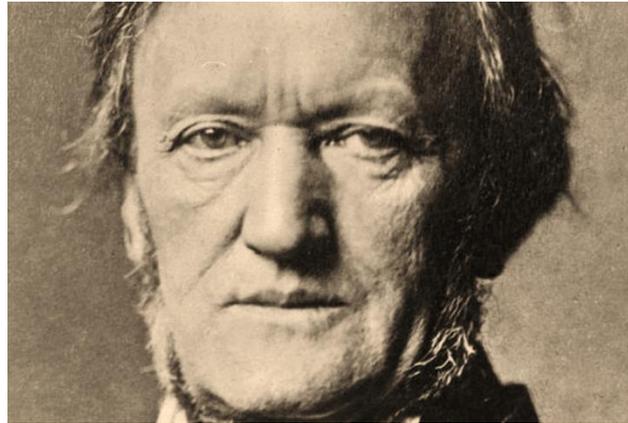


# Richard Wagner: An Esoteric Perspective

Donna M. Brown

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(Figure 1. Portrait of Richard Wagner)<sup>1</sup>

*I have found true Art to be at one with true Religion.*<sup>2</sup>

*I believe that this Art proceeds from God, and lives within the hearts of all illumined men; - I believe that he who once has bathed in the sublime delights of this high Art, is consecrate to Her forever, and never can deny Her; - I believe that through Art all men are saved.*<sup>3</sup> (Richard Wagner)

## Abstract

This article seeks to familiarize the reader with the multi-leveled complex of ideas underlying the artistic works of Richard Wagner, one of the most influential, but hotly-debated composers who ever lived. The article touches upon Wagner's early life and the psychological types that qualified his psychospiritual field. The political, philosophical and religious underpinnings of his creative genius as expressed in his various operas and written works are also discussed. In view of the controversy over the composer's anti-Semitism, a brief section on Wagner's attitude toward the Jews is included as well as a section on his anarchist activities. The main thrust of the article explores Wagner's involvement with Greek and Teutonic myth, with metahistorical processes and his ever-evolving interest in a wide-range of spiritual and esoteric ideas, which both inform and emanate from his transcendent music dramas. To this end, the article seeks to show that one of Wagner's foremost concerns

was the "innermost Soul" and his desire to shed an initiating light on "the dark night that envelops men's Souls."<sup>4</sup>

## Introduction

Richard Wagner has been described by both his admirers and his critics as one of the most revolutionary figures in the history of music. At one end of the spectrum, he is viewed as being "a New Age Messenger of Music, whose operas play upon the inner vehicles of man, awakening and stimulating certain latent centers."<sup>5</sup> On the other, he is seen as a repugnant musical genius whose writings provided the framework for Hitler's ideology and

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## About the Author

Donna M. Brown is a long-time student and teacher of esoteric philosophy. Her background includes a career in the arts and election to public office in the District of Columbia. She has served as commentator and Board Member for *The School for Esoteric Studies*.

one of the darkest periods in human history. No other composer is so adored or reviled; likewise, no other music induces such intense emotional reactions of either love or hate. Putting all questions about Wagner the man aside, listeners are either enraptured by the expressive beauty of his musical creations and their immense spiritual depth, or they tend to view his artistic works as flamboyant and tediously drawn-out displays of self-indulgence.

While aspects of Wagner's legacy remain in question to this day, his titanic profligacy and unequalled influence over the development of classical music are indisputable. Indeed, Wagner's influence on music was enormous. As a composer, he altered the rules for opera, introducing new ideas in harmony, melodic process (leitmotif) and operatic structure. These achievements resulted in what has been described as "dazzling and unforgettable tapestries that melded orchestral magnificence with the soaring beauty of the human voice."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, he envisioned a bold new conception of opera that synthesized the many different forms into one all-embracing art form which some of his earliest detractors sarcastically yet aptly termed "the art work of the future."

The timelessness and universality of his music dramas and their ability to be understood through such a variety of perspectives is remarkable. There are a myriad of books interpreting Wagner's work, so many in fact that only Shakespeare and Jesus Christ are thought to have had more books penned about them. One finds, for example, countless treatises on Wagner's work based on the philosophy of Kant, Hegel, Sartre, Schopenhauer and Rousseau, to name a few. Others provide interpretations based on the works of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung and feminist psychology. Still others examine the composer's works from the angle of their anti-Semitism or from a mythological, sociological and/or political point of view. All this is to say nothing of the many volumes that have been written about Wagner's fascinating and scandal-laden life or those dedicated solely to a musical analysis of his operatic works.

The composer, who considered himself to be the most German of all men and the very em-

bodiment of the German Spirit,<sup>7</sup> was not only one of the most consequential and innovative figures of nineteenth-century music, he was also an important figure in nineteenth-century cultural history for both his criticism and polemical writing. He penned over 230 books, articles and essays, in addition to over 10,000 letters on a diverse range of topics. His writings have been associated with everything from racism, anti-clericalism, anti-capitalism, and even with nationalist and proto-fascist currents of thought. Moreover, he has tended to serve as something of a scapegoat or lightning rod for all that went wrong with the German system at the turn of the twentieth century.

In addition to the political, philosophical, sociological and psychological dimensions to Wagner's written work and his music dramas, one of the other enthralling elements that one encounters when entering the complex world of his musical creations is the intricate level of allegory and the archetypal symbolism they contain. These elements can be depicted in ways that range from the commonplace to the deeply esoteric, although the esoteric elements are seldom discussed. While this article will touch upon the vast world of allegory and symbolism that is embedded in the operas of Richard Wagner, its primary focus will center on the surprising range of esoteric and spiritual ideas that informed the life of the man and the temple of his music. In so doing, it is hoped that the reader will gain some insight into the composer's life purpose and will begin to understand why Wagner has been called the "Apostle of Music" whose operas should be studied by every serious student of the Mysteries.<sup>8</sup>

## **Wagner's Personality Typology**

**I**n an effort to provide the reader with some insight into the personality and character of Richard Wagner, this article provides an outline of the psychological attitudes that qualified or conditioned his makeup. The outline is based on the application of *the seven archetypal currents* hypothesis that was originally given by Helena Blavatsky, but which was subsequently and significantly expanded by Alice A. Bailey. These seven types provide an integral

psychological approach to understanding what animates an individual and makes him/her what s/he is. The seven psychological types represent the seven predominant characteristics or modifications which condition a human being. As such, they are the primary psychological archetypes. But rather than offer a detailed analysis, this article will be limited to a few examples, leaving it to the readers who have some understanding of this psychological typology to ferret out further examples for themselves.

The seven psychological types as redefined by the Canadian psychologist and psychosynthesis practitioner, René Fugère, are as follows:

1. Willful/Determined
2. Sensitive and Humanist
3. Strategic/Active/Adaptable
4. Creative/Harmonizer
5. Analytical/Practical
6. Idealistic/Committed
7. Organizer/Ordering

The following types are thought to have played a distinct role in Richard Wagner's adaption and orientation toward life.

*Type Four - The Creative/Harmonizer.* Both the *Essential Self or Soul* and the *Mental Faculties* of Richard Wagner were governed by the *Fourth Psychological Type*. This type can be described as having a strong artistic and aesthetic sense and the ability to create beauty, harmony and equilibrium. A person qualified by this type tends to be dramatic, expressive, especially musical, imaginative and intuitive. The *Type Four* individual tends toward a fighting spirit which eventually results in reconciliation as well as strength and poise. Some of the weaknesses of the *Fourth Type* are constant conflict, ambivalence, worry, agitation, excessive moodiness, a tendency to exaggerate as well as instability and improvidence.

*Type One - Will/Power/Determination.* Wagner's *Personality* was conditioned by the will and power type. This type is characterized by qualities of leadership, the power to liberate, courage, determination, audacity, self-confidence, synthesis, one-pointed focus and clarity of purpose. Some of the weaknesses of

this type are arrogance, self-centeredness, pride, impatience, irritability, destructiveness and a controlling nature.

*Type Six - Idealistic/Committed.* The *Sixth Psychological Type* had primary influence over Wagner's *Emotional Field*. This type can be distinguished by idealism, persistence, self-abnegation, intense focus and commitment. Individuals qualified by *Type Six* tend to be passionately motivated by an inspiring vision or strong belief. The negative attributes of this type can express as emotional intensity, a lack of sensitivity, tunnel vision, intolerance, extremism and militancy.

*Type Seven - Organizing/Ordering.* Wagner's physical body was most likely qualified by the *Organizing/Ordering* type. A *Type Seven* physical body places an emphasis on formality, is attentive to rhythmic cycles and physical order and detail in his or her environment. The physical body is often extremely sensitive and prone to illness, but is easily trained and capable of great stamina or endurance.

## Formative Years

*One supreme fact which I have discovered is that it is not willpower, but fantasy-  
imagination that creates. Imagination is the  
creative force. Imagination creates reality.*

(Richard Wagner)

Wilhelm Richard Wagner—born in Leipzig, Germany on May 22, 1813, into a middle-class, theatrical family—was a quick-witted, mischievous child. He resisted all authority and was so self-assertive, rebellious and unruly that his stepfather, Ludwig Geyer, a painter and playwright, called him “the Cosack.”<sup>9</sup> In speaking of his childhood, Wagner says: “I grew up in the wildest of anarchy; it had to be, for then as later no known method ever fitted me, but how much should I have been spared if I had been accustomed to obeying!”<sup>10</sup>

In addition to being a strong-willed and lonely non-conformist—life-long qualities indicative of his *Type One* personality—the young Wagner was a sickly and extremely emotional child who was plagued by acute shyness, a host of

fears, ghostly dreams and ruminations.<sup>11</sup> From his youth onward, Wagner seemed to live in two worlds: an ordinary human world and a numinous world. His experiences of “the other world” are evidenced in some of his many childhood fears, such as his fear that mundane, inanimate objects contained “spirits” and could become living things.<sup>12</sup> Such fear and sensitivity must surely have been engendered, at least in part, by the loss of his father Carl, shortly after his birth, and then by the traumatizing death of his beloved stepfather, Ludwig Geyer, just seven years later. Added to this was a cold, overwhelmed mother, who grossly neglected the troublesome child and is said to have “almost wished him dead.”<sup>13</sup> Wagner’s strong imagination, excessive inner and outer agitation, along with his acute sense of abandonment, life-long illnesses and frequent desire to kill himself, would also seem to be indicative of the *Fourth Psychological Type*, which is thought to have conditioned both his essential Self and mental faculties. The *Seventh Psychological Type* governing his physical body would have contributed to some of the problems just described.

Despite a number of pronounced weaknesses in character, such as his many indiscretions,<sup>14</sup> moodiness, fierce self-assertiveness, pomposity and his need to be the center of attention, there are quite a few examples of Wagner’s compassionate heart—compassion or sympathy born of suffering and pain (which continued into his final days) being one of the virtues or strengths of the *Fourth Type*. This quality or attribute was evidenced in the young Wagner’s sensitivity to the suffering of people and animals. His compassion for the suffering of animals was especially pronounced and developed later in life into a strong support for animal rights and a vegetarian diet. An example of Wagner’s mature views on the subject can be seen in the following excerpt from his 1880 essay titled *Art and Religion*.

This teaching [of the sinfulness of murdering and living upon our fellow beings] was the result of a deep metaphysical recognition of a truth; and, if the Brahman has brought to us the consciousness of the most manifold phenomenon of the living world,

with it is awakened the consciousness that the sacrifice of one of our near kin is, in a manner, the slaughter of one of ourselves; that the non-human animal is separated from man only by the degree of mental endowment, that it has the faculties of pleasure and pain, has the same desire for life as the most reason-endowed portion of mankind.<sup>15</sup>

The attribute of compassion born out of the throes of suffering and pain that we see in Wagner (along with his ability to create and express beauty) are a few of the impulses that eventually prompted him to try to change the world through a combination of revolutionary (*First Type*) and artistic and harmonizing (*Fourth Type*) means. As he wrote in a letter to his friend, Franz Liszt: “In all my relations to the suffering world I feel led and guided by one thing alone — Compassion.” No doubt Wagner also understood the value of voluntary suffering and renunciation as it affects man’s ego when he goes on to say, “If only I could give myself thereto without reserve, then all my private woes would be overcome.”

There are other instances of Wagner’s compassionate nature. Maurice Kufferath, one of the most ardent admirers of Wagner, speaks first hand of how, despite his own poverty and suffering, “the young man was continually sharing his last shilling with a more-needy brother.”<sup>16</sup> Kufferath goes on to say that it was Wagner who said: “No individual can be happy until we are all happy; for no individual can be free until all are free.”<sup>17</sup> Other examples from Wagner’s early childhood show how the very young boy tried to cheer up his stepfather as he lay dying, and how he gave away one of the boots he was wearing to his sister whose feet were cold, so they could each hop on one foot and keep the other one warm and dry.

Because Wagner was such a sensitive child, with extreme moods and a number of other temperamentally bothersome traits, he was repeatedly “exiled” (a pattern that would continue throughout his life) and sent away from his family.<sup>18</sup> At the age of seven, he was sent away yet again, this time to attend Pastor Wetzel’s Kreuzschule near Dresden.

During his early years at the school Wagner received piano instruction. His interests, however, lay elsewhere, and according to Wagner in *Mein Leben*,<sup>19</sup> his mythologized autobiography, filled with after-the fact edits, he “never learned to play the piano properly.” He goes on to allege that his piano teacher thought “nothing would come of him.” Despite being an undisciplined student, Wagner developed a deep and abiding interest in Greek and Latin as well as Mythology and Ancient History. He claims to have translated the first 12 books of the *Odyssey* into German at the age of thirteen, although only three translations are on record. Wagner’s devotion to the Greek mystery plays was to significantly influence his conception of opera as a reinvigorated “mystic play” or “initiating ritual.” His avidity to read Shakespeare prompted him to learn English<sup>20</sup> and helped him to become a dramatist.

With his stepfather’s encouragement, the young Wagner also developed a fascination with the theatre. He wrote his first play at the age of fifteen and has been described as being a “theatre brat.” But by the time Wagner left the Kreuzschule in 1827, he resolved to become a poet. Although the aforementioned studies and interests persisted, Wagner became more and more drawn to music.<sup>21</sup> The determining factor in his decision to make a career of music came as a result of a performance he attended. Wagner says: “I only remember that one evening I heard a symphony of Beethoven’s for the first time; that I fell ill of a fever; and that when I recovered I had become a musician.”<sup>22</sup>

As John Runciman, an early and rather fanciful chronicler of the composer explains:

His purpose was set. ... Beethoven’s music touched his young being and fermentation began which drove him forthwith to make himself a perfectly equipped musician. Almost like ... St, Paul, he was “converted” in a twinkling of an eye.<sup>23</sup>

In actuality, “it was not one particular concert,” as Klaus Kropfner and others have discovered, but several experiences with the music of Beethoven “that fired the young man’s enthusiasm.”<sup>24</sup> Wagner’s poetical description

of this and other events in his life, point to a pattern typical of the *Fourth Psychological Type*, which seeks to dramatize and even fictionalize events in order to craft or burnish an image.

Nevertheless, given Wagner’s *Type One* personality and his *Type Four* Soul and mental field, it is perhaps not at all surprising that Wagner’s soul destiny was revealed to him through the music of Beethoven, whose Soul and personality types were identical to his own (and to those of the German nation), and whose musical contributions were also to have a spiritual and psychological impact for centuries to come. As his sense of purpose matured, Wagner’s passionate interests were united in a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or a “total work of art:” a conception of music drama or opera that was to be the German equivalent of the Eleusinian mysteries, but which integrated a wide range of metaphysical, political, philosophical, and psychological elements.

## Mythic Influences

*Wagner’s appropriation of myth is not merely a matter of one person’s moral and artistic credo. It is also one of the great intellectual advances of modern times: the ancestor and inspiration of comparative anthropology, symbolist poetry, psychoanalysis and many aesthetic and theological doctrines that are now common currency.*<sup>25</sup> (Roger Scruton)

In order to understand the man and his music dramas, it’s necessary to take a closer look at the layered complex of ideas that informed his work. It is well-known that Richard Wagner was an intellectual who took a serious interest in a wide range of ideas that lay outside of the usual purview of his work as a composer. Ernest Newman, one of the most celebrated musicologists and critics in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said that no other composer possessed such a combination of musical genius and intellectual gravitas.<sup>26</sup> However, rather than detail Wagner’s diverse and considerable intellectual interests, the focus of this article will be limited to those interests that contributed to the esoteric or metaphysical dimensions of Wagner’s thought process and his artistic

works, although none of Wagner's large-minded interests, so characteristic of the *First Psychological Type*, lay outside of his creative endeavors.

As previously noted, Wagner developed an early and profound involvement in mythology. He was drawn to myth, especially Greek and Norse mythologies, for a number of reasons. There seems to be little doubt, as Robert Donington reveals in *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols*,<sup>27</sup> that myth reinforced the numinous aspect of Wagner's personality and gave him access to unconscious parts of his own psyche. As such, it provided the more mature Wagner with a vehicle by which he could come to terms with the long-standing conflict between his own rationally formed ideas and the more intuitive elements that fueled his artistic creations.<sup>28</sup> Wagner also held a passionate belief about myth's capacity to embody deep and hidden archetypal truths that needed to be cloaked or veiled in riddles or symbols so that they could gradually bring the unconscious part of human nature into consciousness. He maintained that myth represented "the poem of a life-view" that "was true for all time and its content inexhaustible throughout the ages." "The poet's task," he claimed, "was simply to interpret it."<sup>29</sup> More importantly, Wagner understood that saga and myth could purposefully reflect the universal and metahistorical concerns of humanity,<sup>30</sup> concerns which were to figure prominently in the composer's worldview and music dramas.

### Wagner and the Greeks

For Wagner, the only time and place that art was able to wholly embody profound Universal truths was in Athens, during the golden age of ancient Greece;<sup>31</sup> an age, it might be noted here, which was given expression under the impulse of the *Fourth archetypal current*. Greek myth, like all myth, provides a cosmological and historical framework by which civilizations summarized their beliefs and knowledge of the past, and offered guidance to humanity about its own nature and its relationship to the larger whole of which it is a part. Wagner saw the experience of mythic theatre as a kind of spiritual activity that dealt with

*metahistory*— the "transcendental framework within which history unfolds."<sup>32</sup> Additionally, he believed that mythic drama was able to communicate the intuitive wisdom of the past, the evolutionary stages in humanity's development along with the insight needed for its future growth.

Greek drama and the mystery plays employed all of the arts—instrumental music, verse, narration, singing, dance and mime—in a single composite form which Wagner believed brought the entire community into a conscious relationship with itself and its own essence. Financed and sustained entirely by the state and accorded the utmost importance, these ancient plays overshadowed and informed the civilizations of the time, introducing them to the beauty of philosophical concepts, high standards of morality and Nature's most precious secrets. As such, the ancient rites and plays stood in stark contrast to the commercialized art, anti-communal trends and degenerate bourgeois society in which Wagner lived.<sup>33</sup>

As the classics and music scholar Father Owen Lee reveals throughout his *Athena Sings: Wagner and the Greeks*,<sup>34</sup> the composer's operas "make extensive use of Greek elements to give dramatic credibility and structural unity to his Nordic and German Myths."<sup>35</sup> Father Lee also demonstrates how countless details in Wagner's operas, especially in his *Der Ring des Nibelungen* or *Ring of the Nibelung*, provide Germanic characterizations of Greek mythical figures. For example, Wotan (the chief God, associated with inspiration, order and law) and Fricka (guardian of marriage and women) are shown to be German versions of Zeus and Hera. Brünnhilde (the noble heroine), one of Wotan's daughters, becomes an Icelandic Athena, "the warlike daughter of Wotan the father god and the feminine embodiment of his masculine will"<sup>36</sup> who seeks to solicit the aid of the heroic Siegfried or Achilles. Lee goes on to describe how Wagner's various operas correspond to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and *Prometheus*.

Michael Besack also explores a great many of these influences and symbols in his perceptive

and highly informative book—*The Esoteric Wagner: An Introduction to Der Ring Des Nibelungen*.<sup>37</sup> For example, Loge’s authority as a negotiator with mortals on behalf of Wotan, as Besack states, “mirrors the Greek classical arrangement between Zeus and Prometheus.”<sup>38</sup>

The Tarnhelm, the magic helmet used by the subterranean villain Alberich in *Das Rheingold*, the first opera in *The Ring*, and later by the hero Siegfried, in the third opera that takes the hero’s name, can be likened to the cap of invisibility given to Hades by Cyclops.<sup>39</sup>

Wagner no doubt drew upon the Old Norse legend of Wayland the Smith in drawing up the story lines for both *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried*, two operas in which the forge and the smith figure prominently. However, he was undoubtedly aware of Hephaestus, the Greek god of the forge and the artist/blacksmith, as well as his sons, the chthonic Kabiri or Cabrie. The Kabiri, were masters of volcanic energies and the keepers of the Mysteries. According to Helena Blavatsky, “they are beneficent Entities who, symbolized in Prometheus, brought light to the world.”<sup>40</sup>

The influence of ancient Greek drama on Wagner was, in fact, so pervasive that Fredrick Nietzsche (a once great friend) thought that he was “Aeschylus come alive again.” Father Lee describes how, on several occasions, “Wagner imagined a performance of Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia* in his mind, reading it aloud to his friends, providing his own commentary, and relating the Greek classic drama to his own worldview.”<sup>41</sup> Wagner’s deep interest in classical Greek drama, such as *The Oresteia* and *Prometheus*—which he thought was the most profound work of art dealing as it does with the “Lighting up of Manas” or mind—were rooted, at least in part, by his understanding of their emphasis on the seemingly endless cycle of karma, the idea of divine or heroic intervention, which alchemicalizes the old pattern and humanity’s need to recognize and abide by universal laws.<sup>42</sup> Such tragic masterpieces, he maintained, spoke to man’s inner consciousness and through them he was in communion with his God; he was in the universe and the universe was in him.

The following quote from Wagner’s *Art and Revolution*—one of his many prose works—provides some insight into the composer’s thoughts about the great Festival Plays in Ancient Greece, specifically *Prometheus*:

To see the most pregnant of all tragedies, the Prometheus, came they; in this Titanic masterpiece to see the image of themselves, to read the riddle of their own actions, to fuse their own being and their own communion with that of their god . . . For in the Tragedy the Greek found himself again, — nay found the noblest parts of his own nature united with the noblest characteristics of the whole nation; and from his inmost soul, as it there unfolded itself to him, proclaimed the Pythian oracle.<sup>43</sup>

Besack provides additional insight about the composer’s ideas on Greek drama and his metahistorical worldview in the following passage from *The Esoteric Wagner*:

Dramatic art, for Wagner, was an exceptional communal medium through which the ground of being was given a voice. The ancient Greeks had worked this out in their dealing with Tragedy, and Wagner was reasonably clear on the objective to be achieved. The ground of being represented the foundation on which cultures were built in the past. The universal recognition this foundation pointed to the existence of an underlying unity that had to be preserved at all cost.<sup>44</sup>

For Wagner then, Greek myth and drama, with its metahistorical basis, was a means by which the archetypal patterns that ensure lucidity and stability for human society over the long term could be revealed. These same myths and ritual dramas were also the primary means by which interaction with the ground of being or the underlying unity could be maintained.<sup>45</sup> Importantly, for Wagner, this interaction could be maintained without the aid of a formalized religious structure or corporate hierarchy.

### **Teutonic Mythological Influences**

Norse or Teutonic mythology, most notably, the *Poetic* and *Prose Eddas*, the *Volsung Saga*

and the *Nibelungenlied*, were among the other formative influences on Wagner's worldview and his music dramas. Germanic and Norse myth served as a vehicle by which Wagner could move away from the Italian and French operas that were dominating the operatic stage. These legends and myths also allowed him to give expression to the most ardent political and social sentiments; sentiments that are indicative of the zealous idealism of the *Sixth Psychological Type*—the qualifier of Wagner's emotional field. In appropriating Viking and Norse myth, Wagner was able to create a more *volkish* or home-grown operatic form that served as a medium through which he could comment upon what he perceived as humanity's perilous social, religious and political state. Many of the symbolic, allegorical and archetypal elements of these myths, which have strong metapolitical, metahistorical and metaphysical parallels with the mystery rites of antiquity, were consciously employed by Wagner to create a new mythology that would provide the much needed insight into the unconscious or subconscious part of the human psyche.

Norse sagas depicted the interplay and conflict between spirit and matter, i.e., between the Gods and Giants of the Hyperborean and/or Lemurian race. These ancient sagas focused on the role of courage, will and sacrifice, as well as cycles of creation and destruction and other cosmological and evolutionary themes. Like the ancient mystery rites, the Norse and Teutonic hero myths were thought to contain a complete "system of initiation," but one based on the descent of the World hero,<sup>46</sup> and his or her death and spiritual rebirth. This world hero

or heroine, as Michael Besack explains, has always been an exemplary individual who serves as a bridge or pontifex between the temporal world in which humanity lives and the higher world of guiding influences.<sup>47</sup>

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Of particular interest to Wagner were the Old Norse ideas concerning evolutionary growth via the World hero or heroine, the Ur-Kinghood and the maintenance of sacral-political power.<sup>48</sup> The Ur-Kinghood represented the ancestral seat of all religions and the union of royal and priestly power sprung from the formless Val-Father (or All-Father) and passed on, after the great flood, via various avatars and/or heroes from the Asiatic-Ur and kings of pre-Greek history.<sup>49</sup> Reaching westward into Europe, the stem-branch and seat of divine power, ur-conscience and wisdom were thought to manifest

most clearly in the ancient royal lineage of the German confederation of the Franks under the name Wibeligen or Gibeligen<sup>50</sup> from which the pure of blood *Volk* or Folk had sprung.

The Ur-Kinghood was the means by which the world was able to positively interact with the Val-Father or the ground of being. Such an interaction was not only responsible for establishing a correspondence or higher unity between the macrocosmic and microcosmic spheres; it was necessary for the correct development and initiation of cyclic processes of creation and destruction.<sup>51</sup> The higher unity remained "as long as the earthly king acknowledged the ruling house in the heavens and timed his actions to coincide with celestial harmonies."<sup>52</sup> However, as Besack points out, the ancient cosmologists knew the association between the Ur-Kinghood and the heavens was

never completely persistent. As the poles shifted, due to the precessional pattern, the world axis or pillar (symbolized by the king as the sacred principle of world organization) would break down, creating a world crisis and the need for a catharsis.<sup>53</sup> A new world order would follow in which the earth would be inhabited by a new generation of aesirs or gods<sup>54</sup> who would take up the task of world repair and renewal. This new world order, born of necessity and built upon the ashes of the old cycle, preoccupied Wagner's thoughts and found its way into a number of his operas. His fascination with the Ur-Kinghood found its initial expression in 1842, in *Rienze* (The Last of the Tribunes), his tragic opera about a heroic leader of veiled and kingly descent, who, as Besack explains, "raises his people from their deep existential sleep."<sup>55</sup> The opera was based on a book by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, whose recurrent esoteric works influenced the likes of Annie Besant and Helena Blavatsky. But the operas which focus most forcefully on the Ur-Kinghood, the interplay of polarities or forces of being and non-being, the rule of law, the major steps in human evolution, as well as the great epoch or cycles of time after "the fall" when the present Aryan race was just beginning, is Wagner's apocalyptic, four-part magnum opus—*Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

### Wagner as Anarchist

*Whence [will come] the manly strength against the crushing pressure of a civilisation which disowns all mankind, against the arrogance of a culture which employs the human mind as naught but steam power for its machinery? Whence the light to illumine the gruesome human heresy that this civilisation and this culture are of more value in themselves than the true living man?*<sup>56</sup> (Richard Wagner)

Richard Wagner was born into a world that was undergoing dramatic change. His world was churning with deep disruptions and power struggles between the upper and middle class, liberals, socialists, conservatives and communists. In Germany and the rest of Europe, barriers were breaking down and the public was rising up against oppression, insisting upon greater freedom, political unification,

independence and other democratic rights. It was in this atmosphere of war and insurrection, and in the years which followed, that Wagner developed his utopian-socialistic vision and his hopes that the repressive German rulers, the old gods, and the anti-communal values that were beginning to dominate Germany and much of Europe, would be re-organized along more democratic and aesthetic lines.

Wagner's political and social attitudes were also influenced by various philosophers, such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Ludwig Feuerbach. Proudhon was a libertarian socialist and one of the so-called fathers of anarchism. Feuerbach could be described as a secular humanist who believed that the concept of God was a human projection, and advocated that humanity take charge of its own destiny and the fate of the world,<sup>57</sup> ideas that Wagner incorporated into the *Ring* as well as his three-part poem, *Jesus of Nazareth*, which this article will discuss below. Feuerbach's critique of Christianity and his belief that "assertions we make about God are, in fact, assertions about ourselves," were adopted by Wagner, who came to believe that no religion was "true," but had immense value as a tool for what it revealed about its practitioners.

The composer's views were influenced further by his various political activist friends, most notably the Russian Prince Mikhail Bakunin and August Röckel. Bakunin formulated a theory of freedom based on the destruction of the state and the creation of a new society built by federations of free workers. Bakunin was a key figure in the emerging socialist movement, along with Karl Marx. Although the two men had common aims and enemies, their philosophies eventually came into conflict. Wagner rejected Marx's theories in favor of Bakunin's anarcho-collectivism, due in part to his belief that Marxism was just another form of totalitarianism. Marx's rejection of aesthetics and his contempt for aristocrats, landowners and artists were also contributing factors.<sup>58</sup> Bakunin's utopian ideals, his antagonism for accepted ideas and laws along with his belief that "established society served only to oppress and extort from the people it claimed to serve,"<sup>59</sup> had tremendous appeal for Wagner. So too did

the revolutionary theories of Röckel, the German conductor and composer, whom the twenty-year old Wagner met in Dresden in 1843, when he was conducting the *Flying Dutchman*, his opera on redemptive love. According to Wagner, Röckel's views were based "on the socialist theories of Proudhon and others pertaining to the annihilation of the power of capital by direct productive labour." He goes on to say that Röckel's ideas represented the "construction of a whole new moral order,"<sup>60</sup> which in turn inspired him to develop conceptions of a possible form of human society that reflected his own high artistic ideas.<sup>61</sup>

Wagner's concerns for what he saw as Germany's Faustian bargain, which surrendered aesthetic values and communal rituals for money, status and power,<sup>62</sup> along with his belief in the absolute necessity for a complete regeneration of society, were the prime factors fueling both his artistic expression and left-wing revolutionary activities. The combination of his *Type Four* essential Self and mind, and his *Type One* personality, which provided him with an uncompromising sense of values, his fighting spirit, strength of will and purpose, his keen interest in political activity and social reform along with his large-minded approach toward humanity's problems, expressed as a powerful mix of creative genius and destructive energy. This culminated in the creation of some of the greatest musical creations of the human spirit, and the desire to liberate humanity from the bondage of ignorance and materiality regardless of the cost. To this end, Wagner, along with Bakunin and Röckel, became part of an inner group of leaders who were actively engaged in the Dresden insurrection in May of 1849.

Their efforts to "set all men free" and produce a much-needed catharsis were unsuccessful. Wagner had to escape from Dresden to Switzerland in order to avoid arrest, where he lived in exile for the next twelve years. His co-conspirators were sentenced to death, sentences that were later commuted to long prison terms.

## Wagner and the Jews

Jewish Emancipation had been one of the primary reasons for the revolution in 1848, along with the calls for greater freedom among the middle class. Wagner, as we know, enthusiastically supported the cause. He was, as previously shown, deeply concerned with the plight of the working class and the degradation of society, especially the growing corruption of poetry and music. His belief that revolution would bring about a much-needed change never materialized, and he quickly came to see that it had been a mistake—indeed one that caused even greater damage to art and artists. In *Art and Revolution*, he lamented:

It is not the battles of the "barricades," not the sudden mighty shattering of the pillars of the State, not the hasty change of Governments,—that is bewailed; for the impression left behind by such capital events as these, is for the most part disproportionately fleeting, and short-lived in its violence. But it is the protracted character of the latest convulsions that is so mortally affecting the artistic efforts of the day.<sup>63</sup>

In Wagner's mind, one of the groups responsible for the alarming degradation of society and art, were the Jewish elites (along with the Jesuits), who had aligned themselves with the Enlightenment and its materialistic ideals.<sup>64</sup> Despite this obsessive belief, Wagner made it clear in a letter to his wife Cosima that: "not just the Jews, but every creature seeks to further their own interest. It is us, we of the state, who condone such things."<sup>65</sup>

Before 1850, when Wagner penned his offensive *Judaism in Music*, there is no record of his espousing anti-Semitic sentiments. But it would be an understatement to say that anti-Semitism was anything but the order of the day in Germany and most of Europe. Indeed, such sentiments were rampant and deep-seated. Wagner's views on the Jews coincided with those of the masses, with the utopian, anti-clerical thinking held by the likes of Karl Marx and Bruno Bauer as well as the evolutionist and race theories that were prevalent at the time. While there is no denying his compulsive and odious criticism of the Jews, there are, as Michael Besack points out, various ways of

regarding Wagner. A more balanced approach has shown that Wagner was not a “hidebound hater of Jews, driven by notions of German racial superiority.”<sup>66</sup> On the one hand, Wagner perceived the Jews to be a foreign and corrosive force, a fiendish enemy that threatened Germany’s highest cultural goals. On the other hand, many of his best friends were Jews. He

was, in fact, surrounded by so many Jews that rumors spread throughout Germany and elsewhere that the composer was of Jewish descent. Stereotypical cartoon characterizations mocking Wagner and his network of Jewish friends with their crowning adulation and support were published in the press.



(Figure 2. A cartoon appearing in the German press mocking Wagner’s many Jewish friends, and close associates.)<sup>67</sup>

Although a good deal of the prevailing scholarship still tends to portray Wagner’s anti-Semitism as having its roots in “Jew-hatred,” German racial superiority, or as some critics believe, in his feeling that he could not succeed in the business of music because it was under the control of Jews who conspired against him; “what Wagner really objected to,” as Besack explains, “were certain aspects of Jewish emancipation, which he felt had a strong negative impact on the communal foundation of German culture.”<sup>68</sup> The worst of the negative influences in what Wagner called “Jewish nature” were the “promotion of individualistic ideals”<sup>69</sup> which threatened the faint vestiges of German communal unity. For Wagner and many others in the first third of the nineteenth century, anti-Semitism was coupled with criticism of modernism, and with the idea that Jews were one of the principal agents of a new, industrial-capitalist era. When viewed from

this perspective, as Besack maintains, Wagner’s complex and controversial attitudes toward Judaism and Germanism “can be tied to complex metahistorical developments that he followed very closely.”<sup>70</sup>

These ideas are substantiated in the following passage from Dr. Irad Atir, a young Israeli musician and scholar who states that Wagner’s

... opposition to Jewishness was part of his opposition to the sociopolitical and cultural reality of the period in general, including the non-Jewish German reality... He criticized certain aspects of Germanism; for example, the conservatism, religiosity, pride in aristocratic origins, and militarism. He also criticized Jewish separatism and lust for money. For him, there were good Germans and bad Germans, good Jews and bad Jews.<sup>71</sup>

Like Besack, Atir goes on to say that “the only way to understand Wagner’s art, which expresses political, sociological and musicological ideology, is to approach it neutrally”<sup>72</sup> and to realize that Wagner held inconsistent or ambivalent views of both Jews and Judaism.

Besack and Atir, along with a growing chorus of other scholars<sup>73</sup> maintain that Wagner’s art must be divorced from the will to power of Nazi Germany and Adolph Hitler, since Wagner died fifty years before Hitler’s regime and had condemned racist worldviews as “totally immoral.” Therefore, Wagner cannot be held responsible for the fact his music was eventually appropriated by the Nazis with the aid of several heirs and other racist thinkers.<sup>74</sup> Although the psychologically dwarfed Hitler cherished Wagner’s music and identified with the morally ambiguous God Wotan or “Wolfe,” as he was sometimes called; he missed *The Ring of the Nibelung’s* central message about the destruction that inevitably ensues when the love of power replaces the power of love as ruling principle. Any rational individual who is familiar with the composer’s *Ring Cycle* can clearly see that it represents a complete repudiation of the will to power and the abuses to which the selfish use of the will must inevitably lead.

Additionally, it is important to note that Wagner believed that assimilation and intermixing would make everyone equal and lead to a harmonious and aesthetically ordered world.<sup>75</sup> The idea of Jewish and Christian reconciliation and assimilation, along with his rejection of German imperialism, were reflected in the composer’s comedic opera—*Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, which ends with “a utopian vision of love and a community united by holy German art.”<sup>76</sup>

## Wagner’s Spiritual Philosophy

*Religion lives, but only in its primal source and sole-true dwelling place, within the inner chamber of the individual... for this is the essence of true religion... it shines in the night of man’s inner most heart, with a light quite other than the world’s sunlight, and visible nowhere save from out of that depth.*<sup>77</sup>

(Richard Wagner)

Wagner’s deep absorption with philosophical and spiritual questions began at an early age. In *My Life*, he describes being a young boy who “gazed and agonized with sympathy on the altarpiece in the Kreuzkirche (Church of the Holy Cross), and yearned, with ecstatic fervor, to hang upon the Cross in the place of the Saviour.”<sup>78</sup> But by the time he was ready to be confirmed in 1827, Wagner had begun to turn away from his conservative Lutheran upbringing, disallowing its puritanical attitudes and finding it intellectually and temperamentally inadequate.

Nevertheless, his interest in religion and the numinous continued, engendered, in large part, by nineteenth century Romantic ideals that rejected the social and political norms of the Enlightenment, and which treasured instead: heroic striving, the imagination, the mystical over the mundane, and spiritual transcendence. No artist expressed Romanticism (an expression of the *Sixth archetypal current*) more intensely than Wagner, whose emotional field, as previously stated, was qualified by the *Sixth Psychological Type*.

Yet, Wagner seems not to have taken religion and the spiritual world seriously until he encountered the music of Beethoven. The first experience, in Leipzig in 1827, where the young Wagner saw “mystical constellations and weird shapes without meaning,” prompted him to become a musician. Another, in Paris, in 1839, might be categorized as the first of several mystical experiences that would occur during his lifetime. Of this experience, Wagner says: “I now found flowing from innumerable sources, streams of the most touching and heavenly melodies which delighted my heart.” He goes on to describe how it resulted in an “inner change” or “upheaval” and a renewed dedication to music. More importantly, Wagner came away with a new belief in himself—a belief that “God dwelled within his own breast,” and was both transcendent and immanent. It also resulted in an “intense spiritual questioning that became a part of every subsequent work.”<sup>79</sup>

As Alan David Aberbach explains in *Richard Wagner’s Religious Ideas*, during each of these

spiritual or mystical experiences Wagner “seemed to intuit some element of knowledge transcending direct sense perception, although not one necessarily connected or associated with any specific religion.”<sup>80</sup>

In fact, over the course of the years, Wagner’s views on traditional religion had become highly idiosyncratic. They were sometimes accompanied by harsh denunciations of traditional religion, especially Christianity and Judaism, whose “dogmas and rituals interpose themselves between man and his creation.”<sup>81</sup> “Religion,” he thought—especially Christianity—“had become crystalized and artificial. It had to keep heaping on incredible saints, fetishes, and idols instead of fulfilling its true vocation to disclose the inner kernel of its origins in an allegorical presentation of the truth.”<sup>82</sup> It was reserved for art, he claimed, to save the spirit of religion by recognizing the figurative or metaphorical value of mythic symbols in order to reveal their deep and hidden truths.<sup>83</sup>

The Jewish God, Wagner believed, was a petty tribal god who promised the Jewish nation supreme mastery over other races and the peoples of the world. He deplored the wrathful and punitive God of the Old Testament who seemed more concerned with maintaining power than helping the poor. Christianity, he opined, “is derived from the Jewish religion and that is its dilemma... the Jewish religion has been grafted on to Christianity and has completely spoiled it.”<sup>84</sup> “It’s connection to Judaism,” he maintained, “transformed original Christianity into a creed of aggressive greed and domination which does not reflect the loving and humble teachings of Jesus the Christ, the Redeemer, as much as Jehovah who wished the other Gods to be subjugated by his faithful people.”<sup>85</sup>

In the same vein, Wagner claimed that Christianity “denied the world, seeing it as a fleeting and dreamlike illusion where one must prepare for renunciation by Faith.”<sup>86</sup> Christianity, he claimed, “sets man’s goals entirely outside his earthly being.” “Religion (like art),” he decried, “should not lead us out of life, but lift us up within it.”<sup>87</sup> The Judeo-Christian religion, he also believed, had grievously erred in con-

demning sexual desire and the body as sinful and shameful; for the meaningful uniting of a man and woman was to him a loving and life-creating act.

Roman Catholicism came in for special criticism, especially the institution of the Papacy and the *Society of Jesus*. Wagner saw the papacy, which acted as if it were infallible and the exclusive representative of God, as psychologically controlling. He viewed the Jesuits as the distrustful corrupters of Christianity and European culture who degraded man and life by viewing them as inherently sinful, and who spent their lives manipulating for position and riches. Eventually, Wagner came to be even more contemptuous of the Jesuits than the Jews and went so far as to claim that “wherever society tried to accommodate this group... the result had been disastrous for humanity and the state.”<sup>88</sup>

Since both Judaism and Christianity advocated for their own spiritual interests, and neither embraced the idea of the brotherhood of humankind as part of a living practice, Wagner appealed for a revolt against the Judeo-Christian inheritance,<sup>89</sup> calling instead for “The Religion of the Future, the Religion of Universal Brotherhood,” based on Love, the fellowship of man and the life-need for man to give of himself to other men.<sup>90</sup>

Wagner cannot be viewed as a religious man in the traditional sense of the word. He was, for all practical purposes an atheist or, at the very least, an anti-clerical agnostic. Nevertheless, as the aforementioned comments reveal, he was a highly intuitive, intensely introspective, spiritual man who supported the need for a direct relationship with God. He did not, however, specifically embrace the idea of “God,” but said that the traditional terminology was a useful symbol for the general public. Despite his punitive invectives against organized religion, the composer’s interest in religious and spiritual matters persisted with great force.

As Alan Aberbach describes:

Wagner would spend more time working out answers to questions about God, religion, and the nature and meaning of spiritu-

ality, than any other subject. Even musical theory and composition did not appear to consume so much of his time, energy and attention. From his earliest days in Paris, until the end of his life, he talked, wrote and conversed about religion.<sup>91</sup>

## Kabbalistic Currents of Thought

In keeping with the self-contradictory and ambivalent nature of the *Fourth Psychological Type*, Wagner seems to have been both repelled and attracted by the Jewish Faith. He disdained the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments; Judaism, he thought, was flawed because it stressed the idea that the Jews were the chosen people of God and denied the idea of a universal spirituality or religion. Nevertheless, Wagner had many genuine Jewish friends and close associates who influenced his attitudes in paradoxical and conflicting ways. Many of his most ardent devotees were Jews who gave him crucial fiscal and artistic support. Although there were a number of Jews who, at least in Wagner's mind, were responsible for his early lack of success, and also for the degradation and commercialization of society and his beloved art, there were many others he admired and some who had a profound impact on his worldview and his creative endeavors.

According to both Besack and Aberbach<sup>92</sup> an early and important source of spiritual inspiration seems to have come from one of Wagner's three closest friends, the struggling Jewish philologist and philosopher, Samuel Lehrs, who Wagner first met in Paris in the early 1840's, and whose friendship the composer described as "the most beautiful friendship of my life." Lehrs is known to have helped deepen the twenty-year-old Wagner's intense absorption in philosophy and medieval poetry with its heroic legends and German Hohenstaufen emperors who were seen as the last representatives of the Ur-Kinghood. And it was Lehrs, as Besack and others claim, who discoursed with Wagner about death, life after death, and the innermost soul,<sup>93</sup> and who "furnished him the source material for two of his early oper-

as"<sup>94</sup>—*Tannhäuser*, which depicts, among other things, the conflict between the animal and divine souls, and *Lohengrin*, an opera that deals with the concept of higher justice, the idea of world repair and invisible aid.

Various scholars have acknowledged that Wagner seems to have been acquainted with the Talmud and had knowledge of Safed Kabbalistic thought.<sup>95</sup> Some, like Dieter Borchmeyer, claim that Wagner gained familiarity with Kabbalistic teachings from August Friedrich Gfrörer's writings on the influence of Judaism in early Christianity.<sup>96</sup> Others, like Besack, say that while confusion over this issue abounds, Wagner's knowledge of the Kabbalistic notions relating to the duality of the soul—the divine soul and the animal soul—and to ideas about the evolving and devolving nature of universal harmony<sup>97</sup> seems to have come from Lehrs. However, Wagner certainly came across the concept of cyclic existence from previously mentioned Nordic sources, such as the *Ragnarok*, as well as Vedic and Buddhist notions of Samsara, at various periods in his long and sustained spiritual journey.

Wagner's concerns about the inner most soul and humanity's loose connection to the ground of being were co-mingled with his revolutionary zeal and his belief that art could salvage or "repair" a broken and crumbling world. The idea of world repair that so consumed Wagner, as Besack maintains, corresponds to other elements in esoteric Judaism, specifically Isaac Luria's postulations on the Tsimtsum or primordial retraction of the light in the creation, as well as his ideas about the need for a Tikkun or healing of the world. He notes further that "Lurianic ideas of repair are dependent on messianic or heroic action" a concept Wagner was drawn to early on from his exposure to Greek and Norse myth. These ideas and those pertaining to the need for a cosmic repair or Tikkun were to be realized in one way or another in Wagner's anarchist zeal and in a number of Wagner's operas, such as the previously mentioned *Tannhäuser*, *Lohengrin*, *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* as well as *Parsifal*. However, it should be noted here that Wagner abandoned the idea of repair in favor of destruction in the *Ring* cycle, particularly *Götterdämmer-*

ung (Twilight of the Gods), the final opera in the four-part series, only to take it up again with sublime force in *Parsifal*, the very last opera he completed.

## Wagner and *Jesus von Nazareth*

*Give your Savior my greetings, even if from the beginning he has caused a lot of confusion.*

(Richard Wagner to his wife Cosima before she left for church.)<sup>98</sup>

Despite Wagner's lifelong hostility toward Christianity, he was intrigued by its underlying message concerning the power of infinite love and was drawn by the mystical and intuitive approach to God and Jesus.<sup>99</sup> After reading the Gospels and the New Testament in late 1848, the thirty-five-year-old Wagner, who was becoming progressively enmeshed in the revolutionary movements in Europe, began to inquire into the ideas and character of the historical Jesus. This resulted in a three part prose poem—*Jesus von Nazareth*.<sup>100</sup>

According to Aberbach, Wagner's attraction to Jesus was due in part to the fact that Jesus lived in a corrupt and degenerate world that was much like the mid-nineteenth-century Europe of Wagner's time. Although Wagner thought Jesus's mission had failed, he wondered if there might be something more to be learned from Jesus's life and teachings that could result in a fundamental world repair, and prevent a catastrophic upheaval in Germany and the rest of Europe.<sup>101</sup> As the scholar Mathew Giessel explains, *Jesus of Nazareth* also served as a means by which Wagner's own "ideology of social revolution could be reflected."<sup>102</sup> Giessel goes on to say that Wagner conceived of his prose poem as a vehicle through which he could "question religious dogma and create a kind of art-religion that bridged the religious-dramatic aesthetic gap."<sup>103</sup> *Jesus of Nazareth*, therefore, provides further evidence of the *Fourth Psychological Type's* desire to harmonize and create at-onement between seemingly irreconcilable elements. Additionally, it reflects the *First Type's* craving, as Wagner said in a letter to Theodor Uhlig in 1849, "to create a revolution wherever

I go." In Wagner's case, the interplay between these two psychological types resulted in a desire to bring about a *Menscheitsrevolution*, or "a revolution of mankind, particularly in the sphere of art."<sup>104</sup> Therefore, Wagner came to believe that, like Jesus, he too had a redemptive purpose, albeit one that functioned through the medium of salvific art.

In writing *Jesus of Nazareth*, Wagner intended to write an anti-Catholic drama, where, according to Giessel, Jesus engaged in kind of creative destruction.<sup>105</sup> Wagner depicts "Jesus the man," who is distinguished from the cosmic Christ, as the embodiment of Love and wisdom. However, Wagner thought that Jesus' mission, as Giessel explains, had earthly rather than transcendental applications.<sup>106</sup>

Wagner has his Jesus of Nazareth say:

I bring man back unto himself, in that he apprehendeth God as he is in himself, and not outside himself... for God is knowledge of self.<sup>107</sup>

From these remarks, it is clear that Wagner took Jesus' words in Luke 17:21 to heart: "The Kingdom of God is within you," and used them in support of the idea that it was possible for humanity to build a better world where it was neither shackled nor degraded by institutionalized religion. In Wagner's sketch, Jesus' mission is the redemption of all the Volk or peoples of the earth through the practice of Love and receptivity to Knowledge. Wagner's Jesus also takes up the decidedly Feuerbachian theme when he states that: "From man must come the force to help himself."<sup>108</sup> Such a force, Jesus claims, is based on the knowledge of one's own innate Godliness or divinity, his direct connection to Spirit and his free will.

Not only did Wagner's Jesus claim, like Feuerbach, that man is God unto himself, he also proclaimed that there is one Universal Soul and that each individual is a corporate part of the whole—of the All-Soul.<sup>109</sup> The path to freedom—Jesus of Nazareth says in a quote from Corinthians — is not the body, but the innermost soul. For "Your body, you know, is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you since you received him from God."<sup>110</sup>

In keeping with his antagonism toward religion and the state, and his desire to do away with theistic dogmas, Wagner's Jesus goes on to say that "the Law," as it was given hitherto, is to be replaced by the Law of Love and the Law of the Spirit, which are "eternally generative, fluent and mobile." Love is Eternal, unlike tribal codes or societal and religious Law, which are at variance with man's true nature and limited by time and the whims of men.<sup>111</sup> Jesus states further, that he comes to abrogate the law which restricts human nature and makes humankind believe it is inherently sinful. Drawing again upon a quote from the Gospel of John, Wagner has his Jesus exclaim:

I bring you not a new commandment, but the old commandment which ye had from the beginning, whosoever is born of God committeth no sin, for his seed remains in him for he is born of God.<sup>112</sup>

Man's suffering, as Wagner's Jesus states, is his clash against the law which has turned against God himself and the Ur-law of Motion. "It is the suffering of God himself, who has not come as yet to consciousness in men"<sup>113</sup>—a consciousness that can only be attained when humanity realizes that it and God are One, and "the selfsame creative force."

Not surprisingly, Wagner's Jesus does not believe that a connection to God is the result of prayer, ceremony or ritual performance. God must be searched for within, and "seen through the inner eye," for the "temple of God is Mankind."<sup>114</sup> Furthermore, we must be prepared to die, after the heroic model of Jesus and other saviors of humankind, to release the innermost Soul from egotism, the world of the senses and the mind. These must be left behind. Only through "the perfect riddance of Death, the giving up of the body, of the hearth and home of egotism,"<sup>115</sup> can the last obstacle to a person's ascent into the generality of the One be overcome.

These passages show that Wagner thought of Jesus as a hero-soul, a remarkable individual—a divine/human incarnation on earth—whose sphere of influence was far-reaching, but whose purpose was not brought to fruition. He was unable to comprehend why Jesus, the

great avatar of Love and ethics, the one who was connected to the Ur-Kinghood and the ground of being, could not prompt humanity to examine the hollowness of materialism and build a new world based on spiritual values and his Soul's high desire.<sup>116</sup> Wagner's sketch of *Jesus of Nazareth*, as Aberbach contends, was an attempt to work out some of these questions in his own mind. The prose poem also provided Wagner with a means to express his own spiritual and revolutionary ideals—ideals that he believed were commensurate with those of the true Jesus, who struggled against tyranny and crystalized traditions, and who came to reinstate the "ur-old notions" that had been lost when the Germanic peoples, who represented the stem-branch of the Ur-royal lineage, were forced to convert to Christian faith.

*Jesus of Nazareth* was never completed or published. Aberbach thinks that Wagner may have abandoned the work because he came to conclude that Christianity's doctrines had become so exclusive and restrictive that it might never become a truly universal religion.<sup>117</sup> Although Wagner knew that it was not just the church, with its false hierarchy and the faults of the Law, but also the human element, its lack of love, self-interest, and egotistic desires that were responsible for the dark night enveloping men's souls. Nevertheless, *Jesus of Nazareth*, as Giessel demonstrates, "served as an important lens in which Wagner's ideas of redemption and spirituality were developed and eventually subtly refracted in his later thought and works, particularly in Wagner's growing transformation and conception of himself into a redemptive force."<sup>118</sup>

## The Influence of Freemasonry and other Secret Society Models

Although Wagner's knowledge of occultism is rarely discussed, it is known that he was acquainted—through both family and friends—with the Freemasons and a number of other secret societies such as the Rosicrucians, the Schiller Society and the Tunnel über der Spree.<sup>119</sup> Given Wagner's early experienc-

es as a child of war, his more mature desires to liberate and remake what he saw as a crystallized and decaying world and his belief about a spiritual aristocracy that maintained a ritual connection to the Ur-ground of being, it is not surprising that he was inspired by certain secret society models.

Inspiration along these lines is thought to have begun very early in life. Wagner's father, Carl, had been a Freemason, and after his death, the Masons attended to the grief-stricken family. His stepfather, Ludwig Geyer, was also a member of the lodge *Ferdinand zur Glückseligkeit* in Magdeburg, and one of his brothers was educated at the *Institute of Freemasons* in Dresden through a scholarship obtained by the Masons.<sup>120</sup> Further influence is thought to have come from his brother-in-law, Professor Oswald Marbach, who was the Grand Master of the chapter *Baiduin, Zur Linde* in Leipzig for more than 30 years.<sup>121</sup> Marbach was the honorary member of 50 lodges and authored many articles on Freemasonry. Jacques Chailley, in what is considered by some academic scholars to be a controversial book on the Masonic and initiatory elements of Wagner's work, maintains that Marbach was Wagner's principal source on Freemasonry.<sup>122</sup> It is of further interest to note that Wagner's sister Rosalie and his piano teacher Christian Theodore Weinlig were involved with the radical para-Masonic "Tunnel."<sup>123</sup> Rosalie, with whom Wagner was quite close, was married to Professor Marbach. However, whether either Rosalie or Weinlig actually exerted any Masonic influence on Wagner is not known.

Several of Wagner's anarchist friends, the previously mentioned Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin, were also members of Masonic lodges in Paris and elsewhere. Bakunin founded a secret society called the *Program of the Revolutionary Brotherhood* that was conceived on the Masonic model. However, he thought that the world was largely beyond repair and wanted to make men free by establishing a community of uninhibited and independent beings. Bakunin's world, as Besack notes, is not unlike the apocalyptic world of Wagner's *Ring*.<sup>124</sup>

Proudhon, Bakunin and Wagner, were all captivated by the philosophical ideas of Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), who was a Warden in the *Lodge Pythagoras of the Blazing Star* and the author of *Discourses in Freemasonry*. Besack, in *The Esoteric Wagner* lists seven main points that have been abstracted from Fichte's lectures. Several points relevant to this discussion are included here:

- 1) Greek philosophy must be acknowledged as the essential channel for the transmission of western thought.
- 2) Humanism is to be achieved through a confrontation of the different types of humanity.
- 3) The "secret" tradition leading up to Freemasonry is universal in scope.
- 4) Man can access humanist philosophy without the help of any religion.

A comparison between Fichte's ideas and those ideas reflected in Richard Wagner's own philosophy are clearly evident.

Another close friend and Freemason whose spiritual ideas might have influenced Wagner's worldview, was the composer and pianist, Franz Liszt, whose daughter, Cosima, was married to Richard Wagner. Liszt was a member of the *Loge zur Einigkeit* or "Unity" lodge, in Frankfurt, where he was promoted to the second degree. He was eventually elected master of the same lodge in Berlin and held honorable memberships in Zurich and Pest (Budapest-Hungary).<sup>125</sup> Although Liszt and Wagner exchanged numerous letters, no explicit reference to Freemasonry has surfaced of which this author is aware.

Yet another intimate friend was the civic leader and banker, Frederick von Feustel. Feustel was Grand Master of the lodge *Zur Sonne* in Bayreuth from 1863–1869, and a key figure in proposing that the restrictions on admitting non-Christian members to the lodge be abolished.<sup>126</sup> Inspired by his friend and the ideas Freemasonry espoused; Wagner communicated his desire to become a member of the lodge *Eleusis zur Verschwiegenheit* in Bayreuth. However, his admission was blocked by some

members of the lodge who were concerned about the composer's troubled and unsavory personal life. Wagner's revolutionary past, many outstanding debts, sexual indiscretions and harsh invectives against various individuals and groups, would have been some of the contributing factors.

Although Wagner was not a Freemason and did not belong to any known esoteric order, there are numerous hints and associations to be found in his prose works and operas that contain Masonic and other esoteric symbols. For example, his *Die Meistersinger* deals with the "Mastersingers" or troubadours who inherited the Bardic Mysteries. Among its many esoteric themes are the various degrees, steps and grades within the Guild of Mastersingers. *Tannhäuser*, an opera about a Knight-Troubadour and "Love-Singer" is thought by various scholars<sup>127</sup> to represent the Hermetic and Masonic first degree of purification. These themes are also prevalent in *Lohengrin*, Wagner's opera about the "Swan Knight" or emissary of the White Brotherhood who seeks to bring in a new civilization. The figure of Lohengrin, represents the second degree of service.

The rituals observed in Wagner's *Parsifal* are also filled with Masonic and other esoteric symbolism. The American author, Christian mystic and occultist Corinne Heline, divides this opera into the three Masonic degrees of Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master, or the Student, Probationer, and Disciple of the more modern esoteric schools.<sup>128</sup> Parsifal is the "Widow's Son" and a type of Redeemer. He can be seen as the hero-representative who "magically rejuvenates the Hyperborean order from its immortal roots"<sup>129</sup> through the control of instinctual passion and its transmutation into the healing power of great compassion, the highest aspect of Love. Other figures in the opera, such as Titurel and Amfortas, serve as Grand Masters of the Grail.

The figures of Lohengrin and Parsifal—both guardians of the Grail—were early role models for the Rosicrucians, as Gabriel P. Weisberg and Laurinda S. Dixon point out. Indeed, there are numerous ideas shared by the Rose+Croix

and Wagnerian philosophy. Many of Wagner's philosophical ideas—the concept of a union of the arts, notions of ancient racial pride, social and intellectual reform, and most importantly glorification of the artist in society and the belief that the most direct route to the soul was through symbol—"read like paraphrases of the Rosicrucian Manifesto."<sup>130</sup> Wagner would have come across these ideas from various sources. One source of note would have likely been Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, whom he read widely. Goethe was greatly interested in the Rosicrucians and expressed a good deal of Hermetic and Rosicrucian wisdom in various works such as "The Mysteries," "Fairy Tale of the Green Snake and the Beautiful Lily" and "Faust." So taken was Wagner with Goethe's most famous occult drama—"Faust"—that he intended to compose a Faust symphony. He abandoned the symphony, but managed to complete a beautifully expressive overture that portrays the soul's aspirations and labors to perfect itself.

Wagner espoused many of these same ideas throughout his prose works and operas. His belief in the knowledge and wisdom of ancient Greece, his utopian views of the world, his alternative views on politics and religion, his universalism, anti-clericalism and his ideas about a spiritual aristocracy mesh easily with the notions and aims of secret societies like the Freemasons, which are qualified by the *First archetypal current*. Key Masonic phrases such as the "Temple of Humanity," "Building of the Temple," and the "Brotherhood of Man," are used throughout his written works. In speaking of "universal currents of Divine Thought that vibrate through the ether," the "great cosmic law" and the idea that "Imagination creates reality," he embraced ideas that are similar to those found in the Theosophical works of Helena Blavatsky and the Ageless Wisdom philosophy.<sup>131</sup> But as will be seen even more clearly as this article progresses, it would be a mistake to claim that Wagner's prose works or operas can be interpreted in terms of one particular set of ideas. The composer drew upon a broad range of religious, spiritual, mythic and esoteric influences and sought to combine and reconcile them into a unique but concordant

whole. And in this can be seen the harmonizing influence of the *Fourth Psychological Type* as well as the synthesizing aspects of the *First*.

### The Inspiration of Hafiz<sup>132</sup>

In addition to the influences discussed thus far, Wagner's interest in religion, spirituality and mysticism extended to Eastern and Middle Eastern sources. With regard to Middle Eastern inspiration, it is possible that Wagner was aware of the parallels between the Parsifal myth and the earlier Persian *Fal Parsi* (Pure Fool), as well as Persian Shia chivalry and its associations with the Knights Templar. Given his interest in myth and metahistory, he may also have had some understanding of Mazdean doctrines and beliefs and their innumerable connections to Norse tradition. One early source may have been Goethe who considered Persian literature to be one of the four main bodies of world literature. Another likely source was his brother-in-law, Herman Brockhaus who specialized in Persian and Sanskrit literature at Leipzig University. Fredrick Nietzsche, whose relationship with Wagner was quasi-familial and intense, could have been a later influence.<sup>133</sup> It is also quite possible that Wagner intuited the equivalences between the Norse and Mazdean traditions that appear in his various music dramas. Nevertheless, in various letters, Wagner unambiguously connects elements of the *Ring*, especially *Das Rheingold*, to the writings of the Persian mystical poet, Hafiz. Wagner probably came across the work of Hafiz by way of Goethe, who has been described as a disciple of the great Persian poet.

The first mention by Wagner of the great fourteenth-century Sufi Master is contained in a letter to August Röckel, dated September 12, 1852, who was still in prison for his role in the 1849 Dresden revolution:

I would like to introduce you to a poet whom I have recently recognized to be the greatest of them all; it is the Persian Hafis... Familiarity with this poet has filled me with a real sense of terror: we with our pompous European intellectual culture must stand abashed in the presence of this prod-

uct of the Orient, with its self-assured and sublime tranquility of the mind.<sup>134</sup>

In a letter to another friend, Theodore Uhlig, Wagner says that "Hafis is the greatest poet that ever lived and sang."<sup>135</sup> He goes on to tell his friend that he must instantly procure a copy of the poet's work and should:

Study Hafiz properly, he is the greatest and the most sublime philosopher. No one else has gone to the root of the matter so surely and incontestably as he. There is only one thing he lauds: and all the rest is worth not a farthing, however high and loft it may dub itself. —Something similar will also become clear in my *Nibelungen*.<sup>136</sup>

One of the few scholars to explore the link between Hafiz and Wagner's music dramas in depth, is the previously mentioned, Alan Aberbach. According to Alberbach, what Wagner found in the works of Hafiz were concepts that built upon and expanded some of the ideas he had earlier explored in his *Jesus of Nazareth* and elsewhere. These ideas concerned such themes as the philosophy of love and aesthetics, the nature of the soul and the unfathomable nature of free will and destiny.

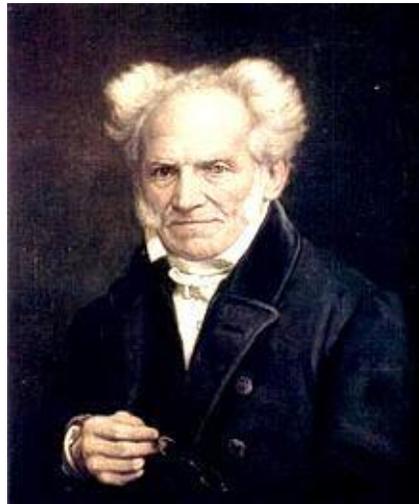
Wagner believed that neither the mind nor the intellect could explain the mysteries of the universe. Hafiz reiterates this idea in saying, "Love has a wisdom, wisdom cannot prove—Reason knows nothing of things divine."<sup>137</sup> Like Hafiz, the composer thought that all creation was an expression of God, that man was essentially one with the Universe or God, and that the kingdom of God existed within.<sup>138</sup> Each believed in the universality of the Soul and decried the narrowness of dogmatic Law as well as the formal aspects of religion; and each held that Love, the eternal Law of Love, was the universal key to God realization. Love, especially redemptive love, is one of the primary themes in Wagner's *Jesus of Nazareth* and in a number of his operas. The ghazals of Hafiz, which by definition, are verses that deal with the great theme of Love and the need for Love to take precedence over Law and Power. Other similarities between Hafiz and Wagner abound. The Sufi poet's belief that "Where love is, there is no need for covenant hell"<sup>139</sup>

corresponds to Wagner's ideas in *Jesus of Nazareth* about the Law of Love abrogating religious or Mosaic Law. Hafiz, also like Wagner, commented at length upon the hypocrisy, perfidy and deceit that existed in society and within certain religious circles.

These same themes also make their appearance in Wagner's *Ring*. For example, the conflict between Love (self-giving) and Power (self-seeking), which coincides with the development of the human ego, are some of the dominant themes in *Das Rheingold* (Rheingold), the first opera in the composer's four-part cycle. Love (as embodied in the divine feminine), versus the Law, is one of the overarching themes of the second music drama—*Die*

*Walküre* (The Valkyrie). The heroic struggle for Love and for Freedom from the ego, nature and the rule of the old Gods continues with *Siegfried*, the third opera in the series. This struggle culminates in *Götterdämmerung* (The Twilight of the Gods) which depicts the destruction of the Old Order as well as the possibility of an entirely new cycle brought about through the keynote of Sacrificial or Redemptive Love. This last theme is also one of the primary themes in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, which, like the poems of Hafiz and other Sufi mystical poets, draws upon the metaphors of erotic imagery to express sacrificial love leading to union, as well as oneness with the divine.

## Schopenhauer and Buddhist Doctrine



(Figure 4. Arthur Schopenhauer, 1788–1860)<sup>140</sup>

*Will power is to the mind like a strong blind man who carries on his shoulders a lame man who can see.*<sup>141</sup> (Arthur Schopenhauer)

Not long after the failed uprising in Dresden in 1849, Wagner had fallen prey to a profound loss of faith and disillusionment with the underlying principles of anarchist politics.<sup>142</sup> In *The Tristan Chord*, Bryan Magee says that this was a traumatic experience for the composer because he believed if there was no hope for German renewal via political or revolutionary means, there was no hope for the future of art or Richard Wagner.<sup>143</sup> This result-

ed in what Magee perceptively describes as a “decisive detachment from the world outside himself,” brought on by the recognition that he had been submerged in a “veritable bonfire of illusions.”<sup>144</sup> But in 1854, at the age of forty-one, the composer underwent a pivotal experience when he discovered the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's book, *The World as Will and Representation*, altered Wagner's understanding of himself and the universe by helping him to shift his focus away from the socio-political and historical view of the world to an understanding that was more in keeping with his unconscious and intuitive in-

instincts.<sup>145</sup> In a letter written to the conductor Hans Von Bülow, Wagner reveals that he was so taken with Schopenhauer's philosophy that he read the book four times in the same year, in addition to reading it again and again (along with his other works) over a period of many years.

One of the central concepts articulated in *The World as Will and Representation*, was the theory that the only essential reality in the world is *the will*, and that it was the key to human existence and the ground of all life and being. This theory, which built upon but altered the philosophy of Emmanuel Kant, goes on to state that the world of phenomena is nothing more than the subjective representation of the will or the Kantian "thing-in-itself." To state this idea another way: the empirical or phenomenal world is a relative reality or an illusory perceived existence, in contrast to the essential reality which exists outside of space and time. Unlike Kant, who held that this essential reality or thing-in-itself was unknowable, Schopenhauer claimed that we can and must penetrate this deeper reality. But to do so inevitably invites suffering and unrelenting dissatisfaction since the will almost always manifests as desire or selfish will.

While Schopenhauer believed that suffering was a permanent feature of existence, he thought that art, and especially music, could provide a temporary release or escape from the endless promptings of desire/will and the veil of illusion it creates. The will, he believed, cannot be known by concepts or representations; however, music, which is non-conceptual and exists in the noumenal realm,

can acquaint us with the will since it is a direct expression of the world's essence or impulsive will. He went so far as to claim that "music is the voice of the metaphysical will."<sup>146</sup> Given Wagner's own theories about how selfish desire corrupted civilization, his unrelenting questions about free will and predestination (themes that reoccur throughout *The Ring*), and his wish to redeem humanity by way of a reinvigorated form of music drama that stimulated the free heroic impulse, many of these ideas had immense appeal. Indeed, "it was Schopenhauer," says Thomas Mann—the Nobel-prize winning German novelist—"that freed Wagner from bondage and gave his music the courage to be fully itself."<sup>147</sup>

**Wagner's concerns about the inner most soul and humanity's loose connection to the ground of being were commingled with his revolutionary zeal and his belief that art could salvage or "repair" a broken and crumbling world. The idea of world repair that so consumed Wagner . . . corresponds to other elements in esoteric Judaism, specifically Isaac Luria's postulations on the Tsimtsum or primordial retraction of the light in the creation, as well as his ideas about the need for a *Tikkun* or healing of the world.**

Among the other aspects of Schopenhauer's metaphysical philosophy that resonated with Richard Wagner and which were in keeping

with the views he espoused in *Jesus of Nazareth*, was the belief that it was compassion or love, and not reason, as Kant argued, that serves as the moral bond uniting human beings. The plurality and differences which separate human beings from each other belong to the world of phenomenon or appearances. These differences, he thought, were an illusion or mirage based on the ego and the inability to recognize the ultimate essence or ground of being that manifests in all living things.<sup>148</sup> Since "All is One," the only actions that have moral value are those which have sprung from compassion and the desire to eradicate suffering. And only to the extent that we have identified ourselves with another can the ego or the little self be momentarily abolished.<sup>149</sup>

Schopenhauer's thoughts on erotic love also had immense appeal for Wagner. His essay, "The Metaphysics of Sexual Love"—one of the chapters in the aforementioned *World as Will and Representation*—contains the idea that erotic love, which is related to the will to survive or the will to life (*Wille zum Leben*), takes precedence over reason. For this reason, erotic love and the will to survive is the cause of much suffering and pain. Yet, paradoxically, Schopenhauer believed that a loving sexual relationship was a means by which the impediments to selfhood could be temporarily transcended, and the individual could "lose his sense of self and experience oneness with another person in the sexual act."<sup>150</sup>

As the reader can no doubt discern from the few examples offered here, Schopenhauer's ideas have an affinity with Hindu and Buddhist teachings. However, it should be noted that the main ideas in Schopenhauer's philosophy were worked out before he discovered that they echoed Hindu and Buddhist philosophy. Unfortunately, he misunderstood key aspects of these teachings, such as the concept of *Maya* or world as illusion, which resulted in his decidedly pessimistic outlook on life. Schopenhauer also failed to grasp the concept of Nirvana or Non-Being, which he wrongly associated with the death-wish. Wagner's first introduction to Buddhism came through Schopenhauer's books, and some of these misunderstandings were passed on. Later, however, Wagner read Eugène Burnouf's influential and highly informative *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism*, as well as the Upanishads and other oriental literature and these no doubt strengthened his grasp of both Vedic and Buddhist thought.

In addition to the ideas touched on above, Wagner's interest in Buddhism, like Schopenhauer's, was surely encouraged by the atheistic, or more accurately, non-theistic concepts contained therein, as well as Buddhist ideas about the elimination of ego, the nature of suffering, the idea of enlightenment, the doctrine of metempsychosis, karma and the heroic acts of the Buddha. He might also have been drawn to Buddhist and Brahmin philosophy because its doctrine was more ancient and

therefore more authentic than the corrupted religions of the Jews and Christians.<sup>151</sup>

In letters to Franz Liszt, Mathilde Wesendonck and August Röckel, Wagner wrote with great excitement and understanding about the sublimity of Buddhist doctrine, with its concepts of reincarnation and metempsychosis, saying that the Buddha's teaching on these matters "must certainly express the truth." Wagner was so drawn to Buddhist teachings that he planned an opera—*Die Sieger* (The Victors)—based on an *avadana* (a series of heroic tales and miraculous acts as told by the Buddha or performed by him in his various incarnations). He drafted a sketch for the opera between 1856-1858, and thought about it over a span of 12 years, but the opera was never brought to fruition.

Nevertheless, various features of Schopenhauerian and Buddhist doctrine undoubtedly found their way into Wagner's ensuing music dramas and libretti. With respect to Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung*, which was written over a period of twenty-six years, it must be said that a preoccupation with the evolution of consciousness, the will in its various facets as well as the concept of cyclic existence, i.e., the Buddhist wheel of life, death and rebirth, were present in the libretti in advance of his having come under the influence of Indian thought. However, Indologist and Sanskrit scholar, Professor Carl Suneson has suggested that Buddhist and Brahmin ideas caused Wagner to alter the ending of *Götterdämmerung* by giving Brünnhilde a role akin to a bodhisattva.<sup>152</sup>

One of the most Kantian/Schopenhauerian of all Wagner's operas is his allegorical tragedy, *Tristan and Isolde* (1859). Though in some circles, the opera still tends to be thought of as a sublimation of the composer's love for another woman to whom he was not married, more perceptive analyses understand the opera to be a profoundly moving meditation on death, erotic love and the sacred.<sup>153</sup> The two lovers are redeemed, not by other-worldly means, but through an erotically transcendent love based on the renunciation of selfish desire and a shift from the Schopenhauerian Phenomenal "world of day" or *Maya*, to the unifying Noumenal "world of night" or Nirvana. Their

shared death is means of self-sacralization, which in turn sacralizes their world.<sup>154</sup> The erotic love between Tristan (Tantris)<sup>155</sup> and Isolde can also be likened to a tantric practice based not on the sexual act, but on complete identification with the other, i.e., the renunciation of the flesh and the soul's dying to all but divine love. From this perspective, *Tristan and Isolde* represents the inner life of man who brings together the polarities of male and female or spirit and matter into a balance that finds its ultimate consummation in the Mystic Marriage or conscious union with the World Soul.<sup>156</sup>

### Parsifal: A Great Synthesis

*Parsifal*, written in the last years of Wagner's life when he was suffering from exhaustion and worsening health, is often viewed as the most Christian of Wagner's operas. The opera utilizes quite a bit of Christian imagery, such as the Knights of Grail, the Grail cup and the spear that wounded Jesus's side, as well as a Eucharistic reenactment or communion. At the time of its completion in 1882, the opera was seen as a capitulation to traditional Christian doctrine by a composer who had previously seen himself as something of a pagan spiritual hero for the new age. Nietzsche, who came to believe that the Schopenhauerian metaphysical world was nonexistent, went so far as to claim that in *Parsifal*, Wagner "fell kneeling and hopeless before the cross." He went on to say that Wagner "flatters every nihilistic (Buddhistic) instinct and disguises it in music; he flatters everything Christian, every religious expression of decadence. Open your ears: everything that ever grew on the soil of impoverished life, all of the counterfeiting of transcendence and beyond, has found its most sublime advocate in Wagner's art."<sup>157</sup>

*Parsifal* was certainly inspired by the teachings of Jesus, as well as by a number of German Christian mystics. But, before exploring these influences, it is vital to note, as Wagner did in a letter to a friend about the meaning of his so called "stage-consecrating ritual," that he "mercilessly relinquishes the Church, and the whole phenomena Christianity in history." He exhorts further: "we do it for the sake of

the Christ... whom we want to protect in His pristine purity... so that we can take him with us into those terrible times that will probably follow the inevitable destruction of all that now exists."<sup>158</sup> Thus, from one perspective, Wagner intended *Parsifal* as the one who could salvage a decaying world and bring a much needed "Redemption to the Redeemer."

One of the Christian mystics who inspired the composer's thoughts on *Parsifal* was Meister Eckhart (1260–1388), the man who Schopenhauer called "the father of German mysticism. There were many ideas in Eckhart's sermons that appealed to Wagner and which corresponded with his own mystical inclinations. One finds, for example, that both Eckhart and Wagner thought that the teachings of Jesus were universal and that his message applied to everyone. Eckhart believed that prayer consisted of opening the heart and mind to God. The most powerful form of prayer, he thought, comes from the person who seeks no gain, but abandons all self-will to the Will of God. Eckhart, like Wagner, thought that the great need for man was to unite his Soul with Deity. But for the Soul to know Him, "he must not seek Deity outside himself." Eckhart speaks further of the need for breaking through to the nothingness of God, likening the breakthrough to a "fundamental death." Additionally, Eckhart, like Wagner's *Jesus of Nazareth*, thought that this was possible for anyone—for all are sons of the Father. Consequently, what is possible for one Son is possible for all without distinction.<sup>159</sup>

Although the Christian element in *Parsifal* cannot be denied, it must be viewed in a larger, more inclusive context. One could say for example, that the opera concerns "the Christing of man." But this is not to imply that one is made or becomes a Christian. The operas purpose, so states the English author and Freemason, W. L. Wilmhurst, goes beyond any specific doctrine in an effort to reveal "an inward way of reintegration, the engrafting of the new self upon the old, the unifying of the personal will with the universal will and the transformation of one's natural manhood into God."<sup>160</sup> As the distinguished theosophist and author, Basil Crump evinces in a series of articles on

Wagner's mythic dramas, "Parsifal presents the essential truths of the great World-Religions in a form especially adapted to the Western world of today where Christianity is the ruling religion."<sup>161</sup> Crump maintains further that Wagner blended the historical Jesus and Buddha into the mythical Parsifal,<sup>162</sup> whose legends, we must recall, already contained Manichaeic ideas about the transformation of evil, as well as Islamic, Masonic and Celtic elements.

Therefore, *Parsifal* might be seen as Wagner's great synthesis and the culmination of all his mystical works. Parsifal is a mythical and meta-historical figure who fuses the Love of Jesus and the Compassionate Wisdom of the Buddha (resulting in the highest aspect of the will),<sup>163</sup> into a new type of hero-soul who reestablishes the lost connection to the ground of being. Crump identifies him with the seeker, the

Prodigal Son, Ulysses returning from war or the Soul seeking its heavenly state. Although the opera contains a fusion of elements, it is also clearly intended to articulate Schopenhauerian, and therefore, Buddhist themes. For it is here that Buddhist and Indian ideas related to suffering and compassion as well as the will to self-abnegation, are most prominent. Yet, the primary message of *Parsifal*—which Wagner called his "sacred festival play"—is that individual transmutation, transcendence and redemption are possible without the aid of supernatural intervention or any organized religious hierarchy or structure. Redemption and access to the inner hidden reality behind phenomenal appearance come not by way of a temple made by the hands of men, but via a self-initiated effort to purify the heart, illuminate the mind and live a life of complete self-offering.



(Richard Wagner at the piano in 1871)<sup>164</sup>

## Conclusion

This article demonstrates that Richard Wagner was more than an illustrious but controversial composer known for his anti-Semitism and his crisis filled life, as well as for his complex and dramatic operas. Wagner was a fierce and courageous "Übermensch" who fought against extraordinary obstacles to reconcile a dying culture, wrought with anti-communal trends and rampant individualism, with the path of higher unity or wholeness. Not only was Wagner a "cultural visionary and intellectual artist, an iconoclastic genius and

unapologetic firebrand"<sup>165</sup> whose powerful ideas inspired generations of thinkers and "left few aspects of the Western approach to music untouched;"<sup>166</sup> he was, despite his numerous flaws, a musical Initiate and an emissary of a new Spiritual Science who applied himself to the study of humankind, its place in the world and its growth and development.

From his youth onward, Wagner yearned for a numinous world that existed outside of time and space. However, he also longed passionately for a brotherhood of man, for a new world and for a new communal art—a

*Gesamtkunstwerk* or a “total work of art,” that would touch the deeper recesses of the human psyche and awaken it to a new level of truth and meaning. Like no other composer, Wagner was determined to fathom the depths of the world’s religious and mystical traditions, philosophy and myth in an effort to create a rein-vigorated form of ritual where the religious or spiritual experience was “transferred to the aesthetic sphere.”<sup>167</sup> Working with clear intent and strategic purpose, Wagner was able to draw upon the inspiration of his creative and harmonizing mind and essential Self, to clothe diverse religious and philosophical ideas in the garb of poetry, drama and beautiful music—music that expressed in an endless stream of harmony and poignant melody that, according to one Wagnerite, seems to engender an invisible magnetic field that extends into the reaches of space and penetrates to the very heart of the listener.<sup>168</sup>

Yet, the composer seldom used any of these ideas or influences in their original forms. Rather, the inner realities and archetypal truths that all of his music dramas contain, were creatively refashioned and shrouded within an intricate, multi-layered poetic veil.<sup>169</sup> “From these often contradictory and frequently mysterious sources,” as Wentzel van Huessteen, the Princeton Professor of Theology explains, “Wagner was able, with astonishing insight and serendipity, to assemble narratives that make sense on every level of interpretation: literal, metaphorical, symbolic and mythical.”<sup>170</sup> While these dramatic creations, which contain so many symbolic layers, arduous narratives and dialogues, are not easy to penetrate, like all initiating rituals, they reveal the necessity and the methods for self-recreation to all those who can look behind the kaleidoscopic mantle in which they are disguised.

In examining the mystical and religious ideas that underpin Richard Wagner’s music dramas and in touching briefly upon the many half-concealed and half-revealed methods and truths contained therein, this article has intended to show that the composer’s greatest concerns were for humanity’s perilous social, spiritual and political state. Wagner saw pure art, specifically music-drama, as a vital medium

for bringing about a much-needed *Tikkun* or world repair. In each of his operas, the composer consciously employed a multi-level complex of ideas and allegory to convey the essential steps in humanity’s development in a way that bypasses the need for religious and hierarchical structures and places the emphasis on the individual’s own self-initiated effort.

A metaphysical examination of Wagner’s most complex and influential work, his metahistorical tetralogy, *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*, tells a cosmic story about the conflict between the forces of being and non-being in which the past, present and future development of human freedom and consciousness are portrayed. Some of his other music dramas deal with the themes of purification, sexual transmutation, individuation and the marriage of the opposites. The concept of invisible aid and inspiration as well as redemptive love and self-offering to those in need are also prominent themes. Other works highlight the distinction between the right-hand and left-hand paths, the development of the will, and complete self-mastery.

As such, Wagner’s aesthetically redemptive music dramas are examples of how high art, when it is informed by a large measure of spiritual insight and power, can reverse harmful and regressive tendencies and lead the individual and the masses out of the darkness and bondage of its mortal house into the realms of the innermost Soul.

For students of the perennial philosophy, and the world at large in acute need of complete catharsis and regeneration, the music dramas of Richard Wagner, with their great variety and depth of meaning, have as much and perhaps even more relevance today as they did in Wagner’s day. Furthermore, his masterworks can tell us a great deal about the deep significance of beauty and harmony in the development of consciousness and their role in helping humanity establish a connection with the currents of evolution.

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<sup>1</sup> Portrait of Richard Wagner, photograph, 1871, image in the public domain.

- <sup>2</sup> Richard Wagner, *Religion and Art*, 1800, trans., William Ashton Ellis (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 228.
- <sup>3</sup> Richard Wagner, "An End in Paris," 1841 *The Wagner Library*, Edition 7. <http://users.belgacom.net/wagner/prose/wagnedpa.htm>. (accessed November 3, 2013).
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Wagner, "Rienzi's Prayer," Act V, *Rienzi, the Last of the Tribune*. <http://www.aria-database.com/cgi-bin/aria-search.pl%3Fopera%3DRienzi%26a> (accessed July 27, 2014). The quote, "Lord, dissolve the dark night that envelops men's soul," is from the libretto of *Rienzi*, an early opera dealing with the liberal ethos of the hero Cola Rienzi, leader of the *Volk* or Folk, and the political intervention of a reactionary clergy.
- <sup>5</sup> Corinne Heline, *Esoteric Music Based on the Musical Seership of Richard Wagner* (La Canada, CA: New Age Press Inc., 1948), 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Greenberg, "Music of Richard Wagner," *The Great Composers* (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company).
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Wagner, *The Diary of Richard Wagner, 1865-1882*; trans., George Byrd (London, UK: Cambridge University Press 1980), 73.
- <sup>8</sup> Heline, *The Esoteric Music of Richard Wagner*, 11.
- <sup>9</sup> Barry Millington, *Wagner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries 1869-1883* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), July 5, 1871.
- <sup>11</sup> Richard Wagner, *My Life: Part 1* (Middlesex, UK: Echo Library, 1992), 10.
- <sup>12</sup> Cosima Wagner, *Cosima Wagner's Diaries 1869-1883*, July 5, 1871.
- <sup>13</sup> Richard Wagner, *Mein Leben*, 5.
- <sup>14</sup> Wagner's reputation was marred by a number of outstanding debts and romantic relationships with married women.
- <sup>15</sup> Wagner, *Religion and Art*, 198.
- <sup>16</sup> Maurice Kupperath, *The Parsifal of Richard Wagner*, (1892; reprint; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2009), 214.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> See for example, *Wagner, The Last of the Titans*, by Joachim Köhler
- <sup>19</sup> Richard Wagner, "Autobiographical Sketch," 1843, *The Wagner Library*, Edition 9. <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagauto.htm> (accessed October 3, 2013).
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Howard Gray, *Wagner* (London: Omnibus Press, 1990), 121.
- <sup>22</sup> Richard Wagner, "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven," 1840, *The Wagner Library*, Edition 9. <http://users.belgacom.net/wagnerlibrary/prose/wagpilg.htm#d0e980> (accessed November 5, 2013).
- <sup>23</sup> Runciman, *Richard Wagner Composer of Operas* (1913; reprint; Hamburg: Tredition Classics, 2012), 11.
- <sup>24</sup> Klaus Kropfinger, *Wagner and Beethoven: Richard Wagner's Reception of Beethoven* (Cambridge, ENG: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 15-16.
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