

**Everything That Is, Ends: Apocalypticism in Wagner's *Ring***

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# **Everything That Is, Ends: Apocalypticism in Wagner's *Ring***

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This dissertation traces the history of apocalypticism, broadly conceived, and its realization on the operatic stage by Richard Wagner and those who have adapted his works since the late nineteenth century. I argue that Wagner's cycle of four operas, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1876), presents colloquial conceptions of time, space, and nature via supernatural, divine characters who often frame the world in terms of non-rational metaphysics. Primary among these minor roles is Erda, the personification of the primordial earth. Erda's character prophesies the end of the world in *Das Rheingold*, a prophecy undone later in *Siegfried* by Erda's primary interlocutor and chief of the gods, Wotan. I argue that Erda's role changes in various stage productions of the *Ring*, and these changes bespeak a shifting attachment between humanity, the earth, and its imagined apocalyptic demise. As a given production asks new apocalyptic questions, we receive new fictive stage worlds with different limits, endings, and prophetic figures, often through different staging practices and forms of technological mediation. Apocalypticism takes many forms here, as the ends to many different kinds of worlds and epochs.

The first chapter introduces what I am calling Wagner's "voices from elsewhere," magical or prophetic characters across his music dramas that sing prophecies from beyond the limits of the stage. Chapter 2 applies this framework to one of these "voices," Erda, and analyzes her two scenes in the *Ring* (*Das Rheingold* scene 4 and *Siegfried* Act III, scene 1). Chapter 3 turns to Erda's role as staged, where I argue we find many different "Erdas" among the history of staged *Ring* productions, where her message and the meaning of apocalypse in Wagner's fictive world changes.

Chapter 4 explores the *Ring*'s central themes of apocalypse and utopia; I aim to show here that contemporary stagings of the *Ring* display an ability for the work to dramatize new apocalypses and utopias. In chapter 5, I read Erda's message particularly in terms of the lesson it prescribes—"learning to die"—and I focus on stagings that foreground the *Ring*'s paradoxical senses of time.

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## 1.0 Introduction: Voices from Elsewhere in Richard Wagner's Music Dramas

Voices and bodies often exist at the limits of hearing and at the limits of the stage in Richard Wagner's music dramas, especially in his later works. Such is the case with many of the composer's minor dramatis personae: the young sailor at the very start of *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), the mysterious "voice from above" and Titurel (the voice from the tomb) in *Parsifal* (1882), and numerous characters throughout the *Ring* cycle (1876), such as the Woodbird, Fafner, and—the subject of this study—Erda, the avatar of the primordial earth who dwells in its deepest reaches. However, I argue that Erda functions quite differently from other voices from elsewhere, yet still retains many of their magical and authoritative qualities.

My analysis in this dissertation focuses on Erda's role, further, because of its closeness with one of the *Ring* cycle's most central and enduring themes: the end of the world, its *Götterdämmerung* or "twilight of the gods." Erda is a character of ancestral, chthonic origins who, towards the end of the *Ring*'s first opera *Das Rheingold* (scene 4), emerges from under the stage and delivers a doomsday prophecy to Wotan, chief of the gods. She tells Wotan that "alles was ist, endet" [everything that is, ends], that he and the other gods are doomed to fade unless he shuns the all-powerful ring. Erda's appearance, however, is a strange one. The contralto singing Erda, according to Wagner's stage instructions, emerges to only half her height—she remains partly visible, half occupying the stage and half residing *elsewhere*. This is a small moment in Wagner's large work of four music dramas and yet, it raises questions for those who witness and hear it: what is the relationship between this strange character, the apocalypse she prophesies, and the spectacle of her uncanny appearance? While these are tough questions to blithely answer, I argue in this dissertation that her role has provided productions of the *Ring* since Wagner's own with a



vernacular mouthpiece for voicing and staging contemporary concerns about the end of the world, specific to the time and place of each reiteration of Erda's appearance and the warning she sings.

Later in the *Ring*, during the third drama (*Siegfried* Act III, scene 1), Erda appears again, in an episode where she and Wotan seem to flip their respective roles from their first encounter. Here, Erda appears entirely on the stage because Wotan, and us audience members, have ostensibly traveled to Erda's dwelling place: that mysterious *elsewhere*. In this scene Wotan supplies the prophecy—not of apocalypse, but of a potential utopia guided by the redemption of the hero Siegfried by the sacrifice of Wotan's Valkyrie daughter Brünnhilde. Yet, the characters of Wagner's *Ring* are still fated to experience a world-ending catastrophe at the end of the fourth opera, *Götterdämmerung*, when the Rhine floods and flames engulf both the earthly Gibichung Hall and the celestial home of the gods, Valhalla. Notably, Erda's character is physically absent during this chaotic finale—and musically, she remains a distant memory. To be sure, this is a reduction of the *Ring* cycle's important narrative events, of which there are many to keep track of during the work's sixteen-hour duration. During those sixteen hours, Erda's character occupies our attention for only a few minutes, and yet, her two episodes are crucial to the plot's development, as the next chapter will explicitly detail.

Throughout this dissertation I look for multiple iterations of Erda's character as it appears differently in the many productions of the *Ring* since Wagner's own in 1876. I construct an archive of different "Erdas" from various *Ring* stagings—a method building on David Levin's studies of

“unsettled” stagings of canonical operas.<sup>1</sup> How producers of the *Ring* have staged Erda and her two scenes, I argue, continues to update Wagner’s imaginary end of the world for new audiences. These updates tell us something about our own conceptions of the end of the world, whether such notions are derived from systematic Continental philosophies (a common approach in critical Wagner studies) or from vernacular knowledges taken up by newer critical frameworks in the humanities that seek to make sense of our world’s potential apocalypse, especially in the case of climate crisis (an apocalypse that parallels Wagner’s own allegory in many ways). While Wagner’s words and music remain more or less fixed in the meaning they ascribe to the *Ring*’s narrative themes, what happens on stage seems a vital place where new meaning can be made: where the work’s themes can be altered and played with via stagecraft and *mise-en-scène*. At the risk of understating it: what happened on stage was vital for Wagner, too, and the staging of his works has always been a zone of tension for those interpreting his music dramas.

Of Wagner’s famous interlocutors, many found the *gesture* paramount in his works. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, the Wagnerian spectacle was what came first, before the music, which came to fit the spectacle only later. Nietzsche ultimately deemed this spectacle hallucinatory or illusory, and came to judge the entire process as decadent, almost perverse.<sup>2</sup> Still, Nietzsche’s observation expresses the excess of Wagner’s work, which were of course not singularly considered as music, but as visual spectacles as well. Wagner thought deeply about the visual

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<sup>1</sup> David Levin, *Unsettling Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), and also Levin’s interpretation of the *Ring*: *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> See Nietzsche, “The Case of Wagner,” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 616, 626.

world of his operas and of the attention his audience would pay them; potential distractions were a related issue for the composer/theatre designer, too. Indeed, Wagner sought to control the visual and musical experience of his audiences, and in the process, left many important dramatic elements of his works unstaged, those “voices from elsewhere” being but one example.<sup>3</sup> What, then, are we to make of the things that Wagner denies us? What do we make of the voices who remained unstaged in Wagner’s music, libretto, and staging instructions? Reactions such as Nietzsche’s (later echoed by Theodor Adorno, who argued that Wagner falsifies reality in a slightly different way) fundamentally miss these important, invisible operatic roles. In missing these roles, or glossing over their potential to teach us anything philosophical in performance, critics like Nietzsche may even have missed some important metaphysical lessons.

Carolyn Abbate shows the nature of similar roles to be uncanny metaphors for the nature of music itself, as in the example of Orpheus’s decapitated, yet still singing head in Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* (1607). Abbate makes a similar argument with regard to Kundry from Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1882), a role whose *metempsychosis* mirrors the changeability of opera, different as opera performances are from one night to the next.<sup>4</sup> Erda’s role exhibits a similar type of characterization, although she exists in an indistinct zone of dramatic legibility, and in fact, this illegibility comes to define her. In her first scene, the odd nature of her stage presence confuses the visual and physical order of Wagner’s world, as we will see in chapter 5. In her second scene, Erda’s illegibility manifests in confusion about the narrative events that have passed her by while she

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<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Abbate explores these unstaged elements in *Unsung Voices* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991) and *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 5 and 144.

sleeps in her *elsewhere*. Erda's role, perhaps not a metaphor for the uncanny nature of music or the different manifestations of opera, might metaphorize the double act of staging/performing opera, where a performer is "between aliveness and deadness," to use Abbate's words.<sup>5</sup> Erda is similar to other operatic roles of ghostly proportions or even inanimate objects, such as the Commendatore in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787)—kinds of roles Abbate describes as "if marble, canvas, or ectoplasm had strong megaphonic properties."<sup>6</sup> There are many different kinds of disembodied voices and reembodied voices, and Wagner made heavy use of them, especially in his later works.

Many of Wagner's disembodied voices share qualities aside from their invisibility—and Erda is unique among Wagner characters as a mostly visible voice who shares these qualities: mythical properties, prophetic messages, and surprising hermeneutical questions about the nature of music, listening, and singing. These roles often deliver important narrative information in terse passages of text, sometimes accompanied by a small section of the orchestra (as in Erda's monologue) or by no orchestral music at all (as with the sailor in *Tristan* and Titurel in *Parsifal*). Other dramatic roles, such as the Woodbird of the *Ring*, have a more complicated, dialectical relationship with the orchestra, as we will see.

Titurel in *Parsifal* and the young sailor in *Tristan und Isolde* provide two examples of disembodied voices from elsewhere that have little or no orchestral accompaniment. The first Abbate calls "sheer voice," seemingly more real and less constructed than other voices in the score

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<sup>5</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 152.

of *Parsifal*.<sup>7</sup> Titurel's voice echoes from his tomb as he offers guidance to his son Amfortas, hoping that seeing the Grail will lift him out of his state of half-deadness. It should also be noted that Titurel's message to Amfortas is closely related to another disembodied voice in *Parsifal*, the mysterious "voice from above" that sings Parsifal's prophetic motif ("Durch Mitleid, wissend der reine Tor") later in the same scene (Act I, scene 2). As with other disembodied voices, this voice (sung by a contralto, like Erda) gives Gurnemanz a puzzling message, not to be deciphered immediately (Figure 1).



**Figure 1-1 The "voice from above" sings Parsifal's prophecy**

The sailor in *Tristan* also sings an ominous message ("Westwäerts schweift der Blick"), one that notably annoys an already irritated Isolde in the very opening of the drama, as the famous prelude fades away. Abbate calls attention to the rarity of the sailor's song as a totally unaccompanied, hyper-realistic diegetic song, one that accurately portrays a sailor singing from high up on a ship's mast, out of sight.<sup>8</sup> Like the voice from above, the sailor's song comes from an invisible source and momentarily disrupts the onstage character's focus. Isolde responds with a cold prophecy ("Mir erkoren, mir verloren") that foreshadows the gloomy end that she and Tristan will share. In both *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, Wagner's invisible voices sing prophecy or ominous passages that help seal the fate of other characters, preordaining the narrative ends yet to come.

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<sup>7</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 131.

<sup>8</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 154.

Erda functions differently though, as neither a completely disembodied voice nor an ectoplasm-cum-megaphone, per Abbate. Yet, Erda's role also seals Wotan's fate with her dark prophecy of the end of the gods. It seems that her character lacks the inanimate quality of the Commendatore or the fleeting nature of truly invisible roles, such as the sailor or voice from above. Erda, rather, is a role who works to unsettle linear narrative and the limits of Wagner's visual world. She does this doubly: by her hybrid appearance, onstage and elsewhere, and by her absence at the end of the *Ring*, which leaves her fate unknown despite her foreknowledge of the apocalypse. Her character therefore poses questions about the world of Wagner's *Ring* and its limits by inciting moments where, I argue, Wagner shows us the contents and inhabitants of that offstage elsewhere, if only in glimpses. Neither wholly visible nor invisible, Erda's role troubles those critiques of spectacle that were important to the criticisms of astute observers such as Nietzsche and Adorno. Staging Erda and the *Ring* today seems an opportunity to explore that elsewhere, the limits of Wagner's world, and that fictive world's ability to mirror our own apocalyptic end, whether for aesthetic pleasure, ideological commentary, or both.

Lisa Feurzeig argues that Erda provides a basis for knowledge that differs in important ways from the knowledge that Wotan offers spectators through the experiences we ostensibly share with him.<sup>9</sup> Feurzeig argues that Wotan's collection of experiences is the conscious narrative through which spectators experience *Das Rheingold*, from scene 2 to its triumphant end on the Rainbow Bridge to Valhalla. When the two characters meet for a second and final time in Act III

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<sup>9</sup> Lisa Feurzeig, "The Interrelations of Knowledge and Will: Erda, Experience, and Epistemology in the *Ring*," *The Opera Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 71-94.

of *Siegfried*, Feurzeig argues, we find ourselves more sympathetic to Wotan because he has shared his experiences with us, while Erda has been sleeping.

Erda's knowledge and experience, I propose, are actually available to spectators in both of her scenes, as we will see in the next chapter. Her non-rational experiences of time and space are articulated in her music, the Leitmotifs she seemingly brings up with her from under the stage. Space and time, thereafter, appear unsettled for spectators of the *Ring*, who are presented with options for interpreting the narrative as Erda does—its dimensions collapsed and expanded, the beginning of *Das Rheingold* and the end of *Götterdämmerung* closely linked in her prophetic monologue. The particulars of Erda's persona, the prophecy she sings, and the ways we hear her voice and see her body as staged already bear these shifting concepts of space and time.

The apocalyptic themes of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, I argue, shift as well across its staging history. This makes sense given the closeness of Wagner's works (musical and theoretical) with the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century stagecraft technology and the consistent ability of Wagner's works to engage ideology in performance.<sup>10</sup> Wagner's *Ring* already substantiates metaphysical concerns as musical dramatic ones, or, as Joachim Köhler puts it, the *Ring* answers questions normally asked only in metaphysics: questions about the meaning of human life, its teleological aim, the origins of history and its end, and so forth.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, my focus on the apocalyptic theme of the *Ring* stems both from Erda's role and from Wagner himself, who

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<sup>10</sup> See Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Joachim Köhler, *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans*, translated by Stewart Spencer (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2004), 315.

famously wrote to Franz Liszt that the *Ring* held both the beginning and ending of the world.<sup>12</sup> Wagner's creation of Erda elucidates that apocalyptic nature as well, even if it keeps us wondering about the liminal ontology of the character's role and the ways she fits with neither Wagner's operatic voices from elsewhere nor his fully staged main characters, the Siegfrieds, Isolde, and Parsifal of the canon.

Wagner's unstaged, invisible characters—the sailor, Titirel, and so forth—are of a minor nature and function, and some sing for as little as a few measures. At the metaphorical and sometimes literal edges of the stage, protagonists hear these *acousmatic* (unstaged) voices from elsewhere (and, potentially, diegetic orchestral music as well). I propose we also find at these margins of opera non-rational (in some cases, suprarational) modes of knowledge and experiences of time and space, particularly spelled out for us by Erda's strange appearance and grim prophecy. These characters provide ominous prophecy or supernatural guidance which become devices for the composer or stage director to allegorize idealist questions about the limits of reason and perception. As Abbate and others have noted, those voices (and sounds generally) whose origins remain unknown are associated with divinity, authority, and omniscience (as well as doubt and trickery).<sup>13</sup> While we can physically see Erda's character, it might be the case that her speech symbolically originates elsewhere. We listen to her the way we listen to other disembodied voices,

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<sup>12</sup> Letter to Franz Liszt, 11 February 1853. *Richard Wagner Sämtliche Briefe Band V September 1852-Januar 1854* (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1993), 185-190.

<sup>13</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 6. Abbate also notes examples where invisible voices instantiate doubt and cannot be trusted, *ibid.*, 155. Also, see Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014).



albeit with a different level of urgency, perhaps rendered in part by her strange half visibility on stage.

In other words, the message of such roles and their peripheral position seem inseparable, and, when staged in various cultural contexts, they offer possibilities for changing both the messages they sing and their alleged authority. Perhaps because of their existence in the metaphorical margins of the stage work, voices from elsewhere sing cryptic bits of information that require interpretation from their onstage interlocutors—they sing things that cannot be easily ignored by Wagnerian protagonists such as Wotan, Siegfried, Isolde, and Amfortas, among others. I argue that the same enigmatic quality of those voices from elsewhere also opens their scenes to contextually meaningful reinterpretations in staging, which are capable of centering said scenes on those disembodied voices, if they so choose.

Often, differences of character ontology (or empirical knowledge, as in Feurzeig's study) among Wagner's dramatic personas are explained and articulated musically, aside from the obvious disparity in stage presence. If we follow Abbate's line of inquiry—taking certain operatic roles as capable of metaphorizing parts of opera, voices from elsewhere might metaphorize many different aspects of Wagnerian music drama. As noted above, Erda's role might mimic the double act of staging/performing, but this is not the case with Wagnerian roles across the board. For example, in the Woodbird's two attempts at communicating with Siegfried (in *Siegfried* Act II, scenes 2 and 3), Siegfried metaphorizes the perils of listening and interpreting music, especially Wagner's motivic writing, for us audience members. The magical Woodbird repeats an ascending triadic motive (see Figure 1-2a) with a coloratura flourish at the end (Figure 1-2b) and a related motive outlining C-sharp minor and E major (Figure 1-2c) against a wavering backdrop of orchestral "forest murmurs." When he first listens to her, Siegfried's character hears these motives

played by a clarinet and flute in the orchestra, but their wordless figures convey nothing to him, except that they may, in fact, have *some* meaning.

Carolyn Abbate describes the Woodbird as “the least dubious musical presence in the entire *Ring*.” The role’s coloratura, Abbate claims, is a kind of operatic artifice, mechanically producing the sounds of nature in Wagner’s fictive world.<sup>14</sup> Siegfried attempts to imitate the coloratura melody back to the Woodbird with a handmade flute, but he fails to accurately repeat the melody. Even after he plays a hunting call and his own triumphant ascending motive on his horn, the Woodbird remains silent. Siegfried’s noisiness instead awakens Fafner, now a dragon who guards the ring and Nibelung’s hoard in a nearby cave. Only after defeating Fafner and tasting his blood does Siegfried hear the Woodbird’s melodious music as audibly texted (sung by an offstage soprano). This episode illustrates a difference among Wagner’s characters, namely, between those who can and cannot hear the music that constantly surrounds them, and further, between those who can and cannot understand the music’s meaning.



**Figure 1-2 The Woodbird's music**

What in the first place is considered purely sonic becomes direct and meaningful, audibly texted for both Siegfried’s character and the audience. And yet we audience members know that music in fact constantly surrounds this precocious youth—does he hear it? He seems to listen in several different ways, times when Siegfried hears orchestral music or does not, as it is assumed

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<sup>14</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 124.

to be non-diegetic most of the time.<sup>15</sup> Rather, what is “absolute music” only later bares its hidden meaning, especially in the case of Wagnerian Leitmotifs. In a sense, the scene dramatizes the listening activity spectators perform during Wagnerian music drama, where the signification of a motive is not always available until we have experienced something else, a moment of transcendence perhaps, that tells us its direct meaning.

The act of singing seems signified in this scene by the Woodbird perhaps in a way analogous to Orpheus or Kundry. While Abbate describes how Orpheus makes us wonder at the source of music or, with Kundry, the nature of opera, the Woodbird presents the signifying power of nonverbally (and then verbally) mediated motives. The Woodbird initially “sings,” signified variously by upper woodwinds or human soprano, the latter making transparent the obscured information in the former. But we might still wonder if the music’s meaning has been completely elucidated by virtue of the inclusion of text. Are orchestral Leitmotifs simply cryptic sounds waiting to be deciphered? Must they have a meaning worth finding, or can some simply be enjoyed, especially beautiful ones like the Woodbird’s coloratura?

Motives don’t always imply a text or a voice, but the Woodbird episode suggests we are always a taste-of-the-dragon’s-blood away from finding out. Wagner’s voices from elsewhere seem to decipher for us, as his orchestra so often does, suggesting that the hidden meaning of some motives is meant to be uncovered, while others are best left to other forms of hermeneutics. In the aftermath of this episode, Wagner seems to offer us a possible new mode of listening to the rest of the *Ring* cycle that follows, one where we guess at the truth or the voice behind orchestral motives.

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<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Abbate discusses a similar phenomenon at play between Brünnhilde and Wotan in *Unsung Voices* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

We might be left to wonder: what is in the blood of the dragon that reveals musical truth from a persona's phenomenal standpoint?

In this listening situation, identifying the bald meaning of a motive can seem inadequate or merely tautological—an analytical practice Carl Dahlhaus found questionable, if regrettably unavoidable.<sup>16</sup> However, Leitmotifs invite interpretation, whether in the moment or in retrospect. While, for Siegfried, learning the information that accompanies music is helpful in his quest to learn fear, we in the audience have a different relationship to the musical event as it unfolds. Instead of wondering at the “true meaning” behind nonverbally mediated motives (a hermeneutical battle with little to gain), what seems on trial is the efficacy of singing information that might normally be left unsung.

Wagner might leave a motive's meaning ambiguous or not, so when he spells out an interpretation for us it seems especially important. In other words, the guidance that the Woodbird provides is so specific that Wagner couldn't leave it to the mediation of orchestra alone. It seems to follow that the character who sings this guidance remain unstaged, to bestow it not only with the magical, divine authority that often accompanies unstaged sounds, but to also imbue it with the air of potential objectivity we might implicitly accept from narrative explication in the orchestra.<sup>17</sup> The effect of giving these voices from elsewhere urgent, prophetic messages—tightly

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<sup>16</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 61. The interpretation of Wagner's motivic writing has since been both shunned and celebrated by critics; it is either a simple mechanism that tells the audience (no matter how musically educated) exactly what to make of the music or else it is a brilliant innovation for linking narrative or structural themes musically.

<sup>17</sup> Abbate explains a similar phenomenon in non-diegetic film music, as “absolute or accurate judgments in sound,” *In Search of Opera*, 159.

linked with orchestral motivic figures, as in the *Ring*'s case—unsettles the otherwise normative signifiers of Wagner's music dramas. What happens then, when a performance chooses to stage what is normally not staged? That phenomenon is what Erda's role might metaphorize as a “voice from elsewhere” that we can see—the double act not only of staging/performing but of adapting and changing how an opera is normally presented. Meaning feels overdetermined, then, when stagings that want to tell different kinds of *Ring* stories toy with Erda's role. As we will see in chapter 3, some are hyper-realistic allegories where Erda's role shines, while others, driven by isolated dramaturgical principles, don't always leave room for the Earth Goddess's message to be particularly compelling or meaningful.

It may be true that musical performance hides no cryptic meaning, per Abbate, but opera stagings can also work to inoculate spectators from other truths, especially those outside the narrow historical or social vision of Wagner's music drama. By this, I simply mean that Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* can easily seem totalizing in effect, not just in compositional intent, and part of this totalizing effect is a felt impression that the artwork does indeed have one “true” meaning. Among Wagner's many interpreters, a common (and not unproductive) trope has been finding this meaning through the philosophical and aesthetic positions allegedly dramatized by Wagner. Adaptation of the work, again, “unsettles” this totalization, to use Levin's terminology—even if doing so is an unintended consequence. For example, a staging of Wagner's *Ring* can set the events through the perspective of one character or another, as in the 2003 Copenhagen *Ring*, set ostensibly from Brünnhilde's point of view. This setting might rework various themes of the *Ring*—here, apocalypse takes a back seat to a love story. While stagings like this one may not excise Wagner's words and music from their original meanings, they do offer new and alternative interpretations that appear alongside earlier ones.

The Woodbird episode might remind us that even unstaged music can have onstage consequences. Erda's role constitutes a voicing and visual staging of what might normally remain out of sight and earshot, so perhaps it is in staging that her character especially struggles against the alleged truth of the *Ring*'s meaning in many forms—epistemological, ontological, temporal, and spatial. Those meanings might, however, necessarily change for the *Ring* today, the apocalyptic message of which has shifted for new worlds, epochs, and political and social forms. As such, the staging of her dramatic role presents a challenge—one that will return throughout this dissertation—to any staged or filmed production of the *Ring* cycle. The challenge is to closely link Erda's prophetic doomsday message with/against the cycle's purported meaning, as in Wagner's *Urtext*, with its reinterpretation in the hands of opera directors, producers, singers, costumers, set designers, and so forth (from a wide range of theatrical approaches, as we will see).<sup>18</sup>

That narrative information comes to these characters through opaque musical voices or forms is the phenomenon Abbate articulates in her book *Unsung Voices* (1991).<sup>19</sup> In this landmark work of critical musicology, Abbate finds gestures and voices often overlooked in conventional analysis and creatively decenters the criticism and hermeneutics of nineteenth-century opera. She argues that those voices can include orchestral ones as well as conventional, embodied singers' voices. Abbate's analysis of unsung voices in the *Ring* centers on two instances involving Brünnhilde and Wotan, both of whom emphatically hear the orchestra as a voice in particularly drastic moments. In her reading, Brünnhilde is a sybil in her listening abilities, capable of hearing

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<sup>18</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung* (UK: Allen Lane, 2016), 6. This, notably, counters Scruton's aim to show the *Ring* cycle's relevance today in spite of its production history—a much more universalist aim, to be sure.

<sup>19</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton University Press, 1991).

the orchestra as if it were a voice directly telegraphed from the *elsewhere*. Brünnhilde may indeed hear motives sound directly from the orchestra in ways that we in the audience do not. But my analysis is, in some ways, on that elsewhere itself. By centering an analysis elsewhere, this dissertation occupies a position where we might listen, like Brünnhilde, to the messages mediated by the orchestra and unstaged voices. Where Abbate historicizes invisible operatic roles (both in *Unsung Voices* and *In Search of Opera*), I scrutinize about the process of change those roles undergo in production—particularly Erda’s, due to its proximity to themes of apocalypse and utopia.

In chapter 2, “Erda’s Two Scenes: Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Peripeteia,” I argue that Erda’s two scenes, when considered together, display a symmetrical narrative function: both scenes serve as prophetic signposts to future narrative events and as peripeteia, or turning points in character arcs. I provide an overview of the extant literature on Erda in musicology, as well as the creation of her character by Wagner in the early 1850s, which coincides with Wagner’s various sketches of the ending of *Götterdämmerung*. I make the case, as other scholars have, that the significance of Erda’s role is already encoded in the *Ring*—evident in Wagner’s own words and in revisions to Erda’s passage. While scholars have argued that Erda’s two scenes display a reversal of the positions between her and Wotan’s characters, I argue that her two scenes also offered Wagner a formal device for structuring his *Ring* cycle around two prophecies—in the end, it allowed Wagner to get around the “Erda problem” described by Warren Darcy, that the gods are doomed despite her prophecy.

Chapter 3, “Erda in Three Dimensions: Historical/Imaginary, Remediated, and Live,” is an overview of numerous important *Ring* cycle productions, the history of which displays a constant engagement with Wagner’s own designs for spectacle. Aesthetic debates about the nature of opera,

too, follow Wagner's *Ring* from one production to the next, and ideology is never far behind. Many of these productions exist only in our historical imaginations—such as the geometric designs of Adolphe Appia and Wieland Wagner or the austere political settings by Joachim Herz and Götz Friedrich. Others display a remediation of Wagner's work for newer media, such as in Herbert von Karajan's filmed version of *Das Rheingold* (1978), in which Erda's role finds yet new ways to “unsettle” the fictive, visual world. Lastly, I read my own experience of seeing the *Ring* live at the Metropolitan Opera in New York against this archive of productions. Robert Lepage's somewhat controversial setting of the cycle attests to many of the problematics of the *Ring*'s staging history: questions of Wagnerian fidelity, totalizing aesthetics, and even technological failure. In each of the different dimensions where Erda's character lurks—configured differently each time—we still find her apocalyptic prophecy and her appearance encoded in the apparatuses of stagecraft.

In chapter 4, “Apocalypse Staged,” I consider the themes of apocalypse and utopia more deeply, in terms of their germination from Wagner's engagement with German idealism and romanticism. These themes, crucial to the development of the *Ring*, also appear crucial in contemporary stagings of the *Ring* today, especially among productions that dramatize Anthropocene climate change and global extinction. I frame these stagings as being particular to an understanding of humanity's impact on the earth. In other words, these are productions that particularly read the *Ring* as an allegory for the deadly perils of climate crisis as a way for the music dramas to remain relevant on a philosophical, and not just aesthetic, level.

In chapter 5, “Learning to Die,” I return to Erda's lesson in teaching us how to die today, in Anthropocene times. Erda, in this sense, also seems to have shown Wagner how to end the *Ring* cycle, as she appears closely related to the structure of the work, as Wagner knew it through mythological sources. This structure, further, paints the *Ring*'s story as between myth and history,



a kind of “metahistory” that prescribes an eschatological ending. This eschatological reading, which many *Ring* commentators have noted Marxist or socialist interpretations, somehow misses Erda’s role. In fact, her “learning to die” message is where the truly revolutionary and anarchic meaning of the drama lay—not in Wotan’s utopia, where the old guard is cleansed and redeemed.

I conclude by revisiting opera’s ability to be read and heard as metaphysics. Again, I consider the ability of voices from elsewhere to initiate non-rational or suprarational understandings of space, time, and the apocalypse. Wagner’s works pose questions about the nature of metaphysics—something he learned from Schopenhauer—and these seem especially unlocked in operatic performance, as in the phantasmagoria critiqued by Theodor Adorno. I circle back to the question of voices from elsewhere through the question of operatic meaning and truth. Erda’s role, as seen in the archive of productions throughout this dissertation, ultimately provides a useful metaphor for the relationship between staging and the politics they initiate. Today, then, the *Ring*’s apocalypse is as pleasurable to behold as it was in 1876 for reasons both obvious and subtle—Wagner’s music and words remain beautiful, of course, but Erda’s role appears to continually invite new voices to contribute to the re-engineering of the artwork and its evolving lessons in annihilation.

## 2.0 Erda's Two Scenes: Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Peripeteia

Character study is a conventional method by which operas have been analyzed, but I aim to broaden its possibilities to include characterization in multiple opera stagings. Joseph Kerman famously claimed that characterization is one of the three principal contributions that music makes to drama, together with action and atmosphere. Characterization, he claimed, is the most obvious of opera's contributions and that music is capable of rounding out a character beyond what is possible by poetry and plot alone.<sup>20</sup> For Kerman, music broadly does two things to a character in the hands of a competent composer: it "gives life to a character" and it "subverts a character."<sup>21</sup> For example, the musical realization of a character such as Wotan brings his character to life and provides Wagner the ability to shape that characterization as he experiences joy, turmoil, and so forth in the narrative. In the case of Wagner's writing, this could be evident in the motives or key areas that often accompany Wotan's character, tools that Wagner plays with throughout the cycle to signal changes in the character's journey. Even prior to that process though, music offered Wagner the opportunity to create Wotan beyond the libretto, and we could perhaps imagine a different musical Wotan being given life: one defined by more excessively triumphant music or, inversely, a role whose music constantly works against the wishes he expresses in words.

Throughout this dissertation, one thing my analysis shows is that staging, particularly set and costume designs but also performance and conducting, can also give life to or subvert the

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (University of California Press, 1988 [1956]), 215. Also see Julian Rushton, "Characterization," in *The Oxford Handbook of Opera* (Oxford, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Kerman, *Opera as Drama*, 215-219.

expectations of a character. As we will see in the next chapter, directors and performers are provided an opportunity to play with Wagner's characters. To use Wotan again, we find variously performed and presented Wotans throughout the *Ring's* production history: some are brazen demagogues, as in Patrice Chéreau's infamous setting in 1976, where Wotan's story seems to take center stage even more so than Wagner would intend. The same is true of course for Erda. Before getting to those multiple "Erdas"—that archive of different takes on the same character—it is worth spelling out what Erda's role is, primarily looking at the extant literature on Erda in character studies and Wagner's own music and text. I argue that this Erda, prior to her appearance on stage, is already a deeply significant character to the *Ring* cycle, despite her minute presence in the score. I show that Erda's prophecy and, later, her initiation of Wotan's prophecy, provide structural pillars that encode apocalypse and utopia, respectively, into the music and text of the *Ring*.

Other character studies of the *Ring* point similarly to the analytical fruits of characterization, by which Wagner's characters seem to take on qualities of agency, as if they are not merely predetermined in their experiences, actions, and qualities. Some scholars ask questions of these characters that reflect this agential quality, as in William McDonald's "What Does Wotan Know?" and Mark Poster's "What Does Wotan Want?".<sup>22</sup> Minor characters, including Erda, the Rhinedaughters, and Waltraute, have inspired similar analyses.<sup>23</sup> Lisa Feurzeig's article, "The

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<sup>22</sup> William McDonald, "What Does Wotan Know?: Autobiography and Moral Vision in Wagner's *Ring*", *19th-Century Music* 15, no. 1 (Summer, 1991): 36-51. Mark Poster, "What Does Wotan Want?: Ambivalent Feminism in Wagner's *Ring*," *New German Critique* 53 (Spring-Summer 1991): 131-148.

<sup>23</sup> Werner Breig, "Der Rheintöchtergesang in Wagners Rheingold," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 37, no. 4 (1980): 241-263. Kimberly Canton, "Redeeming the Rhinemaidens," *The Wagner Journal* 2 no. 2, 40-45. Maria Euchner, "The Ring's Rhinemaidens: Singing Seductresses or Women of Wisdom?," *The Musical Times* 153, no.

Interrelations of Will and Knowledge,” and Sherry D. Lee’s article, “On Dramatic Text, Absolute Music, Adorno and Wagner’s *Ring*,” are the two most significant studies of Erda to date.<sup>24</sup> Warren Darcy also explores the genesis of Erda’s character by looking at Wagner’s sources. Darcy argues for the character’s significance to the cycle’s musical construction, particularly its opening prelude and the music for the Norns.<sup>25</sup>

Feurzeig, Lee, and Darcy are important scholars for any study of Erda’s role, and my own work builds on theirs by considering Erda in relation to other “voices from elsewhere” in Wagner’s output, and in relation to her primary onstage interlocutor, Wotan. Following an established tradition in Wagner studies (including the work by Feurzeig, Lee, and Darcy), I also link Erda’s character, her qualities and musical characterization with elements of Wagner’s music-cum-philosophy. For example, Lee argues that Erda’s prophecy foretells not only of the end of the *Ring*, but of opera itself. While I agree with Lee’s reading, I offer a slightly different one—particularly initiated by the staging of that prophecy in different circumstances, with different stagecraft and *mise-en-scène*, and so forth.

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1918 (Spring 2012): 37-51. Arnold Whitall, “A Tale of Two Sisters: Brünnhilde, Waltraute, and the Fate of Valhalla,” in *The Wagner Style: Close Readings and Critical Perspectives* (Plumbago Books, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> Lisa Feurzeig, “The Interrelations of Knowledge and Will: Erda, Experience, and Epistemology in the *Ring*,” *The Opera Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 71-94. Sherry D. Lee, ““Alles was ist, endet”: On Dramatic Text, Absolute Music, Adorno, and Wagner’s *Ring*,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 922-940.

<sup>25</sup> Warren Darcy, ““Everything That Is, Ends!’: The Genesis of Erda’s Episode in ‘Das Rheingold’”, *The Musical Times* 129, no. 1747 (Sep., 1988): 443-447. Darcy, “Creation ex nihilo: The Genesis, Structure, and Meaning of the “Rheingold” Prelude,” *19th-Century Music* 13, no. 2 (Autumn, 1989): 79-100. Darcy, *Wagner’s Das Rheingold* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

The genesis of Erda's character is worth reviewing here, as it suggests that her dramatic role combines several character tropes. While Wagner drew much of the *Ring's* story and characters from various Nordic mythologies, he first encountered the sources for Erda's character in secondary literature on German mythology, and he took great creative liberties with it. Deryck Cooke and Warren Darcy both note that Wagner drew on two poems in the *Poetic Edda* in which Odin summons a "völva," or wise woman/prophetess figure: (1) the *Völuspá*, *Prophecy of the Seeress* and (2) *Vegtamskvida* or *Baldrs draumar* [Baldr's Dreams].<sup>26</sup> These provided Wagner with the material for Erda's interactions with Wotan and the prophetess's connection to the creation and destruction of the world. Richard Bell notes that these sources merely gave Wagner an Erda who was a seeress, not necessarily the Earth goddess she would also be.<sup>27</sup> Erda in these sources is called "Wala," an abstraction from the Nordic "völva," which appears in Jacob Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*.<sup>28</sup> The name Erda, while homonymic with *Erde* (the German word for earth) was an abstraction Wagner received from Grimm, who referenced Tacitus's goddess Nerthus in *Germania*. While the Norse völva is summoned against her will by Odin in the Eddic sources (as Erda is in *Siegfried*), Tacitus's Nerthus provided Wagner with a goddess who proactively intervenes in the affairs of others (as Erda does in *Rheingold*).<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 227; and Warren Darcy, "“Everything That Is, Ends!”: The Genesis and Meaning of the Erda Episode in ‘Das Rheingold’," 445.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Bell, *Theology of Wagner's Ring Cycle II: Theological and Ethical Issues* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 39-41.

<sup>28</sup> Stanley Hauer, "Wagner and the 'Völuspá'." *19th-Century Music* 15, no. 1 (Summer, 1991): 52-63, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Cooke, 227.

Erda first appeared in Wagner's drafts for the first prose sketch of Act III of *Der junge Siegfried* in the spring of 1851.<sup>30</sup> Wagner's first *Ring* sketch, in 1848, was significantly different and, in Erda's place, had Wotan seeking counsel from the three Norns. Notably, the annihilation of the gods is also absent in the 1848 sketch, where the gods are essentially redeemed or cleansed by Brünnhilde. Lacking there, too, is the parallel fiery catastrophes of the immolation on earth and the razing of Valhalla. While the ending written roughly ten years later also absolves the gods, they perish in flames. In other words, their punishment occurs not in spite of absolution, but perhaps because of it. In the 1851 ending, where Erda first appears, we see the beginnings of this connection: where Brünnhilde claims that the gods will receive "blessed redemption in death."<sup>31</sup> In the "Feuerbachian" ending written in 1852, Brünnhilde mimics Feuerbach's secular assessment that the gods are human constructions. Their end, then, suggests their replacement by a human society built around sexual love.<sup>32</sup> The 1856 "Schopenhauerian" ending differs as well, where Brünnhilde sings that "grieving love's profoundest suffering" opens her eyes, so she "[sees] the world end."<sup>33</sup> Erda's role, then, given that its genesis is close to the many endings Wagner wrote, suggests a closeness between her character and the themes of apocalypse and utopia. Yet, Erda's absence at the end of the *Ring* feels suspicious in light of it, especially given the fact that Erda's role mirrors earlier supernatural interventions that all occurred at the end of their respective operas, other *deus ex machina*.

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<sup>30</sup> Darcy, "Everything That Is, Ends!," 445.

<sup>31</sup> Spencer and Millington, *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion* (Thames & Hudson, 1993), 362.

<sup>32</sup> Spencer and Millington, 362-3.

<sup>33</sup> Spencer and Millington, 363.

Slavoj Žižek notes the various versions of the ending of *Götterdämmerung* appear as Feuerbachian (the reign of human love), Schopenhauerian (resignation and withdrawal from the world), and also Bakuninian (revolutionary destruction of the world).<sup>34</sup> The last of these refers to Wagner's reading of the works of anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who Wagner knew from his years as a revolutionary in Dresden in the 1830s and 1840s. The Bakuninian and Feuerbachian themes are combined, Žižek argues, in the 1852 ending. Many critics thought Wagner was unsure of the central thematic he wished to portray in the ending, evidenced not only by the various sketches for the libretto, but also in the final version's smorgasbord of Leitmotifs.<sup>35</sup> The final ending of *Götterdämmerung* combines parts of these endings: Brünnhilde performs a single act (her immolation)—one of "supreme freedom and autonomy" in Žižek's words—that embodies her love for Siegfried. Brünnhilde's deed thus offers the utopian hope that Wotan prophesies in *Siegfried*, and (perhaps paradoxically) also ends the world.<sup>36</sup> Žižek analyzes Brünnhilde's immolation in terms of it as a suicide, as if her death only reflects her amorous link to Siegfried and her contentious relationship with her father, Wotan. This is a point of departure for our analysis of the

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<sup>34</sup> Slavoj Žižek, "Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and 'German Ideology,'" in *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 161-225 (London: Verso, 2010), 192.

<sup>35</sup> Žižek follows Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht in this regard. Kitcher and Schacht, *Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Adorno also argued that Wagner's ending, the mish-mash of Leitmotifs, displays an uncertainty about the ending's meaning.

<sup>36</sup> Žižek, 196. Žižek, however, asks about the authenticity of Brünnhilde's task, a question that he uses to ask about *Parsifal*'s ideology. Warren Darcy argues that the ending is definitively Schopenhauerian, despite the final revision. Warren Darcy, "The Metaphysics of Annihilation: Wagner, Schopenhauer, and the Ending of the *Ring*," *Music Theory Spectrum* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 1-40. See also Scruton, *The Ring of Truth*, and Bell, *Theology I*.

apocalypse in the *Ring*, which encapsulates a larger scale of human death and of ecological collapse.

There may be clues to Erda's genesis in other creative works that Wagner had been working on during the late 1840s and throughout the 1850s. For example, in Wagner's arrangement of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Aulide* and his ultimately unrealized arrangement of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*<sup>37</sup> the composer encountered prototypes for his own *deus ex machina* in other last-minute dramatic interventions by supernatural characters. In his arrangement of the Gluck opera, now titled *Iphigenia in Aulis* (1847), Wagner updated the work for nineteenth-century German audiences by expanding its orchestral forces and inserting new transitional music between arias and recitatives so as to make it feel less like a number opera. Further, the adapted *Iphigenia*'s *deus ex machina* ending has Artemis—Wagner used the Greek equivalent of Diana in the 1775 revision for Paris—intervening to rescue Iphigenia from being sacrificed.<sup>38</sup> In one of the more significant revisions to Gluck's work, Wagner's Act III, scene 6 includes wholly original material—new text based more closely on Euripides's play and new music with a phantasmagoric effect, similar to

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<sup>37</sup> See Chris Walton, "Iphigenia Lost and Found: A Newly Discovered Gluck Arrangement by Richard Wagner," in *Fontes Artis Musicae* 45, no. 3/4 (July 1998): 227-236. Also see Jeremy Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris: Translation, Identity, Modernity* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2019), especially 85-103. Simon Goldhill argues that Wagner's Hellenization of Gluck's work was also an effort to remold Gluck to resemble his own burgeoning concept of music drama. Goldhill, "Who Killed Gluck?", *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 210-39.

<sup>38</sup> Jeremy Coleman notes that Gluck had introduced Artemis in his own 1775 version. *Richard Wagner in Paris*, 98.



later divisi writing for strings in *Lohengrin*.<sup>39</sup> Artemis sings a soft, slow passage, underscored by long tones in the orchestra, what could easily serve as a model for Erda's appearance in *Das Rheingold*.<sup>40</sup> Both follow the pattern of other phantasmagoric instances in Wagner's works in which music serves to make space timeless, or create "mirages of eternity" as John Deathridge calls Isolde's transfiguration.<sup>41</sup> The placement of both Artemis's and Erda's scenes relative to their respective operas' endings bespeaks a similar relationship to the narrative structure of their operas. In other words, Wagner might have found prototypes of Erda's character in goddess figures from other operas before the 1850s, or, in the case of the unfinished *Don Giovanni*, in tropes of supernatural intervention. The fact that he made extensive revisions to Gluck's opera, especially its ending, provides some explanation for Erda's sudden appearance in the early 1850s, when she replaces the Norns in the sketches for *Rheingold*.<sup>42</sup>

Erda's role has provided an enigma to musicologists, leading some to wonder at the work's dramatic and narrative inconsistencies. Darcy notes: "Why, [critics] ask, do the gods ultimately

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<sup>39</sup> Coleman, 99.

<sup>40</sup> See *Richard Wagner Sämtliche Werke Band 20, IV: Iphigenia in Aulis* WWV 77, edited by Christa Jost (Mainz: Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG), Act III, scene 6, mm.85-102.

<sup>41</sup> John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil*, 149. Also see Gabriela Cruz, *Grand Illusion: Phantasmagoria in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Artemis/Diana might also be related to Erda through the mythological figure Hecate. Hecate is the Greek goddess of entrances, keys, light, night, magic, and sorcery. Her peripheral position towards the other Greek gods is similar to Erda's position towards Wotan and the other gods. The two also reside in the underworld, guard boundaries, exist in "triple form," and so forth. Wagner might have known Hecate through the Greeks or through Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1605), where Hecate is mentioned as queen of the witches. The "triple goddess" quality might explain Wagner's decision to keep the Norns in the final draft of the libretto.

perish even though Wotan heeds Erda's warning and relinquishes the ring? If the gods are ineluctably doomed from the outset, what sense does her warning make at all?"<sup>43</sup> These questions not only probe Wagner's *Ring*, but they also ponder the efficacy of Erda's prophetic meaning and her function as a character. Pushing Darcy's criticism further, one might wonder why Erda is included at all—why, for instance, did Wagner supplant the three Norns with her? Her character seems to do something else for Wagner as a dramatist, composer, and director.

Erda, as others such as Darcy have argued, is crucial to the plot of the *Ring*. She is also crucial to its theme of apocalypse and death, yet this connection to the cycle's larger themes was not always clear, even to Wagner himself. In the 1848 scenario, "Die Nibelungen-Mythus: Als Entwurf zu einem Drama," Wotan "yield[s] to the counsel of the three Fates (Norns), who warn him of the downfall of the Gods themselves."<sup>44</sup> By 1853, when Wagner had the libretto for the entire cycle published and distributed privately (in only 50 copies), Erda appears with her warning almost intact, except for the *Weltuntergang* prophecy. Before Wagner's crucial revision, Erda was set to tell Wotan:

Ein düsterer Tag  
dämmert den Göttern:  
in Schmach doch endet dein edles  
Geschlecht, lässt du den Reif nicht los!<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Warren Darcy, "Everything That Is, Ends: The Genesis and Meaning of the Erda Episode," 443.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Wagner, "Der Nibelungen-Mythus: Als Entwurf zu einem Drama," in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 7 "In Paris and Dresden," 299-311, translated by William Ashton Ellis, 302.

<sup>45</sup> From 1853 libretto with Wagner's corrections in Morgan Library & Museum, Heineman collection, call number 0739. Translation is my own.

A dark day  
dawns for the gods:  
your noble race in shame ends  
if you do not let go of the ring!

Darcy has shown through his analysis of these changes, from 1848 to 1853, that Wagner kept in the implication that shunning the ring might somehow save the gods. Yet, by 1854 Wagner changed this passage, evident from the Wagner holograph libretto that shows his hand crossing out the old passage and inserting the new one.

In a long letter to August Röckel early in 1854, the composer explained this decision, elucidating much of what he valued thematically in the nascent *Ring* cycle. While describing the meaning of the work and its representation of reality, Wagner wrote:

Statt der Worte: „ein düstrer Tag dämmert den Göttern: in  
Schmach doch endet Dein edles Geschlecht, lässt du dein Reif nicht  
los!“ lasse ich jetzt *Erda* nur sagen: „Alles was ist—endet: ein  
düstrer Tag dämmert den Göttern: Dir rath‘ ich, meide den Ring!“—  
Wir müssen *sterben* lernen, zwar *sterben*, im vollständigsten Sinne  
des Wortes; die Furcht vor dem Ende ist der Quell aller  
Lieblosigkeit, und sie erzeugt sich nur da, wo selbst bereits die Liebe  
erbleicht. Wie ging es zu, dass diese höchste Beseligerin alles  
Lebenden dem menschlichen Geschlechte so weit entschwand, dass

diese endlich alles was es that, einrichtete und gründete, nur noch aus Furcht vor dem Ende erfaßt? Mein Gedicht zeigt es.<sup>46</sup>

[Instead of the words: “a dark day dawns for the gods: in disgrace ends your noble race, if you do not let your ring go!” I now have *Erda* say: “all that is—ends: a dark day dawns for the gods: I advise you, shun the Ring!”—We must learn *to die*, and indeed *die*, in the fullest sense of the word; the fear of the end is the source of all lovelessness, and it arises only where love itself already wanes. How did it happen, that this most blessed one of all that lived vanished from the human race, that this is what finally did it, arranged and founded, only to still be seized by fear of the end? My poem shows it.]

This is a significant passage because it articulates one possible meaning of Wagner’s *Ring*, the ending of which was still under revision. But it also raises a substantial question about *Erda*’s importance to the cycle’s meaning: if she is so vital to the cycle’s core theme, why did Wagner relegate her to a few minutes of stage time (and hardly any room on stage)? In the final version of the *Ring*, Wagner does not necessarily prescribe “learning to die” as the poem’s most important message, yet *Erda*’s passage remains untouched after 1854, even despite new endings to the work

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<sup>46</sup> *Richard Wagner Sämtliche Briefe, Band IV Januar 1854-Februar 1855* (VEB Deutscher Verlag für Musik: Leipzig, 1986), 67. Translation is my own.

composed later. It seems some part of the compositional process during the 1850s partially erased the importance of Erda's message, at least in Wagner's intention.

The 1854 letter to Röckel demonstrates Wagner's shifting notion of what the cycle was going to mean and which themes would carry its narrative, in an approximate sense. One sees this earlier, too, in the 1848 prose draft of *Siegfrieds Tod*, where Siegfried becomes aware of Götterdämmerung and leads the gods to victory against Alberich and the Nibelungen in the battle of Ragnarök.<sup>47</sup> Ragnarök is left out of the final version of the *Ring*, displaced so Brünnhilde can spiritually redeem the world. Erda's role, then, was not alone in changing throughout the extensive process of revision that occupied Wagner's life for nearly two decades. Erda's passage and its revision articulate the importance that Wagner saw in Erda's role as related to its ending and its philosophical limits—that ability for the work to “teach us to die”—even if that theme underwent further changes as time went on. Those changes, though, happened without much further revision to Erda's words. What, then, can we still learn from Erda's music and words?

## 2.1 Das Rheingold, Scene 4: Apocalypse Prophesied

In scene 4 of *Das Rheingold*,<sup>48</sup> Wotan questions giving up the ring that Alberich forged from the gold of the Rhine river—a ring that would grant Wotan absolute power. If he gave it up, he reasons, the giants Fasolt and Fafner would take it in lieu of the goddess Freia, as payment for

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<sup>47</sup> Darcy, “Everything That Is, Ends,” 444.

<sup>48</sup> *Richard Wagner Sämtliche Werke Band 10, II Der Ring des Nibelungen Vorabend: Das Rheingold WWV 86A*, edited by Egon Voss (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1989), scene 4 begins at m. 2857, p. 284.

their work constructing Valhalla. The other gods in attendance, Fricka, Donner, and Froh, plead with Wotan to give up the ring (“Spare das Gold nicht!”; “Spende den Ring doch!”), but their words fail to move him. Wotan is stubborn in his decision to keep it (“Den Reif geb’ ich nicht.”), until Erda appears:

Die Bühne hat sich von neuem verfinstert. Aus der Felskluft  
zur Seite bricht ein bläulicher Schein hervor: in ihm wird plötzlich  
Erda sichtbar, die bis zu halber Leibeshöhe aus der Tiefe aufsteigt;  
sie ist von edler Gestalt, weithin von schwarzem Haare umwallt.<sup>49</sup>

[The stage has darkened. From a fissure in a rock a blueish  
glow emerges: suddenly Erda is visible, rising from the depths up to  
half her height; she has a noble form, nearly enveloped by black  
hair.<sup>50</sup>]

Erda’s appearance is otherworldly and yet tightly bound to the actual earth represented by the stage. Her black hair and blue light surround her, ostensibly marking her as *other*, arriving as she does from a place unknown to the gods and giants who are already onstage. The orchestra’s shift, too, emphasizes this otherness: the new tonal area of C-sharp minor sounds ominously from a group of low brass and bassoons (m. 3456). C-sharp also foreshadows the enharmonic area of D-flat, which comes to be associated with Valhalla, the ending of *Das Rheingold*, and the ending of *Götterdämmerung*. At the beginning of Erda’s passage, long diatonic tones slowly change and

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<sup>49</sup> Beginning at mm. 3452, p. 344.

<sup>50</sup> Translations are my own, unless noted otherwise.

ascend, forming the Leitmotif that will evoke Erda throughout the cycle: dotted-rhythmic ascending steps (usually by divisi bassoons) that mimic her very ascension from under the earth (Figure 2-1, mm. 3458-9).<sup>51</sup>



**Figure 2-1 Erda's ascension music, mm. 3458-9**

Her Leitmotif, it should be noted, is a minor-mode version of the ascending dotted-rhythm figure associated with the Rhine, the Rhinedaughters, and the genesis of nature at the very beginning of *Das Rheingold*, which famously consists only of an ascending E-flat major triad that lasts for the first six or so minutes of the cycle (Figure 2-2).



**Figure 2-2 The music of the Rhine**

This musical recollection of the opening (or as Darcy calls it, the *creatio ex nihilo*) is part of what makes Erda's intervention so significant. Darcy argues that Erda's entire prophecy (see Figure 2-3, mm. 3471-3508), then, "reach[es] out in both directions across the temporal continuum...embrac[ing] the beginning and end of the entire drama."<sup>52</sup> This "reaching out" is

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<sup>51</sup> Richard Wagner *Sämtliche Werke Band 10, II Der Ring des Nibelungen Vorabend: Das Rheingold WWV 86A*, edited by Egon Voss (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1989), this motif first appears m. 3458, p. 345.

<sup>52</sup> Darcy, "Everything That Is, Ends!," 443.

completed towards the end of this prophecy by a new Leitmotif that firmly ties itself to the concept of Götterdämmerung, a reversal of Erda's music in a new key.

(A)	Wie alles war, weiß ich; wie alles wird, wie alles sein wird, seh' ich auch: der ew'gen Welt Ur-Wala, Erda mahnt deinen Muth.	[Erda]	How all things were, I know; how all things are, how all things will be, I see as well: the eternal world's ancestral vala, Erda warns you.
(B)	Drei der Töchter, ur-erschaff'ne, gebar mein Schooß: was ich sehe, sagen dir nächtlich die Nornen.	[Norns]	Three of my daughters, borne in primeval times, from my womb: what I see, the Norns tell you nightly.
(Retransition)	Doch höchste Gefahr führt mich heut' selbst zu dir her: höre! höre! höre!	[Zwang]	But utmost danger brings me myself to you here today: hear me! hear me! hear me!
(A)	Alles was ist, endet. Ein düstr'er Tag dämmert den Göttern: dir rath' ich, meide den Ring!	[Erda] [G.D.] [Ring]	Everything that is, ends. A dark day dawns for the gods: I advise you, shun the ring!

**Figure 2-3 Erda's monologue with Leitmotifs in brackets, mm. 3471-3508**

Erda's prophecy, as Darcy argues, is essentially in three sections (ABA) with an introduction and coda.<sup>53</sup> Thomas Grey describes it is a kind of "free-standing aria" that turns into a "poetic-musical period," beginning with a declamatory recitative-like passage.<sup>54</sup> When Erda

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<sup>53</sup> Warren Darcy, *Wagner's Das Rheingold* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 202.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas S. Grey, "Leitmotif, Temporality, and Musical Design in the Ring," in *The Cambridge Companion Wagner*, 85-114 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 103.



appears (mm. 3460-3468) she tells Wotan to flee the ring for it will cause destruction (“Weiche Wotan, weiche! Flieh’ des Ringes Fluch!”). Wotan asks Erda who she is (mm. 3468-70), and in her response she declines to give her name (at least not yet) and instead explain her powers of sight, her temporality, and her status as an oracle (the A section above, mm. 3471-3482). Only then does she name herself as a being who is as one with the ancestral earth, the *Ur-Wala* (m. 3480). These differences set her apart from all the other characters in the *Ring*; further, they convince Wotan of her authority on the matter of the ring’s powers and the content of worldly events. Toward the end of her response, she explains that her appearance is provoked by the crisis at hand and then prophesies the twilight of the gods.

At the beginning of the B section (m. 3483), I have labelled the material at Erda’s mention of the Norns as their motif, but it is noteworthy that Erda’s motif continues to recur in the bassoons and violins. The Norns motif, arpeggiated triads reminiscent of the Rhine’s music, is not fully presented until their appearance onstage in the *Götterdämmerung* Prologue, but their music appears in the second violins during this section.<sup>55</sup> Throughout Erda’s prophecy, the orchestra reminds us of her Leitmotif, usually in an eerie orchestration of low bassoons or muted strings.

The musical climax of this scene arrives with Erda’s plea for Wotan to hear her (“höre!”) at the end of the retransition (Figure 2-4, mm. 3495-7). Loud orchestral bursts on a descending half-step accompany her as she sings “hö-re,” particularly jarring because this moment feels musically quite different than Erda’s more fluid Leitmotif. The bass movement, Fx-G-sharp, prepares the dominant cadence and is only partially resolved during the prophecy that follows

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<sup>55</sup> See Grey, 103.

(“alles was ist, endet”), where Wagner uses Neapolitan harmonies and the new Götterdämmerung Leitmotif to reflect the dissolution inherent in Erda’s apocalyptic message.



Figure 2-4 Erda's plea ("höre!"), mm. 3495-7

This provocation for Wotan to listen (“höre!”) is related to the Leitmotif associated with “Zwang” (compulsive force) and “Weh” (woe and grief), both marked by a descending half step, played either in the orchestra or sung. Erda’s first “höre!” is sung to that same minor second, and the orchestra repeats it at her second iterations of “höre!” as well. This Leitmotif had previously accompanied Freia (“Hilfe! Hilfe!”) prior to Erda’s entrance, and, before that, Alberich’s “Wehe!” (woe) and “Schmerz!” (grief), as the Rhinedaughters rejected him in the opera’s opening scene. Here it signals Erda’s forceful plea to be heard because Wotan *needs to be forced to listen*, and it conveys the grief Erda feels at the circumstances that bring her there.

Erda’s passage urging Wotan *to hear* is perhaps analogous to the Woodbird’s call to Siegfried, the voice from above’s ominous repetition of the “enlightened through compassion” motive in *Parsifal*, and the young sailor’s mocking song to Isolde from afar in *Tristan*. The primary difference between Erda’s communication and these other ones is that the sound of Erda’s voice is accompanied by the bodily presence of a singer on stage. Her voice is not acousmatic, although it shares the supernatural, chthonic qualities that opera composers often assigned to acousmatic

voices.<sup>56</sup> This makes sense given Wagner's use of such voices in the aforementioned examples. In contrast, Erda's role manifests as an audible voice and a partly visible singer's body (in most productions). Given her dramatic likeness to Wagner's acousmatic voices, we may well wonder why Wagner called for her to appear as she does, with her singer's body half above and half below the stage.

With the reprise of her prophecy's A material (Figure 2-5, mm. 3499-3508), Erda explains mortality and finitude to Wotan: "Alles was ist, endet." This prefaces her more direct threat to the chief god: "Ein düstr'er Tag dämmert den Göttern," and the crisis demands action: "meide den Ring!" she cries, as her melody again reaches up to E5.

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<sup>56</sup> Brian Kane, *Sound Unseen: Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

Erda

Al - les, was ist, en - det! Ein düst' - rer

5

Tag däm - mert den Göt - tern: dir rath' ich, mei - de den Ring!

Figure 2-5 The Weltuntergang Prophecy, mm. 3499-3508

This is Erda's *Weltuntergang* [Doomsday] prophecy, as it is known in its final version. At the line “ein düstr'er Tag,” Erda's Leitmotif (mm. 3500-1) suddenly reverses direction and is reharmonized as a Neapolitan sixth chord (D major). This reharmonized, descending form of her theme becomes the *Götterdämmerung* Leitmotif (Figure 2-6, mm. 3502-3), or as Darcy labels it, the *Weltuntergang* Leitmotif. It is also worth noting that the ring Leitmotif (ascending and descending minor thirds, at mm. 3504-8) accompanies her vocal line counseling Wotan to shun the ring, at the prophecy's conclusion. The ring's thematic appearance at this moment associates it—particularly the lovelessness required to get and keep it—with the *Götterdämmerung* motive

and, thus, with the downfall of the gods. The lovelessness that begot the ring is, at the end of Erda's prophecy, repurposed as a sign of world destruction.



**Figure 2-6 The Götterdämmerung Leitmotif, mm. 3502-3**

The two themes, Erda and Götterdämmerung, are closely related musically and conceptually (Figure 2-7). The second motive (2-7b) closes the circle, so to speak, created by the first (2-7a). Perhaps they provide us a fully realized musical representation of Erda and the concepts she brings into the *Ring*'s fictive world, interlocking her character's subjectivity with the theme of Götterdämmerung. Alternately, the Götterdämmerung Leitmotif could be heard as an inversion or negation of the ascending figure and the things it signifies: Erda, the Rhine, the Rhinedaughters, the natural world, and the cosmos. In this hearing, Götterdämmerung might emerge as a process that is diametrically opposed to Erda's natural world, something that in fact combats nature or even dialectically undoes it. Yet it is Erda's words that introduce the Götterdämmerung Leitmotif into the *Ring*'s musical lexicon. It seems paradoxical that Erda would bring apocalypse to the stage with her because it might undo her world in the process. However, Erda has been staged in ways that trouble this paradox even more. For example, Erda's world is not implicated in her message when she appears in science fiction *Ring* stagings—as a figure from another world, she transmits her message from somewhere else entirely.



**Figure 2-7 The Erda and Götterdämmerung motifs**

Erda's role bridges two ideas in this passage: the natural world before it was tainted by Wotan and the culminating apocalypse. Sherry D. Lee even claims that the two themes—Erda and *Götterdämmerung*—become one. In this scene, Lee argues, time symbolically collapses, yet listeners are also flung forward toward the drama's future.<sup>57</sup> Significantly, Erda's line, "Alles was ist, endet," first appeared in Wagner's sketches when he set this scene to music in early 1854. His inclusion of "alles" implies that it is the cycle's entire fictional world that may come to an end, not just the gods'.<sup>58</sup> Feurzeig's reading of this passage adds the important point that while the event of *Götterdämmerung* is made plain by Erda's prophecy, its meaning has yet to be clarified. The meaning of *Götterdämmerung* seems, to Wotan, to terrify him. Of course, this changes when Wotan accepts his fate, which surprises Erda in their confrontation in *Siegfried* Act III, scene 1.<sup>59</sup>

The *Weltuntergang* section of Erda's prophecy is not only important in terms of its textual content, but in terms of its music. The orchestra, by following her prophecy with the *Götterdämmerung* motive, seems to offer her words a sheen of authority. Yet we are left to wonder about the aporia of Erda's role, that unsolvable problem of her prophecy, to which she also seems vulnerable: will everything truly end, or is her sight and knowledge truly boundless? There are, in Erda's prophecy, motivic references to events in the past (the ring), the present (Erda), and the future (*Götterdämmerung*). In this formation of the prophecy's motives, the past is actually evoked

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<sup>57</sup> Sherry D. Lee, "'Alles was ist, endet': On Dramatic Text, Absolute Music, Adorno, and Wagner's *Ring*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 922-940.

<sup>58</sup> Darcy, "Everything That Is, Ends!," 447. Darcy shows that this revision also had a domino effect on the revisions of other scenes, notably the prelude to *Das Rheingold*.

<sup>59</sup> Lisa Feurzeig, "The Interrelations of Knowledge and Will: Erda, Experience, and Epistemology in the *Ring*," 73.

at the prophecy's conclusion—time works in reverse. Prior to that, the information Erda imparts has consequences for the present—encouraging Wotan to shun the ring—but also for the future well-being of the gods and, by association, humans, giants, and Nibelungen.<sup>60</sup> Past, present, and future are interwoven into the music of the passage's climactic prophecy, reflecting what Erda tells us of her ontology and temporality—that she indeed sees the past, present, and future. In this way, Erda's character and the orchestra are closely linked together as narrators. As Kerman suggests of opera, Wagner's music fully realizes Erda's characterization here quite literally, by matching the things she tells Wotan (that she everything that was, is, and will be) with appropriate musical signifiers in the orchestra (the motives of the ring, Erda, and *Götterdämmerung*). Beyond just associating her ontology with ideas though, he provides these motives in a certain order that lets us “reach out” to the beginning and ending of the drama, as Darcy put it. Erda's recurring motive (and the brief appearance of the Norn's motive) constantly evokes the present moment as well as her role's omniscience (spelled out later by the Norns). The past and future, then, appear in the cameo of the ring Leitmotif towards the monologue's end and the debut of the *Götterdämmerung* theme, respectively.

Wotan's character is dumbstruck by Erda's prophecy and wishes to know more, a response that is perhaps exacerbated by his experience in scene 2 of *Das Rheingold*, when Freia is taken by the giants temporarily and the gods begin to age and weaken without her golden apples. Erda responds to his curiosity with a refusal, singing, “Du weißt genug, sinn' in Sorg und Furcht!” [You know enough, think in care and fear!] (mm. 3518-3521). These words will come to be thrown back

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<sup>60</sup> See Hilda Meldrum Brown, *The Quest for the Gesamtkunstwerk and Richard Wagner* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 150.

at her in their later encounter, where their roles are dramatically reversed, in the *peripeteia* of both characters' journeys and arguably, of the *Ring* itself.

Erda's words and music are, of course, accompanied by her strange appearance on stage, neither wholly visible nor invisible. The entire scene, though, ought to be considered as the sum of its parts. Indeed, Carolyn Abbate provides an analysis of Brünnhilde's sibylline qualities—shared by Erda, I think. In *Unsung Voices*, Abbate describes Erda's daughter, Brünnhilde, as a sibyl, a woman who foretells the future from this different world:

Sibyls (and clairvoyant Brünnhilde is one) have a unique relationship to what they say in their moments of prophecy, and we hear their speech in a special way. Their speech is oracular; that is, sibyls are heard as a sounding board for speech that originates *elsewhere*.<sup>61</sup> Such speech is the sound of an aeolian harp played by an unseen presence, or the speech of a ventriloquist's doll; that speech seems to have complete authority since we sense an ultimate speaker (the speaker whom we assume to speak through the sibyl) who is mysterious and omniscient. The sibyl, on one level, articulates *truth* in a way that no other narrator can. We might speak of sibylline speech as always ringing true. Our assumption of truth is thus directly tied to our assumption that the sibyl is a conduit, and that she does not *intervene* in the vision that she receives. Yet in all this, the sibyl is also a “hybrid, double, ambiguous figure,” who

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<sup>61</sup> Emphasis mine.



“introduce[s] the fantastic and the supernatural in the ‘real’ world  
and retain[s] only a highly tenuous relationship with the  
transcendental idea.”<sup>62</sup>

Abbate quotes Kristeva’s explication of the sibyl, a character who possesses the future and points to the “unlimited possibilities of discourse,” breaking down stability and undermining “any speech’s claim to transcendence,” potentially even her own.<sup>63</sup> Erda, being the Ur-sibyl of Wagner’s *Ring*, is one of these ambiguous figures, but she also fits exceedingly well with this description of the sibyl as bringing the “fantastic and supernatural” onto the stage of the imaginary Wagnerian world. In other words, she signals a mystical, gnostic world coexisting in parallel with the stage world. The elsewhere in which Erda’s knowledge originates might equally be the space from which her body protrudes onto the stage, the interior center of the *Ring*’s world (a *Weltinnenraum*, for Rilke and Heidegger, or Epicurus’s *Intermundia*).<sup>64</sup> The limits of the world of Wagner’s *Ring* are expanded by Erda’s persona, whose half-presence lends credence to Abbate’s analysis of the sibyl.

The symbolic elsewhere beneath the stage is not only a place where Erda’s extraordinary speech originates, but her oracular listening, too. The sibyl’s hybridity points to this double function—she is not only a speaker of truths, but an erudite listener as well. In contrast, Wotan needs to be told to hear, marked by Erda’s plea to “höre!”. According to Abbate, clairvoyance is thus also *clair-entendement*, hearing and understanding what others cannot, including those

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<sup>62</sup> Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 213-214. Emphasis Abbate’s.

<sup>63</sup> Abbate, 214.

<sup>64</sup> Rilke’s *Weltinnenraum* is the space that extends through all beings, the inner space of the world that makes all of us beings of the same cosmos. See Haar, 125-6.

ordinarily illegible or acousmatic voices such as the Woodbird's. It seems that Erda can hear and understand such voices even without magical aids like the dragon's blood, and they speak to her of events beyond a mortal's grasp. In the *Ring*, these future events pertaining to the fictive stage world, are unknowable to gods and humans in the present moment of *Das Rheingold*, scene 4. It takes a personification of nature to explain, a sibyl to listen to these unheard truths and translate them for unattuned ears.

For Abbate's Brünnhilde, this process is different. Brünnhilde "proposes that we doubt narration," namely, the narration offered with her own words and music, as well as the master-narration coming from the *elsewhere* through sibylline characters (and, we should add, the orchestra).<sup>65</sup> Brünnhilde is of-this-world in the *Ring* and hears another world through her inherited sibylline ear, in Abbate's reading. In contrast, her mother Erda is not-of-this-world, only auditorily and musically bound to it and summoned, first, by a world-historical crisis and second, by the Wanderer's greed for extracting knowledge. Erda's is an ear and a voice that slips between worlds more readily than Brünnhilde's, and it is this unstable ontology of her role that lets her bend our sense of space, world, and their limits in the *Ring*.

These limits of space and world are communicated through *mise-en-scène* in any number of ways. According to Wagner's libretto, Erda's elsewhere, for example, is accompanied by the magical, blue light that cloaks her half-presence on stage. Light, we have seen, has long been a valuable medium of possibilities for directors to carve out their own preferred limits of space and attention on stage, as ways of directing the audience's engagement. Hence, in Erda's scene in *Das Rheingold*, amid all of the chaos of the giants trying to secure the ring, Wotan guarding it from

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<sup>65</sup> Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 248-249.

Donner and Froh, and Freia hidden behind the hoard, Erda's arrival is announced by significant changes not only in the music, but in the controlled darkening of the stage-world as well. Erda's entrance in the dark presents each director with the ability to create a unique world for their *Ring* (and this is not a completely unique moment/character/etc., as others provide opportunities for world-building as well, particularly Loge). This is just one dramaturgical decision among many involving the realization of Wagnerian space, of course, ranging from how to create visual unity among the four operas, and among each opera's different acts and scenes, to questions of the significance of specific locations.

The concealment of Erda's character is as important to this concept of space as is the half of her that we see and hear. On the one hand, there seems a clear analogue in Erda's presence with its simulation of interiority, a mainstay precept of Romanticism (and especially musical Romanticism).<sup>66</sup> While implying an interiority, Erda's visibility insinuates a theatrical depth, almost literally beyond the perceived limits of Wagner's staged world, and this is linked not only to her role as prophetess but as Earth goddess. The opacity of Earth, in fact, becomes a necessity in modernity, where nature must manifest itself as the machinations of technology continually strive to conceal the properties of the natural world. The elsewhere, too, manifests itself in various ways: the elsewhere resonates beyond Erda's first appearance, replicating itself in the sibylline Brünnhilde, the Norns, and even Valkyries like Waltraute. The elsewhere that Abbate tracks reflects a property that seems inherent in attempting to represent the Earth, where truth-telling and prophesying are accompanied by closeness with the natural world.

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<sup>66</sup> See Holly Watkins, *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 72.

The moment of Erda's intervention, in this reading, is a clear struggle for space as much as it is for ideological control or raw power. It is not surprising that the construction of Valhalla culminates at precisely the same moment: Wotan's possession of the ring appears symbolic of the seizure of power inherent to the monumental hall of the gods, and only then comes a creature from under the earth, a space where Wotan cannot follow despite his best efforts. Erda's intervention startles because it displays spaces beyond Wotan's dominion, spaces that will remain even after Valhalla is built and razed. Further, this elsewhere beyond Wotan's reach has metaphysical consequences, where the oblivion of being is equivalent with the oblivion of power.<sup>67</sup> What Wotan finds most interesting about these other spaces is their proximity to different kinds of knowledge and sight (Erda's panoramic view of time and space) that have the capacity to be weaponized, or at least mobilized, to Wotan's benefit in some way. If Erda signals a political space beyond Wotan's dominion, then it seems only natural that her ability to inhabit the stage—the very stage on which Wotan sleeps, schemes, and sings—is very often uncomfortable, awkward, or downright strange, as we will see in the various stagings in the chapters that follow.

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<sup>67</sup> This idea comes from Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche's metaphysics, but its extension to include the spaces of Valhalla and Erda's elsewhere is my own. See Haar, 105

## 2.2 *Siegfried* Act III, Scene 1: Apocalypse Reversed

Erda's scene in *Das Rheingold* is subverted in many ways by her later encounter with Wotan (disguised as the Wanderer) in *Siegfried* Act III, scene 1.<sup>68</sup> While the first scene, in *Rheingold*, is important for the apocalypse it prophesies, Erda's second scene matters for different reasons. Patrick McCreless argues this scene functions as the *peripeteia* of the whole drama and as Wotan's personal *cognitio*. The former is a narrative reversal, in which Wotan's desires reverse due to the *cognitio*, a set of self-realizations revealed in the line of questions thrown at Erda.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Curt von Westernhagen calls this scene the "central point" of the entire tragedy, due in part to its richness in Leitmotifs, including many old motives and a new one.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, Roger Scruton echoes the importance of the motifs here, arguing that the mysteries Wotan presents in this scene are answered, more often than not, musically better than rhetorically.<sup>71</sup>

Between the two scenes, Feurzeig notes, Wotan changes significantly from the young god who once held Erda and her wisdom in awe. We too are meant to have changed in our listening habits, from their first scene to their second one. Because of Erda's change, Feurzeig argues, we

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Wagner *Sämtliche Werke Band 12, III Der Ring des Nibelungen Zweiter Tag: Siegfried* WWV 86C, edited by Klaus Döge and Egon Voss (Mainz: Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG, 2014), scene 1 begins at m. 59, p. 18.

<sup>69</sup> Patrick McCreless, *Wagner's Siegfried: Its Drama, History, and Music* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982), 4-5, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Curt von Westernhagen, *Die Entstehung des 'Ring'* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1973), 198.

<sup>71</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Richard Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung* (UK: Allen Lane, 2016), 176.

might no longer sympathize with her plight.<sup>72</sup> Further, Erda's role, as H.M. Brown notes, becomes problematic here; it is no longer clear *what she is*, if, as Wotan claims, her oracular powers are waning.<sup>73</sup> Feurzeig notes the vast differences of experience that Wotan and Erda have undergone in between their encounters:

While Wotan has experienced love affairs and battles, raised a son and then killed him, argued with his wife, punished his intransigent but beloved daughter, and battled to gain the control of world events that he once expected to win easily—Erda has been sleeping.<sup>74</sup>

It is this difference in experiences that makes Wotan the more sympathetic character to audiences in this second scene. According to Feurzeig, Erda's source of her power, sleeping and dreaming, has actually caused her to fall out of favor with those witnessing the drama. Yet while Erda slept, Wotan travelled to her dwelling and raped her, he tells us and Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* II, scene 2, "mit Liebeszauber" [with love's magic spell] and then "stört ihres Wissens Stolz" [destroyed her wisdom's pride]. Through this violent process, Wotan and Erda conceive Brünnhilde and her eight Valkyrie sisters. For this reason, I find Wotan hard to sympathize with at this point in the drama. In fact, in their second scene together, Erda makes a point of highlighting some of Wotan's questionable decisions, such as the punishment of Brünnhilde at the end of *Die Walküre*.

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<sup>72</sup> Feurzeig, 77.

<sup>73</sup> H.M. Brown, 165.

<sup>74</sup> Feurzeig, 77.

When the two characters meet again in *Siegfried* Act III, scene 1, it is as the diametrically opposed beings they have become: Wotan now appears as a character of pure will and action while Erda is a character of pure knowledge and inaction. Other scholars have also noted the opposition between these characters, as Wagner realized it musically. Wotan's music is centered on G minor, while Erda's music avoids tonal coherence. Likewise, Wotan's music gradually accelerates (*etwas beschleunigend*) and Erda's slows down (*langsamer*). Whereas Erda had called out to Wotan ("höre!"), now Wotan awakens her ("herauf!" at mm. 84-5). While Erda had once prophesied the end of the world; now Wotan prophesies that the world will be redeemed by his offspring. And although Erda was once the all-wise seeress, in this scene she is now utterly confused. Wotan had once wondered who Erda was, and here, it is Erda who cannot recognize him. Even Erda's appearance, as described in Wagner's stage instructions, has changed:

Die Höhlengruft erdämmert. Bläulicher Lichtschein: von ihm beleuchtet steigt mit dem Folgenden Erda sehr allmählich aus der Tiefe auf. Sie erscheint wie von Reif bedeckt; Haar und Gewand werfen einen glitzernden Schimmer von sich.<sup>75</sup>

[The crypt of the cave dawns. Blueish glow: from which is illuminated Erda, gradually ascending from the depths. She appears as if covered in hoarfrost; hair and garb cast a glittering glimmer.]

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<sup>75</sup> At m. 121, p. 30.

Once awoken, Erda's appearance is fundamentally different from that in *Das Rheingold*. Although she is accompanied by the same blueish light, her black hair and noble stature are covered in hoarfrost that emits a glimmering shine, illustrating the length of time she has remained in her state of unconsciousness.

In this scene, I argue, the reversal of Wotan's and Erda's roles, relative to their appearance in *Rheingold*, culminates in a thematic reversal—where apocalypse becomes utopia. This is initiated by a musical/rhetorical moment towards the end of the scene that parallels Erda's *Weltuntergang* prophecy that “everything that is, ends.” In *Siegfried*, however it is not Erda, but Wotan who sings prophecy. Wotan describes a future event where his daughter, Brünnhilde, redeems the deeds of the world, prescribing a new ending for the *Ring* as a whole—not only an ending to the gods as Erda prophesied, but an ending with potential hope for humanity. Musically, Wotan's prophecy also invites a new Leitmotif, as Erda's prophecy did with the *Götterdämmerung* motif. Wagner builds up to this culminating motive with many other musical reversals of character, instances we can frame as examples of subverting a character—one of the two possible things music offers a composer in creating drama, according to Kerman.

Wotan's invocation for Erda to awaken (“Wache! Wala!”) begins the scene, rhetorically and musically. Throughout this opening passage, Wagner's score gives the audience most of the music that will make up the rest of Wotan's material throughout the scene: the musical themes of Erda, *Götterdämmerung*, Wotan's spear, and surprisingly, love (Figure 2-8, mm.76-7).<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See H.M. Brown, 158, on the significance of motifs in *Siegfried* Act III, Vorspiel and scene 1.





**Figure 2-8 The Wanderer wakens Erda to the "love" motive, mm. 76-7**

Patrick McCreless notes the importance of this refrain in establishing G as the scene's primary key and the importance of the half-step between G and A-flat, an interval that recurs throughout the scene.<sup>77</sup> To my ears, the accompaniment to the "Wala" invocation, over an A-flat major chord (m. 76), also recalls the Neapolitan harmony that framed the *Götterdämmerung* Leitmotif in their *Rheingold* scene. Harmonically, then, Wotan's music reminds Erda of their earlier encounter, even though he conceals his identity behind the Wanderer disguise. A-flat is also significant as it comes to be associated with the World Inheritance Leitmotif, that new motive that debuts later in this scene. This moment, I suggest, serves the same dramatic function as the *Götterdämmerung* motive did in Erda's prophecy in *Das Rheingold*.

In the next passage, Wotan sings, "Erda! Erda! Ewiges Weib!" (mm. 91-3) accompanied by Erda's ascending motive in the orchestra. The music's association is obvious here, but the theme struggles against Wotan's G-minor key area and tends toward A-flat and A-natural, until finally it starts to resemble music from the *Rheingold* episode, complete with a *Götterdämmerung* theme in D major when Wotan calls the oracle "Allwissende!" [all-knowing] (mm. 106-8). Wotan echoes the D-flat association at "Wala!" (m. 116), which slides to D-natural at the final "Erwache!" punctuated with Wotan's own descending stepwise spear motive (m. 117). Wotan repeats most of

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<sup>77</sup> McCreless, 197-198.

this material throughout: the chromatic motion between G, A-flat, and A-natural; between D and D-flat; and the motivic appearances of Erda, Götterdämmerung, love, and his spear.

Erda's own musical material is made of motives related to herself, the magic sleep of Brünnhilde, and fate. She awakens and responds, delivering her words in the comfortable key area of C-sharp minor: "Stark ruft das Lied; kräftig reizt der Zauber; ich bin erwacht aus wissendem Schlaf: wer scheucht den Schlummer mir?" ["Strong is your song's call; powerful the appeal of its magic; I am awakened from wondering sleep: who scares slumber from me?"] (mm. 128-141). Her appearance provides some *Augenmusik*, in its change to a blank key signature and an ambiguous tonality. The chord progression that marks her awakening is notably the same one that Wagner used to send Brünnhilde to sleep at the end of *Die Walküre* (Figure 2-9, mm. 124-131). Perhaps beyond its function accompanying Erda's awakening, this progression might also signal that Wotan (or the spectator) is descending to Erda's world of sleeping—we are being lulled to sleep, Wagner's music inviting us to a psychological realm.

Erda

Stark ruft das Lied

*ppp*

Figure 2-9 Erda wakes up to "magic sleep" music, mm. 124-131

Wotan's presence, in contrast, is underscored by the Erda and Götterdämmerung Leitmotifs, perhaps foreshadowing Wotan's changing perspective on the doomsday prophecy. Other musicologists, such as Feurzeig and Gösta Neuwirth, have noted how the two characters

attempt to musically and rhetorically imitate each other here, but successively fail to do so.<sup>78</sup> For instance, when Erda awakens, she asks “wer scheucht den Schlummer mir?” [who scares off my slumber?], and Wotan responds over a series of major triads related by thirds (mm. 144-186), showing how “his association with purposeful tonality is undercut by his identity as the Wanderer.”<sup>79</sup> This contrast in musical languages thus begins this scene’s function as *peripeteia*, where Wotan’s and Erda’s roles are reversed respective to their encounter in *Das Rheingold*. Throughout Erda’s responses to Wotan, she invariably attempts to invoke people (the Norns, Brünnhilde) through their Leitmotifs, unsuccessfully, as Feurzeig notes: “When she refers to motives, we sense that they are artificial for her...her keylessness represents her more accurately.”<sup>80</sup> As if to drive the point home, Erda tells Wotan that her knowledge comes from her sleep, in which she dreams and exercises divine knowledge, again accompanied by a chord progression associated with the magic sleep music (Figure 2-10, mm. 190-199).

Mein Schlaf ist Träumen, [Magic Sleep]	My sleep is dreaming,
mein Träumen Sinnen,	My dreaming reflecting,
mein Sinnen Walten des Wissens.	[Erda] My reflecting the exercise of knowledge.

**Figure 2-10 Erda explains her dream-knowledge, mm. 190-199**

Feurzeig notes that Erda might recognize Wotan immediately and that, by pretending to be confused, she forces Wotan to confess to punishing Brünnhilde, thus “squandering that precious gift” she once gave him.<sup>81</sup> Her questions about Wotan’s actions sting a little bit more if we think of them this way. McCreless notes in this passage how Erda’s tonal ambiguity forces Wagner to

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<sup>78</sup> See Feurzeig, 86-88.

<sup>79</sup> Feurzeig, 85.

<sup>80</sup> Feurzeig, 88.

<sup>81</sup> Feurzeig, 82.

create a sense of directed motion by relying on stepwise melodies.<sup>82</sup> Yet Erda's melodic line includes more and more disjunct intervals and leaps the more she sings—the word “Meineid” is sung to a descending octave plus tritone, from A-flat to D-natural, reflecting musically the seriousness of Erda's accusation and perhaps her own emotional investment in Brünnhilde's punishment (Figure 2-11, mm. 305-6). Here, Erda's vocal line seems to betray her previous closeness with the orchestra, as we saw in *Rheingold*. The relationship between Erda's character and orchestral music has changed—her vocal line operates incongruently with the stepwise melodies of the tonalities that accompany her. As in Kerman's assessment of characterization in drama, Wagner uses music here to change Erda's character or, more accurately, to portray the changes her character has undergone since we saw her last.

Erda

Mein - - - eid?

*ff*

Figure 2-11 Erda accuses Wotan of "Meindei" [perjury], mm. 305-6

In the scene's dramatic climax (Figure 2-12, mm. 334-351), Erda and Wotan exchange accusations, and this is primary the turning point of both characters' arcs—where the reversal is

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<sup>82</sup> McCreless, 200.

completed. Erda claims Wotan is not who he says he is, perhaps indicating she knows his true identity. Wotan, in turn, claims Erda is no longer who she believes herself to be—her wisdom is waning. Poignantly, this accusation is the last time we hear Erda in the entire cycle.

Erda: Du bist nicht was du dich nenn'st! Was kam'st du störrischer Wilder zu stören der Wala Schlaf?		You are not what you say you are! Why have you, stubborn god, come to disturb the vala's sleep?
Wotan: Du bist nicht was du dich wähnst! Urmütter-Weisheit geht zu Ende: dein Wissen verweht vor meinem Willen. Weißt du, was Wotan will?	[Love]	You are not what you believe you are! Ancestral mother's wisdom comes to its end: your wisdom drifts away before my will. Do you know, what Wotan wills?

**Figure 2-12 Erda and Wotan exchange accusations, mm. 334-351**

In a single stroke, Wotan sends Erda back to sleep and proclaims his mysterious will for the gods' demise ("Um der Götter Ende, grämt mich die Angst nicht, seit mein Wunsch es—will!") (mm. 360-365)—what Karol Berger notes is a shift from a Schopenhauerian willing to a Nietzschean acceptance, "*amor fati*."<sup>83</sup> Wotan also denigrates Erda as unwise ("dir unweisen" at m. 353), a description the orchestra underscores by repeating Erda's theme (mm. 352-4) and the Götterdämmerung motif (mm. 355-7).<sup>84</sup> Further, when Wotan sends Erda to sleep, he attempts, with help from the orchestra, to mirror what Erda had done in her prophecy in *Das Rheingold*, where we heard the Götterdämmerung theme close out her prophecy. Wotan sings that the world's

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<sup>83</sup> Berger, *Beyond Reason*, 130. Also see Section 225 of "Beyond Good and Evil," *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 343-4.

<sup>84</sup> H.M. Brown, 161. Brown notes the accusation of "unweisen" is particularly stinging because it implies danger towards Erda, more than simply being called "Nicht-Wissender," or ignoramus.

inheritance belongs to Siegfried (“dem herrlichsten Wälsung weis’ ich mein Erbe nun an”) (mm. 381-385) and that Brünnhilde will accomplish the deed that redeems the world (“wachend wirkt dein wissendes Kind erlösende Weltentat”) (mm. 409-416). At the precise moment that Wotan prophesies Brünnhilde’s redemptive sacrifice, a new Leitmotif appears in the orchestra (Figure 2-13, mm. 408-410).



**Figure 2-13 The World Inheritance Leitmotif, mm. 408-410**

During rehearsals for the *Ring*, Wagner described this newly formed motive: “It must sound like the proclamation of a new religion.”<sup>85</sup> Indeed, this motive signals the reversal of Erda’s apocalyptic message—now the ending of the *Ring*, despite its catastrophic spectacle, might be hopeful. This meaning, however, isn’t clear until Wotan himself sings this prophecy of the end—not of apocalypse, but of a potential utopia where the deeds of the world are redeemed by Brünnhilde. Again, this scene displays a character reversal, where Wotan constantly replicates the effects of Erda’s *Weltuntergang* prophecy with new thematic underpinnings. This new music—the World Inheritance motive—also takes from previous motives (Wotan’s spear and Erda’s ascending motive), similar to the way the *Götterdämmerung* and Erda motives expanded on previous motives, such as the Rhine’s music. In both *Rheingold* and *Siegfried*, it is thus the moment of prophecy that allows the creation of new Leitmotivic associations and themes. As a formal device, then, these prophecies offered Wagner the ability to change the course of narrative themes and introduce new musical ones alongside them.

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<sup>85</sup> Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the ‘Ring’*, 103.

Erda's prophecy in *Das Rheingold* connects the two extreme ends of the drama, per Darcy, and the *Siegfried* scene works as Wotan's *peripeteia*, per McCreless, but it seems these observations can apply equally in reverse as well: the *Rheingold* scene is also a *peripeteia*, and the *Siegfried* scene also bridges the beginning of the drama to its end. Put differently, Erda's prophecy might be a *peripeteia* confined to *Das Rheingold*, functioning dramatically on the level of one music drama the way the *Siegfried* scene works for the cycle at large. Erda's appearance in *Siegfried*, too, accomplishes more than the dramatic reversal of roles that signals the drama's descent to a state of falling action. Through Wotan's constant invocation of motives old and new, related to the inheritance of the world, this scene also encapsulates the beginning and end of the drama, tying the Erda/Götterdämmerung of the past to the eternal love/world inheritance of the future. In this sense, both scenes work to expand time and space, first for Wotan and then for Erda.

From one scene to the next, several days later in a sequential performance, we seem to witness two totally different Erdas, but it might also be the case that we are too easily persuaded by Wotan's perspective, musically and rhetorically. In *Siegfried*, Erda's appearance and musical characterization bespeak qualities shared with the earlier Erda of *Rheingold*, especially her primeval wisdom and noble stature. That Wotan appears to "win" their later encounter is, at best, a simplistic reading of this climactic scene. Wotan sends her into an eternal sleep, but we should also recall that Erda put herself to sleep in the first place and that throughout the *Siegfried* scene she asks Wotan to allow her to return her slumber, signaling her own agency and free will. Further, as Feurzeig notes, there is the possibility that Erda's knowledge does not really wane at all, but that she, like Wotan, has decided to play the role of deceiver. In that case, both scenes truly work as *peripeteia* on different dramatic, structural levels.

Regardless, Erda's configuration of a non-rational experience of time and space might already be seen in her strange appearance in *Das Rheingold*, the prophecy she sings, or the ontology she describes, where she sees everything that was, is, and will be. She might be privy, then, to a hidden history and future of the *Ring*'s world, seen only beneath the stage and in her *elsewhere*. While Erda's words and music tell us much about the *Ring*'s themes of apocalypse and, eventually, utopia, we won't find the *elsewhere* anywhere in Wagner's score. Rather, Erda's non-rational experience of the *Ring*'s world may only be found when the *Ring* is staged in ways wholly different from Wagner's 1876 premiere version. The history of the *Ring*'s staged and filmed performances since then displays some of the different ways one can conceptualize Erda's *elsewhere* and the history of the *Ring* she sees with omniscience. This history also continues the lineage of considering Wagner's music dramas as ideologically engaging, especially in the spectacle they sustain on stage.



### 3.0 Erda in Three Dimensions: Historical, Remediated, and Live

The meaning of the *Ring* and, by extension, Erda's doomsday message is not fixed once and for all, but this meaning can change in the course of adapting the work for new staged and filmed performances. Indeed, no other canonical work has been the object of such an intensive, historically continuous tradition of artistic interpretation and reinterpretation. In this chapter I provide an overview of some of the more significant *Ring* productions and the debates about fidelity and meaning to which they have contributed. Where appropriate, I focus my discussion of these adaptations on their approach to Erda's two scenes. This focus supports my broader concern with Erda, of course, but it also reflects my persuasion that Erda's scenes usually contain the key for understanding a given production's vernacular sense of apocalypse and/or utopia. In staging the *Ring*, this theme cannot be completely eschewed, but many producers choose to render it in different terms, for different worlds, and for different epochs.

My approach to historical productions of the *Ring* is shaped especially by the work of Levin, which offers a framework and vocabulary for the possibilities of meaning in opera.<sup>86</sup> Levin's work captures the meanings made and subverted by directors, scholars, and spectators today who push on the cursory themes of Wagnerian music drama in performance. Opera productions, whether experienced live or through video recording, offer different layers of discursive meaning beyond words and music alone, and thus they can also offer more philosophically tinted ideas and questions, perhaps even beyond those what Wagner could have

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<sup>86</sup> David Levin, *Unsettling Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

imagined for his work. Any given opera can be updated (or, conversely, remain a relic representative of its original means of production) according to the director's requirements, including ideological ones; but even then, the capacity for opera to catalyze drastic or gnostic experiences still depends on the subjective engagement of audiences.

In *Unsettling Opera*, Levin lays out what he calls “polylogism” or dialecticism of opera as performed—its multiple, flexible powers of signification in the hands of (especially radical) directorship.<sup>87</sup> I read Levin as probing opera's philosophical powers (be they ideological, political, representative) through staging. Opera's ability to engage philosophy seems bound to staging as much as it is bound to the music and poetry that, of course, predate the acts of performance and staging. Yet, music and poetry, I think, often develop as ideological bedfellows in reception, and they seem to stand in for the opera's ability to engage political, cultural, or social discourse. Yet music and poetry often become singular when considering opera in a holistic sense—staging is often left out of the conversation. For example, many operagoers and scholars interested in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* know the ending intimately as a foreshadow of later dangerous nationalist ideas in Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, how an ending (even a notorious one like *Meistersinger*) is staged can in practice work to affirm, deny, problematize, or subordinate what is considered the cold meaning of Wagner's words and music.

The coherency of staging is a related issue. As Levin points out, “stagings that would render the tension between opera's constituent elements are frequently denounced for supposedly

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<sup>87</sup> Levin borrows *polylogism* from Hans-Thies-Lehmann, who borrows it from Kristeva, *Unsettling Opera*,

dispensing with the very coherence that they in fact seek to achieve.”<sup>88</sup> Levin finds in polylogical or dialectical stagings a potential solution, or at least a possibility, that the stakes of a work can be stated clearly or more powerfully than in a conventional staging. Further, he distinguishes between strong and weak readings, defining the latter as offering little or no new critical meaning. Given the long history of Wagner on stage, new productions of his work will naturally grapple with these issues: do they don or doff Wagner’s ideology or mythology, and if so, how? The consequences of those decisions can seem to claim intentionality, even if the dramaturg has other intentions. Perhaps this simplifies matters overmuch, as the dramaturgical process is unquestionably complex. Still, these stakes are omnipresent for those staging the works of Wagner.

A performance-centered hermeneutic, while appropriate and specific to this dissertation, seems to nonetheless brush up against a logocentric hermeneutic in a variety of ways. This obstacle is inherent to musicological scholarship oriented toward original scores and other materials, which differ greatly from an opera performance. Wagner’s prolific career as an essayist and polemicist seems to encapsulate this problem, as his theoretical ideas concerning music drama (let alone *Gesamtkunstwerk*) were so often articulated in prose before they could be realized in music, poetry, and theatre. Writing about music may be like dancing about architecture, as Martin Mull put it, but Wagner’s solution (and many other opera composers did the same) was to instead have characters occasionally sing about philosophy and politics. Writing about music in performance might be as fraught, then, as trying to overdetermine the philosophical abilities of opera and its characters, but these are precisely the limits that Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, and countless others pushed in operatic performance. So, studying performances might let us probe those limits of meaning as well.

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<sup>88</sup> Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 32.

Interpretations of the *Ring* vary in this regard, as some assume performance is involved, while others leave little room for it. Their conceptual frameworks also differ, ranging from psychoanalytical, political, and philosophical approaches.<sup>89</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez's interpretation in *Wagner Androgyne* is a significant text in this regard, combining psychoanalysis and hermeneutic methods to "interlock" Wagner's various creative outputs and theories into a single whole.<sup>90</sup> However, Nattiez's work focuses almost entirely on the union of music and text, with little to be said for performance. Nattiez paints a portrait of Wagner as *androgynous* in his music and theoretical works. This approach requires a psychoanalytical framework, using feminist and structuralist theories to show how Wagner's creative process sought to unionize the masculine and feminine. The *Ring*, Nattiez shows, is a metaphor of this union in Siegfried and Brünnhilde. Nattiez has also written on performance, though, in an article on the Boulez-Chéreau *Ring* cycle (Bayreuth 1976).<sup>91</sup> Here, Nattiez explores questions of narrative meaning in music that focuses on the exegesis of Leitmotifs that, he finds, are transformed syntactically, formally, and semantically. Nattiez makes the striking claim that the oft-repeated criticism of stagings that appear unfaithful

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<sup>89</sup> Some political interpretations I have little room to fully consider here include Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006) and Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth* (UK: Allen Lane, 2016). See also Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht, *Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), which is another interpretation between the political and philosophical. See also Robert Donington, *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols: The Music and the Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974). Donington's Jungian interpretation is well known, but not useful for this dissertation. Mary Cicora also offers a literary reading in *Mythology as Metaphor: Romantic Irony, Critical Theory, and Wagner's Ring* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). Cicora argues that the *Ring* displays a process of hermeneutical self-creation and destruction.

<sup>90</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation* (University of Princeton Press, 1993).

<sup>91</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "Chéreau's Treachery," *October* 14 (Autumn, 1980): 71-100.

to Wagner are, in fact, based on a misunderstanding of the mutability of the Leitmotif.<sup>92</sup> This is an important if subtle analytical move for connecting Wagner's work in performance, its fidelity or authenticity to Wagner's "original," and how staging inculcates new meaning.

Levin also offers his own reading of the *Ring* in *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen*. Here, the cycle of operas is read allegorically, in terms of its ability to allegorize nationalization, ideology, and anti-Semitism, and compares Wagner's *Ring* with other Nibelung stories and settings, particularly Fritz Lang's cinematic adaptation.<sup>93</sup> Levin's analysis also relies on a Freudian psychoanalytical framework to center *representation* (particularly total representation, beyond even *Gesamtkunstwerk*) as a primary aspiration of Wagner, Lang, and Freud as well. Levin's reading, although it shares methods of analysis with Nattiez's *Wagner Androgyne*, more directly finds meaning in performance, particularly accomplished by relating multiple Nibelung stories across various media. This reading of the *Ring*, plus Levin's work on "unsettled" opera, is crucial to my own study of *Ring* productions, with some differences. While Levin found in the various Nibelung a representation of anti-Semitism, I find in various "Erdas" a more abstract provocation for thinking through the *Ring*'s themes of apocalypse and, by extension, utopia. The questions of fidelity that follow the *Ring* cycle through its staging history are also part of the story, for they provide a foundation for understanding the stakes of performance. Indeed, a level of scrutiny towards operatic inventions and designs that might seem overdetermined to the casual observer is, in fact, quite at home with the staged works of Wagner.

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<sup>92</sup> Nattiez, "Chéreau's Treachery," 81.

<sup>93</sup> David Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen: The Dramaturgy of Disavowal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

### 3.1 The Stakes of Staging Wagner's *Ring* and the Ethos of Space at Bayreuth

It is well known that Wagner theorized dramaturgy, stagecraft, and *mise-en-scène* alongside his philosophies of art, music, and so forth. The Bayreuth Festspielhaus [festival theatre], the opera house constructed to Wagner's precise designs, was the concretization of these theories, elucidating both sight and sound as issues that interested Wagner as he attempted to prescribe exactly how one should witness his music dramas. Further, Bayreuth's construction monumentalized a politics of visibility and audibility, and the theatre's architectural particulars reveal Wagner's personal desire for an artistic and sensory experience that borders on the totalitarian.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, issues of attention and distraction manifested directly on Wagner's stage, where Wagner sought to create real drama through a temporary suspension of disbelief achieved by controlling the darkness of the auditorium and the visible spectacles on stage. Adorno describes this process as akin to the *phantasmagoria*, an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century technological practice of making projections seem real, which Adorno finds at the heart of products of the culture industry, as opposed to authentic works of art that render their illusions visible.<sup>95</sup> Levin also relates

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<sup>94</sup> James Treadwell begins *Interpreting Wagner* (Yale University Press, 2003) with a description of the theatre's unglamorous features and its surprisingly powerful effects, 3.

<sup>95</sup> Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London: Verso, 1991) and see Karin Bauer, *Adorno's Nietzschean Narratives: Critiques of Ideology, Readings of Wagner* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 141. See also Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (University of California Press, 2018), 15, and Gabriela Cruz, *Grand Illusion: Phantasmagoria in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

phantasmagoria to Wagner's "penchant for totalization" in representation.<sup>96</sup> Essentially, this involved hiding of the work's labor by procuring a realistic, self-animated presentation. Adornian critiques of this sort thus echo Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner as a kind of con man of illusion, but with much more at stake, i.e., the blueprints for fascist ideology.<sup>97</sup> The music, then, seemed the subservient element to spectacle for those later detractors, for the problem of Wagner was found solely onstage. Earlier commentators also broached questions of stage presence and craft in Wagner's works, although they did not find spectacle as ideologically suspect. For example, Eduard Hanslick complained about Wagner's onstage spectacle stealing the show in his review of the Munich premiere of *Das Rheingold*, writing that the "swimming nixies, colored steam, the castle of the gods and the rainbow" received more attention than the music itself.<sup>98</sup> The *Ring* premieres thus failed or succeeded on the merit of their production as well as, or in spite of, the merits of their music.

For Wagner, in staging his own works, their phantasmagoric quality captured an ideal relationship between work, as a product whose labors were hidden, and spectators, who wished to

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<sup>96</sup> Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen*, 14.

<sup>97</sup> Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (London: Verso, 1991). Nietzsche, *The Wagner Case*, section 3, cited in Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000), 324. See Bauer, *Adorno's Nietzschean Narratives*, 118. Bauer expertly locates both Nietzsche's and Adorno's critiques of Wagner as surrogates for their critiques of modernity.

<sup>98</sup> Oswald Georg Bauer, *Richard Wagner: The Stage Designs and Productions from the Premieres to the Present*, translated by Stewart Spencer (New York, 1983), 222. Also see Matthias Theodor Vogt, "Taking the Waters at Bayreuth" for a social history of water, hydropathy, and the cult of water in Wagner's time.

be temporarily whisked into a fantasy world devoid of obvious human labor.<sup>99</sup> This phantasmagoric intent further explains Wagner's design impetuses and his dissatisfactions with contemporary theaters.<sup>100</sup> By constructing Bayreuth as such, Wagner famously sought to exercise control over the attentions of his spectators and this, in turn, became as important a part of the experience as the music for dedicated Wagnerites. In this sense, the technology of presenting Wagner's work has always been an equally contentious or ideological zone of meaning in reception and hermeneutics.

Towards the end of his life, Wagner called his own works "deeds of music made visible."<sup>101</sup> Jonathan Crary interprets this aim as wanting to design a "theatron" or "place of seeing" created by architectural mediations—the submerged orchestra pit (the "mystic gulf"), only front-viewing seating, near total darkness, multiple proscenium arches—that lent Wagner multiple ways of manipulating the spectator's perceptual acuity and attention (minimizing distractions, mostly).<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Some could argue that the phenomenon is still at play on stages of operas and musicals today—certainly more so in cinema, but this is outside the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>100</sup> See Wagner, *Opera and Drama* (1851) in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 2 Opera and Drama, translated by William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 3-376, and "Zukunftsmusik" (1860), in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 3 The Theatre, translated by William Ashton Ellis (New York: Broude Brothers, 1966), 293-345.

<sup>101</sup> Patrick Carnegy, "Designing Wagner: Deeds of Music Made Visible?", in *Wagner in Performance*, edited by Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer, 48-74 (Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>102</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (1999), 250-251. See Clive Brown, "Performing Practice," in *Wagner in Performance*, edited by Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer, 99-119 (Yale University Press, 1992) on the submerged orchestra. Also see Jo Leslie Collier, *From Wagner to*



Yet Wagner's bid for total sensory and attentional control, despite its practical application at other theaters since, is what Abbate finds lacking, or at least stripped of its power, in her own drastic and gnostic subjective experiences of his operas.<sup>103</sup> As she put it, no amount of theatrical control sought by a composer, designer, or director might have kept the tenor who sang Walther in *Die Meistersinger* from losing his voice, nor could it have altered the black-and-white production that came to occupy Abbate's imagination, she noted, some nights later, heavy with the cultural burdens of Wagner's anti-Semitic and nationalist legacies. Nevertheless, staging can help push our senses towards one reading or another.

Phantasmagoria for Wagner—which many period writers, including Nietzsche, equated with hypnotism—might be too easily reduced to questions of naturalism, realism, and immediacy. In my view, phantasmagoria is not simply a case of Wagner tricking the audience with special effects, making the action of his operas seem real and immediate. At the same time, the fact that Wagner's operas did seem real to many spectators came to define his place in German culture—his stage works implicitly valued a mythical configuration of the *Volk* and their simple, authentic, and intuitive culture.<sup>104</sup>

Hiding the orchestra, employing multiple prosceniums, and the simple architecture of the Festspielhaus (without a foyer, for instance) worked to achieve this theatrical-ideological goal, but later directors did not necessarily share it. In fact, some directors have found cause to directly confront Wagner's dramaturgical theory from different stances of meaning-making, possible only

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Murnau: *The Transposition of Romanticism from Stage to Screen* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988), 30-34.

<sup>103</sup> Abbate, "Music—Drastic or Gnostic?," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Spring 2004): 505-536.

<sup>104</sup> Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 41.

in production, where it is possible to play with the work. The history of adapting Wagner's music dramas following his death is rife with these issues; seemingly, every director has to come down on some stance, as Romantic naturalist, anti-naturalist, or somewhere in between (perhaps taking the debate as the very theme on which their dramaturgy is built). Similarly, the question of left or right politics often enters critical discussion of productions that seem to lean too far towards obtuse experimentalism or else seem fetishistic in their fidelity to Wagner, respectively.<sup>105</sup> In a sense, from Wagner's lifetime onward, realism and naturalism at Bayreuth were more than just aesthetically conservative traits: they were felt to attest to some kind of truth—for some, a truth that was culturally, uniquely German and for others, one that was universal and prescriptive of great art.<sup>106</sup> Witness Heinrich Porges's account of the first Bayreuth *Ring* rehearsals: "[The 1876 *Ring* performances] form a milestone in the efforts of the German spirit to achieve an authentic culture bearing the stamp of truth."<sup>107</sup>

Through the spectacle of Bayreuth, Wagner unquestionably sought to play with the reality of operatic space as much as with the metaphysical powers of music, priorities that are revealed in criticisms of the composer's many creative projects. Wagner's use of space and his ability to construct mythical worlds were among the elements that lent his music dramas mass appeal in his

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<sup>105</sup> Mike Ashman, "Wagner on Stage: Aesthetic, Dramaturgical, and Social Considerations," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, edited by Thomas S. Grey, 246-275 (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 250.

<sup>106</sup> Such values manifested palpably in Wagner's choice to employ an atypical scene designer for the cycle's premiere: Josef Hoffmann, who was actually a landscape painter with little experience painting sets for operas. See Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (Yale University Press, 2006), 77.

<sup>107</sup> Heinrich Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring': An Eye-Witness Account of the Stage Rehearsals of the First Bayreuth Festival* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

own time. Nietzsche, for instance, increasingly derided Wagner's idea of infinite music, with its spatial indeterminacy, as an heir to Hegel's legacy, another instance of a German "idea" that lacked clarity. Nevertheless, the philosopher perceived this musical infinity as part of the appeal that Wagner held in youthful German circles:

The youth of Germany understood [Wagner] better than any.

The two words 'infinite' and 'meaning' were already enough; they somehow gave an incomparable feeling of well-being...Wagner's genius at building castles in the air, his roving, rambling, and roaming through the clouds, his Everywhere and Nowhere—all are the same as Hegel used in his day to entice and to seduce!<sup>108</sup>

Nietzsche's criticism especially targets the young Wagner of the 1840s, supposing an analogy with Hegel's similar ability to seduce young intellectuals. The two figures shared strategies of seducing young people through vague *ideas*, as in Hegel's idea of the infinite or Wagner's creative mythologies or endless melodies. Part of this, for Nietzsche, was an indictment of Wagner's works as sublime in the Romantic sense, as having none of the delineated forms and boundaries of classical art.<sup>109</sup> Elsewhere, too, Nietzsche had philosophically condemned such a filtrating concept of the world as limitless—for him it was decidedly finite, compared to the infinity of time.<sup>110</sup> Later

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<sup>108</sup> Nietzsche, *Werke*, vol. VIII, 33 f. Cited in Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche: The Revolution in Nineteenth-Century Thought* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 186. See "The Case of Wagner," *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 634. Also see "Beyond Good and Evil" section 244, 367-70. Interestingly, Hegel's idea is teleological. See Bell, *Theology I*, 200.

<sup>109</sup> Berger, 400.

<sup>110</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche* vol. 2, 88-9. Nietzsche believes boundless space is a misnomer, "all is force."

critics, most notably Adorno, also argued that this vague representation of reality was central to Wagner's appeal, but they found that this phantasmagoria falsified reality a step too far. Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch pressed this critique further, arguing that Wagner's spectacle was a "*hieroglyph in the hollow space of the nineteenth century*."<sup>111</sup>

The space that Wagner envisioned both in Bayreuth and his fictive stage worlds, then, was historicized by different thinkers in different ways. In many of this critique's iterations, Wagner is labelled as a kind of visual con artist, where the action on stage is too spectacular to be taken as truth, or at least, such action's very status as spectacle allows us to question its relationship to the music and words of music drama. Wagner's idea of space was thus considered vague or, as in Bloch's case, a hieroglyph filling up the hollow space of the nineteenth century. That is to say, per Bloch, it isn't the case that Wagner is offering us an infinite world by making his "castles in the air." Rather, Wagner's onstage spectacles offered something to be interpreted on its own merits—Bloch's "hieroglyph"—and this, it seems, was especially unique to Wagner in music drama and opera.

I find the "everywhere and nowhere" quality that Nietzsche discerned, though, especially insightful, as offering a veritably theory of the spatial worlds Wagner created through music drama. Wagner's works implied a metaphysical reality that was ultimately incompatible with Nietzsche's own eventual disavowal of the noumenal realm altogether, although the two figures actually shared a conception of space as imaginative.<sup>112</sup> Yet Wagner's work was deemed decadent regardless of the similarities in thought. It is worth noting, too, that earlier in Nietzsche's career,

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<sup>111</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of our Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990 [1962]), 340.

<sup>112</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche* vol. 2, 91. Heidegger analyzes Nietzsche's world as *chaotic*.

that same quality—what he then deemed Wagner’s *simplification of the world*—seemed to him the very essence of Wagner’s mastery over the arts.<sup>113</sup> Later, Nietzsche perceived this quality as a means of seducing philistines of consumption, weak and exhausted from simply experiencing Wagner.<sup>114</sup> Wagner’s vague infinity implied an understanding of the end of the world specific to his own time—ethereal and ghostly, something altogether different from Nietzsche’s own burgeoning materialism.

Although Nietzsche’s criticism does not extend to Wagner’s invisible voices, acousmatic roles seem both everywhere and nowhere, as sound hits us in waves from invisible sources. These voices strike a visual boundary between voices seen and unseen. When we witness Wagner’s *Siegfried*, for instance, there are characters who either appear on stage or do not: Mime, Siegfried, Wotan, and Brünnhilde all do, while the Woodbird usually does not. Fafner the Dragon is an interesting case, where in some instances the basso voice sings offstage with an onstage avatar, sometimes of immense size and technical machinations. But Erda’s role uniquely unsettles the spatial limits of her stage worlds. If we consider Erda’s appearance in *Rheingold*, Wagner’s “everywhere and nowhere” takes on new meaning vis-à-vis its possibility as a valuable metaphysical claim. The physical presence of the singer performing Erda, half on and half off the stage, embodies this metaphysical problematic by provoking us (as well as Wotan) to wonder at the true limits of her surrounding world, the human world (*Lebenswelt*) that retains most of the work’s meaning.<sup>115</sup> Or, as some designers and directors of Wagner’s works have theorized, either

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<sup>113</sup> Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 209.

<sup>114</sup> Berger, 402. See Nietzsche, “The Case of Wagner,” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 622.

<sup>115</sup> See Scruton, *The Ring of Truth*, 179-80.

directly or indirectly through their rejection of conservative realism, space itself becomes a kind of dramatic role via Erda. *Mise-en-scène*, then, reflects more than the surface values of a production: in fact, it reflects their essential ideas.<sup>116</sup> Operatic space becomes a vessel for meaning and more, capable of making meaning on its own, perhaps intended by the composer himself in the gulf between audience and stage at Bayreuth, its “mystic abyss,” a veritable separation between reality and ideality.<sup>117</sup> Wagner left a void for future directors to fill, a blank canvas that some reject and others embrace.

Space and the question of how to utilize it, however, would remain as important to the legacy of Wagner’s works as the music and ideology that Bayreuth championed. In Celia Applegate’s history of German music, *The Necessity of Music: Variations on a German Theme*, the author finds place and space as neglected, hidden dimensions of the study of music and musical culture in general.<sup>118</sup> Wagner, in her investigation, stands paramount as the mind from which Bayreuth springs. So, too, the importance of space within music drama comes to a head in Wagner’s creative forms of Valhalla, the Venusberg and the Grail temple—obvious examples among the many dramatic settings on which the composer bestows a specificity of place with its own unique music. Applegate notes that the choice of Bayreuth as a performing location was also intentional in its geopolitical nature as a place far from the European metropolises where Wagner had struggled earlier in his career.

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<sup>116</sup> See Collier, *From Wagner to Murnau: The Transposition of Romanticism from Stage to Screen*, 67.

<sup>117</sup> Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 72-3.

<sup>118</sup> Celia Applegate, *The Necessity of Music: Variations on a German Theme* (University of Toronto Press, 2017), 50.

The specificity of Bayreuth as a venue for Wagner's operas, then, became an analogy for his own ambitions of creating such worlds in his music dramas—the two were consciously, inescapably linked. Applegate notes that as early as 1850 Wagner toyed with the idea of *Siegfrieds Tod* being performed only once, “in a temporary structure in the fields outside of Zurich, which would then be burned to the ground in the finale of the opera.”<sup>119</sup> Other creative solutions to the problems of industry and urban civilization, from which Wagner sought to distance his music and its venues, included temporary structures built along the banks of the Rhine river or as a floating theatre on Lake Lucerne.

It may be no coincidence that Wagner started to conceive of Erda's character and the narrative function she might serve at roughly the same time that he was imagining these temporary, singular theatrical spaces, the early 1850s. As we saw earlier, Wagner also explored several different endings to *Götterdämmerung*, and therefore different kinds of apocalypses, at the same time as well. Like these performing spaces, the message that Erda would ultimately bring with her from a place underneath the stage—“alles was ist, endet”—also prescribed a singular, finite reality. If ever there were a counterargument to Nietzsche's criticism of being vague, Erda's positioning and sung lyrics deliver Wagner's most contrarian perspective on the infinite.<sup>120</sup> The kind of spatial

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<sup>119</sup> Applegate, 53.

<sup>120</sup> Perhaps as shocking to Wotan as Erda's prophecy is her ability to exist in these half-spaces. Wotan, too, serves to allegorize Wagner's visions of totalizing space. Valhalla, like Bayreuth, is constructed as a monument to imaginary unity among its inhabitants. In Bayreuth's case, this fallacy is the presumed oneness of German life that Wagner imagined throughout his career. Valhalla stands as a perfect music-dramatical analogue to this, yet Wotan mistakes the building as unique despite similar spaces existing elsewhere, such as the Gibichung Hall on earth and the World Ash Tree that predates them both.

singularity that Wagner had desired, whether in a field in Zurich or on Lake Lucerne, was captured in the characterization of Erda, a dramatic role at the limits of the stage and in an impossibly realized place.

At the Festspielhaus though, conservative naturalism found staying power because of its specificity, particularly during the Cosima and Siegfried Wagner years, until the 1920s, and this style found welcoming audiences in major opera houses elsewhere as well, notably at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York City. Siegfried produced notable developments at Bayreuth that traditionalists at the time found inconsistent with Richard's and Cosima's aesthetic designs. However, Siegfried's productions were still perceptibly uncomplicated and capable of communicating fixed meaning, although he was not afraid to make controversial cosmetic changes. The Festspielhaus's singularity, as a place dedicated solely to Wagner's art, stifled innovation immediately after the composer's death. As early as the 1890s, though, radical reimaginations contested Wagner's naturalism, as in the productions of Swiss designer Adolphe Appia, who sought to craft dramas of the mind, as opposed to dramas of specific location or culture.<sup>121</sup> Appia, like Wagner, felt that the opera house needed reformation to reflect certain underrecognized audience/performer relationships. Appia, however, disagreed with Wagner's theories and their practical application at Bayreuth; Cosima allegedly rejected Appia's designs out of hand.<sup>122</sup> Wagner's works, which are so often rooted to a specific place, if not a general German-specific sense or logic, seemed hard to dislocate for the Wagner cult. Appia found, in his *Ring* scenarios, that the cycle necessitated compromise between realism and abstraction. Each opera,

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<sup>121</sup> Ashman, "Wagner on Stage," 249.

<sup>122</sup> Collier, *From Wagner to Murnau: The Transposition of Romanticism from Stage to Screen*, 69.



accordingly, worked best one way or the other, and dramatic unity was therefore not to be found on the surface, where literalist tendencies often brushed against the technical difficulty of many scenes.<sup>123</sup> Surprisingly, Appia argued against symbolic interpretation of the *Ring*, in favor of a “typical” setting instead.

Throughout the decades of productions since 1876, particular stagings either revel in or deny the possible contingency of Wagner’s music drama relative to the space in which it is performed. Appia envisioned single, dominating spaces, particularly in his setting of *Das Rheingold* that utilized one setting with variations—a solution to the problem of continuity inherent to the work.<sup>124</sup> But Wagner’s coherency was not always limited to the idea of singularity, despite his insistence that *Parsifal* only ever be performed at Bayreuth. Donald Oenslager, an American scene designer who attempted to follow Appia’s lead, drafted scenarios for a *Ring* production in 1927 where every scene could take place on a single set that he called the “Life Tree of the eddas and sagas.”<sup>125</sup> The Life Tree is a massive set with multiple levels connected by narrow, spiraling stairways. Using such an immutable piece of stage, perhaps a prototype for Lepage’s Machine, Oenslager depended on light as the primary means by which scenes and locales could change. Although this production never came to fruition, it remains a good example of the concerns that absorbed Wagner and the directors who found his legacy challenging: concerns primarily devoted to the sense of space in performance, related to the question of dramatic unity and cogency between visuals, music, and plot.

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<sup>123</sup> Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 180-1.

<sup>124</sup> Collier, *From Wagner to Murnau: The Transposition of Romanticism from Stage to Screen*, 67.

<sup>125</sup> Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 197-8.

Following in Appia's artistic footsteps, similar experiments in *Regieoper* [director's opera] were undertaken at the Vienna Hofoper by Alfred Roller and Gustav Mahler in the early 1900s and at the Berlin Kroll Opera during Weimar Republic years by music director Otto Klemperer.<sup>126</sup> Levin finds the Mahler/Roller creations in Vienna as a reasonable point of origin for the conflict among interpretations of Wagner, where the literalist camp no longer held absolute aesthetic authority in Wagner productions.<sup>127</sup> Specifically, the Vienna stagings seemed a continuation of Appia's interest in light as a means to produce different locations and atmospheres in lieu of total scenic overhauls, notably the case in the 1903 production there of *Tristan und Isolde*. It is interesting, though, that the contemporaneous conservative Wagnerians took issue with Mahler, whose 1898 *Götterdämmerung* included scenes normally omitted at the time, including the prelude with the Norns and Waltraute's lengthy scene with Brünnhilde in Act I.

Unsurprisingly, the Kroll Opera was attacked by the right (including Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg and some of Wagner's descendants and their spouses, such as Winifred Wagner) for cultural Bolshevism, perhaps laying the foundation for political and ideological analogues per Wagnerian realism, surrealism, and experimentation that would follow. Klemperer successfully conducted the *Ring*, *Tristan*, and *Parsifal* in 1913, and in the process established himself as a competent Wagnerian despite criticism from the right. By the 1930s, Klemperer had essentially stopped conducting Wagner, having conducted the *Ring* only once after 1924, which unfortunately

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<sup>126</sup> Levin calls these different schools of opera production protectionism and explorationism, 17. See the second chapter in *Unsettling Opera* for information on the Kroll Opera, "Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading: Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* in Performance."

<sup>127</sup> David Levin, "Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9, no. 1 (Mar., 1997): 49.

is when Klemperer began to truly reform opera through other works, particularly after 1927 when he became director of the Kroll.<sup>128</sup> However, Klemperer's 1929 *Der fliegende Holländer* is a noteworthy example of the modern ideological challenges that directors faced when presenting Wagner and dealing with its legacy: a clean-shaved Dutchman and red-haired Senta were, to critics, signs of communist political agitation having overtaken Wagner's otherwise purely mythical work.

During World War II, Hitler's enthusiasm for Wagner's works prompted a little innovation in productions of the *Ring* in surprising places, such as a production of *Die Walküre* in 1940 at the Bolshoy in Moscow, directed by film-maker Sergey Eisenstein who provided "mime choruses," essentially large ensembles that accompanied characters such as Wotan and Hunding. These innovations notably experienced a revival in the 1970s.<sup>129</sup> Eisenstein's *Walküre* had been commissioned, in fact, as a kind of cultural olive branch between Russia and Germany in the aftermath of the German Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939 (Wagner's works had been essentially banned for its German nationalism since the 1920s).<sup>130</sup> Eisenstein sought to embody the myth of the *Ring* through gesture and movement, using physicality as a powerful means toward theatrical ends. Bayreuth, in Eisenstein's view, had merely reflected the nineteenth-century German bourgeoisie's alienation from nature and was thus not truly mythological. He achieved all this in rather Wagnerian terms: as opposed to Appia's designs and theories, Eisenstein felt that the text of the work was paramount for determining the nature of the music and that the music "wants

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<sup>128</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 249-55.

<sup>129</sup> Mike Ashman, "Producing Wagner," in *Wagner in Performance*, edited by Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer, 29-47 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 38.

<sup>130</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 226-7.

to be visible, to be seen, and the visibility must be sharply defined, palpable, frequently changing.”<sup>131</sup> Deeds of music were still being made visible in new ways.

Bayreuth in the 1930s gingerly housed experiments with designs by Emil Preetorius and Heinz Tietjen, which showed some awareness of Appia’s theories of geometry and contemporary expressionism.<sup>132</sup> Preetorius and Tietjen had been employed by Winifred Wagner, Siegfried’s widow, despite some suspicion cast on these appointments by the Nazi theatre administrations. Bayreuth, because of Hitler’s love for Wagner, thrived independently of the state, so experimentation found a surprising safe haven there.<sup>133</sup> Preetorius’s designs, using lighting effects such as chiaroscuro, influenced Wieland Wagner’s first *Ring* in 1951, which would be a landmark in de-Nazified Wagner productions and general theatrical experimentation. Bayreuth, meanwhile, was a place not only for music drama but also diplomacy and foreign relations for Hitler even if, by 1943, the festival theatre was down to a sole production of *Die Meistersinger*.<sup>134</sup> Elsewhere, European opera houses and directors generally turned away from the Weimar-era experiments and returned to conservatism during this time; meanwhile, the Metropolitan Opera in New York ceased Wagner productions in the late 1930s.

The nationalist turn towards Wagner’s works during the war prompted Wieland Wagner in the post-war years towards an Appiaesque de-naturalized dramaturgy, an attempt to undo the relationship of Wagner’s works at Bayreuth to nationalism in favor of a more general mythology

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<sup>131</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 232.

<sup>132</sup> Ashman, “Wagner on Stage,” 251 and “Producing Wagner,” 38.

<sup>133</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 272.

<sup>134</sup> Pamela M. Potter, “Wagner and the Third Reich: Myths and Realities,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey, 235-245 (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 239.

or Greek tragedy style. Appia's theory of prioritizing Wagner's music over his stage directions thus found a stable home in Wieland's productions. By stripping the stage bare—the tactic of *Entrümpelung* [stripping way]—Wieland put forth a dramaturgical argument regarding the work's ahistorical timelessness that relied on the expansion of time and space that many moments in Wagner's works invite, Erda's prophecy being but one instance. In a similar vein, Wieland set *Die Meistersinger* “ohne Nürnberg,” a staging that shed Wagner's work of the specificity of time, place, and culture of medieval Germany.

Wieland, again echoing Appia, used light as a primary means for effecting his productions. Wieland's stage was often dominated by huge elementary shapes and single textures or forms, which served to give the audience only a partial picture of the drama—the rest was left to the audience's mind. This was met with resistance initially; Wieland's productions of *Parsifal* and the *Ring* in 1951 used these means to do away with both the political ties that Wagner's works encultured in Nazi Germany and the imperative to stage those works in ways “authentic” to earlier Bayreuth. Wieland's second Bayreuth *Ring* (1965) further expanded on those themes, using a central raised disc [*Scheibe*] as the single space of drama, but it excised more overt and specific props and scenes for general, symbolic, or psychological ones, influenced in part by his readings of Freud, Jung, and the classics. The play with light and dark allowed Wieland to focus the action solely on the *Scheibe* and use the areas around it to hide the entries of other characters. His *Ring* cycle had gone from a kind of modernist, geometric world of iconoclasm, foreshadowed by Appia, Mahler and Klemperer, to a dreamlike world of psychological codes begging to be deciphered,

offering a link from early twentieth-century aesthetic experiments to later schools of dramaturgy.<sup>135</sup>

### 3.2 Mid-Century *Ring* Cycles

Postwar productions, generally, precipitated a revolution in staging Wagner's works. Walter Felsenstein's work at the Berlin Komische Oper proposed an alternative evolution of realism in his "music theater" style (though he did not stage any Wagner post 1945) that was continued by his students Joachim Herz and Götz Friedrich. Felsenstein and his pupils seem to pick up where Eisenstein's Wagner left off, and they did so under similar Marxist circumstances and with a precision of gesture and movement at the core of their dramas. As we move forward in the twentieth century, Erda is also a character whose presence in these stagings is felt more readily, as these productions offer greater material traces in the forms of photographs and videos.

What followed Felsenstein was a revival, particularly in 1970s Europe, of Weimar-era experimentation practices, which, to quote Levin, "stages the characteristic clashes of expressive systems, taking operatic staging as a complex and autonomous (rather than merely derivative or decorative) expressive form."<sup>136</sup> In the *Ring*'s many "unsettled" productions in the middle of the twentieth century, perhaps most relevant among them is the tendency towards futurism and the closeness they express with generic forms of other popular media, such as the reflections of

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<sup>135</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 264-7, 307.

<sup>136</sup> Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 27.

timelessness and the expansion of space that occurred in cinema and literature at the same time under the names of space opera and science fiction.

Timelessness is a dramaturgical trope apparent in many of these productions. Ulrich Melchinger's Kassel production in 1970 did so through means largely unavailable to previous directors: space-age technology and Pop Art references, unclear mythological citations, all integrated without coherent unity.<sup>137</sup> Melchinger's setting also deconstructed some of Wieland's values by making visible many things that were often left invisible, such as a visible Woodbird and the onstage incestuous sexual activity between Siegmund and Sieglinde. Deconstructive in a larger sense of scale, Melchinger also set the cycle as four distinct dramas instead of one, a technique picked up later by twenty-first-century directors.

Felsenstein pupil Joachim Herz's Leipzig *Ring* in 1973 was a crucial watershed in the history of *Ring* productions, bridging the gap between Wieland's empty spaces and later trends, such as definitive settings that focused on pointed social commentaries and symbolic heaviness paired with Brechtian strategies of anti-illusion and alienation. Further, this Leipzig staging was a rare one in the GDR, the *Ring* having been deemed otherwise problematic for socialism due to the bleak future it proposed. Herz's staging was the first of many to turn the *Ring* cycle's allusions to capitalism and fascism into surface textual meaning, influenced as he was by the writings of Thomas Mann and George Bernard Shaw. For other East German dramaturgs, this was not enough.

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<sup>137</sup> Millington, "What shall we do for a Ring?," in *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion*, eds. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington, 25-28 (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 27. Ashman, "Producing Wagner," 41.

Herz's *Ring*, they argued, should do more than attack capitalism and industry, it ought to support a socialist utopia as well.<sup>138</sup>

The cycle was simply not a political manifesto for Herz, but it was also a work of art capable of actualizing in socialist realism, just the same as Wagner's other works (*Meistersinger*, *Holländer*, *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*). Herz continued Eisenstein's usage of large crowds to populate the stage world. For example, Alberich and Mime are constantly accompanied by little mafias, the giants are represented not by two, but by dozens of creatures, and Siegfried's journey on the Rhine is eerily lined with cheering women and children. Herz's *Ring* sought to make real the possibilities for Wagner's cycle to be about society by making that society visible on stage and, to a lesser extent, by exposing the artifice of the work in Brechtian ways, where parts of the stage or lights were exposed. Ultimately, Herz's *Ring* was received as a socialist touchstone and a Marxist correcting of Wieland's depoliticized staging.<sup>139</sup>

A London *Ring*, designed by fellow Eisenstein pupil Götz Friedrich, was staged at Covent Garden a year later (1974). Friedrich's was a production dressed in futuristic trappings, following Herz's psychological, Brechtian vision of theatrical realism, where stagecraft and technology were not hidden, but proudly displayed. Time was, again, staged prominently: Friedrich saw the cycle as a kind of time machine, not limited to the problems of the past, present, or future, but a fusion of many timeframes at once.<sup>140</sup> Like Wieland, he intended to hold the *Ring* up as a mirror to the world by presenting universally relevant content, yet its sense of time could still be politicized.

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<sup>138</sup> Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 331.

<sup>139</sup> Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 340.

<sup>140</sup> Carnegie, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 348-9.



Friedrich walked a fine line to not simply equate characters, settings, and actions with historical or present counterparts in reality, for that would strip the work of its myth. This struggle between staging abstract myth and concrete political reality was of paramount importance to the mainstream *Ring* cycles of the 1970s, and it came to a head at Bayreuth for the centennial anniversary of the cycle.

Patrice Chéreau's infamous centenary *Ring* at Bayreuth in 1976, conducted by Pierre Boulez with sets by Richard Peduzzi and costumes by Jacques Schmidt, demythologized the cycle through a confused intermingling of traditional mythic signals (say, Brünnhilde in a traditional Valkyrie helmet) and contemporary trappings (Brünnhilde wearing a modest twentieth-century dress). This was a controversial production for a number of reasons: the mostly French creative team, the erasure of the *Ring* cycle's "essential" (conservative) features, its confrontation with Wagner's intentions, broadly conceived, and its criticism of Bayreuth's elitist bourgeois milieu. Chéreau's production takes the work as an allegory for the modern world, both as Wagner knew it in the nineteenth century and as his audiences knew it one hundred years later. This idea manifested on stage in the work's large, industrial sets: from the Rhine's hydroelectric dam where streetwalker Rhinedaughters tease Alberich to the grimy factories of Nibelheim, Hunding's home and Mime's cave. Chéreau's characters, too, reflected nineteenth-century caricatures of capitalists or the proletariat masses they oppressed, full of contradictions and exaggerated gestures.

Jean-Jacques Nattiez's article on this centenary *Ring* explores questions of fidelity, Chéreau's *Ring* being a brilliant case study for what Nattiez saw as a semiological problematic.<sup>141</sup> In Chéreau's combination of multiple *Ring* mythemes, Nattiez found that the director told many *Ring* mythologies at once—the myth itself, the myth as Wagner knew it in the nineteenth century, what Wagner's myth means one hundred years later, and, most controversially, the myth of Wagner himself and all that comes with him (Bayreuth, Wahnfried, etc.). The centenary *Ring* cycle's deliberate anachronisms in props, sets and costume designs also lent the work an explicitly communistic tone, where the work prominently allegorizes nineteenth-century working-class struggles against capitalism and the harmful effects of industry on the natural world. This was accomplished by setting the story in Wagner's own world, the Victorian nineteenth century.<sup>142</sup> The very meaning of the work, then, became the *Ring*'s stage history and its ideological analogies, where commentary on the work, particularly George Bernard Shaw's Marxist interpretation, became the reality of the stage.<sup>143</sup> In this staging/reading, the world has already been changed by capitalism and industry, and only a spark of Wagner's mythology remains. The pure nature

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<sup>141</sup> See Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "Chéreau's Treachery," *October* 14 (Autumn, 1980): 71-100. Also see Nattiez, "'Fidelity' to Wagner: Reflections on the Centenary *Ring*," in *Wagner in Performance*, edited by Barry Millington and Stewart Spencer, 75-98 (Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>142</sup> See Alexander Rothe, "Staging the Past: Richard Wagner's 'Ring' Cycle in Divided Germany during the 1970s and 1980s," Dissertation, Columbia University. 2015. Notably, Herz's political productions in Leipzig share this theme.

<sup>143</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring* (New York, NY: Brentano's, 1909 [1898]). Shaw, for example, describes Nibelheim as a factory in much the same terms as it appears on Chéreau's stage. Shaw, 18.

intended by Wagner's opening scene is never given time to blossom on stage, and when the creatures of the natural world appear they do so disturbingly, as when the Woodbird appears as a mechanical toy in a cage. Chéreau's finale asks an open-ended question about humanity's future, full of possibility in a world distinctly transformed by power and its degradation. Following Brünnhilde's immolation, a mass of humanity remains on earth in the form of a nameless crowd that bears witness to its redemption.

Chéreau's Erda is a ghostly apparition of the past, clad in a thin white robe. She, unlike most Erdas before her, ascends completely onto the stage and walks around the other characters, even pressing her head on Wotan's shoulder during her prophetic monologue. After their encounter in *Siegfried*, Chéreau's Erda retreats to the comfort of the stage and allows her robes to swallow her body as she descends to her eternal sleep. Chéreau must have felt Erda's role to be uniquely significant to the cycle; writing on the end of the cycle, he wondered if we should listen to the redemption motive with some caution:

Doesn't one hear it, shouldn't one hear it with mistrust and anxiety, a mistrust which would match the boundless hope which this humanity nurses and which has always been at stake, silently and invisibly, in the atrocious battles which have torn human beings apart throughout the *Ring*. The gods have lived, the values of their world must be reconstructed and reinvented. Men are there as if on the edge of a cliff—they listen, tensely, to the oracle which rumbles from the depths of the earth.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Bayreuth Program, *Siegfried*, 1977. Quoted in Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 363.

Interestingly, scholars such as Patrick Carnegie find this as a reference to the orchestra's role as interpreter, or as judge, of the events on Chéreau's stage. This, I think, is highly compatible with my own earlier reading of Erda's closeness with the orchestra as both assume narrator-like roles. Further, the "oracle which rumbles from the depths of the earth" seems as descriptive of Erda's role as it is of the orchestra. Chéreau's Erda, more than most, is particularly autonomous on the stage.

The centenary *Ring* seems to have set a standard for many productions in the 1980s and onward, particularly in its ability to set naturalism and realism in abstract ways; to be both controversial and immediate in scope. Perhaps most important, however, was its attempt to put forth a strong, critical interpretation of Wagner's work, beyond the banality of Wieland's vacuous mythemes or those productions of the 1970s that seemed to culminate in Chéreau's boisterous setting. By the early 1980s, Chéreau's production had, interestingly, ceased to be controversial and was instead warmly received. Michel Foucault notes the small attention span audiences had in regard to the problems of production and of Wagner's legacy. In the Chéreau setting, ultimately, the foreign creative team is "pale enough, just like the fallen gods" despite the controversies they stirred early on in the production process.<sup>145</sup> Foucault notes that Wieland Wagner, Joachim Herz, and Peter Stein had all presented prior solutions to the same issue of Wagner's myths in the form of symbolic purging, historicizing the *Ring* to the 1848 Revolution, and the reposition of the Wagner question to nineteenth-century theater, respectively. In a sense, Chéreau merely picks and chooses from these ideas. Foucault finds in the Chéreau *Ring* a revival of Wagnerian mythology with the added weight of diffusing all the constituent parts of reality from Wagner's world—

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<sup>145</sup> Michel Foucault, "19th Century Imaginations," *Semiotext(e): The German Issue* 4, no. 2 (1982): 184.

uncertainty in time and space, in short, thus submitting Wagner as not a creator of mythology, but a very part of our myths. This production, Foucault argues, is one that takes Wagner seriously at the cost of showing the opposite of what he would have wanted. It unearths the realities that caused and allowed Wagner to create the *Ring*, neither elevating its status to eternal myth nor presenting a simple concrete history. In this sense a meta-production, this *Ring* is highly aware of the contexts that make it feasible, and it secured for future productions the ability to stage a similarly compelling, strong reading.

Götz Friedrich's second *Ring* production (1984-85, Deutsche Oper Berlin and later Tokyo, Washington, and London) and Harry Kupfer's Bayreuth productions (1988-92) both thematized the ecological catastrophe inherent to the *Ring* cycle's narrative, achieved primarily by playing with time and space. With his designer Peter Sykora, Friedrich set the action in a massive "time tunnel," a kind of shelter where "survivors of a nuclear Armageddon re-enact the play of the *Nibelung's Ring* in an attempt to understand man's downfall."<sup>146</sup> Friedrich's time-tunnel links the *Ring*'s events more tightly than most productions and lets those events dissolve into human history. Sykora called the time-tunnel a purgatorial space that connected events "reaching from early Christian catacombs to an atomic waste-storage area."<sup>147</sup> Patrick Carnegy describes the concept as a "play within a play."<sup>148</sup> Friedrich's Berlin production thus managed to spatially confine the events of the *Ring* to a single claustrophobic space while temporally expanding their set of

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<sup>146</sup> Mike Ashman, "Wagner on Stage," 264.

<sup>147</sup> Peter Sykora, "The Spatial Concept," in the program book for the 1989 production of *Die Walküre* at the Royal Opera House, London and quoted in Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (Yale University Press, 2006), 353.

<sup>148</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 352.

associations and consequences, an act that itself metaphorizes human impact on the environment. Further, Friedrich's time-tunnel sought to continue the long legacy of psychological settings since Appia, where the action and sets of his work seemed too fanciful to be real, yet too real to be a dream. While Erda and Wotan meet in their own sort of "play within a play," Friedrich throws the drama and its entire *dramatis personae* into such a theatrical hyper-space.

In Friedrich's *Rheingold*, Erda appears in complete view, a technique perhaps borrowed from Chéreau. However, a blindfold covers her eyes, her vision impaired at the cost of greater metaphorical sight. This reference to a blind prophet, like Tiresias in the Oedipus myth, expands the mythemes already at play in Wagner's works. During her prophecy, Erda stares directly at Wotan, stating perhaps that Friedrich's time-tunnel works like the spaces where Erda sees everything through closed eyes, while she dreams offstage and sees world events. Erda navigates the space of the time-tunnel, a space laden with histories past and future, with the utmost precision and comfort despite her blindness. Insofar as Erda's character already represents the natural world and the earth itself, Friedrich presents an earth quite capable of surviving and outlasting the apocalypse, and this is a trope within ecocriticism up to the present (which will be discussed in chapter 4). Erda's character navigates the time-tunnel with such ease that we can only take ecological catastrophe to mean something for everything *else*, not Erda but the gods, humans, giants, and Nibelungen. This is confirmed in *Siegfried*, when Friedrich's Woodbird appears, hovering triumphantly above the time-tunnel, her persona unbound by the confines of the otherwise claustrophobic area of the time-tunnel, outside of the play within a play.

Kupfer's 1988 Bayreuth production, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, similarly takes place after a world-ending catastrophe. Kupfer, like Friedrich, stages the "rolling wheel of history" as well as economic catastrophe and its aftermath. In this even grimmer setting, Kupfer and his

designer Hans Schavernoch crafted a “Weltstraße,” a street of world history, the limits of which remained hidden and ever extending beyond the proscenium.<sup>149</sup> Humanity struggles here against time and the very teleological nature of history. Kupfer’s *Ring* highlights the connection between the “abandonment of love” theme and its purported relationship to the telos of global extinction. The ending of Kupfer’s *Götterdämmerung* truly seals this: people walk on stage, some dressed in tuxedos and cocktail dresses, others as mid-century working- and lower-class families. Each family carries with them a television set, which they set down and stare at intently. Brünnhilde’s immolation is reduced to a television program, while a small boy from a wealthy family approaches a girl from a poorer one and takes her by the hand. He turns on a flashlight as the two tread into the future, leaving their technologically incapacitated parents behind. Barenboim punctuates the moment with a soft, quiet orchestral presence, perhaps at the cost of what is usually a more saccharine sound-world at the end.

In both of Erda’s scenes, the oracle comes up from under the stage as prescribed in Wagner’s staging directions, to half her height. In *Das Rheingold*, while all of the other characters appear as apocalyptic caricatures of a *Werktreue* setting, Erda remains almost unchanged. If, in settings like Friedrich’s, we find meaning in how Erda is staged differently than Wagner’s instructions, Kupfer provides a counterexample, despite the similarity in themes. Kupfer’s Erda remains in the ground, a one-dimensional representation of the earth past its expiration date. If there is a less generous reading to be made, it is that Kupfer was simply not up to the challenge or enigma that staging Erda presents. But Kupfer is too good of a director and knew his Wagner too

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<sup>149</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 353.

well to claim that Erda was a substantial challenge he couldn't overcome. So, then, something is left unsaid in his staging of the prophetic as dialectical with the rest of his setting.

Of these director-oriented responses to Wagner's theories of music drama and intended naturalism, Ruth Berghaus's Frankfurt *Ring* (1985-7) provides the most effective break with the past, presenting a "Theatre of the Absurd" staging that is bizarre, shocking, and wholeheartedly anti-naturalist. The very pairing of an East German Marxist, Brechtian director in West Germany perhaps forged this production's particular dialecticism from the start as it engaged social realist aesthetics under the circumstances of the capitalist global West. As Carnegy describes, Berghaus's production allowed the responses to Nazi Wagner from West and East to meet and culminate in unique, strange, and surprising ways.<sup>150</sup> Berghaus's *Ring*, as many of her productions, set up obstacles between the audience and its consumption of the work. For example, after Siegfried dies, he is pushed to the side of the stage by Hagen's men, stripping the Funeral March of its austerity and stifling its reverence. Berghaus's characters often appear as figurines, or literally puppets, criticizing the stiff lack of autonomy of Wagner's characters. Even Erda, clad in a grey suit, rolling a globe of the Earth before her (similar to the golden globe that represents the Rheingold or the Norns' many celestial globes) is controlled by the object she pursues and not the other way around. Even Wotan is stripped of his will in *Die Walküre* Act II, prematurely donning his Wanderer disguise. Berghaus's *Siegfried* offers yet more dialectical positioning: Fafner appears as both the dragon and the cave in which he dwells and the Woodbird is a small boy with a wing on his arm

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<sup>150</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 364.



who leads Siegfried by the hand across the cave's threshold. The Woodbird here becomes a "bird of death" instead of a "sweet little songster."<sup>151</sup>

In the 1991 Brussels production at Theatre de la Monnaie directed by Herbert Wernicke, a grand piano sits on stage throughout the cycle and the entire setting is confined to one set piece for all four operas. The piano, scholars argue, visually presents the primacy of music in the work. This reads too on the nose, though, especially considering that the piano is just about the only instrument Wagner excludes from his massive orchestras (and obviously this is not unique to Wagner). And although I have been unable to find video or photography of this cycle, evidently Erda, too, sits at this piano all cycle long. The production thus tacitly stages those unsung forces of music and labor—the instrument that Wagner composed the opera on but found inadequate for its use in his orchestra played by the character from whom such primal music emanates. Both piano and Erda receive stage time equal to their inimitable importance to the composer's process and the work itself. Wernicke therefore sets *poiesis* on the stage, for better or worse. Certainly, it makes obvious what should be a subtle point; disenchantment (on many levels: spatial, temporal, creative) becomes the very meaning of such a production.

Mike Ashman calls Erda's presence at the piano "theatrical rather than sub-textually interpretative."<sup>152</sup> That might be an understatement, but a telling one at that. It is not *sub*-textual because it is *hyper*-textual, bringing Erda's spatial realization, what is perhaps only heard and never seen, onto the stage as the very set where music and drama occur—making real what is acousmatic. Erda's *poiesis*, the connecting ontological function of her two scenes, becomes the

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<sup>151</sup> Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre*, 373.

<sup>152</sup> Ashman, "Producing Wagner," 45.

centerpiece of the performance. Further, we are told in *Siegfried* that this *poiesis* comes from her dreams, where she creates knowledge. Setting her on stage, then, might suggest a psychological reading of the *Ring* through Wernicke's performance—might the entire drama be Erda's dream? Barry Millington, similarly, calls Wernicke's message "not a political one," but "rather that the death of God requires humanity to take control of its destiny."<sup>153</sup> That such a utopian reading can be made seems to correspond to the centrality of Erda to this staging.

Similar messages creep up in twenty-first-century *Ring* cycles, which have this history of productions as a new set of texts with varied meanings, political or otherwise, that can be implemented, replicated, or problematized. The Danish Royal Opera *Ring* of 2003, directed by Kasper Bech Holten, delivered a version of the cycle from Brünnhilde's point of view that moved through various decades of the twentieth century, from the 1920s to the Cold War of the 1950s, 1968, and finally the "end of history" in the late 1980s. There is a Chéreauian tinge to this "Feminine" *Ring*, as it is advertised, but with the trappings of a family drama—Erda appears as a dying matriarch to the modernist, bourgeois family; her body finds eternal rest in a lowly hospital cot. Equally at play is the Marxian reading, evident in those different points in Western political history: the 1920s, 1950s, late 1960s, and late 1980s. The macrocosmic scale of the work is thus signaled by its setting, but its pathos and mythology are supplanted ultimately by the singular evolving perspective of a solitary character, Brünnhilde. The Copenhagen *Ring* pairs naturalism with a bit of absurdity and temporal displacement, a common problem of incoherency when one sets, say, a sword-forging scene in the twentieth century. This disjunction of myth with modernity

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<sup>153</sup> Barry Millington, "What shall we do for a Ring?", 28.

seems a common attribute of *Ring* productions that dislocate the work into a specific setting that eschews the work's Germanness.

A resurgence of science fiction *Ring* cycles also appears in the twenty-first century, notably outside of Germany. Carlus Padrissa and Roland Olberter's *Valencia Ring* (2007) and Marcelo Lombardero's *Ring* at La Plata (2012) displayed an interest in reproducing the features that made *Ring* cycles of the 1970s and 1980s so controversial and provocative (more on these in the next chapter). These newer sci-fi stagings seem particularly indebted to Götz Friedrich's first *Ring* cycle from Covent Garden (1974).

As I wrote this dissertation, Chicago had promised to stage a superbly interesting and dialectical *Ring* cycle directed by Sir David Pountney. This cycle's *Rheingold* first hit the stage in 2016 and proceeded through the cycle's other pieces once per year, to conclude with a full cycle and the premiere of *Götterdämmerung* in April of 2020. This *Ring* cycle would have had much in common with many of its predecessors: shared scenery that serves as a unifying element between the four operas and modern (even post-modern) costumes and props that set Wagner's work over a course of many decades and centuries—*Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* take place in a timeless past and future, while *Walküre* and *Siegfried* take place in the 1940s and 1950s, respectively. Within unity, however, Pountney also strives for disparity, in which each opera is considered in light of its own character and form. *Das Rheingold* is a "colorful political cartoon," *Die Walküre* a dark family drama, and *Siegfried* a childlike fairy tale, in which the usually heroic young man is reduced to a child surrounded by huge objects normally found in a child's playroom.<sup>154</sup> In this sense, Pountney's *Ring* belongs in the camp of *Regieoper* interested with the literalist, naturalist

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<sup>154</sup> "Sir David Pountney on Directing the RING." <https://www.lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/directing-the-ring/>.

imperative, perhaps most similar to Harry Kupfer's late 1980s Bayreuth production and the Copenhagen *Ring* from the early 2000s.

The goal of this production, the creative team states, was to “take the *Ring* back for the theater.”<sup>155</sup> This is achieved in a number of different ways, all of which point to a central design impetus to embrace the means of telling story through theater. For example, the Rhinedaughters in *Das Rheingold*, scene 1 sing their famous trio (“Lugt, Schwestern”) atop refurbished camera dollies, similar to the way Wagner presented them at the 1876 Bayreuth festival. However, in Pountney's production, the action is positioned in reverse, so the audience occupies the strange perspective of seeing stagehands (the “Crew”) working the machinery. The same is then true for the “Ride of the Valkyries” in Pountney's *Walküre*, where the audience can see dollies that prop up stage horses. If Adorno had found phantasmagoria at the heart of Wagner's stage-world, Pountney's *Ring* seems to do everything in its power to undo and reverse it. His is a *Ring* truly about the labor it takes to put on a *Ring*, where silent stagehands (made up of actors, dancers, and even acrobats and aerialists) are almost always present, wheeling around props or working a piece of mechanical stagecraft (or, evidently, Erda's humongous, stage-consuming dress!)—elements that, despite eager transparency, remain invisible to the *dramatis personae*.

Pountney, writing on the direction process, claims that the “world” he chose for his *Ring* was the “world of the story,” and he and his creative team thus took on the roles of storytellers whose position to the *Ring*, with its immense problems of politics or philosophy, was a position of

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<sup>155</sup> “Lyric's RING: An Inside Look at the Week the Stage Went Dark.” <https://www.lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/lyrics-ring-an-inside-look-at-the-week-when-the-stage-went-dark/>.

naivety.<sup>156</sup> Pountney's world is one of confusing beliefs, playing on the timeless ability of audiences to suspend disbelief in the face of dragons and gods; as such, his stage is laced with confusing symbols. The work relies on this conventional audience trust in creating a world of "Once upon a time...", where "the ambience of the story *is* the theater, [and] its techniques are the simple tricks of the theater that everyone can simultaneously see through and believe in."<sup>157</sup> The burden, then, of being tricked into disbelief falls squarely on the shoulders of the audience and not on the creative team that usually makes the *Ring* as seamless, realistic, or natural as possible. Pountney's cycle takes the Romantic epic realism that Wagnerians consider traditional as, in fact, the centerpiece of their creative decision-making. By choosing the "nakedly theatrical," as opposed to technological tricks, interpretation too is then left up to the audience. This is also a reaction to those *Ring* productions that yield a "closed" interpretation where, for example, a character, object, or action comes to mean or signify just one thing at the expense of others. Pountney's production is a solution to the old problem of naturalism, by simply asking the question "what does this mean?" of the audience, instead of letting the audience ask the question of the production.

I was excited for the opportunity to see this *Ring* in a familiar opera house. However, amidst the panic of the global COVID-19 pandemic, this *Ring* cycle was canceled. The reality of being an opera scholar (and especially a Wagner scholar) is that so many works and their specific adaptations exist in this way, in archives or in the imagination, places where time becomes material and space holds the memories of music drama for those wishing to receive them. In lieu of finishing their cycle as planned, the Lyric Opera flooded their website with videos and articles that made

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<sup>156</sup> "Sir David Pountney on Directing the RING." <https://www.lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/directing-the-ring/>.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

discussing this production possible for me. This is another phenomenon regarding opera today, very specifically as I write this dissertation in the isolation of coronavirus-imposed social distancing—the phenomenon of opera and opera-related materials being made remotely accessible more than ever. It is to this kind of opera, “opera in place,” to which I now turn, where the history of staging Wagner and the challenges that accompany it are forced to navigate new means of technology.

### 3.3 Opera in Place

The disappointment of not seeing the Pountney *Ring* cycle at the Chicago Lyric Opera was mitigated, partly, by the overabundance of opera companies and houses who were willing, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the many “shelter in place” scenarios it forced, to stream their operas or ballets online for free. Such was the case with the Robert Lepage *Ring* at the Met, filmed during the 2010-11 and 2011-12 seasons. I explore this production in its 2019 revival in the following section, but viewing this cycle “in place,” as it were, was a physically and mentally taxing experience. The Met’s free nightly opera streams work in such a way that each opera must be viewed before the next one begins streaming, leaving for me a *Ring* cycle that existed over the span of only four days. In this section, I consider opera as filmed, as other scholars have done (notably Levin), but with the caveat of having no alternative to it. I read this experience of opera, and particularly the *Ring* and its apocalypticism, against theories of media, remediation, and technology by philosophers as well as other Wagner scholars for whom these questions are always lurking, given the nature of Wagner’s epic realist dreams.

Opera scholars have traced the importance of technology to the specificity of music drama. Gundula Kreuzer's recent monograph on technology in nineteenth-century opera in fact describes Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk* as not a philosophical cumulation of modernity, but a material one that culminated at the height of technology, perhaps as a symptom of it.<sup>158</sup> Opera mediated through video perhaps continues the processes of this phenomenon—materially (and materialistically) determined as much as it is also a metaphysical extension of modern opera practices.

Being able to experience opera at home was a privilege not exclusive to the time of post-coronavirus stay-at-home orders. Many *Ring* productions exist on YouTube (even some not available on DVD or other video formats). This appears to be the case with recent productions, particularly of *Das Rheingold*, including the dynamic stagings by Carlus Padrissa in Valencia (2007) and Marcelo Lombardero at Teatro Argentino de La Plata (2012). There are also very different productions to be found on YouTube: China National Opera House's *Das Rheingold* (2016) almost outdoes Wagner at his own game of epic realism, and Adam Fischer's *Das Rheingold* at the Vienna State Opera (2016) offers a bare bone reading, taking a kind of *tabula rasa* approach to the usage of light and the representation of world. In late May of 2020, not coincidentally around Wagner's birthday, new streams of the *Ring* cycle appeared from the Dutch Nationale Opera and Oper Frankfurt. The former, the 2014 revival of Pierre Audi's Amsterdam *Ring* (1999), is a monochromatic production that reminds one of Appia's play of light and geometric shapes. The Frankfurt cycle (2020), directed by Vera Nemirova, delights in the stark, open spaces and a floating disc stage reminiscent of Wieland Wagner's *Ring* productions. Indeed, Nemirova's use of a gigantic disc, with smaller moving discs laid within, serves as a unifying piece

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<sup>158</sup> Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam*, 17.

of stagecraft. The existence of these on YouTube is particularly fortunate given the issues of accessibility to opera archives across the world, even prior to COVID-19, but these are different in form than those operas filmed for the sake of film media alone.

Opera as film is a vastly different material than live opera, and it has been studied as such by many musicologists and opera scholars. Levin's work has used DVD operas as a primary material due to the advantages of its circulation for broader audiences. These instances, for the most part, are different from *remediated* operas per se, those that are filmed with the format of DVD or television sequences in mind. Examples of the latter include Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Parsifal* (1982), which makes hefty use of cinematic techniques and capabilities; Joachim Herz's black-and-white, shortened version of *Der fliegende Holländer* (1964) for DEFA (the GDR's state film company); and *Herzog Blaubarts Burg* (1963), the filmed adaptation of Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* directed by Michael Powell for West German television. All provide great examples of the expansion of space and world made possible through cinematic remediation of opera, where the limits of the stage are exceeded by the naturalism afforded by the filmic medium. The paradox of such remediation lay in its ability to create intimate closeness with the characters and action while simultaneously erasing the haptic feelings of live opera, i.e., the visual and auditory closeness of being in an opera house.

*Remediation*, as a concept in critical theory, originates in the work of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's analysis of the film *Strange Days* (1995).<sup>159</sup> Remediation is the theory that media today are a constant reiteration of past cultural interfaces, a sort of digital step beyond Walter Benjamin's theory of mechanical reproduction. Remediation is, further, a creative process that can

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<sup>159</sup> Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, "Remediation," *Configurations* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 311-358.



take the shape of reformation, rehabilitation, or refashioning a work for a new medium. This is a nearly ubiquitous phenomenon in modernity; indeed, Bolter and Grusin claim that no cultural event or work today happens in isolation from other media.<sup>160</sup> For opera, remediation has always been a key ingredient of the recipe; the genre's earliest works all refashioned older myths or histories (notably Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) for the then-new medium of opera, itself a synthesis of Commedia dell'arte theatre and sixteenth-century vocal music and dance. Wagner, like many opera composers before him, was also a remediator of refashioned mythology (perhaps with greater liberty than most other librettists and composers).<sup>161</sup> Recently, musicologists have taken an interest in operas remediated for even newer media, as in Marcia Citron's work on Tony Britten's adaptation of Verdi's *Falstaff* for television.<sup>162</sup> The advantage of remediation for opera, Citron suggests, is that it opens the genre to new markets and greater audiences. Through the process of remediating, these operas often undergo massive transformations as the watchability of the work becomes a paramount artistic concern. At the same time, remediated opera often creates new meaning, sometimes in the form of confronting the limitations or characteristics of the media presenting it. For example, Britten's *Falstaff* is presented in the style of a British sitcom, and this frames the entire work in a new lens to fit our own conceptions of comedy today.

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<sup>160</sup> Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>161</sup> Krisztina Lajosi argues that *Die Meistersinger* is, in fact, a kind of allegory for remediation. "Wagner and the (Re)mediation of Art: Gesamtkunstwerk and Nineteenth-Century Theories of Media," *Frame* 23, no. 2 (2010): 42-60.

<sup>162</sup> Marcia Citron, "Opera-Film as Television: Remediation in Tony Britten's *Falstaff*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 70, no. 2 (2017): 475-522.

Syberberg's *Parsifal* has a more dialectical relationship with its medium, thematizing the separation between opera and film by using the same techniques advantageous to cinema: lip-syncing, two actors playing Parsifal, autonomous props (such as Amfortas's wound being a separate prop from his physical body) and a general visual tone that tends to strip the work of its operatic size and scope.<sup>163</sup> The remediated *Parsifal* situates itself at the very depoliticization and demystification of Wagner's multiple cultic legacies in twentieth-century modernism. Much of Syberberg's work, *Parsifal* included, are examples of "Trauerarbeit," works that mourn Nazi ideology; *Parsifal* extends to include Wagner's legacy in cinema as well (especially in Weimar Germany). What better medium to remediate *Parsifal* than film, which captured so many of Wagner's creative interests and made possible what to him was only ambition? The argument has often gone that Wagner would have made films if he could have and that his frustrations in staging *Parsifal* particularly reflected this. Susan Sontag describes this notion: "Wagner's fantasy of the invisible stage was fulfilled more literally in that immaterial stage, cinema."<sup>164</sup>

Perhaps our current, pandemic-induced reliance on new media for how we get our art is a mere update of the aspirations of Romantic metaphysics, where music was a redemptive art of reality.<sup>165</sup> Syberberg fulfills Wagner's desire to "make the deeds of music visible" by taking such a deed to task; the director sets the drama on a stage made of an enormous replica of Wagner's death mask with backdrops made of images of Bayreuth and other Wagner stagings. Syberberg's

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<sup>163</sup> Marcia Citron, "Opera and Film," in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, 44-71 (Oxford University Press, 2014), 49.

<sup>164</sup> Susan Sontag, "Syberberg's Hitler," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (London, 1983), 157.

<sup>165</sup> Rolf Goebel, "The Soul of the Phonograph: Media-Technologies, Auditory Experience, and Literary Modernism in the Age of COVID-19," in *Humanities* 9, vol. 82 (August 2020): 1-10.

film is thus self-aware of its status as rehabilitator inside a medium with a contentious position to the composer himself.<sup>166</sup> In a sense, Syberberg's film argues what Sontag did: that film is *the* medium capable of staging Wagner's works in the present moment, where Syberberg had seen the contemporary theatre directors of the day allegedly failing (Chéreau, Herz, Berghaus, etc.). However, Syberberg was not the first to use the cinematic form to stage Wagner in inventive ways.

There are not many *Ring* cycle opera-films. Perhaps most prominent among them is the filmed version of *Das Rheingold* from the Salzburg *Ring* (1973), directed by Herbert von Karajan with cinematography by Ernst Wild, that completed production in 1978. This opera-film became available through the Berliner Philharmoniker Digital Concert Hall website, like many other works that existed behind paywalls until the COVID-19 crisis. Karajan's filmed *Rheingold* makes use of its cinematic possibilities immediately: the prelude is accompanied by supertitles that explain the symbolism and power of the Rheingold and the ring with plot points of the drama following. In the vein of Wagnerian naturalism, the first scene is filmed in such a way as to persuade its audience that it occurs in the depths of the Rhine—a cinematic epic realist effect that could not be produced in a live setting, achieved by the camera's ability to inhabit impossible points of view, behind filters that lend the scene a blurry, nostalgic quality.

Karajan's film makes possible a degree of naturalism through cinematic remediation. For example, fades and cuts allow our ascent to the gods' mountaintop and the descent to Nibelheim to feel seamless and real, unimpeded by the obstacles of the theatre—as if the realms exist exactly how and where Wagner depicts them in his libretto and music. The film does much of our imagination's work for us in this sense. Karajan's Nibelheim is an especially layered place, and as

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<sup>166</sup> Marcia Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 145.

the camera pans back up to the mountaintop at the beginning of scene 4, we follow Wotan (Thomas Stewart), Loge (Peter Schreier), and Alberich (Zoltán Kelemen) through these various extra spaces within Nibelheim, again only made available through the possibilities of cinematography. The same is true for moments of cinematic action, such as when Alberich turns invisible and taunts his brother Mime (Gerhard Stolze). The cinematic possibilities of remediation allow Alberich to become truly invisible, an acousmatic voice that is usually not so in live productions.

Erda (Birgit Finnilä) appears in Karajan's *Rheingold* in truly strange fashion. At her first words, "Weiche Wotan, weiche!" a light appears on a group of rocks nearby the gods on their mountaintop. Slowly, a projected image of Erda's face fades in while she sings the rest of her monologue. While in many literalist depictions, Erda's character appears only from the waist up, here she appears only as a mirage-like image of her face. While her character normally troubles the sense of space on the stage, in Karajan's film Erda appears to trouble the very nature of spectacle now that the stage is invisible, to use Sontag's words.<sup>167</sup> Her appearance unsettles the ontological possibilities of the voice's source, not quite acousmatic but not entirely present in the way other characters are. Finnilä plays an eerie Erda, one who remains completely still, eyes unblinking, whose coldness imbues her words with more magic and supernatural austerity than usual. The ethereal qualities of her fade-in and fade-out leave Wotan thoroughly incapable of following her into the depths, and in fact, this Wotan hardly even tries to, frozen as he is with fear.

While Syberberg's *Parsifal* and other films (particularly *Ludwig* (1972) and *Hitler* (1977)) display a constant deconstructing of Wagner's legacy over time, not all remediated versions of

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<sup>167</sup> Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, similarly writes of the singing head of Orpheus, which represents the "uncanny aspects of musical performance," 5. Sontag is cited above, "Syberberg's *Hitler*," 157.

Wagner's work share such an interest, for a variety of reasons. Indeed, if the struggle with Wagner's legacy is found prominently in Syberberg's filmography, the lack of that struggle appears equally prominent in Karajan's film. This is perhaps because Karajan is a conductor first and a stage director second. The more likely answer simply lay in Karajan's aesthetic loyalties to literalism and because of his controversial relationship with right-wing politics, having gone through a denazification tribunal in 1946 that cleared him of illegal charges despite holding party membership since 1933. Rather, Karajan's *Rheingold* thematizes the limits of space and world in Wagner's cycle by rendering those limits invisible, equally appropriate to the cinematic medium as Syberberg's criticism of Wagner's legacy, but perhaps a weaker reading overall of the composer's work. Despite the differences of technology in opera-films contra live opera, however, many of the questions first posed by the legacy of Wagner's stage works appeared reinscribed, perhaps by the content of the operas themselves. In Wagner's case, as we especially saw in the introduction, his characters and music will still ask certain questions of his audience if the director is unable to erase them via the medium. In this sense, Karajan's Erda is one of fidelity to Wagner's, updated by the medium without much refashioning of its meaning. Karajan's political past and aesthetic conservatism could explain why, but without more opera-film versions of the *Ring* cycle to compare it to, it is hard to say definitively.

### **3.4 When I Saw the World End**

In this section, I explore yet another mediation of opera, not as historical, imaginary, or digitally mediated, but as live event. Going to live opera was an important part of my early adult years—experiences that I still recall fondly with the friends who shared them. It was only

appropriate, then, that I see my first *Ring* cycle at the Met where, for me, it all began. Attending the 2019 revival of the Robert Lepage production from 2010, conducted by Philippe Jordan, also fulfilled my unrealized desire to see the same production that I saw when it was staged at the Met while I was an undergraduate, contemporaneous with the first time I had heard Wagner's music in my nineteenth-century music history class. The 2010-12 filmed version of this production is also available on DVD and on the Metropolitan Opera on Demand streaming service, where it briefly became available for free during the COVID-19 crisis.

Lepage's *Das Rheingold* launches its prelude in circumstances that are a little perplexing. On the one hand, Wagner's music was wonderfully performed by the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, as one might expect. On the other, my attention was hardly on the music and its hypnotic imitation of the Rhine. Rather, I was distracted by the omnipresent "Machine" that constituted the entire stage, a 90,000-pound stagecraft apparatus used in a variety of ways to achieve Lepage's dramaturgical ends through the use of movable planks.<sup>168</sup> In the prelude, for instance, colored light projection and coordinated mechanical motion allowed the Machine to resemble the blue waves of the Rhine, a tautological representation visually of the prelude's musical attributes and associations. In this scene, Lepage uses the Machine to provide scenery consistent with Wagner's libretto and music, but this isn't always the case. The Machine, in its totalizing effect as spectacle piece, lends Lepage's production a conservative, literalist tone. Many scenes throughout this staging seemed deliberately to showcase the impressive capabilities of the Machine, perhaps at the

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<sup>168</sup> See Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (University of California Press, 2018). Kreuzer notes the Met's zeal to appeal to an imagined set of authentic, Wagnerian desires based on newer technological possibilities that Lepage's version realizes.

expense of the overall opera: its flexibility as the bottom of the Rhine, the bridge to Valhalla, the Ash Tree around which Hunding's home is built, the Gibichung Hall, and so forth afforded the adaptation a recipe to constantly outdo itself. Its omnipresence also engrossed problems for the literalist or naturalist tendencies of Lepage's production, though. One of the chief complaints leveled at the Machine is its noisiness: it creaks and groans often as its heavy planks shift back and forth in its attempts to represent the shifting spaces in the world of the *Ring*. Yet, the Machine provides a lot of drastic possibility in live staging, where the naturalist tendency of this staging seems to constantly confront the realities of its mammoth stagecraft, working against the dramaturgy as much as it creates its entire framework. Other *Ring* cycle productions supply similar levels of possibility or tension in different, less totalizing ways—as in the Bayreuth premiere where the Rhinedaughters were propped upon stilts and wheeled around so as to appear swimming under water. The Machine, a mechanical improbability in Wagner's own time to be sure, lends itself to a constant sense of possibility in its omnipresence and its flexibility for Lepage's dramaturgy, intended or not.

Such flexibility is punctuated in the transitions between scenes, which present staging challenges for directors. How do we get from the depths of the Rhine to the mountaintops of the gods, then down to Nibelheim and back? While the Machine is an immutable fixture, its movable planks and the light cast on them provide numerous possibilities, and Lepage can surprise at times. In the case of transitioning between the first two scenes of *Das Rheingold*, the Machine's planks slowly turn over and, as the world of the Rhinedaughters is hidden, the gloomy mountaintop where Wotan (Michael Volle) and Fricka (Jamie Barton) reside appears. In the journey to Nibelheim by Wotan and Loge (Norbert Ernst), the Machine's planks are cast in staggered formations to create a kind of floating sideways staircase, enveloped in darkness, across which the two slowly traverse

in mid-air (accomplished by doubles). A constant orientation and reorientation of space is required of Lepage's audience in this sense. Another example of this comes at the end of *Das Rheingold*, when the gods enter Valhalla by ascending directly upwards, seemingly defying gravity.

Lepage's production is, however, a weak reading when it comes to the subtleties of Wagner's cycle. For Erda's role, it reverts to a reliance on prescribed stage directions and the tradition of how her role has been staged by traditionalists (arguably something to be expected based on the production's other attempts at fidelity to traditionalism). Erda (Karen Cargill) appears in a black dress, couched under the planks of the Machine, which splay around her like a fan—a gorgeous setting, to be sure, that nonetheless serves to remind Lepage's spectators of its bid to conservative fidelity (though an unsurprising fact given the history of Met *Ring* productions, such as Otto Schenk's directed staging that premiered in 1987). Erda leaves the scene as she came in, under cover of darkness and hidden by the stagecraft, just out of reach of Wotan's threat to learn more of her knowledge.

The Machine itself is already a means towards a similarly conservative dramaturgical end, though. It is Wagnerian in its bombast, its totalizing effect on the stage, and its mixed reception history. It seems like the kind of technology Wagner would have utilized without hesitation if it could be manipulated to serve the functions required of his realist approach. Further, many of the costumes of this production (designed by François St-Aubin) attest to this conservatism as well. I found Erda's intervention into the narrative quite jarring from a sense of coherency within Lepage's staging—a total, if momentary, directional change. Her presence proposed a subtle return to Wagnerian fidelity of which the Machine could hardly make sense. The small return to Wagner's prescribed stage directions, the darkening of the world around her that Erda conjures alongside strange new music, marks Lepage's production as, in truth, one that oscillates between operatic



ideologies—naturalistic for the sake of the modern Met audience who expects some level of technological innovation, but also is incapable of divorcing itself from an imaginary, nineteenth-century concept of *the work*.<sup>169</sup> By this, I mean that the Machine attests to Lepage's inventive use of time and space, but he props the *Ring* cycle up as a monument to something totalitarian in time and space, myth and history made real to our visual and auditory senses.

In *Die Walküre* Act I, as Siegmund (Stuart Skelton) tells Hunding (Günther Groissböck) and Sieglinde (Eva-Maria Westbroek) his origin story, projected shadows play out the backstory on the planks of the Machine. The Machine positions itself here, more so than anywhere in *Das Rheingold*, as a storyteller on its own, not unlike Wagner's orchestra. Beyond its play with the different spaces of the cycle's world, the Machine also reflects an expansion of time, from the present moment to the past that Siegmund narrates, one that is doubly narrated in nostalgic love themes as he and Sieglinde share knowing glances. The same play of shadows repeats later when Siegmund explains the events that brought him directly to Hunding's home: the forced marriage he valiantly sought to stop. Again, the Machine tells the story, while the orchestra provides music that might otherwise lack clear motivic meaning. The orchestra begins to seem only incidental as the power of attention shifts overwhelmingly to the stagecraft itself. When Siegmund pulls Nothung from the Ash Tree towards the end of Act I, the Machine's planks flip over and seemingly bow down to the newly named Siegmund, as if the sword's symbolic association with Wotan's project to redeem the gods is beginning its path, perhaps a foreshadow of the rolling wheel of history that Wotan seeks to stop. Again, the Machine begins to take on the role of a clock: it tracks the time we and the *Ring*'s characters experience. Wotan, too, uses this function in *Die Walküre*

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<sup>169</sup> See Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Clarendon Press, 1992).

Act II, when he explains the past events of his life to Brünnhilde (Christine Goerke). We see projections of the ring, Erda, Fafner, and of past events double the information being told us by both Wotan and the orchestra in the form of motives. Perhaps the most literal case comes later, in *Götterdämmerung*, when the three Norns (Ronnita Miller, Elizabeth Bishop, Wendy Bryn Harmer) spin the rope of destiny on the Machine's planks, which swing back and forth, resistant to their attempts to control time as perhaps a consequence of its ability to singularly dominate space.

The Woodbird's acousmatic role (sung by Erin Morley) is somewhat troubled by her appearance in Lepage's *Siegfried*. Projected onto the Machine as an animated little green bird, the Woodbird, like Erda, becomes one with the props, stagecraft, and orchestra that tell Wagner's story without words. Lepage's *Siegfried* is perhaps the most literalist of the four in his cycle, where the Machine is distilled to the specificity of locations: it serves as a fine visual representation of the forest, of Mime's abode, Fafner's cave, Brünnhilde's rock and so forth, but does little else. Erda, too, appears a victim of this relatively weak staging. Her character appears in essentially the same austere setting and shimmering trappings as in Lepage's *Rheingold*, coming up from underneath the Machine. This time, she comes out from her nook in the rocks and interacts with the Wanderer, a typical decision made by directors since the 1970s. Her divorce from the stage seems due to an increasingly changing concept of space in these late Anthropocene times.

Lepage's *Siegfried* seems a consequent to its *Walküre* antecedent. In *Walküre*, Lepage's strongest gestures, those which provide the greatest feeling of novelty and critical meaning, come in those moments when characters sing of the past—Siegmond telling his background stories in Act I, Wotan telling his to Brünnhilde in Act II—where shadows tell the story. *Siegfried* is Lepage's opera that most deals with the true contrasts of light and dark: over the Machine's shoulders there is usually a bright red or yellow sunlight, and Nothung gleams so brightly one

wonders if the tenor singing Siegfried should be staring at it so directly. In a fitting finale, Brünnhilde and Siegfried finish the opera with their own ode to light (“Heil dir Sonne! Heil dir Licht!”): the omnipresence of light as visual motif reaches an excessive climax. The absence of light, too, becomes equally striking. For example, Nothung appears especially bright when the rest of the stage, Mime’s abode, darkens sharply. Other specific locations are similarly dark—the forest, Fafner’s cave, Erda’s cave, and Brünnhilde’s rock.

The light-and-dark of *Siegfried* also then seem to contradict the Machine’s position in the opera that follows. Lepage’s *Götterdämmerung* begins with a critical statement regarding the Machine’s symbolic function: as the levers or rolling wheels of history under the auspices of the Norns. The Prologue’s opening thus provides a statement on symbolic function as much as it provides a commentary on the preceding work and its motivic relationship to light. The First Norn’s opening passage is: “Welch Licht leuchtet dort?” [What light glimmers there?]. As the scene continues, it is clear they are speaking of the dawning day, their concern for the cycles of time is due to their occupation as spinners of fate’s yarn. Yet, in Lepage’s cycle, they seem to comment on the previous drama’s play with light, as if to subtly remind us of the Machine’s changing functions, as narrator to spectacle and back again.

The specificity of location, too, is immediately thrown into question at the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*. This occurs not on Lepage’s stage, but in Wagner’s libretto, where the Norns can no longer spin their rope on the Ash Tree, but instead must use whatever pine tree or ragged rock they can find. The lack of magical object leads to the snapping of the rope: the Machine’s planks swing violently and history without prophecy begets chaos. The Machine lacks the specific magical qualities its many possible locations previously imbued it. The Norns’ undoing of determined history is not an immediate effect, though. What they predicted before the rope snaps

still happens, and in Lepage's staging, the bright lights of Siegfried and Brünnhilde return to the stage just as their onstage characters do, wiping away the gloomy underworld of the Norns. The Norns of Lepage and Wagner, respectively, bear resemblance to each other as immutable forms, personified types rather than realized individual characters.<sup>170</sup> They work as calm, almost frozen representations of past, present, and future, who slowly reveal the chaotic, wilder side of nature, a type in contradistinction to that of the Rhinedaughters, who, in Lepage's setting, accompany a stable Machine in the form of the Rhine river. The Machine's flailing planks at the end of the Norns' scene represent the triumph of time over space, of the efficacy of human history over the eternal mythical world. Lepage's *Götterdämmerung* delivers the Machine as a suitably grand prop for its moments of "grand opera." For instance, when Hagen calls the Gibichung vassals in Act II, the Machine finally meets its match in terms of Wagnerian maximalism, accompanied by huge numbers of choral singers. In Act III, Brünnhilde's sacrificial immolation is hidden by the Machine's planks. When *Götterdämmerung* ends, we are left only with the Machine, the statues of gods in the Gibichung Hall symbolically collapsing behind it. Even after the gods are gone, the means of their outward representation in the Machine remains.

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<sup>170</sup> See Porges, *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'*, 117.

## 4.0 Apocalypse Staged

As we saw in the chapter on Erda's prophecy of apocalypse, the genesis of her character occurred at a time in Wagner's compositional process where he also explored numerous endings of *Götterdämmerung*. I noted that Žižek's analysis ultimately focuses on the relationship between Brünnhilde's suicide and the sexual love that drives it—a central theme to many of Wagner's music dramas, to be sure.<sup>171</sup> Yet, I framed Žižek's analysis as a point of departure for my own, simply in the matter of scope. I find that the *Ring*'s message regarding death, while achieved by Brünnhilde alone, in fact seems to prescribe global catastrophes, apocalypses that doom entire collectives of people. The related theme of utopia also implies the redemption of the whole world, not just Siegfried or Wotan. This apocalypse—and later, the utopia that Wotan promises—is the central theme of the *Ring* that Erda's character initially offered Wagner in his libretto sketches: the theme of “learning to die” that he described to Röckel. In this chapter, I aim to show two things about this dual theme of apocalypse/utopia: (1) that it was prefigured in Wagner's own time by natural philosophy, not created ex nihilo, and (2) that this theme has become especially important in light of Anthropocene concerns in our world today, where various apocalypses are on everyone's mind—from world-ending natural catastrophes to the ends prescribed by capitalism. A few *Ring* productions will serve as case studies here, and I find that these stagings capture Anthropocene responses to the end of the world.

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<sup>171</sup> Žižek finds parallels, in fact, among Wagner's works in “triads.” *Tristan—Meistersinger—Parsifal* represent one such triad, where sexual love is the centerpiece of each drama's meaning. In short, each work provides a different solution to a similar problem of a forbidden love.

Opera is not always philosophical, but it can present or implicitly speculate on engrossing philosophical problems, not all of which are specific to the ontology of music, the performativity of listening, or as is often the case with Wagner, ideology and politics. German idealism and romanticism gave Wagner the ingredients to dramatize natural philosophy in the *Ring*. Nietzsche and Adorno, as we have seen, zeroed in on Wagner's concern with spectacle and yet miss the potential for his works to be philosophically engaging in production—which seems lacking in hindsight especially, where the history of the *Ring* that we saw in the previous chapter displays a clear ability to ask philosophical questions emphatically in production.

In the case of Wagner, there is a wealth of takes on the relationship between his opera and philosophy that posit it differently: as two perpendicular axes that meet at a point of intersection rarely, or as two concepts that are constantly interweaving and contributing to each other. For example, it has been argued that one of the prime tenets of romanticism was, in fact, a shift by which philosophy and art were no longer seen as entirely separate.<sup>172</sup> Other scholars have argued that Wagner's operatic works entail philosophical and ideological problems that were contemporary to his work and, primarily, his relationship with Nietzsche, in some cases realized on stage allegorically or dialectically.<sup>173</sup> Elsewhere, Wagner's reading of the philosophies of Feuerbach and Schopenhauer have readily been linked to his music-dramatic results, although some cases are much more obvious than others in this sense (the ending of *Götterdämmerung*

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<sup>172</sup> Dalia Nassar, "Introduction," in *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>173</sup> Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche* (University of California Press, 2016), and Roger Scruton, *The Ring of Truth: The Wisdom of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung* (UK: Allen Lane, 2016), although the latter seems displeased with the imaginations of those who produce the *Ring*, 5.

being a clear example in its different, explicitly Feuerbachian and Schopenhauerian versions).<sup>174</sup> The latter of these philosophical influences is particularly relevant to the understanding of Wagner's works as representative of a metaphysical problematic, by which noumenal realities are allegedly made phenomenal.<sup>175</sup> The ending, then, also seems a place where music drama particularly engages apocalypse as a philosophical problem, of presenting the metaphysical concern of apocalypse with the physical reality of staged opera.<sup>176</sup>

Still, in Wagner's works generally, one can find the composer grappling with Schopenhauer's metaphysical dichotomy; on the one hand creating a world of "Representation" that constantly alludes to a world of "Will," perhaps done musically in a way that poetry and drama alone could not. Further, Schopenhauer argued that nature, or the phenomenal world, and music are two different expressions of the same thing.<sup>177</sup> Carl Dahlhaus traces Wagner's shift towards this thinking between the composer's *Opera and Drama* (1851) and his essay on Beethoven (1870), as the relegation of music from representing the phenomena of the world to becoming itself an idea of the world, as an element of metaphysics in sound.<sup>178</sup> Drama here is an important matter

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<sup>174</sup> Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000).

<sup>175</sup> Magee, 230. Nietzsche echoes this later when he describes art as the metaphysical activity of life. See the Foreword to *The Birth of Tragedy*, cited in Heidegger's *Nietzsche* vol. 1, 72. Wagner's reading of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) emerges in a number of mature works: the pessimism of Hans Sachs in *Meistersinger*, Tristan's hopeless sexual desires, Parsifal's aimlessness, etc. See Thomas Mann, "From 'Schopenhauer'," in *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 194-5.

<sup>176</sup> See Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 102. Wagner admitted the connection of Schopenhauer to the *Ring's* ending, but the staying power of this interpretation is suspect.

<sup>177</sup> Schopenhauer, *Welt als Wille und Voerstellung* I, 309.

<sup>178</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas* (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 5.

of realization, as Dahlhaus notes that the concept of “absolute music” does not exist for Wagner. Music, absolute or not, was a privileged phenomenon for Schopenhauer and for Wagner’s career post-1870; as a phenomenon considered superior to the other arts and language, music more readily communicated metaphysical truths as the immediate language of the will, as Nietzsche argued.<sup>179</sup>

Music’s potential to reach the noumenal world seemed to come from the form and content of Wagner’s music dramas, signaled often by those invisible acousmatic voices. After all, music alone is what we are left with as the cycle ends. While the world burns, we hear the “redemption” motive, ostensibly commenting on the finale’s bittersweet message that love, despite all of its ugly shortcomings and fragility, is the ultimate redeemer of worldly sins—feeling overcomes reality. The significance of Brünnhilde’s sacrifice might be better communicated by music than words, as a message from the world of will, according to this reading.

Wagner’s own philosophical ruminations came in the form of essays and letters as well, so it is a common tendency for others to read his music drama in overly ideological terms. As is the case with Nietzsche and Adorno, it might be this focus on ideology that stifles other messages that productions might contain. Recently, philosophers have found cause to open and re-open the “case of Wagner” that Nietzsche began, and that Adorno continued. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has articulated the complex legacies of Wagnerism, the composer’s split from Nietzsche, and its effects on both aesthetics and politics in Europe in the twentieth century.<sup>180</sup> In response to Lacoue-Labarthe, Alain Badiou embraced different philosophical truths that could be gleaned from

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<sup>179</sup> Nietzsche, “The Birth of Tragedy,” in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 103. Nietzsche later rejected Schopenhauer’s philosophy as a kind of ideological armor for Wagner. See “Genealogy of Morals,” Section 5, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 538 and *Human, All Too Human*.

<sup>180</sup> Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Musica Ficta (Figures of Wagner)* (Stanford University Press, 1994).



Wagner, especially in performance. For Badiou, what Lacoue-Labarthe misses is the fundamental importance of Wagner to the contemporary world—not solely in terms of the composer’s configuration in the questions laid out by Nietzsche or Adorno.<sup>181</sup> In the afterword of Badiou’s book, Slavoj Žižek also offers a rethinking of Wagner’s singular effect on the modern world, particularly in relation to ideology, broadly.<sup>182</sup> This is also where Žižek analyzes the endings, as we saw in the section on Erda’s genesis in chapter 2.

Žižek gets at the core problem of the “Wagner case” when he recalls a Wagner conference where one participant asked if the composer’s anti-Semitism was sufficient to stigmatize his listeners as complicity with, or at least acquiescent to the Holocaust. The embarrassed participants backpedaled, because Wagner simply wrote wonderful music. This problem, Žižek notes, is as much one of German ideological identity.<sup>183</sup> In this reading, we are in a decisive moment for the Wagner problem—particularly found on stage, where Žižek finds the symbology and ideology of Wagner deconstructed, from Chéreau’s staging to Berghaus’s, as well as Syberberg’s film of *Parsifal*. In this sense, Žižek grounds the Wagner case in the stage action and the text—not just the music—similar to this dissertation and the work of Levin, Nattiez, Abbate, and others.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner* (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>182</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and ‘German Ideology’,” afterword of *Five Lessons on Wagner*, 161-225 (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>183</sup> Žižek, 162.

<sup>184</sup> Žižek, 180. Žižek is a little fast to set up Wagner as being concerned only with music. Surely, this is not the entire story, given the fact that Wagner wrote his own librettos and had much say in the action on stage, the designs of Bayreuth, and so on.

To historicize the philosophical epoch that contains Wagner's life and works, we might conceptualize it as a moment of possibilities and shifting mainstream intellectualisms, where absolute idealism and materialism are both on the menu for Wagner, so to speak.<sup>185</sup> Broadly, Wagner chose from both and participated in the lineage they share, so it would be a disservice to the journey that his ideas took to reduce his music dramas to a single philosophical movement.<sup>186</sup> Friedrich Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* sought a way in between dualism and materialism, a metaphysics designed to reach beyond the previous attempts to critique reason.<sup>187</sup> Wagner had read Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800) before working on the *Ring*, and this may be where Wagner found a natural world constructed from subjectivity.<sup>188</sup> Schelling's organic concept of nature was a veritable solution to the problematic that the external world presented idealists. Wagner's natural world, however, appears mostly supernatural or even occult in its powers of divination, as in Erda's case, or its ability to heighten the senses, as in Siegfried's encounter with the Woodbird. The difference between music drama and philosophy seems rested in the ability to represent or signify metaphysics in a stage world already very different from our own, where everyone and everything in drama is realized through music. Again, we saw this in

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<sup>185</sup> Richard Bell finds that Wagner's debt to idealism, and especially Hegel, is often unsung in the literature and in Wagner's own writings. Bell, *Theology of Wagner's Ring Cycle I*, 3.

<sup>186</sup> Bell, *Theology I*, 175, explains that Wagner shifted from objective idealism (Hegel) to subjective (Schopenhauer, then Kant).

<sup>187</sup> Beiser, 467. Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* also asked the very basic questions at the core of idealism: "how do ideas of external things arise in us?" See Bell, *Theology I*, 186 n100.

<sup>188</sup> Bell, *Theology I*, 182. Bell traces Wagner's learning of Schelling through Christian Hermann Weisse (1801-66).

the Siegfried/Woodbird scene, where the subject (Siegfried) dialogued with the representation of nature external to it (through the Woodbird).

Wagner presents his audiences with many noumenal realities that are clearly meant to be taken as phenomenal; indeed, this might be the very ethos of Bayreuth, where it seemed possible to broach noumenal truths via the revelatory capacities of spectacle and music. Music's purportedly metaphysical qualities and ineffable processes have been explained, too, by the logocentric nature of scholarship. However, it is not a given that the noumenal reality Wagner hoped would manifest through his music dramas is actually realized in performance, for example, in Abbate's gnostic experiences at the Met. This is to say, there is a subjective gap between the metaphysical intentions of Wagner's music dramas on stage and their consumption and reception. Some might find Erda's role disturbing for its strange ontology and the doom her prophecy brings, but on stage, she can be interpreted differently—sometimes that strange ontology is a welcome counterpart to Wagner's gods and her prophecy is not merely dreadful or grim, perhaps it is musically or visually beautiful.

Erda, and similarly supernatural characters in Wagner's output, probe the verity of noumenal and esoteric truths, and these truths seem mutable in performance. Whether they succeed or fail onstage, in reception by other dramatic personas, affects the metaphysical, even mystical qualities of music drama in performance. If we recall my proposal that Erda might metaphorize the double act of staging and performing—almost as if her character is aware of the meta relationship between her role and the stage she uncomfortably occupies—her prophecy might offer Wotan the realization of his own role, as a dramatic persona in a music drama. This reading is a deconstruction of Wagner's work, certainly outside of the composer's intention, that nonetheless receives some credibility from later twentieth-century productions, particularly by Kupfer and

Friedrich in the 1980s. I propose, in short, that voices and bodies like Erda's can make magical what isn't; they can enchant, and they often beg us to hear and witness enchantment. These qualities, however, are not contingent on staging, but rather, are provided by Wagner himself, partly, through his engagement with natural philosophy, idealism, and other post-Enlightenment philosophies.

Enchantment might already seem like the bread and butter of romanticism—especially when recalling other musical and dramatic works from the nineteenth century. Magical and supernatural operas influenced Wagner early on, such as Weber's *Der Freischütz* and Marschner's *Der Vampyr*. Of course, there was also similar interest in magical settings and characters in Italian *opera seria* and French *tragédie lyrique* from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Enchantment, broadly, also has roots in the philosophies that shaped Wagner's intellectual career—German thinkers including Goethe, Herder, Fichte, and Hegel.<sup>189</sup> Indeed, regardless of Schopenhauer's central influence on the composer, German idealism and early romanticism's philosophies and science of nature, *Naturphilosophie* (included here are Schelling, the Schlegel brothers, Hölderlin and Novalis), prefigured Wagner's worldview and cosmology, even foreshadowing the annihilation of nature as a central theme.<sup>190</sup> Romanticism, notably, configured

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<sup>189</sup> Richard Bell, *Theology of Wagner's Ring Cycle I* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 3. Bell particularly finds Goethe and Hegel as influential to Wagner's "theology". All of these writers were influential to Wagner's early period, though, as well as Shakespeare, Dante, Schiller, Martin Luther and others. Bell explains Wagner's literary influences in chapter 5 "The *Ring*, Drama, Poetry, and Literature," 129-172. Bell also argues that Goethe's *Faust* had a specific influence on Wagner's understanding of nature. See Bell, *Theology II*, 57-60.

<sup>190</sup> See Bell, *Theology I*, 129-172 and chapter 6 "The *Ring* and German Idealism," 173-251. Bell makes the case that Wagner had read much of these works and incorporated them into the myth of the *Ring*. In 1804, Schelling

art as capable of engaging philosophical questions, especially regarding the continuing responses against pure Cartesian subjectivism. Art sought to reckon the reality of the world that is external to the individual ego.<sup>191</sup> Karol Berger frames much of his book *Beyond Reason* on this question of an autonomy-centered humanity encoded in Wagner's music dramas.<sup>192</sup>

While other thinkers have centered their Wagnerian inquiry on individual death in romanticist aesthetics (of which *Tristan und Isolde*'s Liebestod seems a culmination), I find that the *Ring* is uniquely situated to comment on the link between such aesthetics and human death on a global scale, as well as the death of nature.<sup>193</sup> I reconsider, then, what Wagner does with *nature* in his music dramas as such—particularly as Erda's character encompasses nature as a metonym. That Wagner sought his music drama to represent nature might be a result of reading metaphysical

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foreshadowed artworks like the *Ring*, when he warned that philosophy would lead to the annihilation of nature. See Bruce Matthews, "The New Mythology," in *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 202-3.

<sup>191</sup> See Frederick C. Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Harvard University Press, 2002). Beiser is sometimes too quick to equate the early romantics with idealism per se, but his argument is persuasive and well-formed. One of the main driving forces behind late eighteenth-century metaphysics was to construct a satisfactory reality greater than the sum of its parts that could explain how knowledge is possible while conceding the reality of the external world. The development of idealism, from Kant to the Jena romantics, sees an increased interest in realism and naturalism and, notably Spinozism. In nature, they found the infinite, objective reality from which subjectivity and the transcendental individual could be constructed. Hegel's system culminates in the Spirit and this contrasts with many of the naturalist approaches of the other romantics.

<sup>192</sup> Berger, *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche* (University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>193</sup> See Nicholas Saul, "Love, Death, and Liebestod in German Romanticism," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 163-174.

realist philosophy. Beyond just the figuration of nature by Hegel, a repeated trope in monographs on Wagner and philosophy, Wagner's music dramas inculcate other visions of nature and its collapse.<sup>194</sup>

As stated above, opera is not usually philosophy, although it can provide philosophical food for thought. Wagner as music-dramatist, though, occupied a privileged position as a *quasi-mystic*, one who provided a specialized aesthetic experience of the "beyond reason," as opposed to the work of a pure metaphysician (as one who demonstrates through pure reason).<sup>195</sup> Music might already imply a mystic experience beyond reason for some, but the Wagner experience, particularly at Bayreuth, seems unique. The common ground between academic metaphysics and quasi-mystical (in this case, Wagnerian) experience, then, might simply be the desire to explore the limits of human reason. These limits are explored in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, mostly at its narrative points of crisis: moments when, we might say, a monist or Spinozist version of the universe (as static and eternal) is upset or even undone by some new design or action. The "end of the world" as an aesthetic experience and as a historical crisis are both relevant here, as crises that the *Ring* both thematizes and provokes. Wagner's dramatization of the end of the world across a four-opera cycles distinguishes it as one of few operatic works to seriously engage this thorny metaphysical and historical problem in musical language and stage action.

The beginning and ending of time are present as the absolute universe in the idealist, vitalist philosophy and romantic poetry of Hölderlin as well.<sup>196</sup> In Hölderlin's response to previous

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<sup>194</sup> Such as in Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy*. See Bell, *Theology I*, 173-251.

<sup>195</sup> Beiser notes this difference between Kant and Swedenborg, 34.

<sup>196</sup> Beiser, 399.

dualistic versions of idealism, the noumenal and phenomenal cease being distinct realms, and this seems particularly relevant to Wagner's project vis-à-vis later scholars presuming that his music dramas make "deeds of music visible" to represent Schopenhauer's noumenal world. As the conception of the end of Wagner's world proceeds through time, from the late nineteenth century to the present day, we see these philosophical and political realities constructed on the stage in various ways. In short, we see numerous different types of ends of the world staged at specific moments in history—Armageddon settings towards the end of the Cold War or the alien sci-fi worlds of the twenty-first century. The perceptions of allegorical characters, for instance of Erda as the Earth or as prophetess, change alongside respective metaphysics or theories of history. Wagner's Erda seems a logical dramatic personification of the world in Wagner's own time, an absolute being who realizes concepts of nature and eternity as he knew them. As such, Erda's role can be seen as an idealist one, in as much as she anthropomorphizes of the limits of reason. Wagner's *Ring* cycle, in its capacity to bring metaphysical questions to the stage, makes the end of the world—what is normally only possible in speculation—into a transcendent aesthetic experience, an attempt at breaking down the limits between reason and fantasy, or perhaps epistemology and mysticism.

The "end of the world" is an idea that, in European philosophy, takes many different names and forms—the closing of the circle of History (Hegel), the completion of metaphysics (Nietzsche), the end of philosophy (Heidegger), the end of history (Fukuyama).<sup>197</sup> Thomas Mann,

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<sup>197</sup> Later critiques of reason appear similarly oriented toward prophesying the end: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002 [1947]) and Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis* (1959). The Frankfurt School of critical theory, which is often understood in terms of its wholesale responses to Marxism, also provides a varied set of responses to Romanticism and to Wagner's

similarly, claimed that Wagner wished for an end of politics.<sup>198</sup> This should be remembered throughout this dissertation as a constant shadow of the hand-in-hand ideas of apocalypse and utopia, which appear as philosophical outcomes yielded by the question *what is nature?*, a question that appears as one of the problematics posed by idealism and romanticism, the latter especially through art and music. Utopia, unsurprisingly, is evoked by Wagner's choice to return to eternal mythemes, according to Dahlhaus's reading of the origins of the cycle, in which the musicologist argues that the nature of this utopia isn't always clear or clearly desirable.<sup>199</sup> These are ideas that have since been elucidated by philosophers—and even opera directors setting Wagner's work. But these questions were, to an extent, already available in much of the philosophy that Wagner read.<sup>200</sup>

#### 4.1 Anthropocene Endings

What, then, does apocalypse mean today, in the Anthropocene era? The Anthropocene is the proposed geological period marked by significant human impact on the earth, encompassing the past hundred or so years. Some trace its beginning to the 1780s, notably the same period of

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intellectual legacy. See Margarete Kohlenbach, "Transformations of Romanticism 1830-2000," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism*, edited by Saul Nicholas, 257-280 (Cambridge University Press, 2009). See also Dalia Nassar, "Romantic Empiricism after the 'End of Nature'," in *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, edited by Dalia Nassar, 296-311 (Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>198</sup> Thomas Mann, "From Reflections of a Non-Political Man," in *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 65.

<sup>199</sup> Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 81, 114.

<sup>200</sup> See Bell, *Theology II*, 95, on Friedrich Schlegel's employment of biblical categories such as paradise, fall, and redemption.



time when much of German romanticism was germinating for the Jena thinkers whom Wagner read as a young man. Wagner's work, then, exists under this categorical umbrella, and the *Ring* seems more attuned to this categorization of human life than most of his music dramas. His other music dramas certainly display an awareness of their position as possibly speaking to the human condition, but none work to dramatize how an entire world changes and ends based on the selfish deeds of men (or, in this case, Nibelungen and gods). The *Ring* cycle, we could say, is but one in a long list of "extinction stories that implicate people," to quote environmental philosopher Thom Van Dooren.<sup>201</sup> The *Ring* is a much earlier example, then, of the continued tradition of storytelling that Van Dooren references. That the *Ring* satisfies the conditions of an "extinction story" is not an uncontested interpretation among those that have appeared on stage and in scholarship. The extinction in the *Ring* might be that of the gods, and thus it ill fits how we think of current human extinction narratives, which focus on extinctions of humanity and of an increasingly massive number of animal species with whom we share the earth. While the *Ring* might be an early Anthropocene story though, the development of the Anthropocene as a topic in the humanities is much more recent, and so the application to Wagner's work might seem somewhat anachronistic. Twentieth- and twenty-first century productions, however, are contemporaneous with the emergence of Anthropocene thinking, and they tend to bring out those similarities between Wagner's work and more recent extinction stories.

Humanist critical thinkers concerned with the Anthropocene are drawn to questions of space, place, and the geopolitics tied to them—and for good reasons. Globalization is one, but it

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<sup>201</sup> Thom Van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4.

might soon be replaced by things previously imagined only in science fiction, like terraforming other planets. Doreen Massey, in *For Space* (2005), asks her readers to imaginatively refuse the distinction between place as meaningful and lived, and space as meaningless, abstract, and outside everything else.<sup>202</sup> This is a common distinction made in ecocritical humanities, and it isn't surprising that Massey, a social scientist and cultural geographer, posed this hypothetical question to interested readers in 2005. The challenge, though, seems equally applied to Erda's elsewhere, a space in that it is abstract and *other* to the places of political conservatism like Valhalla, the monument built to Wotan's quasi-legalist sovereignty. It is significant that Valhalla doesn't already exist at the beginning of the *Ring*, but instead needs to be constructed. The Rhine and the World Ash Tree imply the formlessness of pre-humanity and pre-ideology "space" and yet could easily be construed as meaningful "place." Massey argues, in fact, that the spatial is already political; so Erda's elsewhere, too, can imply ideology, of a different type than Wotan's Valhalla, the Rhine with its guardian Daughters, or the forest where Siegfried comes of age. The latter two are similar paths to the elsewhere, but with more clearly defined political properties and grounds for interrelations outside of them. Anthropocenic thinking about time and space (which are also various responses to structuralist notions of time and space) allows us to conceptualize the legacies of the *Ring*'s characters and events, even those whose fates Wagner keeps close to his chest.

Massey relates our conceptions of time and history with space in a way that makes sense to modern humanists, too. For example, a dampening stasis in our perception of space (say, in conceptualizing the borders of nations) leads to a similar perception in historical pasts (an inability to understand history as leading to anything other than our current geopolitical situation) and future

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<sup>202</sup> Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 6.

possibilities (an inability to conceptualize radical future differences in geopolitics). This is, further, to step outside of the perceptions of idealist time and history and instead open the possibility of different temporalities by reimagining the relationship between time and space.<sup>203</sup> Massey puts it succinctly: “For the future to be open, space must be open too.”<sup>204</sup> If this is the case, then perhaps the end of the *Ring* can be hopeful, that is, open to different possibilities of emotion and experience, despite Wagner’s prescribed redemption through love. We saw this already in Wagner’s Feuerbachian ending, so perhaps directors might try to let their production reiterate those themes, even if the words and music suggest something else. John Deathridge notes, in his new translation of the *Ring* librettos, that: “There is no specific message about the future,” in which Brünnhilde’s monologue and the orchestral music that follows are “beyond reading.”<sup>205</sup> Because Valhalla and the Gibichung Hall are literally razed, they are transformed into space.

Two recent productions are emblematic of these Anthropocene concerns, particularly in the worlds they build and the Erdas they offer. The first is the setting of *Das Rheingold* (2007) by the Catalan directors’ collective La Fura dels Baus (Carlus Padrissa and Roland Olberter are the stage director and set designer, respectively) in Valencia, a dimly lit production that sets us on an alien world inundated with cyborg technologies. This production makes extensive use of projected

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<sup>203</sup> Poststructuralists like Louis Althusser assumes a formation where changes in time are always indicative of changes in space, and vice versa. Post-Marxist philosopher Ernesto Laclau calls the reduction of time to space “spatialist,” echoing Wagner’s Gurnemanz. See Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time* (Verso, 1999), 42. This is something that someone like Fredric Jameson might disagree with; Jameson sees the reconceptualization of space from vertical to horizontal as the move from modern to postmodern.

<sup>204</sup> Massey, 12.

<sup>205</sup> John Deathridge, *The Ring of the Nibelung* (Penguin, 2018), xx.

video to position the action's strange sci-fi locations. For example, in between the first and second scenes, we see a dark, black and grey planet earth spinning slowly before it dissolves into a linear diagram of a faceless human sitting with its knees to its chest, which continues to dissolve more as Wotan and Fricka arrive on stage in silvery spacesuits and unnecessary mechanical apparatuses that elevate them above the stage. The scene is murky and green; Valhalla not built yet; they might exist Nowhere.

Scene four of *Das Rheingold* similarly lacks any signs that they exist in “a place” yet. As Erda's (here sung by Christa Mayer) music precedes her appearance onstage, the lights dim considerably, somehow even more than usual for this already dark staging. The screen behind the action shows its darkened earth, slowly coming into full view. Then Erda appears, as in Wagner's suggestions, to half her height on the stage. She wears a mesh black dress, a small black veil, and a large black cone-shaped hat. The earth onscreen behind her crackles and comes apart during her prophetic monologue. It continues to spin slowly as it moves further and further away. As Wotan responds, a gold ring appears, twisting and turning around the desolate globe. Olberter's Erda has much in common with other productions, (such as Chéreau's) being from an already destroyed planet and appearing separate from the fate of the gods, a fate seen in the post-apocalyptic earth as it floats hopelessly away. Olberter's setting of Erda, and Padrissa's setting of *Das Rheingold*, seems to ask similar questions of Wagner's world: *whose* earth is this? If Erda is its representative, what is her spatial relationship to it and, further, what is ours?

The second Anthropocene production is Marcelo Lombardero's *Rheingold* (2012, Argentina), similarly a spawn of the science fiction cinematic genre. Lombardero's, however, is as bright as Padrissa's is dark. Its gods are draped in white, and Valhalla is brightly lit, as if it were the inside of a pristine luxury office building. Lombardero also builds his world with the use of

video projections. At its very end, a projected video takes its viewers up the huge building to reveal its place above the clouds, a shot reminiscent of Cloud City from *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). This opulent Valhalla doesn't sell the science fiction elements alone, though. The gritty, rocky Nibelheim provides a stark counterpoint, perhaps analogous to Yoda's home planet in *Empire*, a vastly different palette from Cloud City.

Erda's role (here sung by Isabel Vera) provides an interesting challenge for this production, as for her to emerge from a trap door in the stage would undercut the setting of Valhalla in scene 4. Instead, Lombardero projects her image on the back wall of the Valhalla set, and the gods and giants receive her as if she is some intergalactic, faraway transmission from an intergalactic elsewhere. Lombardero's Erda shares no part of the stage with the gods, and insofar as she can be read as connected with the natural world and the earth, Lombardero's setting begs the question of its world: where does it take place, if not our earth? Is Erda still bound to the earth? Perhaps like the earth in the Valencia production, this earth is already well past devastation, so Erda's prophecy comes from the experience of an apocalypse already past.

In any case, this Erda seems truly reflective of an Anthropocene vision of the apocalypse. For example, one set of assumptions constantly under attack in philosopher Timothy Morton's book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* is that there can be any such singular thing as "the world" at all. If there is, according to Morton, the question of whether or not it is worth saving is not always or immediately ethically clear.<sup>206</sup> Morton's thinking is contemporaneous (roughly a year apart) with Lombardero's setting of the *Ring*, and both ask

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<sup>206</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

ethical questions about what kind of world is being doomed, in the latter case by Erda's *Weltuntergang* prophecy and appearance onstage. Is this doom exclusive to the world of the gods, where the luxurious Valhalla rises thousands of feet into the air? Or is a different world implied as well, one from which a distraught Erda sends out an interplanetary S.O.S. to warn others of a doom that may spread to them?

Such twenty-first-century, science-fiction *Ring* productions conform with the interests and attitudes of Anthropocenic ecological humanities writers who wonder about our relationship to the end of the world, the nature of that world, and the implications and condemnations inherent to those questions. The *Rings* in this section share, if nothing else, pessimism for the future of the planet. But, I think, they also offer glimpses of hope for a character such as Erda, despite her ties to the ravaged earth. In a very literal sense, at the moment of Erda's prophecy, the earth is still standing. The machinations of capitalism in Chéreau's staging are incapable to completely destroy nature, Lombardero's Erda warns the gods of an end to *their* world but not hers, and Padrissa's *Ring*, probably the grimmest stylistically, nonetheless shows an earth that will outlast the gods despite being swallowed up by the ring and its symbolic thirsts for power.

An Erda that might survive the events of the *Ring* is an interpretation of her character that is only possible in productions such as these, for Wagner simply does not offer the opportunity in his libretto and score alone. The realization that the earth will outlast us has been a primary component of Anthropocene scholarship (and this is to say nothing of this belief's position in many global indigenous cosmologies, religions, and philosophies). During this moment in the humanities and in humanistic thinking, staging the *Ring* also highlights the parts of Wagner's story concerned with climate change and, often in the same productions, the sense with which climate change will spell the end of time and history. Examples of these are found in the productions of the 1980s:

Götz Friedrich's second *Ring* and Harry Kupfer's Bayreuth staging, which I turn to in the next chapter.

Erda's role, today, might be what Heidegger called a *Stimmung*, a being who can attune others to certain events or feelings—in this case, the event of apocalypse.<sup>207</sup> French philosopher Michel Haar explores the relationship between *Stimmung* and Earth in *The Song of the Earth*, a commentary on Heidegger's 1935 lecture "The Origin of the Work of Art." In his 1935 Freiburg lecture, Heidegger eschews the obvious answer to the question of the origin of art, namely the artist themselves, and instead asks about the "thingly" element of the work, the stone-ness of architecture, the wood-ness of carving, etc.<sup>208</sup> He comes to call this thingy element something akin to the Earth. Similarly, the thingy element of music is, per Nattiez's interpretation of the *Ring*, precisely what Wagner presents to us in the music of the Rhine (as the birth of music) and, by extension, the music of the Norns, the natural world, and, of course, Erda.<sup>209</sup> Erda is not just an anthropomorphized Earth here, as closely linked to the natural world of the *Ring*, its forests and rivers and rocky crags, but also to the Earth-as-thingliness that makes up the work of art itself. Erda's role implies not just a primeval, ancestral world prior to the action of the *Ring* and its agents,

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<sup>207</sup> John Sallis, Foreword to *The Song of the Earth: Heidegger and the Grounds of the History of Being* by Michel Haar (Indiana University Press, 1993), xi-xii. It is worth noting that Heidegger is a fraught interlocutor for somewhat obvious reasons. Invoking Heidegger has the potential to present his philosophies, warts and all, which the philosopher himself thought could gain favor among the ideologies of German Nazism. Wagner's closeness with proto-fascism is already well known and provides a problem for Wagner's reception and for studies on his works.

<sup>208</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings*, 139-212.

<sup>209</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne* (Princeton University Press, 1993), see chapter "The *Ring* as a Mythic Account of the History of Music," 53.

but a connection with the process of the music itself, as a character who sings from a position akin to the orchestra, as we saw in her closeness to the orchestra in *Das Rheingold*.

Haar explains the differences between earth and world, according to Heidegger. In early Heideggerian discourse, the world is not finite. Like Schopenhauer, Heidegger found philosophical truth in the noumenal possibilities of the world, beyond phenomenal reality alone. Indeed, Heidegger's world was the horizon from which all other things received their referential meaning. The earth was a different entity altogether though, to be understood in terms of its opposition to the concept of world (unconcealment vs. concealment, noumenal vs. phenomenal, etc.). Heidegger's earth, Haar explains, is known in four senses: the dimension of withdrawal and concealment, as nature (the Greek *Physis*), as material in the work of art (which absolute idealists like Friedrich Schlegel and Schelling similarly argued), and the place of given and chosen homes [*Heimat*]. Others have described Heidegger's earth in terms of a dwelling and resting place, not a planetary body, but the zero-point of world and history.<sup>210</sup>

The work of art, in this formation, belongs neither to the world it comes from nor to the earth from which it is made, and Heidegger argues that this is why we can find the beauty of a Greek temple or a Gothic cathedral transcendent, engrossing, and relevant in the present.<sup>211</sup> Such works of art are capable of un-concealing truth for those in a different time and place. World, further, is both the grounding of the work of art as well that which is opened up by the work itself: "To be a work means to set up a world."<sup>212</sup> Great art, then, is art that both reveals the historical

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<sup>210</sup> Rafael Winkler, *Philosophy of Finitude: Heidegger, Levinas and Nietzsche* (Bloomsbury, 2018), 66.

<sup>211</sup> Haar, 95.

<sup>212</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Basic Writings*, 170.



essence of an era but shows the particular world it comes from as if for the first time. Wagner's work might dramatize the difference between world and earth, as one might end and the other might not. Each time the cycle is performed in its entirety, the world is built *ex nihilo* into a world similar to our own and subsequently destroyed for our pleasure. What remains of this experience is the earthy-ness of the work itself, the thing that stays with us afterwards, memories of music and spectacle.

Haar particularly explores Heidegger's meaning of earth by asking *of its demise*, of the threats it faces, primarily in the form of technology and its ensuing cultures and politics. Haar explains how the world is not reducible to its presence as "pure nature": "The oblivion of the Earth is the oblivion of the originally local and regional character of thinking and action."<sup>213</sup> This is partly a reiteration of Hegel's notion that God is an inseparable part of the world—why Richard Bell argues that the gods and nature are inseparable in Wagner's *Ring*.<sup>214</sup> The earth is then the body of the world and is subject to history and epochs; the world, on the other hand, is its historical dimension, a horizon of possibilities.<sup>215</sup>

On the stage, we saw similar questions asked by productions that centered ecological devastation, by directors such as Chéreau, Padrisa/Olberter, and Lombardero. In the process of re-building and re-destroying Wagner's world, we gleam multiple kinds of earth in a Heideggerian sense: that of Wagner's nineteenth-century bourgeois, cosmopolitan worlds as well as the

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<sup>213</sup> Haar, 5.

<sup>214</sup> Bell, *Theology of Wagner's Ring Cycle II: Theological and Ethical Issues*, 25. Goethe's influence is also paramount here.

<sup>215</sup> Mădălina Guzun, *Eternal Return and the Metaphysics of Presence: "A Critical Reading of Heidegger's Nietzsche"* (Traugott Bautz Verlag, 2015), 71.

circumstances of the work's production in its new place, sometimes Bayreuth but not always. Staging, then, is an interstitial place and moment, where multiple senses of the earth in its various names—as source, abode, homeland, something beyond nature—meet.

Although Heidegger's concept of the earth might find surprising agreement among humanistic thinkers today, it is lacking in a fundamental sense that, I argue, Wagner's work contests, by presenting a world always on the brink of destruction. The solutions that Wagner's work implies (those highlighted in various ways by later productions) seem at odds with the earth from which Heidegger himself writes. For example, in Heidegger's essay on Hölderlin's "Germania," the philosopher finds that a "native Earth" [*heimatliche Erde*] is one where gods are nurtured, prior to the mission of history or reason of a human people.<sup>216</sup> Without gods, earth is just a place of residence [*Wohnsitz*]. This, I think, the *Ring* contests in multiple ways: by leaving open the possibilities of future epochs after the end and by providing gods of pure, ontic being. Both of these are elements of the Erda-Wotan scene in *Siegfried*, where Wotan offers a prophecy of utopia to Erda that also necessitated and welcomed the annihilation of himself and the other gods.

Erda provides a philosophical solution here: she reveals herself as an avatar of earthly properties and bestows historical knowledge in a process that can only happen in art, poetry, or fiction. In fact, Heidegger's interest in the end of the epoch as a simultaneous end of the earth is revealing—it implies not just a new age for humanity but an entirely new sense of both history and earth that we cannot imagine. The earth might then spatialize what Heidegger had already proposed was the essence of death: both earth and death worked as horizons of the possible and the limits of what could be understood. For Wagner and Heidegger both, the world broadly conceived

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<sup>216</sup> Winkler, 67.

outside of the subject had a primary function towards the subject as affecting it or touching it. Heidegger calls this property *Stimmung* or attunement, and this *Stimmung* is the weight or burden of things that imbues us with feelings and knowledge.<sup>217</sup> Heidegger even recognizes the musical analogy of the word *Stimmung* and describes it as a music unto itself—the sense of a melody that sets the tone of being and harmonizes/determines it.<sup>218</sup> Every understanding of the world exterior to us is affected by a *Stimmung* (again echoing responses to the question of our knowing the world external to us from idealism). Erda’s prophetic intervention illustrates this in a dramatic sense, by affecting Wotan’s cosmology, accosting him with the knowledge of apocalypse. Erda appears as a vessel through which *Stimmung* touches Wotan and changes the appearance of the world external to him. *Stimmung* is a manifestation of the limits of the world, and we see this as Erda unsettles Wotan’s experience of space. Further, the episode towards the end of *Das Rheingold* grounds Wotan’s understanding of the earth as historical and teleological. In other words, for both Wagner and Heidegger, history manifests itself in the earth; the end that Erda describes attunes Wotan’s feelings to the process of history as much as to its end. Wotan’s metaphysical truths, of theism and legalism, slowly come undone and subsequently deprive his life of its particular meaning.

This existential reading perhaps redeems the staging of Lepage’s finale in *Götterdämmerung*, where the scenes of death are out of sight and behind the Machine, except for the toppling statues of the gods because their demise in that world is actual first, symbolic second. Lepage’s *Ring* has been criticized for the shortcomings of the Machine and for being perhaps too

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<sup>217</sup> Haar, 37-8. Also see Heidegger’s lecture “What is Metaphysics?,” in which he describes the fundamental source of knowledge to be in *moods*, particularly anxiety. *Basic Writings*, 90-1.

<sup>218</sup> Haar, 40.

Wagnerian in many of its dramatic and scenic choices. Its ending—at first glimpse a kind of unspectacle—appears in hindsight as truly grasping a subtle point in Wagner’s world-building. Lepage decorates the Gibichung Hall with statues of the gods, particularly of Wotan. At the end of the opera, during its lush, evocative finale, these statues topple in the flames of Brünnhilde’s immolation, behind the Machine. The waters of the Rhine, projected on the Machine itself, flood the statues and produce a smoky haze that extends to the audience beyond the stage while the redemption motive sounds from the orchestra pit. As the fires in the Gibichung Hall parallel the fires Wotan has set in Valhalla, the death of the gods occurs in both places; yet what we see is only the destruction of their stone likenesses, representing the gods not simply to parallel their position in Valhalla but to preserve their metaphysical standing prior to their encounter with the *Stimmung* of the earth, Erda. What I normally find a shortcoming of many *Ring* productions—the inability to show the gods’ demise as Waltraute describes it in *Götterdämmerung* Act I—is perhaps mitigated by Lepage’s insistence on showing the likeness of the gods destroyed on earth. Yet, these statues reside beyond the Machine, which serves as a kind of proscenium obstacle to spectatorship. Lepage’s production plays here with the limits of our ability to perceive opera—analogous, I think, to the kind of perception of time and space that Erda attunes for Wotan.

This attunement, however, seems analogous to Erda’s musical prophecy that seeks to teach us how to die. I turn to this prompt now in light of Anthropocene thinking about the end of the world. As Siegfried and the Woodbird taught us how to listen in their episode by dramatizing that process as spectacle, Erda might be said to do the same for teaching us how to die. The act of staging/performing, then, symbolically reflects this teaching as our very experience of witnessing the *Ring* cycle in Anthropocene times: learning to die through the creation and destruction of operatic performance itself.

## 5.0 Learning to Die

Writer Roy Scranton begins his book *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* with a quote from Plotinus's *Enneads*: "The knowledge of future things is, in a word, identical with that of the present."<sup>219</sup> Scranton recalls driving through Iraq in 2003, which, to him, felt like seeing the future state of the rest of the world's hot and volatile global warming crisis. Scranton argues what many Anthropocene humanists already know: that the humanities, and I would suggest the arts, are uniquely suited to help us tackle the problems of living a meaningful life and dying, face-to-face with such a precarious civilization-wide problematic.<sup>220</sup>

Erda's *Weltuntergang* prophecy provides an analysis that similarly propels the present into the future. What seems like a direct warning for Wotan and the gods, however, is actually a problem for everyone bound to the earth's stratified realms. The catastrophe Erda prophesies is an equalizing one, where gods and humans both suffer regardless of their respective past deeds or injustices. They suffer collectively.

In this chapter, I argue that Erda's role can still teach us to die, as Wagner had suggested in his letter to Röckel in 1854. Given the *Ring*'s central themes of apocalypse and utopia, as

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<sup>219</sup> Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2015), 13.

<sup>220</sup> Scranton, 19. Heidegger prefigured this by comparing natural time with the more dynamic Dasein time, in which natural time is a set of now-points on a line and Dasein time is a kind of intersection of present and future. Haar, 21.

evidenced by Anthropocene-oriented stagings, it seems appropriate that Erda's role could still do this—albeit in ways that Wagner might not necessarily have prescribed or intended. Further, this message of “learning to die” might be considered a meta-message of operatic stagings of Erda's role. With this point, I aim to resurrect the reading of Erda's role I suggested earlier in this dissertation: Erda's role as metaphorizing the double act of staging/performing. As Erda's prophecy is sung (and later undone) each night the *Ring* is performed, so too is the world performatively ended, over and over again. This seems especially the case in stagings where time, or history, is a centerpiece of the stage world, as in Kupfer's *Weltstraße* or Friedrich's time tunnel. In these stagings, Erda's scenes appear especially like meta episodes, as a Shakespearian play within a play. Erda's character is also acutely aware of this hybrid ontological status, her bringing finitude to the fictive stage world.

Erda's role, as was the case with operatic space and fictive worlds, sits at the nexus of competing understandings of time—the ending she describes seems to betray her eternal, ancient nature. Her music, as we saw in earlier chapters, suggested not only a connection to the beginning of the cosmos, but also a close relationship with its ending and the possibility of a cyclical repetition. The stance of her character, couched in a chasm between realms, suggested a way for Wagner to expand and collapse space—a metaphysical shell game for future stage designers to play—and yet the metaphor of depth is also close with Wagner's reliance on myth itself, what Holly Watkins calls “time depth,” in which Wagner ostensibly time-travels through history and

mythology.<sup>221</sup> The *Ring*'s status, then, as either myth or history is also probed by Erda's role and prophecy, a role which, in Friedrich's time-tunnel seems a veritable time traveler herself.

Jean-Jacques Nattiez argues that Wagner's *Ring* cycle allegorizes the history of music, from its primal beginnings to the artwork of the future.<sup>222</sup> Wagner composed a music-drama that was both history and myth, a generic hybrid that John Deathridge shows grew from a tortuous debate, after which Wagner definitively came down in favor of myth. Deathridge notes, however, it is more likely that the two were blended.<sup>223</sup> While Wagner's music dramas appeared more myth than history, his historiographical essay from 1848/9, "Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Sage" [World History as Told in Saga], was an example of a similar blend that was more history than myth.<sup>224</sup> Both musically and philosophically, Wagner created numerous works throughout his

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<sup>221</sup> Watkins, *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought*, 120-1. Watkins primarily focuses on *Die Walküre* and its lovers Siegmund and Sieglinde.

<sup>222</sup> Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne* (Princeton University Press, 1993), see chapter "The *Ring* as a Mythic Account of the History of Music," 53. Strikingly, Nietzsche argued that Wagner does not belong in the history of music in "The Case of Wagner," *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 634-5.

<sup>223</sup> John Deathridge, *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (University of California Press, 2008), 93.

<sup>224</sup> Richard Wagner, "Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Sage (Sommer 1848.)," in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, vol. 7 "In Paris and Dresden," translated by William Ashton Ellis, 257-298. See Richard Bell, *Theology of Wagner's Ring Cycle I* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 17-28, for an analysis of "Die Wibelungen" and its importance to Wagner's understanding of myth and the creation of the *Ring* in particular. Edward Haymes also notes that Wagner is actually quite careless about the differences between history, myth, allegory, legend, etc. about which the Grimms and Franz Joseph Mone would have been much stricter. See Haymes, "Richard Wagner and the *Altgermanisten: Die Wibelungen* and Franz Joseph Mone," in *Re-reading Wagner*, 23-38, edited by Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993). Wagner was contributing to debates

career that synthesized myth and history.<sup>225</sup> Or, as in Hayden White's analysis of the nineteenth-century historical imagination, we might call Wagner's synthesis a kind of aesthetic "metahistory," in that he uses the rhetorical and poetic strategies of narrative and myth to explain historical processes.<sup>226</sup> Wagner's music theatrical metahistory works differently from, say, Hegel's or Marx's, two contemporary philosophies of history that share attributes with Wagner's. The difference, however, is in the nature of music, where metahistory seems concrete in its real-time process. In a visceral way, music might provide an alternate external reality to the historical reality proposed by words on a page as in traditional history. Music, too, might make history or myth seem real by offering each genre a truly temporal dimension. History and myth normally assume different temporal experiences, as in history's teleological models of time or in myth's eternal and cyclical nature. Similarly, the meaning of myth and history are figured differently and in different

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about the origins of the Welfs and Ghibellines, to which the Grimms had taken one side and Wagner, with Franz Joseph Mone and others, had taken the opposite. See Haymes, 38 n. 24. Köhler, *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans*, also traces the origins of the Wibelungen essay and, in fact, so much of Köhler's take on Wagner is predicated from his reading of the essay as central to Wagner's development of more sophisticated theological and philosophical themes throughout the composer's career. Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire* and Scruton, *The Ring of Truth*, also circulate theological interpretations of the work.

<sup>225</sup> *Tannhäuser* (1845, 1861) is a very underrecognized work in this sense. This combination of myth and history as one resembles also the earlier nineteenth-century project of *Geschichte* as both history and story, especially relevant in Friedrich von der Hagen's *Nibelungenlied* (1816). See David Levin, *Richard Wagner, Fritz Lang, and the Nibelungen* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6-7.

<sup>226</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of Nineteenth-Century Europe* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). Notably White does not list myth as a model of narratives for historiography, but lists romance, satire, tragedy, etc.



terms of verity—myth is often considered neither objectively true nor false, per se. Part of this lack of objectivity or verity in myth might, in fact, be related to its lack of an end, which comes to broadly assume its lack of a *telos*.

Erda's character provides her own metaphysical take in her *Weltuntergang* prophecy, where "alles was ist, endet." The *Ring* thereafter has a *telos* within its own stage world. The position that everything will end appears later upended by Wotan's workaround, when he takes his own life and the lives of the gods so that they, like the ring's curse, may be purged of evil in the cleansing fires of immolation. The implication is that Wotan bequeaths the world to Siegfried and Brünnhilde, despite their deaths in the process. The consequences of this for the future are left open to interpretation, whether Wagner realized it or not. Some stagings choose to give humanity an explicit chance, often in the presence of a mass crowd (Chéreau, Kupfer), and others do not, in the form of the destruction of the idols of the gods and the absence of other life (Lepage). Erda's character, surprisingly, appears related to the cycle's ending despite her physical and musical absence—and we saw this partly in Wagner's finale revisions. Further, her character, created as she is in Wagner's hands, appears related to the entire structure of the cycle as analyzed by other musicologists and scholars, and again her role appears closely related to the very materials of the work of art itself.

Stanley Hauer, in his article "Wagner and the 'Völuspá,'" argues that the *Völuspá*, the first poem from the *Poetic Edda*, provided Wagner with a number of dramatic and textual elements beyond Erda (the Völva/Wala) alone, the most notable of which include the linguistic device of *Stabreim* (alliteration) and the larger structure for the mythical narrative (i.e., its world-building). Hauer recreates the narrative arc of the poem in terms that mirror the *Ring* cycle's larger plot points:

1. Creation, stanzas 1-16
2. The institution of man and the fates, sts. 17-20
3. Corruption through gold and world war, sts. 21-26
4. The need of Odinn [sic] and the gods as a result of this corruption, sts. 27-30
5. The death of the world-hero Balder, sts. 31-35
6. The resulting *ragnarök*, sts. 36-58
7. The world's rebirth in innocence, sts. 59-65.<sup>227</sup>

Hauer argues that the *Völospá* poem provided Wagner with the tetralogy's overarching structure and that such a fact explains why the *Ring's* structure is different from those of the other mythological or legendary sources available, such as the *Nibelungenlied* or *Volsunga saga*. The völva scene (essentially Erda's scene) occurs in stanza 28, and its placement illustrates how this structure closely parallels Wagner's narrative. The first thirty or so stanzas of the *Völospá* reflect the events before and during *Das Rheingold*. Following, *Die Walküre* and *Siegfried* reinforce the need of the gods (*Götternot*) and expand on the theme of "worldly corruption," particularly in the actions of the villains Hunding, Mime, and Alberich. *Götterdämmerung* then includes the death of the world-hero (Balder is essentially Siegfried) and all the rest of the *Völospá* happens more or less in the final moments of the cycle, with "rebirth in innocence" being merely implied in the aftermath of Wagner's cycle, foreshadowed by the appearance of the Redemption Leitmotif at the very end of it all.

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<sup>227</sup> Hauer, 60-1.

The relationship between Erda and the larger structuration of events in the cycle comes from her predecessor's role (the *völva*) in the *Völuspá*, not surprisingly where Wagner also gained the narrative's large world-historical arc, from creation to destruction and implied rebirth. Erda's invitation to think about past, present, and future events in the *Ring* seems more salient in this light, and it in fact makes her claim that she is summoned by the highest of dangers quite literal. Her character is wholly contingent on the concept of *Götterdämmerung*, something that I noted might already be present in the musical similarities between her Leitmotif and the *Götterdämmerung* Leitmotif. This explains Erda's supplanting the Norns in *Das Rheingold*, who lacked this explicit connection with the *Völuspá* narrative arc. Erda's contingency to crisis is similar to that of the historical materialist drawn to historical crisis as a call to action, but her role serves another function: a manifestation, a la phantasmagoria, of the earth's response to its destruction and as ecological deterrent onset by Alberich plundering the Rhine and Wotan extracting wisdom from the natural world's Ash Tree. Taking from this narrative arc, Wagner seems to have found a character who can serve multiple dramatic purposes, tied as Erda is to both the fictive world and the narrative's dialectical propulsion.

Erda as the Heideggerian *Stimmung* of apocalypse (as a literal voice that attunes to certain feelings, moods, etc.) similarly serves to temporalize time, essentially to set the boundaries of time and insist on an epoch delimited by events, such as Wotan losing his eye for knowledge up to the end, Brunnhilde's Immolation. Such an epoch might look similar to our own, onset by anxiety and alienation by technology. If we took the stagings of the *Ring* in the 1970s as the results of the global Atomic Age and its particular *Stimmung*, their own concepts of the end of time might find a home in staging Erda, the Norns, and, largely, the events of apocalypse. Erda is, like the *Stimmung* of anxiety, both inside and outside of history, a fact presumed by her ontological

likeness as Earth. We might extend this ontology further to include a subtle repositioning of her character on the limits of narrative as well, between myth and history, story and reality.

Wagner's understanding of history and the philosophy of history came from Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, where Wagner found not only a starting point for how his mythology might take on historical character, but a starting point for philosophy itself. Wagner wrote in his autobiography: "As an introduction to philosophy I now chose Hegel's *Philosophy of History*. A good deal of this impressed me deeply, and it now seemed as if I should ultimately penetrate into the Holy of Holies along this path."<sup>228</sup> Hegel's world-historical processes are repeated in Wagner's *Ring* cycle, where Brünnhilde redeems the sins of the gods, and it is noticeable how much of Hegel's and Wagner's senses of history both derive from Christian models of history.<sup>229</sup> Erda appears in this equation as a kind of "historic" character, one who knows what is necessary and timely given the long-view of events.<sup>230</sup> Both Wagner and Hegel present a history with an end, teleological (it has a design and purpose) and eschatological (it has an all-important end, an apocalypse).

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<sup>228</sup> Richard Wagner, *My Life* (New York, NY: Tudor Publishing Company, 1936 [1911]), 521. Richard Bell also notes that Wagner got some understanding of history from Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800). Bell, *Theology I*, 185. Bell also provides an analysis of how well Wagner knew Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, *Theology I*, 203-6. Hegel's Platonic theory of history [*Geschichte*, the series of epochs, as opposed to later thinkers' *Historie*, historical enquiry] explains the inner and essential progress of the spirit, a panorama of sin and suffering with inherent salvation and fatalism. It is worth noting that much of Hegel's historicist idealism is taken from Friedrich Schlegel, who had already formed the ideas of a dialectical historical critique of reason. See Beiser, 437.

<sup>229</sup> See George Windell, "Hegel, Feuerbach, and Wagner's Ring," *Central European History* 9, no. 1 (Mar., 1976): 27-57.

<sup>230</sup> Allen Speight, *The Philosophy of Hegel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 93.

The metahistorical paradigm that White traces in nineteenth-century histories can also be described in terms of eschatology, in the sense that nineteenth-century European historiographies (from Hegel, Marx, etc.) shared not only the fictional and poetic strategies of metahistory, but also an eschatological worldview of time inherited from theological models of salvation, as argued by philosopher Karl Löwith in the late 1940s.<sup>231</sup> Wagner's *Ring* displays an end to mythology and beginning to history—a different kind of metahistory than the narrative styles that White traces, such as romance, satire, and tragedy.<sup>232</sup>

The question of eschatological history is at play in many Wagnerian stagings. We see it in Chéreau (1976), Friedrich (1984), Kupfer (1988), and even Lepage (2010), where history is located to and on the stagecraft. Friedrich's time-tunnel, Kupfer's Weltstraße, and Lepage's Machine all worked to set time differently—the first two are *Rings* that seem postapocalyptic, while the latter uses stagecraft to narrate past events and symbolize future ones. History and time, broadly, become interactive objects for the characters of Wagner's world. There is a tendency, further, among later stage directors to monumentalize or concretize time on the stage, an attempt to control it through things the Weltstraße, the time tunnel, or Wieland Wagner's elevated Scheibe. Wagner's Bayreuth shared a similar ethos to control time by controlling all sensory perceptions, like a casino without clocks. Musically, we also feel the collapse of time when Wagner means us to; when Erda slows the music just as the Wanderer speeds it up; when Erda reminds us of the Rhine's music and warns us of Götterdämmerung; or when the gods begin to wither without Freia's golden apples and age

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<sup>231</sup> Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (University of Chicago Press, 1949).

<sup>232</sup> On history and myth, see Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 21, 37. Ernst Bloch, in my favorite reading of Wagner, calls it dream-kitsch mythology. Bloch, *Heritage of our Times*, "Rescuing Wagner through Surrealistic Colportage" (1929), 338-45 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990 [1962]).

quickly, the orchestra allows us to feel the slowing down of their bodies. The very length of the *Ring* speaks to this killing of our sense of time and, to a lesser extent, firmly lodges itself as a memory hard to forget.

Other cycles, such as Chéreau's adaptation, the Copenhagen *Ring* from 2003, and the Chicago *Ring* from 2019, all relocated the drama from Wagner's eternal world to historical periods, usually the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Other productions that sought alternatives to Wagner's mythical world also looked to different timeless epochs, such as the sci-fi settings of Padrissa and Lombardero. In the Valencia production by Padrissa, especially, Erda's role comes to a separate earth from a future reality, after its apocalypse. In those settings that make history visible, there is a tendency to bring the *Ring* more firmly into the realm of science fiction (and we should include other productions from the 1970s here, by Melchinger and Koltai for example).

Wagner's *Ring*, more than his other music dramas and relative to most other operas in the Western canon, seems particularly suited to a science fiction or post-apocalyptic resetting of its characters, locations, and events. There is a tempting popular culture analogy to explain why that is, which also explains the proliferation of operatic science fiction, as in "space operas," in the late twentieth century. The epics created in that time period were science fiction, they reiterated Wagnerian themes: think of the *Star Wars* films, the *Dune* novels, the *Star Trek* television series, and so on. At the same time, Cold War geopolitical differences, which cultivated competing conceptions of time and space, may explain those genres' popular success up to the present day. Only more recently has there been a greater cultural shift toward fetishizing alternative histories of the past in media beyond the literary and mythological, i.e., the fantasy and high fantasy epic genres in film and television, and in Wagner we see this especially in the China National Opera

House's *Das Rheingold* (2016), a production that basks in the implied magic of Wagner's worlds, perhaps to the point of excess.

Another reason the *Ring* seems especially like science fiction today is historical, related to our contemporary Anthropocene attitudes towards world and climate that I discussed in the previous chapter. Writer and novelist Amitav Ghosh essentially argues that the extreme weather precipitated by climate change in the modern era have caused artists to conceive, on a massive scale, the science fiction, fantasy and horror literary genres in place of what was once called simply “romance” and “melodrama.”<sup>233</sup> Today, ecological catastrophe means something different than it did for Wagner, and the worlds we imagine are different, too—perhaps new genres are also on the way. Given the proliferation of the science fiction genre in films and books in the early half of the twentieth century up to the present day, this might not surprise us. Our Erda also changes in these times, and her elsewhere, while partly revealed by the time-tunnels and Machines of Wagnerian stagecraft today, might also be partly erased.

In stagings where history or time is made a prop or set, Marx's theories of history seem to lurk in the wings, not only in obvious socialist settings like Chéreau's. Given the cultural milieu of post-Atomic Age or post-Cold War Europe, it's perhaps not surprising that other directors broached socialist *Ring* cycles, as some scholars already argued the work allegorized a socialist revolution.<sup>234</sup> Marx's political eschatology, as Karl Löwith calls it, was a spiral view of history:

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<sup>233</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 24, 66.

<sup>234</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898) and Karol Berger, *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche* (University of California Press, 2016). John Deathridge and Bryan Magee also come to similar conclusions in their Wagner books.

progressing through morally better systems of government and cycling through life-and-death processes under those regimes. Another way of thinking through Marx's history is as neither circular nor linear, but elliptical in shape.<sup>235</sup> That the *Ring* was seen in a similar light, regardless of staging, makes sense given the diagnosis of capitalism among twentieth-century philosophers as a necessary harbinger of an eschaton, and further, the theories of history in nineteenth-century Europe (including Wagner's) already supplied the Christian ingredients to such a recipe for mass annihilation and redemption, two of the *Ring*'s largest themes inculcated in its finale.

The way we view the *Ring* is generally as a story of Hegelian progress, in which the natural world succumbs to human achievement, the conception and perfection of the human race as its goal and the culmination of proper history as the work's grand meaning.<sup>236</sup> The appropriation of this reading as specific to Germanness is not particular to Nazism, but it seems to proliferate among nationalism generally. This appeared in Wagner's "Wibelungen" essay, where historical progress was not necessarily about Hegelian spiritual redemption but about the becoming of nations as well; Wagner unsurprisingly tried to combine the two. Michel Foucault described the historical processes of these and other revolutionary eras as patently masquerading our sense of reality (in Wagner's case, the prop is the sword of Germanic heroes) and simultaneously venerating a new

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<sup>235</sup> Karl Ameriks, "History, Succession, and German Romanticism," in *The Relevance of Romanticism: Essays on German Romantic Philosophy*, edited by Dalia Nassar, 47-63, (Oxford University Press, 2014). Ameriks argues that the elliptical shape of history is one of the primary contributions that Romantic philosophy made to the philosophy of history.

<sup>236</sup> George Windell, "Hegel, Feuerbach, and Wagner's Ring," *Central European History* 9, no. 1 (Mar., 1976): 27-57. Also see Bell, *Theology I*.



religion, and this appears to bridge Löwith's diagnosis of history and Wagner's phantasmagoria.<sup>237</sup> The phantasmagoria of Wagnerian music drama, in Foucault's configuration, appears much more insidious than even Adorno or Nietzsche might argue. Reading the *Ring* as socialist revolution, then, seems to fail in that Wotan, and therefore the old guard of legalism and governance, is ultimately redeemed. While utopian, the revolutionary implication of the World Inheritance music undoes the work's Marxian sense of history.

Instead, learning to die seems anarchic, and this is why Erda's role seems relevant today. What unfolds throughout the *Ring* after Erda's appearance in *Das Rheingold* is approximately what Scranton prescribes for the civilization that must learn to die: "[it] means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of identity, freedom, success, and progress." The role of the humanist thinker here is an Erda-like figure: "one who is willing to stop and ask troublesome questions, the one who is willing to interrupt, the one who resonates on other channels and with slower, deeper rhythms."<sup>238</sup> Erda and her creator precede humanist thinking on the Anthropocene's particular "wicked problem,"<sup>239</sup> but the *Ring*'s message, especially on the stage today, is not always as clear.

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<sup>237</sup> Julian Potter, "Meaning in Eternity: Karl Löwith's Critique of Hope and Hubris," Thesis Eleven 110, no. 1 (2012): 35. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 160.

<sup>238</sup> Scranton, 24.

<sup>239</sup> This is a phrase originally used in social planning to describe unique problems without stopping rules, with no immediate solution, and usually allow no right or wrong solutions. Usually these problems are economic, ecological or political in nature.

The philosopher-as-interrupter is an old concept (Nietzsche described Circe as a philosopher, for instance)<sup>240</sup> expanded on more recently by philosopher/cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk. Sloterdijk describes the activities and responsibilities of the humanist that apply, I think, to Erda: “[The philosopher’s] mission is to show that a subject can be an interrupter, not merely a channel that allows thematic epidemics and waves of excitation to flow through it. The classics express this with the term ‘pondering.’”<sup>241</sup> Erda need not perform revolution herself, but merely provides interruption and suspension: “It’s not smashing, it’s sitting with. Not blockage, but reflection.”<sup>242</sup> Yet, interruption is still anarchic. If it works, Scranton argues, it lets us see our world in new ways (what Erda does for Wotan in *Das Rheingold*). If it fails, the interrupter is “driven mad, ignored, or destroyed” (what happens to Erda in *Siegfried*).<sup>243</sup> But Erda’s knowledge is seemingly contagious, for after the *Siegfried* encounter Wotan finds himself burdened with the knowledge and responsibility of interrupting. As he blocks Siegfried’s path with prescient information about the future of the world inheritance directly after sending Erda to sleep, Wotan finds himself the failed philosopher whose destruction is imminent. “While life beats its red rhythms and human swarms dance to the compulsion of strife, the interrupter practices dying,” Scranton writes.<sup>244</sup> Erda might be Wagner’s consummate one-who-dies, and yet it is Wotan, too, who practices dying through Brünnhilde, Siegfried, and finally, at his own hand. It is the final of these, however, that is rarely staged or witnessed. Wotan’s death takes place in the elsewhere of

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<sup>240</sup> “Beyond Good and Evil,” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 319-20.

<sup>241</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Neither Sun nor Death* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2011), 84-85.

<sup>242</sup> Scranton, 87.

<sup>243</sup> Scranton, 87.

<sup>244</sup> Scranton, 88.

our imaginations, that place where Erda has been comfortably dwelling, dreaming, and practicing dying throughout the cycle.

Ecofeminist Donna Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble" is a similar act of reflection, in which one learns to die (and live): "our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."<sup>245</sup> Erda, presented with a similar problematic that implies apocalyptic futures, finds prescience in staying with the trouble and describing the end of the gods as inevitable, not contingent on Wotan relinquishing the ring. Her prophecy does not task Wotan to make the future truly safer, only to know it is coming. Rather, her message sits with the injustices of the past and present in order to deal with them as best as possible in the present, where Freia is being held for ransom. Indeed, Erda's prophecy seems to keep Freia from paying a debt that isn't hers more than it eschews the end of the gods. While Erda's ontology might presume an omnipresence, to understand all things and interpret them nonlinearly, Erda's later appearance allows her to finally set such an exhausting myriad of possibilities to the side. Simply, she finally succumbs to much-needed rest. Erda's version of "staying with the trouble" differs from Wagner's final, ultimate message of redemption through love, as her role can "have no truck with ideologues."<sup>246</sup> When it comes to such a massive eschatological problematic, the Earth Mother might simply have no skin in the game, despite the fact that those of us bound to the earth have so much left to lose.

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<sup>245</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016),

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<sup>246</sup> Haraway, 2.

## 5.1 Starting Over Again

At the same time, the possibility for commentators to note the *Ring* cycle's potential as working *cyclically* has proven too enticing. Singer-comedienne Anna Russell, in her famous stand-up bit on the *Ring*, observed that at its end, when the Rhinedaughters return, we are back where we started all those hours ago. She goes on to close with a “most horrible thought,” that the ring is back in the Rhine, the Rhinedaughters are protecting it, and Alberich, too, is still down there: “Do you know they could start this whole darn thing all over again?!”

Cyclical time was prefigured in philosophy by the idealists, particularly in the poetry and thought of Hölderlin, who wrote his brother in 1799 that all the “streams of human activity return to the ocean of nature as they have gone forth from it.”<sup>247</sup> Goethe, in a letter to Schiller only three years later, used the same metaphor when referencing Napoleon: that history is a rushing of rivers into each other, culminating in a great flood that dooms all: “those who foresaw it and those who had no inkling of it.”<sup>248</sup> What, then, of the *Ring*'s ending and its aftermath: are we only left with a placid ocean? Have the rivers that crash into it run dry?

The question of what happens next seems asked by Erda's intervention and absence at various times throughout the cycle. As an anthropomorphic version of nature, her role presumes that humanity determines the design and meaning of the end of the world and not the other way around—anthropomorphism was also, in Nietzsche's opinion, Wagner finding in everything the

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<sup>247</sup> Beiser, 401.

<sup>248</sup> Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 53.

desire for a voice, things that previously had no desire to speak.<sup>249</sup> Erda's provides a philosophical axiom here, in which she teaches us to "learn to die" per Wagner's 1854 letter—a consequence of being given a voice by Wagner. Her absence at the end assumes we are prepared for the future, a future without crisis and without need for anarchic presence. But if time, narration, and life were cyclical, then there needs to be a new conception of death, or rather, of change, for Erda's role is also determined to occur, night after night, in one opera house and the next.

In the same letter to August Röckel in 1854 in which Wagner mentions the revision to Erda's prophecy and its message of *learning to die*, Wagner also describes the narrative impetus in the *Ring* cycle:

Look at the first scene between Wotan and Fricka, which eventually leads to the scene in Act II of *Die Walküre*. The rigid bond that unites them both, arising from love's involuntary mistake of perpetuating itself beyond the inescapable laws of change, of maintaining mutual dependence, this resistance to the eternal renewal and change of the objective world lands both of them in the mutual torment of lovelessness. The course of the drama thus shows the necessity of accepting and giving way to the changeability, 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

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<sup>249</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, 118. Notably, Horkheimer and Adorno claim that anthropomorphism is also the basis of myth, and they build this thought from Hume, Feuerbach and others, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 4.

everything that we learn from the history of mankind: to will the inevitable and to carry it out oneself. The product of this highest, self-destructive will is the fearless, ever-loving man, who is finally created: Siegfried. That is all.<sup>250</sup>

According to Wagner, the eternal reality of change is one of the most important ideas underlying the *Ring*. Nietzsche, for all of his criticism against Wagner, took much of the work's cyclical possibilities as part of his own later philosophical developments, primarily his prophetic character, Zarathustra. Roger Hollinrake, in *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism* (1982) argues that Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883-5) alludes to Wagner's *Ring* throughout, beyond their shared mythological or apocalyptic messages.<sup>251</sup> Far from teleology, Paul Loeb argues that Nietzsche's fictional work is philosophically revealing of the deeper reality of eternal repetition, a concept that appears in his other philosophical works.<sup>252</sup> Besides the content of Zarathustra's words and actions, Loeb argues it is the narrative trajectory of the drama that holds Nietzsche's philosophy of the eternal recurrence, in which the protagonist's many dreams and visions show that "Zarathustra is living a life he has already lived before."<sup>253</sup> Zarathustra, like Erda, is a prophetic mystic whose knowledge comes in the form of dreams and non-linear time. The difference between the two characters, and between the apocalyptic implications for

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<sup>250</sup> Translation in Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Richard Wagner* (London: Michael O'Mara Books, 1990), 184-185.

<sup>251</sup> Roger Hollinrake, *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism* (London, 1982), 117.

<sup>252</sup> Paul Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>253</sup> Loeb, 7.

*Zarathustra* and the *Ring*, is that Erda prophesies that all things end and Zarathustra prophesies that all things remain the same.<sup>254</sup>

That opera displays a sense of eternal time makes sense given music's ineffability and the genre's insistence on mythological subjects. This might take the form of experiencing opera as both present and as eternal return. Other scholars have noted that Wagner, particularly, might have conceived of time less in terms of myth and history than in terms of recollecting—a characteristic of German culture as a whole.<sup>255</sup> Where the *Ring* cycle problematizes this phenomenon is in its eschatological nature and message. This paradox is evident in historiography as well, as in theories of history that presume teleology and those that do not. Some are stuck in the middle of the paradox, as is the case with Walter Benjamin's Angel of History, ostensibly trapped in an eternal catastrophe, constantly seeing disaster and interpreting it in terms of its hopelessness.<sup>256</sup> Eschatology, then, while implicit in Hegelian historiography and Wagnerian myth, supposes competing theories of time as well and perhaps explains why Erda's role seems paradoxical between its ontology and the content of her prophecy.

Wagner mentioned cyclical time, at least tangentially, in his "Wibelungen" essay by explaining the importance of messianic and "Light-God" figures, such as Siegfried, who slays the

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<sup>254</sup> "Beyond Good and Evil," *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 321, Nietzsche predicts the large-scale political splintering in twentieth-century European politics—a third kind of apocalypse based on prophecy.

<sup>255</sup> Watkins, *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought*, 162. Particularly, Watkins finds this relationship between recollection and Germanness in Wagner's essay "What is German?" (1865/78).

<sup>256</sup> Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 120. This is the primary sense in which Benjamin breaks with Hegelian theories of history. Hope exists for Benjamin, but he is acutely more aware of the innate inability to attain it than, say, Hegel.

“Chaos-God,” or the dragon. The importance of Siegfried slaying the dragon is only fully realized once Siegfried himself is killed: “Yet, as Day succumbs to Night again, as Summer in the end must yield to Winter, Siegfried too is slain at last: so, the god became man.”<sup>257</sup> Wagner argued that this fills the German *Volk* with the motive for vengeance, the desire to renew Siegfried’s deed eternally:

...just the same as that eternal alternation of day and night,  
summer and winter—and lastly of the human race itself, in ceaseless  
sway from life to death, from triumph to defeat, from joy to grief,  
and thus perennially rejuvenating in itself the active consciousness  
of the immortal fund of Man and Nature.<sup>258</sup>

This was the eternal changeability of reality of which Wagner wrote to Röckel only six years later. The *Ring*’s oscillation from gods to humans was evident in Wagner’s *Wibelungen* history as well, where he writes of cities of God (ur-towns) that the German stem-races copied in their own realities. In the tetralogy, the end of *Götterdämmerung* is determined by the same cosmological relationship, when the destruction of the Gibichung Hall and Valhalla mirror each other. When Brünnhilde’s Immolation sets the Gibichung’s Hall aflame, she copies the burning of Valhalla in the heavens above, sealing the fate of both heaven and earth.<sup>259</sup> Similarly, we might posit that Wotan’s building of Valhalla imitates the natural world’s World Ash Tree, and once the attempt is made to imitate the old order, that order is spiritually sentenced to destruction.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Wagner, “Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Saga,” 275.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-3.

<sup>260</sup> See also Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954). Eliade describes the conditions of a possibility for a return to mythic age, in which “archaic man” imitates “celestial



Although Wagner did not say so in his essay, his music drama carries out this process by transfiguring the gods from immortal to mortal and nature from permanent to temporary. In this reading, Erda shakes Wotan's understanding of the cosmos and his own ontology with the fact of his modality change, due to his own disavowal of nature and, therefore, of the notion of linear time itself. Erda's warning is to say "all that is, ends" because as nature (the World Ash Tree) withers and dies, so must everything else that seeks to imitate it: Valhalla, the Gibichung's Hall, and so forth.<sup>261</sup> That Wotan refuses this new order (by creating Siegmund, Sieglinde, and the Valkyries, etc.) means that he refuses the designs of teleology, while at the same time lamenting the feedback of myth and history. The best he can hope for, then, is redemption, so he accepts his fate.

Nietzsche's "doctrine of eternal recurrence" or "eternal recurrence of the same" [*die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*] provided a cyclical theory of time counter to Hegelian, progress-based philosophies of history.<sup>262</sup> Later theorists and commentators on Nietzsche's work, notably

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archetypes" in the center of their towns. This time is both sacred and profane, just as Löwith's histories are both based in Christianity and its secularization.

<sup>261</sup> See Eliade, 85. "Archaic man's refusal to accept himself as a historical being...is the will to devalue time."

<sup>262</sup> It should be noted, though, that Hegel did consider time as something which does not exist for the historical Spirit, in order so that it might be eternal. See Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 105; and Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964 [1941]), 208. Löwith notes that Nietzsche essentially derives his entire philosophy from Schopenhauer's natural philosophy and its un-historicity as well as Wagner's revolutionary bent in the 1840s, ergo eternal recurrence and future will to power, respectively. See *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 176. First mention of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence of the same (although Heidegger points out that it is not really a doctrine here, quite yet)<sup>262</sup> came in *The Gay Science* (1882) "Book Four: St. Januarius," aphorism 341, *the heaviest weight* [Das schwerste Gewicht]. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, edited by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge

Heidegger, found the doctrine of eternal return to be the fundamental thought of Nietzsche's metaphysics.<sup>263</sup> Löwith described the doctrine as a “substitute for religion” and “an attempt to leave ‘nothing’ and arrive at ‘something’.”<sup>264</sup> For Nietzsche, cyclical time was the modality of the natural world—one that required no redemption, for there was no sin to salvage. Nietzsche's theory of eternity might seem liberating, yet without sin, cyclical time appears horrifying, paralyzing, and tedious (or comedic, as in *Groundhog Day* (1993) and *Palm Springs* (2020)), redolent of the kinds of *Stimmung* Erda presents Wotan in her monologue. Wotan's understanding of history and time is broken by Erda, causing in him the idea to create a morally free human, one capable of destroying the power of cosmic fate on life.<sup>265</sup>

Nietzsche believed that, for us, eternity should be horrible; the knowledge it imparts burdens us as the “heaviest weight” [*schwerste Gewicht*] we could bear, perhaps analogous with Erda's *Stimmung*. Löwith's investigation of historical theories proposed eternity was, similarly, a

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University Press, 2001), 194. Walter Kaufmann notes that Nietzsche likely first encountered this idea from Heinrich Heine and, even earlier, Heraclitus and the Stoics. See Kaufmann and Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 317-319. Georg Simmel argues that Heraclitus and the Greeks were the likelier progenitors of the theory. See Loeb, 12.

<sup>263</sup> See Heidegger, *Nietzsche* vol. 2, 5. Löwith also thought the eternal recurrence doctrine was essential to Nietzsche's philosophy, and he found that Nietzsche's work usually asked about the contingent nature of history contra the natural world and cosmos. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, 214-215.

<sup>264</sup> Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, 373.

<sup>265</sup> Loeb, 148-50. Loeb and Hollinrake notice similarities between Siegfried and Zarathustra, although we might posit that Zarathustra experiences everything cyclically, over and over again, while Siegfried was created as part of a project by Wotan to escape time's teleology.

universal and present principle, outside of history.<sup>266</sup> The fate of humanity in modernity, for Löwith, was the loss of an eternal perspective. In the *Ring* this is mirrored in the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*, where the Norns weave the rope of destiny until it snaps, and future sight is no longer available. The Norns instead weave the rope on various natural objects: a tree, a rock, and so forth, because the World Ash Tree is withering away. This complicated necessity of the changed natural world and our inability to adapt to it is the future failure of history and of human life—as Joachim Köhler notes, the rope breaks and “fate is replaced by politics.”<sup>267</sup> Politics are, in this sense, fated to apocalypse.

The fatalist conception of time and space was not unique to Wagner. For instance, Charles Baudelaire composed his “The End of the World” around 1850.<sup>268</sup> That Baudelaire’s Symbolist poetry shares themes with Wagner is not too surprising—Baudelaire was an avid Wagnerian and Wagner is generally considered an influence on French Symbolism. Baudelaire’s “The End of the World” describes a world in decline, existing only thereafter because it *physically* can. The poem prophesies a *Ring*-like history, where civilization is undone by the laws and morals that seemed to

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<sup>266</sup> Julian Potter, “Meaning in eternity: Karl Löwith’s critique of hope and hubris,” *Thesis Eleven* 110, no. 1 (2012): 27-45, 39-40. Löwith finds that the search for meaning in history is also the search for meaning in life. So, Wotan’s choice to eschew the eschatology of Erda’s prophecy might mirror his acceptance of death.

<sup>267</sup> Köhler, *Richard Wagner: The Last of the Titans*, 386.

<sup>268</sup> Berger, 395 and Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, “Why Am I So Clever?” 5, 704. Also see Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 15. Baudelaire wrote an effusive article on the composer’s importance to modernity during Wagner’s second trip to Paris from 1859-61, a period during which the scandalous Paris *Tannhäuser* (1861) has tended to overshadow both Wagner’s and Baudelaire’s other activities in historiographical accounts. See Coleman, *Richard Wagner in Paris*, 147-54.

once prop it up. This poem, like Wagner's *Ring*, asks "what is left to the world of man in the future?"<sup>269</sup> Baudelaire, ultimately, is unsure of what is left, only that it will not be society, religion, private property, or anything that can be conceived of as, traditionally, civilization-wide progress. This is an obvious reading of *The Ring*: Nietzsche made it in *The Wagner Case* and Shaw made it in *The Perfect Wagnerite*. What Wagner's *Ring* aspires to, however, is more than that: to teach us how to die and prepare for a future world. Erda's role is the anarchic means of pushing us to do so. Perhaps eschewing decline, Wagner's work might have longevity because it compiles birth and death on a massive scale into four dramas (admittedly, it could be shorter), where we can experience the future apocalypse as presently occurring, even if imaginarily so.

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<sup>269</sup> Löwith, 97.

## 6.0 Conclusion: Opera and/as Metaphysics

If Erda's apocalyptic message has variant meanings in multiple productions of the *Ring*, it is partly due to the nature of Wagner's work itself, where, as noted, meaning can be found in a variety of places; and the work's interpretation, throughout the twentieth century, has pointed to this contradictory variety of meanings. Although my analysis has centered on rationalizing questions of time and space, which seem particularly relevant to Wagnerian music drama, opera clearly asks other questions as well. One of those philosophical inquiries is the broad question of *logos*, or the question of reason, language, meaning and understanding, and the process of creating the work of art, of gathering disparate materials, i.e. the very act of composition (or for Wagner, gathering myths for retelling).<sup>270</sup> *Logos*, in the philosophical sense, is a system marking the difference between reason and belief, and it is the grounds on which Adorno had once chastised opera's ability to eschew reason for the sake of disbelief. Nietzsche, too, had found the limits of belief as beyond reason, related to his doctrine of eternal time (and the heaviest burden of existence).<sup>271</sup> Nietzsche's analysis of Platonic metaphysics described the essence of being as determined by reason. Heidegger, too, drew an equal sign between "Western metaphysics" and

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<sup>270</sup> Heidegger devotes separate sections to phenomenon and *logos* in his *Being and Time*. In his section on *logos*, he describes how it is, in fact, more than just language—it is the making visible what is being talked about. The language (and speech) connection is especially important to other older philosophers, such as Vico, who had nonetheless also found that metaphysics and logic were really two ways of describing the same thing (*New Science* 400-1).

<sup>271</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche* vol. 2, 121-32, "The Thought of Return as a Belief."

“Logic.”<sup>272</sup> *Logos* is more, though: it is a question of interpretation and how one approaches it, perhaps also a question of finding reason in opera where Adorno thought it could not exist.

For Hegel, logic was not merely a system of proofs or artificial languages.<sup>273</sup> Rather, logic described a deeper connection between language and the concepts it housed as well as the very grounding by which those concepts were contained.<sup>274</sup> Joseph Carew, explaining Hegel’s logic, argues that language provides humanity’s break with nature by creating a world of non-natural norms, perhaps akin to the ending of the *Ring*.<sup>275</sup> What this means for the possibility of a metaphysics of annihilation made real through music drama is that matters of the spirit (as Hegel would conceptualize it) are not easily answered by the physical sciences or philosophy alone. That music is something other than physical science or philosophy is not a given, but the ineffable nature of music, especially in performance, might present us with metaphysical or physical provocations for pondering the conditions of humanity and the potential for its extinction.

Hegel’s metaphysics, particularly in his *Science of Logic*, were criticized by Schelling, Feuerbach, Marx, and Engels, for essentially applying its logical system to nature, instead of letting the natural world supply the system of thought first.<sup>276</sup> Hegel’s *Naturphilosophie* had been met

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<sup>272</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche* vol. 3, 48. “Western Metaphysics as ‘Logic’.”

<sup>273</sup> Joseph Carew, “Hegel on the Universe of Meaning: Logic, Language, and Spirit’s Break from Nature,” in *Rethinking German Idealism*, edited by McGrath and Carew, 163-189 (Montreal: McGill University Press, 2016). Carew argues that Hegel’s *Science of Logic* is a metaphysical treatise as much as it is a systematized work of logic.

<sup>274</sup> Hege’s logic was essentially a philosophy of language or semantics.

<sup>275</sup> Carew, 165.

<sup>276</sup> Wes Furlotte, “Lack and the Spurious Infinite: Towards a New Reading of Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature,” in *Rethinking German Idealism*, edited S. J. McGrath and J. Carew, 191-214 (Montreal, CA: McGill University, 2016).

with some suspicion in light of his metaphysics' shortcomings, where the gulf between reason and nature seemed impassable. The anthropomorphized role of Erda seems a product of Hegel's system of thought, especially considering the closeness between Wagner's exposure to Hegel in the late 1840s and the creation of Erda in the early 1850s. Her character points to the problematic between human impact (or even human inability to think non-rationally) and the natural register of the world. How nature and logic (and for Hegel, spirit) intertwine was the core problem for understanding or constructing the rest of a system of metaphysical thought—so, too, in the *Ring* does Erda's role exhibit our inability to understand the natural order without first personifying it.

Earlier in this dissertation, I proposed that a logocentric hermeneutic was almost unavoidable in this analysis, perhaps mirroring the faults of critiques like Nietzsche's illusion of gesture or Adorno's phantasmagoria, both of which reduced Wagner's metaphysics to the spectacle of annihilation or representation and, somehow, missed or ignored Wagner's voices from elsewhere. Yet Erda's role is found in the very framework of the drama, in between the floorboards of the stage, and in the margins of the narrative, as apparatus. And yet, the ontology of Erda's role, so thoroughly reviewed up to this point, is clearly that of Other, in which her dramatic entrance and exit requires the literal tearing apart of the stage in order for her to be known, between a logical formation of the metaphysics of annihilation in Erda's song and one entirely resilient to it, dependent on mere spectacle as representative of mythic nature and, perhaps, a materialist view of space and time.

Wagner's *Ring* cycle interprets nature in various ways, as a coordination of Hegelian spirit or as deeply linked with Heidegger's earth, as seen in different productions. It immanently reconstructs an intertwining of nature and logic in materialist terms: nature anthropomorphized and physically contained, logic derived from music and drama as a system of thought both open

and closed to historical and social contexts. That vague Hegelian infinite idea—the one that Nietzsche heard echo in Wagner’s work—is this system of logic, nature, and spirit. Hegelian nature poses a threat of total annihilation to subjectivity and subjectivism in a way that prefigured Schopenhauer’s metaphysical pessimism and in fact seems to shade it, and the typical association that Wagner’s works share with Schopenhauer, with a new implication for humanity’s connection to nature: that pessimism and apocalypticism are tied up with the condition of existing as natural beings. Music is a phenomenon unlike language, which palely imitates its symbolic powers, and as such, music challenges a metaphysics of annihilation to do in music drama what it could not do in poetry alone. With that in mind, we can regard each dimension of reality in turn, say, as if we are Siegfried both before and after drinking the dragon’s blood.

### 6.1 Learning to Dream in the Elsewhere

The nature of the *Ring*’s apocalypse also poses a different kind of metaphysical question beyond the phenomenal realm of music drama, concerning the *dream* and its reading.<sup>277</sup> Indeed, the nature of Wagnerian music drama suggests that its metaphysical questions allude to the noumenal realm, usually marked by the dreaming state of lucid consciousness. Not coincidentally, Erda’s (and Zarathustra’s) knowledge originates there, too. Dreaming as a form of knowledge-

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<sup>277</sup> Note that Nietzsche begins *The Birth of Tragedy* with an examination into *dreams* and *intoxication*, the separate art worlds that present the contrast between the Apollinian and Dionysian and, to an extent, the difference between will and representation, or noumenal and phenomenal. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 33. I think we can disagree with Nietzsche in that the dream world of illusions might not be both immediate and phenomenal.



gathering and poetic process is a concept as old as (and certainly older than) Lucretius's assertion that it is in dreams where divine beings come to us.<sup>278</sup> Nietzsche, in fact, found the dream to be the first notion of metaphysics, the source for an entire second, substantial world.<sup>279</sup> The dream's relationship to the creative process is not unique to Wagner, but is perhaps most often recounted in relation to the genesis of the *Das Rheingold* prelude. In this story, Wagner's creative process is deeply linked to the noumenal space of dreams:

After a night spent in fever and sleeplessness, I forced myself to take a long tramp the next day through the hilly country, which was covered with pine woods. It all looked dreary and desolate, and I could not think what I should do there. Returning in the afternoon, I stretched myself, dead tired, on a hard couch, awaiting the long-desired hour of sleep. It did not come; but I fell into a kind of somnolent state, in which I suddenly felt as though I were sinking in swiftly flowing water. The rushing sound formed itself in my brain into a musical sound, the chord of E flat major, which continually re-echoed in broken forms; these broken chords seemed to be melodic passages of increasing motion, yet the pure triad of E flat major never changed but seemed by its continuance to impart infinite significance to the element in which I was sinking. I awoke in sudden terror from my doze, feeling as though the waves

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<sup>278</sup> *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 33.

<sup>279</sup> Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 17-8.

were rushing high above my head. I at once recognized that the orchestral overture to *Das Rheingold*, which must long have lain latent within me, though it had been unable to find definite form, had at last been revealed to me. I then quickly realized my own nature; the stream of life was not to flow from without, but from within. I decided to return to Zürich immediately, and begin the composition of my great poem.<sup>280</sup>

This episode was the result of Wagner falling sea-sick while visiting Spezia, Italy in 1853. The nature of his creative process here seems quintessentially reflected and reified in Erda's own process of knowing things by nightly visions. She tells us and the Wanderer in *Siegfried* that her sleep begets dreams of knowledge ("Mein Schlaf ist Träumen, mein Träumen Sinnen..."). The dream-state, that kind of faraway elsewhere of chthonic sibyls, is a place not just of knowledge but of making meaning.

Sherry D. Lee calls Wagner's dream "sentient" and notes that it "somehow resembles Erda's sleep of primeval world-wisdom. Both dream the dream of origins whose motivic identity and phantasmagorical essence turn it into a dream of ending."<sup>281</sup> Lee argues further that "Wagner's dream[...]becomes Erda's dream of the world's curse, conceived in primeval sleep, and then becomes history as it encounters the disillusionment of modernity."<sup>282</sup> The dream might then be a

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<sup>280</sup> Wagner, *My Life*, 603.

<sup>281</sup> Sherry D. Lee, "'Alles was ist, endet': On Dramatic Text, Absolute Music, Adorno and Wagner's *Ring*," 932.

<sup>282</sup> Lee, 939.

template for dramatizing perceptions of the world, and Erda is not unique among Wagnerian dreamers in this sense: Elsa in *Lohengrin*, Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer*, or even *Tannhäuser*'s eponymous hero. These characters, of which Erda might be the most prominently determined by the acts of sleeping and dreaming, are characters who then use dreams to locate to the elsewhere what was once confined to the limits of drama and proscenia, the phenomenal realm of theatre. Then, like the boomerang of Erda's music into the theme of annihilation, the process comes full circle and these characters, particularly Erda, bring to the limits of drama and proscenia the material of their dreams, just as Wagner had in his own world.

In other words, what is shared between Wagner's dreams (and Nattiez counts 420 documented dreams besides the *Rheingold* one!) and those of his characters is a process of oneiric poiesis, of bringing something into existence from a state of dreaming. This is significant because of, but not specific to, the nature of dreaming within opera and drama, especially in Wagner's works. Early psychoanalysts made this connection explicit in many of their analyses on dreams and their representation in myth and art.<sup>283</sup> Freud pupil Karl Abraham described the phenomena of Freud's "typical dreams" as those that are common to all humanity: "Freud has succeeded in tracing back this group of dreams to certain wishes common to all men, at the same time to point out that these same wishes lie at the bottom of certain myths."<sup>284</sup> Beyond mere tautology, though, Freudian thinkers argued that myths represented an infantile childhood of races and cultures that

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<sup>283</sup> Otto Rank, a collaborator of Sigmund Freud's and a co-author of some chapters in *The Interpretation of Dreams* ("Dreams and Poetry" and "Dreams and Myth" in eds. 4-7), made these connections throughout his career and wrote his doctoral thesis in 1911 on the myth of Lohengrin.

<sup>284</sup> Karl Abraham, *Dreams and Myths* (New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1913),

functioned analogously to dreams at the level of the individual human psyche.<sup>285</sup> So, humans dreaming are analogous to cultures creating and interpreting myths. For Abraham then, following in the footsteps of Freud's dream interpretation, the same unconscious desires and wishes found in dreams were also found in myths, the two functioned the same and required to be interpreted.

Erda, as the primary dreamer in the *Ring*, is already closely related to the act of interpreting, as we first see in *Das Rheingold*, an appearance that explicates her visual acuity with no mention of dreaming as of yet. The only indication we receive in her prophecy that she is at all related to sleep is when she says that the Norns tell Wotan her visions nightly. It is in her *Siegfried* appearance that we become aware of how intense and embodied her relationship to sleeping and dreaming truly is. There, she appears more invested in her role as dreamer than as interrupter; she would rather go back to sleep than experience the world that is nearing its twilight. The connection between the physical and metaphysical is thus constantly encroached by Erda's role, whose elsewhere might provide a dimensional escape from the destruction of the phenomenal realm.

As Erda awakens, roused by Wotan's waking song, she is accompanied by the Magic Sleep chords that sent Brünnhilde to her slumber in *Die Walküre*. Given the nature of Erda's sleeping and its poietic abilities, this music might signal something other than merely going or being sent to sleep, for the opposite is happening when Erda awakens. Rather, the motive's meaning might expand in this dramatic moment where Wotan, or the audience itself, now enters the dream realm, that second, substantial world of elsewhere. As the Magic Sleep chords descend into the unconscious, Erda sings "stark ruft das Lied," a reminder of her capacity to listen. If we recall Abbate's description of the sibylline Brünnhilde's ear, Erda's waking state seems determined by

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<sup>285</sup> Abraham, 36.

listening and her dreaming state by seeing, as in her prophetic, omniscient sight. By being roused to consciousness by Wotan, whose song often relies on the reminiscent qualities of the love motif, Erda reveals more about the Wagnerian sibyl's ontology.<sup>286</sup> The Magic Sleep music might not only accompany the sleeping individual as they are sent to rest, but it also signals a shift between noumenal and phenomenal realms. A barrier is broken by this music between states of consciousness and sensual acuity, and it might imply a transcendental listening subject between metaphysics.

If the Magic Sleep music implies a kind of transcendence, there is a congruent emergence of perspective that accompanies it. We don't simply become aware of a metaphysical world around or near us; we are invited inwards. Erda embodies the position of an audience member when she hears Wotan, or at least, we in the opera house might find in her waking an invitation to embody the same position as her. What Erda's dream begets is the very drama we have been experiencing up to the moment of the Magic Sleep theme's recurrence. Upon awakening, she explains to Wotan her oneiric process, of exercising knowledge from dreams—the only possible knowledge this could refer to, based on the nature of her prophecy in *Rheingold*, is the series of narrative events and music that have been unfolding in front of us, events brought on by Wotan's myriad reactions to the *Weltuntergang* prophecy (the Wälsungs, the Sword, etc.). The events between Brünnhilde's sleep and Erda's waking exist behind this thin film of sleeping and dreaming; where events only become known to us because they are being dreamt of elsewhere. This, however, concedes quite

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<sup>286</sup> Watkins, *Metaphors of Depth in German Musical Thought*, 138-42. Watkins devotes a significant analysis to the love motif, calling it “the intractable leitmotif.”

a bit to Adorno's criticism of Wagnerian phantasmagoria, and we might find cause to re-evaluate just what the phantasmagoric in Wagner's works is.

Adorno, in his monograph *In Search of Wagner*, wrote about the work of art and its outward appearance. The final product of art, he argued, is an *illusion*; the work of art is really a “*sui generis* that constitutes itself in the realm of the absolute without having to renounce its claim to image the world.” The realm of the absolute, in Wagner's case, might be proscenia and their limits, a self-contained representation of the phenomenal and an implied extra-noumenal that his music heavily suggests. Adorno goes on, however, to say that “Wagner's operas tend towards magic delusion, to what Schopenhauer calls ‘The outside of the worthless commodity’, in short towards phantasmagoria.”<sup>287</sup> Phantasmagoria is broached in the *Ring* in a meta sense perhaps most of all by characters like Erda, Fricka, Brünnhilde and even Mime—those characters whose labor appears cloaked by the structures and machinations of Wotan's imperialist designs or Siegfried's fanatical search for fear, two different kinds of neoliberal coming-of-age fantasies. Erda's elsewhere appears equally “worthless” in this sense; it functions at first opposite Wotan's desire to possess power and capital and later works to force an adaptation in how Wotan's desires work, namely that they become overtly racialized when he realizes he can bestow the world inheritance on his own grandson, Siegfried, instead of the Nibelung's son, Hagen. Wotan realizes that the world's inheritance can be burdened by Siegfried because of the precarious situation in which he has left

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<sup>287</sup> T.W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner* (Verso, 1991), 85. Adorno also received this concept from Marx's *Das Kapital* vol. 1, where phantasmagoria captured the relationship between products of human labor and the human doing labor, an invisible social relationship among things and humans in which commodity-forms and the labor that produce them have nothing to do with the physical and material relations they exhibit.

Brünnhilde, whose labor is divorced from the value that commodity takes in the new utopia ostensibly left behind in the wake of her immolation.

Adorno specifically located the phantasmagoric in Wagner's works in *Tannhäuser's* Venusberg and in the conjuring visions of Elsa in *Lohengrin*, signaled by the extremes of range and the obfuscation of time as eternal, or as in the case of *Parsifal*, as space itself. These dream-like spaces are typical and crucial in Wagner's music dramas, and yet even Adorno failed to recognize Erda as similarly bound to the poetic processes of the elsewhere, reaching down into the very lowest bass notes and up to the heights of the music of *Götterdämmerung* and *Valhalla*. Her dreams seem to broach the phantasmagoric for us, not unlike *Tannhäuser's* dreams of the Venusberg or Elsa's dreams of *Lohengrin*. What seems fundamentally different about Erda's role, though, is that she is not a protagonist. Her dreams are not limited to the objects of desire or realms of sexual bliss or, in the case of *Parsifal*, realms of spiritual completion. Her dreams are of bare history, and the fruits of her labor are never realized under Wotan's regime for they have no relative value to him.

Of all of the stagings of the *Ring* we have engaged, only one reads into Erda's role this link between her dream-like powers and her double role as interpreter of phantasmagoria and performance itself. This is the 1991 Brussels production at Theatre de la Monnaie directed by Herbert Wernicke, with its omnipresent grand piano at which Erda constantly sits. The setting, remaining unchanged throughout all four operas, stages the elsewhere more than I think would ever be possible. It takes phantasmagoria to task as much as it takes the idea as its dramaturgical point of departure; it shows what is usually taken for granted in a way both similar and different from other Brechtian *Ring* cycles (such as Berghaus's or the recent Chicago cycle). Compare this

with the technological re-enchantment of the work in Karajan's cinematic *Rheingold* and you find two very different Erdas, two very different metaphysics, and two very different apocalypses.

In Wernicke's setting, Erda is truly a Gaia-like figure, physically connected to the stage, undoing her metaphysical closeness to the elsewhere. The fates of world and stage seem bound together by this constant presence of Erda's role and the grand piano, symbols of hidden labor for Wagner, symbols of hyper-phantasmagoria. In contrast, Karajan splits Erda from the stage in his filmed *Rheingold*: Erda becomes a hologram on the face of a rock, a ghostly apparition that sings from another world, another dimension in technological and medial terms, a different kind of phantasmagoria. Wernicke's setting, perhaps despite the alienation one might expect from its disillusion, manages a more tightly reasoned experience of the end of its world. Karajan, on the other hand, provides something slick and smooth: an end of the world filtered by layers of mediation, layers that might even provide reason for us to pause and wonder at the validity of the message. Can Karajan's *Ring* teach us lessons in dying, and did it teach its audience in the 1970s? Again, Adorno's criticism of opera rings in our ears—perhaps opera is simply not rational enough in any mediation to do this. The question seems begged time and again: what exactly does it mean to experience music drama as such and how are we to take any of its content as logical or form-fit to our own lives?

The dream is but one example of the shifting process between noumenal and phenomenal realms. Yet, this seems to return us to Nietzsche's criticism of Wagner's penchant for illusion and jejune decadence, of his tendency to overdetermine this process as fulfilling aesthetic needs in overly saccharine and seductive ways. The Romantics, including both Wagner and Nietzsche, aspired towards new mythologies as well—those dreams of nation and culture, according to the psychoanalysts. For Wagner, too, these mythologies were fundamental to nation-building. For



Nietzsche, these mythologies were a part of material reality, as the will to power crystallized in time and space. Inherent to these new mythologies (and there are others in German Romanticism, Schelling's mythology of nature, for instance) was utopia, in many forms: utopian reason, politics, or religion. Ernst Bloch, writing on the *Ring*'s allegorical possibilities, noted that Wagner's "idealism" could be dangerous and material: "the originally revolutionary element would be retrieved and the colportage of revenge and utopia sharpened out of appearance of 'mythology'."<sup>288</sup> However, it is through this visage of the potential of utopia that we might, per Bloch's insistence, "decontaminate Wagner" even ninety years later.<sup>289</sup> While Erda supplies us with options for anarchy today, utopia, for others, might be the more sought-after alternative.

The phantasmagoria of Adorno's criticism and the hallucination of Nietzsche's also accompanied criticisms of Schopenhauer's organization of the world into noumenal and phenomenal realms. In both music drama and philosophical discourse, then, there seemed to be a space for reconciling what was considered material and real, and what was not. Hegel imagined that theoretical work ultimately held greater weight than practical work in the real world, and this might appear contentious to us: "Once the realm of representation [*Vorstellung*] is revolutionized, actuality [*Wirklichkeit*] will not hold out."<sup>290</sup> Hegel may not be completely wrong, though, if we understand the realm of representation, certainly in opera, to encompass the powers of imagination,

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<sup>288</sup> Bloch, *Heritage of our Times*, 342. Bloch found Wagner an utter embarrassment even in 1929, prior to Wagner's closeness with Nazism and decadent barbarism, which Bloch later condemned. Bloch, 79 in the essay "Juggler's Fair Beneath the Gallows" (1937).

<sup>289</sup> Bloch, 344.

<sup>290</sup> Quoted in Adrian Johnson, "Absolutely Contingent: Slavoj Žižek and the Hegelian Contingency of Necessity," 235.

already engaged by music drama. What makes illusion so bad for one like Hegel—and especially more so for Marx and today, Žižek—is that the process of societal becoming, say towards communism, cannot merely be imagined as constantly germinating. The visionary processes of apocalypse and utopia seem similar projects in art.<sup>291</sup> Leftists today especially might be unable to imagine the end of capitalism, but we can imagine the end of the world, especially through works of art like the *Ring* or Baudelaire’s “The End of the World.” This is, ironically, why Nietzsche seems to still admire the *Ring*, even after he admonishes Wagner in *Der Fall Wagner*: in section 4 he describes the cycle’s revolutionary properties as birthed, first and foremost, from the misfortunes of old contracts—from the old regime’s concepts of society and everything that society presupposes, perhaps morality, logic, and reason most of all.<sup>292</sup>

## 6.2 Operatic Meaning, Truth, and Their Limits

Levin pointed out in the late 1990s, when opera houses all over the world succumbed to the trend of projected super-titles, that a “burgeoning culture of operatic literacy” was revived, exacerbated perhaps now through opera’s availability online.<sup>293</sup> As for many operagoers, opera has always been accompanied by some kind of literary supplement, and this literacy has become not the ceiling of understanding, but the floor. Whatever an opera can do for us, then, seems limited

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<sup>291</sup> Adrian Johnson imagines lists the exhaustive failures of the Left in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as cause for Hegelians to avoid prophecy because of its results. Johnson, 243.

<sup>292</sup> Nietzsche, “The Case of Wagner,” *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 619.

<sup>293</sup> Levin, “Reading a Staging/Staging a Reading,” 58.

by the abilities of gestures in space and time to produce meaning, because it can't hide its meaningful twists and turns. This process of creating new meaning is not limited only to those actions prescribed by the stage director, or by newly designed sets and costumes, but is limited also by music as performed and conducted. This is, admittedly, to see many kinds of literacies as created equal. Certainly, they are highly subjective.

Staging an opera and writing a musicological analysis both require research and result in the telling of, or even curation of an old story (or stories) in a new way, understood for an audience of new and different historical, cultural, and social circumstances. Here, Erda's truth-telling provides a litmus test of Wagnerian literacy, of multiple kinds of *logoi*. Erda's half-existence on the stage already speaks to a hybrid ontology, one that uncomfortably navigates neither world, the inner world of earth nor the outer world of humans, signs, and play. These are, however, markers of the gathering or *logos* that houses being and meaning. The Platonic heritage of absolute idealism and early romanticism in Germany lends the *absolute* of idealism—the singular universe, like Spinoza's substance—an identification with both *telos* and *logos*, the function and the truth that govern all things.<sup>294</sup> The metaphysical suppositions that underpinned Wagner's early philosophical forays depended upon a version of the world whose end was imagined as easily as our own—part of the possibility of opera to be both rational and suprarational.

What Hölderlin, the romantics, and Heidegger found in Greek philosophy, particularly in Heraclitus, were two kinds of *logoi*—one immediate and sacred, the other mediate and poetic. Perhaps the power of Erda's passage, especially in *Das Rheingold*, implies a different *logoi* than Wotan's world would allow. Wagner, for all of his shortcomings, proves a wise poet in this sense,

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<sup>294</sup> Beiser, 355.

especially given the revision he made to Erda's passage, which brought about her most important message: "alles was ist, endet." The end of the world Erda posits might equally be an end of logic, where the loss of Earth necessitates a loss of the basis and context in which language can be understood, "the play of Earth and world, of man and sacred" that gives words meaning. The voice, here, is what mediates Earth and world, harmonizes the invisible and visible, noumenal and phenomenal.<sup>295</sup>

In this sense, Nietzsche appeared as a bastion for Wagnerian ideals when, in *Twilight of the Idols* (1888), he supposed that not only was God dead, but Reason, too.<sup>296</sup> Nietzsche found that the metaphysics of religion and language were tightly linked: humanity's vernacular and multiple faiths in theism were propped up by its faith in grammar. The end of the world, then, was the end of apparent meaning. Whereas Nietzsche provided a surprising level of optimism in his ultimate message, relayed by Zarathustra, Wagner's Erda provides a much starker view of things, a total annihilation of everything. Wagner, by bestowing Hegelian world-historical processes upon the highest forms of beings first (gods) and letting them trickle onto humanity, dramatizes a situation to which Nietzsche essentially prescribed the opposite, in which humanity constructs its own visions of good, evil, and annihilation. If Wagner's cycle can be interpreted as culminating in a collective humanity, though, then this is emphatically a point of separation for Nietzsche, who finds the individual to be the sole bearer and maker of meaning. Wagner's music drama, though, more than most other operatic works, contain the problem of totalization—the problem of *Gesamtkunstwerk*—in which it often seems Wagner is the only creator of his works, hiding the

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<sup>295</sup> Haar, 115.

<sup>296</sup> Berger, 386.

labor of countless other artists. Wagner's cycle, in its creation and in its own narrative, actually requires a collective of people to imagine and construct the beginning and ending of the world. Nietzsche may need to be correct, then, if we wish to successfully stage the *Ring*'s apocalyptic themes for future audiences.

Erda's encounter with Wotan in *Siegfried* provides the latter his shift from pessimism to *amor fati* and also signals the work's dramatization of apocalypse, from its origins in Erda's prophecy in *Rheingold*. That Nietzsche provided a worldview beyond reason and without a noumenal realm yielded a set of contingencies that were essentially incompatible with this apocalypse. Simply put, there is an alternative to rationalism that Wagner already provides, not yet "beyond" it, from his voices from elsewhere, who experience the same phenomenal world as Wagner's other *dramatis personae* but with some caveats, or enchantments. Wagner need not provide anything quite beyond reason as of yet, for that is an intellectual project more properly taken on by Nietzsche, Adorno, and later thinkers.<sup>297</sup> Yet Deathridge notes that, at the *Ring*'s end, "all reason and its expression in law...is destroyed by a fire outrageously impervious to it as well as animal and human life. What the *Ring* is definitely is not is a rational sermon about 'truth'."<sup>298</sup>

If we follow the line of philosophical thought that extends from Nietzsche's philosophy beyond reason, we ultimately wind up in a fairly undesirable place by most modern standards of morality—those areas of Nietzsche's ideology that became, like Wagner's mythemes, the building blocks of German National Socialism. Such is one of the pitfalls to the overwhelming

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<sup>297</sup> See Karin Bauer, *Adorno's Nietzschean Narratives: Critiques of Ideology, Readings of Wagner* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 21.

<sup>298</sup> Deathridge, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, xxi.

individualism that Nietzsche prescribed. What a dramatic role like Erda can do—not beyond reason, but non-rational nonetheless—is navigate a world dominated by reason (in politics, legalism, etc.) in ways that allow the survival of those who are considered emphatically unequal in the eyes of that world, or whose identities may read as illegible. Erda’s is a chaotic response to world and its governance—chaos and illegibility being two close processes of the gap, or abyss, that Erda presents in both space and legible representation.<sup>299</sup>

The reason for illegible roles can be explained, partly, in Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner’s art as *decadent*. In *Der Fall Wagner* Nietzsche explained: “Wagner begins from a hallucination—not of sounds but of gestures.”<sup>300</sup> We are familiar with this argument, and Wagner might even corroborate it a little bit, as in his aim to make the deeds of music visible. Nietzsche continued, however: “Then he seeks the sign language of sounds for them.” Nietzsche argued that Wagner’s mastery in musical forms lay in his ability to work with the smallest units of music, to the detriment of translating his gestures to larger, total forms. Karol Berger has since shown quite thoroughly how misguided this criticism is.<sup>301</sup> However, the combination of music and gesture (which perhaps we can broaden to include characterization) often suggests entirely new meaning, not to be found in Wagner’s forms. In other words, Wagner was not merely playing a game of smoke and mirrors, of hallucinations or phantasmagorias; we should know better than to be fooled by this watering down of any artistic process, but especially one as complex as Wagner’s. In fact, Wagner’s

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<sup>299</sup> See Heidegger on Nietzsche’s view of chaos, *Nietzsche* vol. 3, 80.

<sup>300</sup> Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner: A Musician’s Problem*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 626-7.

<sup>301</sup> This is, in fact, one of the prime criticisms to which Karol Berger’s monograph *Beyond Reason: Wagner contra Nietzsche* (2016) responds, showing that Wagner had supreme command over his large-scale forms.

placement of voices such as Erda's at the periphery of visibility and audibility imbues these voices already with a different sense of meaning, almost as if they were made from different parts than the rest of the work—especially if his work sought to make the deeds of music visible. Nietzsche took this further to mean that Wagner made all that existed in the physical realm even more profound through music.<sup>302</sup> The composer's ability to simplify the world was equivalent with his ability to gather from disparate sources, to be a logician or philosopher, and later, this became congruent with his ability to immorally seduce. Both Wagner and Erda formulate new horizons of meaning, the first via phantasmagoria and illusion, and the latter via a covert, stealthy position among the other technical extensions of said horizons, namely communicated in prophecy.

Erda's prophecy, as Sherry D. Lee has argued, is one that necessitates and prefigures Adorno's prophecy of the end of opera in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1959).<sup>303</sup> Lee notes the cryptic nature of Erda's language, although we might now contest this, as her role actually elucidates vernacular notions of the end of the world and the completion of history and/or metaphysics. Lee is right though in asserting that Wagnerian music drama necessarily had a fatalistic condition, one shared by the characters and worlds within Wagner's works. That Wagner presents the pinnacle of operatic accumulation and saturation is not aesthetically surprising, but that he also provides a possible ending to metaphysical opera does not necessarily follow. The *Ring*, Lee notes, takes ending at its very subject matter (note, though, it also takes beginning as its

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<sup>302</sup> See the final chapter of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, sections 6 and 7.

<sup>303</sup> Sherry D. Lee, "Alles was ist, endet: On Dramatic Text, Absolute Music, Adorno, and Wagner's *Ring*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 79 no. 3 (Summer 2010): 922-940.

subject matter). That humans can imagine the end is both exceedingly difficult and wildly easy, as evidenced by Wagner's arduous process completing the *Ring*.

The work of art might in fact be an illusion, a process whereby we convince ourselves of realities that don't exist. In Wagner's case, this might be doubly so: aesthetically suspect as Nietzsche and others found it to be. We might emphatically say this is a cautionary tale that comes down on the side of apocalypse-and-utopia as united in erasing a morally inclusive view of the world and how culture works within it. The *non plus ultra* of this is that Hitler listened to music from *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung* in the bunker, during the moments before his death and thus before the end of his own imagined world, perhaps as reminders of what for him was once the pleasurable construction of a racially determined ethno-state that now serves as a standard for unambiguously evil morality on a global scale. Hitler listened to both beginning and end, as if, even in those final moments, he still tightly clutched onto the teleology of space and time.

That "good and evil" is invoked finally, at the problematic of illusion, should not surprise. Walter Benjamin ended his famous essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" with the stark observation that our self-destruction is an aesthetic pleasure of the first order, one entrenched in fascism: "'*Fiat ars—pereat mundus*' says Fascism."<sup>304</sup> Benjaminian aura is similar to the phantasmagoria of Wagner's works, in that both metaphysics seek to account for a myriad of ethical assumptions about space and ideology. As for us, we can reclaim the basic synthesis between art and philosophy for which the Romantics strived, and there should be desirable reasons for doing so—reasons for which the futurism of today is determined by those

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<sup>304</sup> Let art be made, let the world perish (Latin). Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 242.



with socially benevolent agendas whose art moves us. Wagner's *Ring* once moved us because it presents a relationship with the earth and history that lets us imagine a new world of our own making, perhaps at the cost of a violent, frankly scary apocalypse. As in the *Ring*, our future appears open, perhaps because we can imagine the end through art and music. Today, then, we can't forget the *Ring* cycle simply because it might enable dangerous ideology, for in fact that is why we must remember its lessons in annihilation.

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