

# The Incongruence of the Schopenhauerian Ending in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*

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In Richard Wagner's four-part musical drama, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, the composer experienced great difficulty in completing the final draft of the last piece, the *Götterdämmerung*. Before the music had been composed, the text of the piece – the libretto – remained incomplete for many years. Wagner planned five endings, yet one is particularly distinct in terms of context and philosophical underpinnings. Musicologists later labeled the unused text as *The Schopenhauer Ending* to reflect how strongly the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer influenced Wagner during the libretto stage. Focusing on the libretto, Locus explores Wagner's preoccupation with Schopenhauer's work and the way in which it inspired an ending, incongruent with both the larger context of *The Ring of the Nibelung* and the prevailing culture of Wagner's time.

## Introduction

Richard Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung* epitomizes the pinnacle of the romantic Western tradition of music composition. The musical drama<sup>2</sup> in a prelude and three episodes recounts the events leading to the fall of the gods and the tragic, interwoven fates of its characters. Spanning four nights, the sixteen-hour production took twenty-six years to complete, resulting in several versions - each offering its own insight into the compositional process of its creator. The final scene of the last work, the *Götterdämmerung*, is one such example, requiring five significant attempts to arrive at a suitable ending.

*The Ring* has a complex narrative. The plot details how a stolen magical piece of jewelry affects the lives of a lineage of gods across several generations. Early in the narrative, a ring is forged with gold, stolen from the three Rhinemaidens. It possesses great power, thereby granting its holder the ability to dominate the world - if they so choose. This incredible potential attracts many power-hungry suitors, leading to a long trail of deceit as each attempts acquisition of the ring. Wotan, chief of the gods (and male protagonist for much of the story), is among the first to be ensnared by this lust for power. His flaw, then, proceeds to

haunt his descendants as treachery and lies wreak havoc upon his once orderly world. It is not until Wotan's daughter, Brunnhilde, returns the ring to its owners and destroys the world of the gods after the death of her lover that the history of deception ends. The moral of the story speaks to the redemptive power of love in overcoming the lust for power.

A close reading of the various endings reveals Wagner's struggles as he associated himself with and, then, disassociated himself from an increasingly philosophical tone. This shifting is particularly evident in the later revisions of Brunnhilde's final monologue in the final act of the *Götterdämmerung*. Of these, the *Schopenhauer Ending*<sup>3</sup> departs strongly from both the *Final Published Ending* and other rejected endings. Its change in tone and structure warrant investigation as it indicates a significant shift in the artistic will of the composer.

The revisions address the libretto and stage directions, which are the focus of the entire drama's final scene. Brunnhilde, Wotan's former guardian and daughter (also the leading female protagonist), stands over the body of her slain lover, Siegfried. He has been tricked and killed as a result of the gods' desire to obtain the power held within the accursed, but mighty

ring. At this moment, Brunnhilde begins a monologue, expressing her emotional response to the events before bringing the drama to a close. The central difference between the versions lies specifically in her words and actions. The words had to be chosen with extreme care in order to elucidate the composer's artistic vision. Yet, in these final moments, Wagner appears to struggle with the philosophical implications of the ending rather than with how compatible and well integrated it would be with the work as a whole. In his penultimate revision, Wagner's reverses his stance, underscoring the redemptive power of love, in favor of Arthur Schopenhauer's view, emphasizing love's meaninglessness and base sexual nature.<sup>4</sup> But why does Wagner stray from his central theme, affirming love, and adopt Schopenhauer's disparate vision?

In this essay, I argue that Wagner's attraction to Schopenhauer's philosophy was a misdirection, which caused him to temporarily ignore the dominant element of love, present in the *Ring Cycle*. First, I consider the rejected endings and final published ending in overview, emphasizing their salient characteristics. Further, I examine the specific contrasts between the *Schopenhauer Ending* and its predecessor, labeled by historians as the *Feuerbach Ending*. Then, I focus on the way in which Schopenhauer's writing influenced Wagner, compelling him to draft an additional revision to an already completed text. Finally, I contrast Wagner's Schopenhauerian outlook with his final product to illustrate how Wagner finally divorces himself from a view, which devalues love, and returns to his original premise.

## The Five Endings of the *Götterdämmerung*

In Wagner's *28 November 1848 Ending*,<sup>5</sup> Brunnhilde is notably more forlorn and agitated as she stands over the slain body of her beloved Siegfried. Valhalla, the great hall of the gods, still

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burns in the end; however, her final words have taken a more accusatory tone. She openly rebukes Siegfried for his refusal to heed her advice not to pursue unnecessary heroism. Nonetheless, she reaffirms her love for him.

You overwhelming hero, how you held me in thrall! All my wisdom I had to forgo, for all my knowledge I gave to you what you too you did not use, - in your bold defiance you trusted alone...Let the fire that now consumes me cleanse the ring of its curse.

Afterwards, Brunnhilde frees the Nibelungs (the people of the underworld), hands off the accursed ring to the Rhinemaidens, and enters the flames.

By comparison, the *18 December 1848 Ending* adopts a decidedly more religious tone:

Blessed atonement, I saw for the holy, sacredly and only gods! Rejoice in the freest of heroes! To the greeting of his brotherly gods, his bride is bringing him now! Depart without power whom guilt now shuns. From your guilt has sprung the blithest of heroes whose unwilling deed has expunged it: you're spared the anxious struggle to save your waning power: fade away in bliss before man's deed, before the hero whom, alas, you create! In the midst of your anxious fear I proclaim to you blessed redemption.

Here, the percolation of divergent theology begins to seep into Wagner's work. *The Ring* was not intended as a direct religious allegory; however, the imposition of phrases such as "[b]lessed atonement" and "holy, sacredly" do correlate with potent themes associated with religion. Further, the redemption of sin - a key element of Christian doctrine - parallels noticeably with the last words of Christ during the crucifixion. The notable similarities

between the two scenes are striking and provide an interesting counterpoint to the mythology, on which *The Ring* is based.

The contrasting *December 1852 Feuerbach Ending* derives its name from a comparatively atheistic text. The name was applied by later musicologists due to Wagner's interests in Ludwig Feuerbach - a known critic of religion (particularly Christianity) in his time. Scholars believe Wagner to have read Feuerbach by the completion of his own article of 1849, "The Art-Work of the Future." Both Wagner and Feuerbach issued similar titles and arrived at similar conclusions, regarding the future of their respective disciplines. While Feuerbach believed that philosophy needed a radically new way of thinking to serve the future, Wagner expressed similar sentiments in regards to music.<sup>6</sup>

This view found its way into the *Feuerbach Ending*. In the drama's final moments, Brunnhilde asserts not only that the fate of humanity rests with humans themselves, but moreover decrees the death of the gods. She ends with the message; "love alone can be," underscoring the power of love to shape the future of humanity. Kitcher and Schacht write;<sup>7</sup>

Religion for Feuerbach involves a kind of confusion, resulting in the projection of features of our own nature and of genuinely human life into an imaginary realm beyond this life and this world.

Feuerbach's view of religion, then, becomes an assignment of human characteristics to deities and other supernatural forces. Brunnhilde's emotional decree that humans rise to assume the place of the fallen gods reflects Feuerbach's view of sustainable belief, emphasizing human attributes over religious mysticism.

Wagner's *December 1852, Final Published Ending*<sup>8</sup> emphasizes the power of love and its importance in the coming world of the humans.

Angered by the perpetual deceit, Brunnhilde burns down Valhalla, the hall of the gods, before immolating herself and her steed, Grane.

Feel how the flames burn in my breast, effulgent fires seize hold of my heart: to clasp him to me while held in my arms and in mightiest love to be wedded to him! - Heiayoho! Grane! Greet your master! Siegfried! Siegfried! See! In your bliss, your wife bids you welcome!

The weight of the passage emphasizes *fire*, which suggests both the emotional fire of her love for Siegfried and the physical fire of the funeral pyre. Love conquers lust for power as Brunnhilde casts the ring back to its original owners, the Rhinemaidens, in order to ignite the passions of her heart.

In stark contrast to these other endings, including that finally published, the May 1856 *Schopenhauer Ending* departs markedly in tone and perspective. While writing *The Ring*, Wagner became immersed in the writings of a popular philosopher of the time, Arthur Schopenhauer. One of Schopenhauer's major contributions to philosophy is his work *The World as Will and Representation*, which is believed to have influenced Wagner in his creation of the last revision of the final scene. For his part, Schopenhauer was greatly influenced by Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, where suffering brings about enlightenment and, further, abnegation of life and will is one's ultimate goal.<sup>9</sup> Greatly simplified, Schopenhauer writes from a pessimistic view of the world as a place, filled with unavoidable suffering and where the most pertinent course of action lies in the seeking to obtain non-suffering or non-existence.<sup>10</sup> As the following excerpt reflects, Wagner incorporates this viewpoint into his final revision of last scene:

I close behind me now: to the holiest chosen land, free from desire and delusion, the goal of

the world's migration, redeemed from reincarnation, the enlightened woman now goes. The blessed end of all things eternal, do you know how I attained it? Grieving love's profoundest suffering opened my eyes for me: I saw the world end.

In essence, Wagner seems to bring contradictory philosophical and religious ideas to bear on the central idea of the affirmation of life through love, which he has already established throughout his cycle and ending.<sup>11</sup> Researchers associate this shift to his exposure to Schopenhauer toward the end of the libretto writing.<sup>12</sup>

*The Schopenhauer Ending* was completed after the plot and significant themes within *The Ring* had already been defined. Kitcher and Schacht write; "Wagner finished the entire Ring poem in December of 1852, nearly two years before he discovered Schopenhauer (in the fall of 1854)." Thus, Wagner was effectively adding new theories, incongruous to the work's original conception. Using Schopenhauer's view, love (the redemptive force in the narrative) becomes a source of suffering to be overcome. This emphatically contradicts not only *The Valkyrie* Act II Sc 4, in which Brunnhilde awakens to the power of love during her conversation with Siegmund, but also the *Final Published Ending* *Götterdämmerung*, Act III Sc 3, in which she announces "to clasp him to me while held in my arms and in mightiest love to be wedded to him."

### Did Schopenhauer Distract Wagner?

Wagner's preoccupation with Schopenhauer may have contributed to his difficulty in settling on an ending. Moreover, the final moments of a massive work create the final impression, in which the composer crystallizes his point and by which the audience judges his entire cycle. The desire to find the "perfect ending" may have driven Wagner closer and closer to Schopenhauer as he revised the

ending. Ultimately, Wagner did decide against using the text<sup>13</sup> to convey the philosophical message; instead, he chose to reinforce the dominant theme of love rather than suppliant it with Schopenhauer's theoretical excess. But why would Wagner follow Schopenhauerian philosophy in the first place?

An examination of the *18 December 1848*, *Feuerbach*, and *Schopenhauer Endings* yields clues. The context and cultural presumptions of the respective texts draw from very divergent (and often distant) cultural presumptions. The *18 December 1848* and *Feuerbach* endings rely on religious motifs, while the *Schopenhauer Ending* rests on a particular philosophical interpretation of Eastern faiths. The first two would have been more accessible to the predominance of Protestants;<sup>14</sup> however, the latter requires a great deal of background in Schopenhauerian philosophy (or Buddhism) in order to fully grasp its significance. Juxtaposing the endings exposes Wagner's divergence into eastern philosophy while creating the *Schopenhauer Ending*.

### Non-Schopenhauerian Endings as Alternative Ends to "The Ring"

The Non-Schopenhauerian Endings would have been more comprehensible to audiences of the time than the *Schopenhauer Ending*. These include the *18 December 1848*, *Feuerbach*, and final endings. Firstly, the characters in Norse mythos are reasonably explained throughout the onstage drama and text of the cycle. Further, in regards to any religious references, Christianity (in particular Protestantism) and its strong connection to rising German nationalism were ubiquitous in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany.<sup>15</sup> Wagner could safely assume his audience's knowledge of and exposure to common religious motifs.

For example, it is unlikely the audience would fail to associate either "[b]lessed atonement, I saw for the

holy, sacredly and only gods! ...In the midst of your anxious fear I proclaim to you blessed redemption" with Jesus' crucifixion in Mark<sup>16</sup> Chapter 15 and Matthew 27 or the absolution of sin through redemption presented in Luke 24 and Mark 16. Framing the ending within a religious context would have allowed for increased comprehensibility for people with an understanding of the New Testament.

However, an ending, relying on quasi-religious premises, wasn't essential. In fact, by pursuing the *Final Published* version, Wagner could retain the central theme of the power of love. Recapitulating love's strength highlights Brunnhilde's struggle and loss of Siegfried while, also, reminding audiences of the undying relationship between Siegmund and Sieglinde. After all, love is a dominant feature in *The Ring*, present throughout the entire composition.

So why did Wagner try to integrate potentially antithetical philosophies into the ending two years after he had already finished the original libretto?

### Why Schopenhauer?

Wagner was led astray by his adoration of Schopenhauer's conception of music as a high art form. Also, Wagner, influenced heavily by religious discussion, undoubtedly found rich intellectual discourse in the works of Schopenhauer,<sup>17</sup> a popular philosopher of the era. The composer followed the philosopher into the realm of religious contemplation. As Schopenhauer sought to comment on the spirituality of his contemporaries,<sup>18</sup> so too, did Wagner seek to reflect on important conceptions of music and their affect on the audience.<sup>19</sup> Though deeply drawn to theological and philosophical considerations, Wagner was chiefly a composer and, ultimately, could not place musical considerations beneath rival endeavors. Nevertheless, Schopenhauer's philosophical

frameworks appealed to Wagner's artistic sensibilities - regarding art as the intersection of Science and Life:<sup>20</sup>

The Art-work, thus conceived as an immediate vital act (*its immediate physical portrayal, in the moment of its liveliest embodiment*), is therewith the perfect reconciliation of Science with Life, the laurel-wreath which the vanquished, redeemed by her defeat, reaches in joyous homage to her acknowledged victor.

As both composer and philosopher, Wagner could benefit from a Schopenhauerian understanding of Art.

One popular presumption as to why Wagner channeled the philosopher as a direct source of inspiration springs from Schopenhauer's concept of music. Schopenhauer's philosophy places music above other fine arts forms because of its ability for pure expression. In this view, music communicates an idea as the idea itself, whereas other art forms are mere representations of abstract notions, expressed through a medium.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the listener is more directly connected to the thoughts of the artist without obfuscation. Wagner writes;<sup>22</sup>

But it was Schopenhauer who first defined the position of Music among the fine arts with philosophic clearness, ascribing to it a totally different nature from that of either plastic or poetic art. He starts from wonder at Music's speaking a language immediately intelligible by everyone, since it needs no whit of intermediation through abstract concepts (*Begriffe*); which completely distinguishes it from Poetry, in the first place, whose sole material consists of concepts, employed by it to visualise the *Idea*.

This belief - that music is the highest art form - is consistent with Wagner's later writings, where he goes even further to relate music to human existence. To

approach music with this idea became necessary to Wagner before embarking on a work of such phenomenal length as *The Ring*<sup>23</sup>

Music speaks out Gesture's inmost essence in a language so direct that, once we are saturated with the music, our eyesight is positively incapacitated for intensive observation of the gesture, so that finally we understand it without our really seeing it... enabling [our senses] to grasp the Essence-of-things in its most immediate manifestment, as it were to read the vision which the music had himself beheld in deepest sleep<sup>24</sup>

The above similarities in thought seemingly had the effect of compelling Wagner through a Schopenhauerian exploration of eastern belief systems, which was unfamiliar territory to the German Christian audience. More significantly, this exploration led Wagner to introduce unestablished, incongruent philosophic ideas into his nearly completed narrative.

Perhaps the fact that Schopenhauer's perspective allowed Wagner to perceive old characters in a new light enthralled the composer. As Roger Hollinrack muses;<sup>25</sup>

Might not the god's retreat in the face of a deterministic necessity be construed as a moral advance? His abandonment of his quest of power as the attainment of a higher metaphysical end?

Perhaps we should not see Wagner's work (prior to his late discovery) as anti-Schopenhauerian. Many of his major characters, including the central protagonist Wotan, cast shadows of Schopenhauerian ideals.<sup>26</sup> Tested with hardship and hardened through experience, Wotan could be seen as embodying Schopenhauer's idea of suffering being interwoven into the life. Wotan's renunciation of power

in the later episodes of the drama even suggests an unintentional allusion to Schopenhauer's philosophy of suppressing the will to live in order to attain true wisdom. Wotan's renunciation of power led him not to destruction or despair - but rather to the end of his suffering as an "obsolete" god. Could not Brunnhilde's loss of her lover Siegfried and subsequent immolation also free her from earthly misfortune?

This interpretation would agree with Schopenhauer's philosophy and could be retroactively adapted to the story, providing a new way of understanding significant events. On 5 February 1855 Wagner writes, "My experiences of life has brought me to a point where only Schopenhauer's philosophy could wholly satisfy my and exert a decisive influence on my whole life."<sup>27</sup> It is at this point that Wagner begins the Schopenhauerian voyage, which diverts him from his central theme - the power of love - and nearly prompts him to renounce it altogether.

## Conclusion

Richard Wagner, as a thinker and musician, was stimulated by Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophical writings. Yet, this influence proved counterproductive to the production of *The Ring* as the composer began to explore philosophies, which reduced the strength of the central theme of the cycle: the redeeming power of love. Wagner's brief detour into the Schopenhauerian stream of consciousness resulted in an unused ending to the *Götterdämmerung*, which proved ultimately incongruent in terms of contextual significance.

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#### Endnotes

1 Wagner began several less substantial drafts of other endings; however, for the purposes of analysis the essay focuses

only on the most richly developed five.

2 Wagner preferred the use of the term "musical drama" to describe The Ring Cycle rather than "opera" due to its lack of traditional songs (as arias) and Wagner's methods of strongly integrating the orchestral music with the text into a single cohesive narrative. The cycle consists of four works; The Rhinegold, The Valkyrie, Siegfried, and Götterdämmerung (Twilight of the Gods).

3 Wagner did not assign names to his various endings; rather they were assigned by subsequent scholars to differentiate between the numerous endings.

4 Kitcher, Philip and Richard Schacht. Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring. Oxford University Press (2004) 19

5 Spencer, Stewart and Barry Millington. Wagner's Ring: A Companion. Thames and Hudson (1993) Appendix, Rejected Versions. The same source is used for all endings.

6 Kitcher, Philip and Richard Schacht. Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring (2004) 16

7 Kitcher, Philip and Richard Schacht. Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring (2004) 15-16

8 Spencer, Stewart and Barry Millington. Wagner's Ring: A Companion. Thames and Hudson (1993) 350-351

9 Kitcher, Philip and Richard Schacht. Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring. Oxford University Press (2004) 17-24

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Some musicologists believe the Schopenhauerian Ending to have survived within the music during the final composition process.

14 Lehmann, Hartmut. The Germans as the Chosen People: Old Testament Themes in German Nationalism. German Studies Review (1991) 261-273

15 Ibid.

16 All Gospel passages used are

from the Kings James Version of the Bible. The Bible is one of the main historical texts of Christians through which the majority of the faith's religious allegories and beliefs are derived.

17 Weinel, Heinrich. Wagner and Christianity. The American Journal of Theology, Vol. 7, No. 4. (Oct., 1903) pp. 609-634

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18 Ibid.

19 Weinel, Heinrich, p. 610.

20 Wagner, Richard. The Art-Work of the Future. Richard Wagner's Prose Works. trans. William Ashton Ellis (1895) p73

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26 Kitcher, Philip and Richard Schacht. Finding an Ending: Reflections on Wagner's Ring. Oxford University Press (2004) 18-19, 22

27 Letter to Rockel, 5 February 1855. Source provided by: Hollinrack, Roger. Epiphany and the Apocalypse in the Ring. Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung. Thames & Hudson (1993) 45



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He would like to express his sincere gratitude to Karol Berger, Erick Arenas, and Jessica Balik for their guidance and critiques that helped shape his academic development.