, dying for the ultimate pursuit: independence. The “sweeping aside” of Wotan’s attempted establishment of order by the young and emboldened Siegfried may represent the ideals of the anarchist Wagner, who dreamt of sweeping aside the existing order of things in his homeland (and his creative world!)⁹. When Siegfried is killed later in the opera, having been literally stabbed in the back by a power-hungry establishment figure (one of the other gods), Brunnhilde throws herself onto Siegfried’s funeral pyre, and the resulting conflagration is what burns down Valhalla and destroys the world of the gods. Considering her confined, impersonal, and disastrous experiences during her own godhood compared to the boundless ecstasy of her short time as a mortal, it is clear that Brunnhilde’s sacrifice was not simply for “love” alone- it was an effort to usher in a new utopia for mortals, one governed only by a natural state of independence. Magee reminds us that the “anarchy” Wagner had in mind was not one of unbridled chaos, but of bountiful freedom:

“As depicted by The Ring the state of Nature, far from being red in tooth and claw, was peaceful, harmonious, carefree. The imposition of any sort of artificial order on it was something that could only ever have been done by unnatural force, and could only ever have been an unnecessary wrong from whose consequences the world could recover only by returning to a state of nature itself.”¹⁰

Perhaps it is this very state of nature that Wagner was calling for with the Ring epic.

⁹ Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord* (Metropolitan Books, 2000), p. 107

¹⁰ Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord* (Metropolitan Books, 2000), pp. 110-111

Frustrated with the institutionalization, privatization, and separation of art mediums, Wagner called the people to action with the most dramatic production possible, to offer others a glimpse into the “music of the future”. In the Ring cycle, Wagner had various art forms (music, drama, visual art, poetry, etc) acting in eager harmony with one another, rather than kept ordered and staid, and was the first to accomplish this at such a scale- seemingly cementing his status as a champion of the independent and dutiful visionary. For Wagner, the time for a new genesis of art was long overdue, and ushering in this new age would spark unforeseen events of great intensity and complexity, such as the Ring. As described by Wagner in an 1854 letter to August Rockel:

“My poem...reveals Nature in her undisguised truth, with all those inconsistencies which, in their endless multiplicity, embrace even directly conflicting elements.” (...) “The necessity of prolonging beyond the point of change the subjection to the tie that binds [Wotan and Fricka]- a tie resulting from an involuntary illusion of love, the duty of maintaining at all costs the relation into which they have entered, and so placing themselves in hopeless opposition to the universal law of change and renewal, which governs the world of phenomena- these are the conditions which bring the pair of them to a state of torment and natural lovelessness.”¹¹

For the gods in the Ring, this “universal law of change” meant the renunciation of their power over man. But for Wagner, it meant victory over the godly figures who had ruled the creative world in his earlier life, a sort of reclamation (or discovery) of independence, and the Ring was its clarion call. He had envisioned tearing down the seemingly impenetrable wall erected by Beethoven only 25 years prior with the 9th Symphony, and he felt his duty was to prove that even greater artwork was still to be made. Whether he also foresaw a sort of *Gotterdammerung* for his new artistic utopia is still up for debate.

¹¹Richard Wagner, letter to August Rockel (1854), from *Wagner on Music and Drama*, (E.P. Dutton & Co., 1964), translated by H. Ashton Ellis, pp. 290-291

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