

Pride, Prejudice, Bigotry and Genius: Richard Wagner's World: A Lecture by James Conlon

James Conlon, the music director of L.A. Opera and one of today's preeminent conductors, will explore Wagner's controversial personality in relation to bigotry, racism, and prejudice in Wagner's time and in ours.

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Introduction

I have been a Wagnerite since the seventh grade. It started with the overture to *Tannhauser*, and—by the time I was a freshman in high school—I had graduated to the orchestral music of the Ring cycle.

Two years later, I began reading biographies about Wagner and discovered his bigotry towards French and Jewish people and his many other personal failings. He used people, borrowed money he never intended to pay back, and was unfaithful to both his first and second wives. Nietzsche, who dedicated the *Birth of Tragedy* to Wagner, later realized the composer's intellectual limitations and came to see him as a romantic influenced by Schopenhauer's pessimism. Despite his bigotry and personal qualities, Wagner's music influenced an entire era of musical expression—from the magnificent symphonies of Bruckner and Mahler to the atonal compositions of the Second Vienna School.

As I began purchasing more Wagner records, I observed the mixed feelings of many people towards his music. Many of the conductors who I felt best understood the drama and spirituality of Wagner's music—figures like Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer, and Georg Solti—had to reconcile their Jewish faith, their families' experiences during the Holocaust, and their personal identities with Wagner's bigotry and his music's role in defining the German Romantic myths of Nazi ideology. Since then, many listeners have endured the same struggle in confronting Wagner's work.

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The Ring of the Nibelungs

The four operas that constitute the Ring cycle are *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walkure*, *Siegfried*, and *Gotterdammerung*. The Ring is one of the great achievements in the annals of music. Between the ascending E-flat note that starts *Rheingold* to the transcendental beauty of the love theme that concludes *Gotterdammerung*, sixteen hours of music and drama has elapsed.

The Ring cycle features thirty-three characters, none of which appear in all four of the operas—unless you view Loge, personified as a character in *Rheingold*, and then represented on stage as pure fire in the other three operas. Ten gods appear—including the three Norns—as well as nine Valkyries, three Rheinmaidens, two giants, two Nibelungs, and seven mortals. These seven mortals are Siegmund, Sieglinde, Siegfried, Hunding, Gunther, Gertrune, and Hagen. Although Wotan is the king of the gods, the primordial goddess is Erda. The Valkyries are the children of Wotan and Erda, who previously gave birth to the Norns—or the spinners of the fate of the world.

Musically, the four operas that constitute the Ring cycle are each unique. Though the same motifs are used throughout, each opera has its own musical stamp. *Das Rheingold* has four continuous scenes separated only by the flow of interwoven motifs. It is the most musically advanced of the four. Set arias and duets are featured in both *Die Walkure* and *Siegfried*. *Gotterdammerung* exhibits many of the traditions of grand opera, including chorus and stagecraft that superseded the staging of previous composers. A performance of the entire cycle, which is now being undertaken by the L.A. Opera has a tremendous impact—and a visceral effect on the imagination.

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Further Reading

Treacherous bonds and laughing fire: politics and religion in Wagner's Ring

By Mark Berry

Music Library ML410.W15B58 2006

I saw the world end: a study of Wagner's Ring

By Deryck Cooke

Music Library ML410.W15C67

An introduction to Wagner's Der Ring des Nibelungen: a handbook

By William O. Cord

Music Library ML610.W22C67 1995

Reflections on Wagner's Ring

By John Culshaw

Music Library MT100.W25C9

Wagner's Ring and its symbols; the music and the myth

By Robert Donington

Music Library ML410.W15D6 1969

Nietzsche, Wagner, and the philosophy of pessimism

By Roger Hollinrake

Philosophy Library B3313.A44H65 1982

Richard Wagner and the Nibelungs

By Elizabeth Magee

Music Library ML410.W15M3 1990

The Wagner operas

By Ernest Newman

Music Library MT100.W2N53 1991

The dream of self-destruction: Wagner's Ring and the modern world

By L.J. Rather

Music Library

ML410.W15R4

The perfect Wagnerite: a commentary on the Niblung's ring

By Bernard Shaw

Music Library

MT100.W25S5 1972

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Further Listening

The Solti recordings from 1958 to 1964 were the first stereo studio recordings of the complete Ring cycle. It remains the most intense, thanks not only to the conductor and singers, but also the brilliant audio engineering of John Culshaw. In a poll on the BBC Radio3's long running radio program

CD Review, this Decca/London set was voted as the greatest recording of the 20th century. No true Wagnerite should be without this set of the *Ring*. The new CD re-mastering available in a box set from 1997 is outstanding.

Although Solti's was the first studio stereo recording, the cycle had previously been recorded live in stereo by Decca engineers at the Bayreuth Festival in 1955 under the baton of Joseph Keilberth. Although unavailable for over 50 years, this cycle has now been issued on CD and vinyl by EMI's Testament label.

The Music Library has both sets. The Solti *Rheingold* call number is 4413mus, *Walkure* is 4414mus, *Siegfried* is 4415mus, and *Gotterdammerung* is 4416mus. The Keilberth *Rheingold* is 13170mus, *Walkure* is 13169mus, *Siegfried* is 13007mus, and *Gotterdammerung* is 13202mus.

The Music Library also has the Patrice Chereau production of the Ring at Bayreuth from 1976. Pierre Boulez is the conductor. Although booed at its premiere, this French production is really one of the most human and emotional interpretation of the cycle ever staged. The call number for the video recording is MUSDVD 65, parts 1-4.

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