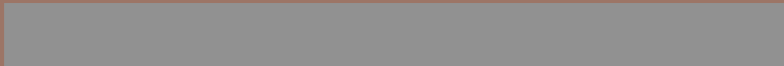


## Dossiê Wagner e o Teatro

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Die walküre act 3 scene 3,  
directed by Richard Wagner  
and Patrice Chéreau



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## Abstract

This paper examines staging directions given by Wagner to the singing actors during rehearsals for the first complete performances of *The Nibelung's Ring* in 1876, and compares them to the movements and gestures devised by Patrice Chéreau in 1976 for the Centenary cycle. Detailed decisions taken by both directors in staging *Die Walküre* Act 3 scene 3, the final confrontation between Wotan and Brünnhilde, are examined; and conclusions are drawn about the similarities and differences between their approaches.

Keywords: Richard Wagner, *The Nibelung's Ring*, Staging Directions, Patrice Chéreau.

## Resumo

*Este artigo examina as instruções de encenação dadas por Wagner aos atores cantores durante os ensaios para as primeiras apresentações completas de O Anel do Nibelungo em 1876 e as compara com os movimentos e gestos criados por Patrice Chéreau em 1976 para o ciclo do Centenário. São examinadas as decisões detalhadas tomadas por ambos os diretores na encenação de Die Walküre, Ato 3, cena 3, o confronto final entre Wotan e Brünnhilde, e são tiradas conclusões sobre as semelhanças e diferenças entre suas abordagens.*

*Palavras-chave: Richard Wagner, Anel do Nibelungo, Direção, Patrice Chéreau.*

**W**hen he put *The Nibelung's Ring* into rehearsal for the first Bayreuth Festival in 1876, Wagner engaged Hermann Levi to conduct the music, and took to the stage himself to train the singing actors. Thereby he became one of the first drama directors, in the modern sense of the word. He asked Heinrich Porges to be present at the rehearsals and compile a notebook of his decisions, both on the interpretation of the score and on the movements of the actors. This was first published in successive instalments of the *Bayreuther Blätter*, and completely published in 1896 to coincide with the first revival of *The Ring* at Bayreuth since the premiere performances. An English translation was published in 1983.<sup>1</sup> Porges' book *Wagner Rehearsing the 'Ring'* provides invaluable insights into how Wagner realized the music dramas in action onstage.

One hundred years after the first performances, Patrice Chéreau and Pierre Boulez were entrusted by Wolfgang Wagner with staging and conducting the Centenary *Ring*. Their cycle met with sometimes vitriolic controversy over the four years during which it was presented (1976-1980); but opinion has come to recognize that Chéreau's revolutionary production is deeply true to the socio-political aspects of the tetralogy. Bernard Shaw had alerted readers to this crucial dimension in *The Perfect Wagnerite*, but it had largely been ignored in productions both at Bayreuth and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Telecasts in the UK, USA, Australia and elsewhere, and subsequent sales of the DVD set, brought this excellent staging of the *Ring* to millions of viewers worldwide.

Like Wagner in 1876, Chéreau saw his primary purpose as to make his singers act:

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1 Porges 1983.

2 Shaw 1923, esp. 29. For an overall appraisal of Chéreau's production cf. Nattiez 1983 and Ewans 1985.

My conception of the *Ring* mainly relies on work with the actors and, in this case, with the singers. This work is not superfluous with Wagner. On the contrary, it is most important because in Wagner it is possible to rediscover a dramatic consideration in the relationship of the roles, an admirable flexibility in psychological delineation, and this psychological dimension has to personify the conflicts – the meaning of the action has to be deep inside the flesh of the protagonists. With Wagner we are dealing with a theatre, a drama which are turned virtually white-hot by the music.<sup>3</sup>

This essay will compare the stage movements and gestures which Wagner developed in 1876 with those of Chéreau's centenary production, which remains after nearly fifty years an exemplary model of how to direct singing actors in the *Ring*. Our example will be the confrontation between Wotan and Brünnhilde in Act 3 Scene 3 of *Die Walküre*. She has defied his order not to attempt to save Siegmund, has told Sieglinde that she is carrying Siegmund's son in her womb, and has sent her to seek refuge in a forest which Wotan, for good reasons, avoids. Wotan chases off the other Valkyries, who have tried ineffectively to defend Brünnhilde, and the father and his favourite daughter are left alone for the final scene.

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Scene 3 opens with the stage directions:<sup>4</sup> *Wotan and, still lying prone at his feet, Brünnhilde, are left alone. Long solemn silence. Neither of them moves.*

*Brünnhilde slowly begins to raise her head a little. Begins slowly and gradually gains confidence.* And she sings a few quiet questions, after which in Wagner's stage directions she *raises herself gradually into a kneeling position* for the second, more emotional part of the speech:

Oh sag, Vater!	Tell me, father!
Sieh mir ins Auge:	Look me in the eyes:
schweige den Zorn,	Silence your rage,
zähme die Wut,	control your anger,
und deute mir hell	and clearly explain to me
die dunkle Schuld,	the hidden guilt,
die mit starren Trotze dich zwingt	which has blindly and stubbornly
	forced you
zu verstoßen dein traueste Kind!	to abandon your most loving child!
	(895-7) <sup>5</sup>

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3 Chéreau in the programme booklet for the 1977 revival, quoted in the booklet for the DGG DVDs of *Die Walküre*.

4 All stage directions present in the score are cited in italics.

5 All quotations from *Die Walküre* are referenced by the page numbers of the Eulenberg study score.

In Wagner's staging,<sup>6</sup> on this last line 'she is able to lean back in a gesture appropriate to the heightened emotion of the phrase'. Chéreau's staging<sup>7</sup> is more practical; just before the speech begins he already has Gwyneth Jones as Brünnhilde rising from prostration to kneeling down, with her posterior resting on her ankles (better for the singer than Wagner's leaving her lying on the ground for the first part); then on 'Oh sag, Vater', Jones moved from kneeling down to kneeling up, erect. This enabled her to achieve effortlessly the heightened emotion that Wagner required for the last line. Chéreau's moves mark off the beginning of the speech and the moment at which Brünnhilde begins her intensified appeal more effectively than Wagner's.

Wotan at this point is *still motionless, grave and gloomy*. Porges does not record his stance in Wagner's production, but to show how little impression Brünnhilde's first appeal makes on his resolve, in Chéreau's Donald McIntyre remained facing away from his Brünnhilde. They argue briefly, then Brünnhilde deploys a second appeal:

Als Fricka den eig'nen	When Fricka estranged you
Sinn die verfremdet;	from your own intentions;
da ihrem Sinn du dich fügstest,	when you took her point of view,
warst du selber dir Feind.	you were your own enemy. (900)

As she begins this Wagner had his Brünnhilde stand; Chéreau had her remain kneeling, but his Wotan turns for the first time in the scene to face her, just before this speech. Wagner's move gives Brünnhilde greater power, and she needs it as presumably his Wotan is still refusing to respond to her. Chéreau by contrast employs physical closeness in the next section. Wotan turns and goes close to Brünnhilde in his response to 'Als Fricka...', and she delivers her reply facing up and looking into Wotan's eyes;

Nicht weise bin ich,	I am not wise,
doch weißt' ich das Eine	but I know this one thing,
das dem Wälsung du liebtest...	that you loved the Volsung...
(902-3)	

He turns away, rejecting her appeal; she seizes his coattails to detain him, but he shakes her off and goes away. Her last line acknowledges that he felt bound to deny Siegmund his support, and as he responds: 'Du weißt es so,/und wagtest dennoch den Schutz?' ('You knew that was so,/and then helped him?') (904), in Chéreau's production he turns back angrily and advances towards Brünnhilde; she swiftly rises to her feet and backs away.

Brünnhilde now embarks on a gentle appeal (905ff., *begins softly*) which becomes a passionate outburst as she describes how she came to Siegmund

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6 All references to Wagner's staging decisions come from Porges 1983: 72-77.

7 All references to Chéreau's staging decisions come from viewing the DVD of *Die Walküre*, DGG Unitel 00440 073 4059.

to announce his death, but sympathized with his distress, and resolved to support him and if necessary share his fate. Wagner directs that for this speech Brünnhilde should go near to Wotan. Chéreau does the same, though for one section of it which is more introverted she faces away from Wotan, forward into the audience. She turns back to him on 'Scheu und staunend/stand ich in Scham' ('Shy, astonished, I stood in shame'), but turns away, out again (even though she is referring to Wotan) for the powerful conclusion, which is set to a beautiful theme, first heard at the very beginning of the scene (Example 1a):



<p>Der diese Liebe mir ins Herz gehaucht, dem Willen, der dem Walsung mich gesellt, ihm innig vertraut – trozt' ich deinem Gebot.</p>	<p>He who breathed this love into my heart, the will, which allied me with the Volsung, inwardly true to him – I disobeyed your command. (920-23)</p>
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Brünnhilde wheels round and goes to confront Wotan as Ex.1a disappears from the orchestra for the sudden, final unaccompanied punchline. Wotan is furious, seizes her by the arm and then throws her away.

In this whole section Chéreau fills in details which are responsive to the music, and which make the action much more effective than the relatively sparse moves in Wagner's original staging. There may perhaps have been details in 1876 which Porges did not record, but the relatively static postures characteristic of nineteenth-century opera singers make this unlikely. Chéreau is pursuing a late twentieth-century approach, working his singing actors much harder and gaining powerful effects by doing so.

Now there is a considerable gap in Porges' account. No movements are recorded for several minutes of action. In this section Wotan broods on his dilemma, and then tells Brünnhilde that he must abandon her. She protests that surely he cannot want a part of himself to become the victim of the first unworthy man who finds her. Once again she mentions the Volsungs – and Siegfried's theme sounds out in the orchestra. Wotan wants nothing to do with Sieglinde and the fruit of her womb.

In Chéreau's production Brünnhilde watches petrified as Wotan unfolds his dilemma, the fact that she did what he wanted to do but could not; then she sinks to her knees when he declares that he must part from her for ever. She

begins her appeal still kneeling, but rises to her feet as she becomes more passionate:

Dein ewig Teil  
nicht wirst du entehren,  
Schande nicht wollen,  
die dich beschimpft.

You wouldn't want to dishonour  
an eternal part of you,  
cannot wish for a disgrace  
that insults you. (937)

Wotan is still facing away, turning back to face her only to reject her appeal. This now intensifies, with Brünnhilde using for the first time vigorous arm gestures in the next speech, where she prophesies the new Volsung hero with her arms extended. Finally Brünnhilde mentions *under her breath* the sword that Sieglinde now possesses, and Wotan *angrily* replies: 'Und das ich ihm in Stücke schlug' ('And which I broke in pieces.') (946). Here Porges tells us that Wagner prescribed 'an aggressive gesture'; Chéreau responds with an extraordinary move; his Wotan forces Brünnhilde to her knees and bends her over backwards, providing an even more aggressive gesture than Wagner imagined. When he lets go of her, Chéreau's Brünnhilde collapses to the ground.

Videoclip



Wotan continues to make it plain that he must turn away and leave her. After this speech from Wotan, the scene, and the whole music drama, enter their

final phase, a profound mixture of the ritualistic and the overwhelmingly passionate. Chéreau's Brünnhilde rises to her feet, inverting Wagner's original direction that has her *fall on her knees*, as she makes an impassioned plea for her sleeping place to be protected:

Soll fesselnder Schaf	If everlasting sleep
fest mich binden,	is to bind me fast,
den feigsten Manne	an easy prey
zur leichten Beute;	for the feeblest man;
dies eine mußst du erhören,	this one thing must you grant,
was heil'ge angst zu dir fleht!	which I beg in solemn fear! (952-55)

Let him surround the rock with 'terrors that scare', so that only a fearless hero can reach her (Siegfried's theme sounds out in the orchestra). Once again, this speech is accompanied by powerful gestures, which would have been difficult in Wagner's kneeling position, though that is clearly an appropriate choice for this powerful appeal.

On Wotan's response 'zu viel begehrst du, zu viel der Gunst' ('You ask too much, too great a favour') (957-8) Wagner directed that Brünnhilde: 'wrings her hands, drags herself across the ground and embraces his knees as she once again implores: "Dies Eine must du erhören... ['This one thing must you grant...]'". Since Chéreau's Brünnhilde is standing before this outburst, she runs to Wotan, seizes his arm and kneels on this musically powerful line. Both decisions are very effective, but Chéreau's seems easier to realize in performance.

*With wild inspiration*, and in Chéreau's production standing up again and extending her arms, Brünnhilde begs Wotan to surround her with a ring of fire, that no coward will dare to penetrate. When she finishes her appeal, Wotan *convinced and deeply moved, turns impetuously to Brünnhilde, raises her to her feet and gazes emotionally into her eyes*; he grants her request, with the words 'Leb' wohl, du kühnes, herrliches Kind!' ('Farewell, you bold, wonderful child!') (972-4). Chéreau's Wotan approaches her from behind and holds her; his Brünnhilde relaxes, knowing that her appeal has finally been accepted, and the stage direction *gazes emotionally into her eyes* is obeyed when Wotan turns her to face him, after the final repeat of 'Leb' wohl'. Wagner directed that after its passionate beginning Wotan's farewell should possess a calm, elegiac quality. Donald McIntyre achieves exactly that, as any truly great Wotan should.

Chéreau creates a moving staging of the farewell. As Wotan describes the fire encircling Brünnhilde's rock, he kneels beside her and extends his arm. Then comes the great climax, which builds up in the orchestra after the words:

Den Eine nur freie die Braut,	only one will free the bride,
der freier als ich, der Gott!	one freer than I, the God! (988-990)

Wagner's stage directions for this passage are (first) *Brünnhilde, moved and exalted, falls on Wotan's breast. He holds her in a long embrace.* (and then at



the climax, as Ex. 1a yields to 1b) *She lets her head fall back and gazes solemnly into Wotan's eyes, still clasping him.*

In Chéreau's production, Wotan collapses at Brünnhilde's waist after singing the words just quoted; she gently strokes his grey hair and then caresses him, comforting him for his loss. Then she disengages, and walks slowly to where she will be laid to sleep. The orchestral music becomes ever more emotional (Example 1a prominent in its yearning), as she turns back to look at Wotan and he, gradually increasing his pace, goes to her and enfolds her in a passionate embrace exactly at the climax when Brünnhilde's theme (Example 1b) sounds out *fortissimo* in the woodwind and brass, followed by the upper strings. Chéreau's response, delaying the actual embrace until the music reaches its climax, is a brilliant and powerful piece of stagecraft.

The remainder of the music drama plays itself. The kiss that takes away Brünnhilde's divine powers and the summoning of Loge to surround the rock with fire create no problems – provided you have a designer who is capable of creating a truly impressive fiery spectacle, as Chéreau had in Richard Peduzzi. (This has not always been the case in more recent productions of *Die Walküre*.) Wagner gave one slightly strange piece of advice; according to Porges, when Wotan takes Brünnhilde's head in his hands to kiss her eyes, Wagner instructed that his spear should slip from his hands. The spear would however have been an encumbrance right through the earlier part of the scene, where Wotan has to engage physically with Brünnhilde; Chéreau wisely had his Wotan abandon the spear long before he needs two hands first to embrace Brünnhilde and then to hold her head. McIntyre goes to and retrieves it just before he uses it to summon Loge.

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Wagner's stage directing in the 1876 production was clear and incisive, and his instructions must have been of enormous help to his volunteer singers, who would have had no previous experience of the demands on their acting skills which were presented by a continuous music drama with the epic scale and emotional demands of *The Nibelung's Ring*. Chéreau by contrast was reacting against the post-war tradition at Bayreuth, under first Wieland and then Wolfgang Wagner, of relatively stylized action and abstract sets.<sup>8</sup> In *Opera and Drama* Wagner emphasized the use of Gesture, as the link between the poet's sung words and the orchestra's exploration of 'the unspeakable';<sup>9</sup> and as we have seen, posture and gesture play a great part in Chéreau's realization of *Die Walküre* III.3.

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8 Cf. Skelton 1976: 148-221.

9 Wagner 1966 (1850) III.v, 316ff.

Chéreau shared Wagner's aims completely, which is one of the reasons for the great success of his production of the cycle. But it is evident from our analysis of this important scene that one hundred years later he created at the same Festspielhaus a more intimate and interactive production than Wagner envisaged, and his eye for detail ensured that he reflects the text and the music, often very closely, in what happens on his stage.

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## Biography

Michael Ewans is the Conjoint Professor of Drama in the School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Science at the University of Newcastle, Australia. He was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities in 2005. His eleven books include four on opera: *Janáček's Tragic Operas*, *Wagner and Aeschylus: the 'Ring' and the 'Oresteia'*, *Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation and Performing Opera: a Practical Guide for Singers and Directors*. He has written articles and program essays on operas by Adès, Bartók, Berg, Braunfels, Britten, Debussy, Gluck, Janáček, Szymanowski and Wagner.