


Are Richard Wagner's operas a potential tool to teach medical students and young doctors humanities?

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Abstract

There is an increasing interest in using poems and novels as a powerful resource to teach medical students ethical and professional behavior, virtues, and to illustrate the complexity of the doctor–patient relationship. This approach as part of a narrative medicine provides a framework for approaching a patient's problems more holistically and also offers a method for addressing existential inner qualities such as grief, hope, and despair that are part of illnesses. Occasionally, operas (mainly Italian) have also been used for this purpose. I however, propose that medical students may learn a lot from a deeper confrontation with the operas from the German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Certainly, Wagner had a rather self-centered personality, also known for his notorious nationalistic and anti-Semitic essays, but his complete *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) encompasses almost every human feeling, conflict, and psychological problem including suffering, compassion, redemption, etc. Wagner's opera somewhat reflected his unsteady life. Wagner was convinced that his art could fill the void left by the retreat of traditional religion, suggesting that humanity may achieve freedom through the perception of beauty uniting communities through shared aesthetic experience. Not a very modest approach and not a very likable character, but a great composer. After a short biography, I will provide some (because of the complexity of the subject, naturally limited) arguments on what medical students can learn from Wagner operas, even though I am convinced that Wagner and his music are not easy to digest, even for experienced opera lovers.

Key messages

- Operas may teach you through the characters and plots important lessons in humanities and ethics.
- The German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883) with his *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) is a typical example of a composer of very complex operas dealing with almost every psychological aspect of human life (love, death, jealousy, hate, theft, even crime/cruelty against animals, murder, etc.).
- Wagner himself was a rather unpleasant personality, also reflected in his unsteady biography, thus excellent art may not always go in parallel with “good” ethical behavior and manner. Nevertheless, a medical student or young doctor may learn a lot regarding ethical behavior and virtues by taking an interest in the plots and motives of Wagner operas.

Keywords: humanities; opera; Richard Wagner

Introduction

Medicine is currently faced with increasing commercialization and economization [1]. In the future, these fundamental contrasting demands on medical doctors will be further tightened because of the demographic change with regard to elderly patients and increasingly expensive therapies such as specific antibodies, e.g. in cancer therapy [2].

In such a scenario, empathy and compassion become forgotten virtues [3]. Therefore, medical ethics, virtues, and compassions should be taught to medical students [3–5]. Despite the emphasis on all the scientific knowledge in medicine, doctors must listen to the stories that patients tell and make sense of these often chaotic narratives of illness and the complex social and psychological interactions with relatives and friends. Consequently, so-called “narrative medicine” has been used to teach these important values in a broader approach to develop medical professionalism [6–9].

I suggest that not only written stories as used in the “classical” narrative medicine used in medical humanities, but also opera can and should be employed to teach such values and virtues to medical students in order to develop medical professionalism and ultimately for them to become “good” doctors [9]. Besides very complex human behaviors on social and psychological levels that are told in opera, listening to music clearly has psychophysiological influences on emotions and can induce empathy or other feelings [10]. For example, Brandy R. Mathews has suggested that: “Opera is a complex musical form that reflects the complexity of the human condition and the human brain” [11]. Operas should therefore evoke emotions and provoke us into reflections on aspects of the human condition [11, 12].

I propose, however, that a single composer, Richard Wagner (1813–1883), has written and composed operas that reflect the multifaceted human condition and every medical student may profit from a more detailed occupation with these operas to gain

Received: April 3, 2023. Revised: April 19, 2023. Accepted: April 28, 2023

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a comprehensive insight into the human psyche [13]. Wagner as a person and because of his frank anti-Semitic views is considered by many as a highly controversial composer: you either love or hate the person Wagner and his operas. As Mark Twain clearly expressed it: “Wagner’s music is better than it sounds” [14].

This manuscript will first give a short biographical sketch of Wagner’s quite discontinuous life reflecting in some way characters from his operas and will then provide some arguments as to why and what medical students may learn from these operas.

Richard Wagner (1813–1883), an eventful life (based on [13, 15])

Wilhelm Richard Wagner was born on 22 May 1813 in Leipzig (Germany). His father, Carl Friedrich Wagner, was working in the police administration. Wagner’s mother was Johanna Wagner and Richard was the youngest of nine children. Six months after Richard’s birth his father died. Johanna married a year later a man named Richard Geyer. Speculations that Geyer was Richard’s real father are refuted. The family moved to Dresden. Richard, as a nine-year-old boy, attended an opera called *Der Freischütz* composed by Carl Maria von Weber [13]. Richard was impressed and soon after started piano lessons, but only for a short time because he hated to practice. Eventually, after advice from his mother, Wagner began studying music with a cantor. These few months of formal musical teaching were the only such instruction Wagner ever experienced. Wagner soon started to write his first opera called *Die Hochzeit* (*The Wedding*) in 1832, but never finished it. In contrast to other composers, Wagner wrote his own librettos. In 1833, Richard joined his older brother in the city of Würzburg where he composed two operas: *Die Feen* (*The Fairies*) and *Das Liebesverbot* (*The Ban of Love*). The premiere of the latter was a disaster: none of the second-class singers really knew their parts and the performance was immediately cancelled. In Würzburg, Wagner met an actress named Minna Planer who was four years older than Richard. They married in November 1836. Wagner was able to get a job as music director in Riga, today the capital of Latvia. There, Wagner composed his first main opera *Rienzi*. *Rienzi* later obtained a dubious reputation because it was much appreciated by Adolf Hitler who visited a performance as a young man in Linz and the opera was often played in the Third Reich. However, the somewhat provincial Riga was not the place for large and complex operas such as *Rienzi*. Consequently, Minna and Richard tried their luck in Paris which had Europe’s finest opera house at that time. Moreover, Minna’s sister lived there. Wagner was for his entire life short of money and the couple had accumulated quite a lot of debt while living in Riga. Because the creditors demanded payment and threatened to throw Richard into prison, the couple decided to flee first to England by ship and then further, crossing the Channel to France. The journey to London took several weeks because of very bad weather conditions with violent storms. This experience provided Richard with the idea for his next opera: *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*) [12]. The star in Paris then was the composer Giacomo Meyerbeer who offered assistance and advice to Richard. Nevertheless, Wagner soon turned against Meyerbeer, at least partly because he was Jewish. Again, in Paris the Wagners experienced serious financial problems, and the couple returned to Dresden. In Dresden Wagner also composed *Lohengrin*, his first opera with leitmotifs without the classical arias, choruses, and recitatives. Another source of conflict was a formulated plan to restructure the opera house that was rejected by the city council. In the spring of 1849, Europe-wide revolution

spread to Dresden where Richard took an active part. Orders of arrest were issued and Richard fled to Weimar where Franz Liszt (later to become Richard’s father-in-law) was *Kapellmeister*. Immediately, Liszt recognized Richard’s talent and even arranged a production of *Tannhäuser* (composed by Wagner in 1845). Not only sheltering the fugitive, Liszt gave Richard enough money to go to Zurich. In Zurich, Wagner started to work on the libretto of the *Ring des Nibelungen*. Wagner started with the end of the opera and worked his way back to the beginning. He finished this enormous task in 1852. Otto Wesendonck, a rich Zurich businessman, financially supported Wagner and even provided a cottage for Minna and Richard on the grounds of his large estate. Mathilde, Wesendonck’s wife, became an admirer of Richard and often visited him in this cottage. It still remains unclear whether Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck had a sexual affair, but Minna thought that Richard had cheated on her and disappeared home to Dresden. Wagner set several of Mathilde’s love poems to music (the so-called *Wesendock Lieder*). Furthermore, Wagner stopped working on *Siegfried*, but started the libretto for *Tristan und Isolde* (1859). The situation in Zurich with the Wesendoncks became embarrassing for Wagner and rumors about the love affair made the rounds in Zurich society. Wagner travelled to Vienna in 1862 where he again borrowed huge sums of money because he thought success was just around the corner. But again he found himself deep in debt and was not capable of paying it off. He sneaked away and went again to Mariafeld close to Zurich. In 1863, Wagner visited the conductor Hans von Bülow and his wife Cosima (Franz Liszt’s daughter) in Berlin and apparently fell in love at first sight with Cosima who was not very happy in her marriage with von Bülow.

In the midst of despair, Richard was contacted by a man claiming to be an official representative of the king of Bavaria (Ludwig II, who was 18 years old and newly crowned) in May 1864. This unexperienced young king lived in a “dream-world” and had been obsessed with Wagner and his music since he saw a *Lohengrin* performance as a 15-year-old boy. Ludwig II paid Wagner’s debts and gave him a mansion in Munich. Wagner also wanted to continue his affair with von Bülow’s wife Cosima. Indeed, the next summer Cosima and her two young daughters traveled to Munich and stayed with Wagner. Von Bülow arrived a week later and quickly realized what was going on. Yet, he admired Wagner too much and did not fall out with Wagner. The following April, Cosima gave birth to a daughter named Isolde. Von Bülow was still officially listed as the infant’s father, but, of course, Wagner was the real father. Nevertheless, von Bülow stayed in Munich to conduct the premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* which was a great triumph.

Bavaria, however, was a quite conservative and very Catholic kingdom and many Bavarians thought that the 52-year-old composer had too much influence over the young, inexperienced monarch and would waste state money. Again Wagner fled to Switzerland where he settled on the shore of Lake Lucerne in a house he called Tribschen, all paid for by Ludwig II. Cosima gave birth to Wagner’s daughter Eva in 1867 and son Siegfried in June 1869. Wagner himself was now working on *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*). *Das Rheingold* (*The Rhinegold*), the first of the four parts of the Ring cycle, was produced in Munich in 1869. *Die Walküre* (*The Valkyrie*), known for its Ride of the Valkyries, even well-known by opera haters because of its (mis)use in Francis Ford Coppola’s movie *Apocalypse Now* (1979), followed in 1870. The same year Cosima was divorced from von Bülow and married Wagner in August. Wagner completed the *Ring* with *Siegfried* in 1871 and *Götterdämmerung* (*Twilight of the Gods*) in 1874. He had visited the small town of Bayreuth, almost in the center of



Figure 1. Richard Wagner in 1882.

Germany, in 1836 and the town held pleasant memories for him. By this time, Wagner was famous enough to collect money for the project through so-called Wagner societies where people would be guaranteed seats at upcoming festivals in return for a substantial donation. The premiere of *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in 1876 attracted worldwide interest and opera fans from around the globe flooded the small town of Bayreuth. *Parsifal*, Wagner's final opera written especially for the Bayreuth opera house, premiered in 1882. Already since 1871, Wagner had frequent bursts of migraine and increasingly complained of recurrent heart palpitations and also hemoptysis [16, 17]. The family decided to spend the winter in Italy in Venice. On 13 February 1883 Wagner had a quarrel with his wife. At a little after two o'clock Wagner cried out and asked for Cosima and his doctor [17]. Within an hour the 69-year-old composer died, likely by another heart attack [15]. Cosima hugged the body for 25 hours, than a gondola draped in black velvet brought the body down the Grand Canal to the train station. The deceased was placed in a tomb in Wahnfried, close to the grave of his favorite dog, named Russ. Voluminous obituaries reviewing Wagner's life were written, memorial poems and music were composed for him. Figure 1 shows Wagner in 1882: the year of the first *Parsifal* performance in Bayreuth and presumably the year of Wagner's first heart attack.

What and how Wagner may contribute to teaching humanities in medicine

As Sherwin B. Nuland wrote in reflecting on Flexner: "enlargement of the physicians horizon, specifically those elements that require a varied and enlarging cultural experience, is much more difficult.... The wisdom of any of us is circumscribed by our relatively limited experience of life. We expand it by studying literature, history, philosophy, and the evolution and beliefs of societies not our own" [9].

I believe that immersing oneself into Wagner's operas in more detail can contribute to this complex task.

Wagner's work is almost bigger than life and he used myth to reinvent archetypes common to all humans such as [15, 16]:

- the novice with unsuspected powers
- the wanderer on his ghost ship
- the cursed ring
- the sword in the tree
- the savior with no name
- redemption through love.

An incomplete overview of various main motives and psychological problems covered in his operas is summarized in the online supplementary material (see Table S1). It is clear that a complete description of all Wagner's operas is beyond the scope of this article. For example, the British author and philosopher Roger Scruton (1944–2020) published shortly before his death a complete book with almost 200 pages on *Parsifal* alone [18]. Wagner himself, however, was certainly a rather unpleasant, narcissistic person, totally convinced of the significance of his work and message. He told Liszt (his later father-in-law) that he had an "enormous desire to commit acts of artistic terrorism" [13].

Dr. Theodor Puschmann, a Munich psychiatrist, wrote (when Wagner was still alive) a small book in 1873 suggesting that Wagner was a frank lunatic [19]. This book had several editions and was widely read at this time. Martin Gregor-Dellin, a profound Wagner expert and author of a fine biography of the composer [20], admits that Wagner suffered from neurotic, neurasthenic periods of exhaustion, not uncommon in many artists, but he strongly denies that Wagner was schizophrenic, and certainly a schizophrenic person with formal thought disorders could never have composed such complex operas as Wagner did.

Composers such as Monteverdi, Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven may have exerted a greater influence on the development of music than Wagner, but Wagner strongly influenced other artists (novelists, poets, painters, and architects) with his *Gesamtkunstwerk*. As Nicholas Vazsonyi wrote: "There is no path into the twentieth century—for good or evil—that bypasses Wagner" [15].

Pellegrino and Thomasma [21] described fidelity to trust, justice, temperance, integrity, and phronesis (a term used by Aristotle for the virtue of practical wisdom, the capacity for moral insight, the capacity, in a given set of circumstances, to discern what moral choice is most conducive to the good of the agent or the activity in which the agent is engaged), besides compassion, as very important virtues for becoming a "good," trustworthy, ethical physician acting professionally towards the patient, colleagues, and institutions [21]. If one looks now to the plot of *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, none of these virtues are present, even or particularly not in Gods. The German jurist and anti-Wagnerian Ernst von Pidde draws a harrowing synopsis of this opera cycle: Nothing more than a collection of severe criminal offenses [22]. The classical approach of the humanities in the education of medical students has often, but not exclusively, emphasized the use of positive doctor role models to teach human and professional behavior [6]. Yet, I argued >15 years ago in this journal that even negative role models such as the doctor Ferdinand Bardamu in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's novel *Journey to the End of Night* can teach important insights to those looking at the unprofessional, even criminal behavior of the protagonist in this novel [23]. As a corollary, I believe that studying *Der Ring des Nibelungen* can teach medical students a similar lesson: how a corrupt and manipulative unstable character being spoiled and seduced by the quest for money, representation (new home in Walhalla), and power (eternal power of the Ring) ultimately leads to severe criminal behavior. It makes it no better that the main corruptive character

is the God Wotan and it is the strength of Wagner to work out that not only humans can fail, but also Gods. Perhaps, this contributes to the popularity of the Ring cycle: Gods are not better than humans and fall even deeper.

In contrast to the more negative behavior of the Ring protagonist, deep compassion and pity can certainly be studied in almost every one of Wagner's operas (particularly in *Parsifal* [18], but also in *Lohengrin* [24], *Tannhäuser* [25], and *Der Fliegende Holländer* [26]).

In addition, traditional role models of women and what the place of women in society should be were constantly challenged by Wagner. For example Senta in *Der Fliegende Holländer* is a girl, bored with her life and fiancée and the expectations of her father. Instead she dreams of a dark ship full of death escaping from the mundane into a phantasy world. For Wagner, she is a woman of the future [20]. There are many other examples in Wagner operas where self-conscious women act against their role proposed by society and rebel against traditional role models (Elisabeth, Elsa, Isolde, Sieglinde, Brünnhilde, Eva). Thus, studying these "strong" women in Wagner operas may help medical students to better appreciate the problems with gender and role models in the education of medical doctors [27].

Sir William Osler suggested that vocations (leisure activities) in doctors are related to an increased professional engagement and decreased levels of burnout [28, 29]. Indeed, in a cross-sectional survey in the United Kingdom it has been found that listening to classical music and going to classical music concerts and opera, but not watching television, was significantly associated with more professional vocation/engagement [30]. Thus, even if medical students and doctors may not be interested in the precise contents and plots of opera, just listening to the opera music can improve their professional behavior and job satisfaction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest—though I acknowledge it is not easy to become acquainted with Wagner's operas, their plots, and the quite complex music—it may be a worthwhile endeavor. William Berger wrote: "I have always loved sharing my enthusiasm for opera in general and Wagner in particular with anyone who didn't run away fast enough" [31]. I can wholeheartedly understand this statement, but I am also convinced that medical students can obtain insights into what makes a good doctor, learning about pity, compassion, redemptions, suffering [32], psychological conflicts between several generations, unlucky love affairs, the difference between romantic and sexual love, the disadvantages of being too pedantic, the advantages of being sometimes a "blameless" fool with an open heart without prejudices, the evil and destructive effects of aiming for money and power, the positive role models and also fatal consequences of strong women not obeying in a man's world, but also negative role models of severe criminal behavior found in metaphysical Gods as well as many other emotions that make us human, just by listening to and viewing the operas of just one composer.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at *Postgraduate Medical Journal* online.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest statement: None declared.

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Table 1. Very short, incomplete overview of the plots, motifs, conflicts, emotions, and selected psychological collisions

Der fliegende Holländer (The flying Dutchman)

- Occultism, mystery, the diabolic Senta.
- Women as redeemer, through the power of love. Constancy, and self-sacrifice (this subject, however, is not typical for Wagner's opera, but is rather a cliché found also in Wagner's own operas (Tannhäuser, Götterdämmerung) but is also common in the Italian opera Manon Lescaut, La fanciulla del West (both by Puccini), as well as Aida and La traviata (both from Verdi) .
- Young women may fall in love with strange apparently dangerous characters, life in a dream-world and may even commit suicide.
- Conflict between Senta and her father.
- Individual fate initially appearing without any hope.
- Salvation through a woman's devotion.
- Love, jealousy.
- Financial interests of the father to sacrifice his daughter.
- Suicide for love, pathological "love", being different from other "normal" young women.
- The Dutchman may be the opera für Wagner novices: it is rather short (but I strongly warn you of the the one-act, quite long, non- intermissions productions, typically shown in Bayreuth. It contains many popular melodies, it is quite stirring (for example The Dutchman's farewell address), partly all because Wagner uses in this opera a conventional classic form with recitative, aria, chorus, ensemble, etc.

Tannhäuser

- Tale of a wanderer seeking redemption.
- Difference between platonic (real love) and sexual desire.
- Too much sex becomes boring for even the most potent man.
- Males are not only looking for a sexual relationship, but true love.
- Seduction by dark forces of the unconsciousness.
- Salvation through a women forgiveness.
- Tannhäuser's apparently self-destructive behaviour.
- Tannhäuser, a man with strong swings of mood.
- Madness? Mood swings, Self-destructive behavior, trying everything and every role.
- Provocation of deadlocked traditions and rituals by Tannhäuser.

- Tannhäuser is full human being with all its problems: he feels and loves, but is also able to think. Reflect, remember, and eventually revise his beliefs.

Lohengrin

- Although named after its male hero Lohengrin, the opera revolves around the fate of the tragic bride Elsa.
- One can and should not know everything of the history of his/her lovers.
- Sometimes trust is better than annoying questions.
- Difficulties to obtain an accurate history.
- Salvation through mystery.
- Elsa asks the forbidden question because she needs to confirm Lohengrin's belief in her innocence.
- Impossibility of a contact between a metaphysical Phenomenon (Lohengrin) and human nature (Elsa).
- Elsa feminine nature as a frame for mental deterioration?
- Elsa's fear of loss and abandonment.
- Elsa's love as a sensual certainty and not an more abstract emotion.
- Epistemological analysis of beliefs.
- Strategic reasoning in human behavior.
- How much do we really know about the others (family, relatives, lovers).
- Ortrud does not believe in God and acts despite she knows of Elsa's innocence.
- Music reflects and explicates a character's psychological condition.
- Ortrud does not know love, her nature is politics manipulating others.
- Elsa makes an active choice to prove her innocence.
- Rejection of Love (Telramud vs Elsa).
- Ortrud (one of the truly great bitches of opera and usually a major diva soprano or Mezzo-soprano role) easily manipulates her husband count Friedrich von Telramund. Thus, it may be learned, even if you are devoted to your wife never always believe what she tells you.
- Das Vorspiel (The Prelude) rather than an overture because it does not rely on melodies from the opera itself) begins very softly with the violins and woodwinds describes a vivid vision of The Holy Grail. It has a very great beauty and the composer Richard Strauss (1864-1949) said a more beautiful piece of music will never be written.

Tristan und Isolde (Tristan and Isolde)

- Tristan is as a doomed romantic figure.

- Isolde as the redeeming woman.
- Tristan and Isolde as archetypes of illicit love, but a love so great it transforms all existence, including death itself.
- Forgiveness of Isolde against Tristan, despite the fact that Tristan had murdered Isolde's fiancée Morold.
- Tristan must select one betrayal: either towards his uncle and supporter Marke or his love to Isolde.
- Problems with different ages, characters and beliefs in a relationship (Marke and Isolde).
- The famous Tristan Chord (F, B, D# and G#) in the prelude, the so-called "unresolved dissonance" seen by musicologist as an anticipation of atonality as introduced much later by Arnold Schönberg (1875-1951).

Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg (The Mastersingers of Nuremberg)

- Wagner's most "funny" and entertaining opera, can be viewed as a comedy with great musical richness, full of cheerfulness, tenderness and wit.
- Setting: Nuremberg, towards the middle of the sixteenth century. There are no myths and legends, but a true homage to the people of the city.
- The plot deals with the Master Singers singing competition, the winner of which will obtain the hand of Eva, a beautiful, charming, ravishing and mischievous young girl.
- The master singers (Meistersinger) were a guild of singers, consisting of amateur poets and musicians, often master craftsmen in their main professions.
- Interestingly, die Meistersinger incorporates many of the operatic conventions that Wagner had railed against in his essays on the theory of opera: rhymed verse, arias, choruses, a quintet, and even a ballet likely making this opera one of Wagner's greatest successes.
- The confusion in the opera arises from a case of mistaken identity, which can be seen as a form of self-delusion, paired with arrogance and self-overestimation.
- Hans Sachs, a shoemaker and one of the Mastersingers, denies his sexual will in accordance to Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy that much appreciated by Wagner. Sachs is often in conflict with the other mastersingers because he is against the strict rules of the guild.

Sachs's final monologue is very chauvinistic, he sings: "Honour your German masters" and he warns of "foreign rules". This may be one reason why the Bayreuth festivals during World War III consisted solely of performances of the Meistersingers, especially given for soldiers on home leave as invited Guest of the Führer. For the reader not so familiar with German history: The city of Nuremberg was chosen in the Third Reich for the Nazi rallies and congresses likely because of the mythos Wagner created. The political problems with this opera are also demonstrated by the fact that it was the last stripped of its history when Wieland Wagner created the New Bayreuth in 1950s.

- Sixtus Beckmesser, another Mastersinger, a town clerk and quite the opposite to Hans Sachs, is mean, pedantic critic with a narrow-minded regularity who also wanted to obtain the hand of Eva. But he completely fails and is even beaten up by David a young jealous man at the end of the second act in the famous mass brawl scene with the music of a choir fugue.

- Beckmesser is often seen as a caricature of the Austrian music critic Eduard Hanslick (1825-1904), initially a great admirer of Wagner, but becoming increasingly critical of Wagner and his operas. Other like the marxist philosopher Theodor W. Adorno have suggested Beckmesser represents the negative stereotype of a Jew. Beckmesser's humiliation by the Aryan Walther is an onstage representation of Wagner's anti-Semitism, but this interpretation remains quite controversial and others are convinced that Wagner wanted rather to criticize academic pedantism in general.
- The Meistersingers express a fundamental humanity in relatively easy-to-appreciate music and this may be the reason why this opera remains in the repertoire despite the political issues.
- The Meistersingers, however, are more for the experienced Wagnerian with excellent seat meat. It is, arguably, the longest opera ever composed (longest performance in Bayreuth by Hans Knappertsbusch in 1952 lasted 4.40 hours whereas the conductor Fritz Busch "only" needed approximately 4 hours for his Meistersingers in 1924. Consequently, Berger wrote: "Most people never even notice the disturbing politics of Sachs's final monologue because they are too busy thinking about which pizza parlors might still be open on the way home" (31).

Der Ring des Nibelungen (The Ring of the Nibelung)

- Formally, the Ring is a series of four operas (or one opera in four parts), meant to be performed on successive nights in a special festival atmosphere.
- Its content is a fusion product of Norse and Teutonic myths influenced by Greek tragedy and a Buddhist sense of destiny under a romantic German view.
- It was and is an avant-garde approach to music and theater, a novel form of opera hitherto unknown.
- Similarities to Tolkien's Lord of the Ring:
- Both center on a ring of power, and the attempts of various people to acquire it.
- In both, the ring carries with it a corrupting curse.
- Both feature an all-conquering sword which is broken and later reforged.
- Both involve a romantic partnership between a human hero-knight and a demigod female.
- Both involve a hero who fails and dies, but whose descendant, after a period of hiding in the wilderness, returns to fulfill the quest.
- Both feature a wise old man (who in the case of Der Ring des Nibelungen is not very wise, but rather ruthless and corrupt) with a staff that is more than just a stick of wood.

Das Rheingold (The Rhinegold)

- Starts with the famous Es-Dur motif by double basses for almost 5 minutes, psychologically: "Swimming in the prehistoric ocean of collective imagination before birth. Prebirth "pure" narcissism of the unborn child in the mother's womb.
- Alberich is rejected by the Rhinemaidens, and he is taunted and humiliated.
- Alberich experiences a fainting fit resembling a "small child" by the unfulfilled sexual arousal and rejection by the Rhine maidens.

- The pivotal blame of the Rhinegold robbery by Alberich. Aggression against the mother's womb by the frustrated "infant" Alberich according to Melanie Klein's hypothesis. Reaction of Alberichs after the experienced narcissistic insult.
- Alberich steals the Rhinegold and wants power to be the ruler over all the Nibelungen with help of the power giving ring.
- Don't take a logical approach and wondering how the dwarf Alberich could walk on the bottom of a river Rhine-it is pure myth.

Die Walküre (The Valkyrie)

- Sieglinde forced into a marriage with Hunding.
- Sieglinde putting her husband Hunding to sleep with a drink.
- Wotans' sword (Nothung) with its unlimited force, only for use by Siegmund. (in a psychoanalytic interpretation: the sword with unlimited power may represent the overpowering phallus of Siegfried's father, Wotan).
- Wotan is the father of both, Siegmund and Sieglinde.
- Sieglinde betraying her husband Hunding with her own brother Siegmund (incest).
- Changing behavior of Wotan: First, he asked Brünnhilde to protect Siegmund. Subsequently, after a quarrel with his wife Fricka and troubled by the warning delivered by Erda, Wotan decided to let Siegmund be killed by Hunding. Thus, Wotan does not help his son against Hunding, he rather helped Hunding to kill Siegmund by blocking the power of the sword Nothung with his spear.
- Wotan's fickle behavior as well as his humiliation by Fricka.
- Brünnhilde's disobedience to her father Wotan.
- Wotan's revenge building a ring of fire around Brünnhilde.
- Why does Wotan act in such a hideous manner. In psychoanalytical terms one may see this behavior as a transgenerational fault -elegation from father (Wotan) to son (Siegmund) through projective implantation.

Siegfried

- Siegfried as an orphan (his father Siegmund was killed by Hunding, and his mother Sieglinde died shortly after Siegfried's birth).
- Siegfried's feelings of guilt because his mother died during his birth.
- Mime is Siegfried's foster father, but his emotions towards Siegfried are quite limited because he is obsessed to gain power with the ring.
- In contrast Siegfried is wicked and almost cruel in his jokes against Mime (for example, he hunts a bear against Mime as "joke" and cannot stop laughing).
- Mime's brooding.
- Mime's not weakening desire to get the ring for power.

- Question duel between Wotan, disguised as a wanderer, and Mime. Mime hallucinates because of fear. This is in sharp contrast to Siegfried who knows no fear.
- Siegfried forges the broken sword Nothung, a task Mime even as an experienced blacksmith was unable to do. Mime wants to kill Siegfried with a poison potion because he knew that Siegfried will eventually kill him.
- Siegfried dreaming in the forest in front of Fafner's cave before the fight of an intact family life idealizing his unknown father and mother.
- The fourth illegitimate robbery of the Rhinegold, ring and camouflage helmet, this time by Siegfried.
- In psychoanalytical terms, the killing of the dragon Fafner may be viewed as a symbolic castration of Siegfried's father. In addition, Siegfried also kills his foster-father Mime because Mime wanted to poison Siegfried to get the treasure.
- Siegfried fails in the oedipal confrontation, a pivotal maturation step, and remains in early childhood dreams and phantasies.
- Finally Siegfried, the hero, overcame the fire ring of the valkyries rock and awakened the sleeping Brünnhilde. He falls in love with her, but nevertheless leaves her, after giving her the ring, for further exploits.

Götterdämmerung (The Twilight of the Gods)

- Start with the three norns; prophetesses of an otherworldly universe, who predict the decline of the Gods domination. They enumerate all of Wotan's outrages, lies, and failures .
- Alberich and his son, Hagen make a wicked plan to rule the world and will obtain more power than the Gods. Therefore, they need the ring.
- Siegfried meets Gunther and his sister Gutrune and Hagen (the son of Alberich) proposes a sneaky deal: Siegfried will use the camouflage helmet to overcome the fire walls and will rob Brünnhilde for Gunther. He himself will take Gutrune as wife. Hagen gives Siegfried a forgetful potion so that he could not remember his love towards Brünnhilde.
- Although the Rhine maidens warn Siegfried about the ring curse, he did not take the warnings seriously.
- With extremely force (almost rape) Siegfried with the camouflage helm takes Brünnhilde after stealing her the ring (he is not able to remember her because of the forgetful potion) away for Gunther. This is the fifth robbery of the ring.
- Brünnhilde recognizes the treason of Siegfried on her and that he has stolen her the ring.
- Brünnhilde, offended in her honor, plan with Hagen and Gunther to murder Siegfried. She also gives Hagen the information where Siegfried is vulnerable.
- Hagen also kills Gunther, the weak king.
- Brünnhilde sets fire to the pyre where Siegfried will be cremated and also advises Logo (the fire God) to kindle Walhall, the home of the Gods. Finally, Brünnhilde jumps on her horse, Grane into the flaming pyre.

- The river Rhine bursts its bank, the Rhine maidens pull Hagen into the depths of the river. They have finally the stolen Ring (actually the Rhinegold) back.
- This impressive end may be seen as the return of Siegfried and Brünnhilde into the ocean of collective imagination (the beginning of the Rhinegold) and the cycle closes.
- Opera visitors may enjoy the ring tetralogy so much because their own need and fail is not so pronounced compared with the Wagnerian heroes.
- To put it simply, the whole problem started with a failed property deal (Wotan was not able to pay Fasolt and Fafner for erecting the Gods home Walhall. It is more than irony, that this home finally burned to the grounds.

Parsifal

- Wagner's last opera especially composed for the Bayreuth opera house
- May be viewed as a depiction of a corrupted society renewed by an innocent young man who gain wisdom through compassion.
- Parsifal invites us to believe and follow "the Redeemer". But it was unclear to many at the time of its first performance whether Wagner had Christ or rather himself in mind.
- Some have considered Parsifal as an extremely anti-semitic work, a defence of Aryan racial purity against Jewish pollution.
- Wagner preferred to describe his Parsifal not as an opera but as a "Bühnenweihfestspiel" meaning a festival play for consecration on the stage, implying an almost religious spectacle.
- But also the heretic opposite of the catholic mess because in Parsifal blood transforms into wine empowering us to turn to the earth whereas in the holy communion performed during the catholic mess the wine transform into the blood (of Christ) according to Wagner a weakening of our powers.
- The plot is loosely based on the 13th century epic poem Parzival (Percival) by Wolfram von Eschenbach, describing the Arthurian knights in search of the holy grail.
- The grail as a symbol of purity in a world full of lust and power.
- The order of grail knights was originally founded by Titirel, the father of Amfortas.
- Monsalvat is the home of the knights who guard not only the holy spear legendarily known as the lance that pierced the side of Jesus as he hung on the cross during his crucifixion, but also the holy grail from which the redeemer and his disciples drank at the Last Supper and in which Joseph of Arimathea latter caught the flowing blood from the spear –wound.
- Klingsor had yearned to join the knights but was unable to keep impure thoughts from his mind and thus resorted to self-castration. He was then expelled from the order, and changed his allegiance while succumbing to the dark arts. He sets up a magic garden opposite to Montserrat, inhabited by beautiful flower-maidens to seduce and enthrall wayward grail knights. Here Amfortas lost the Holy Spear and was injured by Klingsor with this same spear.
- The suffering of the grails king Amfortas because of the non-healing wound caused by Klingsor with the holy spear).

- Sickness conflicted by wrongdoing and guilt. Wagner inherited in Parsifal a long European Christian tradition associating illness with sin. Thus, Amfortas suffering is a divine punishment for his wrong behavior (to use the holy spear as weapon and the carelessness during seduction when the spear was stolen).
- Although the grail knights try to help Amfortas and they are deeply moved by his suffering, they are not very successful as healers and have tried everything to help Amfortas in vain.
- The healing finally came through the blameless fool Parsifal who knew nothing but achieves understanding through compassion. This may suggest that sometimes knowledge of a disease is not always helpful for healing, but a more open holistic compassion and pity can induce healing.
- Unfortunately, Parsifal has also some anti-Semitic content: Amfortas is weak because he interacts with Judaism in the form of Kundry whereas the grail community is renewed by Christianity, but for the sake of this great opera, it was completely banned in the Third Reich.
- I saw many Parsifal performances in various opera houses and also wondered every time how the "Spear-Trick" (at the end of the second act Kundry calls for Klingsor who throws the spear at Parsifal but it stops in midair above Parsifal's head and Parsifal successfully grabs the holy spear and makes the sign of the cross and the magic castle crumbles to the ground) is implemented.
- Act I of Parsifal is rather long (more than two hours in the 1959 production directed by Arturo Toscanini). William Berger wittingly suggested: "There will be a reverse stampede to the restroom at the end of Act I, which may have been the real reason for the "non-applause" tradition in the first place" (31).