

## INTRODUCTION

As he created Der Ring des Nibelungen, Richard Wagner envisioned a compositional cosmos greater than any entity known during his time. His concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, an all-embracing artform, sought to integrate words, music, drama, and movement into a unified structure. He wanted all the pieces of this structure to reinforce each other on a variety of levels, thereby creating a web of meaning that would provide total immersion in the self-contained virtual world of the Ring.

Wagner developed numerous devices to achieve the Ring's compositional unity and unique identity. He commissioned new instruments, utilized alliteration in the dialogue, and even designed a new theater to house the “artwork of the future.” Most notably, Wagner used his expanded orchestra as more than an accompanist to the singers on stage. It is a quasi-character, a commentator on the drama. In the Ring, the orchestra becomes an integral part of the dramatic action. At times, it is used as a sole force for furthering the plot.

Wagner accomplished this feat through his innovative and systematic use of leitmotives. These recurring themes represent characters or ideas. Throughout the music dramas, the leitmotives transmogrify and evolve to match the progression of fluid ideas in the story. They accumulate to form a supplementary, “encoded” level of meaning that augments the power of Wagner’s music to fuse with his dramatic action, and allows him to comment on the thoughts and actions of the characters.

Motives often vary in orchestration as they reappear. A motive may first appear in the violins, and later be found in the winds. In Das Rheingold, the specific scorings recur and accumulate in a systematic fashion that allows for direct symbolic association between instrumentation and dramatic intent akin to the evolution of the motives themselves.

Wagner’s choice of instruments to score the leitmotives reveals another heretofore uncharted layer of encoded meaning embedded in the fabric of the music drama. When scored for horn, a leitmotive associated with the ring itself might indicate the ring as the prize of the gods. The same theme

changes its character when it is played by a clarinet-bassoon combination. The foggy, gloomy sound of these instruments signifies Alberich's connection with the ring. The result is a connotative symbolic level to the leitmotive—its shade of meaning changes consistently with each different scoring.

An examination of this orchestral symbolism layer allows us to understand Das Rheingold on a whole new level. Audiences can follow the choice of instrumentation to grasp new dramatic associations, and directors may choose to emphasize different elements of the production to reinforce the intent of the music. A conductor might find new insights in the interpretation of the score, and opt to highlight the role of certain instruments accordingly. The dramatic nature of the instrumentation could serve as another aid in unifying the structure of the music, as well as enhancing Wagner's dramatic and philosophical intent in portraying a given subject.

An assertion of Wagner's intentional and systematic use of scoring to create a new layer of specific meaning into the Ring requires considerable evidence to substantiate the claim. Wagner himself offers a few hints in this direction. In 1852,<sup>1</sup> he describes the "...speaking-faculty of the Orchestra ... of uttering the unspeakable... which the Orchestra can express with greatest definition, and indeed, in union ...with Gesture... That which Poetry could not speak out... is imparted to the ear by ... the Orchestra." In the same section, he tells us that the orchestra has "the capability of awaking forebodings and remembrances."

Scholars generally agree that the preceding refers to leitmotives and their power to supplement and reinforce other elements of the drama through the language of instrumental music and its "heightened power of speech." Wagner appears to indicate a step beyond leitmotives, into the realm of orchestral timbre, when he says that extra-musical ideas are shown "...plainly enough by the Instruments of the orchestra themselves, whereof each for itself... speaks out quite clearly and intelligibly." In the same passage, Wagner also mentions "tone-figures peculiar to the individual

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Wagner, Opera and Drama, trans. William Ashton Ellis, from Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Vol. 2. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1900), 316-336.

character of specially appropriate instruments, and shaping themselves into the specific Orchestral-melody” to fuse gesture and instrumental music. Later, he asserts that, in order to elevate instrumental music to the point of synthesis, a composer must discover “...the most varied orchestral idioms... so long as the message of the Orchestra is too monochrome to answer these motives' individuality, ... it prove[s] a disturbing factor, because not yet completely satisfying...”<sup>2</sup> From the preceding, it would seem that Wagner views insufficiently varied orchestration as a cause of incomplete artistic expression. He intends his choice of instrumentation as a means to perfect the fusion between instrumental music, poetry, and gesture. Indeed, a year earlier, Wagner describes a “...more symbolic treatment of the instrumental orchestra...”<sup>3</sup> to augment the power of his musical expression. Taking this into account, it is not too great a leap to suppose that Wagner also intended his scoring choices to add an extra layer of meaning to his leitmotives.

To prove this, I will focus on the first of the four music dramas in the Ring, Das Rheingold. Here, Wagner introduces us to his self-contained world, and works hardest to establish entities and contexts. The result is a deliberate, almost pedantic display of themes and dramatic characterization. Such a literal presentation offers the audience a solid aesthetic foundation in Wagner’s virtual world. It establishes basic concepts, and prepares the audience for the evolution of musical and dramatic ideas as they blend and change throughout the course of the Ring cycle. The scoring of Das Rheingold is similarly methodical. Dramatic association with various instruments is at its most direct in this first of the four music dramas. It will become more general in the other three as all elements of the music dramas intermingle and grow more fluid.

I will provide evidence of orchestral symbolism by tracing frequently recurring motives throughout Das Rheingold in relation to their literal/dramatic contexts, and by citing examples of specific scorings that correlate with particular shades of meaning as they reappear throughout the work. These subtexts will not be limited to individual motivic statements.

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<sup>2</sup> Wagner, 370.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wagner, A Communication To My Friends, trans. William Ashton Ellis, from Richard Wagner's Prose Works, Vol. 1. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1892), 374.

Rather, the scorings will retain their extra-musical associations across several leitmotives.. The connotative links will become evident by means of the similarity of scoring and accumulation. Using this method, we can discover a symbolic commonality that mirrors the scoring choices. In addition, I will discuss sections of the work where the orchestration plays a key role, and discuss its implication on performance practice. I hope that revealing this layer of meaning may further aid the reader in understanding the multi-leveled concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which every aspect of the music drama is an equally important member in forming its whole.

Even a century before the advent of computer simulation games, Wagner anticipated the level of encoding and detail necessary to formulate a complete virtual world, one that allows the audience to immerse itself thoroughly. He controlled the words, the visual images, and especially, the music. The result is an environment in which every stimulus, including the orchestration, allows us to discover new significance in the universe of the Ring.