

# The German Empire & Wagner

## Discussion Lesson

11

### OBJECTIVES

By the end of this discussion, you should be able to do the following:

- Explain how Germany's history in the 19<sup>th</sup>-nineteenth century contributed to its extreme nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> twentieth century.
- Explain Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* and relate it to the art of today.
- Explain Wagner's use of the *Leitmotiv*.
- Know the story of *The Ring of the Nibelungen* and how Wagner tells it in his operas.

**Comment [J1]:** We italicized all German words for consistency.

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### KEY TERMS

By the end of this discussion, you should understand the following terms:

- Nationalism
- Romanticism
- Demagoguery
- Gesamtkunstwerk
- Leitmotif

### PREPARE

Study the following instructional material:

The year 1871 was a watershed year incredibly important in the history of Europe. After a crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the French discarded their Second Empire by overthrowing Napoleon III and proclaiming the Third Republic. Thus two centuries of French domination of the continent in Europe came to an end. George Bernard Shaw is reported to have said that it was a marvelous victory, for the most arrogant and warlike people on the continent had been defeated by the most gentle and peace-loving. A new day had dawned over Europe; the German hour had come. Long divided by religion and politics, the princes and diplomats of Germany now marched into the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles and proclaimed their own Second Empire. It was a smugly appropriate place for such a transfer of power.

**Comment [B12]:** This paragraph was moved to the end of the section to create linear flow.

**D**uring medieval times, Germany had been one of the great medieval empires. It had dominated Central Europe, including Italy, and its each rulers claimed the title of Holy Roman Emperor. But this First Reich (or “empire”) gradually deteriorated in the 15<sup>th</sup>-fifteenth and 16<sup>th</sup>-sixteenth centuries, and then the The Protestant Reformation sounded its death knell, as North Germans embraced Protestantism and South Germans remained true to Catholicism. As a result, In the 1500s and 1600s, there were a series of religious conflicts, including the devastating Thirty Years War, that decimated the German countryside, population, and culture; as local, mercenary, and foreign armies traipsed back and forth across German soil. By the 1700s, even though a German Emperor was still being elected, the existence of a unified nation was no more no longer existed, than a polite fiction—it was the French philosopher Voltaire who quipped that the Holy Roman Empire was “neither holy, nor Roman, nor an empire.” The reality was a Germany divided into nearly 300 separate political entities, ruled by a confusing array of kings, dukes, bishops, and town councils.

**Comment [W3]:** We didn't feel this quote added to the discussion.

**Comment [S4]:** We felt this paragraph as a whole was a bit history-heavy, so we tried to take out details we didn't feel were important to the text.

**Comment [B15]:** We were confused by the word “backwardness” and felt that this new wording conveyed the intended idea more clearly.

The This confused political backwardness state also had an effect on affected German culture. During the 17<sup>th</sup>-seventeenth and 18<sup>th</sup>-eighteenth centuries, the Germans admired and imitated the music, art, and literature of the bordering countries on their borders. German opera companies produced Italian operas, German symphonies employed Italian tempo and dynamic markings, and German instrumental suites used French names for their dances. Every petty German monarch emulated the greatness of the palace and gardens at Versailles, and French was the preferred language among educated Germans;—the Prussian King, Frederick the Great, considered German the language of peasants, and only spoke it to his soldiers. Nevertheless, German artists, musicians, and poets were among the finest in Europe during these two centuries—. Although the German composers Bach and Handel may have written wrote concertos, allemandes, gavottes, and passacaglias music in the styles of the surrounding countries, but they were the finest examples producers of these those works in their day. By the time of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven in the late 18<sup>th</sup> eighteenth century, the Germans were the acknowledged leaders in instrumental music and had made serious inroads into the Italian and French monopoly hegemonies over opera.

**Comment [J6]:** We didn't know if this list would make sense to the average reader because it requires an understanding of the origin of each of these styles of music. By simply stating the music styles were foreign, the idea is conveyed much clearer.

**Comment [J7]:** We feel that this is a better word to use. It is a familiar word to most people, so the idea is more understandable.

But it was also during the careers of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven that Germany reached its rock bottom nadir politically. The north of Northern Germany was largely dominated by Prussia with its capital in Berlin, the south and Southern Germany was dominated by Austria with its capital in Vienna. These two powers spent much of the 18<sup>th</sup> eighteenth century at war with each other, but a new power entered to chasten both of these German states. In 1789, the French Revolution set in motion a chain of events that led to the overthrow, then and execution of the French monarch, and This led to the subsequent rise of Napoleon Bonaparte to power, first as an elected official, and then eventually as duly crowned Emperor. Throughout his meteoric career, Napoleon dealt with one coalition after the other of German states intending to remove him from power. Accounted Considered one of the greatest military geniuses of all time, Napoleon achieved his greatest victories over the Austrians (especially at Austerlitz in 1805) and the Prussians (especially at Jena Auerstadt in 1806). For the next several years, Germany lay prostrate before the French Emperor. He Napoleon abolished utterly the remnants of the Holy Roman Emperor and reorganized Germany into a group of satellite states that he exploited politically, militarily, and economically.

**Comment [W8]:** We felt “considered” sounded more natural and conversational.

**Comment [J9]:** We tried to eliminate some of the history, leaving just what is important to understand the progression of events.

In so doing so, Because of this, Napoleon can be seen as the creator of German nationalism. Resentment against the occupying French turned into a spirit of resistance that

brought about a renewed appreciation of ~~then and~~ passion for; all things German. Beethoven stubbornly began ~~to use marking German in~~ the tempo and dynamics ~~markings in~~ ~~of his compositions in German~~. Clemens Brentano and ~~Ludwig~~ Achim von Arnim began collecting ~~the~~ German folk songs and poetry that would soon ~~find its imitators amongst~~ ~~be imitated by~~ the greatest poets and composers of Europe. ~~And~~ ~~At the same time~~, the Brothers Grimm started their great journey up and down the roads of Germany, collecting the tales and legends that ~~had~~ been forgotten by the wise and learned; but that would soon revolutionize the art of a continent. Germany resisted politically, too, and when Napoleon suffered his great defeat in ~~far-off~~ Russia, they wasted no time in rising up and throwing off the French yoke. Austria and Prussia were both at the table of victors at the Congress of Vienna in 1815; when the map of Europe was redrawn from the ashes of the defeated Napoleonic Empire.

**Comment [J10]:** For consistency, both composers first names are mentioned.

Nevertheless, unity was still a long way off. There remained a powerful rivalry between the two greatest German powers; Prussia and Austria. Much of the difference between these two nations lay in two different ideas ~~for an of~~ empire. Prussia, ~~determined never to be humiliated again,~~ the way they had at Jena, and ~~instituted universal male military conscription;~~ by mid-century they had the largest, best-trained army on the continent, and ~~were jockeying to become first among equals in a pan-Germanic state;~~ ~~believed in a powerful military~~. Austria, on the other hand, ~~put her~~ ~~placed~~ confidence in diplomacy. ~~The Austrian p~~Prince, Metternich, dominated the Congress of Vienna, and Austria ended up with a vast, ~~polyglot empire of Germans, Bohemians, Hungarians, Poles, Serbs, Croats, Albanians, and Italians all,~~ loosely connected by a single Hapsburg monarch. Metternich believed the way to dominate was to disunify. ~~His motto was *divisi et imperum* (divide and conquer); was his motto. However,~~ The Prussian model proved to ~~be the one that worked~~ ~~successful over the Austrian approach~~. Prussia determined that the road to German unification lay through ~~in Vienna's exclusion,~~ and ~~accomplished it this unification by defeating Austria in 1866;~~ ~~Although the two powers continued to vie for control, eventually the Prussians claimed victory, in what came to be called the Seven Weeks' War.~~ The Prussian ~~c~~Chancellor, Otto von Bismark, ~~then~~ manipulated Napoleon III (who was considerably less astute than his illustrious uncle); into declaring war on Prussia in 1870 ~~in order to give Germany a common enemy~~. All ~~of~~ the German states, save Austria, joined him, ~~the~~ ~~The~~ French were routed at Sedan, Paris, ~~was becoming~~ encircled, ~~and~~ a long siege reduced the Parisians to eating rats; ~~As a result,~~ the French emperor was overthrown, peace was made on ~~the~~ Germans' terms, and the German Empire was proclaimed on ~~18~~ January 18, 1871.

**Comment [S11]:** We tried to convey the two ideas you told us were important while also removing as much extra material as we could.

~~Thus,~~ German nationalism was ~~thus~~ both Prussian and militant. Bismark proclaimed that "Not through speeches and majority decisions will the great questions of the day be decided ~~... but~~ by iron and blood." By 1871, most male German citizens had spent a considerable portion of their lives in uniform, and parades, reviews, and marches were an integral part of German culture. German nationalism was also industrial. A modern army, Bismarck believed, did not run on courage alone; this was the iron part of Bismarck's formula. Germany had lagged behind the United Kingdom and France in the industrial revolution. They now made up for lost time with a vengeance. By 1900, the German industrial plant was able to meet its rivals on considerably more than equal terms. ~~It must be emphasized,~~ ~~h~~However, ~~that~~ most of this industrialization was for the express purpose ~~the of~~ building of a powerful military. Germany first built an army capable of tackling any other continental power, then ~~built~~ a navy intended to match the British.

**Comment [J12]:** This quote is accurate. It comes from a famous speech Otto von Bismarck gave called "Blood and Iron."

Therefore, the year 1871 was incredibly important in the history of Europe. After a crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the French discarded their Second Empire by overthrowing Napoleon III and proclaiming the Third Republic. Thus, two centuries of French domination in Europe came to an end. George Bernard Shaw is reported to have said that it was a marvelous victory, for the most arrogant and warlike people on the continent had been defeated by the most gentle and peace-loving. A new day had dawned over Europe; the German hour had come. Long divided by religion and politics, the princes and diplomats of Germany now marched into the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles and proclaimed their own Second Empire. It was a smugly appropriate place for such a transfer of power.

## German Nationalism in the Arts

**Y** ~~But~~ et, German nationalism was something more than drills and weaponry. It was an art, a nature, almost a religion. There was such a thing as “Germanness,” summed up in the word “~~v~~olk;” (folk, people), which for Germans has a much richer context than any English equivalent. German art during the 19<sup>th</sup> nineteenth century took inspiration from virtues it considered to be distinctly German. Before the 19<sup>th</sup> nineteenth century, an artist was considered primarily an artisan who performed specialized tasks for an employer. Sometimes the employer was a noble patron of the arts, sometimes a group of businessmen, church officials, or town council. Regardless, the artist’s primary task was to satisfy the tastes of those who paid his bills. ~~But~~ However, in the 19<sup>th</sup> nineteenth century, things changed. Much of ~~it~~ the shift began with Beethoven ~~-~~ within ~~Within~~ his lifetime, he outgrew the role of humble employee until he was recognized as a musical giant ~~—~~; not a satisfier of tastes, but their creator. By the end of his life, he was writing compositions that few in his day could begin to understand; nevertheless, the general attitude was that someday the world would catch up to Beethoven the ~~+V~~ isionary, and meanwhile, it was society’s responsibility to take care of his temporal needs so ~~that~~ he could fulfill his spiritual quest. This became the typical 19<sup>th</sup> nineteenth-century attitude toward artists: by some fortuitous combination of gifts and diligence, the artist sees things others cannot, and ~~see~~. In fact, our the only avenue to that hidden realm is through their prophetic eyes. This belief in a mysterious and indefinable essence, along with a deep and unfulfilled longing for it, is the most important element of the style that has come to be known as German **R** omanticism.

This kind of attitude assumes that there is such a hidden realm, an invisible world standing behind the visible one, ~~a world that~~ that has a direct effect upon mortal creation but ~~that~~ is usually not ~~perceived~~ perceivable by the unenlightened. This world cannot be known understood by the usual methods, but can only be felt, intuited, and art is the primary access to it. Much of the inspiration for this idea came from the German tales and legends that began to surface around the time of Napoleon. The world of the Brothers Grimm, for instance, is ~~was~~ a world of hidden magic. Spirits, fairies, ~~sprites~~, witches, elves, gnomes, trolls, and giants were ~~are~~ regular inhabitants of the this universe, and the stories told ~~tell~~ of their interactions s with normal humans s folk. Nature, too, was ~~is~~ magical. The 18<sup>th</sup> eighteenth century tended to see nature as either the orderly imitation of the mind of God or as the untamed wilderness put on earth for man to conquer. But to the mind of the **R** omantic, it was an entity ~~—~~; a living, breathing creature with its own personality

**Comment [W13]:** “Visionary” is being used as a title, so we feel it should be capitalized.

**Comment [J14]:** According to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, the word *romantic* is not capitalized. To ensure consistency, we followed *Chicago* throughout.

**Comment [J15]:** Since this is discussing a work of literature, it should be referred to in the present tense as opposed to the past tense.

**Comment [J16]:** We cut this list down to the more common fairytale creatures to make the list shorter and easier to get through.

and will. Sometimes this will is malevolent, as in Melville's *Moby Dick*; other times, it is rustic and peaceful, as in Mendelssohn's *Scottish Symphony*. Always it is always an adventure for the hero or heroine, who might triumph over impossible odds, or come crashing down in glorious flames. Frequently the artist identifies himself as the hero, triumphing over the limited tastes of his audience, or starving to death in misunderstood but noble poverty.

**Comment [J17]:** We feel it would be helpful to have a link to this piece for students to listen to. Most people are familiar with *Moby Dick*, but few have heard the *Scottish Symphony*.

### Richard Wagner

The climax of the German Romantic Movement came with the career of the composer Richard Wagner. Perhaps no other composer has simultaneously produced simultaneously such strong feelings of adoration and revulsion. In his lifetime, he was able to dominate everyone around him, to seduce other men's wives and make the husbands feel it a privilege to be cheated, cuckolded, to garner the resources of an entire kingdom for his artistic aims, and to inspire a school of operatic composition that still resonates in the works of our today. And yet, like that earlier Romantic anti-hero/antihero, Napoleon, he also created his own opposition, and there have been at least as many musicians, philosophers, and opera-goers/opera-goers who detest everything Wagnerian as there are those that adore him.

**Comment [W18]:** The term romantic is capitalized here because it refers to the specific German Romantic Movement, not the movement generally.

In the first place, Wagner has had the distinct disadvantage of having been Adolf Hitler's favorite composer, a kind of defamation by association. Anyone who has seen Leni Riefenstahl's film, *The Triumph of the Will*, (*Triumph des Willens*) has a hard time forgetting the image of thousands of storm troopers goose-stepping to "Siegfried's Rhine Journey." Leading members of the Wagner family that gleefully leapt on the Nazi bandwagon when it came their way did nothing to help the Wagner reputation. Anti-Wagnerians hasten to point out the similarities between the two men Wagner and Hitler: both were of uncertain parentage, both grew up warped and frustrated by their youthful experiences, and both soon learned that they had a special gift for dominating the people around them. Both were also capable of assuming the role of the great man and so skillfully playing played the part so skillfully that almost everyone around them came under their spells. And finally, both were capable of almost unbelievable selfishness; to both Wagner and Hitler, the world existed for their exploitation.

**Comment [W19]:** While we recognize that Adolf Hitler is dead and this sentiment would normally be past tense, the disadvantage is still very applicable in the present tense.

**Comment [J20]:** As per your request, we have changed all of the titles of works in this discussion so that they all have the English translation first followed by the original foreign title in parenthesis.

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Like Hitler, Wagner was both a German nationalist and an anti-Semite. And like most young Germans, Wagner was a revolutionary that who wanted to see the creation of a unified, liberal, German state. Furthermore, he was actively involved in the creation of that state after the revolutions of 1848-49 Wagner had to flee to Switzerland, and he spent five years in exile there. From time to time, Wagner's writings, and even occasionally his operas, assume the glorification of the German nation, sometimes to the detriment of other European peoples. This becomes is most unattractive evident in Wagner's writings about Jews. Perhaps his most infamous act was the publication of a tract (an essay-like pamphlet) titled, *Die Juden in Musik* (*The Jew in Music* "Judaism in Music") ("Das Judentum in der Musik"); The burden/main argument of this piece of which is that, since Jews were a foreign element grafted onto the German people, they neither had a culture of their own nor had yet had had sufficient time to assimilate German culture. Until/Until about the time of Wagner's birth, Jews were kept in ghettos, and it wasn't until the early to middle 19<sup>th</sup> mid-nineteenth century that Jews were integrated into German culture. Wagner's objection to Jews, therefore, was neither religious nor racial. It was artistic. Since German music and art was not native to the Jews, all Jewish composers of classical art and music could do was imitate the German example. Hence, music by Jewish composers such as Meyerbeer or Mendelssohn (even though the latter Mendelssohn was a Christian, the son of a man

**Comment [J21]:** We could not see how Wagner fleeing to Switzerland was related to him creating a unified German state, so we removed this detail.

**Comment [J22]:** We were not sure if students would recognize what a tract is, so we have inserted a short definition to clarify what it is.

**Comment [J23]:** The title of this work is wrong. It is actually called "Das Judentum in der Musik" or "Judaism in Music."

**Comment [J24]:** The title of this work is wrong. It is actually called "Das Judentum in der Musik" or "Judaism in Music."

**Comment [W25]:** We need to look at this sentence. The tense is awkward.

converted from Judaism) was somehow less authentic and; less honest than the work of a native German composer.

Admittedly, this attitude is still a far cry from the Final Solution rhetoric of the Nazis, and most Jewish musicians of the day chose to overlook it (~~Mahler and Schönberg were both ardent Wagnerians~~).—Nevertheless it is symptomatic of something much more sinister—the attitude that the Jews were somehow a foreign element, a cancer of sorts, ~~that~~ They not only did not belong to the German nation, but ~~they, that~~ in fact, interfered with its health and well-being and would someday need to be excised.—This was the ugliest element of German nationalism; and would be harped on over and over by its adherents until it became a truism in the German national consciousness, the kind of truism that made it easier for the Nazis to justify the mass deportations and isolation of the Jews.

**Comment [B126]:** We felt that because Mahler converted to Roman Catholicism, just mentioning Schoenberg doesn't present a strong case, this parenthetical note didn't strengthen the idea.

Wagner's admirers often argue that Wagner would have been horrified at the Holocaust, and that his ideas of Jewish inferiority were just theories ~~that~~ he never intended to be carried out to such a radical extent.—But ideas are powerful things, and a bad idea propagated by an influential man can do an enormous amount of damage.—There can be little doubt that Wagner's ~~stupid little~~ pamphlet, coupled with the many nasty racial slurs he uttered in the course of his life, was a powerful contribution to the 20<sup>th</sup> ~~twentieth~~-century German attitude toward the Jews, ~~and they made Wagner an accessory before the fact to Germany's crimes of the Holocaust.~~

**Comment [J27]:** This is the author's opinion, so we removed it to keep the text neutral.

To some critics, Wagner's unsavory character alone is enough to reject his music out of hand. As far as they are concerned, someone as ethically distorted as Wagner could not have been capable of creating works of artistic merit.—~~h~~ His work can only be seductive, at best, and with all its pretensions of ennoblement ~~are nothing~~ but ~~“sounding brass and tinkling cymbals.”~~ (1 Corinthians 13:1).

**Comment [J28]:** This is actually a direct quote from 1 Corinthians 13:1 and so should be in quotations and cited.

~~And speaking of sounding brass,~~ Wagner ~~reminds his critics~~ is reminiscent of Hitler in yet another, perhaps more important way—his propensity for **demagoguery**.—In his ~~oratory~~ public speeches, Hitler was capable of swaying the masses to do his bidding in ways that are unthinkable to us in retrospect; it is still one of the great mysteries of human civilization how this ~~ridiculous~~ Austrian corporal with his wild eyes and Charlie Chaplin mustache could persuade one of the most civilized nations in the world to descend, ~~eagerly participating or silently acquiescing~~, into the barbaric abyss of National Socialism, the Second World War, and the Holocaust, ~~either eagerly participating or silently submitting~~. To some, Wagner's music, with its ~~bombast~~ pretentiousness, ~~its~~ intricate musico-dramatic (music drama) theories, ~~its~~ enormous resources, and ~~its~~ sheer scale, is another manifestation of that same mass manipulation,—an operatic incarnation of the ~~histrionics~~ theatrics, ~~the~~ marches, ~~the~~ pillars of light, and ~~the~~ swastika banners of the Nazis.

**Comment [J29]:** This is an opinion and should be removed.

**Comment [J30]:** *Bombast* is not a very commonly-used word. *Pretentiousness* conveys the same idea in a more familiar way.

**Comment [J31]:** *Histrionics* is also an uncommon word. By using *theatrics* instead, it ties it back to Wagner while getting the idea across in a more understandable way.

## Gesamtkunstwerk

Hitler notwithstanding, one of the most influential aspects of Wagner's works has to do with the relationship between music and the other arts. While Wagner was in exile in Switzerland, he wrote numerous political and artistic tracts; including one called ~~Die Kunstwerk der Zukunft~~ (“The Artwork of the Future?”) (“Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft”).—The basic premise of this work was that, by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> nineteenth century, all ~~of~~ the possibilities of each individual art form—~~of~~ music, ~~of~~ drama, ~~of~~ painting, sculpture, literature, and

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architecture—had been thoroughly explored and were on the verge of exhaustion.—Hence, the future of art lay in its combinative-combinable possibilities.

—The artwork of the future was something Wagner called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, (Ftotal Aart Form), which would combine all the arts into a single, unified composition, be they musical, visual, or verbal, into a single unified composition.—It was further requisite that a All aspects of this art form were to be created and controlled by a single individual, for only through the guidance of this ultimate genius could the work be unified toward a common end—anything else would be just be a collaborative hodge-podge/hodgepodge of unrelated ideas. (From this time on, Wagner stopped referring to his works as operas; and started calling them “music dramas,” to show that they were a new type of art work where all the elements existed on equal grounds).—Of course, it took someone of Wagner’s talent and energy to pull all this off; Wagner himself wrote the music and libretti (operatic text), designed the sets and costumes, coached the singers, conducted the orchestra, and even designed and built a theater for his works.

**Comment [J32]:** Most students may not recognize what this is, so we included a brief definition for clarity.

Another influential Wagnerian concept is that of the leitmotiv (“leading motif”), known in English as the leitmotif. This is a musical idea or theme that returns throughout the opera; and that Wagner and identifies with a particular some character, object, or idea. Every time the leitmotiv leitmotif returns, Wagner intends that someone on the stage is thinking of that particular person/character, object, or idea. Furthermore, Wagner uses these motives-motifs as the primary building blocks of the opera, using them to-weaving a symphonic web in the orchestra while the singers declaim the words of the libretto.

**Comment [J33]:** All instances of *leitmotiv* past this initial definition were changed to leitmotif, per your input and common usage.

### WThe Ring of the Nibelung

While Wagner was in exile in Switzerland he Wagner also came up with the idea for a massive Germanic musico-dramatic event. At first, he envisioned an opera drawn from Teutonic-old German mythology and based on the medieval Saga of the Völsungs (Völsungasaga)/Volsung Saga, a thirteen-century Icelandic saga.—He called the scenario for this opera Siegfried's Tod (Siegfried's Death), (Siegfried's Tod), but soon discovered that the story was far too large for a single work.—So, he conceived of a prequel, Der junge Siegfried (The Young Siegfried), (Der junge Siegfried), but this too also required too much backstory, and soon the work burgeoned-evolved into a trilogy of three-act operas plus a one-act prologue.—By this time, the subject matter had grown to include the medieval epic poem Nibelunglied, (The Song of the Nibelungs), (Nibelungenlied) and the myth of the Götterdämmerung, or Twilight of the Gods (Götterdämmerung), and the project had achieved an almost religious status, at least in Wagner’s mind.—Before setting out to write this ambitious work, he published a tract in which he glibly said that it may take over five years to complete such a project (it took over two decades); and called upon some a German monarch to bankroll the entire project, which would then become an annual German festival.

**Comment [J34]:** *Teutonic* is used here to refer to the Germanic people in general, so we felt it would be more clear to say *old German* instead.

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The result, a cycle of four operas called Der Ring des Nibelungen, (The Ring of the Nibelung), (Der Ring des Nibelungen), often referred to as the Ring Cycle, is remarkable on a number of levels. Its sheer size sets it apart as the largest single musical work in history.—The prologue, Das Rheingold, (The Rhine Gold), (Das Rheingold), is three hours long, and each of the succeeding three-act music dramas, Die Walküre, (The Valkyrie), (Die Walküre), Siegfried, and Götterdämmerung, (Twilight of the Gods),—are well over four hours each.—Wagner intended that they should be performed in four consecutive evenings; and only be presented at a theater

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constructed especially for them. ~~This~~ This last stipulation was calculated to create a national German festival out of the work, ~~but also~~ and because the conventional theaters of the day simply were not up to its demands. The monarch who came to Wagner's rescue was King Ludwig II of Bavaria, who was always somewhat unstable and eventually went mad—~~he~~ He put the entire Bavarian treasury at Wagner's disposal, which almost bankrupted the nation and nearly led to a coup against Ludwig. Wagner selected the little backwater town of Bayreuth for ~~his~~ the festival, and there he built his Festspielhaus (Festival Play House); and a ~~lavish~~ palatial mansion for himself. Ludwig pressured Wagner into performing the operas individually before the theater was finished, but the first complete Ring Bayreuth Festival was held in August of 1876; by ~~now~~ then, Germany was a united nation, and the Emperor himself, Wilhelm I, was in attendance.

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**Comment [J35]:** According to our research, this is the name the festival is known as.

Der Ring des Nibelungen The Ring of the Nibelung also featured the most complex leitmotiv leitmotif structure of any of Wagner's works—anywhere from 50 to 200 leitmotivs leitmotifs have been counted by ~~the~~ various experts, depending on how they interpret the development of the motives motifs. Some motives motifs are associated with persons characters, places, or things, but most have a psycho-mythological association. For instance, one motive motif represents the Rhinegold theingold (the hoard of gold guarded by the Rhine maidens), but by extension, it also represents the desire for worldly wealth. Another represents the Ring, but it also represents power and all things associated with it. Another motif is the Sword, Nothing, ~~but which~~ also symbolizes heroism, and valor, and conquest. One motif simultaneously represents simultaneously a person—the god Loge; a thing—fire; and a concept—energy and vigor. Many motives motifs have no concrete association at all, but immediately skip to the abstract, such as the “Renunciation of Love” or the “Resignation” motives motifs. Each of these motives motifs comes to represent the thoughts of the characters on stage, and we hear these thoughts in a web created by the orchestra, ~~while as~~ the singer, in recitative, sings the words the characters are speaking. All ~~of~~ the music of Der Ring The Ring of the Nibelung is constructed out of these leitmotivs leitmotifs, and Wagner develops and combines them in ingenious ways.

**Comment [J36]:** Since the English translations are the titles that you wanted listed first when naming works of art, it made sense to us that you would want the works referred to by their English rather than foreign titles throughout the discussions.

**Comment [J37]:** The word characters was used when the term leitmotif was originally defined.

**Comment [J38]:** While this would be a good term for the students to know, since it is a complex idea that is not necessary to understanding the point being made here, we suggest removing it. Also, the following phrase is a loose definition of what recitative is, so the idea is still conveyed.

Der Ring des Nibelungen The Ring of the Nibelung tells the story of a struggle to possess a ring of power, similar to the ring in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings—Wagner and Tolkien both used Nordic mythology as inspiration for their works. In Wagner's work, the dwarves are called Nibelungs, and one of them, Alberich, ~~made~~ makes a magic ring from gold he stole from the Rhine maidens, beautiful nymphs living beneath the surface of the Rhine River. The Ring gives its owner the power to rule the world, but in order to craft it, Alberich has to renounce love for all time.

#### [WATCH THE CLIP FROM THE RHINE GOLD DAS RHEINGOLD]

But Wotan, the king of the gods, tricks Alberich and steals his ring, then uses it to pay the giants, Fafner and Fasolt, for building the fortress/palace Valhalla. In Wagner's mythology, the gods are limited in their power, and Wotan must abide by the contracts he makes.

The rest of the Ring eCycle centers around Wotan's attempts to get the ring back from Fafner, ~~who~~ Fafner has quarreled with his brother, Fasolt, over the ring, killed him, and turned himself into a fierce dragon. Wotan roams the earth looking for a way to have Fafner killed because killing Fafner himself would break his contract with the giants. ~~without breaking his contract.~~



In an attempt to create a hero capable of killing Fafner for him, He Wotan sires a number of children, including such as the male and female twins, Siegmund and Sieglinde; he has with by a mortal woman. He also sires, and the the nine female Valkyries by Erda, the earth-mother goddess. He teaches Siegmund to be a great warrior; and sends his Valkyries forth on winged horses to collect the heroes of the earth who have died in battle. The Valkyries and bring them back to Valhalla to form an army to defend it from Alberich, who too is also plotting to get the ring. Wotan sends Siegmund to kill Fafner, but Wotan's wife, Fricka, the goddess of marriage, jealously points out that Siegmund is nothing more than an extension of Wotan's will, and so if he Siegmund kills the dragon, it will be the same as if Wotan killed it himself.

**Comment [W39]:** We felt this sentence was a bit long and would make more sense as two separate sentences.

Wotan relents; and commands his favorite Valkyrie, Brünnhilde, to make sure that Siegmund is killed in battle. Siegmund is killed, but Brünnhilde rescues his sister/wife Sieglinde, who is pregnant with Siegmund's child. Wotan punishes Brünnhilde for her rebellion by taking away her immortality; and putting her to sleep on a rock where she can be found by any man and forced to become his bride. But However, in the end, he relents and he puts a curtain of magic fire around the rock so that only the greatest of heroes can penetrate it and claim her as his the bride.

**Comment [EH40]:** According to your request, we attempted to make this summary as clear and simple as possible by removing unnecessary names and details.

#### [WATCH THE CLIP FROM *THE VALKYRIEDIE WALKÜRE*]

Sieglinde gives birth to Siegfried, a boy who knows no fear; who Siegfried grows and up, and kills the dragon, and claims the ring.

#### [WATCH THE CLIP FROM *SIEGFRIED*]

Siegfried then penetrates the fire and takes Brünnhilde as his bride. To someone steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition, all of the adultery and incest going on in the Ring Cycle is rather disturbing. Wotan, the king of the gods, makes love to a dizzying array of women in an attempt to father someone who can get the Ring back for him. Siegmund and Sieglinde are brother and sister, and but even though Sieglinde is already married to another man, she and Siegfried have both a romance and a child. And while it seems mild by comparison, Brünnhilde is Siegfried's aunt. None of this seemed to bother Wagner in the slightest. To him, the important thing was that Siegfried was born a free hero; with all of Wotan's powers and none of his limitations. This reflects a philosophical attitude, current in Wagner's day, that great things can only be accomplished by one who is not bound by the habits, mores and norms of everyday society. To an extent, this was the concept of the Romantic hero, be it Napoleon, Faust, or Wagner himself. In order for society to evolve, it needed people who could break the rules.

This idea was best enunciated-articulated by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, in his younger days an ardent admirer of Wagner in his younger days. In his work *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (*Jenseits von Gut und Böse: Vorspiel einer Philosophie der Zukunft*), Nietzsche expounds the concept of the Superman (*Übermensch*) (Superman) who, by his exceptional gifts and vigor, earns the right to disregard the conventions of society, and who can thus bring about the revolutions that society so desperately needs. This harebrained idea was to bear bore bitter fruit in the century ahead, and would serveserving as justification for atrocities that Wagner and Nietzsche could not have dreamed of in their most feverish nightmares.

**Comment [J41]:** This is the full title of the book.

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**Comment [J42]:** In all other instances of foreign words, the foreign word is used first and the English translation is placed in parenthesis. This has been corrected here for consistency.

**Comment [J43]:** This is an opinion and should be removed.

Nevertheless, the cycle continues: As the Ring Cycle continues, Brünnhilde has fortified fortifies Siegfried with spells for his upcoming foray into the world, leaving only his back unprotected, for she knows he will never turn it to an enemy. – Siegfried gives the Ring to Brünnhilde as a wedding gift, and then leaves to seek his fortune. Along the way, he encounters the Gibechungs Gibichungs, Günther and Gutrune, the son and daughter of a human king named Gibech, and their half-brother Hagen, who turns out to be the son of Alberich. – Günther is ruler king over the land, but has been unable to find a suitable wife. Hagen tells him of Brünnhilde, the most glorious of all mortal women. When Günther despairs of ever winning her, Hagen says that the greatest of all heroes, Siegfried, is on the way to the castle, and he will win the fair maiden for Gibech.

Hagen greets Siegfried with a magic potion that makes him fall in love with Gutrune and forget all everything else in his life. – He Siegfried then fetches Brünnhilde from the fire and presents her to Günther. Accusing him of infidelity, Brünnhilde gives him back the Ring, but Siegfried swears on Hagen's spear that he has never before met the woman. The men then go hunting, and Hagen gives Siegfried another drink, this one to refresh his memory. He Siegfried begins to tell his life story, and when he gets to the part about Brünnhilde, he remembers everything. Hagen drives his spear into Siegfried's back, exclaiming that since Siegfried admitted knowing Brünnhilde, the oath he swore on Hagen's spear was false; therefore, it was Hagen's duty to kill him with it. he has avenged his perjury. – As Siegfried dies, he sings a greeting to Brünnhilde. – As is so often the case in Wagner, death is seen as a blessing and an awakening from delusion.

Siegfried's body is taken back to the castle, accompanied by "Siegfried's Funeral March," one of the great instrumental interludes of *The Ring of the Nibelung* the Ring, Siegfried's Funeral March. Hagen tries to remove the Ring from Siegfried's hand, but the corpse makes a threatening gesture, and Hagen fearfully withdraws. – Brünnhilde then comes forward, and takes the Ring from Siegfried's finger, and orders that a funeral pyre be built. – She tells us the audience that she now knows everything; the libretto does not tell us explain what she knows, but she has evidently achieved some kind of enlightenment. So, as the flames of Siegfried's pyre lick the sky, Brünnhilde dons her Valkyrie costume, mounts her horse, and rides into the fire. Her last act of will is her own annihilation. The Rhine River overflows its banks and reclaims the Ring, Hagen is drowned trying to reclaim it, and the Rhine Maidens are seen swimming off with it. – In the distance, Valhalla too is in flames, and we hear one final stirring reprise of the Valhalla theme in all its grandeur. – But this too comes to an end, and the last thing we hear is the "Redemption through Love" theme hovering over all the destruction like the promise of a new and perfect world.

[WATCH THE CLIP FROM *GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG TWILIGHT OF THE GODS*]

#### TEACH ONE ANOTHER

##### Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways did Germany's history contribute to its extreme nationalism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> nineteenth and 20<sup>th</sup> twentieth centuries?
2. Compare Wagner and Hitler. Does Wagner's personality and beliefs invalidate his art? Why or why not?

3. Discuss Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Is art improved ~~in combination by combining it~~? What is lost in the mixture? How were Wagner's music dramas different in this respect from other operas? What are some applications of this technique in today's art and entertainment?
4. Discuss Wagner's ~~L~~*Leitmotiv* structure. What are the advantages of this kind of technique? Can you think of any disadvantages?
5. Why must Alberich renounce love to craft the ~~R~~*Ring*? What does this symbolize?
6. Why does Wotan put Brünnhilde to sleep? Why does he place ~~Magic magic Fire fire~~ around the rock? What musical elements does Wagner use to portray the fire?
7. Note the ~~L~~*Leitmotivs*/~~leitmotifs~~ for the bird, Siegfried, and the dragon. How do they each characterize their subject?
8. Discuss the ending of ~~The Ring of the Nibelung~~*the cycle*. Is it happy or sad? What ends? What is born? What changes?

**Comment [J44]:** All other German words are written in italics, so we italicized this for consistency.

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#### PONDER AND PROVE

Prepare and submit the following creative assignment:

Write a brief scenario for a music drama on a *Book of Mormon* story. Include a discussion of costumes, scenery, music, and other elements. Make it a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

**Comment [EH45]:** Since this is a common religious text, it is not italicized.