

Everyday Totalitarianism: Reflections on the Stuttgart *Ring*

By the standards of contemporary German opera, the recent Stuttgart production of Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen* has generated a great deal of hype. Critics hail it as an epochal "milestone in the history of Wagner production, akin to the Patrice Chéreau Bayreuth centenary *Ring* of 1976," and praise it for single-handedly disproving "widespread claims that opera is dead."¹ The most commonly cited virtue of the production is its use of a different director for each opera. Klaus Zehelein, Intendant of the Stuttgart Staatsoper from 1991 to 2006, a dramaturge by profession and the man who organized this *Ring*, offers unabashed self-praise: "Only because we arranged for a different team to direct each piece of the *Ring* will its moments of exposition finally realize those sublime theatrical forms that Wagner offers us."² The result is now available on DVD.

* * *

Why four directors and not one? Zehelein's most straightforward justification, the one that dominates press releases from Stuttgart and reviews in the German press, is that stage directors must be liberated. Any effort to impose a unified concept or meaning on the *Ring* cycle (Totalitätsanspruch), Zehelein argues, restricts the director's creative freedom and is thus "totalitarian."³ Holistic concepts encumber directors by constraining them to adopt interpretations of the *Ring* consistent with the overarching ideas, symbols, and musical leitmotifs in Wagner's text and music.⁴ By treating the *Ring* instead as a series of disconnected episodes, directors are free to respond to each dramatic moment without "prior assumptions" or "obligations."⁵ A modern audience should similarly perceive the *Ring* as a series of disconnected theatrical moments or "theatrical piecework."⁶ Having no big message to transmit and no one in charge enhances artistic freedom and releases creative energy.

Unbounded praise for individual artistic freedom and cultural diversity is, of course, a contemporary cliché—and as such, it obscures more than it illuminates. Is the Stuttgart *Ring* really more open-minded, creative, and diverse than other

notable productions of Wagner's *Ring*? On the surface, to be sure, freedom seems to foster variety. The four productions appear stylistically dissimilar: Joachim Schlömer's *Rheingold* is elegant and balletic, Christoph Nel's *Walküre* is psychoanalytic and intellectual, Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito's *Siegfried* is concrete and banal, and Peter Konwitschny's *Götterdämmerung* is stagy in a self-consciously Brechtian manner.⁷ Beneath the surface, however, the degree of conformity is remarkable. All four directors portray ordinary people in banal settings in contemporary time—a tendency reinforced by both set design and individual characterizations.

Consider the role of nature which, on a literal reading, dominates the *Ring*.⁸ In place of Wagner's grand vistas, mirrored in the orchestral score, the four operas at Stuttgart move everything indoors, under artificial light, with hardly a glimpse of the outdoors. *Rheingold*'s scenic transformations occur within a single chamber of a latter-day Valhalla; *Siegfried* unfolds in a postindustrial wasteland; *Walküre* and *Götterdämmerung* transpire within a bare stage-within-a-stage—a Wagnerian *Pagliacci*.⁹ Rooms are cramped, furnishings grubby, materials cheap, and colors bland. This is not a pristine environment despoiled by man, as in Chéreau's celebrated staging, but a world utterly devoid of nature. Sublime scenery is displayed only ironically: Brünnhilde's rock and the Rhine appear, respectively, as a kitschy engraving and photo suitable for a *bürgerlich* basement.¹⁰ Mythology and magic are absent: *Rheingold*'s exotic creatures and habitats become shifting psychological states, *Walküre*'s magic fire is provided by a single spotlight, and the *Götterdämmerung* deluge does not occur at all.¹¹ Sets inspired by film noir (*Rheingold*), television (*Walküre*), the films of Stanley Kubrick and Bernardo Bertolucci (*Siegfried*), and Brechtian theater (*Götterdämmerung*) accentuate the sense of artificiality.

This ersatz world is inhabited exclusively by dysfunctional families drawn from burlesque, cinema, and television stereotypes. Valhalla houses a gangster clan. Wotan is a henpecked husband who fusses with garden gnomes in his backyard. Siegmund and Sieglinde are an alienated couple in the kitchen. Gunther and Gutrune are deluded *bourgeois* surrounded by beer-drinking, white-collar workers. The Valkyries are trashy tarts strutting their stuff on the sidewalk. Siegfried is a greasy teenager who escapes his masturbating stepdad in order to slay a criminal kingpin cum dragon and then encounters Brünnhilde in a bourgeois boudoir. Even the most heroic characters become sordid, with Wotan uniformly treated as a vicious tyrant. Whatever their role in the drama, Gods, dwarves, and men sport shiny suits, track clothes, leather jackets, cheap dresses, and grimy T-shirts. Only the odor of stale cigarettes is missing.

This remarkable consistency of vision should put us on our guard. Just as Fricka rightly mistrusts Wotan's claim that Siegmund is fully responsible for his

own actions rather than being an emanation of Wotan's will, so we should doubt Zehelein's claim that the Stuttgart *Ring* emerged spontaneously from the liberation of individual directorial energy.¹² Didn't a single intendant choose these particular directors? Didn't they coordinate the productions?¹³ The naming of multiple directors makes good feuilleton copy, but it is a smokescreen. The real meaning of this *Ring* lies elsewhere.

* * *

The Stuttgart *Ring* has little to do, in fact, with liberating directors from grand concepts. Zehelein's claim that any "totalizing" interpretation of the *Ring* is necessarily "totalitarian" is a rhetorical sleight of hand. One can easily imagine creative and subtle efforts to present a coherent *Ring* cycle, and we will consider some examples below.¹⁴ It is more enlightening to ask what (partially hidden) philosophical doctrine lends coherence to this particular production. The answer is postmodern literary theory with a dollop of psychoanalytical Marxism.

According to the view set forth by Zehelein and his associates, the nineteenth-century belief in a progressive teleology of enlightenment, which Wagner shared at certain times in his life and which inspired the *Ring* in the form of utopian socialism, is now obsolete. We no longer believe, as he once did, that philosophy can illuminate the human condition, or that the historical teleology is moving toward a utopian future. Our postmodern sensibility is dominated instead by aporia: the alienating feeling of pointlessness (*Sinnlosigkeit*) in a world filled with irresolvable discontinuities and contradictions.¹⁵ The Stuttgart team draws the conclusion that individuals do not differ from one another according to their adherence to distinct ideals of truth, beauty, love, morality, or politics. Today, such values neither define our identities nor motivate our behavior. Instead—and here the deconstructionist vision of the production is combined with a psychoanalytic theory of power—all that remains is an endless and universal struggle for power and autonomy. The only human characteristics that matter in this battle are material resources and psychological toughness. Any ideal that promises to render such a world more palatable or coherent to us, especially in any utopian sense, is an illusion—and a dangerous one, because the powerful can and will exploit such sentimental beliefs as instruments of control. We can only hope for sober recognition of this bleak reality. It is the opera director's task to hasten such recognition by directly confronting spectators with the naked truth—for their own good.

From this perspective, the Stuttgart team argues, any interpretation of the *Ring* must present it as an inherently fragmented work, aesthetically and philosophically. To do otherwise would be to promise coherence when we no

longer recognize it and to celebrate autonomy where we no longer acknowledge it. The task of the director must be, therefore, not simply to illuminate the text and music, but to distance the modern spectator via a sense of alienation (*Verfremdung*) from those parts of it that are no longer valid. One must “radicalize” the text, embracing “difference for its own sake” (*Differenz “an sich”*)—that is, in order to deconstruct and thus reveal the *Ring’s* internal contradictions.¹⁶ This is done by showing that romantic moments—moments of apparent nobility, beauty, love, or self-sacrifice—in fact result from psychological compulsion or material coercion. The ostensible aspiration is to achieve a distinct fusion of contemporary banality and moral ambivalence in which every character is treated evenhandedly as an amoral human within a modern everyday setting. Thus the relevance of the *Ring* would be restored.

This perspective differs greatly (it hardly needs to be said) from the view that inspired Wagner to compose the *Ring*. He believed that individuals were both distinguished from and drawn to one another, above all, by their capacity to love. Love takes different forms in Wagner’s operas: religious love in *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*; romantic love in *Tristan* and *Der fliegende Holländer*; an embedded sense of friendship, family, community, and art in *Die Meistersinger*; and human compassion in *Parsifal*. The characters in these operas embrace love, share it, and, in the end, sacrifice for it. In exchange it gives their lives meaning. The underlying message is essentially romantic, not because it is optimistic or utopian per se, but because it stresses the central and natural role of autonomous individual subjectivity in transforming how we assign meaning to the world and our place in it. The fact that the overwhelming force of love may often be no more than an aspiration or a fiction—as Brünnhilde might be said to realize in her final monologue—need not dilute the power of the underlying idea.¹⁷ Any production that denies this romantic message, as does the Stuttgart effort, is compelled to spend considerable time undermining the explicit meaning of Wagner’s text and score. The dominant trope of the Stuttgart *Ring* is thus irony, often spilling over into vicious parody.

Deconstructing Wagner’s romantic message in this way may be intellectually stimulating and radically chic, but the results are problematic.¹⁸ Some characters and situations, to be sure, are illuminated as rarely before, but others suffer from such an antidramatic and unmusical distortion as to call the entire notion of “difference for its own sake” into question. These virtues and vices are closely intertwined. In order consistently to implement an interpretation that runs in large part against the libretto and score, the directors constantly tweak and twist the stage action. This heavy-handed, often parodistic, micromanagement clutters the stage, wears the mind, and tightly constrains the ability of any given spectator to interpret to the proceedings in his or her own preferred manner. In the end,

the result of this ideological reeducation program is ironic: those who most vociferously criticize the totalitarianism of others become the most totalitarian of all.

* * *

The Stuttgart *Ring's* greatest musical-dramatic insights result from its humanization of “evil” (and often nonhuman) characters such as Alberich, Mime, Hagen, and Fasolt. Sympathetic treatment of traditional “bad guys” creates some spell-binding dramatic moments, most notably in certain sections of *Götterdämmerung* and most of *Rheingold* and *Siegfried*.

Perhaps the most striking is Alberich's appearance to the sleeping Hagen (“Schläfst Du, Hagen, mein Sohn?”) which opens act 2 of *Götterdämmerung*. Konwitschny sets this not as a lurid nightmare out of a Gothic romance, as one normally encounters it, but as the final visit of a dying, yet still dominant father. With eerily elongated fingers grasping his son from under a spooky white shroud, Alberich gently reminds the hesitant Hagen to fulfill his familial oath to avenge the theft of the ring (“Sei treu!”), then passes away in his son's arms. As Hagen bends over his father's corpse, motionless in grief, the body simply melts away into the stage, accompanied by a bittersweet bass-clarinet lament. The effect is not simply eerie, as are many treatments of this scene; it is also emotionally and dramatically gripping in ways that emerge organically out of the text and music. We come to know Hagen, much like Siegfried and Brünnhilde, as a figure motivated to fulfill a grim heroic destiny by sincere love—a task he carries out with a tortured mix of self-satisfaction and self-loathing.¹⁹

Konwitschny's sympathetic treatment illuminates other characters as well. Rarely, for example, has Siegfried's death been staged with attention to Wagner's clear intention that Gunther and the chorus be deeply moved, even transfigured, by the event. For the entirety of “Siegfried's Funeral March,” Gunther remains draped over Siegfried's body, while the chorus silently stares out at the audience.²⁰ This succeeds in underscoring the deeper meaning of Siegfried's death, which is to demonstrate to the populace—including Gunther—the essential inconsistency between “natural man” and our corrupt modern society.²¹

The Stuttgart presumption of everyday amorality is most appropriate to *Rheingold*, where even in a traditional reading, no character is truly admirable. Schlömer's unchanging set signals immediately that the proceedings will unfold on a human scale: the elegant yet simple scene is that of a decaying fin-de-siècle spa of golden tile from which—with one striking and very effective exception—supernatural pyrotechnics have been banished. Within it, *Rheingold* unfolds as an “intimate Strindbergian drama”—a study of interaction between a set of closely related individuals subject to psychological compulsion and unconstrained by moral scruples.²² The characters are stereotypes from a Hollywood mob film: a

boss and his coolly self-interested wife, surrounded by shrewd operators, exploited henchmen, and frustrated weaklings. The underlying point on this reading is that all are eternally alienated from all others by the lure of material wealth. Freia's divine apples (that is, our erotic desires) can provide no more than temporary relief. Niebelheim is a nightmarish realm of role reversal, in which avarice transforms the weak and small-minded into the strong and ambitious. The Tarnhelm is a sinister psychological mirror by which Alberich transforms himself into a self-deluding tyrant and dominates others, if only briefly, by stimulating their own greedy self-absorption. Alberich is not nastier than Wotan, only more vulnerable and thus more inclined to a fatal overestimation of his own importance.

Schlömer's approach inspires some moments of powerful musical-dramatic insight. One is his interpretation of Wagner's stage direction, "All express astonishment and various forms of bewilderment," following Loge's explanation that no man (except Alberich) will sacrifice love for riches.²³ Whatever their previous relationship, all the characters are momentarily entranced, mingling like dancers in slow motion, gazing at each another with polymorphous eroticism—a vision perfectly suited to Wagner's dreamy orchestration. Another is the final scene: the gods descend rather than ascend to Valhalla, but, in a moment of "eternal recurrence," soon reenter the same room only to find that now the dwarf rather than the god is the more powerful. In the last seconds, Alberich stares at Fasolt's corpse, wondering at the power of his own curse while the three disheveled *Rheintöchter* huddle sadly together. This conclusion is just shocking and clever enough to permit us to overlook—almost—its essential inconsistency with Wagner's orchestral depiction of an upward-arching rainbow bridge.

Wieler and Morabito's *Siegfried* similarly exploits the dramatic possibilities of moral ambivalence. Wagner himself believed that *Siegfried* was both comic and sentimental, and he predicted that it would thus be an extremely popular work. It has not turned out that way, not least because the title character seems to lack psychological depth. Siegfried commonly comes across on stage, in Ernest Newman's famous words, as "an overgrown boy scout . . . a man whose mental development was arrested at the age of twelve and has been in custody ever since."²⁴ The final scene on Brünnhilde's rock, in particular, often seems a long and static opportunity for two Wagnerian *Heldensänger* to hold forth in grandiose surroundings.

Against these odds, the Stuttgart *Siegfried* reveals the human essence of the saga more successfully than any other production in recent memory. What are normally treated as fairy-tale events unfold in the contemporary world, without the intervention of dwarves, giants, dragons, or even a hero. The human scale of the proceedings is further underscored by settings that hint at the evolution of postwar Germany: Siegfried's boyhood living quarters are an abandoned factory,

his forest is a chain-link fence at the edge of a dark criminal-infested no-man's-land, his rendezvous with Wotan takes place in an empty Nazi nursery, and his mountaintop meeting with Brünnhilde occurs in an immaculate futuristic boudoir bathed in florescent light.

In such settings Siegfried emerges as a well-meaning and confused teenager, still a bit awkward around grown-ups, confronting an inhuman world of ceaseless struggle for dominance—a bad neighborhood writ large. Like many young men, he lacks the fear and caution that restrain weaker individuals and mature adults. He is thus forced to be as bloody-minded as those around him. Yet his enemies have no broader significance as incarnations of evil: Mime is simply a weak and exploitative parent; Alberich is a smalltime hood; and Fafner is a criminal kingpin unlucky enough to find himself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Clad in an increasingly bloody T-shirt emblazoned with the splendidly ambiguous “Sieg Fried,” Siegfried reenacts the classic coming-of-age story of the young man breaking away from a weak and impotent father, meandering unthinkingly from one dangerous adventure to the next, disrespecting the elderly, and finally discovering romance and laughter in the arms of a woman outside of traditional society. On stage, even Jon Frederic West’s chunky physique and unrefined vocal delivery intensify the dramatic impact of his character’s youthful awkwardness.

The final scene touchingly captures Siegfried and Brünnhilde’s struggle with the classic tensions between dominance and submission, enthusiasm and timidity, playfulness and embarrassment, childishness and maturity, love and sex that arise when young people discover erotic pleasure. Rarely have Wagner’s closing textual references to laughter, with its unique power to overcome the fear of intimacy, been so concretely and compellingly portrayed. Their tussles over just how to make the bed for a first night of passion are so utterly natural as to disarm any hint of disbelief. Overall, this staging inspires in the spectator an appropriate balance of revulsion and sympathy for Siegfried’s struggle with the world around him. In the end, one shares his relief at discovering a respite from it—even though we know (not least from the final set’s overt allusion to *2001: A Space Odyssey*) that it is too artificial to last.

* * *

If these moments in the Stuttgart *Ring* demonstrate that subtle and sympathetic treatment of love as a motivation, even as applied to antagonistic characters, can generate strikingly original insights, other moments illustrate an obverse tendency toward crude and superficial overdirection. This is clearest in the way the Stuttgart team indulges a compulsion to viciously caricature the motives and ideals of traditional protagonists like Wotan, Siegmund and Sieglinde, Brünnhilde, and the *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried. Here any character, action, or

situation that is classically romantic or tragic—that is, any moment that implies an autonomous role for love, compassion, renunciation, heroism, or nature—is reshaped ruthlessly to fit a deconstructionist bed of Procrustes. A corrosive irony strips protagonists of psychological depth, reducing Wotan and his offspring to foils for other characters or for tendentious dictums about the evil of all authority. This tendency blunts the otherwise subtle impact of Wieler and Morabito's *Siegfried*, fatally undermines most of Konwitschny's otherwise insightful *Götterdämmerung*, and almost totally vitiates Nel's *Walküre*.

Wotan, whom we have already encountered in *Rheingold* as a rigidly calculating gangland boss, appears elsewhere as a similarly monochromatic villain. In *Siegfried*, he is an aging, leather-jacketed sadist who plays Russian roulette with Mime and forces the now barren Erda to dance a “last tango” (with everything that this implies). While the visual concept of Wotan as an aging rocker is intriguing, his character is so monotonously angry and cruel that his engagements with Mime, Erda, and Siegfried seem inhuman—rather than, as in more traditional accounts, illustrating the full range of human responses to tragic personal decline. In Nel's *Walküre*, Wotan is an abusive father: He is self-indulgently manipulative, by turns brutal and passive-aggressive. He secures Brünnhilde's assistance by appearing to be blind and helpless, if only in order to better implicate her in his crimes, then stages her punishment for his aesthetic pleasure.²⁵ The resulting characterizations often lack textural or musical support and almost entirely obscure the ambivalent mix of human motivations—hunger for authority, desire for wisdom, yearning for love, distancing through ironic wit, and existential despair—that render the Wanderer intriguing.²⁶

Reducing Wotan to a crudely cynical authoritarian undermines our dramatic interest in other characters, as well. His offspring become little more than arbitrary victims. By treating Brünnhilde in this way, for example, Nel undermines the significance of her compassionate choice to save Siegmund—a decision on which *Walküre* and, indeed, the entire *Ring* turn, in the traditional understanding of it as a tale of the autonomous evolution of Brünnhilde's capacity for human understanding and sympathy. Similarly, Wotan's own decision to grant his daughter mercy by constructing a wall of fire around her cannot be plausibly motivated, as Nel wants us to believe, by Wotan's desire for even tighter psychological and aesthetic control. The famous orchestral music of act 3 and the text that accompanies it leave no doubt that Wotan's choice is motivated instead by the triumph of love over anger. This is significant, moreover, precisely because it is among a select few of Wotan's acts *not* foreordained by baser motives—and it is the one that saves the world. The Stuttgart *Ring*'s pervasive cynicism leaves little room for such open-ended altruism, and so Nel seeks instead, by way of a series of unconvincing Brechtian clichés, to convince us that Wotan is just stage-managing everything for his own perverse pleasure.

These quirky misinterpretations would be little more than annoyances were it not for their cumulative tendency to undermine our appreciation of Wagner's musical score. *Die Walküre*, for example, is the most popular among the four *Ring* operas not simply because it contains so much beautiful music, but because that music is sincere, direct, and organically shaped into three coherent acts, each of which culminates in a compelling climax. In Nel's scheme, which rejects any hint that *Walküre* is an opera about the triumph of love, such climaxes serve no dramatic purpose: he undermines each with Brechtian theatrical irony in the form of an artificial stage within a stage, thereby deliberately distancing us from the action. Nel blunts the orchestral coda of act 1, which sweeps the lovers into the moonlight for their sole night of love, by placing Siegmund and Sieglinde on a pedestal, frozen into a parody of an ancient statue of capture and rape.²⁷ This undermines precisely the quality that ultimately renders the Wälungen such compelling and sympathetic characters: their reckless commitment to romantic love, even when it is against the law and the odds. During the swirling, nightmarish duel that ends act 2, Nel directs a set of giant puppets to clobber one another while Hunding and Wotan sing through megaphones and Siegmund meanders passively across the stage in a trench coat. The impact of the irresistibly tender "Feuerzauber" that concludes act 3 is diluted when it accompanies Wotan (unsympathetic to start with) kissing a television set replaying a video of his daughter, then acting out his fantasy as a theater director manqué.²⁸

In *Götterdämmerung*, Siegfried supplants Wotan as whipping boy, with similarly deadening results. At any point where the young man interacts with the natural world, Konwitschny subjects him to vicious ridicule. The Prologue introduces Siegfried as an overgrown three-year-old, minimally clad in a bearskin, fuzzy boots, and his wife's obviously feminine armor, carrying a hobbyhorse and cavorting on the furniture in front of cheap plastic fire and a kitschy nineteenth-century etching. Soon after bounding in to visit the Gibichungs, sporting the same outfit, Siegfried jumps on top of Guttrune, then licks the batter out of her mixing bowl—a crude allusion that looks even worse on stage than it reads in print. For those few who might not yet have grasped the point, Siegfried later appears in dress clothes, wearing an apron, stuffing the finished cake into his mouth—bourgeois heaven. The colloquy between Siegfried and the Rhinemaidens features three girls in cheap wigs and, inexplicably, a man in a bear suit (a refugee from the opening moments of *Siegfried*?) who mugs for the audience, swims with the Rhinemaidens, serves as Siegfried's conversation partner, and underscores significant points by nodding or holding up strands of the Norn's knitting.

One might be tempted, again, to forgive this as a self-indulgent but essentially harmless "strong misreading" were it not for the exorbitant dramatic and musical cost. Deliberately treating much of *Götterdämmerung* as absurd reduces the portion

an adult spectator can take seriously, dramatically, or musically, to half its length. Some scenes remain relatively unsullied, such as those focusing primarily on the Gibichungs (act 1, scene 1 and act 2, scenes 1, 3, and 5), Siegfried's disguised reconquest of Brünnhilde (the second half of act 1, scene 3), and Siegfried's death (act 3, scene 2). Elsewhere one often finds it difficult to attend to the music at all for all the sophomoric proceedings on stage. We have just seen how the lovely orchestral scoring that accompanies the Siegfried-Brünnhilde scene in the Prologue is undermined by hobbyhorse antics. Our inability to take the couple seriously, moreover, blunts the emotional impact of the subsequent transformation of Siegfried into a modern "man in a suit." Nor does tragedy attend the violation of the couple's bonds, though the music and text of *Götterdämmerung* ostensibly turn on precisely that act. Siegfried's arrival at the Gibichung Hall (the opening of act 1, scene 2), hobbyhorse in hand, is made so ridiculous as to undermine Wagner's splendidly ambiguous musical synthesis of the Gibichung's ominously brooding temperament and Siegfried's heroic spirit—an orchestral demonstration that Siegfried's purity is already compromised in the very moment he reaches human society and reenters the flow of history. Waltraute's ridiculous entrance, suspended from ropes, and the meaninglessness of her complaint within the context of the production to that point, combine to undermine the fateful music attending her visit (act 1, scene 3). Clowning distracts us from the tender orchestration accompanying Siegfried's meeting with the Rhinemaidens, a problem that similarly infects Siegfried's subsequent narrative, some of which he illustrates with sock puppets—as if Konwitschny just cannot wait to break down the theatrical illusion in which he never really believed anyway.

Even by his own permissive standards, Konwitschny hits an insurmountable brick wall when faced with Wagner's apocalyptic finale, where the music is unambiguously that of a utopian vision. Brünnhilde sings of the wisdom she has gained and then sacrifices herself to redeem the world. Konwitschny's (predictably Brechtian) solution is to distance us from the spectacle by turning up the house lights, having Brünnhilde sing her concluding scene in concert, and then projecting Wagner's stage directions onto a screen, accompanied by the orchestra.²⁹ Like so much else in the Stuttgart *Ring*, this move is intellectually intriguing, but musically and dramatically misguided. To be sure, the underlying idea of treating Brünnhilde's final scene as a concert piece gives it the distinctive, and quite appropriate, quality of an interior monologue—a sort of Lied writ large, even if some of it is sung to a hobbyhorse. This fits the dramatic position in which the only character in the *Ring* to achieve perfect knowledge of history and to resolve to future action unsullied by self-interest reflects back on all that has happened to her. Yet the supertitles then shift attention away from the apocalyptic orchestral finale to a welter of projected stage directions. Here, as elsewhere, Wagner was more verbose in words than in music, so projection of his 314-word

description of the final scene multiplies the dulling effect of conventional supertitles. Rather than the striking and cathartic effect that the music can achieve by itself or when properly channeled by the staging, one has the sensation of visiting a monument only to find it covered with scaffolding. The Stuttgart *Ring* ends in a dramatic anticlimax, inevitably raising (rather than answering) the question of why one spent sixteen hours with the work.

However, the flaws in Konwitschny's conclusion go beyond its superficial lack of dramatic punch. The deeper concern here is its flagrant lack of internal consistency at the level of theatrical aesthetics—that is, in the fundamental relationship the production posits between director and spectator. Up to this point, Konwitschny's trope, as we have seen, has been to micromanage every facet of audience response: to dot i's and cross t's incessantly in an effort to impose a very specific antiromantic interpretation that is no more than half that of Wagner. In privileging the vision of the director over the freedom of the spectator, he acts in (Zehelein's language, once again) a "totalitarian" manner, much like other directorial teams. However, in the finale, Konwitschny suddenly shifts to the opposite aesthetic extreme, turning over full responsibility to the audience—as if to say that, after all, there exists only the concrete text and score, and that real theatrical experience lies solely within the heads of the spectator and in the musical score, unmediated by any director or staging.³⁰

This is evasive. Konwitschny simply cannot have it both ways. If his fundamental theatrical aesthetic is the one implied by the first two-and-a-half acts of this *Götterdämmerung*, with its strong interpretive slant, then this finale reveals a failure of imagination, courage, or rigor. If, instead, he espouses the aesthetic philosophy that underlies the conclusion, then much of the preceding two and a half acts can only be received as a deliberate insult to any intelligent spectator, treating them as if they were rather dim children in need of remedial education. On such a fundamental issue of the aesthetics of reception, no amount of praise for his originality or ambiguity can excuse such inconsistency—particularly since much of Konwitschny's own public justification for the production is precisely that it overcomes the inadequacies of previous aesthetic conceptions, and much of the journalistic praise for his work stems from its alleged rigor, consistency, and depth at precisely this level.³¹ Like much that is unconvincing about the Stuttgart *Ring*, Konwitschny's final coup de théâtre proves on closer inspection to be more superficial effect than rigorous interpretation.

* * *

We have seen that in terms of the explicit goal set by its creators—namely to present a series of compelling, if fragmented, theatrical moments—the Stuttgart *Ring* is often unworthy of the praise critics and scholars lavish upon it. There are

moments of brilliance but also many episodes, scenes, and even whole evenings that can only be considered failures. More importantly, however, consideration of the Stuttgart effort teaches us that we cannot fragment the *Ring*. Amidst his disingenuous praise of particularism, even Zehelein concedes that deconstruction is only a prelude to reconstruction. Overall coherence is the goal and, as we have seen, the Stuttgart production does in fact impose stylistic tendencies and interpretive biases, even if it declines to make their precise nature explicit. We must therefore ask, in conclusion, what it all adds up to.

Taken as a whole, the Stuttgart *Ring* manages to be tendentious without achieving coherence or consistency. The team's overall interpretive strategy is to supplant the symphonic sweep and suggestive internal cross-references of Wagner's musical score, symbolic language, natural settings, and heroic narrative—all of which it rejects as incoherent and archaic—and in its place to establish a reading based on psychoanalysis, Marxism, and literary theory. These are deployed in a critical mode to rehabilitate traditional antagonists and bring down traditional protagonists. To see how much is lost by the one-sided application of ideas that could have born rich fruit, one need only imagine the production that might have been: a truly contemporary *Ring* that explores the consequences of moral ambivalence by devoting equal attention and sympathy to protagonists and antagonists alike, all within a firmly contemporary setting. In much of *Siegfried* and *Rheingold*, one sees how effective this can be. Yet the sympathetic treatment of the "evil" characters is not matched by an equally sympathetic treatment of the traditional protagonists. Too much of the Stuttgart team's creative energy is thus siphoned away into crude and parodistic suppression of the straight-forward storyline and plain meaning of Wagner's libretto, rather than being deployed to advance, beneath it, a constructive and consistent interpretation of it. Much of the production seems to be arguing against the text and music in order to clear space for a deeper point that never comes. In its weaker moments, the mood is often rather relentlessly literary, even philosophical, and often at the expense of emotional insight, musical sweep, and aesthetic power.

The classic *Regietheater* justification for taking such liberties (and one explicitly espoused by the Stuttgart team) is that modern society desperately requires political reeducation. Opera must be a vehicle to disenchant modern audiences, stripping away their illusions about how the world works, and reestablishing a critical attitude toward theater and politics. This is an amusing point of view to encounter in blandly corporate Stuttgart, within a theater subsidized by the sensible German government and supported by the economic wealth created by luxury car producers. However, even if we were to accept the premise that the good *Bürgers* of Stuttgart require revolutionary reeducation, the theatrical and philosophical lessons this *Ring* teaches seem dated and trite. Its theatrical lesson—that we should reject nineteenth-century romantic realism—flogs a horse that has

been dead for at least a half-century, if not a century and a quarter. In relaunching the “New Bayreuth” style in 1951, Wieland Wagner already crossed this Rubicon, and in doing so rediscovered Wagner’s original conception of opera as a source of insight into deeper human themes rather than a celebration of Teutonic particularism or bombastic *kitsch*.

The Stuttgart *Ring*’s rejection of romantic idealism seems hardly less quaint. It amounts in the end to a rather doctrinaire and deterministic restatement of psychoanalytic and Marxist theories popular in the 1960s and 1970s as read through literary theory—as if one were transported back to an earnest graduate seminar a generation ago. After sixteen hours in the theater, are we really meant to conclude that all human behavior, including subjective states of mind, can be reduced to naked power or psychological compulsion? That ideals of love, compassion, justice, nature, and heroism are simply illusions or instruments manipulated to those ends? That all fathers are abusive, all leaders tyrannical, and all lovers compulsive—and thus all established authority is rotten to the core? That youthful romance is just child’s play and difficult to maintain after the husband enters the workforce? That the superficially good are evil, whereas the superficially evil are just misunderstood? That the only goal worth our allegiance is a sober, disengaged, streetwise antiromanticism? For all his seemingly naive mythologizing, Wagner was far more subtle and ambiguous than this, as are the creators of many recent productions—precisely because they accept political and romantic ideals as real.³² Where is the Wagner who befriended Bakunin and manned the barricades in 1849? Where is the man whose passionate romantic life fueled his art? Where is the artist whose work inspired generations of musicians and poets? One cannot help wondering, as the composer’s stage directions scroll upward to orchestral mood music in Konwitschny’s anti-climax, why Wagnerian opera was chosen as an appropriate vehicle to convey such old-fashioned views.

Whatever the merits of the implied philosophy, any effort to impose a tendentious yet inconsistent interpretation on such a multifaceted and ambiguous work renders the Stuttgart *Ring* claustrophobic. The heart of the problem lies with the professional myopia of the effort. The Stuttgart team’s programmatic declarations about the need to liberate productions of the *Ring* are consistently argued from the perspective of the stage director and dramaturge, not the spectator. Yet what stage directors welcome as expanded artistic freedom may often seem to the spectator like a blank check to engage in fussy micromanagement, hemming in potential audience responses. This distinction is not simply rhetorical. Contrary to the apocalyptic pronouncements of Zehelein and sympathetic critics, who present their approach as if it were the only valid means for dealing with contemporary interpretive ambiguity, directors today face valid alternatives.

Consider, for example, what one might term the minimalist styles of production, such as those advanced by Wieland in the 1950s. The most celebrated and

revolutionary *Ring* staging of modern times is arguably the gloomy “decluttered” production by Wieland in the early 1950s. Its cardinal virtue lies precisely in its understated and open-ended quality—a quality that respects the inherent ambiguity and pluralism (today we would add multiculturalism) of modern audiences in a far more consistent and powerful way. Minimalist *Rings*, in general, of which Robert Wilson’s Zürich/Paris production and Pierre Audi’s Amsterdam effort are two examples (both available on DVD), tend to be suggestive rather than definitive, often highlighting or compounding meaning through deliberate ambiguity.³³ Some find Wieland’s or Wilson’s work coldly aesthetic, yet the open-endedness of their work has the considerable virtue of leaving an individual spectator to imagine and debate the precise symbolic meanings of the work for him or herself—an interpretive approach consistent with the individualism, tolerance, and pluralism of the postwar *Bundesrepublik* as well as most Western countries today.³⁴ The liberal virtues underlying this sort of interpretation are truly democratic.

By contrast, the Stuttgart *Ring*, despite its “everyman” patina and radical rhetoric, proves in the end to be the most “totalitarian” of modern productions. It assumes that the only way to overcome interpretive ambiguity is forcibly to impose someone’s creative will, whatever the resistance from the text, music, or spectator’s views.³⁵ Thus, the Stuttgart team often succumbs to the tragic temptation that has overcome so many political or theatrical revolutionaries—namely, to impose mind-numbing “reeducation” on ideological opponents. Such a course seems superficially attractive to those who believe that all who fail to embrace their revolutionary message must be reactionaries—a perspective that members of the Stuttgart team quite explicitly espouse.³⁶ Yet the aesthetic inconsistency of Konwitschny’s *Götterdämmerung*, with its hours of doctrinaire reeducation followed by a last-minute retreat to a pluralistic vision, illustrates the enduring attractiveness of the philosophy underlying minimalism—even for those who set out to supplant it.

Leaving aside its philosophical virtues in a modern democratic society, the sort of understated approach advanced by Wieland and others has an even more important advantage over the Stuttgart *Regietheater* approach: deference to the musical score. When criticized for his spare designs, Wieland once quipped, “Why do I need a tree onstage, when I have Astrid Varnay?”³⁷ This is as it should be. Music, not text, philosophy or its status as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is what continues to draw us to Wagnerian opera—as the composer himself came to understand in later life.³⁸ One of the distinctive experiences of attending a coherent *Ring* performed in a week, as Wagner intended at Bayreuth, is that one internalizes the consistent, self-referential musical language in which it is crafted. However, the greatest fear of the Stuttgart directors appears to be precisely that the spectator might, even for just a moment, succumb to the dramatic or

aesthetic power of Wagner's music. Such aesthetic immersion would undermine the text-based dramatic and philosophical messages they seek to convey, and they work hard to assure this is nearly impossible. On this point, again, their position is quite deliberate: they profess primary, at times sole, allegiance to the text, not the score. Zehelein goes further, openly disparaging top international singers, precisely because they resist imposition of narrow, text-based directorial concepts.³⁹ This dismissive attitude toward musicians and the composer as we have seen, results in many moments when the stage action is inconsistent with Wagner's music—an enormous cost to pay for directorial freedom.

To be sure, even if Stuttgart had been willing or able to cast more ambitiously, the options would have been limited. Fifty years ago Wieland was fortunate to have at his disposal a spectacular generation of Wagnerian singers and conductors. Today performers in the grand tradition are an endangered species, a fact that may have contributed to the dominance of stage directors in European opera houses.⁴⁰ While true artistic freedom in Wagnerian opera today may nonetheless mean liberation not *by* but *from* stage directors, it is admittedly difficult to say precisely what should replace it, absent the requisite singers.

Since we possess no video recording of a Wieland Wagner *Ring*—only some stunning stills survive—we cannot experience its epoch-making integration of minimalist staging and great singing.⁴¹ However, before resigning ourselves to the recent Stuttgart effort as the next best thing, Wagnerians might do well to remember that the most important and highly praised recording of the cycle to appear recently is not the Stuttgart DVD—or, indeed, any other video representation. This distinction belongs to the release on *audio CD*, after it languished for fifty years in the vaults, of the first stereo *Ring*—a superb live recording of the 1955 Bayreuth/Wieland Wagner production with an unsurpassed cast, under the baton of Josef Keilberth.⁴² Those seeking a deeper musical and dramatic understanding of Wagner's cycle would be well advised to load the Keilberth *Ring* into their CD player, close their eyes, and imagine the rest.

Andrew Moravcsik

For complete production details, please see the listing at
the beginning of this review portfolio
(doi:10.1093/oq/kbq006).

NOTES

Andrew Moravcsik is a professor of politics and international affairs and director of the European Union Program at Princeton University. He writes on topics in European and international politics. He also researches opera performance and is currently investigating the

apparent decline of Verdi, Wagner, and Puccini singing. He publishes music criticism in daily and monthly publications.

1. Alexandra Garaventa, *Regietheater in der Oper: Eine musiksoziologische Untersuchung am Beispiel der Stuttgarter Inszenierung von Wagners*

"*Ring des Nibelungen*" (München: Martin Meidenbauer, 2006), 248, 252; all translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

2. Zehelein, cited in *ibid.*, 251: "*Ich denke, indem wir jedes Stück des Ring mit einem anderen Team gemacht haben, werden die expositionellen Momente erst zu jenen sublimen theatralischen Formen, die Wagner uns bietet.*"

3. Klaus Zehelein, "Zum Stuttgarter Ring, 1999/2000," in A. T. Schaefer, *Der Stuttgarter Ring: Staatsoper Stuttgart 1999/2000* (Mönchengladbach: B. Kühlen KG, 2000), 5–6.

4. Traditional interpretations that seek to make sense of the whole, so it is argued by defenders of the Stuttgart approach, are not only constraining but futile, since no one has proposed an entirely unproblematic understanding of the symbolic, philosophical, and musical language of the *Ring*. See Jürgen Schläder, "Kontinuität fragmentarischer Bildwelten: Postmoderne Verfahren im Stuttgarter Ring vom 1999/2000," in *OperMachtTheater Bilder: Neue Wirklichkeiten des Regietheaters*, ed. Wolfgang Willaschek (Leipzig: Hentschel, 2006), 217.

5. Zehelein, "Zum Stuttgarter Ring."

6. Zehelein's terms are *voraussetzungslos* and *verantwortungslos*.

6. "Das Ganze und seine Stücke: Gespräche mit Klaus Zehelein," in *Narben des Gesamtkunstwerks: Wagners "Ring des Nibelungen"*, ed. Richard Klein (Munich: Fink, 2001), 292. Zehelein says little about the audience, though a possible implication developed in more detail by Schläder is that spectators would thereby benefit from the resulting "attention to particularity and pluralism" (Schläder, "Kontinuität," 217).

7. Garaventa, *Regietheater*, 248. Neither the organization nor the details of Garaventa's book-length treatment, originally her dissertation, transcend the claim that the four parts are "interpreted entirely differently."

8. Essentially all of the *Ring* takes place outdoors. Schläder seeks to draw finer distinctions, arguing that all but three of the seventeen settings in Wagner's *Ring* take place outside (see Schläder, "Kontinuität fragmentarischer Bildwelten," 198–99). However, this understates the role of nature, for the remaining three scenes are exceptions that prove the rule: Hunding's hut opens up to the moonlit night at a critical moment, and Wagner's stage directions state that the Gibichungs' Hall, where two more scenes take place, is "entirely open in the back onto a free space along the banks of the Rhine, surrounded by cliffs." The second scene there begins with moonlight reflecting off the

Rhine and ends with the river overflowing its banks and destroying the hall itself, thus restoring a pristine natural setting.

9. Moonlight barely filters into the set of the first act of *Walküre*, whose second act takes place in a spare dark space, perhaps suggesting an artificial garden; the second act of *Siegfried* is set along a chain-link fence in a "no man's land," so black as to be unidentifiable.

10. Even the Byzantine *fin-de-siècle* spa of *Rheingold*, the only setting to display aesthetic grandeur, is ultimately revealed as an illusion when Erda's prophecy transforms it into a dark, garbage-filled husk.

11. The single exception, namely the entrance of Erda in *Rheingold*, occurs when a back-lit crack suddenly appears in the wall of the spa, through which Erda enters. This is quite effective, even though it is not in keeping with the generally humanistic tendency of the Stuttgart *Ring*. One wonders, contra Zehelein, whether one actually needs to eliminate magical events in order to focus on this tendency. Wagner did not think so; to the contrary, it was precisely the mythological settings that permitted him to access the humanist essence free of specific historical associations.

12. Claus Spahn, "Welt aus, Licht an," *Die Zeit* (March 16, 2000): 42.

13. Zehelein alludes to conversations within the team, and indeed treats them as an aim of having multiple directors. He hints that these conversations break down ideological barriers but remains obscure, even coy, about their positive content. Thus, he concludes his introductory essay to the program book as follows: "The . . . work distinguishes itself from an arbitrary collection of four single interpretations . . . in its sharper consciousness of this problematic. The *Ring's* status as a holistic project is not ruled out. To the contrary: precisely when it is no longer perceived as a totality, it moves into the center of the scenic inquiry." Zehelein, "Zum Stuttgarter Ring," 6.

14. Zehelein, "Zum Stuttgarter Ring," 5–6. In distinguishing the Stuttgart *Ring* from existing work, Zehelein's sleight-of-hand is performed by claiming the rhetorical middle ground; in other words, he claims simply to seek to avoid letting the "whole . . . determine the work" at every stage, as in traditional performances. Other references are similarly rhetorical, as when traditional interpretations are referred to as "manufactured," "overpowering," "static," and employing "totalizing technology" (*aufs Total zielende Technologie*). See Garaventa, *Regietheater*, 251.

15. The allusion is to Derrida's use of the term *aporia*, as well as, via Zehelein's strident rejection

of leitmotifs or any other systematization of the music content of the *Ring*, Theodor Adorno's use of the concept.

16. Zehelein, "Zum Stuttgarter Ring."

17. See Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Culture: Wagner and Strauss* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

18. *Konsequent* is the German critics' positive adjective of choice for this sort of highly conceptualized approach.

19. Spahn, "Welt aus, Licht an," 42. More generally, the portrayal of Hagen, a villain often presented in the style of Hollywood science fiction, is impressive for the directorial subtlety and restraint, as well as the musical and dramatic interpretation by Roland Bracht, who, incidentally, also sings the sympathetic *Rheingold* Fasolt. Similarly, the treatment of Siegfried's betrayal in front of a banal projected backdrop focuses the action on a situation of love and betrayal that might arise among regular people.

20. Essentially, this dispenses with the funeral procession and the scene change, and instead maintains Wagner's previous stage direction: "Gunther bends down, grief-stricken, over Siegfried. The vassals, filled with sympathy, surround the dying man. . . . The rest stand around him in sorrow without moving." *The Ring of the Nibelung*, trans. Andrew Porter (New York: Norton, 1977), 319–20.

21. There are effective moments even with the protagonists, as when the disguised Siegfried's reconquest of Brünnhilde (act 1, scene 3) is portrayed so as to suggest, perhaps, the loveless destruction of erotic life that results when the spirit of the workplace enters the conjugal home, or perhaps the flight from adventurous relationships to conformist marriage—though neither theme is consistently enough pursued to be truly effective.

22. "Kammerspiel vom Strinberg'schem Zuschnitt," Jürgen Otten notes in "Das Rheingold," DVD, 9.

23. "Alle geraten in Erstaunen und verschiedenartige Betroffenheit" in response to Loge's line "Nichts ist so reich als . . . Weibes Wonne und Wert" (Nothing at all is of greater worth to a man than woman's beauty and love) Porter, *Ring*, 28.

24. Ernest Newman, *The Wagner Operas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), xi.

25. See Juliane Votteler, "Anwesenheit, allgegenwärtig," in *Stuttgarter Ring*, 34.

26. All this reverses Wagner's own intellectual development in regard to the *Ring*, which moved decisively toward placing Wotan's struggle to reconcile the personal and the political in the center of the drama. From Wagner's Feuerbachian

philosophical position at the time, moreover, one-sided gods make little sense. The gods are attractive fictions and difficult to renounce, Feuerbach argued, precisely because they are a projection of both the attractive and unattractive qualities in mankind. See, for example, Chapter 4 of Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976). The Stuttgart production is more in the materialist and objectivist spirit of Marx's famous critique in his *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845, but unfortunately this is difficult to reconcile with Wagner's libretto and score.

27. Siegmund and Sieglinde are portrayed as compulsively acting out psychological pressures, as when Sieglinde resists the revelation of the sword (placed there by Wotan). Still, much of act 1 is quite compelling, largely because it is done in an entirely (and largely unavoidably) conventional manner, with Angela Denoke as an uncommonly vibrant and erotic (if vocally a bit underpowered) Sieglinde.

28. Nel sometimes has interesting interpretive points to make. In the climax to act 2, the underlying point is negative: the grand symbolic victory of Fricka's lawfulness over Wotan's ambition can be separated from Wotan's intensely human sacrifice of a son. In act 3, the point cuts deeper by showing how the assertion of psychological control can lead to alienation and aesthetic self-indulgence. The images are potentially moving: Wotan in act 2 embracing a dying son and in act 3 being left nothing more than videos of a lost daughter. Yet such moments are drained of emotional impact by the staginess of the proceedings and the consistent portrayal of Wotan as little more than an abusive manipulator, both of which dampen any sympathy for his self-inflicted plight.

29. Konwitschny is clearly capable of musically sensitive direction, as the scene between Alberich and Hagen illustrates; yet his penchant for tone-deaf denouements is hardly limited to the Stuttgart production. I recently attended his much-praised staging of Richard Strauss's *Elektra* in Copenhagen. During her triumphal final monologue, Elektra was here forced to compete with several minutes of loud machine gun broadcast over loudspeakers, while hundreds of dead bodies piled up on stage. Needless to say, the impact of Strauss's extraordinary musical climax was blunted. Konwitschny's recent production of *Der fliegende Holländer* in Munich ended by portraying Senta as blowing up the stage and theater, which required that the final bars played out of loudspeakers rather than from the pit—a move I would similarly criticize for sapping the dramatic impact from one of Wagner's most

compelling orchestral endings.

30. The consistent line of the opera house, picked up by much of the press, is that only the music matters in the end and that conductor Lothar Zagrosek and the orchestra did a great job—a position that seems rather patronizing, given the intermittent indifference to the score up to this point.

31. Even Schläder, who accepts the basic premises of the Stuttgart *Ring* and views it as a necessary and praiseworthy advance in our understanding of the work, calls Konwitschny's conclusion "paradoxical" for a similar reason. Schläder, "Kontinuität," 217. Yet he seems to ignore the resulting disjuncture at the core of Konwitschny's conception of theater, leaving it for future directors to resolve.

32. There are also, in this spirit, clichéd references to Wagner and the Nazi era. Does anyone still seriously maintain that the main reason for the rise of Nazism was a surfeit of romantic art? Or that Wagner was in any way a crypto-Nazi?

33. The DVD of Pierre Audi's *Ring* at De Nederlandse Opera is available from Opus Arte (OA 0946-9 D). An interview with Robert Wilson in the program book to his Zürich/Paris production, which is similarly slated for DVD release, makes clear the divergence in aesthetic philosophy vis-à-vis Stuttgart: "I try not to impose my interpretation on the work in order to leave room for interrogation. Theater is often too dictatorial. A writer, director, or designer has an idea and insists on it. This leaves no room for exchanges, for other ideas. . . . In my view, with a work that is already full of overwhelming emotions, a [staging] that is equally moving and emotional makes no sense." Alan Riding, "With the 'Ring', Everyone's a Critic," November 3, 2005, *International Herald Tribune*, available at <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2005/11/02/features/wagner.php>.

34. Patrick Carnegy, "Designing Wagner: Deeds of Music Made Visible?" in *Wagner in Performance*, ed. Barry Millington and Stuart Spencer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 53–54.

35. A denial of real historical utopias does not necessarily imply that the world is senseless, fragmented, and bleak, or that art is meaningless.

36. Konwitschny responds to criticisms of his overinterpretation by calling his critics "reactionaries" against his "revolutionary" views: "The opera world is nothing if not reactionary, and readily imposes limits on everything

that is revolutionary." Garaventa, *Regietheater*, 274.

37. Cited in Mike Ashman, "Siegfried," in the program book for the 1955 Bayreuth *Siegfried* conducted by Joseph Keilberth (Testament, SBT4 1392). Rehearsal records and his own statements suggest that Wieland's focus on the music was quite deliberate. Bass-baritone Hans Hotter recalls: "This young prophet demanded that we express ourselves almost motionlessly, without gestures, solely with impact of the sung word. And all of this on a stage that, compared with the old days, was virtually empty. 'If there are no superficial trivialities bothering us,' he [Wieland] said fervently, 'we can manage with a minimum of stage motion.'" Hans Hotter, "Hans Hotter," in *ibid.*

38. Though still often cited for his early beliefs on the primacy of the text, or the equal standing of text and music, in music-drama, Wagner came to view the music as the dominant element. See, for example, Bryan Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (London: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

39. "Every evening we hear that the human voice can be an instrument of as well as a saboteur of the text. . . . The spirit of ensemble opera . . . will establish itself by working on the text.

Globetrotting operatic stars . . . embrace this communicative aesthetic only with great difficulty. When opera takes its eyes off its sole obligation—its responsibility to the text—it has already betrayed its vocation." Klaus Zehelein, "Text und Institution," in *Musiktheater Heute: Klaus Zehelein, Dramaturg und Intendant*, ed. Juliane Votteler (Hamburg: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2000), 66–67. In this context, Zehelein distinguishes "text" clearly from the musical score.

40. Andrew Moravcsik, "Where have all the Big Voices Gone? Explaining the Apparent Decline in Verdi, Wagner and Puccini Singing," *Presentation at the Seminar on Cultural Policy*, Princeton University, May 2007.

41. The only video recording of a Wieland Wagner production currently available is a posthumous Osaka Festival Tristan from April 1967, in grainy black and white, with Birgit Nilsson, Wolfgang Windgassen, Hans Hotter, and Pierre Boulez conducting (Bel Canto Society VHS 462).

42. Alan Blyth praises it as a performance "the like of which is hardly likely to be heard again . . . at Bayreuth or anywhere else." It is "likely to be hailed everywhere as the one to have" Wagner, "Götterdämmerung," *Gramophone* (February 2007): 91.