VOLKS WAGNER

The RING: Artwork of the Future / Cinema from the Past

by Michael L. Somers

Artwork of the Future

Richard Wagner, despite continual hype, is not popular. It might surprise the reader to find just how many have no idea who he is. Among the 'many' are some more familiar with his name than with his art, who place him among the most long-winded and boring artists of all time; even joke about him, as they might about gourmands and wine connoisseurs. Those who know appreciably more are divided irreconcilably over whether he was good or evil (or just plain bad). Some of those who have taken the positive view, would place him among the worlds greatest showmen (the Babe Ruth, or Muhammad Ali of music), considering him a dramatic genius of the order of Shakespeare—or better, as he has even been referred to as the greatest artistic mind that ever existed. Yet in other circles it is fashionable to despise him on all counts, to the degree that extremists on the negative side see him as a musical anti-Christ.

Much of the arguing over Wagner's worth is hardly more than excessive huffing and puffing of the idolatrous between peals of sarcastic laughter and cynical abuse from the contemptuous; useless and meaningless when faced with the practical problems of actually mounting productions of his unwieldy works. While there may be use for quotations laced with the most shocking superlatives—from both ends of the Wagner opinion spectrum—that will have much to do with advertising and marketing; promoting and inflaming the eternal controversy; i.e., propaganda, and little to do with art.

There are, of course, intelligent and less emotion laden arguments, concerning not only the quality of his work and the messages expressed and implied by his various pieces, but directed as well to Wagner's claim to have created a new art form. While such opinions may be thoughtful and revealing, certainly of value in their place, this is not our focus here. Considered out of their order of importance they will tend to divert our course from the practical problems and into esoteric philosophical realms in search of the source and the mystical meaning and purpose of art and music. Not that Wagner would be displeased by such an adventure, having written thousands of pages of such stuff himself—much of it quite obscure. In the end, though, theory must meet practice. Ideas will be revealed through performance—or not. Thus the daunting challenge: How to overcome the unresolved difficulties in THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG?

All arguments made in support of *The RING* as a great (or merely successful) work of art are weakened when confronted with undeniable evidence of a tragic and fundamental (but obviously not fatal) flaw in the piece itself. The plan far exceeds the parameters of its medium, the live stage. This problem crops up, one way or another, in every production. It is of such magnitude that no drapery of elaborate theorizing or tricks of subtle lighting or even sunken orchestras can hope to disguise it. Even his dazzling crown of musical genius can blind us for but a few, intermittent and precious moments to the disconcerting fact that the emperor is naked.

Ardent Wagnerites have learned simply to put up with it; pretending as best they can not to notice that the visual element belies the orchestra's sumptuous descriptive commentary on the gaudy procession. Others, no less faithful, squint tightly to soften the all-too-revealing images, or they respectfully avert the mind's eye in the most embarrassing moments, or they stay home altogether and listen to an electronically enhanced reproduction of only the sonic elements of some past parade—or even to imitation parade-sounds created in a modern recording studio. Still others, in the past decade or so, have actually admitted to enjoying old Wagner's exhibition, and seem to share the opinion that the old maestro must have meant vaudeville when he referred to 'the artwork of the future,' or maybe burlesque, and that he liked the part where his pants fell down and decided to leave it in for comic relief. After all, the otherwise uninterrupted tension of a 'straight' performance might be unbearable for the less lofty minds of the folk, whom, he hoped, would be drawn by his works into pan-Germanic bonding.

Fusing the Arts (The Ingredients--Music; Poetry; Dance; and their Children, the 'Art-Varieties')

Much of the controversy and most of the current misconceptions concerning Wagner's art can be traced to the difficulty encountered in trying to fathom his works. They are understandable enough if one examines his scores and his extra-musical writings and musings—and if, as a non-German speaker, one is fortunate enough to find clear translations of his libretti. Such research, however, can hardly be expected of average folks. Besides, a truly great work speaks to mankind; deals in universals; teaches almost covertly through entertainment rather than by close textual analysis.

That such deeper communication was originally intended seems certain, given this composer's remarkable gifts. Ideas concerning the raising of consciousness in his era by means of a super-art, however, descended somewhat in Wagner's order of priority when it became apparent that, first, if it were to work as intended, the general level of education and perhaps overall intelligence would have to be elevated. Furthermore, the Teutonic 'folk' were unlikely to be bothered much concerning the fulminations of an arrogant, egocentric dandy of questionable morals who expected them to receive his esoteric instruction concerning a socialistic utopia in the hope that they would demand its actualization—or even overthrow the contemporary regime. As he matured, it became increasingly clear that the chance of his 'plays' gaining general popularity were slim. It also grew evident to the politicos of his time (excepting, perhaps, the Bavarian state ministers under Ludwig II) that they had not so much to fear from his revolutionary art. Yet, had they worked as he expected—that is, had this 'fusion' actually occurred—and had the plays not been so confoundedly problematic and expensive to produce, they might have broken out of the elitist museum of fine arts and into the world of popular entertainment. Would they, then, have worked their socio-political, pan-Germanic magic? We will never know. Instead, despite some free performances especially given in the interest of attracting them, the folk remained unimpressed or, at best, confused.

The fact that Wagner's elitist audiences are quite well prepared to receive his various plays before they enter the theater is not a valid response to the charges advanced here, namely, that some of his works (the *RING* operas in particular) are so obscure in actual performance that they are, in all practicality, incomprehensible to the casual theatergoer. They may well be considered great by those who do study and comprehend

them. In order to meet the full and true test of overall artistic greatness, however, they ought to be available, it would seem, if only superficially, to the understanding of the general population so that they might have at least some notable effect on and within the culture from which they emanate. Admittedly the yeomanry has little to say about evaluating the quality of fine art. But it is also true that their tendency toward common sense is often, among the gentry, sorely missed. In any case, while the artistic heights Wagner has scaled in *The RING*'s creation are undeniably lofty, and while the work's global appeal to a significant portion of the learned has made it successful, it is somewhat of a stretch to claim it has been popular.

There are several reasons that might be advanced concerning the limitations of appeal. The most powerful is its unavailability on a mass scale. Its sheer length and the expense entailed in its production makes it scarce; the cost of admission to a major opera house makes it dear; and the fact that only major opera companies can even approach doing it justice and that only a handful of competent actor/singers, orchestras, and conductors are equipped to perform it makes it rare. How could it be expected to gain real popularity under such restrictions?

THE MUSIC

It is likely that even the music left a lot to be desired in the days prior to our modern, much improved instruments and our highly trained, virtuoso orchestras (which would be absolute marvels to 19th Century conductors and composers). But with practice and amazing persistence the sounds of *The RING* have improved. That having been said, the music has never been the problem. The difficulty presented by the dialogue and visuals, however, are not resolved so easily. Thus, awkward and incoherent, the monstrosity continues to be dragged through time by the irresistible force of Wagner's throbbing orchestral engine. Concerts and recordings of orchestral excerpts are quite successful. But how many would attend performances of these plays *without* the music, or listen to a recitation of the complete poem?—though Wagner was known to have forced that on his friends.

THE POETRY

Perhaps the most discouraging problem is the lack of immediate clarity as the work is performed. This stems, in good part, from Wagner's stylized poetry, which is practically impossible for even native Germans to decipher at first confrontation. When the poem is joined to the music through the characters who sing the dialogue it is marvelous, but only to the experienced Wagnerite—or by using a translated libretto, which is not only distracting but practically impossible in a darkened auditorium. Due to the tempo and the musical phrasing, the words are inadvertently stretched and distorted from their expected pattern in normal speech (though, it must be said, much less so than with most other operatic composers). The problem is complicated further by Wagner's non-repetitive and non-lyrical melodic style, which keeps the inexperienced listener desiderate regarding song or rhyme. It is then clouded by the very richness and resonance of the operatic voices of the actors; absorbed by the stage loft, curtains, and the softened acoustics of a packed hall; and hidden, sometimes by the thickness of the musical texture and sometimes by the sheer weight and volume of the orchestra. What the unprepared listener is able to perceive through all these veils is detached and incomplete, tending toward confusion rather than profundity.

THE DANCE & THE ART VARIETIES

As if the above mentioned were not enough to guarantee *The RING*'s failure as a theatrical work, the problems presented to the producer by the visual elements range from barely possible to totally absurd, calling for live animals; flight through the clouds; transformations of characters and scenery into smoke and fire, serpents and toads, including a vanishing act; huge giants and operatic dwarves; a rainbow bridge, which the gods are expected to cross, over an expansive valley from a mountaintop to a castle in the mists; a stage representation of Viking heaven; a gathering of clouds into a great thunderstorm complete with strokes of lightning, to mention just a few of the demands. Most of those just mentioned, in fact, are made by the prologue, alone. The entire opening scene of DAS RHEINGOLD takes place underwater. Wagner has even described, right in his score, the swimming and diving activities of the actors. A kind of underwater ballet, it is the closest the composer came to the art of the dance as we normally expect it. Perhaps, as he composed these unlikely stage works, he had some idea as to how all these things would be done. If so, he apparently forgot the plan, because neither he nor anyone since has been able to make *The RING* work as the creator expected (or merely hoped).

Forging THE RING

By one simple curse, his renunciation of love, Alberich, the Nibelung, was able to form the magic ring from the Rheingold. Along with absolute power, he was granted a very minimal understanding of the means to that power: economics. The control of one's fellows and enemies by the power of the Ring, symbolic of infinite wealth, was made possible by Alberich's virtually instant discovery of this new medium or science.

Despite a great deal of cursing, the composer of the monumental stage work that develops out of that renunciation of love, could not fuse the arts into the desired *gesamtkustwerk*, or unified whole.

After over a century of cursing, arguing, experimenting, and spending, that goal is no closer to realization. Financial success, packed houses, endurance through the ages, all these symptoms of greatness are displayed by *The RING*, and by Wagner, himself. Yet, they cannot mask the essential failure (so far) of the portended 'fusion of the arts.'

Alberich, through his knowledge of the unprecedented medium of his sway, was able to present an illusion of omnipotence to his more simple-minded fellow Nibelungs and to make himself a serious threat to the established order of the mythological world, while his very creator, bound to the real world, was denied such foresight. Wagner could not invent the medium that many of his works (particularly *The RING*) required if his fusion theory were ever to be proven. He could not quite even imagine it. So he remained practically impotent in the eyes of the *Volk*, never convinced of his power; and he was little more than a pest to the prevailing political order of 19th century Europe, his earth-shaking affect in the realm of the arts to the contrary notwithstanding.

Without the proper medium (or an explanation or description, at least, by the artist of what it might be like or how it might come to be), calling his product "artwork of the future" sounds more like a dodge than a prophecy; an excuse for his essential failure as a super-artist. He never admitted failure, of course, and the very real and wonderful achievement of the *Festpielhaus* (famous theater/shrine of his own design in Bayreuth) is a fitting monument to his tremendous efforts and incredible determination.

That is not to say that the results of those efforts are not, in themselves, extraordinary and powerful artworks. To the contrary: if *The RING* dramas had no magic about them, they would have been laughed off the stage forever in view of their defects. That they have been spared is only a hint, however, of their true greatness—not proof. For their salvation might be due to the endurable quality of the music, alone; or that in combination with their seemingly infinite mutability.

RING Fantasies

The initial assault on this Matterhorn of opera production was launched from a base camp established by the composer himself, directly under the steepest cliff face. His confidence was complete. He would provide everything for the audience; leave nothing to the uncertainty of imagination. All the peaks and valleys within the enormous compass of his play would be brought sharply into focus by his profound poetry, lighted by some of the most descriptive and suggestive and luminous music ever composed.

The excitement and magic of the mythological fantasyland would free the audience from the weight of mundane reality by counteraction of a much bigger, brighter, and seemingly *more* real world created via the new art-of-arts. There would be no subtle or suggestive visuals. After all, the folk (expected to flock to the theater—though how they would afford it was, apparently, not considered), did not have sufficient imaginary power to cope with such cerebral stuff as the philosophical ruminating of Richard Wagner. They would have to actually see everything to get the message—particularly since they would have no opportunity (nor could they be expected) to memorize the entire work in advance. Besides, they *wanted* to see everything. We still do.

The mountain proved more resistant than expected. It is much too huge to fit on any stage. And people are not fooled for a minute by the papier-mâché substitution. The artificiality of the stage and the limitations of live actors cannot be ignored. The hypnotic, time-warping capacity of the music is too often interrupted by human and mechanical blunders and unconvincing effects. A completely convincing *RING* on the stage is still impossible. The power of music bears the orchestra to the summit, but the climb is much too tough for average folks, and the audience cannot be shown anything even approaching a reasonable facsimile of the breathtaking view described by the score.

RING-Lite

It was clear to many producers, and fairly early, that Wagner had exceeded the stage. It only made sense to face that fact, do some heavy shoulder shrugging, and leave out the impossible effects. They could only hope that the audiences of Wagner's friends and music-drama experts would understand their plight and forgive the gaping holes that are left, for instance by the conspicuous absence of the animals; the dry Rhine-bed; a paper dragon-head waved about on a stick; the Gods' hesitation to actually cross the rainbow bridge (if one should actually appear) until, presumably, after the final curtain. And they were right. Wagnerites attended anyway. Some of them actually liked it.

It must be said that the turn toward abstraction in staging was not limited to the works of Wagner. At mid-morn of modernity change was in the air everywhere. In fact, the *gesamtkunstwerk* idea was taken over by the whole *Jugenstil* movement in the early

20th century. The new ideas in stage production were fueled by the innovation of electric lighting (the first control boards were installed in 1898). Parisian audiences were already tasting the fruit engendered by the staging of an 'atmosphere' rather than an 'illusion.' In Germany, Peter Behrens said,

> Stage design should be so stylized, so completely reduced to a few ornamental elements, that the whole atmosphere of the act is created simply by line and color. The décor must not imitate nature but should simply provide a framework for the action, a background that is both beautiful and characteristic."[1]

In Berlin, Max Rheinhardt, working with Secessionist painters, advocated a 'complete transposition of the reality of nature into the realm of abstract significance,' and Georg Fuchs's similar idea of 'retheatrizing the theater' was discussed all over Europe. The most immediately effective of these revolutionaries was perhaps Edward Gordon Craig (renowned stage director, set designer, draughtsman, and theater historian, as well as trained Shakespearian), but it was Adolphe Appia (often referred to as the 'father of modern stage production') who was the most original and ultimately the most influential. It was Appia who first saw the need and the opportunity of connecting the burgeoning ideas with the Wagner music-dramas, and who visited Bayreuth while Wagner still lived, only to be shocked by the tackiness of the sets. After the Master's demise, Appia became friends with Wagner's future son-in-law, Houston Stewart Chamberlain. He tried to interest the Wagner group in modernizing. Wagner's devoted widow, Cosima, however, could not be coaxed out of her fixation with every miniscule detail of her late husbands stage directions (many of them embedded in the original scores)—with which she surely felt a very personal relationship.

"In opera," says Henry-Louis de La Grange (paraphrasing Appia),

> particularly in Wagner, there could be no harmony between the music and realistic sets. In Wagnerian drama, 'musical gestures must be perceived with the help of the drama.' They had never been achieved, even in Bayreuth, where set-designers had decided that most of Wagner's ideas could not be realized.

"Wagner himself, towards the end of his life," La Grange appends, "recognized his failure in this area."

"It was inconceivable," says La Grange in the second book of his four-volume biography of Gustav Mahler, "that it [these modern staging notions] would not one day extend to opera productions."[2] But such was not to premier at Bayreuth. The breakthrough with Wagner would come through Gustav Mahler. It was Mahler who first saw in the designs for a production of *Tristan und Isolde* (1903), by Secessionist painter Alfred Roller, what he had been seeking for years as director of Vienna's Hofoper. A new approach, indeed, but nowhere near as stark as what was to come.

Appia's influence at Bayreuth, seemingly nullified by the temple's matriarch, was only delayed. The late and great Wieland Wagner (grandson of the composer, and theatrical stalwart in his own right), desperate to keep the shrine current (and solvent), though reluctant to acknowledge just how deeply indebted his productions were to Appia, did admit to having read his writings and even to having studied his drawings.[3]

The very difficult and the more expensive effects were soon hard on the heels of the outcast impossible ones, and a new camp was pitched some distance from the main peak. In fact, it was established on the gentle slope of one of the least imposing foothills. 'Climbs' were conducted by guides only on dark nights and misty mornings, so that tourists would not notice how remote and inaccessible was the real mountain, and the idea of presenting a rigorous and complete *RING* was abandoned by the advocates of an austere, ethereal, and imaginary sort of *RING*. The dark-and-stark approach that leaves so much to the imagination of the audience also leaves much to be desired.

On the other hand, the 'dark' *RING* as initiated by the highly respected producer, Wieland Wagner, has important, reasonable, and intelligent supporters. This camp has a sincere message and, in advance of sarcastically dismissing 'RING-Lite', we ought to give its advocates a fair hearing.

Before calling on one of their foremost spokesmen, we should acknowledge that there are reasons supporting all (well—perhaps most) of the several alternate RING productions. Some of those reasons are good, but few are purely artistic. Artistry, admittedly, must finally bow to economics. It is inevitable that the best *RING*, like any other grand opera production, is the least debilitating compromise within a given set of inalterable circumstances—usually boiled down to funding. To stop playing it because it cannot be perfectly done would be far more sinful than mounting a weak or misconceived production. The view to be expounded below, however, favoring the austere RING, has little to do with the temporal world of business and finance (apart from the fact that the idea was spawned, in part, by a funding drought). The better argument is based squarely on the purely artistic ground that (in the judgment of a renowned expert) the low-visual Wagner is an improvement; that the removal of the tumors (however defacing the surgery itself might prove) is a cosmetic advantage if not a life-saving procedure.

With that in mind, we shall now hear from one who may have helped impel the darkness. Ernest Newman, in WAGNER AS MAN AND ARTIST (1914), asks:

> Is not this form capable of further development? Can we not imagine something like the second act of *Tristan* with silent and only dimly visible actors, the music, helped by their gestures, telling us all that is in their souls, while they are too remote from us for the crude personality of the actors and the artificiality of the stage-setting to jar upon us as they do at present? Cannot some story be taken as so well known to everyone that only the shadowiest hints of the course of it need be given to the spectator, the real drama being in the music? Or, to go a step further, can we not dispense altogether with the stage and the viable actor, such external coherence as the music needs being afforded by impersonal voices floating through a darkened auditorium?[4]

There is no doubt the highly respected British music critic was biased in the Wagner-as-supreme-musician direction. In his adoration of the composer he makes no attempt to hide his disappointment that Wagner did not sometimes abandon the theatrical trimmings and get on with some purely musical compositions. While Wagner's limited forays beyond theater-inspired music were unremarkable, Newman is right, nonetheless, about the visual element of the original 'realistic' production style. It does tend to "jar upon us" all too often. But in his forgivable obsession with Wagner as orchestral genius, he tends, now and then, to forget (and even berate) Wagner the consummate artist and theorist, who himself said, "Art must appeal to the eye. Unless it communicates itself to the eye, all art remains unsatisfying; and thus itself unsatisfied, unfree".[5]

Newman simply could not accept that, even from his musical idol; though its importance was sufficiently clear for him to include that quote of Wagner in the same book, two-hundred-eighteen pages before he asked that the lights be dimmed—or even extinguished. In all fairness it should be pointed out that the author, in his reference to *TRISTAN UND ISOLDE*, was only using Wagner as an example of what might be done by his younger followers in music-drama. Nowhere in his advocacy of darkness does he suggest that it should be applied as a panacea for the aches and pains of *The RING*. But the low-visual partisans did not write new works for darkened auditoriums. They got busy producing Wagner's old works in a more obscure format than the composer had intended.

"No matter how fully it may express itself to the ear," the maestro continues,

> or merely to the combining and immediately compensating faculty of thought (*das kombinierende, mittelbar ersetzende Denkvermögen*), until it communicates itself intelligibly to the eye it remains only a thing that *wills*, and not yet fully *can*.[6] (*Wagner's Emphasis*)

While there is much room for interpretation here (as with nearly every sentence of Wagner's prose), it seems clear that elimination of the visuals is not to be considered in seeking a cure for the ills of his works (presuming he would admit to any such ills).

Still the impossible problems inherited with his position as director at Bayreuth led Wieland Wagner to try something different, along the lines of Newman's or Appia's suggestions. His increasingly dim productions proved only that the four dramas that make up *The RING* can draw a good crowd in whatever form they take, and that they can work their musical magic under surprisingly different conditions than Wieland's grandfather had expected. Nonetheless, Richard, the artist/philosopher/composer, was a hard man to satisfy. He well might have deplored the austerity of these productions as a violation of principles he had laid down concerning music-drama. Wieland, the producer/director was not all that happy about the situation himself. In the 1951 Bayreuth Handbook, he wrote:

> Today we must still admit that the stage can, at its best, provide only a sparse reflection for the eye of what the orchestra pit is triumphantly conveying to our ears.[7]

Whether the visual element is altogether eliminated or only significantly reduced, the action and the show are depreciated. That pretty much guarantees that only professed Wagnerites who have done their homework will attend. The problem of understanding the dialogue is thus solved to some degree, though unwittingly, in exactly the manner Newman suggested: by an audience of devotees. This would also explain John Culshaw's personal observation that the average age of the audience at such productions (in the 1950s) seemed to be rising: a bad omen! The endurance of a work of living art requires continual attraction of new and young audiences. However high the quality achieved by a particular performance, the low-visual version tends to be a seasoned veterans' *RING*. Rather than a 'fusion,' it becomes a diminution and *dis*assembly of the arts.

If the climb up the steep cliff is taxing beyond the stamina of the live theater; and the walk up the softly sloping hillside is uneventful and insufficient in spectacle (read 'boring' and 'over valued'), what is left? Is it over for *The RING* as a viable artwork? Will it be abandoned, then, to share the dusty shelves of the antiquarian theatrical and musical warehouse with the operas of Felix Draeseke, Hans Pfitzner, and Ludwig Spohr? Not a chance!

RING around the Rosey

The dark *RING* could not really sustain itself without its 'traditional' counterpart for validation. It may be that the advent of the long-play record, the invention of stereo, TV, digital music and video (all recent developments on the Wagner time scale—and important ones for his living, still developing artwork) have had something to do with the demise of the abstract or 'modish' *RING* productions. At any rate (though it would be unfortunate, indeed, despite all the forgoing criticism, if the special beauty of the dark style were to disappear altogether), the return to brightness has already occurred.

But wait! Something seems amiss. Where is the mountain? These scenes look very different. As the lights come up we notice that even Wagner's characters have been replaced. Did they get lost in the darkness? Are they on strike for an increase in respect? Perhaps they have been locked out for refusal to appear on stage in their proper shapes and sizes and costumes. In place of the dwarves, gods, water sprites, and superheroes, there are strange looking aliens in space suits or dandies in gold lamé waistcoats or somberly dressed bourgeoisie in 19th Century business outfits. In the place of innocent, child-like Rhinemaidens frolicking in the clear, emerald depths of the ancient river, we are presented with a trio of harlots selling their dirty love at the base of a hydro-electric dam (an unlikely place, it would seem, to find clients). And what's this: the God of Thunder and Natural Violence in a glittering cape and sporting a pompadour?—God of War and Lord of Ravens wearing a tie, wingtips, a satin smoking jacket?—Alberich's hoard of magical trinkets transported to the mountaintops in plastic trash bags?

There has been a great deal of grumbling among the Wagnerian old-guard to the effect that his original base camp has been occupied by intruders: meddlers who have turned their backs to the mountain. But if the promontory cannot be scaled; if the arts and 'art-varieties' cannot be bonded, why waste time and effort in vain attempts? After all, was it not Wagner himself who urged 'Do something new!'? So, with a respectful bow to jolly old Richard the entertainer, they bring up the stage lights and send in the clowns.

It may, in fact, be more entertaining. At least this new direction promises variety. Might we now be on the crest of 'new wave' *RINGs*; perhaps, a punk *RING*, in which the Nibelungs demonstrate slam-dancing under the spell of the Rhinegold? We have recently been introduced to the American history RING. Next, perhaps, Wotan will metamorphose from God of War into General M^ac^Motors,' trying to wrest the magic, no-limit, gold MasterCard-o-Plenty from Ali Berberich, the Sheik of *Schwarzistan*.

The RING will (in fact, *must*) continually be made anew. That is true of any living art form. It must play or die. But must it be presented as a comedy in order to 'save' it? On the other hand, it is difficult to take it seriously in *any* form when so often, and in so many ways, it looks so very silly. That the work has the power to maintain its identity despite all the drastic alterations and modifications is most amazing. It must be said, if the changes and experiments have not made it more comprehensible or convincing they have certainly succeeded in making it less coherent—and the much desired special effects are still less than satisfactory. The Charles Dickens-style *RING* by Boulez and Chereau, à la Bernard Shaw, emanating from the *Festspielhaus* (how can men with such last names rule in Bayreuth?) and televised worldwide in the 1980s, succeeded in one further and rather important way—by making it more comfortable for the audience to laugh in the wrong places, especially at those formerly embarrassing flaws.

Even if old Wagner is stewing in his own juices on international TV (and in his own theater, to boot) still, poor Richard. How shall we spare him from twitching and twisting eternally in his grave? And how will we ever coerce those *prima donna* 'art-varieties' to cease their dissonant clashing and harmonize with the orchestra?

Cinema from the Past

Surely it was more out of blind frustration than acute foresight which brought Wagner to the brink of renouncing the stage in a letter to 'the friend', King Ludwig II. In apparent contradiction of his espoused theory that art requires a visual element to achieve fulfillment, he now told the King: "I have succeeded in making the orchestra disappear. [He did so by placing it beneath the stage in his *Festspielhaus*—paid for in great part out of the Bavarian treasury.] If only I could do the same for the stage." Had he, Alberich-like, publicly pronounced that shocking curse, he might have been granted the supreme vision: the understanding of a means by which his dream of *gesamtkunstwerk* could be fully realized. Instead, we had to wait for Thomas A. Edison, et al. True, the technology was not available for actually making motion pictures during Wagner's life. But shouldn't he have invented the idea; described it somehow; or, at least, predicted cinema in some secret, undecipherably esoteric fashion? Am I asking too much of, arguably, the greatest artistic genius of his century?

In fact, he seems to have done just that. In preparing the prologue of *The RING*, DAS RHEINGOLD, for production as an animated motion picture, this writer has discovered that it is practically a screenplay already, with complete editing instructions encoded in the music. Wagner was writing wonderful material for the screen, despite the fact that certain technological necessities for the production of a really convincing film version have been invented only in the past few decades. A container of sufficient volume to encompass those resistant 'art-varieties;' the means of cramming them all in; and sufficient heat to bring them into a molten state to permit fusion had to await further development of the 'science-varieties.'

State of the Art

> If the philosophy of the *Ring* is to be shown to have universal application and validity, and if its content is to make contact with a wide modern audience, the means of presentations must be that of the mid-twentieth century rather than an extension of whatever was considered adequate in the nineteenth.[8]
>
> —John Culshaw

Now, at the dawning of the twenty-first century, more than a hundred years after Wagner's death, the technology is available by which his 'artwork-of-the-future' alibi will be transmuted to sagacious prophecy. As has been pointed out by others, probably since the very dawn of motion pictures, *The RING* can, indeed, be completely contained by the screen—at least by a very large one. So it seems quite reasonable that Wagner's scores should practically cry out for film treatment and even appear as a prototype of screen writing.

Particularly in the latest animated-realism format, the visuals at last can match the might of the music; the balance of instruments and voices can be precisely established before presentation; the original poetry of the dialogue will stand out clearly and be made intelligible as it is sung by means of perfectly synchronized sub-titles in English—and/or in translations already available in twenty or more languages (though presently somewhat less synchronized); and all of the missing effects (plus more that are strongly suggested by the music and story) can be performed convincingly before our eyes. The fantastic characters will assume their rightful sizes and shapes. The landscapes can be breathtaking, and the scenery magnificent and realistic. All hindrance of silly-looking monsters, imaginary horses, bears, rams drawing chariots, and the all-too-human actors will be scuttled. In fact, all the problems of *The RING* can be overcome in a single stroke. The fusion of the arts can now be accomplished by virtue of the catalytic action of modern film techniques and the emulsifying agency of celluloid or digital encoding. By artful animation, photography, and editing, the arts of music, poetry, and dance can be molded into a congruent oneness because the living arts, once digitally recorded, can no longer resist manipulation.

Cinema of the Future

John Culshaw, in approaching the production of the first, full-length, studio recorded *RING* (Decca/London Records, with Sir Georg Solti conducting the Vienna Philharmonic), adopted the view that, if Wagner were alive to help him with his recording he would have authorized (probably demanded) the use of every available technique and device (and might have invented some new ones) to conjure his vision in every detail for the listeners; to convey his precise meaning wherever possible; and to lend complete continuity to the drama. This inspired the Decca recording team to construct a thunder machine, lending considerable additional 'weight' to Donner's magic hammer; to add special electronic enhancement to some of the vocal parts (when Alberich makes himself invisible, for instance, in Scene Three of DAS RHEINGOLD); and even to have manufactured a complete set of eighteen 'tuned' anvils, in accordance with Wagner's general specifications (in his score) for the musical interval during which the gods descend into the darkness of Nibelheim.

While a sound recording, even one as spectacular as the Decca/Vienna Philharmonic version, is not a complete '*RING* experience' (though some claim it is actually *better* than a live, fully visualized performance), Culshaw and Solti certainly pointed us in the right direction, and left us a ready-made soundtrack for a potentially stunning motion picture, thanks to the vision of Decca International and the wonderful performances of the orchestra and artists, including the legendary Kirsten Flagstad. Though it was made in the late 1950's for long play vinyl records, it was done using the then state-of-the-art, 21-channel, 'Phase-Four' technology, and every scene, every note, every nuance was meticulously planned to bring this amazing masterpiece to aural life. Since then it has been remastered and digitized and repackaged in CD format for even greater effect. No doubt it could be again refashioned for today's multi-channel theater systems to create an absolutely shocking sonic experience.

In that same vein it is now possible to create a number of dazzling and unprecedented visual effects for such a film. This should be done with care to preserve the integrity of the original antique work of art but also, like the London Records recording, exuberantly, in the interest of popular appeal (particularly important considering the expense of such a production); in following the visionary and revolutionary spirit of the artist; and in blatantly capitalizing on the 'artwork-of-the-future' theme, while sincerely attempting to fulfill Wagner's dream of fusing the arts.

Is it too much to expect that THE RING OF THE NIBELUNG will be produced in its entirety on film? Perhaps so—at the moment. On the other hand, it may be inevitable. But first things first: a fabulous, animated '*RheinGold'* is not at all unreasonable. This colorful, exciting, action-packed music-drama will be irresistible in a high-powered, wide-screen, multi-channel format.

The alluring Rhinemaidens, free at last from corporeal stage-bound performers, can find their longed for youth and innocent beauty as they cavort in the soft glimmering of their underwater world. The illumination of the magic Rhinegold can bathe the entire theater in brilliant, shimmering color. Alberich, the wretched little Nibelung, can finally achieve his proper shape and size, slipping, stumbling, sneezing, and scrambling madly about the river bottom in his vain attempt to catch hold of one of the alluring but ever elusive females.

The screen can lend a wonderful new spaciousness to the scenes from the mountaintops, with rugged landscapes; smoking volcanoes; towering waterfalls; and with clouds, winds, and weather changing with the music to match the moods of the play. The mysterious illusionist, Loge, can change his shape continually, as befits his shifty character—now sliding quickly along the ground as low, flickering flame; now glowing in translucent human form; now growing into a roaring bonfire and instantly diminishing to a harmless wisp of smoke. The explosive storm that clears the skies, gradually exposing the luminous rainbow bridge, and the final "Entry of the Gods into Valhalla" with its triumphal brass and magnificent sunset should be long remembered (and strongly recommended) by all who experience it.

Such a film will certainly endure as a classic, to be attended by literally generations of movie-goers; at its very least, providing an unsurpassable educational guide to opera and music; and opening tremendous vistas on a world-wide basis to the less imaginatively gifted. The work's potential for popularity has already been exposed by the unimaginable early popular success of the Decca recording.

The People's RHEINGOLD

The new, up-to-date format will not only make DAS RHEINGOLD more attractive, it will bring it closer to a general, nearly universal audience, and well within the budget of common folk. They will not have to order tickets months in advance, and they will be spared having to enter that lair of snobbery and hang-out of the elite, the opera house—that is until they are convinced by *RheinGold*, the motion picture, that opera is actually 'OK' (or at least less tedious than they had been led to believe).

The timelessness of *RheinGold*'s mythological setting; the extraordinary empathic quality of its marvelous characters; the universal and allegoric nature of its messages; the startling special effects, great sonic jolts, and surprisingly continuous action; the richness and amazing hypnotic power of its music; and the fairytale, 'sword and sorcery' character of the story will appeal to an international audience of nearly every age and circumstance. The enhancement of the visual element and the improved coherence of the dialogue with a modern, synchronized translation as sub-titles will finally provide them the key to the door of a magnificent chamber in the incomparable treasure house of one of history's most brilliant artistic geniuses. The magic spell of his music will have its way, lifting uninitiated visitors efficiently and smoothly, without the least preparation on the part of the tourists, up and over the steep and rocky slopes to the previously inaccessible peak. At last such a motion picture will provide a modern tramway to the very summit of Mount Wagner.

Far from sealing the fate of live productions, it will actually encourage more of them. It might even inspire a modern-day musical genius to create something new in this format—an operatic play with the screen as the *intended* medium. In any case, it will provide a virtual classroom for generations of new Wagnerites, giving rise to an unprecedented wave of interest in the composer and his shrine at Bayreuth—sufficient, perhaps, to support year-round performances there, a permanent Wagner company, or possibly the touring RING once suggested by Herbert von Karajan and elaborated by John Culshaw in his book, REFLECTIONS ON WAGNER'S RING.

The resulting improvement in audience expertise and a wave of interest in the rest of the tetralogy will pressure producers of live performances to push the envelope ever closer toward the 'fusion of the arts' sought by the composer. The world of musical theater, in general, should derive considerable benefit in many ways. A film like this could give opera an even bigger boost than that provided a number of years ago to the ballet by the movie, *The Turning Point*, starring Shirley M^ac^Claine and featuring prominently the great Mikhail Baryshnikov (a feat that even the immensely popular Pavarotti could not duplicate for the opera with *Yes, Giorgio*). But live action opera films, or opera based stories, however well done, will not compare with the fully animated *RheinGold*. As a movie it will be unique in the world of cinema, just as it is in the world of stage and orchestra. It will endure as long as Wagner is remembered. It will be as exciting and attractive in this form as he must have envisioned it (before trying to produce it), and enormously more popular than even he could have possibly imagined. Thus we may one day witness the mocking answer of Time to Wagner's expression of consternation in that letter to King Ludwig as, more than a century after he wrote it, the stage does, indeed, disappear.

NOTES:

1. As quoted and discussed in GUSTAV MAHLER, vol.2, 'Vienna: The Years of Change (1897-1904)'; **Henry-Louis de La Grange**; Oxford Univ., 1995—p.563. (Originally taken by La Grange from the magazine *Jugend* and from **Fuchs**'s two theoretical books, *Die Schaukunst der Zukunft* [The Stage Art of the Future] and *Die Revolution des Theaters.)*

2. Ibid., p.564.

3. Ibid., p.568 (and see footnote crediting **Walter B Volbach**'s ADOLPHE APPIA, PROPHET OF THE MODERN THEATER; Wesleyan Univ. Press, Middletown, Conn., 1968).

4. **Ernest Newman**, WAGNER AS MAN AND ARTIST, Vintage Books (Random House), New York (1960), 2nd Edition, p.439

5. Ibid., p.221

6. Ibid., p.221

7. Quoted from the *Bayreuth Handbook* of 1951 in **John Culshaw**, REFLECTIONS OF WAGNER'S RING, Viking Press, New York (1976), p.102

8. **John Culshaw**, RING RESOUNDING, Viking Press, New York (1967)