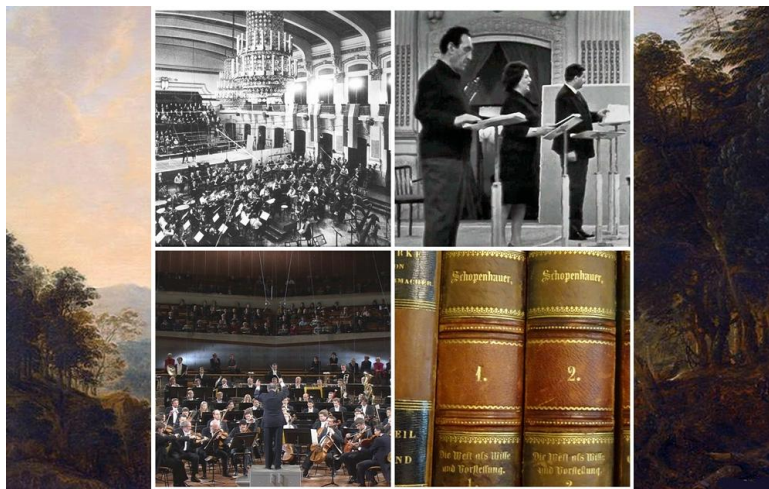


ENLIGHTENMENT THROUGH SUFFERING AND LOVE, WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO *GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG*

Peter Bassett



My first encounter with *Götterdämmerung* came via the incomparable Solti recordings with the Vienna Philharmonic in the 1960s, shown here in the two photos at the top. Below, on the left, is the Berlin Philharmonic playing the sublime ending to *Götterdämmerung*. And at the bottom right are two volumes from Wagner's own library in *Haus Wahnfried* - Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* ('The World as Will and Representation') - which had a profound effect on Wagner and especially on his plans for the ending of the *Ring*.

Many admirers of the *Ring* regard *Götterdämmerung* as a drama of reminiscence, and certainly it contains references to or parallels with

almost everything that has gone before. Even its basic structure of a prologue and three acts mirrors the ‘preliminary evening and three days’ structure of the whole *Ring*. This final ‘day’, it could be said, is not only a continuation of the story but also an elaborate mosaic of reminiscences.

And yet, describing *Götterdämmerung* as a drama of reminiscence presupposes that it was the culmination of creative processes. This is true of its music (which was largely composed in the early 1870s), but its text was written before any of the other *Ring* dramas. So, it is a human drama in its own right and, I believe, can stand alone.



In 1854 Franz Liszt produced an opera by the composer Heinrich Dorn, who was a contemporary of Wagner. Dorn’s opera was called *Die Nibelungen* and, in it, Wagner’s niece, Johanna, sang the role of Brünnhilde. Dorn was Wagner’s rival and critic in Dresden, and when Wagner had had his contract in Riga cancelled in 1839, Dorn was appointed as his successor. Wagner was furious but, nevertheless, fled across the border in the middle of the night because he was unable to settle his debts.

Years later, Dorn described a rehearsal of Act II of *Tristan und Isolde* in Munich as being so static that he was tempted to turn and bite his neighbour just to liven things up!

It was Dorn who suggested to Wagner that *Siegfrieds Tod* should begin with a summary of earlier events, an idea that appealed to Wagner; hence the Norns’ scene and the parting of Siegfried and Brünnhilde on Brünnhilde’s rock. And so there is a long Prologue, and Act I begins with meetings in the hall of the Gibichungs involving Gunther, Hagen and Siegfried.¹

¹ See Adelyn Peck Leverett, *Liszt, Wagner and Heinrich Dorn's Die Nibelungen*. Cambridge Opera Journal, Volume 2, Issue 2, 1990.



Das Nibelungenlied.

Dorn's opera *Die Nibelungen* was based on the Middle High German epic poem, the *Nibelungenlied* ('Song of the Nibelungs') which dates from around 1200 AD, and which also caught Wagner's attention. Geoff Fisher spoke memorably about it at one of our meetings in 2021, and it is interesting to see how Wagner used some details from the old poem but rejected others.



Heinrich Salomon as Siegfried in Dorn's *Die Nibelungen*. It was a successful opera, for a while, with twenty performances in Berlin and numerous revivals elsewhere. But by the end of the 1850s, Dorn's friendship with Liszt had faded, and his attitude towards Wagner had relapsed into the old mixture of resentment, hostility, and total incomprehension. His last three operas were light comedies, and all played to empty houses. [Leverett, *op.cit.*]



A photo from the film *Die Nibelungen* made by the Austrian director Fritz Lang in 1924. It was based on the medieval poem, and we can see the Burgundian King Gunther on the left and the vassal Hagen of Tronje in the centre. Tronje was within the kingdom of the Burgundians and not far from where Siegfried was said to have grown up in Xanten, now in North Rhine-Westphalia but in those days in the Netherlands.

There is nothing in the *Nibelungenlied* to suggest that Hagen's father was Alberich, although in the Old Norse *Thidrekssaga*, Hagen was said to have been Gunther's half-brother, fathered by an elf on the king's wife while the king was away! I wonder who thought that up! On the right in this picture is the elegantly dressed hero Prince Siegfried who, according to the *Nibelungenlied*, was the son of King Siegmund and Queen Sieglind of Xanten in the Netherlands.

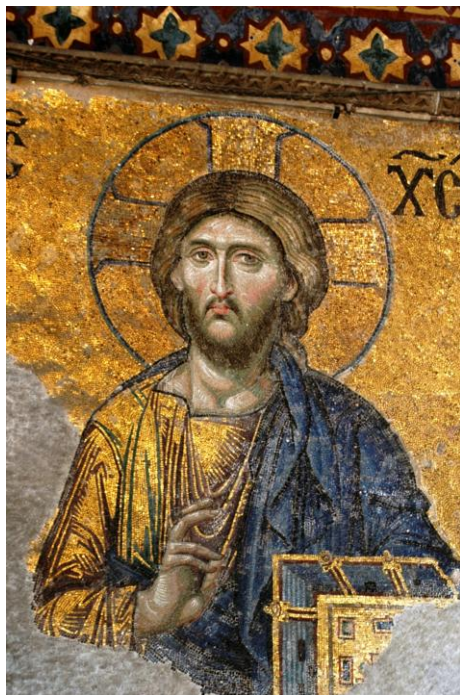
The term 'Nibelungs' in the poem describes not mythological dwarves but the Burgundians who acquired a vast hoard of treasure thanks to Siegfried. The treasure was originally owned by a lord named Nibelung and guarded by a dwarf called Alberich. It was won by Siegfried in battle, passed to the Burgundian royal house (the Nibelungs), and was eventually stolen by Hagen and sunk in the Rhine. By that time, the name 'Nibelungs', or more precisely 'Niflungs', referred to the Burgundians as a whole.

The plot of the *Nibelungenlied* is simply as follows: Having won the amazonian queen Brunhild for king Gunther in exchange for Gunther's sister Kriemhild, prince Siegfried is murdered by Gunther's vassal Hagen after a quarrel between the queens; for which Kriemhild finally avenges

him. So that's it in a nutshell, and we can see just how much Wagner did to create his own version.

The *Nibelungenlied* inspired Wagner to dramatise Siegfried's murder by Hagen during a hunt, but there are no pagan gods in this poem (after all, the kingdom was Christian by the 13th century), and neither are there any gods on stage in *Götterdämmerung*. But, in the opera, there are superstitious references to a primitive past by Alberich in his nocturnal visit to Hagen, by Hagen and the Gibichung vassals, and by Brünnhilde and Gunther under Hagen's influence in the vengeance trio.

There was a Christian connection in Wagner's mind at the time of *Siegfried's Tod*. As early as January 1849, he had plans for an opera called *Jesus of Nazareth*.



Jesus of Nazareth focussed on the tension between love and law which, of course, is an idea that resonates throughout the *Ring*. Wagner regarded Jesus's most revolutionary act as overturning the assumption that violence can only be defeated by further acts of violence or, to put it another way, that lovelessness can be overcome by being loveless. In *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde, inspired by love, frees the world from the curse of an all-consuming, all-destroying obsession with power.

Wagner was influenced by the writings of the contemporary philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach whose book *The Essence of Christianity* burst like a bombshell on the German intellectual scene in the early 1840s. There were also influences from Proudhon and the Young Hegelians, who regarded Jesus as a social revolutionary. The opera *Jesus of Nazareth* reached the point of a complete five Act scenario before being abandoned, but there's no doubt that some of its ideas made it into the *Ring*.

Götterdämmerung, as we know it, is a distinctly human drama, just as the *Nibelungenlied* is a distinctly human poem reflecting the politics and

social concerns of its time. And there are some points in common. In the poem, Gunther wants to marry the Icelandic Queen Brünnhild and, in return for Siegfried's help, offers him the hand of his sister Kriemhild. So, here are parallels with Wagner's depiction of the drugged Siegfried abducting Brünnhilde to be Gunther's bride and taking Gutrune for himself. In the long run through, Wagner became more interested in the Norse mythological sources - and it was those works that shaped the earlier parts of the *Ring* story by introducing pagan gods such as Wotan, Fricka, Donner, Froh and Loge (to give them their German names), the story of the Volsung twins Siegmund and Sieglinde (or Sigmund and Signý in Norse), the character of Sigurd (or Siegfried as we know him), and the role of the Woodbird etc.. All of these things came from the Norse versions of the story – the *Prose Edda*, the *Poetic Edda* and the *Völsunga Saga*.

Traditional operatic features in *Götterdämmerung*, which some commentators regard as throwbacks to outdated operatic forms, actually reflect its humanistic and historical origins. *Götterdämmerung* is fundamentally different from the other parts of the *Ring*, and this was largely influenced by its sources in the *Nibelungenlied* and by Wagner's own preceding operas, especially *Lohengrin*.

Consider typical operatic examples, such as the tenor/baritone duet for the swearing of blood-brotherhood; the vassals' chorus; the vengeance trio; the appearance of Alberich to Hagen as he slumbers on watch, and Siegfried's funeral march, all of which were created for the 1848 text of *Siegfrieds Tod*, written in the shadow of *Lohengrin*. *Lohengrin* was finished in April 1848 and the draft of *Siegfrieds Tod* begun just five months later. I can't help thinking that, in Wagner's mind, the setting and circumstances of *Lohengrin* in the Duchy of Brabant was naturally associated with the *Nibelungenlied*, rediscovered in the second half of the 18th century and immensely popular in the 19th century.

Some comparisons....

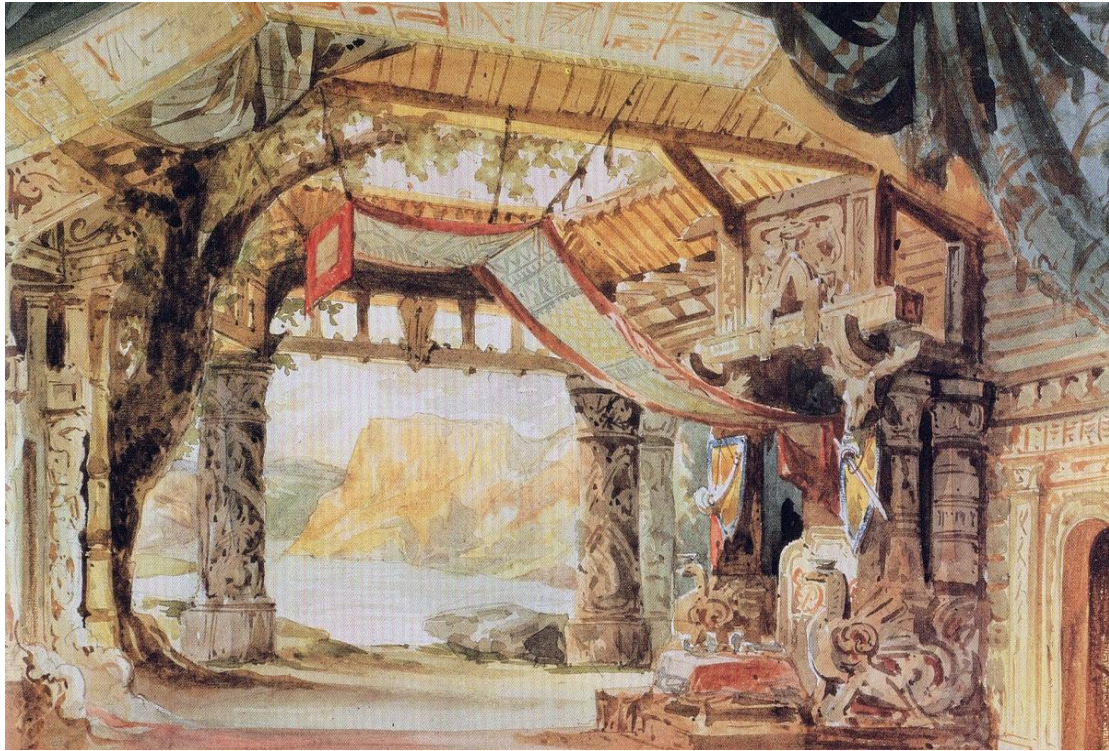


Lohengrin arrives in a boat being drawn by a swan, and Siegfried arrives in a boat carrying the horse Grane.



Lohengrin is welcomed by the Brabantines on the banks of the River Scheldt, and Siegfried is welcomed by the Gibichungs on the banks of the River Rhine.





The Siegfried/Gunther blood brotherhood duet has a precedent in the duet between Lohengrin and Telramund leading to their duel. As a young man, Wagner conducted dozens of operas by other composers and would have become familiar with many duets between tenors and baritones, especially those in Mozart's operas. The Lohengrin/Telramund duet is shorter, but they sing in unison: "God will pass rightful judgement on me, so I'll trust in him, not in my strength." And then they whack into each other with their swords!

The eerie nocturnal conversation between Hagen and his father Alberich outside the hall of the Gibichungs (so-called 'Hagen's Watch') has a touch of the nocturnal conversation between Ortrud and Elsa outside the Citadel at Antwerp. Alberich urges his son to share his misery, and Ortrud warns Elsa not to trust blindly in her happiness. Both scenes are very Shakespearean, and Wagner once said that Shakespeare was the "greatest poet of all times". He recorded how he studied English in order "to read Shakespeare and thoroughly master him ... I soon dropped English again" he said, "but Shakespeare ever remained my model." As a fourteen-year-old in 1827, his first dramatic undertaking was a Five Act drama called *Leubald und Adelaïde*, of which he later wrote: "The story is practically a variation of *Hamlet* ... my hero is driven by the apparition of his father and by his call for revenge." Which sounds exactly like the Hagen/Alberich scene.

There is no funeral march in *Lohengrin*, but we have a wedding march instead. Vengeance in *Lohengrin* is sought by Ortrud, Telramund and their companions, and in *Götterdämmerung* by Brünnhilde, Hagen and Gunther.



This is a still from the wonderful 1964 *Götterdämmerung* recording in the Sofiensaal by the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Georg Solti, with Birgit Nilsson as Brünnhilde, Gottlob Frick as Hagen and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Gunther.

Brünnhilde calls for vengeance, and Hagen decides how he'll kill Siegfried. He'll plunge his spear into Siegfried's back because, according to a vengeful Brünnhilde, only his back remained unprotected by her charms. In the *Nibelungenlied*, Hagen tricks a naïve Kriemhild into revealing that a linden leaf had stuck to Siegfried's back and left a vulnerable spot where, otherwise, the dragon's blood in which he'd bathed would have protected him. There is a link here too with another opera considered by Wagner in early 1849 but later abandoned.



The proposed opera *Achilles* depicted the hero of the Trojan War exercising his free will, like Siegfried, while the gods yielded to humanity. Achilles' vulnerable heel, left unprotected when his mother Thetis dipped him as a baby in the River Styx, anticipated Siegfried's vulnerable back, left unprotected by Brünnhilde.

The third conspirator, Gunther, is misery personified, taunted by Brünnhilde for being a pitiful creature who can't do his own dirty work. Hagen tells him that he should expect "no help from brain, no help from hand". His only hope is "Siegfried's death!" Gunther recoils at this idea and the orchestra refers pointedly to the motif of 'blood-brotherhood'. Hagen persuades him that Siegfried has betrayed his oath and now must atone with his blood. Brünnhilde replies that all the blood in the world couldn't wash away the guilt of those who had betrayed her but, she agrees, Siegfried must die. Hagen reminds Gunther that Siegfried's death will bring him the Nibelung's ring. Gunther is worried about the effect on his sister, the gentle Gutrune but, at last, he too agrees, Siegfried must die. Hagen decides that in order to protect his half-sister's sensibilities, Siegfried's death will be staged to resemble a hunting accident involving a wild boar. And so, this great and terrible trio reaches its climax with unanimity on Siegfried's untimely end - one of Wagner's supreme achievements in the field of music drama.

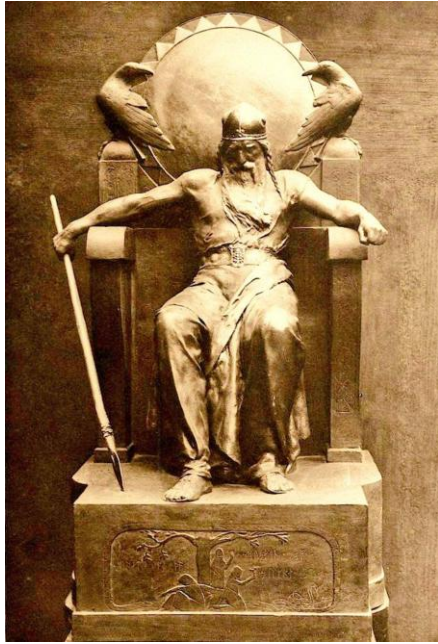


In real life, the young Wagner was actively involved in the 1848-49 Dresden revolution, one of a number of revolutions throughout Europe following the French ‘reign of terror’ at the end of the 18th century.

Richard’s father, Carl Friedrich Wagner, who died when the boy was just six months old, was a loyal servant of both the Saxon king and Napoleonic France. The Saxons made him Registrar of Police in Leipzig (often referred to as ‘Little Paris’), and the French made him Provisional Chief of the Police of Public Safety. Richard’s embarrassment over his father’s Napoleonic connections probably motivated his anti-French attitude, especially at the time of the Franco-Prussian war. No portrait of Carl Friedrich Wagner has survived, and we can only guess why! The Dresden revolution was suppressed, and Richard, now subject to an arrest warrant, fled into exile in Switzerland. He and his contemporaries watched the ruling classes struggling with the effects of the industrial revolution (‘Nibelheim’ in *Ring* terms) while the Saxon king and his family (Wotan and the other gods, one could say) spared no effort to preserve their positions of power.

Wagner believed that a new and more humane society would eventually arise, personified by a man who, in a loveless world, ‘never ceases to love’ – the legendary Siegfried. This hero would confront the gods,

Brünnhilde would purge their guilt by an act of self-immolation, and a reformed Wotan would continue to reign in splendour. The lovers would share a glorious after-life. In the political arena, Wagner argued that the aristocratic regime should be swept away while the reformed Saxon King would remain, like Wotan, father of his people and head of a crowned republic.



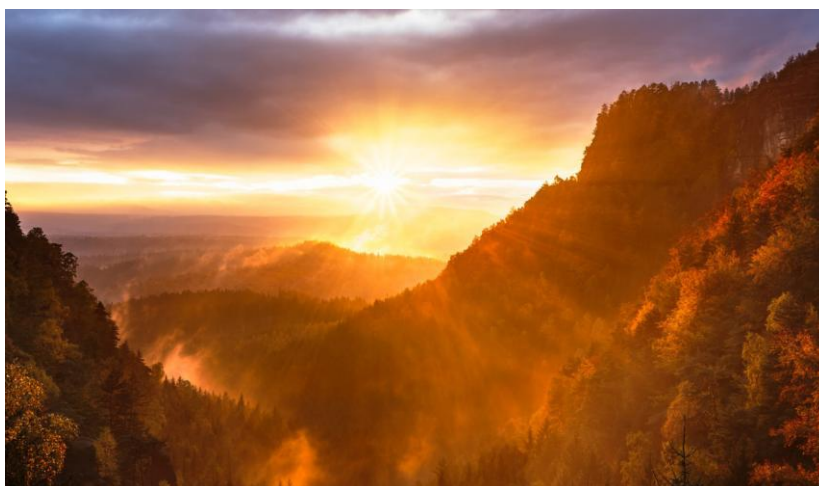
But he soon lost interest in this idea. Languishing in exile, his idealism faded and he became cynical about all forms of government. He felt that there was no remedy for humanity's ills through collective action, which is why he had little in common with people like the scientific socialist Karl Marx and the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin who labelled Wagner an impractical dreamer. In October 1854 Wagner wrote to Liszt: "Let us treat the world only with contempt ... it is evil, evil, fundamentally evil ... it belongs to Alberich, no one else! Away with it!"

Over time, he became more concerned with metaphysical issues than with political ones. In his greatest works - those written after the mid-1850s - he looked inwards at human nature, rather than outwards at human society.

Much has been written about the network of motifs from which the music of the *Ring* is constructed. But, within the narrative as distinct from the music, another set of 'motifs' can be observed at work - motifs of imagery, actions and relationships.



The parallels begin as soon as the curtain rises on the prologue to *Götterdämmerung*. We see three Norns where once we saw three Rhinedaughters. This time the sisters' attention is caught not by sunlight awakening the Rhinegold (although they keep anticipating the dawn) but by the glow from the fire surrounding the Valkyrie's rock. They refer to the World Ash, from which Wotan had fashioned his spear, an image evoking memories of that other ash tree in *Die Walküre*, into which the god had plunged a sword. The Norns' description of the broken spear, the cutting down of the World Ash and the destruction of Valhalla echoes Sieglinde's nightmare of the broken sword, the toppling ash tree and the death of Siegmund. In the first act of *Siegfried* we encountered another ominous reference to an ash tree. Now reduced to charcoal, it fuels the fire in which the shattered sword of Wotan's ambition is being reforged, and later we hear that it has been piled up around Valhalla to ensure its destruction.



The spreading light of dawn heralded rhapsodical expressions of love between Siegfried and Brünnhilde, but it was a false dawn and that was the last time they met as lovers. The imagery of dawn, light and day in the *Ring* is frequently a harbinger of doom. Brünnhilde's apostrophe to the sun, the light and the day in the closing scene of *Siegfried* ends with her invocation of the 'twilight of the gods' and the lovers laughing at death.

The bright moonlight that bathed the Volsung twins in *Die Walküre* inspired a love that was as doomed as it was ecstatic. Now, a fateful dawn precedes Hagen's supreme act of treachery in *Götterdämmerung*, and Siegfried goes to his death under the golden beams of *Frau Sonne*. For the characters of the *Ring*, no less than Tristan and Isolde, the world of day and light offers nothing but separation and pain.

Siegfried declared himself to be 'Brünnhilde's arm', and Brünnhilde said she was Siegfried's soul. This merging of identities gave the impression that the lovers were inseparable, but its real meaning was that Siegfried had supplanted Wotan in Brünnhilde's life. In *Die Walküre*, she had assured her father that, when he was speaking to her, he was speaking to himself - that she was his other self. At the end of *Götterdämmerung's* Prologue, Siegfried abandons Brünnhilde to her fate and disappears through the flames, just as Wotan had done at the end of *Die Walküre*.



In *Das Rheingold*, Wotan had journeyed to Nibelheim to master Alberich, but his dominance had been short lived. In *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried

travels to the hall of the Gibichungs and soon falls prey to Alberich's son. Siegfried recreates all of the mistakes that Wotan had made - embracing power, entangling himself in false treaties and renouncing true love.

The Gibichung siblings Gunther and Gutrune are, like their Volsung counterparts Siegmund and Sieglinde, victims of forces beyond their understanding. Of course, Gutrune's lover (Siegfried) is not her brother, but he is her brother's 'blood brother', which makes him her brother once removed. From Gutrune, Siegfried receives a drink in the house of his enemy, and with that drink, their love is kindled. From Sieglinde, Siegmund had received a drink in the house of *his* enemy, and with that drink, *their* love had been kindled. Gutrune uses a drug (the potion of forgetfulness) to 'remove' Brünnhilde from Siegfried's life, as Sieglinde had used a drug (the sleeping draught) to remove Hunding from hers.

Hagen stands in the same overbearing relationship to Gutrune as did Hunding to Sieglinde, and each kills his respective rival with a spear – Siegmund receiving it in the chest and his son in the back. Brünnhilde is involved in both situations, but in contrary ways. In *Die Walküre* she had tried, compassionately, to save Siegmund and in so doing had earned the wrath of Wotan and the gratitude of Sieglinde. In *Götterdämmerung*, she misguidedly incites the murder of Siegfried and in so doing earns the gratitude of Wotan's dark counterpart, Alberich, and the curses of Gutrune.



The Valkyrie Waltraute alights on the rock in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, reminding us of the wild gathering of all the Valkyries in the earlier drama. In *Siegfrieds Tod*, as *Götterdämmerung* was originally called, Wagner had intended that all eight Valkyries should visit the now-mortal

Brünnhilde out of sympathy for her fall from grace. But finally, he focussed on just one, Waltraute, who pleads for the ring to be discarded for Wotan's sake. Brünnhilde refuses, declaring that the ring means more to her than the fate of the gods and the splendour of Valhalla. And so, the gods are doomed.

Siegfried undergoes a metamorphosis in Act I of *Götterdämmerung*, being transformed by the Tarnhelm not only into Gunther but also into a brute. For the moment, he is no better than his *bête noire*, Fafner, who had been similarly transformed from a giant to a dragon. In *Die Walküre*, Wotan had sentenced Brünnhilde to be taken by the first stranger who chanced upon her. She had recoiled from this prospect, pleading with her father to protect her with fire against all but the worthiest hero.



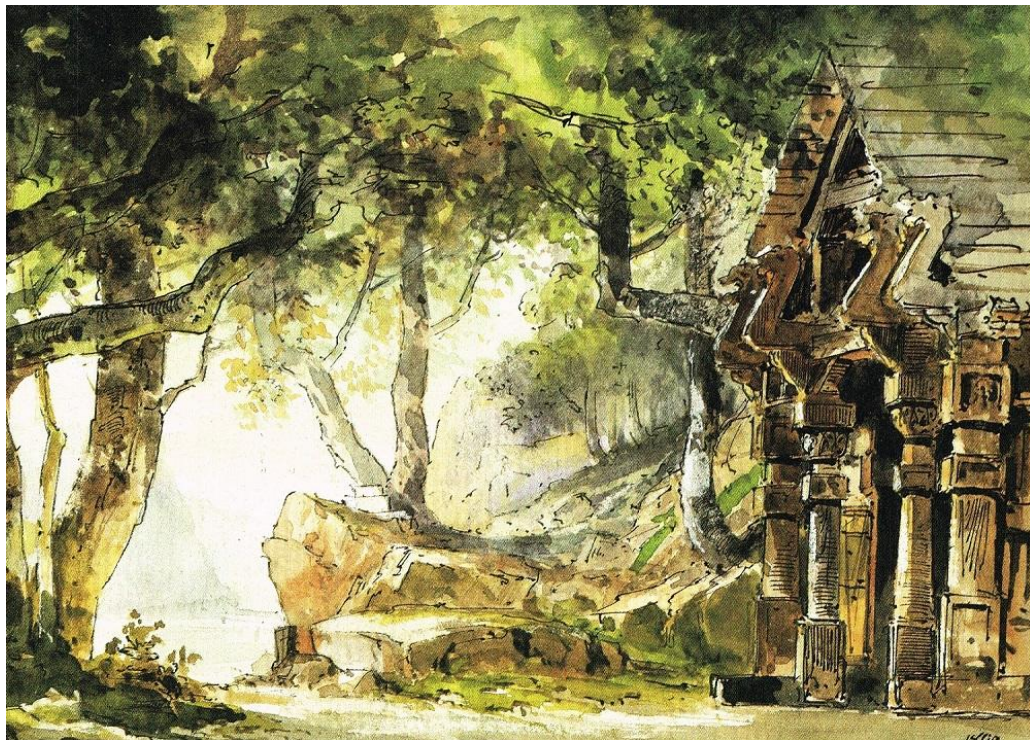
When Siegfried-as-Gunther emerges suddenly from the flames in *Götterdämmerung*, he reawakens memories of the fate once threatened by the 'angry and cruel god'. Brünnhilde, who had been brimming with joy in anticipation of her returning lover, is emotionally crushed. Siegfried compounds the tragedy by tearing the ring from her finger, mimicking Wotan's violent act of wrenching it from the Nibelung's finger. The result is equally terrible, for Brünnhilde in her own way also renounces love and becomes an accessory to Siegfried's murder.

Siegfried displays no redeeming features in this scene, except loyalty to his blood brother, which he demonstrates by placing the sword between him and Brünnhilde in their marital bed. Thus, the sword, once shattered

and then reformed by Siegfried, comes again between husband and wife, as it had, in a sense, between Wotan and Fricka.

The imagery of abduction is one of the most powerful and often-repeated 'motifs' of the *Ring*. The primary instance was Alberich's rape of the Rhinegold itself. This was followed by the abduction of Freia by the giants, Sieglinde by Hunding, the hapless woman by the Neidings in Siegmund's account, Sieglinde (albeit willingly) by Siegmund and, finally, Brünnhilde by Siegfried in the guise of Gunther.

When Brünnhilde is over-powered by Siegfried-as-Gunther, their eyes accidentally meet. Later she tells Hagen that one look from Siegfried's flashing eyes would turn the villain's courage into fear. The imagery of glinting or gleaming eyes was first used in *Das Rheingold* by Wellgunde, when she referred to 'the golden eyes that wake and sleep in turn'. In Scene Four of *Rheingold*, when the Nibelung gold was piled up in front of Freia to obscure her from the giants, Fasolt caught a glimpse of her eye and refused to let her go. In *Die Walküre*, Hunding noticed the 'mark of the dragon' glinting in the eyes of both Siegmund and Sieglinde. Sieglinde described the glinting eye of the stranger at her wedding, which stuck fear into the other guests but to her alone revealed a sweet, longing sadness. Brünnhilde's bright, gleaming eyes, once caressed with smiles by Wotan, were finally kissed asleep in the most poignant of farewells.



In Act II of *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried returns to the hall of the Gibichungs to face a Fricka-like interrogation from Gutrune, his wife-to-be. He responds with Wotan-like evasiveness. Hagen summons the vassals as his father had once summoned his enslaved race. From Alberich's embittered lips we had once heard the blessing with which the Nibelung, in dire distress, invested his ring. Now, in similar distress, Brünnhilde blesses the point of Hagen's spear and dedicates it to striking Siegfried down.



In the final Act of *Götterdämmerung*, the Rhinedaughters tease Siegfried as they had once teased the love-struck Nibelung. But the roles are now reversed, for it is they who do the pleading and Siegfried who does the rebuffing. While Alberich had renounced love in favour of the ring, Siegfried, in the end, is willing to give up the ring in return for love. The fickle Rhinedaughters tell him to keep it after all, so that he can discover for himself what ill fortune it brings. Truly, Siegfried might say with Hamlet: “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!”



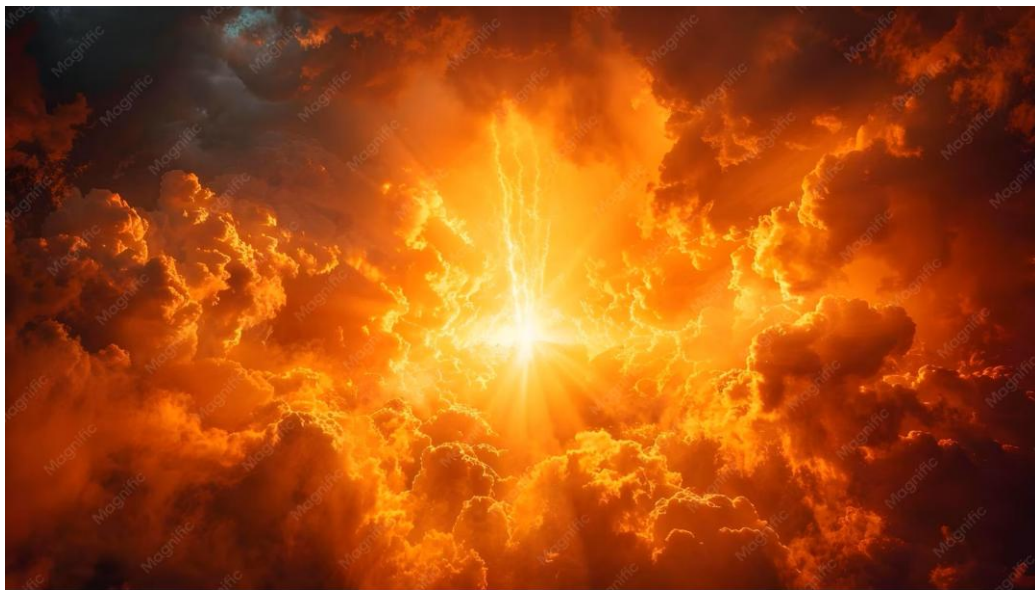
In his dying moments, Siegfried, freed from the memory-blocking potion administered by Guttrune, imagines that Brünnhilde has been put back to sleep and must be awakened again. This is but one of many ‘awakenings’ in the *Ring*, notably those of the gold in the depths of the Rhine; Wotan and Fricka to gaze upon the finished Valhalla; Fafner by his fearless adversary at the cave of envy; Erda from her primeval slumber by the Wanderer, and Brünnhilde by Siegfried himself on that day of days on the Valkyrie’s rock.



Eventually, Brünnhilde does acquire a new, more profound view of existence through her contrition, suffering and love for Siegfried. And what is this new wisdom - this state of enlightenment with which the story ends, if not another awakening and a new beginning?

The textual ending of *Götterdämmerung* was the subject of at least nine revisions by Wagner, as he tried to make up his mind about the implications of the whole work. In early drafts, the ring was to be returned to the Rhine, Alberich and the Nibelungs were to be free again, the gods were to be forgiven for their wrong-doing, and Brünnhilde was to proclaim Wotan's power for all eternity. Wagner wrote several versions of this, and an important influence on his thinking at that time came from the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, to whom he dedicated his monograph *The Art-work of the Future*. Feuerbach's humanist view prompted a final scene which elevated love above material possessions, authority, convention and even fate, to which the gods were subject as much as anyone else.

In the 1848 version, Brünnhilde, once more the Valkyrie, is seen rising above the flames and leading Siegfried heavenwards to his place in Valhalla – a suitably Norse ending. There is no cataclysm, and the old order of gods survives. “Suddenly a blinding light strikes forth from the embers” according to an early version of the text. “On the fringe of a leaden cloud the light ascends. In it appears Brünnhilde on horseback, helmeted and in the dazzling armour of a Valkyrie, leading Siegfried by the hand through the sky.” And then the waters of the Rhine rise, the Rhinemaidens swim away with the ring and Tarnhelm, Hagen plunges after them and is dragged down into the depths while Alberich sinks with a cry of despair. But then Wagner decided that the gods should be destroyed by an act of self-annihilation.



In the Norse *Prose Edda* and *Völsungasaga*, Brynhild ends up on Sigurd's funeral pyre and, in 1851, the idea of *Ragnarök* ('Twilight of the

Gods') was introduced into Wagner's drafts although, strictly speaking, this should occur after a great battle with the powers of evil rather than a hero's funeral.



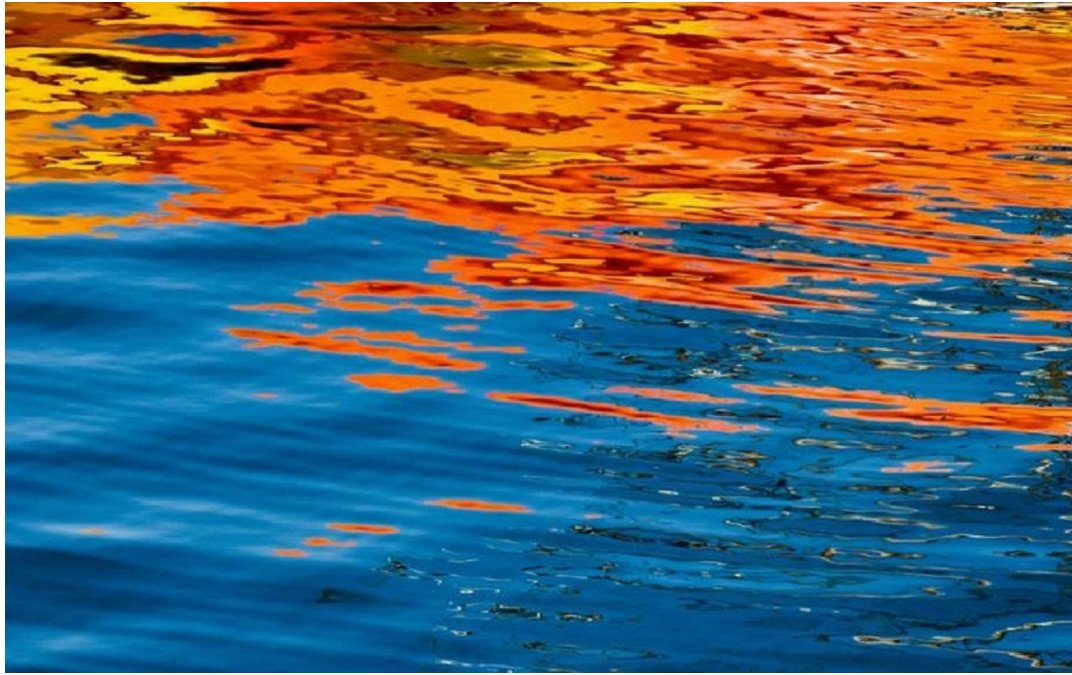
The greatest change to *Götterdämmerung* came at its very end, following Wagner's encounter with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. In September 1854 he read *The World as Will and Representation* and recognized in it a coherent explanation of his treatment of Wotan. His intention had been to show nothing less than the breaking of the chief god's proud spirit, not by an external and greater force but by "willing his own destruction" – what Schopenhauer would call the annihilation of the will – the negation of compulsive wanting, striving, and yearning.

Schopenhauer believed that willing, wanting, longing and craving are not just things that we do: they are things that we are. They are the source of our unhappiness and all the evil and strife in the world. We can only avoid this destructive element in our nature by achieving a state of detachment akin to the Buddhist notion of *nirvana* ...



... the extinction of desire and illusion, and the attainment of absolute peace of mind. The arts - and music in particular - can help in a temporary way in achieving this state of detachment.

Wagner's interest in Buddhism was no passing fad, and as late as October 1882, just four months before his death, he told Cosima that Buddhism was a flowering of the human spirit. For Wagner, who had spent much of his creative life in exile and was disenchanted with politics, Buddhism was a way of answering three fundamental questions: What does it mean to be German? What does it mean to be Christian? And what is art?



He was especially attracted to the notion of reincarnation as a vehicle for his musical technique of emotional reminiscence or leitmotifs. “Only music” he said, “can convey the mysteries of reincarnation.” His intended Buddhist opera *Die Sieger* was never developed beyond a sketch, but some of its ideas were used in *Parsifal*.

The clearest and perhaps most important Buddhist connection with the *Ring* came with a change to the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung* written contemporaneously with the sketch for *Die Sieger*, and within months of the first sketch for *Parsifal*. By then, Wagner’s preoccupation was no longer with the Feuerbachian notion of redemption through love but with redemption through renunciation, and the vehicle for this change was Brünnhilde.

Consider how Brünnhilde was depicted in the medieval German *Nibelungenlied*, and how different that was from the way she’s presented in Wagner’s *Ring*. In the *Nibelungenlied*, she is Queen Brunhild of Iceland, renowned not only for her beauty but also for her great strength, as well as for her skill at throwing the javelin, hurling a weight, and leaping a great distance. Any man who sought to marry her was required to better her in these contests. The prize for victory would be Brunhild herself, but the penalty for defeat was the loss of one’s head. Many would-be suitors had challenged the fair Brunhild but no one had defeated her, and all had lost their heads. This might remind you of the Turandot story! King Gunther wanted to woo Brunhild, but Siegfried advised against this and, out of loyalty to his expected brother-in-law (for he wanted to marry

Gunther's sister, Kriemhild) Siegfried offered to assist. With the aid of a cloak of invisibility and the strength of twelve men, Siegfried *did* win Brunhild for Gunther, although he came to regret this. Here is an obvious parallel with the scene in *Götterdämmerung* when Siegfried, changed by the Tarnhelm into the form of Gunther, abducts Brünnhilde from the mountain top!

The biggest difference between the *Nibelungenlied* and *Götterdämmerung* is to be found in the closing pages of Wagner's drama. In *Götterdämmerung*, Brünnhilde's enlightenment, which had transformed her from an insanely angry woman at the end of Act II to the redeeming figure at the conclusion of Act III, is explained in a remark by Wagner to Mathilde Wesendonck in 1858 about his difficulties in depicting the Buddha in *Die Sieger*.

"I have now solved the problem" he wrote, "by having him reach one last remaining stage in his development whereby he is seen to acquire a new insight, which – like every insight – is conveyed not by abstract associations of ideas but by intuitive emotional experience; in other words, by a process of shock and agitation suffered by his inner self. As a result, this insight reveals him in his final progress towards a state of supreme enlightenment".

In a text that was not set to music, Brünnhilde describes herself as 'the enlightened one' and she says: "The blessed end of all things eternal. Do you know how I attained it? Grieving love's deepest suffering opened my eyes: I saw the world end." "I saw the world end" doesn't mean that *Götterdämmerung* is about an apocalypse or nuclear war. Rather, it describes Brünnhilde's pain - her 'shock and agitation' over Siegfried's death, or, as she herself puts it: "Grieving love's deepest suffering".



It's not difficult to understand why Wagner, in a rare example of motif-labelling, referred to the exquisite closing theme (first used as Sieglinde's paeon to Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre*) as 'the glorification of Brünnhilde' or 'the theme in praise of Brünnhilde'. By embracing mortality and achieving wisdom through love, Brünnhilde reveals the path to a better existence. But her enlightenment doesn't involve lasting hostility towards Siegfried – quite the opposite, and it's a mistake to condemn and reject Siegfried – to dump his body in the river as some productions have done. Siegfried, says Brünnhilde, was like pure sunlight whose radiance beamed on her. He was the one who inspired her transformation from the bitter daughter of a god to a loving and enlightened human being.

It was Wotan who bore the greatest guilt, sacrificing others (including herself and Siegfried) to achieve his ends. But after reading Schopenhauer, Wagner finally understood what he had felt instinctively when he drafted the important scene at the end of *Die Walküre*, when Wotan had reached the conclusion that all he really wanted was an end to everything.

In a letter to August Röckel in 1854, Wagner explained his thoughts in these terms: "The course of the drama thus shows the necessity of accepting and giving way to the changeableness, the diversity, the multiplicity, the eternal newness of reality and of life. Wotan rises to the tragic height of willing his own downfall. This is everything that we have to learn from the history of mankind: To will the inevitable and to carry it out oneself."

As Wotan tells Erda in Act III of *Siegfried*, he acknowledges the inevitability of change, the demise of the old order which he personifies, and the emergence of a new order to which the young Siegfried belongs and to whom he bequeaths the future. What he had once resolved in despair, he will now do gladly. And so, the Twilight of the Gods is brought about not by some external power but by Wotan's own will. Siegfried becomes the agent of change, and Brünnhilde its realisation.

Wagner once referred to *Götterdämmerung* as 'a tragedy of fate'. In the revolutionary era in which he lived, he believed that it was only by destroying the existing order, and through the agency of love, that the human race could make a new beginning. And to express these profound ideas, he left it to the orchestra alone to convey what could no longer be said in words.



The Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Lorin Mazel, performing the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung* in 2000.

Also see: www.peterbassett.com.au