

Wagner's *Ring* as a Musical and Dramatic Cycle. The Semantic Unity of the Tonal Structure

The idea for the only stage tetralogy in the history of music arose in 1848, but did not mature to its full realisation until 1872, in which year Wagner completed *Twilight of the Gods* – the final part of *The Ring of the Nibelung*. Whilst the lengthy hiatus in the work's composition between the second and third acts of *Siegfried* (1851–1871), devoted to work on *Tristan and Isolde* and *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg*, resulted in a stylistic evolution, it fortunately did not disturb the cohesion of the work, the concept of which – including on the tonal level – was clearly prepared even before Wagner began to compose the tetralogy.

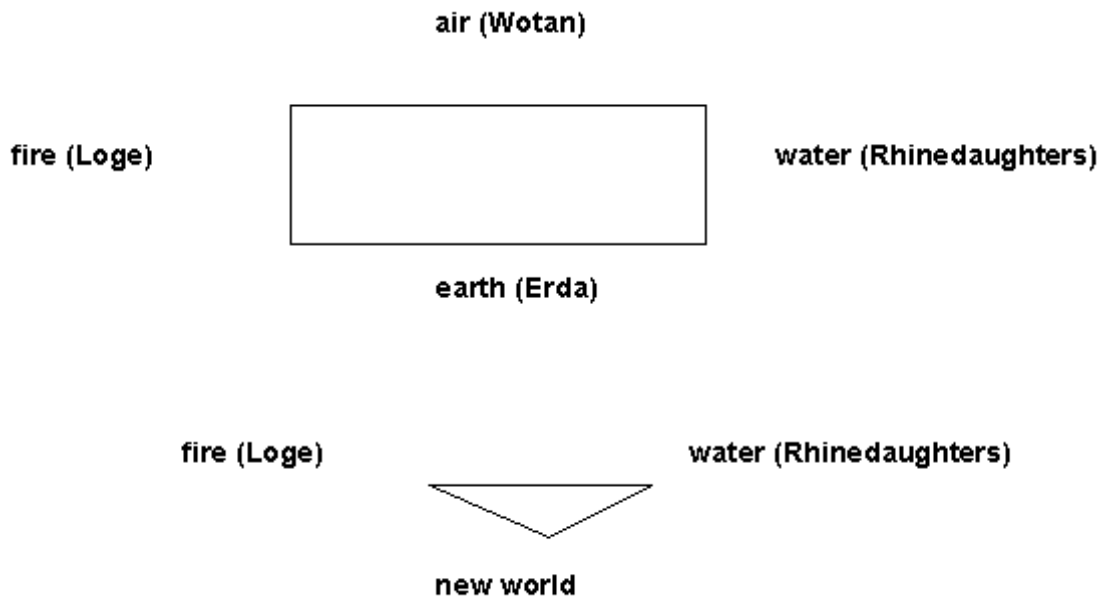
In drawing his inspiration from mythology, the composer was able to employ a vast metaphor, in which he could pass over the realistic concretisation of theatrical timespace. The intention of Wagner's symbolisation is perhaps un- or subconscious, but this does not mean that from the analytical point of view it eludes the tools of hermeneutics. The symbolic interpretation of *The Ring of the Nibelung* is no easy task. The multi-level structure of the action, the multitude of plot-lines, characters and objects of a highly-charged symbolism makes their interpretation particularly difficult. Besides this, one must also keep in mind the fact that symbol cannot be elucidated entirely, since a certain margin of inexplicitness, including on the interpretational level, often distinguishes true hermeneutic investigation from banal overinterpretation, and the borderline is not infrequently very fluid.

The Ring displays a clear gradation of dramaturgical tensions. *The Rhinegold* presents a macrocosm in its original, undisturbed complexity, and also the pillars of destruction which will lead to the ultimate tragedy and at the same time provide a pretext for the further development of the work. The cosmos of the prologue contains the four elements of air, fire, water and earth, which have their specific designata in the drama: Wotan, Loge, the Rhinedaughters and Erda. The action takes place on three basic planes, representing a layered structure: the overground world of the gods, the earthly world of humans (who do not yet appear in the prologue) and the underground world of the Nibelungs, the dwarfs. This peculiar cosmology, filled with internal connections, essentially serves to restore the original order of the world, which was symbolically disturbed by Alberich's stealing of the Rhinegold. This was made possible by his renouncing of love, which triggered an avalanche of unforeseen events increasingly disrupting the Logos.

The world's tragic embroilment in the soullessness of the Nibelungs and the moral weakness of the pagan gods is to be redeemed by humans, who, renowned for their moral integrity and heroic deeds, can become worthy of the role of the gods. *The Valkyrie*, as an heroic drama, shows the complicated path of humans to the higher world, paid for with infidelity (Sieglinde to Hunding), betrayal (Brünnhilde of Wotan), incest (the amorous union of the siblings, Siegmund and Sieglinde), and finally death (Siegmund and Sieglinde). Yet the result is a positive creation: the mythical superman, Siegfried, whose cognizance of the world and heroic deeds form the subject of the drama *Siegfried*, which realises the convention of the optimistic drama. Finally, the gigantic fresco of *Twilight of the Gods* is devoted wholly to the destruction of the values and ideals set forth in the preceding parts of the tetralogy. The failure of the last chance to 'save the world' leads to the twilight of the gods and possibly, as a consequence, to the rebirth of the world of a new order, although one may doubtless advance many interpretations of the prophetic ending.

The cosmological vision of the four elements and three worlds has prompted the most disparate of interpretations. Particularly curious, yet interesting too, is the alchemic conception put forward by Tomas Brandhofe. In his reading, the representation in *The Ring* of the four elements and three alchemic principles of *sulphur* (gas), *mercurius* (liquid) and *sal* (solid) not only fulfils the role of the static presence and symbolic epitome of the laws of the world, but also possesses a dynamic function, which Brandhofe sees as essentially constituting an epitome of the esoteric sense of the work. *Mercurius*, which imparts knowledge of the world (of its four elements) and thus also of the possible changes in the world, is responsible for the transformation of the

original order of the four elements through the climactic synthesis – impossible, of course, from a 'physical' point of view – of water and fire, out of which a new world is to be born. At the same time, the elements of air and earth cease to exist according to the principles hitherto pertaining: both Wotan and Erda are annihilated, together with their ambiguous morality. These symbolic transformations can be summarised as follows:



The alchemic transformations which lead from the original state of things to the finale of *Twilight of the Gods* ultimately come down to Brünnhilde's assimilation of knowledge of the world (*mercurius*) in the finale of *The Valkyrie* and to Siegfried's understanding of the world. However, these individuals must unite in order to destroy the world. So it is they who have brought about the reduction of the elements of earth and air, and their death becomes a symbol of the fusion of the elements which remain (Brandhofe, 1988: 153–159).

However, *The Ring of the Nibelung* is undoubtedly more than just a drama of the elements. Equally crucial would appear to be the motors or motives behind the actions of the protagonists, as 'flesh and blood' creatures. In *The Valkyrie*, these are love, hate and power, which symbolically govern the successive acts of the drama; in *Siegfried*, they are the hero and nature, forming a synthesis at the end of the drama; finally, in *Twilight of the Gods* we have the almost Shakespearean death of the hero and the element of tragedy, which becomes 'the vital element of the world and which derives from things themselves' (Scheler, 1954). It is in this last drama that the poetry of retrospection, at the service of which the leitmotif technique is employed, was developed most fully. Here, almost all the motifs are quoted and a series of tales are introduced – reminiscences, which at once both fashion and substantiate the tissue of the drama.

Finally, the last of the methods used by Wagner in forging the world of *The Ring* consists in the opposition between life and death, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, joy and sadness, and finally – perhaps most crucial of all – God and man. This oppositional vision, on both the aesthetic and ethical, the gnoseological and ontological, level, pervades the literary and musical world of the work. The traditional musical designata of these contrasting qualities – the minor key, the descendent melody, the tendency towards dissonance and the unresolved dissonances in the endings of phrasal structures, the low position of the voices and instruments in connection with qualities endowed with a 'minus' sign (see Treiber, 1975: 250) and the traditionally positive musical rhetoric in passages that are marked with a 'plus' – may constitute not only the point of departure, but also a sort of complement to the work's characteristic layer of symbolism.

The musical realisation of the complex structural and semantic principles at work in *The Ring* should also be seen in terms of multiple layers. The oft-raised question of the modernity of the

tetralogy's musical language, which binds the elements of the music together in a completely new way, and especially the new structural-semantic dependence of the text on the music (Lorenz's 'poetico-musical period') and its involvement in the harmonic layer, give rise to a number of new problems, which would appear to overshadow the question of the traditionally conceived non-musical signification of key, particularly given the innovative harmony that comes here to the fore, and consequently to difficulties in pinpointing the principal key, frequent key changes, or even the temporary obscuring of major-minor tonal features.

On the other hand, it becomes extremely difficult in our analysis of the links between key and the semantic domain to disregard Wagner's main method for assuring the cohesion of this enormous work, namely the scrupulously observed play of the leitmotifs which characterise the characters, symbols, situations, affective states, and so on. And yet it turns out that these calling-cards or emblems of the drama's structural components, between which arise the internal relations of linkage or change that occur as part of the motivic working (see Dahlhaus, 1987) are not the only determinants of the drama's peculiar 'musical action'. What is more, whilst the leitmotifs, being both obvious and relatively easy to grasp, are part of the external layer of the drama, conveying information on the protagonists, events and action, and at times even blatantly labelling particular 'themes', other elements, of a more implicit nature, including the 'key code', which supplements the deep layer of the work, linked to its symbolism, belong to the domain of subtext. Given the multitude of symbolic layers and their wealth of meanings, the existence of a key code seems predictable, even inevitable, although the conglomerate of symbols and harmonic complexities may cause understandable difficulties in discovering and precisely defining it.

With regard to the sphere of tonality in *The Ring*, its most external element, which attracts our close attention on the level of the work's macrostructure, is the kind of 'antiprogressive' concept of this monumental work. In this respect, there have even appeared conceptions of a purely structural nature, according to which the work as a whole would constitute an elaborate cadence in the key of D flat major – the principal key, due to the conclusion of *Twilight of the Gods* (see Lorenz, 1924). Whilst conceptions of this sort can be defended from a musical point of view, from a hermeneutical perspective they seem nonsensical. The multitude of symbolic meanings in *The Ring*, its metaphysical character and specifically dialectic antitheticity, which manifests itself, as already mentioned, in the closing synthesis of elements, precludes interpretations which as the underlying principle of tonal construction would consider only the schematic filling-in of the framework of a perfect cadence, even in the name of the key to the harmonic cohesion of the entire cycle to which this conception gives rise – a key which, given the considerable tonal ambiguities, it is obviously crucial to find.

Whilst the work as a whole leads from the opening key of E flat major to the closing D flat major, the transitional 'stations' on its way there are as follows:

<i>The Rhinegold</i> –	E flat - c - D flat - b flat - A - C - D flat
<i>The Valkyrie</i> –	d - G - C - d - D - E
<i>Siegfried</i> –	b flat - D - f - E - g - C
<i>Twilight of the Gods</i> –	e flat - E flat - b - b flat - C - D flat

I have included here, of course, only the most crucial keys, at strategic points in the work – the opening and closing acts and scenes. Even the most cursory glance at those keys which, for purely structural reasons, play a determining role in *The Ring* allows us to observe the primacy of certain keys against the complete absence of others, as well as the sufficiently evident irregularity of their distribution over particular parts of the cycle. The irregular pattern may testify the secondary role of tonal structure in the sense of the purely musical dependencies between keys or their complexes and the primary role of another element, which, in my opinion, is the semantic tonal system, which provides the hermeneutic key to an understanding of the work's symbolic message.

Let us note the general principles governing the world of tonal symbols in the tetralogy. With few exceptions, specific keys are not ascribed to particular characters in the drama, which seems understandable given the supra-individual message of the work. Only Siegfried and Brünnhilde have their specific tonal spheres, although these, too, are not entirely unambiguous and pertain

rather to the metaphysical dimension of the work. The key most frequently used to characterise Brünnhilde is D major, with C major and E flat major most often ascribed to Siegfried. Yet the complications of this pattern preclude unequivocal assignments. D major tends to be associated with Brünnhilde the Valkyrie rather than the self-sacrificing, heroic Brünnhilde; the youthful Siegfried, meanwhile, bears a different 'tonal mantle' from Siegfried the hero, for whom Wagner set aside the traditionally heroic E flat major. However, in most cases this 'parametric' vision of key propounded by H. Beckh is unacceptable and is often linked to particular persons or situations by accident, insofar as the given characters or situations consistently symbolise anything of a general, supra-individual nature (Beckh, 1937).

There is also no need to link the spheres of particular leitmotifs with specific keys, although in this case, as well, Wagner does make exceptions, associating a motif with just a single key (e. g. the sword motif, invariably occurring in the key of C major, which is hard to explain unequivocally solely with regard to the instrumentation, for example). So Wagner avoids such semantic excesses. When defining elements of the drama by means of particular motifs, he takes no pains to link them additionally through a cohesion of key. On the other hand, certain motifs, as is the case in *Tristan*, display distinctly modulatory features (e.g. the motif of fate or the motif of the magic helmet) or else act, rather more than in the harmonic or melic spheres, on the level of rhythm (e. g. the motif of forging, associated with the motif of the Nibelungs) or colour (e. g. the motifs of Loge). Thus it would be difficult to speak of the need for any cohesion of key in relation to particular motifs.

Finally, there are instances where, following a tradition derived from the times of the 15th-century 'Dutch tricks', Wagner links his favourite sequences of assonances or single words of crucial symbolic significance with particular keys on the basis of alliteration: Donner 'gets' the key of D major, Erda in *Twilight of the Gods* has E minor, Guttrune G major, Hagen B minor (German: h-moll), and keywords such as *Ende*, *ewig* and so on are given the keys of E major and E minor.

However, *The Ring*, as a work of genius, is a multi-layered creation, whose profound meanings may only be reached by means of a tonal key which is more than just a partial signifier of particular moments in the work. As I see it, the tonal point of departure in *The Ring* is the opposition between the keys of C major and D flat major, identical to the man/absolute relationship which made such a profound impression on Wagner from the beginning of his career as an opera composer. This main idea epitomises the fundamental sense of *The Ring of the Nibelung* – man's assistance in the divine 'repairing of the world' and his role in the macrocosm. This assistance is expressed essentially through the relationship of subordination of one key to another. It is D flat major that ends the work; D flat major is a sort of tonic, to which leads a sort of dominant – C major.

Yet these two keys generate two tonal spheres and a whole chain of associations, encompassing the structure of the world (the four elements), the transformations that arise between them, and also the antinomy of good and evil, understood as constructive and destructive forces, assisting or opposing the construction of the macrocosm. The realms of the human and the absolute are marked respectively in the drama by derivatives of the keys of C major (through G major and D major to the limit of sharp keys) and D flat major (E flat major being particularly prominent); minor parallels and relatives contradict the values carried by the pair of major keys. More specifically, the keys of C minor and B flat minor play a crucial role here. So, besides the opposition between the spheres of the human and the divine, one also discerns an antinomy between the positive value and its negation. In this sense, two oppositions influence the shaping of *The Ring*:

The first of these is:

D flat major (the divine element) – C major (the human element)

The second, meanwhile, is constituted by their opposites:

C major (the hero) – C minor (the hero's death)

D flat major (the Absolute) – B flat minor (the negation of the Absolute)

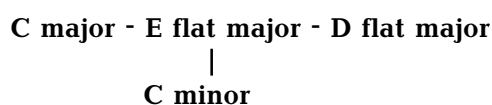
A third opposition, of a mediational character, may also be added:

E flat major (knowledge of the four elements)

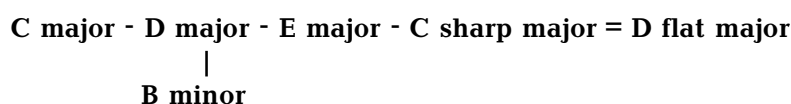
E flat minor (its negation, the twilight of the gods)

Another systemic feature of *The Ring* is the presence of the alchemic symbolism of the elements. The element of air, D flat major, symbolised in the first two acts by Wotan, is doubly opposed by the element of earth, symbolised by Erda (C sharp minor) and the Nibelung (B flat minor). Similarly, the element of fire, symbolised by the key of E major (the sphere of Loge in *The Rhinegold*, the magic fire in *The Valkyrie*), contrasts with the element of water, represented by the Rhinedaughters at the beginning of the tetralogy in the key of E flat major. Yet it is the same key of E flat major that symbolises eternal harmony, the order of nature, which is why the final transformation and the synthesis of water and fire in the finale of *Twilight of the Gods* occurs in this key, uniting the (fiery) motifs of Loge and the (watery) motifs of the Rhinedaughters. On the ruins of the old world, Brünnhilde pronounces the beginning of the new; the news of the rebirth of existence is symbolised by the closing apotheosis in D flat major. It is significant, however, that the tonal complex exploited both in the monologue and in the subsequent orchestral epilogue consists of E flat major (the synthesis), C major (the hero, Siegfried, thanks to whom the synthesis was possible) and D flat major (the new world). Thus the finale 'reveals', as it were, the principal keys of the work.

However, *The Ring of the Nibelung* features not only the tonal 'contrasting' of the elements and their synthesis. The transformations through which this synthesis is possible also occur on the tonal level. The mediation between man and God is possible, as it were, in two distinct ways. Firstly through the circle of flat keys, in which the main intermediate point is the key of E flat major, symbolising knowledge of the four elements (*mercurio*), and the symbolic seed of destruction is the death of the hero, as illustrated by the scheme:



Secondly, through the circle of sharp keys, the sequence/path of which symbolises the path to knowledge, including the feminine element (Brünnhilde), of crucial importance here in the life of the hero. This sequence is opposed by the Nibelung, through their key of destruction, B minor (the main key of Hagen), as illustrated by the scheme:



D major is the principal key of Brünnhilde, and so the B minor of Hagen, preparing the drink of forgetfulness for Siegfried, is turned back de facto against her. One may conclude, therefore, that the negation of the Nibelung (expressed, for example, by the motif of destruction – *Vernichtungsmotiv*) is twofold: they negate both positive existence (D flat major - B flat minor) and also the positive values in man (D major - B minor), thus acting on two levels – the metaphysical and the physical. So the circle of keys that is defined by the principal major keys (C - D - E - C sharp/D flat - E flat - C) and minor keys (c - b/c flat - b flat) is a cabalistic circle: man's path towards God and God's towards man.

The omnipotent Wotan, who in *The Rhinegold* 'wields' the key of mediation and the absolute, D flat major, 'falls' towards man in E major (the motif of Valhalla in the finale of *The Valkyrie*) and as the Wanderer approaches the human sphere in D major - C major (Siegfried). Brünnhilde, from the initial D major, through the fiery E major (the fire in the finale of *The Valkyrie*, the 'fire' in Siegfried's heart in the final duet of the third part of the tetralogy), arrives at the final D flat major in the closing monologue of *Twilight of the Gods*. Siegfried also attains awareness through the ultimate C sharp major/D flat major in the closing monologue and the funeral march in his honour, reaching it through cognizance (the woodland bird in *Siegfried* – E major), and also awareness of the harmony of the cosmos (the equilibrium of three elements – E flat major). Thus, by dint of its twofold nature, his path would be virtually 'exemplary', if it did not end in defeat – C minor.

To sum up, *The Ring of the Nibelung* is a remarkable interpretation of a tonal ethos, in which this system is integrated with the symbolic dimension of the work. However, the complexities and ambiguities in the domain of the symbolism itself, which account for the ambiguous and multi-layered mythical message of the work, make this tonal code difficult to decipher, with the result that any interpretation is open to possible accusations of ambiguity or inconsistency. Difficulties also arise from the considerable complexity of the harmonic language of the tetralogy, and of its final part in particular. The general rule would appear to be the symbolic signification of key, which leads to the main key being designated by the composer's writing out of a specific number of sharps or flats. Yet the changes that occur over larger tonal structures, linked, for example, to the characteristic tripartite structure of the poetic-musical period (see Lorenz, 1924), and also the frequent modulations, the departures from the main key, the manifold alterations and added components, mean that the work's harmonic language would be difficult to comprehend solely from the perspective of the semantics of key. The multiplicity of harmonic issues in *The Ring*, as well as their relatively exhaustive analysis, forced the author to leave aside structural issues connected with harmony and concentrate solely on the semantics of key, to the inevitable detriment of the cognitive status of this element of the tetralogy.

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Santrauka

R. Wagnerio „Nybelungo žiedas“ kaip muzikinis ir dramatinis ciklas. Tonacinės struktūros semantinė vienovė

R. Wagnerio „Nybelungo žiede“ akivaizdus dramaturginės įtampos kilimas. Pirmoji ciklo dalis „Reino auksas“ pateikia visą kūrinio makrokosmosą su jame viešpatuojančiomis keturiomis stichijomis (oras, ugnis, žemė ir vanduo), kurias įkūnija keturios dievybės (Votanas, Loge'is, Erda, Reino dukterys). „Nybelungo žiedo“ kosmologijoje išryškėja trys sluoksniai (dievų pasaulis, mirtingųjų pasaulis ir Nybelungų pasaulis), kurie ryškiai vaizduojami kitose tetralogijos dalyse. Herojinė drama („Valkirija“), optimistinė apologija („Zygfyrdas“) ir eschatologinė tragedija („Dievų suteimos“) – tai trys pakopos, vedančios į enigmatišką baigtį: senojo pasaulio pabaigą galima laikyti naujojo pradžia.

„Nybelungo žiedo“ mitinės struktūros spirališkumas išryškėja ne tik leitmotyvuose, bet ir visos milžiniškos kompozicijos tonacinėje struktūroje. Ciklo tonacijoms suteikiamos ir struktūrinės, ir semantinės reikšmės. Kai kurias cikle vaizduojamas semantines priešybes – gyvenimą ir mirtį, gerį ir blogį (ir ontologine, ir epistemologine prasmėmis), dievus ir mirtinguosius – įkūnija dvejoba tonacinė viso veikalo struktūra. Pagrindinė – dievų ir žmonių – priešprieša išreiškta dviem tonacijomis – *Des-dur* ir *C-dur*. Šios dvi tonacijos taip pat turi savo priešpriešas, išreikštas minorinėmis tonacijomis, kurios simbolizuoja vertybių neigimą. Ketvirtoji priešprieša (tarp tonacijų *Es-dur* ir *es-moll*) gali būti vertinama kaip priešprieša tarp keturių stichijų pažinimo ir nuojautos apie dievų žlugimą.

Tonacijų, kurios Wagnerio cikle yra tarsi tonaciniai logotipai, naudojimas yra struktūriškai ir semantiškai susijęs su metafizine veikalo prasme. Taigi tonacijų parinkimas tampa svarbiu, visą šį didžiausią operos istorijoje ciklą vienijančiu faktoriumi.