

Title:

Indian Influence in The Ring's Happy Ending

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## **Indian Influence in the *Ring's* Happy Ending**

### Main Thesis:

Indian religious philosophy and Schopenhauer's writings helped Wagner evolve his world vision and his art in meaningful ways, certainly with regard to the *Ring's* ending. Wagner intuited, and mythically represented in his art knowledge that is simultaneously found in ancient Indian wisdom, providing an applicable, even therapeutic symbology for today, and foreshadowing an optimistic, new world order for the future.

### Introduction:

In examining Wagner's philosophical influences, it is suggested by all my major Wagner sources (see bibliography below), but in particularly Brian Magee, that, throughout his life, Wagner sought reason and rationality with which to frame life's circumstances; yet, while creating art in his later years, he came to rely increasingly on something less definable. This paper will try to find clues as to what that "something" might have been, and its impact on Wagner's composing of the *Ring*, while paying particular attention to Schopenhauer's writings and Indian theology, both of which are known to have had a profound affect on Wagner. Any attraction to the imperative of logic, such as that of Wagner's, finds some basis in the ideas of the great philosopher Kant, because as Bryan Magee claims in his book *The Tristan Chord*, Kant ". . . permanently demolished factual knowledge-claims with regard to anything outside the realm of human experience. . ." (p. 158). Kant's famous philosophy, outlined in *Critique of Pure Reason*, revolves around rational thought being the key uniting all humans. If Kant's idea championing reason provides a foundation for the philosophies of both Wagner and Schopenhauer, as my research suggests, then it is all the more interesting to point out that, unlike Wagner and Schopenhauer, Kant was a devoutly religious Christian (according to Magee). How does a man

who believes in the existence of God reconcile his spiritual beliefs with the philosophy referenced above? Magee reports that Kant said he found it necessary “. . . to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*. . . (Magee, p. 158). Perhaps as Wagner’s philosophy developed and matured, he, as Kant apparently did, had to “make room for faith.” Though Wagner’s artistic character and sense of intuition seem to have eventually led him to suspect that there were limitations inherent in logic which should be breached, it was certainly also his introduction to the philosophy of Schopenhauer and to traditional Indian religious doctrines that helped forward his spiritual and artistic questing.

In his book, *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer writes frequently and unreservedly of his admiration and debt to Kant’s philosophy in forming his own, but he took a bold step beyond Kant in philosophy by denying that what unites us is bound by reason. For Schopenhauer, everything existing “. . . participates in the ultimate oneness of being. . .” (Magee, p. 164). Schopenhauer’s and Wagner’s thinking, one finds, share concepts central to Indian religions like Brahmanism and Buddhism, namely, that all that is One, boundless, formless, immaterial, and indescribable. Indian religions, like Brahmanism and Buddhism, adhere to the notion that human suffering is caused by ego-attachment and desire. When Schopenhauer, and also Wagner, via the *Ring*’s chief protagonist Wotan (the case in point), use the word “will,” I believe they are talking of an individual’s “ego”; and when they say the only release from human suffering is the “denial of will” (Magee, p. 167), they are referring to what I call the “transcendence of ego,” a supreme goal for individuals because it and it alone - like Wagner’s “denial of will,” liberates us from endless pain and anguish. That liberation, or “redemption,” to use a term that Wagner often does, is a major theme in Indian theology *and* in the *Ring*.

Wagner’s understanding of philosophy - especially that of Schopenhauer - combined with

his knowledge of myth and of Indian religious thought, is expressed noticeably I believe, in a most positive way, both onstage in the *Ring* drama and through Wagner's music. Wagner was so well-read in philosophy as well as in a wide range of related subjects, that Wagner biographer, Ernest Newman, remarked that "such a combination had never existed before [*in a composer*]; it has never happened since and, in all probability, it will never happen again" (Pohanka, p. 11, italics mine). This paper examines the connections between Wagner's philosophical development and point of view via (1) both Schopenhauer and Indian thought, (2) the interpretation of meaning in the *Ring* under the umbrella of philosophy and religion, (3) and my belief that its final scene represents a happy ending, as Bruennhilde's final actions, combined with the music, serve to symbolically transcend her ego as well as the egos of the other major characters, thereby alleviating all their suffering, and enabling their existence in and transformation to - or both - an optimistic, entirely new world order.

#### Indian Influence on Wagner's Philosophy:

As a result of his astounding self-education, Wagner gained knowledge of Indian religions and Asian mystical thought that contributed significantly to his own world view. As early as 1852, Wagner discovered the Persian poet Hafiz, some of whose works had been translated into German. Wagner then wrote to his friend Roeckel, saying he considered Hafiz the greatest poet of all time, one whose sublime and individualistic Oriental perspective put European intellectualism to shame (Pohanka, p. 30). Wagner biographer Ernest Newman writes that, in the late 1850's, Wagner's life turned toward the mystical and metaphysical, not only owing to his study of Schopenhauer, but also from his reading of Buddhist literature (Magee, p. 282). Wagner called Buddhism ". . . the sublime doctrine, the only satisfying one. . ." and, in a letter to Mathilde Wesendonk, said ". . . how hangdog our culture looks beside pure revelations of noble humanity in the ancient East!" (von Westernhagen, p. 207). According to his second wife, Cosima, Wagner

read Schopenhauer and Indian classics like *The Upanishads* continually over the years, getting immense pleasure from the experience, especially from the rereading of Indian classics. I think a good example of Wagner's fond identification with Buddhism and Indian ideology can be found in the fact that Wagner named his permanent home "*Wahnfried*," meaning, literally, "Peace from Illusion," a very common Indian religious ideal. He kept a statue of the Buddha in his living room as well (Magee p. 182). As Wagner wrote to Liszt, ". . . modern research has succeeded in showing that pure and unalloyed Christianity was nothing but a branch of the venerable Buddhism. . ." (Pohanka, p. 49). Furthermore, "his intimate friend, Count de Gobineau, wrote that 'Wagner was a Buddhist in his heart, and called himself so.' In writing to a friend in Paris in 1859, Wagner signed the letter 'your grateful Buddhist'" (p. 50). Indeed, John J. Pohanka, author of *Wagner the Mystic*, believes that (just like devout followers of the aforementioned Indian religions), Wagner often sought the universal, eternal, and timeless in all things. He also informs us that Wagner personally embraced vegetarianism and a belief in reincarnation, both of which characteristics are often identified as Indian (Pohanka, p. 17).

As Wagner became more familiar with Indian-based religious concepts such as renunciation, transcendence of ego, karma, recognition of *maya* (the illusion of the phenomenal, i.e., the outer world), and also of the value of meditation as a means of access to one's inner world - for example, the world of feelings, emotions, intuition, and the unconscious - these concepts began to influence his art, specifically in the music of the *Ring*. As evidence we can note that Mathilde Wesendonk informs us that by 1860, Wagner had already read Schopenhauer and classic examples of Indian religious philosophy, saying then he ". . . sought reconciliation beyond the bounds of time and space, in the idea of the myth of rebirth. . ." (von Westernhagen, p. 105). We also know the following: that Cosima gave Wagner four volumes of the Indian *Rig-Veda* as a birthday present; that he read Koppen's history of Buddhism; and that, in 1856, after reading

Burnouf's *Introduction to the History of Buddhism*, which Wagner said “. . . was the book that stimulated me most. . .” (Magee, p. 138), he wrote a prose sketch distilled from that Burnouf reading which he called a “*Buddhist*” opera. Wagner's title for this is significant. It was to be “*Die Sieger*,” which is translated in English as “The Victors” or “The Conquerors.” In keeping with the theme of the original Indian story, Wagner's title is meant to mean victorious in conquering ego-identification - that is, victorious in achieving enlightenment - the supreme goal of life on earth. This ancient Indian legend concerns how one can achieve enlightenment through unconditional loving, that is, love in an ultimate “spiritual” sense as opposed to a sexual or merely romantic meaning of the word. The subject matter of that Indian myth, and the notion gleaned from Wagner's written notes that this idea haunted him throughout the rest of his life, helps to show how much Indian religious ideology appealed to Wagner on both personal and professional levels. Although he never finished *Die Sieger*, similar themes do turn up in *Parsifal*, and music that Wagner composed as a leitmotif for the Buddha in *Die Sieger*, can be heard in the *Ring*'s third and fourth operas, *Siegfried* and *Goetterdaemmerung*. That music has become known as “the World Inheritance” motif, although it is notable that (according to Pohanka) Wagner called it the “redemption” motif. “Heinrich Porges in his *Wagner Rehearsing the Ring* describes the importance Wagner gave this music when it first appears in *Siegfried*:

Wagner expressly demanded that the Redemption theme be “very brought out. . .,” sounding “like the proclamation of a new religion. . .,” such that “the sudden illumination by which Wotan himself is overwhelmed is all the more powerful. . .,” “. . .the whole scene must be imbued by this revelation of spiritual renewal. . .” (Pohanka, p. 51).

Indian spiritual concepts of enlightenment and reincarnation appear in Wagners' unused rewritings of the *Ring* libretto, including the so-called Schopenhauer versions. These concepts

seem to be ideas Wagner intended to convey with the music he composed in his later years of life. One of Wagner's rewritten endings for the *Ring* has Bruennhilde singing that by her immolation she is “. . . going to the desire-free, illusion-free holiest chosen land, the goal of world wandering, released from rebirth. . .,” which conveys Buddhist meaning. Around 1860, Wagner changed the endings to *Siegfried* and *Goetterdaemmerung*, saying “. . . the interpretation of Bruennhilde, *now that she has become all-knowing*, will be different. . .” (von Westernhagen, p. 219, italics mine). In these rewritings and others - as recorded in Spencer and Millington's English translation of the *Ring* libretto, and as noted in Magee, von Westernhagen, Bolen and Pohanka - the Indian-influenced concepts of reincarnation and enlightenment were referenced by Wagner. According to von Westernhagen, the idea of reincarnation in the *Ring* was regarded initially as “. . . an uncalled for fusion of Germanic and Indian. . .” (p. 219) but, an Ettmueller commentary of the Germanic Vaulu-Spa (Voluspa), which Wagner had in his Dresden library, lists examples of the “old Northmen's” belief in rebirth, so Wagner probably thought he was not proposing anything contrary to the spirit the original Germanic myth that, to a large extent, inspired the *Ring*'s plot. Wagner decided against using these rewrites, explaining to Roeckel that: “I have now come to realize how much there is, owing to the whole nature of my poetic aim, that *only becomes clear through the music*. I now simply cannot look at the uncomposed poem any more” (Pohanka, pp. 34-35, italics mine). We know from various published records that the unused, edited libretto versions of the *Ring*'s ending expressed the Indian concepts of enlightenment and reincarnation fairly explicitly. According to Wagner, one of the reasons he chose not to use these rewrites was to avoid an “. . . attempt to preach any particular doctrine. . .” (Magee, p. 189). And most significantly, if evidence of characters' “rebirth” (reincarnation) in the *Ring* is not obvious in the libretto, it is only, Wagner said, because: “. . . *the meaning they had to convey is already expressed with utmost clarity in the musical rendering of the drama. . .*” (von Westernhagen, p. 219).

In the lengthy letter of 1856 to Roeckel, already referenced in this paper, Wagner discussed the problem of Bruennhilde and the final scene of *Goetterdaemmerung*, mentioning the multiple versions of text he considered after his philosophy had evolved - via Schopenhauer and his own intuition - beyond the political-societal context of the *Ring* that sprang from his first idea of writing "Siegfried's Death." Wagner decided to let the music speak for the story in even larger measure as the composing progressed, even if the text remained unaltered after his philosophical conversion of the mid-to-late 1850's. Listeners may notice this for the first time in the closing scene of *Die Walkuere*, which is often played as an instrumental concert piece. According to Magee, ". . . nowhere in the *Ring* before this point has the orchestra, by itself, stormed the heavens and opened them up like this. . . ." From that section up to the magnificent ending in which *only* the music "talks," the orchestra seems to take the lead in conveying meaning. As Magee says: "The composer is no longer leaving a gap for voices and words to ride through, no longer inhibiting the freedom of orchestral expression. . ." (p. 199), because, as I believe Wagner intended, the music makes dramatic meaning obvious, especially in the *Ring's* ending.

Wagner's compositional use of leitmotifs would seem to lend itself to Indian religious thought in the following way: just as the life events of every being's incarnation is apparent to the Buddha, so might the music of the *Ring* give listeners some insight of conditions or events that may have occurred in the past, or might occur in the future, but are not obvious at all from the action taking place onstage in any given (present) moment or in the text of the drama. Wagner said he projected "motives of reminiscence and presentiment," something Holman refers to as ". . . evoking the memory of things heard before, carrying us towards things yet to come. . ." (Holman, p. 106). These musical motifs, furthermore, ". . . refer as often to what is unseen as seen" (p. 105). The last musical motif we hear repeated in the closing moments of the final scene, for example, was heard only once before in the entire *Ring*, and it is the very same melody we

heard when Sieglinde became aware she was carrying the unborn love child of herself and Siegmund. Though only seconds earlier ready to die, Sieglinde suddenly seeks to live, solely for her unborn child's sake, singing of glorious hope and an optimistic future she will not live to see. This theme could easily be *the* most beautiful melody in the entire work, and it indicates a transformation beyond compare when it returns at the end of the *Ring*. According to Cosima, Wagner resisted giving this melody a name, but if he had, he would have chosen "*Glorification of Bruennhilde*" (Kitcher and Schacht, p. 182). Holman and Cooke refer to this theme as the "Redemption" motif (Holman, p. 140; Cooke, p. 30), which should not be confused with the aforementioned "World Inheritance" motif. Both mentioned titles for this motif, "redemption" and "glorification," have significance in my view: "redemption" suggests the transcendence of ego and "glorification" the divinity or enlightenment attained by Bruennhilde through that transcendence. As M. Owen Lee puts it, the *Ring* ". . . begins with the emergence of man into consciousness, and ends with consciousness voluntarily yielding to: the next evolutionary development in human nature. . . , and Wagner could only say what that was in music, in the theme to which Sieglinde once sang the words '*mightiest of miracles*,' the theme associated with the transformation of Wotan's will. . ." (Lee, p. 95, italics mine). By 1856, Bruennhilde had overshadowed the other *Ring* characters in Wagner's thought, as she attains enlightenment while ending suffering (or ego-identification) without negating it. This magnificent eventuality is foreshadowed when, in Act 3, Scene 1 of *Siegfried*, the Wanderer (Wotan) tells Erda: ". . . Bruennhilde, whom you bore to me, the hero will lovingly waken: waking, *your all-wise child will work the deed that redeems the world*. . ." (Spencer/Millington, p. 258, italics mine).

#### Indian Influence on Schopenhauer's Philosophy:

It seems clear that no philosopher made a more significant impact on Wagner than Schopenhauer, helping Wagner to permanently alter his world view and hence, the *Ring's*

meanings. Though Wagner asserts that he arrived at similar insights intuitively, Schopenhauer's writing expressed them in a supremely artful, yet thoroughly logical prose, offering Wagner a rational, conceptual framework for his "inner artist." Wagner biographer Curt von Westernhagen writes that Schopenhauer's book, *The World as Will and Idea*, which Wagner read at least four times in one year and reportedly referred to regularly until the day he died, affected Wagner as follows: "Fundamental of his own life. . . , more than a book, it was a friend who entered his loneliness like a gift from heaven. . ." (p. 198). When Bryan Magee describes how Schopenhauer's writing changed Wagner he, like von Westernhagen, uses the words "at a fundamental level," and he reminds us that according to Cosima's diaries, until the day he died, Wagner's attitude towards Schopenhauer's work ". . . was, in his own words: 'How can I thank him enough?'" (p. 129). Thomas Mann attests to this relationship in his essay, *Sufferings and Greatness of Richard Wagner*, when he says that ". . . the acquaintance with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer was the greatest event in Wagner's life. . ." (Pohanka, p. 33). Magee points out that numerous Wagner biographers - including Ernest Newman, Ronald Taylor and John Chancellor - are *no less unqualified* in their assessment of Schopenhauer's immense impact on Wagner (p. 134). Wagner not only embraced Schopenhauer's ideas enthusiastically, but he probably did more to promote Schopenhauer's books and spread his philosophy than the philosopher ever did for himself.

Schopenhauer's philosophy, like Wagner's, shares similarities with, and draws inspiration from, Indian religious thought. In the preface to the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer explains that the reader who ". . . has already received and assimilated the *divine* inspiration of ancient *Indian* wisdom. . ." (italics mine) will be best prepared for his message. In his view, the *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and Sanskrit literature overall, offer unparalleled wisdom, such that they ". . . could be derived as a consequence from the thought I am to impart. . ." (Schopenhauer, p. 16 preface). He begins Chapter 2 (of Vol. 1) by

speaking of “that which knows all things and is known by none. . .,” for example, that which does not lie within time and space. He seems to agree with the ancient Indians with regard to Kant’s phenomenal world: “. . . it is *Maya*, the veil of deception, which covers the eyes of mortals. . . (p. 5); for it is like a dream, like the sunshine on the sand which the traveller from a distance takes to be water, or like the piece of rope on the ground which he regards as a snake. . .” (p. 8).

Schopenhauer also appears to validate the concept of karma, saying: “. . . Thus cause and effect are the whole essence and nature of matter; its being and its acting. . .” (p. 9). His attitude about religion may be best summed up in his own words: “That great fundamental truth contained in Christianity as well as in Brahmanism and Buddhism, the need for salvation from an existence given up to suffering and death, and its attainability through the denial of will. . . is beyond all comparison the most important truth there can be” (p. 628).

A chief purpose of this paper is to show how Indian religious concepts such as reincarnation, transcendence of ego, renunciation, enlightenment etc., not only permeate the philosophies of Wagner and Schopenhauer, but are expressed through the *Ring*, even if Wagner and Schopenhauer use their own words with which to express these concepts. I argue that regardless of what words are used, both men embraced Indian religious ideas and that the meaning of the *Ring* is better understood when the significance of these ideas *to* these men is acknowledged. In order to avoid delving too deeply into details of Schopenhauer’s lengthy two-volume treatise of philosophy, the following summary of the Schopenhauerian view summarized by Brian Magee in his book *The Tristan Chord* can prove most helpful. In it we can see the similarity of Schopenhauer’s philosophy to the Indian concepts already outlined in this paper:

The foundation of ethics is *not rationality but compassion*, and it is *through compassion* and not cleverness, that the deepest understanding of things is to be attained; *in the ultimate recesses of our being all living creatures are one*, and therefore the sufferings of each are the sufferings of all; it is not in

this empirical world that ethics and values have their source, nor the real significance of our lives its being, but *in a realm that is transcendental*; nothing in this world has value in itself or is to be seen as an end to itself, and destined to certain destruction; our lives are ones of struggle; it is possible for us to *transcend this world through non-attachment* to its concerns, but this requires of us a wholesale *denial of our will's demands*, the most powerful of which is the imperative of self-preservation, and therefore the challenge involved in self-mastery includes especially the mastery over our sexuality; *redemption may be achieved by a self-transcendence attained through a wholly selfless, non-sexual and compassionate love for others* which involves taking their sufferings on ourselves; the achievement of this state has nothing to do with intellectual understanding and everything to do with *feeling* (Magee, p. 273, italics mine)

A foundational feature of Indian religions such as Brahmanism and Buddhism is a focus on compassion and selfless service. The Schopenhauerian view compiled above stresses both compassion and selflessness. The word that Schopenhauer, Wagner, and the character Wotan in the *Ring* repeat quite often is translated in English as “will.” In the English translation of Schopenhauer’s book, I perceive a semantics problem: What, since we are (all) the phenomenal embodiment of that which is unknowable and indescribable, does one call the “noumenal,” of which we are the phenomenal embodiment? According to Magee, “. . . for reasons that seemed less than satisfactory even to Schopenhauer himself, he decided to call it ‘will,’ partly because the nearest we can get to any direct apprehension of it is the will to live. . .” (Magee, p. 167). I posit that when Schopenhauer and Wagner use the words “denial of will,” they are speaking in similar terms and with the same meaning as the Indian concepts of non-attachment (actions without being “emotionally” attached to the results of one’s actions) and the transcendence of ego. If, in Magee’s Schopenhauerian view, the word "will" is replaced with the word "ego," then we have a prescription for enlightenment that has existed in Indian religions for thousands of years, as it still does today. Schopenhauer admired Indian religious literature and encouraged Wagner to investigate Indian classics. It is an interesting observation of Magee’s that “. . . Schopenhauer was fascinated by the fact that he, a non-believer who had arrived at his conclusions by bringing

rational argument to bear on some of the mainstream problems of Western philosophy as practiced by figures as Locke, Hume, and Kant, should then find the same conclusions expressed beautifully and boldly in writings thousands of years old, emanating from cultures totally different from [his own]. . .” (Magee, p. 169).

#### Wagner the Mystic: Inner Life, Intuition and Improvisation:

Other aspects of Wagner’s philosophy that are quite compatible with Asian practice, if not actually derived from it, include his emphasis on one’s inner life, one’s intuition, and on the art of improvisation. With regard to the importance of one’s inner (real or noumenal) life versus one’s outer (unreal or phenomenal) life, the following quotations characterize Wagner’s belief fairly clearly: Arguing with friends about the dying words of Faust (Goethe’s character) in claiming the need to “respond to” the phenomenal world, Wagner reportedly said: “. . . Fool! To hope to win the world from out there! Salvation dwells only within, in the inner depths!” (von Westernhagen, p. 244). Recounting in his autobiography how, after a night spent in sleepless fever, the orchestral prelude to *Das Rheingold* came to him, Wagner said “. . . quickly, I understood the essence of my own nature: it was not from without but *only from within* that the current of life was to flow to me. . .” (italics mine, von Westernhagen, p. 181). What *was* this “essence,” this “current” that Wagner seems to have discovered? I will propose an answer in my conclusion.

Many of Wagner’s comments about music and his inner life (including intuition) coincide with Indian concepts of meditation and the pursuit of self-awareness. While seeking guidance from a Satguru (a Realized Spiritual Master), the three most important activities of a devotee’s life are: Engaging in spiritual discourse, singing Bhajans (devotional music), and practicing meditation. Throughout the world to this day, meditation is used to help individuals gain access to their inner life - to explore the depths of the soul by quieting the mind-ego and detaching

temporarily from the bustling “outer world.” Wagner was preoccupied with his own inner world and bringing the subconscious to the surface of conscious thought, in other words, grasping ideas intuitively before identifying them cognitively. That is also one of the results of meditation. In Sept. 1860, Wagner writes:

If we may regard all nature, looked as a whole, as a process of development from the unconscious to consciousness, and if this process appears most conspicuously in the human individual, the observation of it in the life of the artist is certainly one of the most interesting, because in him and his creations the world represents itself and comes to conscious existence. But in the artist too, the presenting force is in its very nature unconscious - instinctive; and even where he requires thought in order to form the outline of his intuition, by the aid of the technical ability with which he is endowed, into an objective work of art, it is not exactly reflection (*reason*) that decides for him the choice of his means of expression, but rather an instinctive impulse (*intuition*), which constitutes, indeed, the character of his peculiar talent (Pohanka, p. 83, italics mine).

The notion that inner reflection, or meditation, can assist one in finding creative inspiration, serving as a connecting bridge between conscious awareness and one’s unconscious, is not new or debatable, and it appears that Wagner was intimately familiar with its practice and benefits. In a letter to Matilda Wesendock dated Oct. 5, 1858, Wagner says, “. . . a new insight, like every insight, is conveyed not by the abstract associations of ideas but by *intuitive emotional experience*, in other words, by a process of shock and agitation suffered by his *inner self*; as a result, this insight reveals him in his progress towards a state of *supreme enlightenment*. . .” (Pohanka, p. 52, italics mine). In a letter to Roeckel dated August 23rd 1856, Wagner writes at length about how, “. . . in the course of struggles to understand the world with conscious reason [*at first*], I was working in direct opposition to the intuitive. . .;” yet, ultimately [*at last*] he was “. . . helped to a clear understanding of his own work by *an intelligence* other than his own. . .” (Magee, p. 187-88, italics mine). Was this “intelligence” related to, similar to, or identical to the

aforementioned “current” and “essence” from which Wagner often gained inspiration? Wagner said he made the most remarkable discovery of this “intuitive” aspect while working on the *Ring*: “. . . being *unconsciously guided* by a wholly different, infinitely more *profound intuition*. . .” (Magee, p. 189, italics mine). Magee thinks that nowhere is Wagner’s reliance on intuition more apparent and successful than in the *Ring*; and Holman claims that the preponderance of evidence suggests that “. . . the astounding coherency of the *Ring* music was woven from an intuitive sensibility. . .” (Holman, p. 105). At the end of the long letter to Roeckel referenced above, Wagner asserts that “. . . if the truth is to become known to anyone, it needs to be felt *intuitively* before it can be grasped *intellectually*” (Magee, p. 190, italics mine). In other words, Wagner is saying that what is unconscious within the soul can and should be brought into consciousness through the emotional and intuitive realm of experience. It would seem that despite his non-religious point of view, the empirical world never represented the whole of reality for Wagner; or, at the very least, his ideas changed permanently in the mid-to-late 1850’s, about the same time (after embracing Schopenhauer’s philosophy) his own dogmatic belief in equal status for all the arts in a combined work was supplanted by the uncontested predominance of music. (In stark contrast to earlier published views, Wagner wrote in 1857 that “. . . music can never, regardless of what it is combined with, cease being the highest, the redemptive art. . .” [Magee, p. 187]). Wagner’s philosophical and ideological change seems to “make room for faith” and Indian religious ideas, an important consideration when looking for meanings in the *Ring*, especially since Wagner had yet to finish composing all its music at the time his beliefs had changed.

In the mid-to-late 1850’s, Wagner’s thinking broke away from any purely phenomenal, socio-political notion of what constitutes a “free individual” to that of a noumenal, spiritual freedom attained, as it is in Indian religions, through meditation, transcendence and renunciation. In Wagner’s autobiography, while discussing Schopenhauer’s influence on his own ideas, he says:

“ . . . annihilation of the will and complete self-abnegation are the only true means of redemption from the constricting bonds of individuality in its dealings with the world. . .” (Magee, p. 135). What are the “constricting bonds of individuality” Wagner mentions? In Indian thought, they could easily refer to the ego, that illusionary sense of “I” with which we normally identify ourselves in the outer world, but *not* the inner, spiritual sense of “I” that may “know all but is known by none.” Wagner agreed with Schopenhauer, who considered music the voice of metaphysical will, able to speak to us from the deepest depths of our souls. Schopenhauer said: “ . . . The composer reveals the innermost nature of the world, and expresses the profoundest wisdom, in a language that his reasoning faculty does not understand. . .” (Schopenhauer, p. 260). According to John J. Pohanka, author of *Wagner the Mystic*, Wagner believed in spirituality inaccessible to the intellect (p. 14) and conveyed his vision through his art. Thus, Wagner believed, “ . . . the primary function of art was to show people the true inner nature of their lives. . .” (Magee, p. 83).

As Wagner came to agree with Schopenhauer that only music can express the inexpressible noumenon, at the same time he was, not unlike Christian and Indian religious mystics, becoming increasingly familiar with the potential role of mysticism in the creative process. In conversation with Cosima, “ . . . he commented on people’s ignorance of how remote the creative processes are from all experience, all reality. . .” (von Westernhagen, p. 200). Pohanka uses in his book many examples to support his premise that Wagner’s music contains all of the seven characteristics common to all mystic states, as delineated by philosopher Walter T. Stace in his monumental 1960 study of mysticism, *Mysticism and Philosophy*. Stace describes “extrovertive mysticism” as the undifferentiated unity of the world and “introvertive mysticism” as the undifferentiated unity of the self. He uses the term “One” to function similarly in all religious and philosophical contexts. His description of the seven characteristics are as follows:

### Extrovertive Mysticism:

- 1) The unifying vision, expressed abstractly by the formula “All is One.” The One is, in extrovertive mysticism, perceived through the physical senses, in or through the multiplicity of objects.
- 2) The more concrete apprehension of the One as being an inner subjectivity in all things, described variously as life, or consciousness, or a living Presence. The discovery that nothing is “really” dead.
- 3) Sense of objectivity or reality.
- 4) Feeling of blessedness, joy, happiness, satisfaction, etc.
- 5) Feeling that what is apprehended is holy, or sacred, or divine. This is the quality which gives rise to the interpretation of the experience as being an experience of “God.” It is the specifically religious element in the experience. It is closely intertwined with, but not identical with, the previously listed characteristic of blessedness and joy.
- 6) Paradoxicality
- 7) Alleged by mystics to be ineffable, incapable of being described in words, etc.

### Introvertive Mysticism:

- 1) The Unitary Consciousness, from which all the multiplicity of sensuous or conceptual or other empirical content has been excluded, so that there remains only a void and empty unity. This is the one basic, essential, nuclear characteristic, from which most of the others inevitably follow.
- 2) Being nonspatial and nontemporal. This of course follows from the nuclear characteristic just listed.
- 3) Sense of objectivity or reality.
- 4) Feelings of blessedness, joy, peace, happiness, etc.
- 5) Feeling that what is apprehended is holy, sacred, or divine. [...] Perhaps it should be added that this feeling seems less strong in Buddhist mystics than in others, though it is not wholly absent and appears at least in the form of deep reverence for an enlightenment which is regarded as supremely noble. No doubt this is what explains the “atheistic” character of the Hinayana. [...]
- 6) Paradoxicality
- 7) Alleged by mystics to be ineffable.

([http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/relexp/reviews/review\\_stace01.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/relexp/reviews/review_stace01.htm). Also see Pohanka, p. 77)

In his pamphlet called *The Role of Altered States of Consciousness in the Life, Theatre and Theories of Richard Wagner*, furthermore, author and Professor of Psychology, Jerry Schulster, points out that “. . . Wagner’s autobiography abounds with descriptions of trance, ecstasy, delirium, hypnagogic states, creative reveries, and wild dreams and, [most of these descriptions]

are associated with music, and Wagner considers them to be mystical experiences. . .” (Pohanka, p. 77). I believe that Wagner’s mystical experiences, including intuition and inward spiritual searching, found identification on the level of the rational mind with Schopenhauer’s ideas about music, metaphysics and aesthetics, and that both men’s views find common ground in Indian thought. One good example of this is how their ideas express much the same thinking as that of Hazrat Inayat Khan, the Sufi musician turned philosopher:

“ . . . the power of music depends on the grade of *spiritual evolution* that person has touched. . . (Khan, p. 137)

. . . Man’s state of mind can be read by his touch upon any instrument; for however great an expert he may be, he cannot produce by mere skill, without a *developed feeling within himself*, the grace and beauty which appeal to the heart. . . (p. 57)

. . . Music is called a divine or celestial art, not only because of its use in religion and devotion, and because it is in itself a universal religion, but because of *its fineness in comparison with all other arts and sciences*. . . (p. 59)

. . . What art cannot express, poetry explains; what poetry cannot express, is expressed by music. Therefore to a thinker *music in all ages will stand supreme as the highest expression of what is deepest in oneself*. . . (p. 89)

. . . No part of the world, East or West, can really deny the divinity of music. In the first place, music is the language of the soul; and for two people of different nations or races to unite there is no better means than music. *For music not only unites man to man, but man to God. . .*” (p. 97, italics mine).

Another example of how Wagner’s modus-operandi exhibits some Indian flavor concerns musical improvisation. He even coined a term, “fixed-improvisation,” to describe the way in which the unconscious, informed by technique, can materialize in the conscious through the creative act of composing. In an interview with Peter Lavezzoli, for a book entitled *The Dawn of Indian Music in the West*, John McLaughlin, a guitarist famous for fusing Indian classical music

with American jazz said, “. . . [D]evotional music is that which addresses the need of a person to access a higher sense of awareness. . . . There are only two schools of improvisation in the entire world: Indian classical music and American jazz. . .” (Lavezzoli, p. 338). Whether his comments are true or not, McLaughlin is speaking about two characteristic features of Indian music that have remained intact for years and which were, I feel, integral to Wagner’s approach: devotional aspects and improvisation. Wagner often spoke of how music poured out of him spontaneously, without reflection. Regarding improvisation as “. . . an indispensable quality. . .” (Magee, p. 235), he felt that the greatest composers like Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, and even Beethoven, made their best music when they improvised, allowing for a “. . . degree of freshness, flexibility, and freedom from already-existing forms. . .” (p. 233). Characterizing the plays of Shakespeare as “fixed mimetic improvisations of consummate poetic value,” Wagner eventually conceived of opera as a perfect marriage between two fixed improvisations, one mimetic and the other musical (p. 235). Magee claims that Wagner, had he lived longer than he did, intended to compose “. . . freely and spontaneously constructed. . .” symphonic works. It’s significant to point out that Magee discusses Wagner’s capacity for “. . . amazingly free and uninhibited outward expression of his inward states. . .,” not only in terms of his music, but also in terms of his personality, saying: “. . . an extravagant element of improvisatory performance was very much a feature of Wagner’s character as a person” (p. 236).

### The Ring’s Happy Ending:

By the time the *Ring*’s music was finished, Wagner likely believed that its ending was not a negation but a rendering of a whole, following the way his earlier focus on social order, politics, and the equality of music with poetry and drama eventually came into conflict with his inner realizations and the influence that Schopenhauer and Indian thought helped bring to his later works. In completing the *Ring*, his beliefs were finally “. . . in organic unity with his creative

intuitions, and also, therefore, with the preconscious and unconscious drives from which those intuitions spring. . .” (Magee, p. 182). Though Wagner and Schopenhauer might be thought of as pessimists, and some may say the *Ring’s* ending is nihilistic, I believe their world vision and the *Ring’s* ending is no more pessimistic than the (non-dogmatic) doctrines of Christianity and Indian religions. Because, in those, the supreme goal of life is salvation from suffering and the transcendence of earthly existence. Both men’s philosophy are just as compatible with an optimistic point of view as that of a nihilistic one, particularly in the areas where their thinking coincides the most: metaphysics, music and aesthetics. Pohanka points out that the German word for redemption - *Erloesung* - also means deliverance (Pohanka, p. 22). I believe that when Wagner used that word in the *Ring*, which he did quite often, it means a spiritual deliverance from earthly suffering, salvation, and the transcendence of ego. Wagner “. . . was not anti-religious; he was anti-church: the church (*dogma*) had done a poor job of conveying Jesus’ message of love and compassion, and Wagner intended to do a better job of it. . .” (p. 26, italics mine). Saying that, Pohanka was referring specifically to *Parsifal* but, I believe the idea is equally applicable to religious overtones conveyed in the *Ring*, if not to all of Wagner’s most mature works. In *Finding an Ending - Reflections on Wagner’s Ring*, the authors say “. . . Schopenhauer’s ethics is an ethics of *compassion*, revolving around the abhorrence of suffering, not only in one’s own case but wherever it may occur. . .” (Kitcher and Schacht, p. 18). Similar sentiments are echoed by authors Magee and von Westernhagen with regard to both Wagner’s and Schopenhauer’s philosophy. For example, Carl Dahlhaus said (in *Richard Wagner’s Music Dramas*, p. 143), “. . . Wagner’s faith was a metaphysics of *compassion* and *renunciation*, deriving its essential elements from Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation* and - via Schopenhauer - from Buddhism . . .” (Magee, p. 192).

It is not insignificant, I believe, to mention that Wagner was asked in 1879 to raise his

voice, along with those of animal protection societies, against the torture of animals in the name of science. He referred to that as “barbarism,” telling Cosima that, “. . . a religion could be founded on compassion for animals; compassion between humans was far more difficult, they were so malicious, they recoiled from each other and it was hard to apply the sublime doctrine of Christianity. . .” (von Westernhagen, p. 554). In an open letter in the October 1879 issue of the *Bayreuther Blaetter*, and in a pamphlet printed up at his own expense, Wagner says: “. . . [F]or where human dignity is concerned, let us agree that the first evidence of it appears at the point where the human being distinguishes himself from the animal by showing compassion for the animal. . .” (p. 555).

I agree with Albert Goldman, who wrote in his book, *Wagner on Music and Drama*, that Wagner communicates to us in “anagogical terms” beyond the literal, allegorical, and moral senses, in an ultimate spiritual and mystical sense. Goldman said, “. . . the story and characters are meant to serve as mediums between us and a larger, profounder, and truer world. . .; [for Wagner believes] . . . that the heart of the universe lay within each man’s soul. . .” (Pohanka, pp. 21-22). Jean Shinoda Bolen, author of *Ring of Power: The Abandoned Child, the Authoritarian Father, and the Disempowered Feminine - A Jungian Understanding of Wagner’s Ring Cycle*, defines for us how the psychological becomes spiritual:

Ultimately the psychological becomes spiritual after we free ourselves from having to fulfil expectations that are not true to what matters deeply to us and from addictions and complexes that have us in their grip, and come into a sustained relationship with what C.J. Jung calls the archetype of the Self. I think of the Self as a generic term for the inner experience of god, goddess, Tao, higher power, spirit. The Self by any name is a source of wisdom, compassion, and meaning through which we know that we have a place in the universe.” (Bolen, p. 12, preface).

Bolen also mentions how myth bypasses the mind's effort to divorce emotion from information. Deliberately on a conscious level, intuitively on an unconscious level, or by some combination thereof that will forever remain a mystery, Wagner realized a sense of the spiritual in the *Ring* that does result, I believe, in mythically merging information with emotion for his audience.

The interpretation of the *Ring's* ending as a happy one can be perceived especially clearly when, in addition to considering Wagner's philosophy and artistic character, the work is analyzed in terms of its psychological symbology. Bolen's book is very insightful in this regard. Alberich's theft of the Rhinegold sets into motion the *Ring* drama, in which a full range of human emotion and suffering is portrayed. The Rhinegold is returned to the Rhine, a cleansing fire and flood ends that suffering, and all is returned to a purer state. My first impression after seeing the whole *Ring*, was that the Rhinegold represented ultimate truth, perfection, beauty, unconditional love, or even God. In other words, I understood the Rhinegold representationally in similar terms to how Bolen refers to the "Self" above, and as such, when it is returned to its original state it is as if we are returned to our original state of perfection - that we have come home, or identified deep within ourselves, again, that noumenal existence from which our phenomenal awareness first sprang. Let us consider what Bolen thinks the Rhinegold represents:

The Rhinegold is a metaphor for the Self - an archetypal source of joy, numinosity, and meaning. . . . Pure gold - Rhinegold - in the realm of feeling is impersonal, beautiful, intense, mysterious, like the purity of love that can be consciously contemplated only by a mystic in a state of bliss. . . . It is the inner source of meaning or numinosity that fills us with joy whenever we sense or glimpse its presence - a connection to something greater than ourselves. . . . To forge Rhinegold into an instrument of power that can be used to subjugate others is like tapping into this inner source of divinity and corrupting it. . . (Bolen, pp. 36-37).

Of course, corrupting it is exactly what happens - it is inevitable if a story is to be told at all! It's meaningful that the Rhinegold belongs in the depths of water, a common symbol for the unconscious and also as a purifying agent (as it is when the final flood washes everything corrupt away in the story). As long as the Rhinegold resides in the water where it belongs, we can never mistake it for a mere substance - for it is a spiritual power that all persons can potentially *access* for themselves, but that no one can selfishly *possess*. Unconditional love is selfless, with "no strings attached." When one loves unconditionally, one doesn't have the power (or desire) to alter that which is the object of our devotion - rather, *it* is what has the power to alter *us* through our recognition of it. When Wotan and Alberich quest for ultimate power by renouncing love, only destruction results. Control and power over others is represented by the ring that has been forged from the Rhinegold, but in its original uncorrupted state it, according to Bolen, the Rhinegold "... frees us from a compulsive need to acquire power, fame, wealth, work, intoxicants, or addictive love as a substitute for a connection with the Self, through which we know that we matter and that love and beauty exist in us. . ." (pp. 179-80). This state is one of supreme Self-awareness, renunciation and enlightenment; it is what the return of the gold to the Rhine at the end of the *Ring* symbolizes - what I have also called the transcendence of ego.

The *Ring* tells us that when power matters more than love, there are terrible consequences; but Brunnhilde's choice to sacrifice herself for love in the *Ring's* ending, proclaiming she would never forsake true love, represents a positive choice each of us can make on a day-to-day basis when faced with the option of either "following our bliss," as Joseph Campbell suggests, or succumbing to the will of whoever wields power and authority over us in any given moment, regardless of how negative the consequences of that yielding may be for us or others. As Bolen says about Wotan: though he seeks love and wisdom too, "... time and time again, power wins out and contaminates or subordinates the love or wisdom he seeks or feels. . ." (Bolen, p. 82).

The *Ring* offers this advice - to make an effort to be more conscious of the daily choices we are faced with making:

. . . the process of growth toward the Self that makes life meaningful spiritually - requires that we dialogue with Wotan as a symbol of outer expectations and differentiate from him by rejecting fear and power as the ruling principles that motivate choice and action. The Bruennhilde who goes against Wotan's will can also represent the growth of a man's feminine aspect, a symbol for the soul. . . . Will we as individuals put compassion ahead of abstract principles or obedience to authority, or will we 'put our inner' Bruennhilde to sleep as Wotan did in the *Ring*? . . (Bolen, p. 84). . . . Bruennhilde sees firsthand and emotionally feels the destructive results of Wotan's quest for power. When Wotan asks Erda if the swiftly spinning wheel can be stopped, she tells him to learn the answer from Bruennhilde, who is both wise and courageous. . . (p. 175). Love itself is the pure gold that Bruennhilde bequeaths to us, the treasure that she came to know through her humanity and wisdom. Power over others, which the Ring of the Nibelung represents, is what we settle for only when we give up on being loved. . . (Bolen, p. 177).

If, through Bruennhilde's self-sacrifice, awareness, wisdom, championing of true love and the most noble humanity, she attains a state of spiritual enlightenment, or transcendence of ego, then inherent in that is a transcendence of opposites too. Wagner's *Ring* is resplendent with opposites and role reversals almost too numerous to mention, yet Bruennhilde is the only character who satisfactorily reconciles all change and conflict, purifying it through all-consuming transformational fire and water, achieving wholeness in the end. Understanding that ". . . Siegfried was both the most faithful and most faithless of lovers, as she, by participating in his murder, has also been. . ." (Bolen, p. 185), yet desiring nothing in the end but ". . . to clasp him to me while held in my arms and in mightiest love to be wedded to him. . ." (Spencer and Millington, p. 350), is an ultimate transcendence made all the more obvious by the melodic motif commonly referred

to as the “Redemption” (named by Wagner “Glorification of Bruennhilde”) theme that, though only heard once before in the entire *Ring*, repeats three times in the closing music *and* is the last melody stated before the curtain comes down. By then, most of the major characters of the drama are destroyed by fire and flood. Alberich’s fate is uncertain, though I understand him to represent Wotan’s dark side, and thus a latent tendency for sin in all of us. The symbology in Wagner’s drama illustrates what can happen if we let our dark side rule our actions. The Rhinemaidens survive of course, because they are a part of nature that even the strong will of Wotan can never completely destroy. There can be negative consequences when humans overly assert their will by disregarding the interdependent relationship between man and earth, and indeed, there are negative results when the Rhinegold is stolen from its natural environment and manipulated through “ego-based” desire. Bruennhilde’s actions at the end of the *Ring* and the ring’s return the Rhine indicates, I believe, that man and nature will always survive if we strive to conquer our negative aspects. The surviving humans, or “*das Volk*” in the *Ring*, represents to me a positive latent tendency contrasting with Alberich’s aforementioned negative one. The fact that they are seen at the end of the stage drama and Alberich is not, may also be an encouraging sign. Perhaps it suggests that, only until we *allow* Alberich (our dark side) to reappear and guide our actions, will unblemished purity and innocence reside. Symbolically speaking, the *Ring*’s ending is an affirmation, not a negation. Bruennhilde’s immolation represents the transcendence of ego, allowing for rebirth, or as Bolen puts it: “. . . feelings return, and we are revived. Once again we are immersed in the river of life” (Bolen, p. 180).

#### Conclusion:

I have endeavored to show how Indian religious themes may have had significance in helping Wagner to evolve philosophically, and how, whether by design or not, they permeate the *Ring*. Ultimately, as with all great works of art, as fascinating as it is attempting to gain insight

into the heart, soul and mind of its creator, it matters not so much what the artist actually intended, for that is impossible to know with complete certainty. An artist may not even be consciously aware of a definitive method in the creation of his art, much less be willing and able to communicate it clearly in words to his audience. Such certainly seems to be the case with Wagner, whose world view developed largely through unparalleled self-education, and whose composing relied to such a high degree on his (mystic-like) inner workings: inspiration, intuition and improvisatory aspects. Also, when faced with a choice to either make meaning explicit in his music dramas or not, Wagner generally preferred keeping things vague, allowing for his audience to interpret and react in numerous ways. Striving for maximum emotional impact, as Wagner did, is not an exact science, since it deals with the nebulous inner world of individuals. It is not surprising that Wagner chose a more “open-to-interpretation” approach with the *Ring*. He didn’t desire to abuse his powerful role as a famous composer and poetic dramatist by being overly “preachy.” It was enough for him to recognize *his* truth as *he* grasped it *inwardly*, “. . . *without committing the presumptuous mistake of trying to force it on other people by argument. . .*” (Magee, p. 190, italics mine).

I would suggest that what is more important than precisely what Wagner actually intended to expose in his work is this: What do we think? How do we react? What inspiration, if any, wells up within us as a result of our encounter with Wagner? And most importantly, can we, as Wagner apparently always endeavored to do in his life, find (in his work) that which represents the “universal, eternal, and timeless in all things”? In answering those questions for myself, I am drawn to my own sense of the spiritual, identifying almost immediately a non-dogmatic symbology in the *Ring* that is saturated with Indian religious values I am aware of by personal experience. It’s said of Wagner that he had proto-Freudian and proto-Jungian insight (Magee, p. 85). Similarly, I believe he gained a grasp of insights comparable to what many today

identify as an individual sense of “spiritualism” - a type of faith seeking not to attach or subordinate itself to any particular dogma, but instead, rejoicing in a commonality of ultimate truths shared by various religions and philosophies. These truths can be discovered and understood only through the courageous inner journey of an individual determined to find them at *any* cost. On such a journey one must, as Kant did: “make room for faith” - to allow for something beyond rational understanding - separate, yet encompassing an illusionary phenomenal existence. Doing so requires acknowledgement of, and ideally, inner experience of, *the indescribable*. Nameless, it has nonetheless been called many different words by various sources in this paper. I suggest that “*it*” is what Wagner once described as the “essence” and “current” from which he gained inspiration and ideas.

The *Ring*'s impact on me, my understanding of its symbology, my research, and all I know from personal experience, suggests that Wagner embarked on a meaningful inner journey in search for truth. Bolen used the metaphor “stepping into the void” (Bolen, p. 193) to describe Bruennhilde's heroic, “in-the-present-moment” act of jumping into the fire without knowing what the future held. Through conceiving and completing the *Ring*, Wagner did much the same as his character Bruennhilde did in the drama: symbolically speaking, he took a “step into the void.” The process and completion of the *Ring* enabled Wagner to, perhaps, discover his own sense of spirituality beyond dogma, a more complete and true understanding, acknowledgement, and acceptance of his *Self*. I believe that what Wagner embraced is comparable to what might today be called (the best example of) “new-age” thinking. I believe Wagner's artistic revelations encompassed and foreshadowed *more* than just the theories of Freud and Jung that my sources alluded to; One could also say that Wagner represented proto-new age thinking, proto-spiritualist, proto-Aquarian man, etc. . . .

Like Greek tragedy, which Wagner considered the ultimate, perfect artistic achievement (Magee, p. 86), as a work of art the *Ring* embodies the most profound universal truths. Despite the impressive, enormous amount of scholarly work already done on Wagner, I look forward to more research. I'm particularly keen to explore the potential impact and effect one's spirituality and philosophy has on composing. Had time constraints for this assignment not prevented further research, this paper would be considerably longer, exploring far more depth and details, especially with regard to the psychological symbology and interpretation of Wagner's masterpiece. The fact that so many of those who encounter the *Ring* continue to have so much to say about it is certainly a testament to Wagner's genius.

Greg Chako, final draft August 16, 2012

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