



WAGNER & NIETZSCHE: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

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Abstract

In the history of recent thought, two creative geniuses made both enormous and lasting influences on music and philosophy during the same decades: Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche, respectively. Wagner's operatic masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and Nietzsche's literary masterpiece *Thus Spake Zarathustra* remain monumental contributions to understanding and appreciating the human situation within this dynamic universe. Each work is rich in symbolism and offers penetrating insights into the changing values of and pervasive conflicts within modern civilization. After years of research and reflection, what follows are some of my own final thoughts on their provocative ideas, complex relationship, and remarkable achievements.

Keywords: *Creativity, Evolution, Music-Drama, Mythology, Philosophy, Ring cycle, Worldview, Zarathustra*

1. Introduction

In the history of recent thought, two creative geniuses have left extraordinary and indelible contributions to the evolution of society and culture: Richard Wagner (1813-1883) in music and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) in philosophy. Both took time and change and evolution seriously. Each thinker had analyzed the human condition and offered penetrating insights into the ideas, beliefs, and values of modern civilization. They viewed our species within a dynamic framework grounded in an unabashed atheist's worldview. Wagner dedicated himself to advancing both opera and theatre in terms of his concept of the music-drama as a total artwork, while Nietzsche focused his attention on criticizing both mediocrity and modernity, as well as espousing a new interpretation of reality. There are remarkable similarities, but also glaring differences, in the works of these two iconoclastic thinkers.

A careful analysis of Wagner's *Ring* cycle and Nietzsche's process worldview reveals that each thinker presented an evolutionary interpretation of reality within a cosmic perspective. Each gave a critical understanding of and a deep appreciation for our own species within material nature; each has offered an artistic synthesis grounded in a pervasive symbolism that is open to seemingly endless



interpretations. And both thinkers emphasized the essential value of an individual as a creative being, e.g., Wagner's heroic character Siegfried in his four-part *Ring* cycle and Nietzsche's wise character Zarathustra in his four-part major work *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

For the subject matter of his operas, Wagner had turned to legends and myths in order to present universal themes in his symphonic music-dramas, e.g., the quest to discover one's own identity, as well as the pervasive struggle between good and evil. These basic themes are especially apparent in Wagner's monumental tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, first presented in its entirety at Bayreuth in 1876. Although the unfolding of this dramatic epic is engaging, one is likewise periodically conscious of the impending doom cast over the characters and events due to the twice-cursed reddish-gold magic ring and the ever-present curse motif and the motive of greed. Wagner's ingenious use of diverse evolving *leitmotifs* gives purposive unity to his vast aesthetic cosmology. Clearly, this incomparable composer became acutely aware of the moral inadequacies throughout the human world, including those in his own personality, and the need to enlighten human beings concerning both the cultural shortcomings of and those social alienations that are within modern civilization.

I discovered the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche as a result of reading a chapter on him in Will (William James) Durant's very successful book *The Story of Philosophy* (1926) during my first semester at the State University of New York-College at Geneseo. Although being philosophically-oriented even as a youngster, I now became interested in the academic discipline of philosophy. In fact, after studying anthropology as a graduate student, I earned a Ph.D. *with distinction* in philosophy under the guidance of Distinguished Professor Marvin Farber (1901-1980) at the State University of New York-University at Buffalo. Ever since, Nietzsche's worldview has had a lasting and profound influence on the development of my own interpretation of human values, experience, and reality. My love for ideas has never left me. In particular, I have focused my research on those various interpretations of evolution that are presented in the thoughts of serious thinkers, e.g., those different interpretations that are offered in the writings of Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, Henri Bergson, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Richard Dawkins, including those ideas that are presented in the dynamic worldview of Friedrich Nietzsche himself. During my academic life, I have managed to visit many of those major sites that are associated with Nietzsche's own life in Germany and Switzerland, e.g., Bayreuth, Naumburg, Röcken, Schulpforta, Sils-Maria, Tribschen, and Weimar.

After taking a course on music appreciation while at the college in Geneseo, I have had an avid interest in opera throughout my entire adult life. I experienced my first Wagner music-drama at the Vienna State Opera during my first evening in Austria; it was an outstanding performance of *Das Rheingold* conducted by Herbert von Karajan with Wolfgang Windgassen as Loge! It was a thrilling



event. Thus began my life-long love for Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* tetralogy: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*. In fact, I made my first visit to Bayreuth the very next day. To experience an outstanding production of the *Ring* cycle is to be elevated out of our mundane world and plunged into a mythological realm of glorious music and intense drama and timely issues.

Over the years, I have enjoyed attending productions of the *Ring* music-dramas at major opera houses in the cities of both hemispheres: from Boston, Chicago, New York City, Seattle and Toronto to Bayreuth, Berlin, Munich, Vienna and Weimar. Furthermore, my music library contains many recordings of and selections from the *Ring* operas. My favorite item remains the first-ever studio-stereo recording of the complete *Ring* cycle on records conducted by Sir Georg Solti with the Vienna State Opera (1958-1965). For some, this item is judged to be the greatest recording achievement of all time. *Das Rheingold* remains my favorite music-drama.

In 1976, I attended two complete *Ring* centennial performances, the first one in Bayreuth and then the second one in Seattle. Although the singing and acting were exceptional in the modernized/mixed-styled German production, I preferred by far the mythological/natural-styled production in the United States of America. *Ring* interpretations range from the non-traditional 1976 centennial production of Patrice Chéreau/Pierre Boulez at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus to the traditional 1987 recent production of Otto Schenk/James Levine at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Consequently, *Ring* interpretations range from the sublime to the bizarre. E.g., in modernistic productions, one may experience Wotan dressed in a tuxedo and the three Rhinemaidens as nude prostitutes; staging has had a hydroelectric power dam in the Rhine River and the World Trade Center substituting for Valhalla. Among the greatest Wagnerian singers of the recent past have been: Kirsten Flagstad, Gwyneth Jones, Jonas Kaufmann, James King, Lauritz Melchior, and Birgit Nilsson. Fortunately, no *Ring* cycle production has altered Wagner's music or his text!

In fact, in the final analysis, one may even argue that this complete *Ring* cycle story actually begins as a result of the three Rhinemaidens rejecting ugliness (Alberich).

Wagner's *Ring* cycle continues to grow in popularity and appreciation worldwide, even in Japan and China and Hong Kong: during 2015-2016, first *Das Rheingold* and then *Die Walküre* were performed at the New National Theater in Tokyo; in 2016, a traditional spectacular production of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was presented for the first time by the China National Opera House in Beijing; and the *Ring* cycle is now being performed in concert version by the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra at the Hong Kong Cultural Centre Concert Hall.

Of course, the ultimate goal of a serious Wagnerite is to experience the complete *Der Ring des*



Nibelungen in the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth during the summer festival; today, however, if one wants to watch a *Ring* cycle production as Wagner himself had intended it to be presented (i.e., to have gods and giants and dwarfs, as well as a fierce dragon and stone castle and rainbow bridge, etc., on the opera stage), then it may be necessary for one to experience the *Ring* cycle in another opera house elsewhere in the world.

Inevitably, my love for operas and ideas has continued to converge in my ongoing enthusiasm for Wagner and Nietzsche, especially as they are both relevant to any serious understanding of and deep appreciation for the *Ring* tetralogy (refer to Birx,

Wagner & Nietzsche: The Concept of Evolution, 2016).



Figure 1. King Ludwig II of Bavaria with Richard Wagner / Act II from *Siegfried* (paintings by Zac Sawyer).

In May 1864, Richard Wagner first met King Ludwig II of Bavaria; the composer would benefit enormously from his royal patron and devoted supporter. The new king (1864-1886) had been greatly impressed with Wagner's early operas for several years and was now determined to help this struggling composer. In particular, the king financed the building of both Wagner's unique Festspielhaus and stately Haus Wahnfried in Bayreuth; the opera house has a royal entrance and the museum house has a statue of the young King Ludwig II at its entrance. Furthermore, in the king's 'fairy-tale' castle Neuschwanstein, there are large wall murals depicting Wagner's early music-dramas, as well as scenes from the *Ring* cycle mythology.

In retrospect, King Ludwig II was not ‘mad’ to have financially aided Wagner’s personal projects in such a lavish manner, and to have built his own three elaborate castles. Actually, some opera lovers have waited years to obtain excellent tickets for the world-famous Bayreuth festival, and countless visitors have enjoyed touring Ludwig’s wonderful castles: Linderhof, Herrenchiemsee, and especially Neuschwanstein. One may argue that it is very unfortunate that the king never saw his own plans for the construction of his incredible castle Falkenstein realized.

The emotional relationship between King Ludwig II and Richard Wagner was not entirely reciprocal, as it was not between this composer and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nevertheless, after 26 years, the completion of Wagner’s masterpiece *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (written 1848-1874) is one of the greatest artistic achievements of human creativity and an awesome operatic accomplishment to be enjoyed by audiences for as long as our species appreciates such superb creations in music and theatre and poetry. The *Ring* cycle was first performed in its entirety in Bavaria, at Bayreuth, in 1876; both King Ludwig II and Friedrich Nietzsche attended.

2. Wagner & Nietzsche: Creativity

In 1868, Richard Wagner first met Friedrich Nietzsche in Leipzig. It was the beginning of a ten-year complex relationship between the famous elder composer and the obscure young philosopher, during which time Nietzsche first highly praised Wagner’s early operas but then severely criticized Wagner’s later music-dramas, both those of the *Ring* cycle and *Parsifal* (1882).

Richard Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is a four-part operatic work (an evening and three days, as this composer saw it) grounded in Germanic, Icelandic, and Scandinavian mythology. Its characters and events reflect the pervasive struggles in this world; these epic music-dramas encompass gods and goddess, giants and dwarfs, various tribes and a demigod, as well as the emergence of a human race. Greed pervades the story of this monumental work, as four of its major characters strive to possess the reddish-gold magic ring in order to become the master of this universe: Alberich, Wotan, Fafner, and Hagen (it is worth noting that neither Siegfried the orphaned hero nor Brunnhilde the now-mortal Valkyrie desires to have this unique ring for its magical power). It is a tragic saga filled with sorrow and death, although there are moments of passion and joy: this story unfolds with the creation of this universe, after which it proceeds through a complexity of events and relationships until there is an inevitable cataclysmic end to this world (first in fire, and then in water). No land character survives this deluge and conflagration, except perhaps the ugly and evil dwarf Alberich, whose theft of the lump of magic reddish-gold from the three Rhinemaidens began this tragic cycle of events and relationships.

Taken together, the different characters in the *Der Ring des Nibelungen* tetralogy may be said to represent the various aspects of Wagner’s own multi-dimensional and



complex personality. Nietzsche's personality was also complex; unfortunately, unlike Wagner, this isolated individual could not sustain an intimate relationship with another human being.

Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (written 1883-1885) is a four-part book that challenges one to critically reflect on those ideas, beliefs, values, and perspectives that are entrenched in modern civilization. Of course, human societies and their cultures are a result of a long evolutionary process. In his philosophy of overcoming, Nietzsche offers a dynamic worldview that stresses three major concepts: the will to power, the future overbeings, and the eternal recurrence of the same. His interpretation of this universe and our species within it is grounded in a strictly naturalist framework. In fact, one may argue that Nietzsche's three major concepts are implicit in Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* tetralogy. Clearly, the works of both creative thinkers reflect the emerging evolutionary outlook of their century. Over the years, I have lectured extensively on both Wagner and Nietzsche in Europe and the United States of America.

Despite its Christian and Buddhist symbolism, as well as mystical orientation, Wagner's last opera *Parsifal* is also an essentially naturalist statement on the need for human compassion in order to save our species from the evil that is throughout this world. Nietzsche did not agree. In fact, there is not even a hint that Wagner's human redeemer Parsifal will ever become a creative individual as foreshadowed in Nietzsche's tantalizing conception of the future overbeing. In retrospect, it is interesting to compare Wagner's two heroes, Siegfried and Parsifal. Whereas Siegfried is portrayed within a completely naturalist framework, in sharp contrast Parsifal is presented within a mystical worldview.

In the last century, Nietzsche emerged as the most influential modern philosopher, especially because his rigorous re-evaluation of all values had offered scathing criticisms of all religious beliefs and theological dogmas. Furthermore, he himself had established a crucial paradigm shift from a focus on the present to an emphasis on the future, with his philosophy of overcoming envisioning a global conflict of values. Having rejected the major thinkers of Western thought (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel) and boldly proclaiming that "God is dead!" as a metaphysical entity, Nietzsche gave a provocative interpretation of the natural world based on his three challenging but controversial ideas: the pervasive will to power, the future overbeings beyond good and evil, and the eternal recurrence of this same universe. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of Nietzsche's readers rejected his worldview. Even so, the philosopher's severe criticism of mediocrity and modernity, as well as his awesome vision of the future, must be taken seriously. And, his major work *Thus Spake Zarathustra* remains both a literary and philosophical masterpiece of thought and symbolism.

As a process philosopher, although rejecting Charles Darwin's strict materialism in favor of creative vitalism, Nietzsche did not see our species as the end-goal of human biological evolution. On



the contrary, he argued that the human being is a temporary link between those fossil apes of the remote past and those superior overbeings yet to emerge in the distant future; a creative individual is merely a recent product of ongoing evolutionary creativity within this creative universe. As such, within the flux of reality, humans represent an unfinished and imperfect species. Consequently, Nietzsche's bold speculations had anticipated to some degree both transhumans and posthumans.

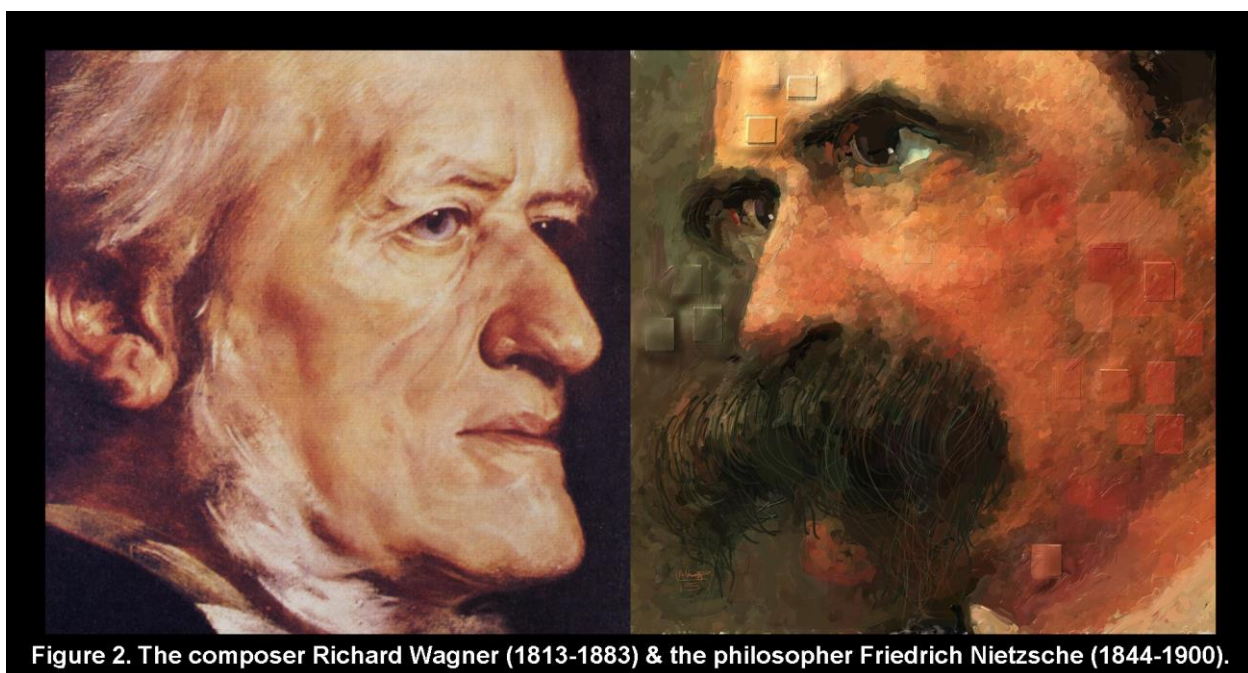


Figure 2. The composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) & the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900).

Despite their differences, Wagner and Nietzsche both challenged our modern values and offered a new conception of human existence. Wagner's viewpoint ultimately called for a community of compassionate individuals, while in sharp contrast Nietzsche's worldview consistently argued for the superior value of those creative individuals who are independent of any human community. No doubt, both positions have some merit for the ongoing evolution of our species on earth and perhaps even elsewhere.

3. Wagner & Nietzsche: Influence

Wagner's influence on music, the theater, and the arts has been enormous, from the dramatic operas of Richard Strauss (1864-1949) and other composers to the film soundtracks of *King Kong* (1933), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and *Quo Vadis* (1951) to mention only three early examples. Modern productions of the *Ring* cycle and *Parsifal* may take advantage of those remarkable innovations in computer technology that now allow for the spectacular realization of Wagner's wishes concerning the symbolic and naturalist presentation of the events and scenes in these two operatic works, as well as in his other earlier music-dramas.



Nietzsche's influence on philosophy and culture has been equally enormous, from the writings of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and other authors to the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), among many numerous examples. There has been a continuous and growing interest in Nietzsche's life and thought, as is clearly evident in the seemingly endless publications of biographies on this philosopher and interpretations of his worldview.

In step with those advances of the special sciences that occurred during their lifetime, particularly in biology and anthropology, both Wagner and Nietzsche embraced the far-reaching implications of a pervasive naturalism. Startling discoveries in the special sciences (from geology and paleontology to archaeology and psychology) of the nineteenth century had devastating ramifications for all the entrenched idealism and dualism in traditional philosophy, as well as alarming consequences for all the preternatural and supernatural claims in dogmatic religions and myopic theologies. Of special significance were the writings of naturalist Charles Darwin, whose evolution theory had turned the traditional Western worldview upside down, i.e., it established a viewpoint grounded in science and reason rather than in religion and theology. The now-outmoded ideas and beliefs of those previous earlier thinkers, who had maintained that the human animal is both a special being within nature and one that occupies a unique place within this universe, were abruptly replaced by a new science-oriented and truly-cosmic worldview. Quintessentially, our species is merely a recent product of, totally dependent upon, and completely immersed within material nature. As such, all the aspects of human existence, from its genetic makeup to its mental activity, are a direct result of organic evolution and socio-cultural development. Wagner and Nietzsche, each in his own way, have made an overwhelming contribution to increasing the awareness of this new godless framework.

In the twentieth century, Arthur Rackham's impressive illustrations and Sir Georg Solti's superb recordings are two examples of major contributions to the promotion of Wagner's *Ring* cycle. Today, in popular culture, it is difficult to escape hearing the musical selection "The Ride of the Valkyries" or the opening bars of the tone poem "Thus Spake Zarathustra" in the mass media. Nietzsche's writings remain both popular and influential, especially among college students. At universities, serious debates continue over the existence of a personal God and those controversial issues that now surround the techno-genetic enhancement of our human species. In fact, one may argue that Nietzsche had envisioned the coming of the future posthuman in his idea of the forthcoming overbeing.

Finally, both Wagner the artist and Nietzsche the philosopher presented a cosmology that is ultimately and quintessentially grounded in the symbol of a ring or circle; this gives their dynamic worldviews an endless framework of ongoing events. After all, Wagner's operatic tetralogy is titled *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and its epic myth has, as its primary object, a magic reddish-gold ring; and



Nietzsche's process metaphysics is grounded in his central and colossal idea of the eternal recurrence of this same universe. Both conceptual views of reality offer both an evolutionary understanding of and appreciation for the fleeting place that our species occupies within material nature. In these two interpretations of the cosmos, neither Wagner nor Nietzsche resorted to the beliefs of Christianity and, furthermore, each was an unabashed atheist. At the end of Wagner's cycle, the music-drama *Götterdämmerung* finds its last scene identical to the first scene of *Das Rheingold*; the three Rhinemaidens are joyous once again over having possession of their magic reddish-gold (now as a ring). And for Nietzsche, reality is the endless repetition of this same finite universe in every detail, i.e., the cyclical return of this identical cosmos forever. This intellectual preoccupation with a circle goes back to the early philosopher Heraclitus, who envisioned this entire universe in terms of the eternal return of a finite cosmic cycle. Thus, Wagner and Nietzsche had offered an interpretation of this universe that is far removed from all finite linear conceptions of time and reality.



4. Conclusion

Today, what is one to make of the relationship between Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche? Each was remarkably creative, but self-isolated from the general public and consequently suffered misunderstanding. And each of them made a lasting contribution to modern civilization in terms of glorious operatic dramas and profound philosophical works, respectively. For sure, this is the



stuff that intellectual dreams are made of. The life of a creative genius is usually lonely, at least from time to time. Even so, Nietzsche suffered the most; his genius in philosophy received recognition only after his tragic death. However, Wagner lived to be greatly admired by many for his genius in both music and the theater.

Focusing on Wagner and Nietzsche, one finds a relationship that was at first a friendship grounded in mutual respect, although Nietzsche's intense involvement was far more personal and emotional than Wagner's ever was. Eventually, however, Nietzsche ended his relationship with Wagner, who he found to be "human, all too human" (as he put it). E.g., Wagner's inexcusable betrayal in revealing one of Nietzsche's very personal behavior patterns, and Wagner's creation of both the overly-theatrical music-dramas of the *Ring* cycle and the deeply-religious and obviously-mystical *Parsifal*, were actions that finally led to a break in their ten-year friendship that was never to be amended.

Suffice it to say that, in both its size and scope, Wagner's monumental *Der Ring des Nibelungen* is a singular ground-breaking accomplishment in the history of music and the theater. Also of great significance, Nietzsche's provocative *Thus Spake Zarathustra* remains one of the most influential books in the history of philosophy and literature. Both iconoclastic works are a major contribution to human civilization.

Over the years, both Nietzsche's gravesite in Röcken and Wagner's gravesite in Bayreuth have been visited frequently by devoted followers; actually, in death, each is appreciated far more by an enlightened public than he ever was during his lifetime. Furthermore, the creative and isolated King Ludwig II was entombed in Munich. So, one has a geographical triangle (not a circle). It is highly unlikely that these three individuals were ever all together in life. Yet, they are forever linked by the *Ring* cycle: one created it, one adored it, and one rejected it!

Will the works of Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche continue to have lasting value? No doubt, it is a matter of perspective. Surely, the operas of Wagner and the ideas of Nietzsche will be appreciated by human beings throughout future centuries, if our species continues to survive. However, enhanced transhumans may eventually have values incredibly different from those human values that are held in our own time. And what about the values of those posthumans who may enjoy their existence while venturing among the stars and perhaps even beyond them? Suffice it to know that at least the enlightened human beings of today may be both thrilled by Wagner's glorious operas and excited over Nietzsche's profound ideas.

Note



I developed some of my ideas presented here in lectures given for various universities, including: Bauhaus University Weimar (Friedrich Nietzsche College), University of Cambridge (Peterhouse College), Friedrich Schiller University Jena (Ethics Center), Harvard University, Imperial College London, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, and especially at the University of Belgrade (Faculty of Philology). In June 2011, as a Wagner Fellow, I had organized a conference on Richard Wagner for and presented a paper at Das Lohengrinhaus in Graupa/Dresden, Germany.

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