

‘Idea’, Teleology, Providence and the ‘Death of God’ in Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*. A
New Perspective on the Composer’s Debt to G.W.F. Hegel.¹

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7983 words

Introduction

Heinrich Heine, reflecting on his acquaintance with Hegel in Berlin, writes this: ‘I often used to see him looking around anxiously as if in fear he might be understood. He was very fond of me, for he was sure I would never betray him. As a matter of fact, I then thought that he was very obsequious. Once when I grew impatient with him for saying: “All that is, is rational,” he smiled strangely and remarked, “It may also be said that all that is rational must be.” Then he looked about him hastily; but he was speedily reassured, for only Heinrich Beer had heard his words. It was not till later that I understood these expressions. Not till later did I understand what he meant when he declared in his *Philosophy of History* that Christianity represents progress because it teaches the doctrine of a God who died; while heathen gods knew nothing of death. What a step forward it would be, if we could declare that God never existed at all!’²

Heinrich Heine is not always a reliable witness and one wonders whether it really was Hegel’s intention not to be understood. But the comments that concern the inextricable bond between ‘thought’ and ‘being’, and Christianity’s doctrine of ‘a God who died’ take us to the heart of his philosophy and sum up rather well why Hegel could appeal to the composer Richard Wagner. So first, Hegel’s view that ‘thought’ is not just *about* ‘being’ but concerns ‘the self-determining and self-unfolding of being itself’³ coheres rather nicely with Wagner’s understanding of music as ‘idea’, which is so closely related to his understanding of teleology. Secondly, the ‘death of God’ is a key to Wagner’s Lutheran outlook which he so closely shared with Hegel. And so in this article I am going to take a new look at Wagner’s appropriation of Hegel in relation to four themes which are central for the *Ring* cycle: ‘idea’, teleology, providence, and the ‘death of God’.

¹ This is a revision of a seminar paper given to the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Nottingham on 19 October 2016. I have enjoyed helpful conversations and e-mail exchange with Ryan Häcker who also gave me written comments on the paper. Stephen Houlgate, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick, kindly read through the paper and sent me detailed comments on key aspects of the paper. Any shortcoming of this article are, of course, the sole responsibility of the author.

² Heinrich Heine, ‘Self Portrait, “Am I a Destroyer of Faith?”’, in *Self Portrait and Other Writings*, ed. and tr. Frederic Ewen (Secaucus, NJ, 1948), 254-55.

³ Stephen Houlgate, *Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth and History*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2005), 45.

Wagner's knowledge of Hegel

Hegel was born in 1770 and died in 1831 when Wagner was 18 years old, and it was in this year that Wagner enrolled at the University of Leipzig. Hegel was the thinker everyone was talking about and, even if Wagner had never read a word of the most influential philosopher of that time, he would have imbibed much of Hegel's world view. In discussing Wagner's philosophical development reference is often made to the influence of his uncle, Adolf Wagner (1774-1835). His uncle had studied at the Leipzig Thomana and then in 1792 registered in the theology faculty of the University, although his interests focussed on classics (C.D. Beck was teaching there) and philosophy, especially German philosophy. In 1798 he went to Jena, for a year of study where he attended Fichte's lectures but we do not know whether he attended Schelling's (in Jena 1798-1803).⁴ Although he left before Hegel's arrival in Jena in January 1801 one can say that he was nevertheless 'influenced above all by Hegel'.⁵ No doubt his enthusiasm for the philosopher spilled over to his nephew. Wagner may also have received Hegelian ideas from his uncle's friend, Christian Hermann Weisse (1801-66). Wagner tells us in his autobiography that 'Two or three times . . . I attended lectures on aesthetics given by one of the younger professors, a man named Weiss'.⁶ This much neglected philosopher/theologian had studied under Hegel and in 1829 two books appeared, one concerning the current state of philosophy in relation to Hegel's system and the other a translation of Aristotle 'on the soul' (*de anima*) and 'on the world' (*de mundo*, wrongly attributed to Aristotle).⁷ Then in 1830 his *System of Aesthetics* appeared which, although holding to a Hegelian method, did not entirely hold to the Hegelian teaching.⁸ Wagner was justly enthralled with Weisse when he met him at his uncle's home and, no

⁴ Carl Fr. Glasenapp, *Das Leben Richard Wagners*, 6 vols., 4th edn (Leipzig, 1905), i.21.

⁵ Joachim Köhler, *Richard Wager: The Last of the Titans*, tr. Stewart Spencer (New Haven/London, 2004), 10, 638 n. 10. He rightly points to his 'Hegelian German'; note, however, that the example he gives is taken from a point in Glasenapp, *Leben*, i.490, where he is offering a free rendition. The original can be found in Adolf Wagner, *Zwei Epochen der modernen Posie* (Leipzig, 1806), 15.

⁶ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, tr. Andrew Gray ed. Mary Whittall (Cambridge, 1983) [ML], 54. One should not draw too many conclusions from the fact that the name is given incorrectly since shortly after this 'Weinlig' is referred to as 'Weinlich'.

⁷ Wagner appears to conflate these two works when he writes that Weisse 'had just translated Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and had dedicated it, with a polemical intent, to Hegel, if I remember correctly' (ML, 54).

⁸ See Rudolf Seydel's comments in the foreword to the 1872 edition of *System der Ästhetik*, ed. Rudolf Seydel (Leipzig, 1872), IV. Seydel also writes that Weisse did in fact lecture on aesthetics in the Winter Semester of 1831-32, hence corroborating Wagner's account.

doubt, this encouraged him later to study Hegel: 'I had listened to a conversation between these two men about philosophy and philosophers, which impressed me very deeply'.⁹

As far as we know it was about fifteen years later that Wagner started to read Hegel. First, he read the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), sometime in the period 1846-47. Although he may well have had difficulty understanding this highly demanding work,¹⁰ something even seasoned Hegelians experience,¹¹ I think the work did make a deep impression upon him. Around the same time read a much more accessible work, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. This was based on Hegel's notes and those of his students of the lectures he gave five times in Berlin, starting in 1822-23, and delivered every two years until 1830-31. Wagner used the second edition of 1840¹² and this was the only work of modern philosophy in Wagner's personal library in Dresden and he dates the first reading to 1847. In addition to these two works he may have read the *Aesthetics* and if he did not he must have learned about Hegel's ideas through some other means¹³ since his Zürich essays so clearly reflect Hegel's *Aesthetics*¹⁴ not to mention the close correspondence between the two thinkers on Greek literature.¹⁵

One factor which drew Wagner to Hegel's philosophy was its relation to history. His *Annals* for 1847 tell of his interest in 'Greek Antiquity' and for the history he mentions

⁹ ML, 54.

¹⁰ See Friedrich Pecht, *Aus meiner Zeit*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1894), 1:294: 'One day when I called on him I found him burning with passion for Hegel's *Phenomenology*, which he was just studying, and which, he told me with typical extravagance, was the best book ever printed. To prove it he read me a passage which had particularly impressed him. Since I did not entirely follow it, I asked him to read it again, upon which neither of us could understand it. He read it a third time and a fourth, until in the end we both looked at one another and burst out laughing. And that was the end of phenomenology'. This is found in the chapter 10 'Dresden 1846-47' (279-303) hence dating Wagner's reading of the *Phenomenology* in 1846-47.

¹¹ E.g. J.N. Finlay, in A.V. Miller (ed.), *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford, 1977), xxix, writes that '[t]he packed thought of §§803-4 . . . defies reproduction in terms other than its own, and one is quite unsure that one has got the full gist of it'.

¹² Eduard Gans edited the first edition of 1837 and this was updated by Karl Hegel (Hegel's son) for the second edition of 1840. This edition provides the basis for that of Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Marcus Michel (*G.W.F. Hegel: Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1970) [Geschichte] which corresponds to the English translation of J. Sibree, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* (London, 1861) [History].

¹³ The celebrated music theorist and critic A.B. Marx, editor of the Berlin *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, whom Wagner knew, was a Hegelian (*The Diary of Richard Wagner 1865-82: The Brown Book*, ed. Joachim Bergfeld, tr. George Bird (London, 1980), 94, records his having dinner with him), and Schumann's influential *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 'devoted the greater part of ten successive issues' (22 July to 23 August, 1842, the journal appeared twice weekly) to a critique by Eduard Krüger of Hegel's idea on aesthetics' (Pete le Huray and James Day, *Music and Aesthetics in Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1981), 340, 530).

¹⁴ See Bojan Bujić, *Music in European thought 1851-1912* (Cambridge, 1988), 51-52.

¹⁵ See Daniel H. Foster, *Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks* (Cambridge, 2010), *passim*.

Gibbon, ‘classical historical works’, Droysen’s *Alexander* and *Hellenism*, and then adds ‘also Hegel’s Philosophy of History’, suggesting a rather cursory reading.¹⁶ His autobiography explains a little further the link between history and philosophy. He tells us: ‘I had always felt an inclination to try to fathom the depths of philosophy’. After some rather bad starts he then writes of a much more detailed reading in the winter of 1848-49. ‘During the last period of my residence in Dresden I had nonetheless tried to do justice to this old, now newly awakened urge, and took as a point of departure the more searching historical studies which so greatly satisfied me at the time. For my introduction to the philosophy of Hegel I chose his *Philosophy of History*. Much of this impressed me, and it appeared as if I would gain admittance to the inner sanctum by this route. The more incomprehensible I found many of the most sweeping and speculative sentences of this tremendously famous intellect, who had been commended to me as the keystone of philosophic understanding, the more I felt impelled to get to the bottom of what was termed “the absolute” and everything connected with it. The revolution interrupted this effort’.¹⁷

‘Idea’

The striking thing about his praise of Hegel I have just quoted, is that these words were dictated to his second wife Cosima at a time when he had come under the spell of Hegel’s most vociferous opponent Arthur Schopenhauer. You *will* find Wagner’s criticism of Hegel after his discovery of Schopenhauer in 1854 but often this is just parroting Schopenhauer himself. That Wagner remained under Hegel’s spell is claimed by Nietzsche in *The Case of Wagner*: ‘Let us remember that Wagner was young at the time when Hegel and Schelling were seducing people’s minds; that he achieved, that he grasped in his hands, something only Germans took seriously – “the Idea”, by which he meant something dark, uncertain, and full of vague presentiments; with Germans, clarity is an objection, logic is a refutation. . . . Let us keep morality out of this: Hegel is a *taste* . . . And not just a German taste but a European one! – a taste that Wagner understood! – that he felt equal to! that he immortalized! – He just applied it to music – he invented a style that “meant the infinite”, – he became *Hegel’s heir* . . . Music as “Idea” –’¹⁸ This last comment corresponds exactly to Cosima’s entry for 3

¹⁶ *Brown Book*, 94.

¹⁷ ML, 429-30. Note also that around this time that he had become associated with Mikael Bakunin (ML, 384-89) for whom Hegel was central.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge, 2012), 252.

April 1870 (she is quoting her husband): '[Music] is not the representation of an idea (die Darstellung einer Idee), but the idea itself'.¹⁹

So what is this 'idea' for Wagner and, going back to his autobiography, what was it that Wagner discovered about 'the absolute' in *Philosophy of History*? The 'absolute' of course is the world Spirit (Geist), the subject of world history. If the drama of the *Ring* can be seen in terms of the evolution of Spirit,²⁰ what then is the 'idea' when Wagner says 'Music is not the representation of an idea, but the idea itself'? For Hegel the idea was the reason in being, nature and history. It is the rationality immanent in the world itself,²¹ and the world is a manifestation of the idea. So if Wagner considered music as the idea perhaps the ironic description he gave of his dramas as 'deeds of music made visible' ('ersichtlich gewordene Thaten des Musik') is not so far off the mark.²² A further aspect of the idea is that it is essentially teleological, i.e. it is working towards a certain goal (telos). So Houlgate writes 'in nature the idea is the logic that is immanent in and generated by space as such and that leads to the emergence of freely moving matter and eventually to life'.²³ Hegel is therefore understanding his 'idea' not in terms of Plato's forms but more with Aristotle's formal-final cause. Therefore with this teleological sense it means that if everything is the appearance of an idea, 'it strives to realize the absolute idea'.²⁴ So for Wagner one could say the music provides the rationality for the development of the Spirit.²⁵

This is particularly striking because Wagner's system of musical 'leitmotifs' could be said to have a fundamentally 'teleological' function above and beyond that of what could be music's general teleological function. The discussion could become somewhat muddled since

¹⁹ *Cosima Wagner's Diaries*, 2 vols., ed. Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, tr. Geoffrey Skelton (London/New York, 1978-80) [CD], i.205-6. Note that later that year Wagner wrote his Beethoven essay, very much influenced by Schopenhauer. However, the comment Cosima records is clearly Hegelian, not Schopenhauerian (for whom music was the objectification of the 'will', not the 'ideas').

²⁰ Cf. Wolfgang Perschmann, *Die optimistische Tragödie* (Graz, 1986), vii, who calls *Das Rheingold* 'Die Historie des expansiven Geistes'.

²¹ Houlgate, *Hegel*, 25.

²² *The Name Musikdrama* (*Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen von Richard Wagner*, 10 vols., 3rd edn (Leipzig, 1897) [GSD], ix.306; cf. *Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, tr. and ed. William Ashton Ellis, 8 vols. (London, 1892-9) [PW], v.303).

²³ Houlgate, *Hegel*, 25.

²⁴ Frederick Beiser, *Hegel* (New York/London, 2005), 67.

²⁵ See Wagner's *Beethoven* essay where music has an a priori function and where he writes of 'this conscious representation of the idea of the world (Darstellung der Idee der Welt) in drama' being 'preformed by those inner laws of music' (Roger Allen, *Richard Wagner's Beethoven* (Woodbridge, 2014), 144-45; cf. PW v.106-7; GSD ix.106). *Beethoven* was written between 20 July and 7 September 1870 (Allen, *Beethoven*, 2), notes being made 3 to 20 July (ibid, 12), just 3 months after the entry from Cosima's diary quoted above.

Wagner did not use the term ‘leitmotif’ but instead used a variety of other terms; but many of these point to a teleological function. First, one can point to ‘Motive,’ ‘musikalische Motiven’, ‘plastische Natur-Motiven’ and ‘thematische Motiven’. As Grey argues, the English ‘motive’ and ‘motif’ are both included in the German ‘Motif’ so the terms just mentioned have a certain ambiguity and may include ‘motive’ which is clearly teleological.²⁶ Secondly, the expression ‘melodische Momente’²⁷ is not referring to an instant *in time* (hence I think the translation ‘melodic moments’ can mislead) but rather with a movement *through time* and could be translated as ‘melodic impulses’ and could likewise be understood as teleological. But whatever terms are used, it is clear that these melodic elements are employed for anticipation and recollection and, more fundamentally for our enquiry, mutate into other motifs.²⁸

Teleology

The sense of teleology (the goal (telos) to which something is working) can be discerned right from the beginning of the *Ring*, in the prelude to *Rheingold*, and I take this as my example. The composer builds up the diatonic scale of Eb major by introducing the notes of the harmonic series: first the octave (Eb – Eb) from bar 1, then the fifth (Bb) from bar 5, and then the third (G) in bars 18 and 20. He then fills in the other notes of the scale from bar 49. Such a harmonic series is deeply rooted in mathematics and in ‘nature’. But with the entry of the first singer, Woglinde, we hear a pentatonic melody which continues for 13 bars, only to be broken by Woglinde’s ‘Safe from your reach’ (‘Sicher von dir’). We therefore move from a harmonic structure to a melodic one, in particular a melodic structure associated with a

²⁶ Thomas Grey, *Wagner’s Musical Prose* (Cambridge, 1995), 319-21.

²⁷ This expression ‘melodische Momente’ is used seven times in the collected writings (GSD iv.114, PW ii.251; GSD iv.200-2; PW ii.346-48). Since only the plural occurs there is an ambiguity as to whether Wagner is referring to ‘der Moment’ (an instant in time) or ‘das Moment’ (an aspect, factor, impulse). However, his use of ‘Moment’ in the singular makes it clear we are concerned with the latter (I counted 56 instances in the works available in *Richard Wagner: Werke, Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Sven Friedrich (Berlin, 2004)). See, e.g., iii.311: ‘Der Mensch, den die Musik herstellen wollte, war in Wirklichkeit aber nichts Anderes, als die Melodie, d.h. das Moment bestimmtester, überzeugendster Lebensäußerung des wirklich lebendigen, inneren Organismus der Musik.’ Ellis translates it thus; ‘But the man whom Music wished to erect, was really none other than *Melody*, i.e. the moment of most definite, most convincing utterance of her actual living, inner organism’ (PW ii.106). It would be better to translate ‘Moment’ here as ‘impulse’.

²⁸ See *Epilogue to the ‘Nibelung’s Ring’* (GSD vi.266; PW iii.266): ‘With the “Rheingold” I was starting on the new path, where I had first to find the plastic nature-motives which, in ever more individual evolution, were to shape themselves into exponents of the various forms of Passion in the many-membered Action and its characters’.

‘primordial form of music’.²⁹ As Nattiez argues this transition reflects Wagner’s comments in *Opera and Drama*: ‘But *that* Melody to whose birth we now are listening, forms a complete antithesis (ein vollkommener Gegensatz) to the primal Mother-melody’.³⁰ Further, Wagner writes of the musician mounting ‘from the depths to the surface of the sea of Harmony; and from that surface will be celebrated the glorious marriage of Poetry’s begetting Thought with Music’s endless power of Birth’.³¹ I think it not purely coincidental that he immediately goes on to write: ‘That ‘wave-borne’ (‘wogende’!) mirror-image is *Melody*’.³²

If Wagner’s reflections in *Opera and Drama* can be related to *Rheingold*, it is striking that the ‘complete antithesis’ of Woglinde’s entry contains within it the notes of the diatonic scale which have been presented in the Prelude. It is as though with the entry of the Rheinmaidens we have the emergence of ‘culture’ out of ‘nature’ and the ‘birth of consciousness’.³³ We have what could be seen as an expression of Hegel’s dialectic, in a musical and dramatic temporal sequence.³⁴ So musically we have seen how the pentatonic melody of Woglinde, although an ‘antithesis’ to the harmonic prelude, is already contained within that prelude. Further, we also find an antithesis in the way the drama develops. The Rheinmaidens, of all the characters in the Ring (including Erda!), are the ones most at one with nature. Nature is manifest in the waves of the Rhine and the waves in turn are manifest in the Rhinemaidens suggested among other things by their very names Woglinde and Wellgunde.³⁵ But when they appear on stage they see themselves as distinct from nature even though they come out of nature (as expressed in the emergence of their pentatonic melody). Also in the ensuing drama of the first scene we have again a temporal expression of the

²⁹ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Wagner Androgyne: A Study in Interpretation*, tr. Stewart Spencer (Princeton, 1993), 57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 58; PW ii.284 (modified); GSD iv.145.

³¹ PW ii.280; GSD iv.142.

³² PW ii.280; GSD iv.142.

³³ Cf *Zukunftsmusik*: ‘If we may broadly denote the whole range of Nature as an evolutionary march from unconsciousness to consciousness, and if this march is shewn the most conspicuously in the human individual, we may take its observation in the life of the Artist as one of the most interesting, because in him and his creations the World itself displays itself and comes to consciousness’ (PW 3:296; GSD vii.88). Note, however, that this work was not written until September 1860.

³⁴ Hegel’s dialectic is rooted in his ‘logic’, one of the most difficulty areas of his philosophy, and in fact is *not* fundamentally temporal.

³⁵ ‘Woglinde’ is derived from ‘wogen’ (‘to heave’ or ‘to billow’) and MHG ‘linde’ (‘gentle’). ‘Wellgunde’ is derived from ‘Welle’ (‘wave’) and possibly from ON gunnr (‘battle’). Note that the third Rhinemaiden, Flosshilde, has a name not derived from the waves but from the ‘fin’ (Flosse) and ‘hilt’ (‘battle’). Note that she is the one who has the sense of responsibility in warning her sisters to guard the gold.

Hegelian. Wagner expresses an innocence in the melody and the words of the Rhinemaidens. In Woglinde's first entry we not only have the pentatonic melody but words which are 'soft': 'Weia! Waga! / Woge, du Welle (Heave, you wave)! / Walle zur Wiege (wave around the cradle)! / Wagalaweia! / Wallala weiala weia!' Not only are half of these words untranslatable but vowels predominate; they have a natural softness and the same goes for the consonants all of which bar one (z) Wagner considered to be soft: so we have here G, L (a 'liquid'! consonant), D, W (as opposed to what Wagner considered "energetic consonants" K, R, P, T or strengthened one such as Schr, Sp, St, Pr).³⁶ Wagner likened 'the movement of the waves' in *Rheingold* as 'the world's lullaby',³⁷ and in an open letter to Nietzsche (12 June 1872) he explained how he had 'and thus built up a root-syllabic melody for my watermaidens, after the analogy of the "Eia popeia" ["hushabye"] of our nursery-songs'.³⁸ The words and melody of the Rhinemaidens certainly suggest a rocking movement. But implicit in all this is a certain seductiveness³⁹ which is manifest when they meet Alberich. But what Hegel calls 'Entzweiung' ('bifurcation', 'diremption') and consequent 'fall' comes about not simply because of a 'third party' (Alberich/serpent of Genesis 3) but, as Hegel emphasized, because of something rooted in the individual.⁴⁰ So the 'fall' Wagner presents corresponds to Hegel's view that the 'Entzweiung' is immanent in the human being and not imposed from outside.⁴¹ After this 'diremption' there is the 'sublation' ('Aufhebung') whereby a position of greater maturity is reached and culminates at the end of the Ring cycle when they gives Brünnhilde 'sincere counsel'. This is how Wagner in *Artwork of the Future* presents the spontaneous emergence of human life from nature, the birth of consciousness and the fall into error, all of which occur in *Rheingold* Scene 1. 'The moment we humans became aware of our difference from nature, the very moment we began to develop as human beings and to break away from our unconscious, animal existence as children of nature to

³⁶ PW ii.271; GSD iv.134. For an example of the strengthened consonants see Alberich's third entry: 'Stör' ich eu'r Spiel, wenn staunend ich still hier steh'.

³⁷ CD i.127 (entry for 17 July 1869).

³⁸ PW 5:297. 'eia pop eia' in Greek means 'now then, ha, now then'. The German song begins: 'Eia, popeia, was raschelt im Stroh?'

³⁹ In Scene 2 Fricka considers the 'watery brood' as dangerously seductive (*Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion*, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1993), 83).

⁴⁰ One way to consider this is the role of the Rhinemaidens' breasts. To a child the mother's breast is a source of comfort and nourishment, but for an adult male the effect can be rather different as can be seen in Alberich's wish to nestle up to Wellgunde's 'heaving breast' ('schwellende Brust'; cf. 'wogen', 'to heave'). Hence the 'negative' of being 'sexually seductive' emerges out of the 'positive' of 'comforting' and the 'nourishing'.

⁴¹ Michael Inwood, *Hegel*, (New York/London, 1983), 95.

wake to conscious life – when we set ourselves apart from nature and, from that first sensation of dependence on nature, thought began to develop within us – this was the moment we went astray, error as the first expression of consciousness. Yet out of error knowledge is born and the history of the birth of knowledge out of error is the history of the human species from primitive myth to the present day'.⁴²

We see then in Rheingold an 'evolution' not only in the realm of nature⁴³ but also of culture. The striking thing about Wagner's own creation myth is that, in contrast to those in his Norse sources, it is 'teleological'; but this is not an external teleology but an internal one, i.e. the purpose is immanent, no external intervention or manipulation being involved.⁴⁴ Wagner thus presents an organic view of the world, and so stands not only with Hegel but also with Herder, Schelling, and Schiller who reacted against the mechanistic views of the world found in seventeenth century science. Such mechanistic views, originating with Descartes, saw the world in terms of matter, inertness, impact, efficient causality and atomism. But at the close of the eighteenth century there was a move to more organic views, and this was partly propelled by a rather different scientific worldview associated with attraction, magnetism and electricity, chemistry, epigenesis (i.e. organisms grow and develop by their own power and are not preformed) and human sciences.⁴⁵ The father of this alternative was Leibniz (who revived Aristotelian ideas of an organic universe). Hegel's view of the organic world, although interwoven with the developments of what was called 'Naturphilosophie', was originally inspired by classical and platonic ideas. In the Tübinger Stift Hegel, together with Schelling and Hölderlin, were enthusiastic about Plato, especially the *Timaeus*.⁴⁶ But even more important for his teleology was theology as can be seen in his use of John 1:1-4 in the *Spirit of Christianity*.⁴⁷ Therefore the relation of the Father to the Son

⁴² Emma Warner, 'The Artwork of the Future', *The Wagner Journal*, Special Issue (2013), 13. Cf PW i.83.

⁴³ Note, however, that Hegel himself rejected an idea of evolution in the natural world and this was rooted in that fact that he was interested in 'the *logical* and not the *temporal* relations between phenomena in nature' (Houlgate, *Hegel*, 173). However, one could argue that in principle his philosophy of nature does not necessarily entail a rejection of evolution including Darwin (ibid, 174).

⁴⁴ Cf. Inwood, *Hegel*, 246-47.

⁴⁵ Beiser, *Hegel*, 84-85.

⁴⁶ Beiser, *Hegel*, 87, points to *Timaeus* 30D: 'God constructed it as a Living Creature, one and visible' (LCL 54-55) and 33B (Plato speaks of 'that Living Creature which is designed to embrace within itself all living creatures' (LCL 60-61). Note that Wagner had the works of Plato in his Dresden library in Schleiermacher's translation but *Timaeus* (and *Laws*) were not included in this edition.

⁴⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *On Christianity: Early Theological Writings*, tr. T.M. Knox (Gloucester MA, 1970), 256, argues that 'the predicates [of the Logos] are not concepts, not universals' but rather 'something being and living'. Further, 'in him [the Logos] was life' (John 1.4).

‘is not a conceptual unity’ but rather ‘a living relation of living beings’.⁴⁸ What may be contradictory in the realm of the dead is not in the realm of life. ‘A tree which has three branches makes up with them one tree; but every ‘son’ of the tree, every branch . . . is itself a tree’.⁴⁹ Such an organic view not only helps explain the trinity but also, if applied to nature, overcomes the alienation between the individual and nature.⁵⁰

What then was Wagner’s own distinctive contribution to teleology in his appropriation of Hegel? His genius does not lie in his cumbersome prose, even though I think he does have some remarkable insights. Rather his genius lies in his music and his drama. Nietzsche expresses it so in the fourth of his *Untimely Meditations, Richard Wagner in Bayreuth*, 236-37: ‘The poetic element in Wagner is disclosed by the fact that he thinks in visible and palpable events, not in concepts; that is to say, he thinks mythically, as the folk has always thought. The myth is not founded on a thought, as the children of an artificial culture believe, it is itself a mode of thinking; it communicates an idea of the world, but as a succession of events, actions and sufferings. *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is a tremendous system of thought without the conceptual form of thought. Perhaps a philosopher could set beside it something exactly corresponding to it but lacking all image or action and speaking to us merely in concepts: one would then have presented the same thing in two disparate spheres, once for the folk and once for the antithesis of the folk, the theoretical man. Thus Wagner does not address himself to the latter; for the theoretical man understands of the poetical, of the myth, precisely as much as a deaf man does of music, that is to say both behold a movement which seems to them meaningless’.⁵¹ Therefore in respect to Hegel, Wagner expresses the Hegelian dialectic by means of the musical and dramatic temporal sequence.

Providence

Hegel argues in *Philosophy of History* that ‘Reason directs the World’ which is in the form ‘of the *religious truth*, that the world is not abandoned to chance and external contingent causes, but that a *Providence (Vorsehung)* controls it’.⁵² But such providence is not the

⁴⁸ Hegel, *On Christianity*, 260.

⁴⁹ Hegel, *On Christianity*, 261.

⁵⁰ Beiser, *Hegel*, 88.

⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, tr. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge, 2001 repr.), 236-37.

⁵² Hegel, *History*, 13; *Geschichte*, 25.

simple optimism his opponents have credited him with.⁵³ Indeed Hegel goes on to speak of history as a ‘slaughter bench’ (Schlachtbank).⁵⁴ But despite this Hegel nevertheless views history as a theodicy, a view he expressed in the final paragraph of *Philosophy of History*: ‘That the History of the World, with all the changing scenes which its annals present, is this process of development and the realization of Spirit, - this is the true *Theodicaea*, the justification of God in History. Only *this* insight can reconcile Spirit with the History of the World – viz., that what has happened, and is happening every day, is not only not “without God,” but is essentially His Work’.⁵⁵ Fundamental to this theodicy is that somehow the death of Christ is written into the very fabric of history, a point to which I will return.

Just as *Philosophy of History* deals with theodicy, so does the *Ring*. The world is recreated at the end of the drama and one of the purposes of the whole drama is that a woman (Brünnhilde) becomes wise, fully self-conscious and hence free. This was only possible through her betrayal and the death of Siegfried: ‘it was I whom the purest man / had to betray, / that a woman might grow wise’.⁵⁶ Freedom is the goal to which Hegel’s Spirit is directed and bearing in mind the teleological sense of ‘idea’ one can sum up a fair amount of Hegel’s thought with the words ‘the idea of spirit is freedom’.⁵⁷ So Brünnhilde is free in that what she wants to do is exactly the right thing to do, i.e. sacrifice herself.⁵⁸ Desire and reason now finally coincide. We see this idea in these words from the final scene: ‘Alles, alles, / Alles weiß ich: / alles ward mir nun frei!’ ‘All things, all things, all things I know: all things became free to me’.⁵⁹ The ideas behind ‘alles ward mir nun frei’ I suggest are all things became free in relation to me such that I could find my own freedom in them or I am free from any misconceptions, misunderstandings or any other hindrances.

⁵³ Houlgate, *Hegel*, 18: Hegel is not ‘the naïve Enlightenment optimist caricatured by Nietzsche or Schopenhauer’.

⁵⁴ Hegel, *History*, 22; *Geschichte*, 35. But note that ‘[i]t is not the general idea that is implicated in opposition and combat, and that is exposed to danger. It remains in the background, untouched and uninjured. This may be called the cunning of reason (List der Vernunft) – that it sets the passion to work for itself, while that which develops its existence through such impulsion pays the penalty, and suffers loss’ (*History*, 34; *Geschichte*, 49).

⁵⁵ Hegel, *History*, 477. Hegel, *Geschichte*, 540.

⁵⁶ *Ring Companion*, 349.

⁵⁷ G.A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, 2000), 12.

⁵⁸ Her willingness to sacrifice herself contrasts rather starkly with the synoptic gospels but has a parallel in Wagner’s *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches.

⁵⁹ All the English translations I have consulted translate the final phrase ‘all is clear to me now!’ (*Ring Companion*, 349). However, if one wanted to express this in German one would not say ‘alles ward mir nun frei’.

Wagner's letter to August Röckel of 25/26 January 1854, in prison in Waldheim, includes addressing an issue which was understandably close to Röckel's heart: freedom. What he writes could equally be a commentary on Brünnhilde's state of mind in that final scene of *Götterdämmerung*: 'One thing counts above all else: freedom! But what is 'freedom'? is it – as our politicians believe – "licence?" – of course not! Freedom is: *integrity*. He who is true to himself, i.e. who acts in accord with his own being, and in perfect harmony with his own nature, is *free*'.⁶⁰

Death of God

Going back to that quotation from Heine, he said according to Hegel 'Christianity represents progress because it teaches the doctrine of a God who died; while heathen gods knew nothing of death'. If by 'heathen gods' Hegel meant the Greek gods, then what he says is perfectly true. Greek gods may lose their power or influence but they do not undergo death as such.⁶¹ But other mythologies do have the death of gods, and one reason Norse mythology may have appealed to Wagner is that the chief god Odin does die (he is swallowed by the Wolf Fenris).⁶² As Wagner worked on the libretto of the *Ring* it is highly significant that the focus moves from the hero Siegfried to the chief god Wotan, especially his downfall. This may give some justification for 'atheist' productions of the *Ring* (e.g. that of Keith Warner at Covent Garden). But I think Wagner is pointing to something much more profound. In her *Schlussgesang*, Brünnhilde lulls Wotan to sleep in both the words⁶³ and the 'lullaby' music, a three bar segment of the Valhalla theme which is similar to what we hear when Wotan puts Brünnhilde to sleep at the end of *Walküre*.⁶⁴ Just as this 'lullaby' was a prelude to the flames of Loge which were to dance around her rock, so here Wotan is lulled to sleep but in preparation for his destruction in the final conflagration which spreads to Valhalla. Now if

⁶⁰ *Selected Letters of Richard Wagner*, tr. and ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (London, 1987), 301; SB, vi.60. However, note that Hegel's has 'an all-embracing theory of freedom' (Houlgate, *Hegel*, 181), aspects of which Wagner would not embrace (e.g. regarding the state, economic and family life).

⁶¹ It is true that Plutarch *Moralia* 419C writes that 'Great Pan is dead' but this refers to the end of Greek gods (Pan = 'all') and the rise of Christianity (Madeleine Jost 'Pan', in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1996), 1103).

⁶² *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, tr. Jesse Byock (London, 2005), 73: 'The wolf will swallow Odin, and that will be his death'. See also Voluspa 62: 'All unsown the fields will grow, / all harm will be healed, Baldr will come; Höd and Baldr will inhabit Hropt's [i.e. Odin's] victory-halls, sanctuaries of the slain-gods: do you know yet, or what?' (*The Elder Edda*, tr. Andy Orchard (London, 2011), 14).

⁶³ *Ring Companion*, 349: 'Rest now, rest now, you god!' ('Ruhe! Ruhe, du Gott!').

⁶⁴ Compare *Walküre* Act III (bars 1625-27) and *Götterdämmerung* Act III (bars 1357-60).

the god who dies is Wotan then we have something fairly straightforward: the chief god together with his pantheon die and everything is now in the hands of humanity. However, as is often the case with Wagner, he can turn things on their head. For the key god who dies is not Wotan, who, as we see in Brünnhilde's final speech, is guilty! Rather the god who dies is Brünnhilde herself.

She is the daughter of two gods, Wotan and Erda, and if 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), something fundamental for Feuerbach (and for Wagner), then surely she is the true divine figure, not Wotan. At the end of *Walküre* she undergoes what can be legitimately called an incarnation. However, in distinction to the incarnation as represented in New Testament texts and in Hegel, she, according to Wotan, actually loses her divinity: 'so he kisses your godhead away'.⁶⁵ We have an emptying of her divinity, a 'kenosis'.⁶⁶ However, when she appears in the final scene of *Götterdämmerung* there are signs that she is transfigured and is in the process of regaining her divinity. The stage direction indicates that she enters 'firmly and solemnly (feierlich)'.⁶⁷ A little later '[h]er features grow increasingly transfigured'.⁶⁸ So one gets the impression that Brünnhilde returns to her original godlike existence.⁶⁹ That she seems to recover her divinity in this final scene is highly significant theologically, for it means that the one who dies is not simply a human being but a divine figure. When she offers herself as a sacrifice at the end of *Götterdämmerung*, working 'the deed that redeems the world' (Siegfried Act III Scene 1), the entire cosmos is renewed. Because of Wagner's views on gender, redemption is achieved by the double sacrifice of Siegfried and Brünnhilde⁷⁰ and this is expressed musically right at the end as the Siegfried musical theme is followed by Brunnhilde's.

⁶⁵ *Ring Companion*, 191.

⁶⁶ This corresponds to Hegel's understanding of the incarnation. Miller, *Phenomenology*, 475, does not seem to translate *Phänomenologie des Geistes* ed. Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (Hamburg, 1999), 418, correctly. Contrast the translation of J.B. Baillie, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, 2nd edn (London, 1949), 780: 'the Divine Being is reconciled with its existence through an event,—the event of God's emptying Himself of His Divine Being through His factual Incarnation and His Death'.

⁶⁷ *Ring Companion*, 347.

⁶⁸ *Ring Companion*, 348.

⁶⁹ Cf. Ulrike Kienzle, in Udo Bernbach (ed.), *Alles ist nach seiner Art* (Stuttgart/Weimar, 2001), 101: 'Im letzten Teil ihres Gesangs kehrt Brunnhilde selbst zu ihrer ursprünglichen Existenz zurück'.

⁷⁰ Letter to Rockel, 25/26 January 1854. See SL 307: 'Not even Siegfried alone (man alone) is the complete 'human being': he is merely the half, only with *Brünnhilde* does he become the redeemer; *one* man alone cannot do everything; many are needed, and a suffering, self-immolating woman finally becomes the true, conscious redeemer: for it is love which is really "the eternal feminine" itself' (SB, vi.68).

As Wagner started work on the *Ring* he also wrote sketches for an opera *Jesus of Nazareth*. In preparation for this he read systematically through the New Testament in Luther's translation. The prose sketches together with his theological commentary is fairly substantial, running to 55 pages in the English translation, but there is just one extant short musical sketch of 11 bars. Many of the ideas from the prose sketches end up on the stage of the *Ring* cycle. In particular the death of Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung* resembles that of Christ in the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches. After Jesus' death (which occurs off-stage), we read 'John and the two Marys return from the crucifixion: "He hath fulfilled." – Peter feels himself inspired with the Holy Spirit: in high enthusiasm he proclaims the fulfilment of Jesus' promise: his words give strength and inspiration to all; he addresses the people, – whoever hears him, presses forward to demand baptism (reception into the community). The end'.⁷¹ The key element is that Jesus dies and then the Holy Spirit comes upon Peter and the Christian community. Such a telescoping of Good Friday and Pentecost is found in John's gospel (see John 7.39; 19.30)⁷² and it may well be that Hegel can throw some light on this. In *Philosophy of History*, a work Wagner was reading at around the same time as composing the *Jesus of Nazareth* sketches, Hegel writes: 'It has been already remarked that only after the death of Christ could the Spirit come upon his friends; that only then were they able to conceive the true idea of God (die wahrhafte Idee Gottes), viz., that in Christ man is redeemed and reconciled'.⁷³ Hegel would know of Luther's view that in order to atone for sins God must die⁷⁴ and this was in fact central to Hegel's understanding of the 'Death of God'. He refers to the second stanza of the passion hymn of Johann Rist 'O Traurigkeit, O Herzeleid' (1641):

O grosse Not!

Gott selbst liegt tot.

Am Kreuz ist er gestorben;

⁷¹ PW 8:297; *Richard Wagner: Sämtliche Werke, Band 31: Dokumente und Texte zu unvollendeten Bühnenwerken*, ed. Isolde Vetter and Egon Voss (Mainz, 2005), 246.

⁷² See Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* 2 vols. (London, 1978), i.324; ii.931.

⁷³ *History*, 340; *Geschichte*, 396-97.

⁷⁴ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, tr. Darrell L. Guder (Edinburgh, 1983), 95-96, refers to 'Formula of Concord' (*Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche*, 10th edn (Göttingen, 1986), 1030-31) [BSELK] and a work by Karl Christian Platt who had been Hegel's fellow student in Tübingen. Both works quote Luther's treatise *On Councils and Churches* which includes the phrase 'if it cannot be said that God died for us, but only a man, we are lost' (*Luther's Works, Volume 41* ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia, 196), 103). Note, however, that not all Lutheran confessions held to the view that God suffered or died (e.g. BSELK 807).

hat dadurch das Himmelreich
 uns aus Lieb' erworben.
 O Great woe!
 God himself lies dead.
 On the cross he has died;
 And thus he has gained for us
 By love the kingdom of heaven.

This is quoted in Hegel's first discussion of the death of God⁷⁵ after which he argues: 'Good Friday must be speculatively re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its God-forsakenness'.⁷⁶ Hegel's point seems to be that up until his own time the death of God in Protestant religion and earlier philosophy had 'only the rank of subjective grief, but not the harsh dignity of a grief of God. That God himself is dead was a feeling of subjectivity, but not a factor (Moment) of truth in God himself'.⁷⁷ Hegel wishes to go beyond this and argues 'the pure concept or infinity as the abyss of nothingness in which all being is engulfed, must signify the infinite grief . . . purely as a moment (factor, impulse) of the supreme Idea, and no more than a moment'.⁷⁸ Further, as Jüngel puts it, 'The idea of absolute freedom and absolute passion are linked together here because God gives himself up to destruction, and thus chooses suffering in absolute freedom'.⁷⁹ As we saw earlier Brünnhilde gives herself up to destruction in the flames and does so in 'absolute freedom'. In fact one of the striking aspects of the close of *Götterdämmerung* is that, as noted above, in Brünnhilde reason and desire coincide. For Hegel such a correspondence was exactly what freedom meant.

Christ's death is fundamental for Hegel although his interest is more in what he calls the speculative Good Friday rather than the Good Friday of the gospels. Resurrection is seen in terms of the Spirit at work in the Christian community and the close of Wagner's *Jesus of Nazareth* corresponds to this. But for Hegel the death of God on Good Friday concerned not just this historical death but that 'the abstraction of the divine essence' is changed. He writes in the *Phenomenology*: 'The death of the Mediator is the death not only of his *natural* aspect or of his particular being-for-self, not only of the already dead husk stripped of its essential

⁷⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, tr. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany, 1977), 190; *Jenaer kritische Schriften*, ed Hartmut Buchner and Otto Poeggeler (Hamburg, 1999), 414.

⁷⁶ Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 191; *Schriften*, 414.

⁷⁷ Jüngel, *Mystery*, 74-75 (translation modified).

⁷⁸ Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, 190; *Schriften*, 413-14.

⁷⁹ Jüngel, *Mystery*, 74.

Being, but also of the *abstraction* of the divine Being. . . The death of this picture-thought (Vorstellung) contains, therefore, at the same time the death of the *abstraction of the divine Being* which is not posited as Self. That death is the painful feeling of the Unhappy Consciousness that *God himself is dead*'.⁸⁰ So 'death becomes transfigured from its immediate meaning, viz. the non-being of this *particular* individual, into the *universality* of the Spirit who dwells in His community, dies in it every day, and is daily resurrected'.⁸¹

Hence with Brünnhilde's death, the world is 'reconciled'⁸² and one can say the Spirit of Brünnhilde runs through the re-created world, expressed musically by 'the glorification of Brünnhilde'. The final lines of the *Phenomenology*, which must be 'one of the most famous endings in the philosophical literature',⁸³ could also be said to apply to Brünnhilde. Hegel speaks of the 'Spirit emptied out into Time' ('der an die Zeit entäusserte Geist')⁸⁴ and 'Absolute Knowing, or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit' and the 'recollection of the Spirits'. Hegel concludes: '[The Spirits'] preservation, regarded from the side of their free existence appearing in the form of contingency, is History; but regarded from the side of their [philosophically] comprehended organisation, it is the Science of Knowing in the sphere of appearance: the two together, comprehended History, form alike the inwardizing and the Golgotha of absolute Spirit, the actuality, truth, and certainty of his throne, without which he would be lifeless and alone. Only "from the chalice of this real of spirits / foams forth for Him his own infinitude"'.⁸⁵ The final scene of *Götterdämmerung* suggests that Brünnhilde is not only 'love personified' but also the absolute Spirit personified;⁸⁶ she comes to a position of 'Absolute Knowing' and through her there is the 'inwardizing' ('Erinnerung') of the absolute Spirit and she represents the 'Golgotha' of the absolute Spirit as she empties (entäussert) her spirit into the new created order ('der an die Zeit entäusserte Geist'). As in Christian theology the crucified Christ's spirit fills the universe, so in the *Ring* it is Brünnhilde's which flows through the whole re-created order.

⁸⁰ Miller, *Phenomenology*, 476; *Phänomenologie*, 419. Note again the quotation of Rist's hymn.

⁸¹ Miller, *Phenomenology*, 475; *Phänomenologie*, 418.

⁸² Note that Hegel's preferred term is 'reconciliation' rather than 'redemption'.

⁸³ Ernst Bloch, *Subjekt-Objekt: Erläuterungen zu Hegel* (Frankfurt am M., 1962), 100.

⁸⁴ Miller, *Phenomenology*, 492; *Phänomenologie*, 433.

⁸⁵ Miller, *Phenomenology*, 493; *Phänomenologie*, 433-34. I have replaced Miller's 'Calvary' with 'Golgotha' (Schädelstätte). At the end Hegel quotes freely from Schiller's poem, *Die Freundschaft*.

⁸⁶ Cf. Sandra Corse, *Wagner and the New Consciousness* (London/Toronto, 1990), 21, who suggests that in the *Ring* 'history is seen as a dialectic of progress, not of Hegelian spirit, but of Wagnerian love'.

