

automatism (if the lawyers wish to continue using that word) into varieties which are likely to recur and those which are unlikely to recur.

In addition in those conditions which are likely to recur and may be preventable by medical treatment (psychiatric or otherwise), it is in the public interest to ensure that such treatment is accepted and persevered with successfully. In serious cases compulsion may be justified until this has been achieved.

A distinction based on differentiating between the causative factors, disease or external agent, clearly does not produce the most just result. Possibly it would be better not to codify the distinction, but to remove the mandatory committal to hospital. This would also allow advances in medical treatment to be considered as they occur. Having gauged the likelihood of recurrence of the abnormal mental state and been advised of the steps, if any, which can be taken to prevent it, the judge would then have the widest possible freedom to deal with the patient sympathetically while minimising the future risk to society,

restraining the patient's freedom if necessary by a hospital order.

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The psychiatry of opera

Richard Wagner (1813–1883)

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Mark Jones continues this occasional series by taking a look inside Wagner's tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung* which was first performed complete in 1876 at Wagner's own opera house in Bayreuth.

In the years between 1840 and 1890 the operatic world was dominated by two men—Verdi and Wagner. Both communicated in operatic language very much their own, each founded on their respective Italian and German musical traditions. Verdi's operas were to become more complex and musically seamless as his genius blossomed. This is also true of Wagner, but through his writings, which are extensive and for the most part tortuous, we can appreciate that in writing opera his aims were different to Verdi's. Wagner's earliest works, e.g. *Lohengrin* and *The Flying Dutchman*, are stylistic experiments with mid-19th century Italian opera to German librettos. Later, he was to move towards works of great musical length, called music dramas, which gave as much

importance to the orchestral sound as to the vocal line. Additionally, Wagner placed great emphasis on the visual aspect of his works and took an interest in every feature of their production.

Any coverage of the psychological elements which underpin opera would be incomplete without at least scraping the surface of Wagner's music dramas. The many books that have appeared over the years are a testament to the complexity of the man and his creations. No book, never mind a short piece like this, could do justice to the multiplicity of levels that Wagner's mind and his operas work on. Yet few if any individuals who have encountered his works can remain indifferent to them, indeed they can be both hated and loved at the same time. It is perhaps this ambivalence to Wagner that many people who love music find most difficult to come to terms with. Controversy continues to surround Wagner, whether it be his unpleasant, egocentric personality, his anti-semitic views (the character of Beckmesser in *The*

Mastersingers is thought by some to represent much of what Wagner hated in Jews), or productions of his operas.

Arguments about how these long and difficult works should be portrayed on the stage have raged ever since Wagner's time. Letters continue to flood into magazines and newspapers after a new production of almost any of his works. Such arguments usually surround 'what it all means', with producers and critics alike being accused and counter-accused of missing the point. Wagner's own explanations of the Ring are confused by his own rationalisations and obsessions. His financial and inter-personal world was chaotic, demanding as he did unconditional love and acceptance. His personality was dominated by marked neurotic traits, and a brief look at some of his letters soon tells us there was more than a touch of the schizoid about him. His mental instability went hand-in-hand, and was inseparable from his creativity. What precisely the Ring means could not have been entirely apparent even to Wagner, although the clarity of the argument, at its many levels, is remarkable. It is perhaps all the more astonishing that Wagner's intermittent and erratic insight at a social level was mirrored by an imagination harnessed in such a rational and creative way.

The challenge of the Ring is something most opera houses face every decade or so. The producer is taking on a huge task, and his burden is all the greater because he must use a design concept that will carry all 16 hours of music effectively. In addition, he should also make meaningful use of the heavy undercurrent of symbolism within the framework of the drama. Wagner's prose-writings were something he needed to do for himself, since they laid the theoretical groundwork for his emerging works of art, and he was able to clear his mind of some unnecessary clutter. Two of Wagner's essays: *Opera and Drama* (1852) and *Religion and Art* (1880) indicate how he saw the creative process in action. He felt it was the function of the artist "to bring the unconscious part of human nature into consciousness". The rational unconscious is not easily accessed, but evidence of it can be found in symbolism, and it is here that we hit upon the centre of Wagner's creativity. No great works of art are entirely conscious in design. Instead they spring from that twilight world where the unconscious libidinous energy of the mind interacts with conscious exploring and directing elements.

That the Ring is an allegory of the corrupting power of money is undeniable, and together with its economic implications was unidirectionally explored in *The Perfect Wagnerite* by George Bernard Shaw (1898). Yet this is only a part of what the Ring has to offer. We need to look deeper than the northern European myths on which these four music dramas are based and look carefully at the symbols, both musical (in the form of leit-motifs) which are sym-



The Royal Opera's 1989 production of *Die Walküre*. Siegmund (René Kollo) and Sieglinde (Gabriele Schnaut). Photograph by Zöe Dominic.

bolic aural images, and the visual images indicated in the libretto and Wagner's stage instructions. Robert Donington, a musicologist with a profound interest and understanding of psychology and the psycho-analytic schools, published in 1963 possibly the most influential analysis of the Ring's subtext since Shaw's book in 1898. *Wagner's Ring and its Symbols* was widely acclaimed when it first appeared for its impressive insight into both the man and his music. Donington's 300 page document is a Jungian analysis of the Ring, which he felt was the most helpful way of looking at the meaning of Wagner's mythology. He argues his case for such a view with an appealing paragraph: "... it is Jung's work that helps most in picking up the 'inexhaustable' contents of mythology, which must certainly include our personal repressions, but which just as certainly include a distilled essence of human experience from untold generations before us: a truth of archetypes rather than a truth of persons".

Although Donington's book is long and exhaustive in its analysis it is not the whole answer, but it does present a coherent and fully thought-through argument. A sample of his side headings at this point are enough to give the reader a flavour of his ideas; the more interested reader must turn to the full text for the full picture. In *Das Rheingold*, which Wagner designated the preliminary evening to the three larger Ring operas which follow it, he sets in motion drama with Alberich (a dwarf) stealing the gold from the Rhinemaidens by renouncing love. Part of the gold is fashioned into a ring which gives the wearer great powers. In order to pay the giants who built the Gods

their fortress, Valhalla, and recover Freia who is taken as a hostage by the giants, the leader of the Gods, Wotan, along with Loge, tricks Alberich out of the gold. Alberich curses the ring, which is also taken from him, and the first evidence of this is seen when the giants fight over the gold and one of them is killed. The Gods cross the rainbow bridge into Valhalla.

Working from the prelude to *Rhinegold* through the subsequent four scenes, Donington suggests that the beginning of the world is a symbol for our own beginning: the state shown at the beginning of *Rhinegold* is the state of nature, it is pristine and innocent. The origin of Man's consciousness is a deviation from this. We are shown a part of the timelessness which is a feature of the collective unconscious, into which is placed both light coming into the darkness of the water (the gold) and a conscious ego with a sense of time and the human burden of responsibility. He has choice and therefore conflict. The mastery which comes from the power of the ring not only represents the outer world, but also the mastery of the libidinal instinct. Gold is, of course, a movable symbol of value but, as Donington points out, it is not in itself evil, only an indifferent party to good or bad ends. Wotan is seen as an image of the self, as a father image, as ego- and inner-consciousness. Fricka, Wotan's wife, is viewed as part of Wotan's inner femininity. The ring becomes a symbol for the self and is ultimately an expression of the libido. It is the use and abuse of this symbol of continuity (a circle has a uniting imagery) that is not always under the control of the same ego and super-ego which forms the centre of the drama. Not all the characters who come into contact with it understand its significance, and those who know of its power try to harness it for their ends, which they do with varying success.

The second opera, the *Valkyrie*, is concerned with incest, with further perversion of the natural order by Wotan's favourite daughter, Brünnhilde, as she tries to protect the brother and sister (Siegmond and Sieglinde) from Sieglinde's husband and the punishment of the Gods. Donington looks at incest in its mythological context as giving expression to something that displeases society, yet is sanctified by writings. He argues that the "... incest taboo is to prevent our slipping back from our measure of human consciousness and responsibility into an animal state of unconsciousness and irresponsibility". Most of us at some point have wished that we could be unburdened of our conscious struggle through life and be returned to the dependent incestuous relationship with the mother.

And so on: Donington moves persuasively through *Siegfried* and then *Gotterdammerung*. Much of his argument clearly operates at the unconscious level whenever we experience the Ring. It is the power of the symbols, not all intentionally placed there by Wagner, but, nevertheless present and waiting to

resonate with one's own psyche. So strong are symbols such as a cross, for example, that they are recognisable to cultures who have no such current imagery. Wagner's symbols operate at a similar level, which is why, I think, people who often love other forms of music find Wagner so disturbing.

It was perhaps Patrice Chereau's 1977 centenary production of the Ring at Bayreuth which set the scene for the new theatricality in opera. The possibilities offered by deconstructionalism were for the first time realised in the opera house. Here was a view based on Shaw's political angle on Wagner, with a provocative design concept that made free with Wagner's stage instructions and actor-singers about whom one could not remain indifferent. The audience had to think; the producer's opera had arrived.

Of course, deconstructionalism is not the last word in the production of the Ring. It is not meant to be, and there have been far less successful attempts than Chereau's enlightened staging. Indeed, the storm of applause and booing that greeted the final curtain of Harry Kupfer's production of the Ring at Bayreuth in both 1988 and 1989, was the most interesting phenomenon of a theatrical experience whose overall merits were few. This a post-holocaust Ring. Set on a long lunar landscape causeway with a disappearing perspective upstage (the 'Highway of the World'), it was capable of some arresting images, particularly when side-lit through dry ice. The designer, Hans Schavernoeh, used the impressive and well-equipped stage, together with state of the art lighting (including lasers), to create effects and dramatic spaces that added-up to hi-tech Wagner and little else. Sure, it looks exciting, contemporary, something that you could get easily involved in, particularly in the still photos used to promote it. Yet there are surprisingly few new ideas, and those that emerge do not get beyond the embryonic.

Kupfer basically plays it straight, telling the story clearly but with little insight into what it all means. This is fine at one level, but then why make an attempt to update it? Kupfer's production says: the world has been nuked, there are survivors, they squabble over the gold, disaster. The post-holocaust idea is carried through with what seems to be a great deal of expense to no particular purpose. If anything, I will remember this production for its wonderful use of lasers: so what? There are many important issues in the Ring. To present a few of them in the context of an exciting, meaningful production must be the aim of any producer. The good producer's genius lies in his ability to strike a truthful resonance with a work through reinterpretation: only then can the operatic experience be meaningful. We are exposed to something new, and understand the opera just that fraction more.

In my sixth and final article in this series, I shall look at some facets of 20th century opera.