

music 310 – winter 2013

**The Idea of Nature
in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* and in Nineteenth-Century Music:
An Eco-Musicological Perspective**

Instructor: Tom Grey

Meeting time and place: Thursdays, 2:15 – 5:05 pm, Braun 102

TG office hours: Tuesdays, 3:15-5:05 pm, 219 Braun

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Course description and objectives:

The musical-theatrical representations of the natural environment in Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* cycle have always been noted and admired (even by the composer's detractors): from the depths of the river Rhine to the mountaintop fortress of Valhalla, the Valkyries' rock, the forests of *Siegfried* to the landscape of Siegfried's "Rhine Journey," back to the banks of the Rhine again at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Wagner animates these settings with elaborate modern variations of classical tropes of musical nature-imitation: the pastoral (the "Forest Murmurs" from *Siegfried*), the tempest (Donner's storm, the prelude to *Die Walküre*, the "Ride of the Valkyries," Wotan's various entrances and exits), flowing water, flickering flames, sunrise, sunset, rainbows, and so on. Wagner added to the existing Norse-Germanic pantheon an oracular nature-goddess of his own devising, Erda, who is placed in an ambiguous relation to the chief god, Wotan. Modern stagings of the cycle since Patrice Chereau's celebrated Bayreuth centennial production of 1976-1980 have repeatedly suggested the relation of the natural environment to the agency of mankind (including gods and dwarves) as an interpretive key to the whole cycle. Specifically, Alberich's theft of the symbolic "Rhine Gold" at the beginning of the cycle and his forging from it the magical talisman of world-domination, the Ring, is presented as an allegory of the human exploitation of natural resources in the modern era for industrial, military, or other economic and political ends. In such readings, the gesture of apocalypse that concludes the cycle, Brünnhilde's valedictory "immolation scene," resonates with various historical and potential forms of environmental catastrophe.

In this seminar we will investigate the role of the natural world in Wagner's *Ring* cycle in its manifold representational and symbolic layers. We will look at his musical-dramatic and mythological construction of "nature" from various historical and critical perspectives. How does nature in the *Ring* relate to Enlightenment and Romantic views of the relation between nature and culture or human society? How do Wagner's characteristic musical means – his evolving harmonic language, "endless melody," the leitmotif, theories of word-tone "language," etc. – relate to classical or other Romantic musical representations of nature? What, moreover, are

the changing claims made by composers, critics, or theorists with regard to music, and specifically Western tonal music, in relation to nature? (Does Wagner's music "betray" the natural foundations of tonality, as some critics would have it, or does Wagner succeed rather in bringing music and language closer to some envisioned natural state?)

In addition to close readings of relevant scenes, figures, and themes of the *Ring* cycle we will have the opportunity of applying similar questions to a wide variety of musical repertoire, from Beethoven's *Pastoral* Symphony to Berlioz's program symphonies, Romantic-era tone-poems, opera, ballet, as well as examples of "absolute music" (e.g., Bruckner). How do appeals to nature inflect the role of music in nationalist cultural discourse – in Germany and Austria, Russia and the Slavic countries, Scandinavia, or the United States? How do cultural modes such as fauvism, primitivism, barbarism, or futurism construct modernity through the deconstruction of harmonizing, pastoral conventions?

In particular, we will be looking at ways in which the relatively recent discipline of "eco-criticism" as practiced by literary and cultural critics, environmental historians, etc. has been adopted by musicologists over the past decade or so. How might the methods and objectives of "eco-musicology" inform new understandings of historical repertoire in a global, environmental cultural context?

Readings, papers, and assignments:

- The following outline indicates some initial readings in eco-criticism, eco-musicology, Wagner and the *Ring* cycle, and musicological studies of topics such as musical imitation, the pastoral, nationalism, and exoticism.
- Further readings will be assigned individually or for group discussion in the course of the term.
- You will be asked to provide weekly short papers (750 words) in response to readings and/or specific prompts starting in week 2.
- You should identify a relatively concise research topic involving themes of music, nature, and eco-criticism by about week 5 of the term (these topics may involve any aspect of 19th-century music and may potentially investigate eco-musicological approaches to earlier or later repertoire). A final research paper of about 5000-7000 words is due on 16 March 2013.
- Readings (including complete text and translation of the *Ring* libretto) are posted on Coursework in the "Materials" folder, arranged topically by subfolder. Piano-vocal scores of the *Ring* operas are on course reserve in the Music Library. Some DVDs of relevant productions may also be added (see also M310 YouTube playlist)

Tentative outline:

Week 1 (10 January)

Eco-criticism and eco-musicology: some initial thoughts.

Music and nature in the *Ring* cycle: environmental perspectives?

For first meeting, listen to the Royal Opera House feature on “The *Ring* and Nature” aired on 16 October 2012 re: revival of Keith Warner’s *Ring* Cycle at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (London):

<http://www.roh.org.uk/news/listen-the-ring-and-nature-roh-insights-session>

Reading:

Introduction and Chapter 1 (“Discourses of Nature”) from Katie Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford and Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1995), 1-14, 15-36.

Ring, Case study: The Prelude and sc. 1 of *Das Rheingold*

Week 2 (17 January)

Eco-criticism and eco-musicology: introduction (continued)

Nature in *Das Rheingold*

Reading:

- Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (2004), chapter 2: “Beginnings: Pollution”
- JAMS 2011 Colloquy, “Ecomusicology”: All read Aaron Allen framing pieces; Grimley, von Glahn, Watkins, and Rehding (individual assignments)
- George Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, “Preliminary Encouragements” and chapter 1, “The Rhine Gold” (1-26) and “Wagner as Revolutionist” (27-34)
- Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964): chapter 1 (3-33).
- Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire: Politics and Religion in Wagner’s Ring* (Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2006), chapter 3, “The Natural World and its Despoliation.”

Ring, Case study: *Das Rheingold*, scene 3 and Erda’s Warning (scene 4)

Week 3 (24 January)

Music-historical backgrounds, 1: Music and Pastoral, Baroque and Classical (to Beethoven’s Symphony no. 6). **Imitation and Representation.**

Reading:

- Alex Rehding review of German studies on music and nature (JRMA 2002)
- Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, chapter 3, “Pastoral” (33-58)
- Eduard Hanslick, Chapter 6 from *On The Musically Beautiful*
- Peter Schleuning, *Die Sprache der Natur: Natur in der Musik des 18. Jahrhunderts*, chapters 1 (“Natur’ um 1700”) and 2 (“Die Pastoral: friedliche Natur: Vier geistliche Beispiele”)

Repertoire: “Pastoral Symphonies” from: Corelli, “Christmas” Concerto, J. S. Bach, *Christmas Oratorio*, G.F. Handel, *Messiah*. Beethoven, Symphony no. 6, “The Pastoral.”

Week 4 (31 January: NB – this meeting will be re-scheduled)

Music-historical backgrounds, 2: Music and Pastoral in the 19th century

Reading:

- Helga De la Motte-Haber, *Musik und Natur* (selections)
- Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, chapter 4 (“Wilderness,” 59-84) and chapter 6 (“Animals,” 136-59)
- Arne Stollberg, “Regression und Klangerfahrung: Das ‘Waldweben’ als Wagners ästhetisches Schlüsselerlebnis,” in *Wagners Siegfried und die (post)heroische Moderne*, ed. Tobias Janz (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011), 235-58.
- Adrian Daub, “Mother Mime,” in *19th-Century Music* 32:2 (2008)

Ring, case study: *Siegfried*, “Forest Murmurs” and Siegfried vs. Mime

Week 5 (7 February)

“Nature” and music in 19th-century thought: *Naturphilosophie*

Mother Nature: gendered nature in literature, music, and the *Ring*

Reading:

- Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* chapter 3, 98-107 and chapter 4 (“Nature and Sexual Politics”)
- D. von Engelhardt, “Science, Society, and Culture in Romantic *Naturforschung* around 1800,” in *Nature and Society in Historical Context*, ed. Teich, Porter, and Gustafson (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 195-206.
- Susanne Vill, “Aspects of Erda,” in *Wagner* 23:1 (March 2002): 17-41.

Ring, case study: Erda, later on (*Siegfried*, Act 3, sc. 1)

Week 6 (14 February)

Music, Nature, and Nation

Reading:

- Soper, *What is Nature?* 107-12.
 - Daniel Grimley, Celia Applegate, Richard Taruskin, et al. – t.b.a.
- Repertoire: (Brahms, Dvorák, Smetana, Rimsky-Korsakoff, Sibelius, Ives)

Week 7 (21 February)

Anarchism vs. Environmentalism? The End of the *Ring*

Reading:

- Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* Chapter 8, “Ecology, Nature, and Responsibility”
- Philip Kitcher and Richard Schacht, *Finding and Ending: Reflections on Wagner’s Ring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapter 21, “Ending and Renewal,” 197-202.
- Mark Berry, *Treacherous Bonds and Laughing Fire* (chapter 3, again)
- John Deathridge, “Finishing the End: Third Day, *Götterdämmerung*,” from *Wagner Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 68-75.
- Dieter Borchmeyer, “The Myth of the Beginning and the End of History: *der Ring des Nibelungen*,” in *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner*, trans. Daphne Ellis (Princeton University Press, 2003), 212-37.

Ring, case study: The Immolation Scene (final scene of *Götterdämmerung*)

Week 8 (28 February)

Other Nature: Exoticism and Colonialism

Reading: t.b.a.

Repertoire: (Verdi, *Aida*; Meyerbeer, *L’Africaine*, Delibes, *Lakmé*)

Week 9 (7 March)

Phantasmagoria and Nature “redeemed”: *Parsifal*

Parsifal, case study: the “Good Friday Spell” episode from Act 3
(Cf. the Flower-Maidens and Kundry in Act 2, Prelude to Act 3)

Anarcho-primitivism and *Parsifal*

MET HD simulcast, *Parsifal* 2 March 9 am.

Week 10 (14 March)

Projects

Final paper due Monday, 18 March, 6 pm