

Sound as Story in Wagner's *Ring: Götterdämmerung*

This essay is an excerpt from Saul Lilienstein's *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: An Interpretive Journey*, a book awaiting publication. It first appeared in *Wagneriana*, a publication of the Boston Wagner Society.

THE PROLOGUE

Late in the afternoon I've sat on the sands by the Atlantic Ocean, staring at the clear heavens above me, imagining the immense expanse of darkening blue to be the iris of an eye. Is it a pagan deity who watches us: the earth and its inhabitants? Are we a pin point at the center of his vision? Just one solitary and watchful eye; its heart beats 93 million miles away within the sun, which is slowly dying and lost beyond all measure of time. The god sacrificed his other eye as the price that had to be paid to gain infinite wisdom. He drank from the stream of all knowledge; he severed a branch from the tree of life, known in the Hebrew scriptures as the Etz Chaim, to fashion a spear that became the symbol of his authority and responsibility. Now the stream began to run dry and the tree is dying. The inexorable countdown has begun. We have only a little time left before the god is dead and his world is gone.

This is the story that the three Norns tell us as the prologue begins the opera *Götterdämmerung – The Twilight of the Gods*. In the hands of these three women, the threads of man's destiny are woven. At the opening of *Das Rheingold*, the first opera in Wagner's four music dramas that comprise *The Ring of the Nibelung*, there were three frivolous Rhinemaidens singing to us. Now the first of many symmetries has begun, informing us that a full circle will soon be closed. Owen Lee described the carefree Rhine- maidens as singing a lullaby to the newborn earth. Are we now hearing the mythic resonance of that – a prophetic threnody that announces the end? They sing in tribute to the world ash tree. Its sturdy branches once protected the earth. They sing in tribute to the flowing spring that once nourished wisdom. And they sing of the sorrowing god, Wotan, sitting in dignity, awaiting the destruction of his throne in the sky. But the woven threads snap; the power of prophecy and wisdom snaps with it. The Norns sink back into Mother Earth.

With just one solitary and watchful eye, Wotan can only observe and wait. He had willingly relinquished all powers to Siegfried and Brünnhilde, the children of his own blood. A new day begins. Phrase by phrase, the French horns will describe the hero awakening. First, just four tones; then, the entire theme. The love song of Siegfried's bride is heard, introduced by a solo clarinet. Warming to the day, developing and expanding, she has grown through the night into the full bloom of her womanliness. With a crescendo to full orchestra, we then hear the full potential of Siegfried, a young hero standing in sunlight.

True to its medieval sources, there are deeds of valor for a young knight to accomplish. Brünnhilde loves him enough to let him go. She will remain behind, rich in love and desire, awaiting his return. She has imparted to him all the knowledge that the gods had given to her. Along with his pledge of loyalty and love, Siegfried's gift to her is a golden ring – wrenched from a dying dragon. Siegfried and Brünnhilde are convinced that the world belongs to them. Their thrilling scene ends in a final burst of blind optimism with the full orchestra at fortissimo level, shaking the air. These two are on their own now, the unwitting vessels of the world's destiny.

This has been Richard Wagner composing at an inspired level, rising to the demands of the myth with exalted music. Even so, the connection to simpler human experience is always a factor, enabling us to recognize this man, this woman. Like so many wives, this one has

sent her husband off on his day of work, sealed it with a kiss and the hope that he will stay out of trouble.

FOUR HOURS LATER

The funeral procession has begun. A self-contained threnody, a concentration of grief introduced by a pair of orchestral chords, followed by a visceral phrase that winds in sorrow through the strings. Together, they confirm Siegfried's death with grim finality. Wagner uses these two motivic sources to bind together an orchestral review of Siegfried's life that grants full honor to his enormous and lost potential. Tenor tubas and French horns identify Wotan's human family, the Wälsungs. Siegmund and Sieglinde are remembered by fragile song in the woodwinds. Siegfried never knew his parents, but we did.

The violins' phrase of mourning expands in gradual crescendo to a return of the sword motif, Wotan's original "great idea," and then Siegfried's own horn theme. This is all Siegfried *could* have been: the man, his father's sword, his own thrilling theme; the embodiment of a genuine hero. Richard Wagner made too great a demand on life. He and his creations for the stage lived in a state of ecstasy, and that is the way they die.

The procession reaches the Hall of the Gibichungs. At last, Gunther defies his brother, but it is only to claim the ring on Siegfried's hand for himself. The two men fight, but Gunther is no match for Hagen. His death is swift and brutal. In *Das Rheingold*, so long ago, two giant brothers fought like this over a golden treasure. Like these, one of them died. It is a fearful symmetry. Hagen grasps for the ring, but Father Wotan's last vestige of power courses through the body of his dead grandchild. Siegfried's arm rises in menace, and even Hagen is dumbstruck, unable to move.

It's time for Brünnhilde to take the stage. The orchestra tells us how she has grown in stature and authority. She has been told by the Rhinemaidens of the treacheries and

deceptions heaped upon Siegfried. Yes, he betrayed her, but without conscious intent. No man was ever more pure in his love. On her command a funeral pyre is erected and his body lifted onto it. She knows what she must do for the memory of her lover and for her father, Wotan, painfully waiting for the circle to be closed. It will be a woman's gift to them both. For Richard Wagner, man's redemption has always depended on woman's sacrifice.

Wagner eventually came to believe that the most profound form of love was compassion. His final opera, *Parsifal*, is filled with that belief. This is the moment where he gives that concept its first full expression. Brünnhilde sings to her father, "Be at rest. Rest, you god." She removes the ring from Siegfried's finger, but she has taken it only to give it away. It will be a woman's gift to the world. The Rhinemaidens are waiting to cleanse the ring of its curse. The great scene is about to reach its musical and dramatic apotheosis. Brünnhilde sets the funeral pyre ablaze. Long ago as a Valkyrie, she rode her horse across the sky at Wotan's command. Soon she will ride into the flames as they consume her lover. Wotan's ravens are sent home with a message: the time has come to put the torch to Valhalla. In the midst of this, a melody from *Die Walküre* is restored. It was Sieglinde's ecstatic praise of Brünnhilde. (Wagner has been holding back with this one for 22 years.) It is heard in the highest winds and in Brünnhilde's voice, and it will return.

She leaps! Flames immediately flare up and fill the Hall of the Gibichungs. They scorch the entire stage in a catastrophic purging fire. The Rhine River overflows its banks, inundating the raging blaze. Hagen's lust for power has driven him mad. He plunges into the flood, grasping for the ring before the Rhinemaidens can reclaim it, but they entwine their arms around his neck and drown him. The ring is theirs at last. Woodwinds describe their playful rejoicing. In the distance Valhalla can be seen in glowing beams of fire. The gods are accepting their own destruction. Their music resounds first in the lower brass instruments until the full section of winds join them and together sing farewell to Wotan in a crescendo of immense nobility.

What is going to happen to our world? Wagner wrote six different versions of Brünnhilde's final address. According to Michael Tanner, "The interweaving of motifs, the counterpoint of crucial themes is so brilliant and so moving that we are willing to accept the composer's promise that the music will make everything clear." The music made everything clear to Thomas Mann, who said about Richard Wagner: "His heart's true prophesy is the heavenly melody which rises from the burning citadel and proclaims in accents of music the same message as that in the closing words of Goethe's *Faust*: "Das ewig-weibliche zieht uns hinan – the eternal feminine spirit leads us on."

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