The Nibelungenlied Essay, Research Paper

The original aim of this paper was to encompass the bulk of Mythology’s impact on the arts. Before very long I realized that to cover such a vast area, I would be treading dangerously close to a book’s length project. I then decided to limit the topic to Mythology and its impact on music, specifically classical. Again, this was an enormous field to limit to a short research paper. After considerable deliberation I decided to focus primarily on the music of Richard Wagner (1813 – 1883), principally his “Der Ring des Nibelungen”, or, The Ring of the Nibelung.

The Nibelungenlied is a medieval German epic poem, written in Middle High German in the early thirteenth century. Its authorship is unknown. The poem is a mixture of Norse and Teutonic Mythology concerning the early history of the kingdom of Burgundy. There are several versions of basically the same story, details are shaded but the end results are the same. Wagner used material from The Nibelungenlied (Song of the Nibelung), and the Vollsunga Saga (Saga of the Volsungs) for the majority of his master work.

The Ring of the Nibelung, a cycle of four operas– Das Rheingold, Die Walkure, Siegfried, and Gotterdammerung–was conceived in 1848 and completed about twenty-five years later. Wagner began with the intention of writing the libretto of a single opera drawn from several myths about the race of the Volsungs and the Nibelung’s treasure; it was to be called Siegfried’s Death, and its content primarilly corresponds to that of the present day Gotterdammerung (Twilight of the Gods).

Between 1848 and 1853, before composing a single note of music, Wagner wrote first, Young Siegfried (corresponding to the present day Siegfried) and then Die Walkure, and Rheingold. By late 1853, composition of the cycle had begun with Das Rheingold. By 1857 he had completed Die Walkure and two complete acts of Siegfried, at which time he postponed work on the Ring for twelve years to compose Tristan und Isolde and Die Meistersinger. In 1869 he returned to Siegfried and Gotterdammerung. By 1874 he was completed and the first production of the entire cycle was held in Bayreuth, Germany in 1876.

Without a doubt, Richard Wagner transformed the existing myth into something distinctly his own. With his execution, The Nibelungenlied became a vehicle for the fervor of nationalism thriving during that period. Here was a story glorifying German honor and pride, again, at a time in history when nationalism was at its peak. Essentially, Wagner became the voice of a very proud German people. As history and myth alike have proven, pride can be, and usually is a destructive force when taken to extremes. The eighty or so years of German history following this period may be the best example of this the world has ever seen. Before discussing the myth and the operas, let us examine the reasons behind this unprecedented work. Why did Wagner feel the need to elaborate on the Saga? What did he hope to achieve? Where did it all begin. . . . ?

Like many artists, Wagner was greatly influenced by Mythology. The majority of his other works were based, at least in part, on famous legends. Der Fliegende Hollander ( The Flying Dutchman) is based on the Norse myth concerning the doomed ship and its crew, destined to sail endlessly never to find a port to call home. Tristan und Isolde (Tristan and Isolde) is the tale of the hero Tristan and the beautiful Queen Isolde, united by a magic potion in a passion that defies all legal and moral sanctions. It is considered one of the greatest love stories ever written. Parsival (Parsifal) is probably one of the least famous Wagnerian operas, but is derived from one of the more famous stories; the quest for the Holy Grail.

The idea for the tentative Young Siegfried actually came from another opera on which Wagner had previously begun work. In October of 1846, the composer started the draft for a five-act play about Frederich ‘Barbarossa’. It was developed, but Wagner was not comfortable with the idea of marshaling a series of historical facts. It was at this point that Wagner realized the similarities between Frederich I and the Nibelung myth. In his mind, the Hohenstaufen monarch was the reincarnation of the heathen Siegfried. This spark of an idea compelled Wagner to write Die Wibelungen: Weltgeschichte aus der Saga (The Wibelungs: History out of Saga). This served the purpose of unifying myth with history to fit the composer’s needs. It is unclear whether or not Wagner believed any of his own theories, but this is an insignificant question. One small substitution and Frederich ‘Redbeard’ became a descendent of the divinely sired Siegfried. Because Frederich was a partial embodiment of nationalist socialist aspirations, Wagner had succeeded in reconciling the current feeling in Germany with its great historical Sagas. The Wibelungen essay was the root from which Der Ring des Nibelungen sprang. Only a short time after the completion of the original essay, Wagner wrote Der Nibelungenmythus, als Entwurf zu einum Drama (The Nibelung Myth as a Sketch for a Drama). This work was a complete and well constructed plot for the entire Ring. There is some belief that at this time Wagner had no conception of the downfall of the Gods. This, however, is a contestable point, Gregor- Dellin writes, ” The whole thing is a parable. Wagner’s earliest plot for the Ring embodied the self destruction of the Gods. If he left them alive in the poem ‘Siegfried’s Tod’, it was for an obvious dramatic reason: They did not appear at all and had yet to disclose their guilt, the origins of which remained obscure. This, after all, was opera”. Wagner completed his prose version of the Ring plot, originally entitled Die Nibelungensaga, on October 4th, 1848. This means that during the few weeks following his visit to Vienna, in August and September, 1848, he formed a complete mental picture of the towering edifice whose capstone, the last note on the Ring score, would not be laid until 1874. The plot was already what the Ring became, ” a socio-critical picture of the age with a mythological structure” (Hans Mayer), and no one who has read Die Wibelungen would dispute that assertion. So his course was set, Wagner’s life long dream of a purely German mythical Saga set to music was realized. In the history of music, there was, nor will there ever be, a composer better suited for the task. Now let us investigate the myth itself, and some interesting similarities between it and other classical, western mythologies.

The story which our poem tells, is one of murder and of revenge long-nourished, and it ends with the destruction of two armies. The avenger is a woman; the avenged her beloved husband; her victims are her brothers and her kinsmen. This, in its crudest terms, is the plot: having won the amazonian Queen Brunhilde for King Gunther in exchange for Gunther’s sister Gutrune, the mighty King Siegfried is murdered by Gunther’s vassal Hagen after a quarrel between the Queens; for which Gutrune at long last avenges him.

The previous passage is an excerpt from a basic description of the myth by the noted author. It is, as he notes, crude, but it is also very accurate. This observation in itself brings up an interesting parallel with The Iliad. In that piece, Homer depicts the rape of Helen, and the siege and sack of Troy in a few days’ time. Homer specifically leaves out the insignificant parts, yet we have a vivid picture of the key occurrences. In comparison, The Nibelungenlied relates a story which encompasses all of Brunhilde’s life from birth to death. To achieve this effectively, the author skips huge lapses of time and concentrates on important, specific situations, much like Homer with The Iliad. This fact may very well be one of the more insignificant similarities between the two epics. For instance; the chief God in The Nibelungenlied is Wotan. As The supreme being, he is obviously to be compared to the most famous of western, classical, Gods; Zeus. Interestingly enough, the association is strengthened by several other factors; Wotan’s entire habitat is almost identical to Mount Olympus. He occupies a mountain top which overlooks the earth, in residence with him are other primary Gods, all of which appear to have corresponding Greek divinities. Frock is Wotan’s wife and also the guardian of domestic virtue. Loge is the God off flame. Freia is the daughter of Wotan and Frock, as well as the Goddess of love and beauty. Also, Wotan’s habits and overall general disposition are near identical to those of Zeus. He is jealous as well as childish. The majority of the poem is laced with similarities to Greco-Roman mythology, but, evident throughout out the piece there are other parrelels drawn with other tales. For example, Siegfried’s father Siegmund is able to pull the sword ‘Needful’ out of a tree. Obviously the similarity with the fables of King Arthur and the Knights of the round table is evident. For all intents and purposes, ‘ Needful ‘ is ‘ Excalibur ‘. The significance of the sword in the Ring is comparable to that of Excalibur in the Arthurian tales. Siegfried himself is the embodiment of a German Achilles. The only significant difference between the two characters is that it is unclear whether or not Siegfried’s downfall is a direct result of his pride, as is the case with Achilles. If speaking solely with the myth and not with the opera, this becomes an unimportant point due to the fact that in The Nibelungenlied Siegfried is not the proper hero as he is in Das Ring des Nibelung. The most symbolic comparison of Achilles and Siegfried arises from the fact that they have similar means of protection from physical harm. The story of Achilles is widely known. Upon being dipped into the river Styx, he became impervious to harm except for the area behind one of his heels which was not touched by the water. Siegfried receives this power as a result of killing the Dragon Fafnir. When he thrust his sword into the beast’s heart the blood which erupted forth covered Siegfried except for a small area of his back on which a leaf had fallen, thus, this became the only penetrable part of his body. Of course, as with Achilles, this would eventually become a very significant factor. Throughout the epic there are several other parrelells drawn with Greco-Roman myth including the lack of a structured concept of the passage of time, Brunhilde’s flying horse Grandi, an obvious reference to Pegasus, and the significance of the number three. In The Nibelungenlied there are three Rhine Nymphs, and three Nornir. The Nornir represent the Norse version of the sisters of fate. The Rhine Nymphs are the original keepers of the gold from which the ring itself is fashioned. They are the daughters of Wotan and are basically to blame for the loss of the gold which essentially marks the beginning of the fable. It would appear that they are a cross between the Greek muses and the sirens. Without a doubt the origins of the entire poem can be traced to classical Greco-Roman myth. Was this intentional? Or was this just the only source that the unknown author had to draw upon for style and substance? It would appear that most literature takes some kind of basic element from the “classics”, even modern works. The essentials of every drama, comedy, and tragedy; love, hate, greed, war, murder, etc. . ., came from somewhere. In the west, that somewhere is ancient Greece. Now let us continue and examine the opera and what Wagner did to make it suit his needs. What are the differences between Der Ring des Nibelung, and The Nibelungenlied?

With the Ring, Wagner establishes a beginning for the fable. He assigns a history to Siegfried and changes what the poem has already established. His reasons for this are speculative at best, but the most widely accepted suggestion is simply; ” With The NIbelungenlied, Wagner has a pallette from which to create his story. It is no different from a painter using the birth of Christ as an inspiration for a painting, or a sculptor utilizing a character from a biblical story as the subject of a piece of sculpture. If adequate acknowledgment is given to the ‘primary’ source than there is not a problem.”. The opera is different from the poem. It cannot be more simply stated. Concerning the adaptation of the myth to the opera Oliver Ditson writes; ” Wagner found the material for his colossal project in the saga of the northern mythology; but it required the hand of the master dramatist to weld the disconnected legends into a logically developed and unified whole, to trace the relation of cause and effect; and by eliminating what was irrelevant to his purpose, and emphasizing the important facts of the narrative, to give to the mass of incident life and action, leading to overpowering climaxes.” What the author is saying is basically that Wagner was creating art from art, that is to say, opera from epic poetry. While the poem is an accepted piece of literature, it lacks the semblance and structure to be a successful libretto for an effective opera. One could use the analogy of a movie screenplay adapted from a novel, the movie usually succeeds in conveying the general crisis of the written story, but it is unable to do this by adhering strictly to the words of the author. If this was done there would exist a ten hour movie that a viewer would not be able to appreciate in one sitting. In the case of the Ring, Wagner changes significant occurrences to achieve something different from the saga. In the opera, Alberich, King of the Nibelung, becomes Hagen’s father and gives the inspiration for the murder of Siegfried. In the poem, there is no mention of Alberich being related to Hagen in any way. One must keep in mind that the poem is exclusively a history of the Nibelung as a race of people, the opera reduces this to a matter of secondary importance as its main theme is the story of the Ring, the myth continues long after the area where the opera ends. In the saga, there is no established relationship between Siegfried and Brunhilde. The only purpose for Siegfried to pursue Brunhilde is to win the hand of Gutrune from her brother Gunther, King of the Gibichungs. This whole scenario does take place in the opera, but in an entirely different way, with entirely different consequences. In the opera, this happens as a direct result of Hagen’s treachery. Siegfried has already suffered the trial of fire for the hand of Brunhilde, in fact, this is the basis for the climax of Siegfried, the third opera in the cycle.

The second opera, Die Walkure, deals with the history of the Valkyrie, and introduces Siegmund, and Siegliund, Siegfried’s mother and father. In the opera, Siegmund dies in a battle with Hunding, Siegliund’s husband. This proves to be a monumental scene as it is the source of Brunhilde’s banishment, as well as the climax of the second act. Siegliund, after the battle, is rescued by Brunhilde and flown, (via Grandi), to Valhalla for protection. Siegliund’s fate is never given in the opera, but it can be assumed that she dies shortly after giving birth to Siegfried.

The first three operas of the cycle are distinctly different from the myth of which they were born, this is a point that has been reiterated several times throughout this paper, but while in contrast with the saga, they also have been, to some extent, in agreement with it as well. This is the significant difference between those operas and the fourth; Gotterdammerung. The Twilight of the Gods serves as a finale of the entire ring cycle. The enormous work comes to a close with this opera, and subsequently all questions are answered; all comes together, so to speak. While it remains the last, it was actually the first libretto that Wagner wrote. At first this seems illogical, but if the entire ring is analyzed, as well as the original saga, it begins to make sense. Gotterdammerung is the one opera of the four that is not directly related to The Nibelungenlied. A good reason for this maybe that Wagner started here, and actually had a complete opera in itself with just this composition, but to him it was not enough, the composer needed to establish a history for his characters, as well as an impetus for them to be where they were. If Wagner would have ended with just this opera he would have had something probably very similar to Tristan und Isolde, but that he had already done. Another significant point is that this work starts mid-way through the fable, it better served his purpose, artistically speaking, to kill the essential players off in true romantic grandeur rather than to let them live on. What would they do? The towering ending to the opera, and consequently the tetralogy, is the death of Brunhilde and Hagen at the funeral scene of Siegfried. In the saga, all of these players, excluding Siegfried, go on to live and die another time.

Despite attempts in some quarters to deny it, there is no doubt that Wagner intended his mighty tetralogy as a critique of existing society, pointing the way to a reconstructed world in which humankind would reorder its affairs differently, more equitable, guided by the spirit of love rather than that of mammon. Nowhere is this intention more explicit than in Das Rheingold. The work opens with a depiction of the innocent world of nature; the flowing waters of the Rhine, at the bottom of which sleeps the gold in its natural, untarnished state. With the entry of the dwarf Alberich arrives the spirit of commerce: in no time he has traded in any finer instincts he might have had, including the capacity for tender love, in order to acquire the ring, which in turn enables him to accumulate limitless wealth and power. Enslaving a whole race of people in the process, he forces others to generate more wealth for him, until eventually he is toppled by a hostile takeover. But for the new owner of the ring, Wotan, the ruler of the Gods, this is just the beginning of a chain of events that is to end not only in his own downfall, but in a global cataclysm. Das Rheingold is an allegory that gives unequivocal expression to Wagner’s anti-capitalist world view. In Marxist terms, it is a critique of production relations, of the destructive, alienating power of capital, and of exploitation and oppression in both industrial and social spheres. Wagner perceived Germany — indeed humanity itself — to be in a spiral of moral and spiritual decline. The Ring with its apocalyptic ending, offering at least the chance of a new beginning, is testimony to that perception.” In the light of his genius the simple legends acquired a deeper significance; the rape of the Rheingold, and the curse which was thereafter visited upon its possessors, crafty or innocent, became symbolic of the lust for wealth and power, with all its attendant evil, a curse which could be removed only through the expiation and triumphing love of Brunhilde, whose self-immolation, while marking the end of the reign of the Gods, brought the dawn of new era — that of human love — upon the earth.

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