

As part of her Undergraduate Research Assistant Position at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Corey Bellis wrote a research paper exploring themes of environmental morality throughout Wagner's Ring Cycle.

Program Notes for the *Ring* Cycle

German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) is a key figure in the history of opera. Known to be outspoken about music, society, and politics, Wagner's philosophies and actions were a frequent topic of conversation among his contemporaries, and to this day, his musical and prose works are fascinating for scholars and audiences. Among the conglomerate of contemporarily controversial topics in Wagner's works (politics, race, religion, etc.) is the topic of environmental degradation, but it is not commonly recognized by modern scholars. Environmental concern sweeps our world today, but expression of such concern was still infrequent in 19th-century Europe. Wagner's most epic work, *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (a tetra-cycle including the operas *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*), contains myriad evocations of nature in the plot, music, and staging; together these elements comprise a moral theme on the treatment of nature and the environment. Examination of Wagner's letters and accounts of his childhood reveal that he displayed a fondness for nature and an inclination to protect it. For the premier performance of *Der Ring* in 1876, Wagner orchestrated every aspect of production, and according to music critic Heinrich Porges, "Everything Wagner did at the rehearsals – every movement, every expression, every intonation – bore out this principle of fidelity to nature [*Naturwahrheit*]."

This first full presentation of the *Ring* cycle's four operas took place at the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the opera theatre commissioned by Wagner to accommodate the large orchestra and stage designs he envisioned for his productions, and is now performed there annually at the Bayreuth Festival. Together the four operas total seventeen hours in length and are typically performed over a span of four days. This analysis will highlight themes relating to nature in order to show that the *Ring* contains an embedded message of environmental morality.

Wagner's version of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* tells the story of the creation and destruction of an all-powerful magic gold ring and the struggles that it causes for society and the earth. The Ring was forged from the magical gold that resided in the Rhine River, and, as it was known to give supreme power to its wearer, it soon became an object of desire for many of the world's inhabitants. As the Ring passes through the hands of dwarfs, giants, dragons, and men, its destructive influence causes societal collapse and devastation of the land. The distress to the environment is paramount when Erda, the goddess of the earth and the embodiment of nature, appears confused and forlorn after being taken advantage of by Wotan, the chief god of the land. The entire drama is resolved when the Ring is returned to its place of origin, the Rhine River, which subsequently overflows as Valhalla, the Earthly fortress of the Gods, bursts into flames and is destroyed.

The Ring in this story both literally and figuratively represents nature. Gold is a pure element that is also a rare and valuable resource, and in Wagner's *Ring* cycle it also symbolizes any element of nature, be it mineral, animal, plant, or water, that man willfully and selfishly rips from its natural environment for his own use. In making such a statement that one must renounce love in order to acquire this gold, Wagner may be saying that such actions as purging resources are detrimental to human beings. The Rhinemaidens, whose job it was to protect the Rhine's gold, were mutually dependant on the gold, and as they mourn the loss of it, Wagner may be harkening to the idea of an ecosystem, part of the study of ecology that was emerging in Wagner's day.

The music of *Das Rheingold* and indeed the whole tetralogy is also relevant to ecology and to the Romantic idea of Organicism. As 19th-century scientists were beginning to understand the deep interconnectedness of the living and nonliving elements of the world, artists and authors were exploring the same idea in their creative works. Organicism, the idea that everything originates from a single source (e.g. Goethe's *Urpflanze*), is integral to the music of the *Ring*. The opening of *Das Rheingold* is the single sound of a low E flat, and as the other instruments gradually enter, first in unison, then in a triad, the audience hears that same idea of things growing out of a single source. Indeed, each motive or theme associated with a specific

subject can be recognized as a development of an earlier theme, furthering the idea of interconnectedness amongst people, elements, and events in the world.

The second opera of the tetralogy, *Die Walküre*, does not include so many direct symbols of nature or environment as in *Das Rheingold*, but instead explores the social degradation that occurs as a result of the Ring's lure. This chapter tells the story of Siegmund and Sieglinde, two mortals fathered by Wotan as part of a plan to create a hero who will restore the magical ring back to Wotan's keeping. The siblings were separated while children and upon meeting each other again years later, they fall passionately in love and conceive a son. This incestuous relationship spawned from Wotan's extreme lust for the power of the Ring sparks a quarrel between Siegmund and another man. Wotan instructs his Valkyrie daughter, Brünnhilde, to offer no help to the incestuous Siegmund, but she goes against her father's orders and sways the battle the way that she, and not her father, sees best. During the famous prelude to Act III, the Ride of the Valkyries, the curtain rises to reveal a vast mountain landscape on which the consort of Valkyries await Brünnhilde to take fallen heroes off to rest in Valhalla. When Brünnhilde's sisters hear that she has disobeyed their father Wotan, they refuse to help her, for they know her punishment will be great. Wotan exiles Brünnhilde to a mountaintop where she must sleep until the bravest of heroes comes to claim her. This secluded mountaintop to which Wotan banishes Brünnhilde is the surprising incarnation of environmental awareness in *Die Walküre*, which arises from a common contemporary association between virginal women and mountain landscapes that is found in many 19th century European dramas. In *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera: The Alpine Virgin from Bellini to Puccini*, Emanuele Senici explores this association and points to Brünnhilde's place of exile as a Germanic demonstration of this idea. The symbolic aspect of landscape was important to Wagner, for he chose to incorporate the actual Rhine River into a story that is otherwise fantasy.

During the early stages of the *Ring's* conception, the national identity of the Rhine River was disputed between the German and the French, each wanting to claim the River's rich history and resourcefulness for their own. The importance that the German people placed on the issue is reflected by the work of contemporaneous composers and artists who incorporated the Rhine and its associated folk-characteristics into their songs and artworks. Though Wagner's use of the Rhine may say more about his nationalist endeavors than his naturalistic ones, the fact that he and his contemporaries recognized this landscape feature as an important national icon reflects their acknowledgement and appreciation of natural features as part of their identity.

Another important landscape association occurs in the third opera, *Siegfried*. Much of the opera takes place in a forest that is home to the title character, the orphaned child of Siegmund and Sieglinde. Early in the opera, Siegfried demonstrates his comfort and familiarity with the natural world as he plays with a bear, even calling it his friend. After fighting a dragon and retrieving the Ring, Siegfried interacts with a woodbird, a feat which has for millennia been regarded as a divine ability, and this bird leads him to Brünnhilde, sparking the relationship that will (in the next opera) restore peace and order to the world. This musical encounter, called "Forest Murmurs," is another popular excerpt, and the composer claims to have conceived of this work while he himself was taking a walk in the Sihl Forest.

The influence of nature abounds in this third opera, and it centers on the protagonist Siegfried. Several elements identify him as a heroic and good-willed: his predestination as a noble hero of the world; his humble roots, which accord him with the standard hero archetype; and his resistance to the lure of the Ring's power, since he gives the Ring to another (Brünnhilde) as a gift, totally unaffected by the curse upon it that has brought harm or death to many of its other bearers. It is significant that Richard Wagner chose to give Siegfried a positive connection and interaction with the natural environment. It is clear from Wagner's personal and observed accounts that he had affectionate and protective attitudes towards nature and thus would have believed that Siegfried's affinity to nature was a positive character trait. This connection between a protagonist and nature makes an obvious suggestion that being respectful to nature is indeed good.

In contrast, the chief god, Wotan is antagonistic, and he demonstrates a disrespect and disregard for nature. When Siegfried meets Wotan (disguised as The Wanderer) near Brünnhilde's exile mountain, Wotan tries to discredit Siegfried's claims that he was led there by a bird's speech. When he finds this will not dissuade

the hero, Wotan/The Wanderer tries bickering and then forcibly blocking Siegfried's path up the mountain. The god eventually calmly admits his defeat, but this confrontation demonstrates his adversity to nature as represented by Siegfried. Wotan's opposition to nature was also evident in *Das Rheingold*, when the god lusts after the magical ring, which represents the domination of nature and the consumption of the earth's raw materials. As the commissioner and overseer of Valhalla, he is responsible for the desecration of the natural landscape. His depravity goes further when he attempts to deceive the giants, the workers of the earth, whom he has hired to do this work for him.

The event that is most striking, though, is Wotan's own account of his physical exploitation of Erda, the goddess of the earth, which he performed for his own selfish pursuits. Reflecting on this incident when Wotan returns in disguise to seek her advice in *Die Walküre*, Erda says, "Deeds of men becloud my mind, wise though I am, a ruler once tamed me." The fact that Wotan, who is an antagonistic character, has taken sexual advantage of and despoiled Erda, the story's most explicit embodiment of nature, sends a message that the exploitation and domination of nature are morally wrong.

With the somewhat pleasant ending of *Die Walküre*, true love reigning and the gods peacefully accepting their fates, it seems that the story could have come to a conclusion. The story is continued, though, in last opera of the cycle, *Götterdämmerung*. The opera begins with a half-dwarf named Hagen who is pursuing the Ring on the advice of his father Alberich, the dwarf who originally forged the Ring. Hagen convinces his half-brother Gunther to trick Siegfried into removing Brünnhilde from the mountaintop so that Gunther can marry her. Brünnhilde believes that Siegfried has forsaken her and wishes that Siegfried would die. Gunther and Hagen have already planned the hero's death, and lure him into the woods on a hunting trip where they will kill him. Siegfried happens upon the Rhine River and sees the Rhinemaidens, who beg him to relinquish the Ring, but he does not give in. After Hagen kills Siegfried, Brünnhilde realizes that they had both been deceived, and she orders a great funeral for the hero, which is accompanied by the oft-excerpted "Siegfried's Tod." Brünnhilde then takes the magical ring, and tells the Rhinemaidens to take it from her ashes as she rides into a great pyre, killing herself and purifying the accursed Ring at the same time. The last images of the opera are of the Rhinemaidens rejoicing, the River overflowing, and Valhalla, the kingdom of the gods, fatally burning.

The final installment of the *Ring des Nibelungen* saga serves the purpose of tying up loose ends, such as the fate of the Rhinemaidens and the hero Siegfried, and it also resolves the fate of the society that was so distorted by the Ring's destructive lure. The ecological events – the landscape burning and the flood – are actually natural events that are now known to have benefits for the land and ecology. Floods, which are often very destructive to our human communities, can refill groundwater caverns, refertilize nutrient deficient soils, and serve other purposes in water-based ecosystems. The Rhine River in the *Ring* cycle can be seen as an example of an ecosystem, with its restorative flooding and also with the symbiotic relationship of its inhabitants (the Rhinemaidens) who are mutually dependent on the elements (like the Rhinegold) of their environment. Forest burning occurs naturally, and it is even sometimes intentionally initiated as a method of cleansing the forest of invasive plant species and harmful diseases; some trees even need fire for their seeds to germinate. The resulting second-growth forest is comparable to the aspired for outcome of the society in the *Ring*, that it will have a chance to start over, free from the impurities that befell it before.

The concepts of ecology and symbiotic relationships were in the early stages of exploration during Wagner's time, but they seem to have made some sort of impact on the composers' intellectual and aesthetic understanding of the natural world. His incorporation of natural landmarks, ecologically based symbols, and environmental morality themes in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* may reflect the beginnings of environmental consciousness and concern. This interpretation might suggest that the tetralogy is the first eco-friendly opera.