# Inside the Ring:
## Essays on Wagner's Opera Cycle

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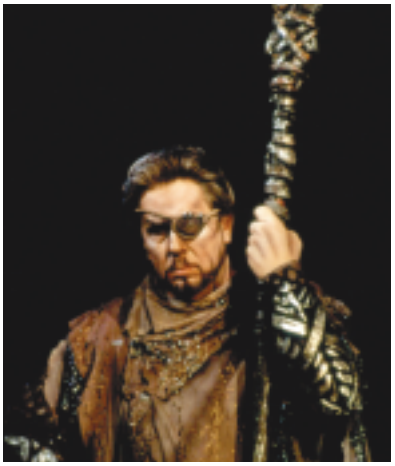

**James Morris as Wotan in Wagner's *Die Walküre*. *Photo: Jennifer Carle/The Metropolitan Opera***

Thirty years ago I edited a book titled *Penetrating Wagner's Ring: An Anthology.* Today, I find myself editing a book titled *Inside the Ring: Essays on Wagner's Opera Cycle* — to be published by McFarland Press in spring 2006. Is the *Ring* still an appropriate subject for today's audiences? Absolutely. In fact, more than ever. The four operas that comprise the *Ring* cycle — *Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried,* and *Götterdämmerung* — have become more and more popular since the 1970s.

Back then there were only two opera companies in the United States that ever staged the *Ring* — The Metropolitan Opera in New York and the San Francisco Opera — and not very frequently at that. How the situation has changed since then. Now every opera company in the world wants to stage the *Ring* cycle. In the United States, *Ring* cycles have appeared in many other places, including Seattle, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Dallas — and around the world in cities like Toronto, Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Adelaide, and London, in addition to most of the other European opera capitals. We are clearly living during a Wagner renaissance when the *Ring* is being staged around the world — and some wealthy fans (often called *Ring*-heads) will go anywhere in the world to see a new production of this tetralogy of operas. All this represents a revolutionary change in attitude, and all within 30 years. Back in the 1970s, the problem was finding a performance of the *Ring*, but now the problem is finding a ticket. Often these *Ring* cycles — the four operas done within a week, as Wagner wanted — are sold out a year in advance of the beginning of the performances, so there is clearly an increasing demand for tickets as more and more people become fascinated by the *Ring* cycle.

### Political Complications

Although Wagner died in 1883, 50 years prior to Hitler's regime, the Nazis clearly wanted to give their criminal movement some intellectual clout so they quoted the world-famous opera composer. As a result, Richard Wagner had a very tainted name after World War II, especially in America. While the composer's anti-Semitic prejudices did not appear in his operas, his reputation had been harmed. Rudolf Bing (a former manager of The Metropolitan Opera) in his memoirs reported that even in a city as operatically sophisticated as New York, people simply did not want to hear Wagnerian opera as long as 10 years after the war. What caused such a major change in attitude toward Wagnerian opera since then?

Beyond the simple passage of time and the magical quality of this composer's operas, one of the major factors was the Wagner Festival (where the *Ring* had its premiere) in Bayreuth, Germany. Winifred Wagner, the widow of the composer's son, Siegfried, was a great admirer of Hitler and she turned the summer festival into a Nazi showplace in the 1930s and until 1944 when the festival was closed. But her sons, Wieland and Wolfgang, managed to reopen the festival in 1951; there, Wieland and Wolfgang's revolutionary new approaches to staging the *Ring* and the other Wagner operas helped to revive audience interest and see Wagnerian opera in a new visual style and without its previous political associations. Wieland and Wolfgang Wagner — the composer's grandsons — emphasized the *Ring*'s connections with Greek tragedy and staged abstract productions that emphasized the *Ring*'s complex characterizations and mythic dimensions. These new productions reflected the extensive lighting effects in the *Ring* cycle and focused on its symbolism.

### New Visual Styles for the *Ring*

Many people, especially the young, have been drawn to Wagner by these new approaches — not to mention the very quality of his wonderful operas. Many of them are too young to have the old World War II associations, and thus can see and hear the operas with minds unburdened by these ugly memories. In addition, the symphonic quality of Wagner's music, coupled with its dramatic and visual powers, has attracted new audiences through recordings and videotapes. Now that virtually every opera house in the world has some system of surtitles, it has also helped

Wagnerian opera since when audiences can understand what is being sung on stage, they become more engaged in opera. The age of compact discs, videocassettes, CDs, and DVDs has brought new audiences to Wagnerian opera — first in Europe and now around the world. Wagner can make music that sounds hot (the fire music of the *Ring*), sexy (the first act of *Die Walküre* and the last scene of *Siegfried*), tragic (the opening of *Götterdämmerung* and *Siegfried's* funeral music), and silly (the flute playing of Siegfried in the second act of *Siegfried*). All these varied musical effects become cleverly woven into the drama and create symphonic sounds that accentuate theatrical developments.

**Jon Fredric West as Siegfried and Jane Eaglen as Brünnhilde in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*.**

## The *Ring's* Revolutionary Ideas

The young have also been attracted to Wagner as a social revolutionary. The spring of 1849 found Wagner at the barricades in Dresden, fighting the aristocratic establishment and defending the rights of the poor and the disenfranchised. The year 1848, during which he started work on the *Ring*, was also the year that Karl Marx wrote *The Communist Manifesto*. The *Ring's* own anti-materialism and anti-capitalism are emphasized by several critics, starting with George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*, and even a casual understanding of the *Ring* forces one to ponder what happens to the gold after it is stolen from the river and transformed into the ring, with its immense wealth and power. In many ways the *Ring* is a study in greed and the corruption that results when even noble characters like the god Wotan renounce love and become murderously ruthless in their determination to possess the mighty ring. The power of money and what it does to people remain the obvious interpretations, as well as how our ability to love can be incapacitated by our desire for money. In many ways the *Ring* is a family tragedy that shows how money and power can destroy a family and pit one member against another.

The dramatic and mythic qualities of the *Ring* have also attracted many new fans to its power. At a time when J.R.R. Tolkien's own *Ring* — both in its original form as novels and its newer film versions — has become very popular, it is not surprising that Wagner's *Ring* (certainly the source of the Tolkien work) becomes more and more enticing. Both artists were interested in mythic patterns such as love and hate, evil and revenge, water and air, earth and fire, life and death, tragedy and comedy, and death and transfiguration. It is no coincidence that the *Ring* ends where it begins, in the depths of the Rhine. Recurrent cycles remain what the *Ring* is essentially about, and our lives are governed by them. A man dies of cancer, his grandson is born a month later; lovers fight and make up; water evaporates and clouds are formed; matter is destroyed, but energy is created. The forces of nature occur all around us and control our lives, and they come in cycles — like Wagner's *Ring* — and these cycles both create lives and destroy them.

## The *Ring's* Scenic Demands

The scenic effects that Wagner demands, utterly impossible at the time the operas were written in the l9th century, provide fresh challenges to modern stage designers and inspire them to produce fascinating new *Ring* productions. So many of the visual effects Wagner wanted seem cinematic because of the composer's impossible demands. The ending of *Götterdämmerung*, with the hall of the Gibichungs afire, Valhalla in flames, and the Rhine overflowing, seems still impossible to achieve onstage. Some great filmmaker, though, could create wonderful images with these Wagnerian demands, assuming of course that realism is worth achieving. If Wagner were alive today, he would probably be turning his operas into films, given the impossible imagistic demands he makes of the operatic stage.

## The *Ring's* Characters

Besides fantastic visual effects, characterization remains another of Wagner's appeals. His correspondence is filled with reference to people as either loving friends or dangerous enemies. In his personal life he tended to look upon other people in extremes, as heroes or villains — and indeed there is a bipolar quality to his life in general, a life lived in extremes of often suicidal depressions and paranoid manias. But one of the most wonderful and amazing things about the *Ring* is its lack of melodramatic characterization. The *Ring's* characters remain as inexhaustible as real people because they refuse to be neatly categorized and dismissed. Who is the real villain in the *Ring*? The god Wotan does much more evil than the dwarf

**A scene from Wagner's *Das Rheingold*.**
***Photo: Ken Howard/The Metropolitan Opera***

Alberich ever dreams of — and often Alberich's many personal rejections and his very isolation make him a very sympathetic character. In *Das Rheingold* Loge finds the gods the most culpable of beings, not the Nibelung dwarves. Wagner's characters become as confusing and fascinating and multidimensional as real people because they are never melodramatically two-dimensional. Even Hunding and Hagen (usually seen as the *Ring*'s villains) can be portrayed onstage as very anguished and sympathetic characters despite the brutality of some of their actions.

## A *Ring* Renaissance

For all of the above reasons and many more, a Wagner renaissance is alive and doing well today, and for the increasing number of people becoming fascinated with the *Ring*, a collection of essays such as *Inside the Ring: Essays on Wagner's Opera Cycle* will be helpful.

**A scene from Act II of Wagner's *Siegfried* with Jon Fredric West in the title role. *Photo: Marty Sohl/The Metropolitan Opera***

Using a variety of writing styles from the most carefully scholarly to the conversational, this collection of essays examines many different aspects of Wagner's complex *Ring*.

Clearly, too many people have approached the *Ring* with fear and trembling, but the time for Wagnerian intimidation is over. More than anything else, the *Ring* cycle was meant to be enjoyed. The new book will provide more information about this work for *Ring* fans, and with more knowledge of this vast work comes more enjoyment. Here a beginner can start his examination of the cycle, but here the expert will also find new approaches and insights. *Inside the Ring: Essays on Wagner's Opera Cycle* will provide an introduction to the inexhaustible *Ring* — arguably the greatest work of operatic art ever composed. Each new hearing, new viewing, and new production offers new insights and new discoveries. The complexities and fascinations of the *Ring* can provide entertainment and enlightenment for a lifetime — and perhaps even beyond! The Metropolitan Opera here in New York will bring back its wonderful production of the *Ring* in two years, so opportunities to experience Wagner's *Ring* exist both here in the New York area and increasingly around the world.

**Professor John DiGaetani** earned a B.A. in English from the University of Illinois, an M.A. in English from Northern Illinois University, and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Wisconsin. Prior to earning the doctoral degree, Professor DiGaetani accepted a position as an instructor of English at Providence College to decide if he wanted to teach at the university level. "I wanted to know if I would like teaching [at the university level] before pursuing a Ph.D.," he explains. "Obviously, I really enjoyed it."

As an undergraduate student, John DiGaetani planned on a career in law. However, after taking courses in English, he found himself immersed in the subject. He genuinely enjoyed reading and writing, and he knew that by pursuing a degree in English he would be able to focus on these areas.

When Professor DiGaetani joined the Hofstra faculty in 1978, he taught courses primarily in business communication at the Frank G. Zarb School of Business. He was also a guest professor for one year at Harvard University's Graduate School of Business Administration. He currently teaches courses on modern theater, modern literature, history of English literature, and Western European literature, among others. Professor DiGaetani loves teaching English, although every so often he will also teach a class in business communication. Professor DiGaetani is also the director of Hofstra University's London Program, which takes place during the January session. The program offers English courses in contemporary British theater.

Professor DiGaetani has authored 15 books on a variety of topics, including: *Richard Wagner and the Modern British Novel, A Search for a Postmodern Theater*, and *An Invitation to the Opera*. In 1978, he edited a book titled *Penetrating Wagner's Ring: An Anthology*. Currently, he is working on another book on Richard Wagner titled *Inside the Ring: Essays on Wagner's Opera Cycle*, which will be published in spring 2006.

Professor DiGaetani is of Italian descent and, as such, he was originally drawn to Italian opera. The first time he visited Europe, however, after arriving in Paris, he ran to the Paris Opera because he was eager to see the opera house. There, Wagner's *Tannhauser* was being performed for the entire week. Professor DiGaetani's first thoughts about *Tannhauser* were in keeping with those of the Italian composer Rossini. During this first experience with Wagner, he remembers that there were "wonderful moments," but "terrible half-hours." Today, however, he has been converted to a full-fledged "*Ring*-head," that is to say, like many others, he is truly in awe of and inspired by this great work of composer Richard Wagner, *The Ring*.

Professor DiGaetani firmly believes that "scholarship works particularly well when you are able to combine it with your teaching." He is always eager to incorporate opera into his course curriculum, when appropriate. His genuine passion for both teaching and scholarship is quite evident.