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Der Ring des Nibelungen

FROM THEORY INTO PRACTICE: THE RING

Chapter: CHAPTER 10 Deeds of Music Made Visible (Class of 1813, I)
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To return now from the speculative to the historical plane and continue our narrative, the intentions implicit in *Art and Revolution* could hardly have been embodied more explicitly than they were in Wagner's next creative project. And equally obvious is the persistent identity of the Wagnerian cult of strength with a cult of nation after all—a nation conceived not in political but in ethnic (or "racial") terms. As Wagner put it shortly after returning from Paris to Zürich, his Swiss abode, exile had made him homesick—but not "merely for the modern homeland":

> As though to get down to its root, I sank myself into the primal element of Home, that meets us in the legends of a Past which attracts us the more warmly as the Present repels us with its hostile chill. To all our wishes and warm impulses, which in truth transport us to the *Future*, we seek to give a physical token by means of pictures from the Past, and thus to win for them a form the modern Present never can provide.[20]

Thus was Utopia tinged by nostalgia. Under cover of a universalism that nevertheless drew exclusively on pre-Enlightened Germanic sources, nationalism had reentered through the back door.

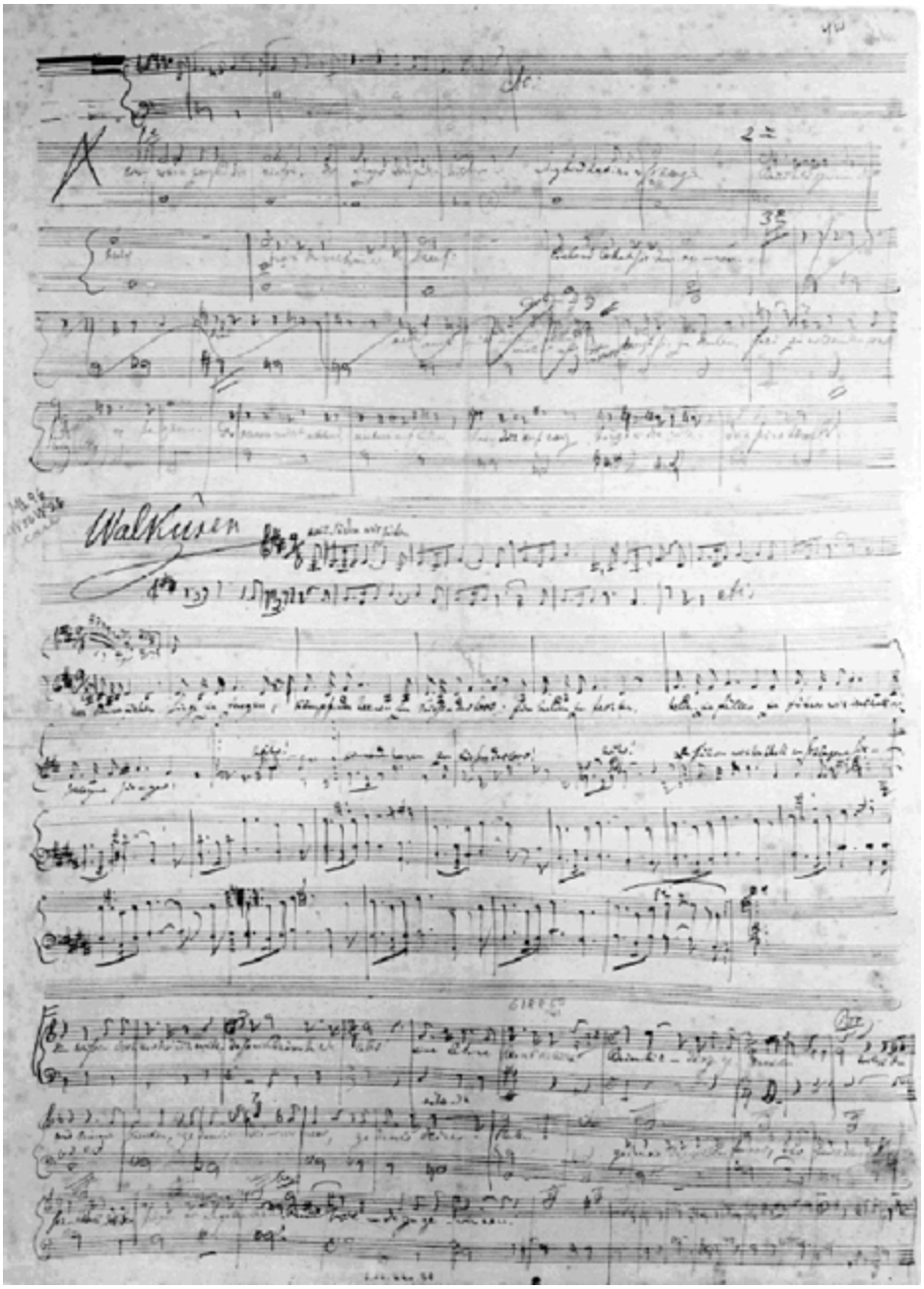


fig. 10-4 Wagner, sketch for *Siegfrieds Tod* (1850), containing music that later went into *Die Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* (Library of Congress, Gertrude Clarke Whittall Foundation).

The combination of futuristic utopianism by way of Bakunin and nostalgic utopianism by way of Nordic myth was a volatile one, to say the least. Wagner met Bakunin in the summer of 1848. He spent the fall of that year drafting the "poem" for a *grosse Heldenoper* ("great heroic opera") to be called *Siegfrieds Tod* ("The death of Siegfried"). Siegfried (or Sigurd) the Dragon-Slayer was the great folk hero of the early and medieval Germanic mythology in which Wagner was immersing himself. For Wagner, Siegfried was a revelation of "the fair young form of Man, in all the freshness of his force, the real naked Man, in whom I might spy each throbbing of his pulses, each stir within his mighty muscles, in uncramped, freest motion: the type of the true *human being*."[21] Siegfried's legend looms especially large in the *Volsungasaga*, an Icelandic epic that recounts the mythic origins of the Nordic peoples, and in the *Nibelungenlied*, a thirteenth-century epic by an anonymous South German poet, which recounts many of Siegfried's exploits, including his brute seizure for his superior Volsung race of the great gold hoard of the Nibelungs (a race of dwarfs), his capture of Brynhild, the Icelandic queen, his death through her treachery, and her atonement through self-immolation, leading to the golden age of gods and Germans.

Wagner's enthusiasm for these old texts was not his alone. As the Wagnerian scholar Barry Millington has pointed out, by the 1840s the *Nibelungenlied* had become the object of a cult in Germany, where it had become "a potent symbol in the struggle for national unification."[22] None other than Franz Brendel, the force behind the New German School, had called for an operatic setting of the myth, no doubt already thinking of Wagner: "I believe the composer who could accomplish this task in an adequate manner would become the man of his era,"[23] he declared. But Wagner had his own reasons to be drawn to Siegfried. As George Bernard Shaw dryly observed in his lighthearted but instructive pamphlet *The Perfect Wagnerite* (1898), Wagner saw Siegfried as a sort of Norse "Bakoonin," a great (if thwarted) revolutionary figure.

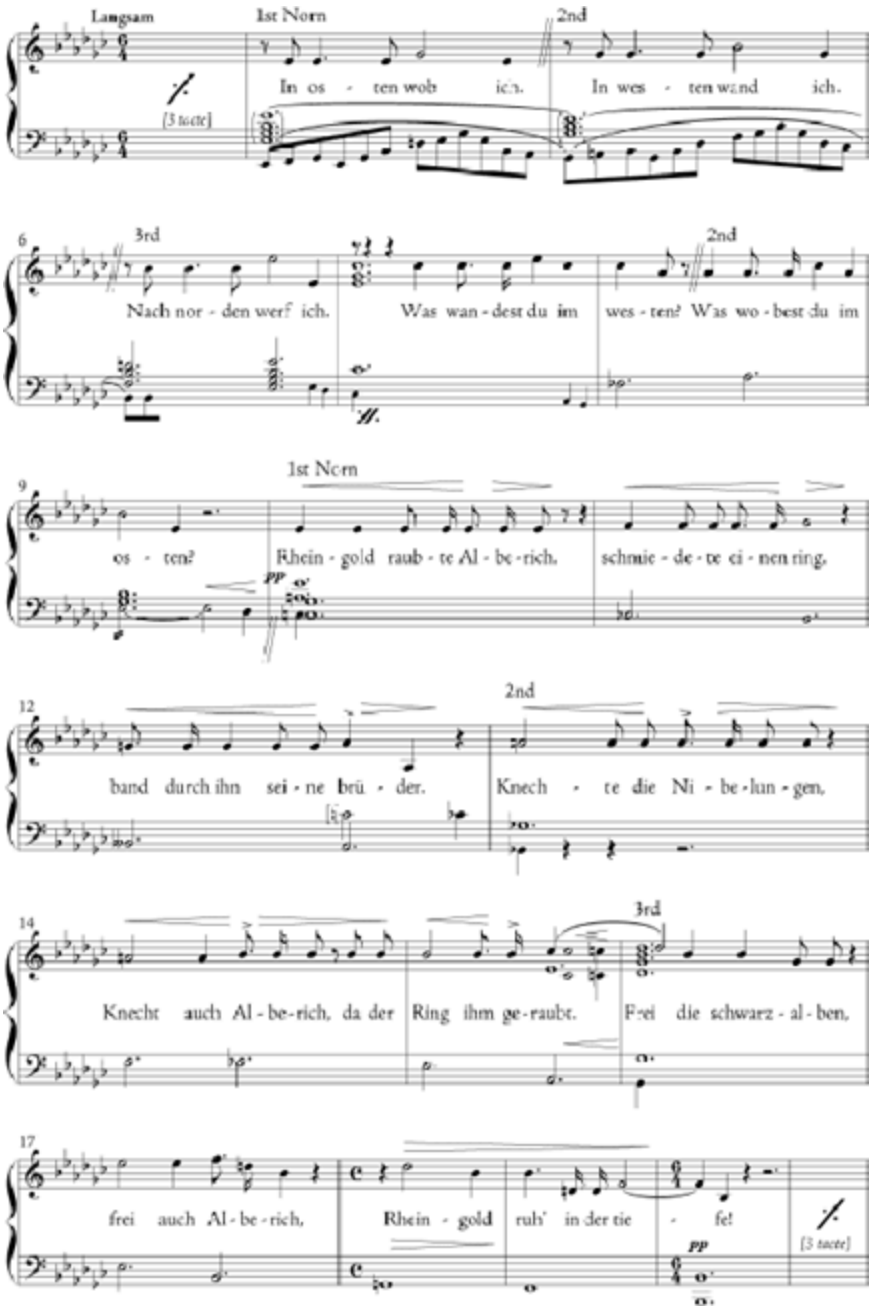
Wagner first learned about the Volsungs and the Nibelungs by way of *Deutsche Mythologie* (1835), a best-seller by the great philologist Jacob Grimm of fairy tale fame, which contained alongside detailed synopses of the sagas a description of the Norse theogony (the genealogy and history of the gods), as preserved in the medieval Icelandic epics known as Eddas. The aim of *Siegfrieds Tod* was to link the personal tragedy of Siegfried, a traditional sort of operatic subject (and one already foreshadowed in the previous works of Wagner's early maturity), with the Edda myths, the history of the gods, and so elevate the drama to the level of a cosmogony (the story of the origins and destiny of the world). That would provide a suitably hallowed subject for his socially transforming "Art-work of the future." The libretto he came up with portrayed Siegfried's death as the end result and expiation of a curse on the Nibelung hoard, placed there long ago (according to the Eddas) by the dwarf Alberich from whom the gods had stolen it. In this blend of tragedy and epic (something, incidentally, that the Greeks said couldn't be done), the tragic element was to be portrayed through action, the epic through a wealth of ballad-narratives of a kind for which Wagner had already shown a strong predilection.

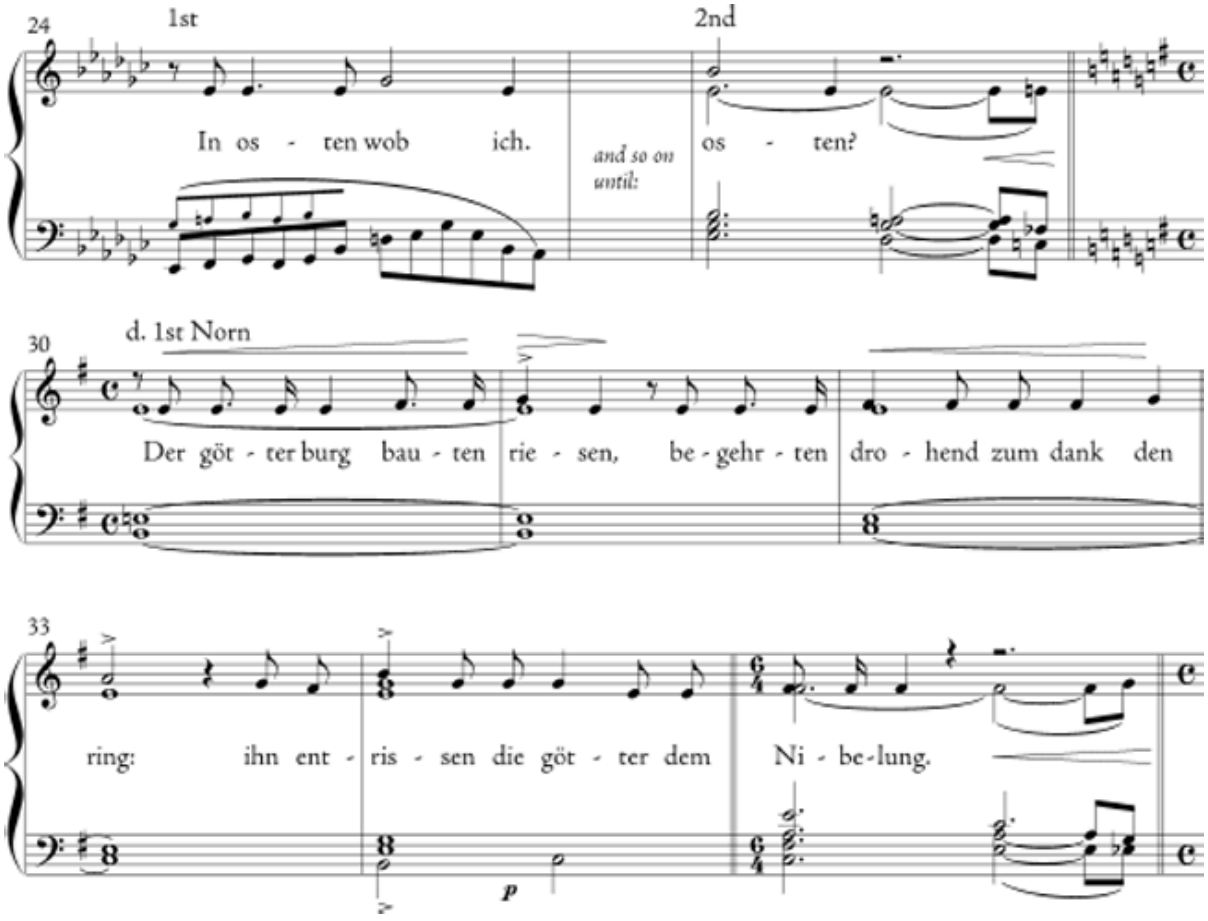
This time, however, it did not work. The biggest ballad-narrative in *Siegfrieds Tod* came right at the beginning, in a lengthy prologue that showed the three Norns, figures comparable to the three Fates of Greek mythology, who weave eternally the rope of destiny. As they weave, they tell the story of how the dwarf Alberich, of the Nibelung race, stole the gold hoard from the Rhine and fashioned from it a ring; how the gods contracted for themselves a magnificent castle and paid for it by stealing the ring from the Nibelungs, who cursed it, and by giving the cursed ring to the giants who built the castle; how Siegfried slew the surviving giant, who had assumed the form of a dragon; how the hero won the sleeping Brynhild (Brünnhilde in the opera), awakened and loved her (an archetypal Wagnerian "love of the strong for the strong") but failed to heed the portent of her treachery. This final section of the narrative brings the story to the point at which direct action can commence. A true ballad, it was even equipped with a refrain that is heard at the beginning and at every point where a semicolon occurred in the foregoing summary (Ex. 10-1).

Wagner sketched a setting of this narrative, and also began the next scene, a duet for Brünnhilde and Siegfried, before breaking off in despair. In a later tract, *Eine Mittheilung an meine Freunde* ("A communication to my friends"), published in 1851 as the hundred-page preface to a collected edition of the "poems" to his romantic operas, Wagner gave an account of his travails. "Just as I was setting Brünnhilde's first address to Siegfried," he wrote, "all my courage suddenly failed me since I could not refrain from asking myself which singer could bring such a heroine to life." Another reason for losing heart was the knowledge, as he put it, that "I should now be writing this music only for paper,"[24] that is, without any imminent prospect of a performance, exiled as he was from his homeland.

But as Carolyn Abbate has suggested, these were rationalizations, not reasons.[25] There was more to Wagner's impasse than practical concerns or temporary dejection. It peeps through the lines of his "Communication" where Wagner wrote—somewhat clumsily, at an uncharacteristic loss for words—of his "fear that my poetic purpose could not be conveyed in its full aspect to the only organ at which I aimed, namely the *Gefühlsverständnis* of any public whatsoever."[26] The best that Wagner's first English translator, William Ashton Ellis, could do with the crucial word, *Gefühlsverständnis*, was "feelings-understanding." It would be fruitless to look for a better English phrase, since the German itself is murky. A gloss is required, an interpretation in the light of subsequent events. But first, back to Wagner. After some hemming and hawing, he continues his confession. If he continued setting the existing poem as it stood, he realized,

> I should have had willy-nilly to tax myself to *suggest* a host of huge connections in order to present the action in its full meaning. But these *suggestions*, naturally, could only be inlaid in *epic* [i.e., narrative] form into the drama; and here was the point that filled me with misgiving as to the efficacy of my drama, in its proper sense of a scenic exposition. But these connections were of such a nature that they could proclaim themselves only in actual plot situations, that is in situations that can only be intelligibly displayed *in Drama*. Only in this way could I have any chance of succeeding in *artistically conveying my purpose to the true emotional* (not just the critical) *understanding* of spectators who shall have gathered together expressly to learn it.[27]


Langsam
1st Norn
2nd
In os - ten wob ich. In wes - ten wand ich.
[3 tacte]
6
3rd
2nd
Nach nor - den werf ich. Was wan - dest du im wes - ten? Was wo - best du im
9
1st Norn
os - ten? Rhein - gold raub - te Al - be - rich, schmie - de - te ei - nen ring,
PP
12
2nd
band durch ihn sei - ne brü - der. Knech - te die Ni - be - lun - gen,
14
3rd
Knecht auch Al - be - rich, da der Ring ihm ge - raubt. Frei die schwarz - al - ben,
17
frei auch Al - be - rich, Rhein - gold ruh' in der tie - fe!
PP
[3 tacte]



ex. 10-1 Norns' refrain and First Norn's first speech from Wagner's sketches for *Siegfrieds Tod*

Usually this passage, and the one before it, is interpreted to mean that Wagner wanted to convert the narrative component of the drama, which recounted all those "suggestions" of previous history, into directly portrayed action, which meant expanding the conception of the dramatized myth into a whole trilogy of musical dramas plus a prologue: that is, the gigantic theatrical cycle that Wagner did in fact succeed in bringing forth (though it took him twenty-five years to do it) and that is now collectively known as *Der Ring des Nibelungen* ("The ring of the Nibelung," or "Alberich's ring").

But this explanation leaves us with a paradox: even after the remaining dramas were composed, the narratives in the last of them, which had been *Siegfrieds Tod* (now called *Götterdämmerung*, "Twilight of the Gods") not only remained in place but became even longer than before. And this applies especially to the narrative of the Norns, where all the trouble began. In the abortive version of 1850, its setting, a simple ballad with refrain, occupied 114 measures; its very complex successor in *Götterdämmerung*, even without counting the spate of orchestral music that precedes the singing, takes 277!

Thomas Mann had an inkling into what Wagner was really about when he wrote that in turning *Siegfrieds Tod* into the *Ring* Wagner was acting on "an overpowering need to bring that previous history within the sphere of his sense-appeal."[28] This begins to suggest that what Wagner felt was needed was a musically realized version of the past history of the drama that would give him the means of triggering through "sense" (that is, the sense of hearing) the kind of emotional response to the action—*whether directly portrayed or narrated*—that only music can elicit. That is what Wagner must have meant by "suggestions of connections"; and the emotional response to that sensory stimulus must be what he meant by "the feeling's-understanding." Put most simply, there had to be a preexisting *musical* reality with which the Norns' narrative, and everything else in the final drama, could suggestively connect.

Carolyn Abbate has built further on Mann's insight, casting Wagner's task as being one of creating "a past in music"[29] (rather than one merely described in words) that would be—precisely because it *was* in music—a truly mythic (or, to use Wagner's word, "engulfing") reality that the listener could be fully drawn into and could thus imaginatively inhabit for the duration of the performance. The purpose, then, of converting what was at first merely narrated by the Norns into directly portrayed action was

to generate from it a fund of musical symbols with which to stock the audience's mind, so that when the same all-encompassing narration finally arrived at the beginning of what was the last in a colossal series of four operas, it would possess a palpable, engulfing, and, finally, irresistible emotional force.

By the time Wagner wrote his "Communication to My Friends," he had formulated this grand plan, had begun implementing it, and had even (in *Opera and Drama*) recast the whole history of music and drama from the Greeks to the present in order to justify it as the inevitable outcome of that history. No artist had ever exhibited such unmitigated arrogant ambition; but by the same token no artist had ever accepted so publicly the risk of risible failure. The eventual triumph of the *Ring* was what made Wagner for the last dozen years of his life the uncrowned king of German music. But these were also the first dozen years of the German Reich, the empire that finally united all the German princedoms and dukedoms under an actual single king. The prophecy of *Art and Revolution*, linking artistic regeneration with the regeneration of the body politic, could be seen, by those who wished, as having come true.

Notes:

(20) Richard Wagner, "A Communication to My Friends," in *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. I, p. 357.

(21) *Ibid*., pp. 357–58.

(22) Barry Millington, "The Music: Operas," in *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner's Life and Music*, ed. B. Millington (New York: Schirmer, 1992), p. 285.

(23) Franz Brendel in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 1845; quoted *ibid*.

(24) *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. I, p. 380.

(25) Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, p. 158.

(26) *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. I, pp. 389–90.

(27) *Ibid*., p. 390.

(28) Mann, "Sufferings and Greatness," p. 423.

(29) Carolyn Abbate, classroom lecture overheard at Princeton University, November 1993.